

Back Porch

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BY SARA JENKINS

When a Jewish friend told me how she'd begun to observe the Sabbath, something clicked. I realized that I had been yearning for a time set aside, different from other days, open and free. My friend's approach sounded workable. Mostly she spent the day at home being quiet and reflective, but if she truly needed to go out in her car, she did so, without considering it a breach of rules. Rules had nothing to do with it. I saw that the form for a Sabbath could be open to experiment.



So I began observing my own Sabbath the very next Sunday. It centered around two ideas: silence and no work. Not that I intended to totally avoid speech or work of any kind; rather, I altered my habitual patterns in a way that allowed my responses to life to be fresh and deep, more immediate, more spontaneous. No social engagements, no telephone, no e-mail—those were natural ways to support my desire for silence and an openness to experience.

In the attitude of *allowing* rather than *restricting*, I told myself I could spend the whole day in bed reading if I wanted to, but that never happened. On the contrary, I spontaneously overcame a major reading addiction to the Sunday *New York Times*. On my first Sabbath I was so absorbed by stepping beyond my habits into a free space that I forgot about the newspaper until I discovered it on the doorstep Monday morning.

Years have passed, and I continue to keep one seventh of my life silent, "should"-free, and devoted to being present to whatever arises. I can use my Sabbath any way I want, and I can quit the whole thing any time. That freedom is essential; it provides the openness in which to explore what is important to me, outside the usual structures of work and social life that constitute my identity. On rare occasions when I want to do something else on Sunday, I block out Saturday instead. The one thing excluded from my Sabbath is the slightest whiff of *Thou Shalt Not*.

The day arrives like a blessing, brimming with emptiness. I never plan ahead what I will do, but typically spend time meditating, walking, poking around in the garden, writing, mending, doing yoga, listening to music. At the end of the day I often lie in the bathtub, sometimes reading, sometimes in candlelight, sometimes in moonlight. There is time to reflect on things in my life that need attention, and time for various projects of the heart—things I long to do but never find time for.

Does it sound as if this practice is self-centered, self-absorbed, plain old selfish? I find that getting to know myself through solitude and silence is, paradoxically, a way of going beyond the incessant self-preoccupation that normally dogs my days. In the same way, I find that discipline leads to freedom, that generosity toward myself—the gift of time, in this case—stimulates my generosity toward others. A well-known Zen teaching says:

To practice Zen is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.

I recently thought of a new twist I might add to my Sabbath.

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When the power went off one evening, a friend and I finished a meal by candlelight. Afterward, we lit candles in the kitchen and dining room and cleared the table and rinsed dishes, surprised at how well we managed in the dimness. Then we took the candles we'd lit into the living room where we sat and talked. The tone of our conversation was softer and more thoughtful than usual, the content more personal. At the end of the evening, we felt as if we'd been given a luxurious surprise: a gift of loveliness and intimacy imposed upon us.

"We should do this more often," we said.

Now I'm thinking of incorporating that beauty, that surprise gift, into my Sabbath. Not turning on lights when the sun goes down—candles instead: a practice undertaken experimentally, creating a space of possibility, just to see what might come into my life as a result.

Sara Jenkins is the author of This Side of Nirvana: Memoirs of a Spiritually Challenged Buddhist and a forthcoming book on spiritual friendship to be published this fall. A freelance editor and writer, she lives at Lake Junaluska, N.C.

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