

“*Cultivating the Inner Life II: Sabbath Time*” a sermon at EUMC  
by the Rev. Dr. Kathlyn James text: Mark 6:30-34 7-29-07

Some time ago, I walked into my office and discovered a book lying on the desk. It was a gift from a member of the congregation, who had seen the authors in an interview on the Oprah Winfrey show. There was a message attached: “*Kathlyn, you have to read this book! It’s great stuff.*”

I always appreciate it when church folks route books and articles my way. It makes sermon preparation into a communal enterprise. So I read the book, and I want to commend it to you all this morning. It’s called *The Power of Full Engagement*, by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz.

The book is really a management book, in the same genre as Stephen Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Like Covey’s book, it also has religious undertones and implications. The basic idea behind *The Power of Full Engagement* is that managing *energy*, rather than time, is the key to high performance and personal renewal.

One of the main points in the book is that **if you want to maximize your positive energy in life, you have to alternate periods of activity with periods of rest.**

**Take physical energy, for instance.** Athletes have always known that if you want to build your physical capacity, you have to train by pushing yourself beyond your normal limits, beyond your comfort zone, and then backing off, allowing your body time to recover. Your muscles need twenty-four to forty-eight hours to be replenished, grow stronger, and become better able to handle the next challenge.

But you need this rhythm---*both* the systematic pushing, and the recovery time---in order to build physical capacity. If you push too hard for too long, stressing beyond ordinary limits without letting up, you will actually break down your muscles and your body’s ability to perform. If you never push at all, and become a couch potato, your muscles will atrophy and your physical capacity will likewise be diminished. In order to *build* physical strength and endurance, **you need repeated oscillation between activity and rest.** Listen to this passage from the book:

Nearly every athlete we have worked with over the years has come to us with performance problems that could be traced to an imbalance between the expenditure and recovery of energy. They were either overtraining or undertraining...Both overtraining and undertraining have performance consequences that include persistent injuries and sickness, anxiety, negativity and anger, difficulty concentrating, and loss of passion. We achieved our breakthroughs with athletes by helping them to more skillfully manage energy—pushing themselves to systematically increase capacity, but also building in regular recovery as part of their training regimens.

The authors continue:

When we expend energy, we draw down our reservoir. When we recover energy, we fill it back up. ...Full engagement requires cultivating a dynamic balance between the expenditure of energy and the renewal of energy in all dimensions. We call this rhythmic wave oscillation, and it represents the fundamental pulse of life.<sup>i</sup>

Balancing stress and recovery time is critical not just in sports, but in all facets of our lives. If we want to maximize our **mental capacity**, for instance, we need to oscillate between periods of mental stretching---through concentrated study, perhaps---and periods of mental rest. How many older adults do you know who do crossword puzzles or cultivate new interests for just this reason: to keep their minds active and alert? Artists and scientists testify that creativity demands both periods of focused concentration and periods of mental disengagement. Albert Einstein said that his best ideas came to him while he was shaving in the morning.

**Emotionally, too, we grow through this same pattern of oscillation.** If you want to build capacity for emotional depth and resilience, you need to push beyond your normal limits by actively engaging with other people and with your own feelings. But no one can sustain intensity of emotion all the time without going numb or burning out. So periodically you need to back off, disengage, and give yourself an emotional rest.

**What about the spiritual dimension of life?** Does the same principle apply? You remember that one of the 10 Commandments is the commandment to keep the Sabbath, to work productively for six days each week, and to honor the seventh as a day of rest. The word “Sabbath” comes from the Hebrew verb *shabbat*, which means, “to rest.” One of the earliest teachings in the Bible, then, specifies that for our *spiritual* strength and endurance, we are to adopt a life pattern of oscillation between engagement and disengagement. **We are to alternate between activity and rest, work and Sabbath time.**

My favorite story about the importance of Sabbath time is a true story. It involves a wagon train that traveled from St. Louis to Oregon, in the 1800's. The wagon train's members were devout Christians, so the whole group made a practice of stopping every Sunday, to observe a day of rest.

Winter was approaching quickly, however, and some members of the group began to panic, in fear that they wouldn't reach their destination before the heavy snows. Consequently, several members proposed to the others that they should quit resting on the Sabbath and continue driving onward, seven days a week.

This proposal triggered great contention in the community. Finally it was suggested that the wagon train should split up into two groups---those who wanted to observe the Sabbath by resting, and those who wanted to travel on that day. The proposal was accepted. Both groups traveled together until the next Sunday, when one group went on while the other remained at rest.

Guess which group got to Oregon first.<sup>ii</sup>

You're right. The ones who kept the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment reached their destination first. Both the horses and the people were so rested by their Sabbath time that they could travel much more vigorously the other six days of the week.

**This pattern, or principle, occurs again and again in the Bible.** When Moses, the powerhouse of the Exodus, becomes weary of leading his people through their trials in the desert, God tells him, *"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."* Isaiah, one of the great prophets of Israel, promises: *"In returning and rest you shall find salvation; in quietness and trust you shall find your strength."* In the New Testament, Jesus says, *"Come to me, all who toil and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* *"Learn from me,"* he invites, *"and you will find rest for your souls."*

When we think of Jesus, we usually think of him teaching, preaching to the multitudes, or attending to the crowds of people who sought his healing touch. But Jesus would just as often send people away, or disappear without warning, dismissing those in need with neither explanation nor excuse, and retreat to a place of rest:

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. (Matthew 14:23)

But so much the more the report went abroad concerning him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. But he withdrew into the wilderness and prayed. (Luke 5:15-16)

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together about the door...And in the morning, a great while before the day, he rose and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. (Mark 1:32-33, 35-36)

Jesus didn't wait until everyone had been properly cared for, until all who sought him were healed. He did not ask permission to go, or even let his disciples know where he was going. **Jesus obeyed a deeper rhythm.** When the time for rest had come, the time for work was over. He would simply stop, retire to a quiet place, and pray.

And Jesus didn't only model this for his disciples; he taught them to do the same. The text that was our reading for this morning opens with a flurry of activity: the disciples have been running around, preaching and teaching, as the gospel writer says, *"many were coming and going, and they had no leisure, even to eat."* Sounds like a description of many of our lives, doesn't it? Hurried, breathless, even our meals eaten on the go. *"Many were coming and going, and they had no leisure, even to eat."*

In the midst of all this activity, Jesus says to the disciples, **"Come away by yourselves to a deserted place, and rest awhile."** And they do. They climb into the boat, leave the crowds behind, and go off by themselves to a quiet place, to pray.

It's interesting to note, especially as we continue this sermon series on "cultivating the inner life," that one translation of the biblical verb "*to pray*" is, in fact, "*to come to rest*." The biblical assumption is that **when we pray, at least three things happen:**

First, **we withdraw.** We pull away from the activities and demands of the world, from the scramble of panting feverishness<sup>iii</sup> that describes too much of our lives. We don't wait until all our work is completed---in fact, for the *sake* of our productivity and effectiveness, we know we need to oscillate *away* from work, and leave it for a time.

Secondly, **we allow our souls to quiet down.** I heard of a woman who practiced this every night before going to sleep. She would lie down in her bed in the darkness, and as the worries and cares of the day arose in her mind, she would imagine placing each one at the foot of a cross that stood on her nightstand. She would say, "*Here, God, I give this worry to you for tonight, to carry while I sleep. And this. And this. Today I have expended my energy doing your will, as best I can discern it. And now I lay it down, trusting you with everything.*" Then she would relax into sleep, as if into the arms of God, who she imagined as holding and rocking the world.

Finally, in this state of spiritual rest, **we open ourselves to guidance from God.** The Tao Te Ching says, "*Who is it that can make muddy water clear? But if allowed to remain still, it will gradually become clear of itself.*" There seems to be a spiritual law of gravity that allows things at rest to settle, to find their place. In quiet prayer, Sabbath time, we discover a gradual clarifying of perception, a strengthened sense of purpose, and a **renewal of energy with which to return to the challenges and demands of our days.**

Maya Angelou, the beloved poet and playwright, speaks to the importance of Sabbath time in a reflection called, "A Day Away." She writes:

Each person deserves a day away in which no problems are confronted, no solutions searched for. Each of us needs to withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us. We need hours of aimless wandering or spates of time sitting on park benches, observing the mysterious world of ants and the canopy of treetops.

If we step away for a time, we are not, as many may think and some will accuse, being irresponsible, but rather we are preparing ourselves to more ably perform our duties and discharge our obligations. When I return home, I am always surprised to find some questions I sought to evade have been answered, and some entanglements I had hoped to flee had become unraveled in my absence. A day away is like a spring tonic. It can dispel rancor, transform indecision, and renew the spirit.<sup>iv</sup>

Well, **what about your life?** Do you have a healthy rhythm of alternating activity and rest, work and Sabbath time? Or **does your pattern need some adjusting** in one direction or the other? Can you hear, in Jesus' words to his followers, an invitation to *both* inner peace and outer effectiveness?

**"Come away by yourselves to a deserted place, and rest awhile."** Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> From Jim Loehr & Tony Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement* (New York: Free Press, 2003) p. 29

<sup>ii</sup> Thanks to Marva Dawn, in her book, Keeping the Sabbath Wholly, for this story.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941) speaks of today's pace as an "intolerable scramble of panting feverishness." p. 45

<sup>iv</sup> This quote from Maya Angelou was given to me by a friend; I do not know its original source.