



# RHYTHMS *of* REST

Finding the Spirit *of* Sabbath  
in a Busy World

SHELLY MILLER



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*For H, who embodies a Sabbath heart  
and defines rest by the way he lives and loves,  
every moment since the day we first met.*

A self is not something static, tied up in a pretty parcel and handed to the child finished and complete. A self is always becoming. *Being* does mean “becoming,” but we run so fast that it is only when we seem to stop—as sitting on the rock at a brook—that we are aware of our own “isness,” of being. But certainly this is not static, for this awareness of being is always a way of moving from the selfish self—the self-image—and toward the real. Who am I, then? Who are you?

Madeline L’Engle, *Circle of Quiet*

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# Foreword

Most of us who practice Sabbath came to it slantwise and stumbling. It wasn't some mountaintop epiphany that brought us to the place—it was hopelessness, raggedness, lostness. We were at our wit's end. All our doing had turned into undoing. We had run out of strength and wisdom to manage the wild and yet drab perplexity and complexity of our lives. We had nothing left to give, nowhere else to go.

And then somehow, by some miracle of grace, we heard a voice: *Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

At the time, we might not have even recognized whose voice it was: we'd grown *that* deaf. All we knew was that our failure to heed the voice would be death. So we came. And we made a beginning, clumsy at first. We weren't accustomed to receiving. We'd lost the art of childlikeness. But slowly, haltingly, we started to breathe again, to feel the hardness of earth and the coolness of water again, to stretch our limbs, to open our eyes, to unclench our fists, to laugh, to cry, to *feel*.

And we discovered whose voice it was: the Lord of Harvest and the Lord of Sabbath. *Eat*, he says. *There is bread to spare*. *Rest*, he says. *I'll keep watch*. *Play*, he says. *Stop trying to run the universe*.

Shelly Miller knows all this. Her book bears the sure marks of the desperate. She is not a guru telling us the secrets of enlightenment. She is a fellow traveler telling us where she found bread. Hers is the testimony of the child who lost her way and then, by sheer grace, stumbled unto the only path that leads home and took the hand of the only guide who knows how to walk it. And now she invites us—out of her own overflowing joy and thankfulness—to find that path, to take that hand.

I wrote a book once about my own discovery of Sabbath. Ever since, the practice of rest has become for me a weekly gift of renewal. And ever since, I look for one thing above all in any book on Sabbath: the author's deep—personal, intimate, in the bones—understanding that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. I look for a second thing as well: that Jesus himself, through the author's words, invites us to abide with him.

Shelly delivers on both counts. Here is her testimony of running out of herself and, just in time, falling fresh into the arms of Jesus. And if you attend carefully to that testimony, you will hear Jesus himself calling you. *Are you weary and heavy laden? Are you tired? Come*, he says. *I will show you my ways. I will give you true rest*.

This, I suggest, is why you're holding this book now: to hear that voice, and heed it.

Mark Buchanan  
Author of *The Rest of God: Restoring  
Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath*



# Beginnings

If you keep the Sabbath, you start to see creation not as somewhere to get away from your ordinary life, but a place to frame attentiveness to your life.

Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*

The week before Christmas, I make a pact with myself: I will sit down and finish writing personal notes in each of several cards lying in a stack on my desk.

These cards were pulled out of a box on the first day of December, along with ornaments for the tree and decorations for the mantel. My aspirations about the holiday season were obviously fueled by idealism. But before I start another project—wrapping gifts, baking cookies, or tidying up the house—I am determined I will finish what is most time sensitive.

Head bent over my desk, I glide black ink over white linen card stock, insert the cards into envelopes, close the flaps, and affix stamps. Momentum toward achieving the goal I created for myself becomes a syncopated rhythm with the discovery of a missing detail: the address for my new friend Susanna. I compose a quick email, press send, and flip the kettle on.

*Hi, Susanna,*

*Hope all is well in your world. I know this is a busy time for all of us—thinking about you and praying your Advent has been meaningful. Can you send me your mailing address when you have a few moments?*

I met Susanna during a speaking engagement, a retreat day for clergy wives on the theme of Sabbath. Every time I scoured the audience for responsiveness, I noticed she was sitting on the edge of her seat making eye contact, and either nodding or scribing copious notes in the notebook on her lap. Body language assured me the message I was delivering, at least for her, was indeed relevant. After I returned home, I received a follow-up email from Susanna, a thank-you with an invitation to meet again. I learned that she is not only the wife of a pastor and the mother of two young children but also a published author seeking direction about her next writing project. We have a lot in common. Over the next few months, generous conversations between us echo the spirit of her timely response to my email, words declaring more than I expected.

“Have I been having a meaningful Advent? Amazingly, yes, and it has so much to do with you! Reading your emails has been so life-giving for me.” I can almost hear the excitement in Susanna’s voice as I read her response and feel my heart begin racing with anticipation.

The emails she is referring to are weekly letters I send to hundreds who make up the Sabbath Society, people who say, “I’m all in” when it comes to making rhythms of rest a reality. The letters are meant to encourage and garner accountability, but often the replies I receive back are more than a thank-you or pat answer to the questions I pose. What I receive instead are accounts of restoration and a surprising return to true self. Susanna subscribed to the Sabbath Society shortly after I extended the invitation to the women attending the retreat day. Susanna’s letter to me continued:

*I have started taking time each day for that place of meaning and home and rest. I can't explain it, but I feel happier, more at peace, more able to cope, and weirdly, I realized last night right before going on date night with my man, I like myself more. Over dinner, he said to me, "You're energized, it's great, I love being with you."*

*I feel like I am finding my way, and I don't ever want to go back. Also, I have been having so many ideas; I know creativity thrives in me when I rest. This year has actually been different! I don't know how I can say this, a pastor's wife before Christmas with two kids in school. Also, I have been more organized and actually seem more on top of things. If they could just bottle it and sell it!*

*She likes herself more?* When I initiated the Sabbath Society several years ago, I had no idea I would receive this kind of response to a weekly email. I didn't foresee mentoring people on how to incorporate Sabbath as a rhythm of life. I don't claim special credentials allowing me to be known as an expert on Sabbath-keeping. I'm still learning every day how to rest well myself. What I know is this: In the same way that beginning a New Year with a clean slate and fresh hope motivates us toward change, finding a rhythm of rest in a busy world makes life radically different. Susanna's positive experience is a common outcome among the community, but I pray that transformation never becomes commonplace. Once you open the gift of Sabbath, you will never want to go back to life as usual.

Rhythms of rest are possible because they were there from the beginning. The account of creation in Genesis is our example. When God created the world, he started with a clean slate and fresh vision. Each day incorporated a specific rhythm with rest as the endgame (Genesis 1–2:4).

On the first day, he created light and darkness, and on the second day, he made the heavens. The third day, he created the earth and filled it with vegetation. On the fourth day of the week, God

separated day from night, creating signs in the moon, stars, and sun for days, years, and seasons. Can you see the preparation in his mind? The way he organizes time with care toward detail while at the same time anticipating future implications?

On the fifth day, he populated the sea with creatures and the heavens with birds. The sixth day, he made beasts that creep and crawl and walk on the earth, and then he made humankind in his image to have dominion over all the animals. And we think *we* have had a full week!

God stood back and looked at all he had done, rehearsing each previous day of work with the conclusion of deep satisfaction. *Good*. He decided the results of his work had been good. Isn't this how we long to approach the weekend, satisfied with our work and ready for relaxation? Unfortunately, contentment in work that lends permission to rest seems elusive. Our work is never fully finished. And that's why we don't allow time for rest.

According to a study by Oxford Economics, Americans aren't using vacation days and are essentially working for free almost one week per year. Workers are only using 77 percent of their paid time off, the biggest decline in the past four decades. In 2013, the report found that U.S. workers took an average of sixteen days of vacation compared with slightly more than twenty days in 2000.<sup>1</sup> And the reasons why people aren't allowing for time off seem to be common no matter the geography.

Fear of an increased workload once we return, working longer hours in order to keep up with the fast pace, we're worried that other people will assess our time off as being slack, lazy, or incompetent. And even when we do have time off work, we may silence the alarm clock and avoid an office commute, but we often use whitespace to get things done: paint a room of the house, clean the garden until our bones ache, polish the boat, or carpool kids to birthday parties and sporting events. Time off often means we rehearse what we will do next.

On the sixth day, God didn't say, "I'm finished"—full stop—as a justification for a day of rest on the seventh. God is in the business

of continually creating, and his work is never fully finished. The work you have to do while you are on this earth is never fully finished either. Sabbath isn't an allowance for rest when the dishes are done, projects are complete, or when your volunteerism is on hiatus.

Genesis tells us that a day of rest was on God's heart long before he made it a commandment. The seventh day is more than a day to sleep in, check out, and be a lump on the couch while binge-watching our favorite TV shows. The day God chose to rest is the first time he names something *holy*.

*Holy* is unique to God's character, a nature Christians aspire to imitate for achieving moral character. But don't confuse holy with perfectionism in following a set of rules. *Holy* means "set apart," which isn't only limited to people. *Holy* is also used to describe places where God is present. Words like *transcendent*, *awe*, *supernatural*, *fear*, and *reverence* are also used in conjunction with describing the holy.

*Holy* isn't a word we often use to describe Sabbath in today's culture. We assume a day set apart for rest is impossible, old school, unattainable, not holy. Here is one of many examples I gleaned affirming this notion; a status update from a friend on Facebook.

*Well, another Sabbath day arriveth, my friends. The problem I'm finding is that Sundays rarely feel restful and life-giving.*

*We're hustling and bustling in the morning to get ourselves and the kids ready for church. "For heaven's sake, come here and put your pants on so we can go!" is often said to one or both of the kids every Sunday. And sometimes [my husband] has to say it to me, too.*

*Then there's church itself, which is always a crapshoot with our kids. It can go fine or REALLY NOT FINE—and usually a crapshoot with me too. Small talk isn't my forte, and every now and then being in church opens up some old wounds that are still healing. So it's a tender time. (I see you, folks who still can't go to church. I see you.)*

*Then there's lunch after service. We jet home, wrestle [my daughter's] phenomenal stubborn will to get her down for a nap, get [my other child] settled after a high-sensory-input morning, then start cleaning and getting ready to host our small group at 5 p.m. (that can include up to twenty people).*

*Then there's the kids' bedtime routine. After they're out, I completely crash, only to get up and start the week on Monday, totally drained and wiped out.*

SUNDAYS ARE NOT SABBATH FOR ME.

*I'm trying to figure out how to honor and practice the art of Sabbath in our home when Sundays look like anything but rest for us.*

*Sincerely,  
Drained in Utah*

Sound familiar?

I believe the frustration *Drained in Utah* is communicating is common among many—the assumption that Sabbath is a routine we create. But God created rest to be as natural as breathing. Sabbath is the exhale required after six days of inhaling our work.

Routines are meant to be structured with a specific purpose in mind. Think of dancers, cheerleaders, marching bands, taking the trash out before collection, or even the routine of caring for an elderly person. One small misstep has negative implications and sometimes dire consequences. Routines are often rigid and concrete, correct or incorrect. Usually a person implements rules or follows a routine in order to control a specific outcome. Routines aren't bad; after all, most of us implement a routine of showering, brushing our teeth, and eating three meals a day. We like knowing when the trash will be picked up.

Rhythms, on the other hand, are nuanced and unique to each individual. Rhythms describe the art of living a life embodied with meaning and intention in the same way God creates. The way you move out, adapt to, and integrate with the world around you is like

a free-flowing dance of choices. Pay attention to your surroundings, adapt while remaining open to adjustments, and integrate with the world around you. Rhythms shift while remaining focused on what is most important.<sup>2</sup>

A plethora of studies show that the brain requires alternating periods of structured work followed by unstructured rest in order to maximize function. And my friend Susanna is one example among many, proving that in a matter of a few weeks a rhythm of rest is not only possible but life-giving, no matter what your stage of life or circumstance. Sabbath is realistic even when the time you choose to rest is the busiest day of the week. But Sabbath isn't limited to the weekend.

When God made remembering Sabbath the fourth commandment,<sup>3</sup> he asked us to make the day holy and set apart. And when Jesus came to the earth as one of us, he set us free from the law of how Sabbath should look. The commandments are still relevant today because truth never changes; it is always and eternally true. However, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our sins changes the rules of Sabbath to a day of grace. He is waiting for us to be with him and to trust that his commandments are good, no matter what day or how much time we choose to give him. Jesus *is* Sabbath. When we make the day different on his behalf, holiness inhabits our intentions.

A few years ago, during Advent, I stumbled upon Sabbath only to find *awe*, *transcendence*, and *reverence* aren't just words describing the God we know from Genesis, but a common way of experiencing him when rest is the focus. The unexpected surprise we open each week is like a letter sliding into your inbox: personal, generous, and more than you expected. Rest isn't only a choice we make from a menu of options, but rather the focus of our time set apart from work.

Whether a rhythm of silent pauses at your desk, a couple of hours to quiet thoughts midweek, or a whole day to play and ponder on the weekend—when we choose a rhythm of Sabbath, everything changes. You may even like yourself more.

But first, you must choose to begin.