

The Wisdom of Winter
Appreciating the Cold, Dark, Still, Quiet Times of Life
By
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This is my last Sunday in the pulpit before my brief, month long, sabbatical begins. I say, “brief,” because most sabbaticals last four to six months every five years, but a month is long enough for me, even after nearly eight years. There’s a difference between sitting idle for a bit and spinning our wheels. Everyone needs a break now and again, but I don’t want to interrupt our momentum by being away too long.

Sabbatical comes from the Hebrew word, *šabbāt*, meaning, “to rest.” The idea of rest was so important to the ancient Hebrews that doing so became one of their most sacred commandments; “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your town.”¹ This is one of the earliest labor laws in human history, and the first to include clauses regarding gender equality, child labor, immigration, and animal rights. Everyone and everything deserves a break! There has to come a time when we stop sweating it, even the small stuff. Many of the Hebrews had once been enslaved, so it’s not surprising they’d create such a comprehensive workers rights law. As the Jewish author of *Ecclesiastes* famously says, “Better is one hand full of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind.”²

This belief in the sacredness of rest is present in the thinking and practices of other religions too. “The active life is troubled and busy about many things but the contemplative life *sits in peace with the one thing necessary*,”³ says the unknown Christian mystic who wrote, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton once said, “There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence... activism and overwork.”⁴ And, “If busyness can become a kind of violence,” Theologian Wayne Muller says, “we do not have to stretch our perception very far to see that Sabbath time—effortless, nourishing rest—can invite a healing from this violence.”⁵ I believe the Sabbath principle is also at the core of the Christian notion of Grace, the notion that we don’t have to do anything to be saved.

Jesus himself, who is considered by many, including me, to have been a Wisdom teacher (“Wisdom,” being the Hebrew equivalent of, “Mother Nature”) as evidenced by his use of parables and proverbs, and, most telling, nature metaphors, wanted people to have an abundant life, not by amassing wealth, he said, but learning to be grateful for just enough for

¹ Exodus 20:10

² Ecclesiastes 4:6

³ Johnston, William, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing & The Book of Privy Counseling*, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1973, 1996, p. 50.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. p. 5.

today, our “daily bread.” “Look at the birds of the air,”⁶ he said, “consider the lilies of the field.”⁷ The birds do not sow, harvest, or store away, yet they are fed. The flowers do not toil or spin, yet they are clothed, “yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”⁸

Likewise, in Taoism the term *wu wei* means to accomplish by “doing nothing.” As an old Chinese proverb puts it, “sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.”⁹ Karen Armstrong explains that the ancient Chinese took this notion so seriously that their most revered spiritual and political leader, the Prince, “...had to be entirely passive. He did not direct the administration; he gave no orders.”¹⁰ Or, as Confucius put it, “he ruled by inactivity,”¹¹ by, *wu wei*. In fact, the Chinese pictograph for “busy,” is symbolized by two characters meaning “heart” and “killing.”¹² This ancient wisdom helps explain why today 20 percent more heart attacks happen at the start of the work week on Monday mornings.¹³ Instead of stressing about all we must do, “Practice not-doing,” the *Tao te Ching* says, “and everything will fall into place.”¹⁴ “Fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill. Keep sharpening your knife and it will blunt.”¹⁵ “Tao never acts, yet nothing is left undone.”¹⁶

These notions of *wu wei*, Grace, and Sabbath, have led to spiritual practices like meditation, prayer, contemplation, and Sabbath, all of which are accomplished by sitting still and keeping quiet. But these beliefs and practices, counter as are to our drive to going somewhere and doing something, are based on the workings of nature and observations of the Universe itself. If we want to be in harmony with nature, with the Way (the way things are) we need to sit still and keep quiet now and then, to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy; to remember how the birds are fed and the lilies clothed, how spring comes and grass grows, and that everything that exists in the Universe emerged from what Buddhism calls, *Mu*, nothingness. Cosmologist Brian Swimme says, “Each of the sextillion particles that foamed into existence had its root in this quantum vacuum, this originating reality.”¹⁷

Still, the notion of doing nothing, of sitting still without some distraction, not even a good book or a bad tv show, hardly seems natural to us “hardworking” Americans, in a country where so much of our very identity and sense of purpose is based on our jobs and what we do for a living. Shaped by our Protestant work ethic and the philosophy of Pragmatism—the only western philosophy founded in the U.S.—it’s no wonder we often think living means the

⁶ Matthew 6:26

⁷ Matthew 6:28-29

⁸ Matthew 6:29

⁹ Watts, Alan, *The Way of Zen*, Pantheon Books, Inc., U.S.A, 1957, p. 141.

¹⁰ Armstrong, *ibid.* p. 147.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 148.

¹² Muller, Wayne, *Sabbath*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1999, p. 3.

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/14/health/14real.html>

¹⁴ #3

¹⁵ #9.

¹⁶ #37

¹⁷ Swimme, Brian, & Berry, Thomas, *The Universe Story*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1992, p. 17.

same as making a living; and that someone, like something, that doesn't work must be no good.

According to Juliet Schor's book, *The Overworked American*, a third of our population feels rushed and stressed everyday of their lives,¹⁸ a majority of us get one to one-and-a-half hours less sleep that we need each night,¹⁹ and half of us report having too little time for our families,²⁰ all of which is leading to increased instances of child neglect, marital distress, sleep deprivation, and stress related illnesses. Yet the whole point of our education system is increasingly about preparing children to get out of school, get a job, and spend the rest of their lives working. Ours has become a society that doesn't value rest and doesn't know how to rest.

But it's not just us. Throughout human history our species has been drawn toward activity, distraction, and play like a moth toward flame. Indeed, the energy we use and consume in our bodies is from photons stored in the food we eat, and the energy we use to power everything in our lives, our homes, our technology, and our machines, is chemical energy converted into thermal energy. Our ancient myths are about fiery heroes defeating the darkness. The Greek Horus, Helios, Attis, and Dionysus, the Roman Sol, the Persian Mithra, the Assyrian Tammuz, the Egyptian Osiris and Ra, the Norse Odin, the Aztec Quetzalcoatl, and India's Krishna, are all sun gods, and, like Jesus, said to be "the light of the world," were born on or around December 25th, marking the end of Winter and the return of the fire in the sky. To this day, many of us continue celebrating the lengthening of days, the resurrection of the Sun, when the Winter Solstice rolls around each year.

According to an Acoma Pueblo myth, a young woman, the chief's daughter, encounters a stranger while out gathering cactus leaves. He's a brightly dressed man carrying an ear of corn. She tells him her people have been unable to grow corn and have been starving ever since she married Shakok, the Winter Spirit. He tells her he's from the South where it's always sunny and corn grows year-round. She admits she doesn't really love Shakok because he's too cold, then invites the attractive stranger home. Reluctantly, at first, the man, who it turns out is Miochin, the Summer Spirit, accompanies the woman to her village, where a fierce battle between he and Shakok ensues. It turns into a violent storm, producing thunder, lightning, and tornadoes from the powerful collision of heat and cold. Eventually, Miochin defeats Shakok, who agrees to let him marry the chief's daughter. From then on, to keep the peace, the two Spirits agree to rule for only half the year each, which explains the existence of both Summer and Winter.

This is not unlike the Greeks myth of Persephone, a young maiden lulled underground by Hades. When her mother, Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and harvest, discovers her beloved child missing, she retreats into a cave, causing the whole world to become dark and cold. Everything stops growing, then dies, and people begin to starve. Zeus, becoming weary

¹⁸ Schut, Michael, ed., *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, The Morehouse Group, Denver, CO, 1999, 2001, p. 35.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

of their burdensome prayers, finally intervenes and orders Hades to release Persephone. But because she had already eaten three pomegranate seeds while down in the dumps, she is required to return to the underworld three months of the year, during which Demeter retreats to her cave and Winter covers the Earth.

You'll notice that in both these myths, there is a preference for Summer over Winter, which is portrayed as a villain or catastrophe that causes people to suffer and starve. Yet both stories also recognize that Winter is an inevitable part of life, that it must return each year, to maintain balance and harmony. It is understandable we'd evolve to prefer the warmer, brighter times of summer, the harvest time, when we don't have work as hard to find food, or worry about predators hiding in the dark, or keeping warm, but imagine a world without four seasons.

Sure, if there were perpetual winter, nothing would grow and life on Earth would soon perish. But imagine perpetual Spring, with life endlessly growing and being born. Talk about problems with over population, and the plant life would start choking itself out as all of it competes for dominance in the sunlight, it's fruit and seeds never ripening or falling to impregnate the ground with new life, and, again, everything would eventually die. Or, if we had perpetual Fall everything would always be in the process of dying, establishing a world of endless decay and suffering. And if the perpetual season were Summer, well, we'd end up with Global Warming, with a planet that is drying up and burning up, eventually becoming too harsh to sustain life.

So, our ancestors were right to acknowledge there must be a place for Winter in our lives, even if it does make things harder for us, and causes us to shiver and go without at times. Winter allows us to freeze and store the rains atop our mountains, then slowly lets it melt for us to drink, and bathe, and swim, and fish, and boat, and farm the rest of the year. Winter snows press the fallen leaves and dead vegetation into the ground, where it moistens and nourishes the soil in preparation for Spring and keeps their carbon molecules from simply drying up and being absorbed into the atmosphere. Winter is the Earth's Sabbath, giving her a chance to rest and replenish her energies before Spring rolls round and it's time to start producing again.

Today, however, rather than acknowledging and adapting to the need for Winter, as our ancestors did, we are forcing the planet to adapt to our desire for perpetual Summer, for unending harvest. Economically speaking, each new quarter must produce better than the last if it is to be considered successful. We must be forever able to reap the bounty of unending growth. We want fresh fruit and vegetables on our tables all year long, even if they are hard and tasteless, and artificially preserved and ripened. We heat our homes and cars with the push of a button, flooding the atmosphere with carbon emissions, making Winter's attempts to store and reuse them futile. In forgetting the wisdom of our ancestors, the Wisdom of Winter, we are rapidly moving toward a world of perpetual Summer, which means rising sea levels, longer fire seasons, droughts in some places, floods and tsunamis in others, more powerful storms and hurricanes, global immigration and refugee crises, mass extinctions, and all the other problems we're now experiencing.

In the process of shaping the Earth, our global habitat, to adapt to our habits, rather than us adapting to its natural rhythms, especially to its need for Winter, for downtime, for rest, we have radically altered its composition. When our ancestors first came up with the myths I've mentioned, there were only a few million people inhabiting the planet. Today there are more than 7 billion. Our species is humanizing the planet, making it look like us and adapt to our desires, slowing transforming it into a monoculture in the process. According to historian Yuval Harari, the combined weight of today's large wild animals, "from porcupines and penguins to elephants and whales,"²¹ is less than a million tons, compared to all us humans weighing in at 300 million tons.²² There are less than a quarter million chimpanzees left, our closest primate cousin. In fact, the only animals outnumbering us are the 21 billion cows, pigs, chicken, and sheep we feed most the world's grain and drinking water to, just so we can eat them at almost every meal. And, compared to the world's 200,000 wolves, our 400 million pet dogs are also among the very few mammalian species thriving today. In other words, most the animals in the world today are the ones we like having around. The rest are becoming endangered or dying off amidst our planet's sixth great extinction.

In his best selling book, *Life 3.0*, MIT physicist, Max Tegmark, says, "not only do we now contain more matter than all other mammals except cows (which are so numerous because they serve our goals of consuming beef and dairy products), but the matter in our machines, roads, buildings, and other engineering projects appears on track to soon overtake all living matter on Earth."²³ Even so, there are only 0.5 billion tons of cows, and 0.4 billions tons of humans, and, if you're wondering, 0.0005 billions tons of whales, the largest mammal on Earth, compared to 2 billion tons of cars, 15 billion tons of asphalt, 20 billion tons of steel, and 100 billion tons of concrete on the planet today.²⁴ In short, we are terraforming our entire planet by forcing it to unnaturally yield to our desires and commands.

I've personally never been a summer person. I just don't enjoy the heat, probably the result of growing up in San Francisco. But I do appreciate human ingenuity, and progress, and technology. There's a time and a place for it, and, in many ways, it has made our lives much better. My concern, rather, is that we have forgotten to remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy. We've left no room in our collective lives for rest and recovery and restoration. And if Winter, as Demeter in her cave of despair suggests, is also a metaphor of personal depression, today we're also leaving no room for feeling down in our lives, no cave-time. Certainly, there are those who suffer from clinical depression due to chemical imbalances who can benefit from therapy and medication. But depression can also be our natural sense that's its time for a break, for a Sabbath. We feel depressed because we're tired, overstressed, and need a break. What do we feel like doing when we're depressed? Nothing! Depression can be a winter of the soul, a time to pay attention to the inner discontentment calling upon us to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Yet, culturally, we feel there must be something wrong with us, that we're supposed to feel up all the time, remaining active and productive.

²¹ Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version), loc., 5435.

²² Ibid.

²³ Tegmark, Max, *Life 3.0*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2017, p. 258.

²⁴ Ibid.

Yet doing nothing, as the world's religions all remind us in their own way, accomplishes much. It is restorative and reenergizing. Nothingness, Mu, *wu wei*, fecund emptiness, is also the place from which everything originates. It is part of nature and the mother of nature and the wisdom of nature. The creation mystic and founder of Aikido, the Way of Harmony with Nature, Master Morihei Ueshiba understood this when he said, "Now and again, it is necessary to seclude yourself among deep mountains and hidden valleys to restore your link to the source of life."²⁵ This is what the Wisdom of Winter is, remembering the importance of rest, and the need for dark, and cold, and lack in our lives, and that "for everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." Everyone and everything needs a break now and then. Let's give the Earth a break. Let's give each other a break. And, I hope, you'll give yourself a break too.

²⁵ Ueshiba, Morihei, *The Art of Peace*, Stevens, John, trans., Shambhala, Boston, MA, 1992, p. 21.