

SABBATH IN THE SUBURBS

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A Family's Experiment
with Holy Time

MaryAnn McKibben Dana



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For Robert

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Dad, you're the reason why the words are in me.

A Note to the Reader

When you get to the heart of it, we were looking for a way to cheat time.

From the moment my husband and I became parents, we were told, “Don’t blink. It goes by so fast.” But in the hazy glow of maternity and paternity leave, we found this impossible to believe. Days with a newborn stretched out into seemingly endless expanses of time. She nursed a dozen times a day, sometimes for an hour or more. Robert and I took turns rocking her for long stretches of the evening. We went for meandering walks pushing the stroller. We watched her sleep. We marched back and forth with her on our shoulders as she wailed, a cry so loud I’m sure it’s still reverberating in some parallel universe. Diaper changes, baths—all were slow and sometimes fumbling thanks to our inexperience. We rarely multitasked.

New parenthood was exhausting—an all-encompassing job that sometimes overwhelmed us. But one thing it wasn’t was fleeting. The days were long. We were awash in time.

Parental leave ended soon enough and we went back to work. The baby’s face kept changing overnight. Then she rolled over, gummed soggy crackers, walked, went to daycare, boarded the school bus. Without warning, those long hours together had shrunk down to a few snatches of time: at the breakfast table, after school, at bedtime, and on weekends. Caroline also gained a sister and a brother, and the process repeated, but there was even less opportunity to cherish the passage of time.

At last we understood what everyone had been saying. It does go by fast. And we want our children to grow up. But was there a way to slow things down a little? To breathe, bask, and behold?

Our Sabbath project grew out of a desire to reclaim some of the unhurried wonder of those early days of parenthood—to see what would happen if, on one day out of seven, we stopped working, striving, and hurrying. The result of this experience was clarifying,

expansive, and freeing. It was also annoying, difficult, and odd. Our house was a perpetual wreck. We fell behind on work and domestic tasks. Our day-long togetherness sometimes drove us crazy.

Yet we wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

This book is for anyone who wants to learn to live at a savoring pace, especially in the company of family and loved ones. It's for parents who look around at the arms race of activities, sports, enrichment, and homework, and who feel a sense of unease amid all the good intentions and hard work. It's for people like a friend of mine, who looked up one day and noticed that it had been four months since her family had a day without anything on the calendar.

This book is for committed Christians, for whom Sabbath is a familiar concept, though perhaps not practiced much anymore. It's also for folks who grew up Christian but who no longer adhere to that faith, for people of other religious traditions, and for those who are suspicious of religion altogether. Though I write from a Christian perspective, I meet people every day from all walks of life who sense something dysfunctional about the pace at which many of us live. The longing to slow down, take stock, and experience delight transcends spiritual boundaries.

Each chapter chronicles our triumphs and struggles during a particular month of the project, along with practical wisdom and advice. Several chapters contain tips or tricks that helped us make Sabbath more pleasant and kid-friendly, called "Sabbath Hacks." A hack, whether in computer programming or life, is an "inelegant but effective solution to a problem." This Wikipedia definition sums up our Sabbath practice: imperfect and cobbled together.

When we began our year of Sabbath, we started with a simple rule: no work one day a week. This guideline seemed elegant in its simplicity but inadequate. In practice, we found our definition of Sabbath changing often as circumstances changed. To describe the evolution of our thinking about Sabbath, each chapter contains a section called "The Work of Sabbath." Check out these essays for other ways to define Sabbath and consider what it could mean in your life.

This is a book about a crusty old practice called Sabbath, but it's really a book about time. Sabbath became the lens through which we saw ourselves: the ways we hurry and the deep goodness in the moments when we don't. Through Sabbath, we came to new understandings about ourselves, our work, our dreams for our children, and the passions that drive us.

Let us begin.

1

Beginnings

If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

—E. B. WHITE¹

“Something’s got to change.”

“I know, but what? How?”

The island was working on us, like it had for thousands who’d traveled here before us.

Back in the sixth century, the legend goes, an Irish monk hopped aboard a boat with no steering system, convinced that God and providence would wash him ashore where he needed to be. That place was Iona, the tiny isle in the Inner Hebrides where Christianity touched Scotland for the first time. Columba (later St. Columba) built an abbey church there. A nunnery came later, and for countless generations, Iona was a mission outpost for western Scotland.

Now, some fourteen hundred years later, Iona is a popular spot for pilgrims and tourists with a spiritual bent. My husband Robert and I had traveled there in 2007 with a group from the church I served as associate pastor. I was there as a spiritual guide and tour director but was needing a little guidance and direction of my own.

Iona is famously described as a thin place—a place where heaven draws very close to earth. (My list of thin places also includes hospital deathbeds, labor and delivery rooms, and U2 concerts.)

The craggy landscape, crumbling Celtic landmarks, and sunshine slanting late into the evening make the place feel heavenly. But

it was the silence that did something to me. I'm a city girl, always have been, and never realized how accustomed I was to a basic drone of noise until that noise disappeared. There are precious few mechanical sounds on the island. An occasional car. A distant lawn mower, though these are rare because the wandering sheep do most of the grass-trimming work. A plane, so high we could barely hear it, going from London to Reykjavik perhaps. After several days, the silence had seeped into my bones, making my chest heave from the sheer otherworldly beauty of it. I began to crave the silence that begins in the ears and permeates the whole body. A peace that is not thin but *thick*.

It was a peace that held up a mirror to my not-so-peaceful life back home in the suburbs of Washington, DC. We'd traveled via plane, train, bus, and two ferries to escape, but somehow a gaggle of discontented questions had stowed away in my carryon.

My husband Robert and I had numerous soul-searching conversations on that island. Our lives felt way too full, we realized, with two careers, two young children, and volunteer obligations perpetually tugging at us. Not to mention the countless tasks required to keep the lawn minimally mowed (forget gardening), the bills paid (forget filing), and the clothes cleaned (forget folding and *really* forget ironing). None of these household tasks was all that burdensome, but taken together, they often left us feeling we'd never get on top of it all.

Each morning we would ready the girls for school and daycare. Even as I brushed their teeth I felt the clock ticking and the work tasks piling up. "Hurry up, let's go!" was our default phrase; I feared our daughters would someday etch it on our tombstones. Our tempers were too short, our leisure time too chopped up. And yet our neighborhood was full of kids who were enrolled in way more activities than ours were, leaving us feeling that we were failing at our parental duty to give them every opportunity for enrichment and achievement.

We were still reeling from the news that our third child was on the way, the one we called our bonus baby. We were excited with a side of awe. But the question nagged, "How will we do it all?" Our life felt like a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle with 600 pieces.

During the week at Iona, we hiked around the island as part of the Iona Community's weekly pilgrimage. This pilgrimage included a visit to Marble Quarry, not far from the beach where Columba is said to have made landfall. The rocks there are 2.4 billion years old,

some of the oldest rocks in the world. I chose three to take home and listened to them clacking in my pockets for the rest of the hike.

We were here long before you, and we'll be here long after you.

There they were: three smooth pebbles of perspective. We have such a short time on this earth. How did we want to live it? Always busy, working on the next project, chore, or errand? Or with an attitude of unhurried trust and joy?

Our last night on the island, these questions, and the night air, beckoned us outside. We scrambled over a fence, climbed a squat hill, found a couple of large tufts of wild grass to sit on, and had our final State of the Union conversation. The sun was setting, although it was nearly 10 p.m. I imagined the sun still shining brightly in Northern Virginia, where the girls would be having a late afternoon snack. I imagined Caroline's blond hair flowing as she rode her bike—the training wheels would be coming off soon—and Margaret's cocoa-brown eyes as she sucked on three fingers and took in everything her big sister did. I gave silent thanks for my mother, who was taking care of them while we floated in the North Atlantic. I missed them. I owed it to them to come home changed. If they were going to be without their mother for a week, they at least deserved a new-and-improved one.

“Something needs to change, but what?” Robert asked. “We both love our jobs. I think you'd be unhappy staying home full time. I suspect I would be, too.”

“Maybe it's where we live,” I mused. “Things are so crazy in DC. I don't think it's like that everywhere.”

“Yes. There are places in the world where you don't get honked at the nanosecond the light turns green.” We laughed. “But what about your mother? It's so wonderful to have family nearby. We wouldn't be able to do things like this if it weren't for her.”

Our discussion meandered, aimless. We even considered chucking it all and going to live on a farm in the country. This got us laughing again.

“We know nothing about farming,” I said. “It would be like a bad reality show.”

“Not to mention that that lifestyle is anything but easy,” he replied, his practical side showing as always.

No, there would be no geographical cure.

Out of nowhere I said, “What about Sabbath? What if we took a day off from everything each week? Errands, job, housecleaning, all that stuff.” The word “Sabbath” tasted strange in my mouth, but something about it felt right, too.

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“Soooo . . .,” Robert began slowly. “We feel like there’s not enough time to get it all done, and now we’re going to have even less time to do it?”

“But that’s always going to be the case. Let’s turn it around and set aside the time for rest and fun. Remember fun?”

He smiled. I continued.

“Right now we take little moments, but that’s only after we’ve finished everything else. It’s like we have to ‘earn’ it. What if we took a whole day no matter what?”

After some discussion, Robert agreed: “Yeah. Let’s do it.” Then he added, “It’s one of those things that sounds easy, but I think it will be hard. Especially for you.”

It was. Especially for me.

* * *

“Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy.” It’s one of the Ten Commandments, but one most folks don’t take very seriously. It’s the cute commandment. The one we easily dismiss.

Sabbath-keeping seems quaint in the twenty-first century. Most people can admit that it’s a nice idea, a lofty, pleasant-sounding but unattainable goal. Even among Jews, for whom Sabbath is a key part of religious practice, the sabbath day is relatively rare; a quick Google search turns up surveys suggesting that only a quarter to a third of Jewish households observe the Sabbath in some way. Sabbath feels like one of those cultural trappings from the Bible that doesn’t apply any more, like polygamy or washing a guest’s feet when they enter a house.

But what’s not to like? A day each week without work . . . a day to unplug, unwind, laugh, play, and love. It was worth a try. On one day, we would not multitask. We would not map out the optimal way to get our errands done with cranky kids in tow. We would not shop. We would not plan. We would stop, which is the literal meaning of Sabbath—“Shabbat” in Hebrew. We would rest, and we would not expend energy except to do the things that we enjoy.

The world would go on without us. We would be dispensable. We would let God’s grace seep into us in a way that it can’t when our lives are crammed full of activity.

For one day a week, we would let the laundry sit in the basket, let the leaves languish on the lawn, let the bills sit unpaid on the desk.

For one day a week, we would take a day of rest that, we hoped, would help put the remainder of the week in better perspective.

But how, *how* were we going make this happen? How does it work, with two careers and three children, and the relentless tasks that make up life in the modern world? As a pastor, I work every Sunday morning, plus many Sunday afternoons. There are committee meetings in the evenings, Saturday retreats, and late-night phone calls with parishioners in need. Weekends are our time to catch up on chores and errands.

The laundry will not do itself. If we didn't have small kids in the house, we could put off going to the grocery store, gamely subsisting on whatever we might find in our kitchen. But it feels irresponsible to feed growing bodies a meal consisting of Wheaties, half a bag of frozen pearl onions, and Catalina dressing.

There had to be some best practices—after all, people have been doing this for thousands of years. In my post-Iona glow, I decided to consult some experts, hopeful that they could help with the “how.” I found every book on Sabbath I could get my hands on. These were helpful companions, as far as they went. Other people apparently also found the pace of life as confounding as I did. Other people saw our 24-7 world to be exhausting and dysfunctional too.

The problem was, parenting is a 24-7 job. Parenting *is* work. And none of the books I found had much to say about how to do Sabbath with children. They were beautiful books with urgent pleas to take a break, to observe a holy rhythm of work and rest. But they seemed to be written by people without children, or folks whose kids were grown.

The Jewish-oriented books were fascinating, and the rituals were beautiful. *This is deep stuff*, I mused, as I read about candles and fresh challah bread, prayers said by mother and father, and the blessing of children. These books were more family oriented and at least acknowledged the presence of children more than the Christian books did. I read about homes in which children tear toilet paper the day before Sabbath for the family's use; tearing is one of the activities that's prohibited on Shabbat.

But the orthodox Sabbath did not suit us. A stay-at-home mother seemed to be a key ingredient to making it all work. One book dispatched with the arrangements for Shabbat in a single sentence: “Preparations intensify on Friday as we engage in shopping, cooking, and cleaning to make everything ready for Shabbat.”² I

was incredulous: *That's it!?!?* How exactly does the challah get purchased? The house tidied? The food prepared? Who remembers to unscrew the light in the refrigerator so it won't come on the next day? (Thou shalt not kindle fire.) How does all this happen before sundown—or more precisely, eighteen minutes before sundown as the rabbis specified?

Other books were more practical, with step-by-step guides, recipes, and cheerful urges to do what you can and start where you are. One author, a working mother herself, provided a charmingly frenzied diary of her preparations for Shabbat, including a tense countdown to the candle-lighting moment.³ Another writer titled her essay “Preparing for Shabbat: A Frantic Approach.”⁴

Ultimately, we couldn't go the Orthodox Jewish route. We are Christians. Copying the Jewish Shabbat felt like co-opting a practice that was not our own.

We decided to set the books on a shelf for possible reference and figure it out ourselves.

For a couple of years after Iona, we dabbled with Sabbath. We'd get it right one weekend and miss the next four. We'd high-five ourselves for going two weeks in a row, then find ourselves three months later, worn out and dazed, and one of us would ask, “Whatever happened to the Sabbath thing?”

Oh, yeah. That.

Meanwhile, James was born. He's almost three now, our only boy, who inherited Matchbox cars from family friends and will turn anything—potato masher, toilet paper tube—into a pretend vehicle. Margaret is four, our exuberant child who never walks when she can skip and who cycles through a dozen or more moods each day.

Caroline is nearly eight, an age at which she is starting to expand her world, yet still likes being around us. She reads Magic Tree House books, devouring them in forty-five-minute bursts, sneaking them under the dinner table. She's involved in a few after-school activities—mainly Girl Scouts and piano lessons—and when we talk to friends with older children about how we don't want to overcommit her, they look at us sympathetically, as if they want to pat our hands and say, “Good luck with that.”

* * *

In the months after Iona and James's birth, we muddled along with our fitful Sabbath observance, doing well, then falling off the wagon. Then something happened that helped crystallize things and got us serious about Sabbath again.

Caroline's elementary school made some changes to the bus route that delayed the kids' arrival home in the afternoon. Many parents found this unacceptable and decided to mount a petition and letter-writing campaign. After three weeks of phone calls, letters, and updates at the bus stop, the schedule got changed: other children would stay on the bus longer so that our kids would get home four minutes sooner.

Four whole minutes.

The parental blitzkrieg for the sake of four minutes of afternoon time struck me as ridiculous. When the draft petition went out over e-mail, I wrote a painstaking response, picking my words as carefully as a SWAT team member diffusing a bomb.

The fact that the whole affair bothered me so much was a sign, I felt. I didn't want to live the kind of life in which an extra four minutes were so crucial to my family's schedule that I would petition the county government to get my way.

But the bus stop petition exposed the insanity in my own life. I, too, treated time as a scarce commodity to be hoarded. It was a constant struggle to keep from gripping tightly to every four-minute nugget of time, maximizing every moment, multitasking as if my life depended on it.

I'm no saint when it comes to time. I do not smile beatifically at the grocery store checker with the crashed register. I do not breathe deep cleansing breaths at life's little annoyances. One afternoon on my way to a meeting, I made a wrong turn onto a street that—of course—had several blocks of stop-and-go traffic to suffer through before I found a place to turn around. Did I accept this situation with the Zen-like equanimity of a woman who refuses to sign a bus stop petition? No, I pounded the steering wheel and shrieked with frustration.

I work more than I should and find it hard to rest—surely I will let someone down if I take time off. I find every excuse to put off silence, meditation, and prayer, even as I preach about their importance to

the congregation I serve. I'm way too plugged into technology for too many hours of the day.

I feel muddled by my own spiritual contradictions. I want my children to live an unhurried childhood, even as I jam tiny feet into shoes, scooting us out the door so we won't be late. I believe that our constant drive for kids to *Go! Do! Be!* can have perilous consequences. But as Caroline brings home flyers and permission slips for science club, campouts, and Spanish, I see how overloading one's children is such a gradual process—a thousand small, well-intentioned decisions, not a single cataclysmic blunder.

So after too many fits and starts, we're going all in: one year of Sabbath practice. That's one day, every week, from September to August. There will be no work. No tidying. No answering e-mails. No sermon writing. Those errands and chores that take up a week-end? They will have to be done on the nonsabbath day, shoehorned into the weekdays, or (gulp) not done at all.

Could we pull it off?

We were about to find out.

* * *

Christians typically get an understanding of Sabbath from the Ten Commandments and from the story of creation. According to Genesis 1, God made the universe and everything in it and then rested for a time: "On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:2–3). God did it, so we should do it. The rhythm is established.

But for Jews, there is another narrative that resonates as strongly as the creation story. The sabbath day is a gift for the Jewish people because it reminds them of the time when their people were slaves in Egypt, captive to Pharaoh's regime. They were forced to work, not six days a week but every day of the week (Ex. 1). There was no freedom, no relief—just the constant lashing of expectations: do more, produce more, build more.

But God brought the people out of slavery. God parted the Red Sea and gave them safe passage to freedom, and with it, the Ten Commandments. Among them? *For six days shall work be done, but*

the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest (Ex. 20:8–11). So the Jewish observance of Sabbath is an exclamation to the world:

We are not slaves to the empire anymore!

We are free!

I'm a captive too, but of a very different sort. I feel enslaved to the type-A madness of my environment and my own soul.

I'm longing for the Promised Land.

And Sabbath is my Red Sea, I'm sure of it.