

## Creation Sabbath

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In the Jewish religious calendar, the Sabbath that follows immediately after the celebration of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, days marking a new year, and days of introspection, repentance and recommitment, is called Sabaoth Bereshit—Creation Sabbath. That day ritually marks the end of a season of holy days and festivals that symbolically take the Jewish people to the very summit of their faith and tradition and then deposits them at the foot of Sinai invested with a sense of liberation and with the reality of their creation as a free people. It is an intoxicating, grave, and holy time of the year of endings and beginnings. As well, four Advent Sundays and Christmas Day have come and gone, and this morning we stand days away from the Christian Feast of the Epiphany. A holy day which celebrates a divine, new creation made manifest in the birth and life of Jesus of Nazareth. Creation Sabbath.

Many of us are the children of these traditions and they may still resonate with us in profound ways. And so, perhaps, this day, we share in some way that sense of endings and beginnings. In addition, all of us have just passed through a holiday season of gift giving, family gatherings, New Year's celebrations, libations, and resolution making; and here we are standing at the cusp of a new year with acute expectations, hopes, and anxieties about what the future may bring.

Indeed, what happens when we come down from the summit of our high holiday season? At Sinai, so the story goes, there was thunder and light and the sound of trumpets, a prophet transfigured bearing in his hands a new table of laws written by the finger of the Almighty. In Bethlehem, there was a great blazing star, and oriental wizards bearing gifts to a new kind of king born improbably in a barn.

What happens after these climactic scenes are over: once the clouds have lifted, the ringing voices of heavenly choirs have died away, and the highs of the holidays give way to the mundane? Because now, we're re-entering ordinary time and space: school is about to begin again; we are returning to work. There are bills to pay; thank you cards to write, pots to stir, children to feed, commuting to take up again. Our interminable wandering in the desert after Sinai begins once more.

With me, I am sure you have asked, what happens after happily ever after: that all-purpose line which winds up fairy tales and bed side reading. That phrase signals the end of the story, the end of the day—and hopefully, the beginning of a night of care-free sleep. We say, “and they all lived happily ever after,” so that we can close the book, turn off the lights, and equip the young and ourselves with that needful, blessed assurance that all is well enough in the world.

But when the lights are off and we wander in the dark, we turn again to the question, “what happens after happily ever after?” Do we wonder, along with the characters from *Into the Woods*, Stephen Sondheim's musical fairy tale for adults: we wonder, will Prince Charming be faithful to Cinderella once the giddy romance of dress up balls, glass slippers, and royal weddings have come to an end? Will the wife of the giant killed by Jack shrug off the theft and murder of her husband and remain content, sitting alone by the hearth in her castle in the clouds? And Little Red Riding Hood? How will she handle the trauma of a wolf stalking her in the woods, the gruesome death of her granny, and the bloody killing of her sleek, deceptive pursuer? Is it any wonder, then, that one of the characters in the play, tested beyond endurance after happily ever after, cries out, “No more questions. No more test. No more riddles. No more jests. No more curses you can't undo. No more quests. Time to shut the door. Please just no more.”

What strikes me about this day, this time of the year, this time in our lives, is a shared and very private sense of endings and of wanting to begin our lives again afresh, and re-empowered. Here we are standing

at the shore, with that great ocean of the past behind us, facing an open road that leads toward the journey of our lives. And it means so much to me that we find ourselves in this particular place and time; that we have gathered ourselves up, alone, or with family, partners or friends. Reckoning that by our presence here we will contribute to the making of good beyond ourselves, and thus give expression to our desire, our hope to escape what the Puritans called the “hell of loneliness.”

As holiday time re-fragments into hurried moments, as it unravels into the loosely knit fabric of ordinary times and duty, how can we make room for and cultivate a sense of the centered completeness we experienced oh-so-briefly on a “Creation Sabbath” like today, or the holiday season through which we have just passed? When we go from this place, what resources lay at hand to enable us to experience spiritual leisure, a sense of reverence, and a feeling of rightness about who we are as individuals and as members of this congregation?

Today, I want to suggest three strategies: first, that we mark the passing of time and our movement through space with ritual. Second, that we think of our lives as a story. And third, that we reflect upon and freely express to ourselves and to others, especially to our young “students and scholars,” what we value and know to be good about the religious tradition that gathers us here today. Let me explain.

The experience of doing and experiencing “Sabbath” is not just something that must be confined to a day or a moment in the week. Rather, it is a way of being in the world that enables us to get our bearings as we rush from one deadline and place to another. For generations in the West, “Sabbath” meant Saturday or Sunday to most people. A day when shops closed; when workers laid down their tools, and when friends and family gathered to rest, celebrate, and to renew their relationships with other and with the divine. The reality of Sabbath as a day of rest is being lost in our busy society—but a sense of “Sabbath,” of rest and reorientation, is badly needed in our time-starved world.

We can celebrate a Sabbath moment to moment by intentionally breaking away from work and rushing about to honour the source of life that pulses within and around us. When time is broken up into little parts, rather than gathered up together in a larger whole, it feels too heavy, too scattered; time and space lose their shape and levity, their grave and joyous lightness. However, when we “ritualise” a moment or a place within the chaos of contemporary life, we can create an opening for a sense and an experience of the Sabbath. Rituals keep time from becoming one damn thing after another. They separate duty and desire. They allow for leisure—so well defined long ago as that which we choose rather than what we must do. They can invite limited, fragmented time to become more expansive and abundant. They make spacious what is cramped, generous what is stingy.

Now I recognize that historically, Unitarians worked hard to divest themselves of institutionally imposed liturgy and rituals as something shop-worn, irrational, and repetitively meaningless. But that divestment, I believe, has come at a very high price. What if we thought of rituals not in the Latin sense as a subject noun: not as *ritus*, as a “custom” handed down that we are obligated to dumbly enact, but ritual in the root sense that we can trace all the way back to the Sanskrit verb *ri*, which means “to go,” or “to flow.” Rituals can be verbs, not nouns. They are a method whose purpose is creating time and space for pleasure, for bringing the flow of peace back into our harried, scattered lives. And the burden and blessing of this tradition is that we are free to make our own way in the world, to bless what we find worthy of merit, to attend closely upon what we value. Since we are free to create them, I can’t or won’t presume to prescribe them. But rituals for Unitarians, rituals for reclaiming some Sabbath back in our lives, can include some of the following kinds of acts that we can intentionally incorporate into our lives:

- Sitting down together for dinner with the TV off, with family, partners and friends
- Writing a letter to a friend or relative

- Reading bed time stories to children, or going to a school or a care facility and reading there to someone hungry for a kind word and a story
- Setting aside one evening a week for a date or a dance
- Lighting a candle, taking a deep breath and allowing memory and desire work their melancholy and their ecstasy
- And for me, the most important daily ritual I know of, indeed it's the closest act I have to prayer, is taking an evening walk through the streets and along the beach with someone with whom I can look back and forward in thought and word about the day that has just passed and toward the journey of days stretching out before me.

Our search for peace, for an on-going experience of the Sabbath can be aided and abetted by something that is deeply embedded in our nature as human beings: and that is our thirst for meaning. We neglect that thirst, we suffer from want of life giving waters by not attending to and cultivating the ritualisation of our time and space to our own peril and impoverishment.

In addition to bringing rituals into our lives as a means of inviting the creative sustenance of Sabbath-like way of living, I believe that is essential that we think of our lives in terms of a story. In the past few years, an unusual number of my friends and acquaintances have approached me to confess a profound weariness about their work and occupations, about loveless marriages, and about care worn and exhausted religious affiliation and identity. So much of who we are is bound up and expressed in these crucial means of self-definition—religious belief, the bonds of marriage and commitment, the careers we pursue. Each of them has expressed a sense of a deeply inadequate fit between what they are acting out in their lives and what they feel they should be doing, and who they are.

We sometimes tend to trivialise, to collectively write off this phenomenon as a “mid-life crisis,” as a passing tragic-comedy that befalls others, not ourselves; as a shallow, somewhat tawdry soap opera played out by inauthentic adults caught in the grips of overblown fears about the passing away of youthfulness, physical and sexual vigour, and workplace productivity.

In response, how often do we hear and tell stories about men who go out and buy convertibles and women who check in for cosmetic makeovers. To be sure, people do this in a desperate attempt to reclaim time and life. But by writing off this off, by reducing a pervasive existential angst to unattributed mythic melodrama, we run the risk of ignoring something that is very real and crucially important: and that is our need for meaning, our profound and holy desire to see and live our lives as a story full of purpose. We are feeling that living authentically is dissolving away under fragmenting commitments, diversions, and habits; and want desperately for the erosion to stop!

The call to live fully and authentically in ways most fitting and true to who we are and want to be arise, I believe, from the very fact of the temporal limits placed upon our existence—our life span. As well, it arises from the intuition that we are created with an end, a goal, which calls us forward and which we feel we must achieve in the limited time remaining to us. We have but three score years and ten to live out the purpose for which we have been given the gift of life. We do not experience time merely as a succession of moments, days and years. We know in our guts that in some way we, and others, hold ourselves accountable for how we have lived and fulfilled the ends to which we were born.

It is no coincidence then, that people my age are taking stock of where we've come from and where we are going. Our biological clocks are ringing us awake to the fact that we have mere decades to live and that we have the project of life to complete and offer up as a fitting testament of who we were and how we want to be remembered. This, too, is the “Creation Sabbath” working within us, and it calls us to imagine our lives as a story: a grand narrative of a life with an opening chapter of youth and education, the mediating narrative of

evolving adulthood and maturity, and a conclusion full of wisdom and satisfaction of a life well lived.

Sit down, pick up a pen, or sit at a keyboard, and think! Take the pain, desire, and pleasure, the accomplishments and setbacks of our days so far, and set them in the framework of a narrative which is our own unique story. A tale that is leading somewhere worthy of who we are and want to be. When we can see, by an act of will and hope, written one line at a time, that the story leads somewhere, and that we have been and can still be agents for good, both for ourselves and for the sake of others, it can give us hope and dignity. The intimation and intuitions we receive about the end of life and its purpose are great blessings that can open the gates to the garden of the Sabbath here and now.

Finally, I believe that we can increase a sense of and experience with the Sabbath in our lives by freely and frequently expressing what we value and know to be good and worthy in this religious tradition of ours. We need to share this with those who come within these walls, and to those we encounter at work, school, and other places where we associate with others. We have so much to offer to one another and to the larger community in which we live!

But let's look at the facts. Most of us are come outers from other religious communities and traditions: we feel we don't know enough about Unitarianism to talk about it comfortably. And if that isn't enough to inhibit us, we sense, and with good reason, that at the present time our movement has no one certain recognisable theological shape. And to top it off, I fear sometimes we are so well-behaved and proper that we stifle within us the very thing that needs to be said about what we believe and value, and what brings us together in this place of common worship and celebration.

As is so often the case, weaknesses can be strengths; being new to this religious and ethical community means that we are not hide bound to customary ways of perception and expression. Not knowing is an invitation to learn. And freedom so great as this can liberate us to speak and act up, to seize an extraordinary opportunity and create our own ways of doing theology, justice, and building community.

Andrew Delbanco recently claimed that "the most striking feature of contemporary culture is the unslaked thirst for transcendence." I think that he has got it just about right. The signs of that desire for experiencing something greater, better, nobler in our lives are all around us. I have suggested today that there are three ways in which we can bid transcendence, that experience of creation Sabbath, a hearty welcome into our lives through mundane, everyday rituals; through understanding and acting out our lives as a story; and by learning and expressing what we value most deeply in this religious society of ours. May we cultivate them this year ahead of us!