

FROM LIVING THE SABBATH: DISCOVERING
THE RHYTHMS OF REST AND DELIGHT

by Norman Wirzba, Brazos Press
Grand Rapids, MI
2006

Foreword

■ We are living at the climax of industrialism. The “cheap” fossil fuels, on which our world has grown dependent, are now becoming expensive in money and in lives. The industrial era at climax, in the panic of long-anticipated decline, has imposed on us all its ideals of ceaseless pandemonium. The industrial economy, by definition, must never rest. Rest would deprive us of light, heat, food, water, and everything else we need or think we need. The economic impulse of industrial life (to stretch a term) is limitless. Whatever we have, in whatever quantity, is not enough. There is no such thing as enough. Our bellies and our wallets must become oceanic, and still they will not be full. Six workdays in a week are not enough. We need a seventh. We need an eighth. In the industrial world, at climax, one family cannot or will not support itself by one job. We need a job for the day and one for the night. Thank God for the moon! We cannot stop to eat. Thank God for cars! We dine as we drive over another paved farm. Everybody is weary, and there is no rest.

To rest, we are persuaded, we must “get away.” But getting away involves us in the haste, speed, and noise, the auxiliary pandemonium, of escape. There is, by the prevailing definition, escape, but there is no escape from escape. Or there is none unless we adopt the paradoxical and radical expedient of just stopping.

Just stopping is the opportune subject of this book. The thought of just stopping is not new and it is not simple. In biblical tradition, it is one of the oldest thoughts. Humans, one must suppose, thought of stopping soon after they had thought of whatever first made them tired. But biblical tradition elevates just stopping above physiological necessity, makes it a requirement, makes it an observance of the greatest dignity and mystery, and assigns it a day. The day is named Sabbath. On that day people are to

come to rest, just stop, and not merely because they are tired; they are to do so in commemoration of the seventh day, the day on which, after the six days of creation, God rested.

He was not able to rest until the seventh day because the creation was not completed until the end of the sixth day. The world, once it was made, was not complete in the sense that it was “done” or “finished.” It was complete because it was whole. Its maker had so filled it with living creatures so invested with his spirit and breath that it could keep on working, it could live on its own, while he rested. It was an active and ongoing wholeness. It was a wholeness that could adapt and change; it could “evolve,” as you may say if you wish. That too.

And so the humans who “remember the Sabbath day” do so not only to rest, but also to honor the rest of the seventh day, which perfected the work of the six days. This rest is made possible by the capability of the creation, once made whole, to continue indefinitely on the basis of its originating principles and its culminating goodness. The creation is a living work in which every creature must participate, by its own nature and by the nature of the world. We humans, by *our* particular nature, must participate for better or worse, and this is our choice to make. Will we choose to participate by working in accordance with the world’s originating principles, in recognition of its inherent goodness and its maker’s approval of it, in gratitude for our membership in it, or will we participate by destroying it in accordance with our always tottering, never resting self-justifications and selfish desires?

The requirement of Sabbath observance invites us to stop. It invites us to rest. It asks us to notice that while we rest the world continues without our help. It invites us to find delight in the world’s beauty and abundance. (Thank God for cheap recreation!) Now, in our pandemonium, it may be asking us also to consider that if we choose not to honor it and care well for it, the world will continue in our absence.

The life of this world is by no means simple or comprehensible to us humans. It involves darkness and suffering; it confronts us daily with mystery and our ignorance. But the idea of the Sabbath passes through it as a vein of light, reminding us of the inherent sanctity of the world and our life, and of the transformative sanity of admiration, gratitude, and care. Norman Wirzba’s book asks what kind of human life it takes to include the Sabbath. It is high time somebody asked. As this book shows, what is implied is a set of answers dangerous to ignore.

Wendell Berry

Preface

■ There is an ancient rabbinic tradition that says if we learn to celebrate the Sabbath properly and fully even once, the Messiah will come. This is a striking view because it suggests that Sabbath observance is the fulfillment or perfection of a religious life that is harmoniously tuned to the life-giving and life-promoting ways of God. Without the Sabbath, in other words, faith, but also life itself, is in peril of losing its most basic and comprehensive orientation and purpose. Just as God’s *shabbat* completes the creation of the universe—by demonstrating that the proper response to the gifts of life is celebration and delight—so too should our Sabbaths be the culmination of habits and days that express gratitude for and joy in the manifold blessings of God.

It makes sense, therefore, to think of Sabbath observance as one of our most honest and practical indicators of authentic religious faith. The extent and depth of our Sabbath commitment is the measure of how far we have progressed in our discipleship and friendship with God. Our Sabbath commitment bears witness to whether or not we have brought our habits and priorities in line with the ways and intentions of God. When we fail to observe the Sabbath we miss out on the chance to experience creation and each other as God desires it. We forfeit the opportunity to live our days in the modes of care, celebration, and delight—all marks of the first Sabbath day.

It is dangerous, of course, to presume to speak for “the ways and intentions of God,” because we easily forget or deny that our speaking is often motivated by arrogance, fear, or fancy. In the end, God’s ways with the world, indeed God creating a world at all, confront us with mysteries that elude our best efforts to comprehend. As fallible and finite creatures the best that we can do is move with caution and humility, trusting that our

efforts to align our lives with God's intentions are throughout informed and shaped by God's self-revelation to us. In this book I suggest that Sabbath teaching contains an inner logic that helps us make some theological and practical sense of God's revelation. When understood in its proper depth and breadth, the Sabbath not only situates us within the orders of creation, and thus within the larger drama of God's redeeming love, but also opens new paths as we journey toward justice, peace, and joy.

The central significance of the Sabbath, though well understood (if not always faithfully observed) by the ancient Israelites, has mostly been lost to us. In part this is because frantic and competing schedules make it much more difficult to keep a Sabbath focus, particularly if by Sabbath observance we understand communal rest one full day in the week. Many of us, whether we be pastors, caregivers, store managers, medical staff, teachers, farmers, emergency service personnel, or athletes, do not have the time at all or do not have it when we need it: some of us are required to work on the formal day of the Sabbath or feel we need to use the day to catch up on the myriad tasks we failed to complete during the course of the week. A "free day" or "day off" constitutes a luxury many of us simply cannot imagine, let alone afford. Who will do the laundry and the grocery shopping, or prepare the lesson plan and the meeting's agenda? Moreover, given the pluralistic, multiethnic character of global cultures, we can no longer assume a shared social understanding or commonality of purpose that would grant to communities as a whole the time and place to celebrate a Sabbath. Does this mean we are doomed?

This book lays out the case for Sabbath observance that does not depend on the cultural sanction of complete rest for one day of the week. Though such a practice is still and always will be a desirable goal, many of us need additional suggestions for daily practices—alternative rituals—that can move us into the heart of the Sabbath. The question for us is whether in doing so we can approximate a Sabbath sensibility that realizes many of its central aims. Can we envision contemporary avenues for the practices of delight, thanksgiving, and praise—quintessential indicators that we are at rest—that will transform our daily and weekly habits? This book argues that we can, but if we are to accomplish this we must expand the range of Sabbath reference so that all our days and activities fall within its orbit. I do not want to minimize the importance of setting aside one day of the week for special religious observance. Indeed, in many instances the frantic and frenetic pace of our activities simply needs to come to a stop. But I also want us to appreciate that the Sabbath is not confined to one day. Sabbath observance has the potential to reform and redirect all our ways of living. It should be the source and goal that inspires and nourishes the best of everything we do.

If we are to live the Sabbath in this more expansive way, we need to think differently about what it means. The Sabbath is not simply about taking a break from our busy routines. It should not be reduced to a "time of rest" understood as inactivity, because this formulation overlooks the rich potential within Sabbath teaching to transform a complete life. This book therefore devotes several chapters to an exploration of the Sabbath's rich meanings, and then considers why it is difficult to appreciate and realize Sabbath goals within our personal and communal lives. As I will argue, the key to Sabbath observance is that we participate regularly in the delight that marked God's own response to a creation wonderfully made.

In the second part of the book I develop several chapters on how to make Sabbath delight real in the various dimensions of daily life: at work, in the home, in our economies and schools, in our care of creation, and in the church. Sabbath teaching has the potential to elevate all our practices so that they bring honor to God and delight to the world. When we become a Sabbath people, we give one of the most compelling witnesses to the world that we worship a God who desires our collective joy and good. We give concrete expression to an authentic faith that is working to deflate the anxious and destructive pride that supposes we have to "do it all" by ourselves and through our own effort. Our faith replaces such selfish ambition with a holy desire that God's life-building and life-affirming ways become more manifest through us. We also become participants in God's redemptive purposes for the whole world by attending to and addressing the pain and injustice that currently deny God's desire that all of creation be well and at peace. In short, Sabbath observance has the potential to release the depth and meaning of God's many blessings at work within creation and in all of our doings.

I am not an "expert" in Sabbath observance. Like many others, I struggle to practice delight and to ponder and properly imitate the goodness of God. Indeed, much of what I have learned about the rich meaning of the Sabbath has been as a witness to personal failure. I take comfort, as should you the reader, in the fact that the ancient Israelites developed this teaching over many generations and through much trial and error. What sustains us in our Sabbath journey is the companionship and support of fellow travelers who inspire us to be more faithful and who bear witness to the excellence and loveliness of the ways of delight. For their gifts of friendship and help, I would like to thank Gretchen Ziegenhals, Stanley Hauerwas, Kyle Childress, Rodney Clapp, Rebecca Cooper, and Wendell Berry, who read sections or the whole of this manuscript in earlier versions, making valuable suggestions for improvement. I would especially like to thank Wendell Berry for writing a foreword to this book. Their kindness and insight have made this a better book. No doubt it would have been even better had I heeded all of their suggestions. To them I offer heartfelt thanks.

Part 1

Setting a Sabbath Context

Losing Our Way

■ By most accounts, the average North American today enjoys one of the highest standards of living humanity has ever known. In fact, many of us lead comfortable and luxurious lives that heretofore would have been unimaginable to, let alone the envy of, kings and queens. Given our much trumpeted prosperity and success, we should wonder why we don't really seem to *enjoy* our lives very much. For all that we have achieved, our lives, as viewed in their day-to-day ordinariness, do not appear measurably happier. Moreover, the social and ecological costs associated with our success—habitat destruction and family and community deterioration—are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Many of us submit to daily schedules that keep us moving at a soul-blistering, exhaustion-inducing pace, and we agree to ever-lengthening to-do lists that invariably leave us stretched or stressed to the breaking point. To be sure, we have a lot to show for our efforts in the extensive résumés we compile and in the mountains of stuff we store in our basements, garages, and off-site self-storage lockers (now a multibillion-dollar industry). But despite our many career accomplishments and consumer acquisitions, we are not satisfied or at peace. We are forever hounded by the worry that we do not yet have quite enough, or that what we have is not the latest, fastest, or most fashionable best, and the fear that we will be perceived as slackers.

To help us through this chaotic, soul-unsatisfying chaos, we frequently turn to pharmaceutical enhancers and stimulants—Prozac, Viagra, Prilosec (the “Purple Pill”), Lipitor, Ambien—to keep us going through our paces. In doing so we simply ignore or override the natural bodily signs—exhaustion, hypertension, obesity, anxiety, insomnia—that would otherwise alert us to the fact that something is terribly wrong with the way we are conducting our lives. Is this not a strategy in which we will all finally turn out to be losers?

The frantic, fragmenting, multitasking character of contemporary living has made it likely that many of us will simply evade, or fail to consider with much seriousness or depth, life’s most basic and profound questions: What is all our living finally for? Why do we commit to so much? Why do we devote ourselves to the tasks or priorities that we do? Will we know when we have achieved or acquired enough? What purpose does our striving serve? While these questions point to the basic ingredients of any recipe for a decent human life, they are also vital to the life of faith, for in pondering them we not only become clearer about our ultimate allegiances but also gain insight into who we understand ourselves to be. In answering them we get a clearer picture of how closely our intentions and our living line up with the purposes of God. Do we truly believe ourselves to be children of God and members of creation, and thus able to trust in God’s beneficent care and provision?

A Sabbath Bearing

Though we don’t often think of it this way, biblical teaching on the Sabbath takes us to the heart of this essential questioning. Rather than being simply a “break” from frenetic, self-obsessed ways of living, the Sabbath is a discipline and practice in which we ask, consider, and answer the questions that will lead us into a complete and joyful life. As such, the Sabbath is a teaching that has the potential to redirect and transform all our existence, bringing it into more faithful alignment with God’s life-building and life-strengthening ways. Sabbath life is a truly human life—abundant life, life at its best—because it is founded in God’s overarching design for all places (Sabbath celebration completes the creation of the universe) and all times (Sabbath worship is the week’s fulfillment and inspiration). Though the Sabbath does not promise a life without pain and suffering, its observance does offer the practical context through which our collective hurt can be addressed (if not always answered).

Sabbath teaching best equips us to think about the ultimate bearing or direction of human life. It gives us a glimpse and a taste of the all-encompassing divine context in terms of which we can formulate and

evaluate our life plan. Better than anything else, it helps us appreciate and understand what all our living is finally for. Put simply, Sabbath discipline introduces us to God’s own ways of joy and delight. In the invitation that follows from it, we are given the opportunity to share in the divine life of love and peace.

Psalms 92, the Bible’s own “Song for the Sabbath Day,” lets us know immediately that a Sabbath way of living stands in marked contrast to our current stressful, exhausting, death-wielding ways. According to the psalmist, Sabbath observance is above all infused with thanksgiving and praise. Insofar as our practical living grows out of a grateful disposition, a sense that the gifts of God to us far exceed what we can comprehend or expect, we give concrete witness to the world of a God whose generosity and care simply know no bounds. When our work and our play, our exertion and our rest flow seamlessly from this deep desire to give thanks to God, the totality of our living—cooking, eating, cleaning, preaching, teaching, parenting, building, repairing, healing, creating—becomes one sustained and ever-expanding act of worship.

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.

According to the psalmist, our offerings of thanksgiving and praise are not a forced or commanded response. When they are at their most authentic pitch, they follow spontaneously and naturally from a life that is attentive and responsive to God’s grandeur and goodness everywhere on display.

For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

How great are your works, O LORD!
Your thoughts are very deep!

The work of God’s hand, the whole panorama of creation—flowers, bees, photosynthesis, earthworms, rain, humus, chickens, sheep, babies, families, and friendships—testifies to God who cares intimately and deeply about the world and desires that it be beautiful and at peace. The psalmist believes that those who do not see this beauty and feel inwardly the marks of divine care are simply fools. They are guilty of a fundamental blindness and insensitivity, an inability to see the world for what it really

is: the concrete manifestation of God's incomparable *hesed*, God's covenantal and creative love for the whole world. Being ignorant fools, they are likely to become wicked by destroying or spoiling the good gifts of God that are the nurturing root of our being and the inexhaustible source of our joy. The psalmist does not mince words:

The dullard cannot know,
the stupid cannot understand this:
though the wicked sprout like grass
and all evildoers flourish,
they are doomed to destruction forever,
but you, O LORD, are on high forever.
For your enemies, O LORD,
for your enemies shall perish;
all evildoers shall be scattered. (92:1-9)

It is not a comforting exercise to contemplate whether we are among the dullards and the stupid, or whether our aggressive and anxious patterns of living place us among the enemies of God. But we need to consider this as a real possibility. Why? Because it is surprisingly easy to be dishonest about our piety. We have to admit the possibility that we have overestimated our devotion, particularly when we note the overwhelming evidence of human destruction and despoliation of communities and creation *in the midst of our religiously informed culture*. Though we may speak words of praise and thanks, does our living concretely manifest the deep gladness and appreciation, the celebration and respect the psalmist models, and thus render our speaking true?

I begin to wonder why my days are not given over to more joyful and harmonious singing, following directly and spontaneously from the knowledge that I am at peace with the world around me. If I am honest with myself, I acknowledge a serious lack of readiness and desire to cherish the many gifts of creation that sustain and inspire me. I do not nearly enough devote myself to the caretaking and celebration of all God's bewildering array of blessing. The result, more often than not, is self-pain and pain to those around me. Collectively, our anxious obsessions prevent us from adequately considering and enjoying the convivial life God so much wants for us.

Psalm 92 not only stands as an indictment against today's culture of exhaustion and destruction. It also presents us with a positive vision of the Sabbath that takes us far beyond all notions of Sabbath observance as a mere reprieve from six days of frantic exertion. Sabbath practice is the focus and culmination of a life that is daily and practically devoted to honoring God, the source of all our delight and the provider of every good and perfect gift, and to sharing in God's own creative delight. We do

not wait for one specified day of the week to offer our thanksgiving and praise, even if one day is set apart to shed a critical and corrective light on all our other days. The goal is rather to arrange our schedules and direct our choices so that they manifest *at all times* a deep appreciation for the diverse and costly ways of God's grace. That we cultivate such sensitivity and understanding in each other is absolutely essential if we are not to become wicked fools, the spoilers of grace who take the *hesed* of God for granted. The seriousness of our failing to adopt a Sabbath way of life comes through clearly in the rabbinic view that on the day of judgment we will need to give an account for all the times we did not sufficiently or properly celebrate the gifts of God's creation.

If the psalmist is right, then the test of whether we have genuinely practiced the Sabbath will come in the middle of our working week, as we are building, teaching, healing, cooking, rather than the formal (and sometimes merely formulaic) setting of a "worship service." We need to learn to evaluate our mundane, daily, practical activities and aspirations in light of the Sabbath goals of praise and thanksgiving to God. Does our obsession with personal accomplishment, and the anxious insecurity it often tries to mask, deny God's unfailing affirmation of and care for us? Does our planning for financial control and security (as manifested in countless daily tasks) practically contradict our verbal expressions of faith and hope in the goodness and generosity of God? In these diverse times and places—our investment portfolios, career aspirations, housing preferences, consumer habits, extracurricular activities—a more honest reckoning of our piety will become possible. Moreover, as we begin to cast a Sabbath light on the whole sweep of our activities and routines by looking for occasions to be thankful and to celebrate, we may yet catch glimpses of God's sustaining presence and abiding goodness in places we never thought possible.

That the Sabbath should assume such importance in the life of faith will likely sound strange to many of us, because we have grown used to thinking of Sabbath observance as an add-on to the end of a busy week. Sabbath is the time for us to relax and let down our guard, to pause from the often anxious and competitive patterns of daily life. This is not what the Jews, those who first gave us the teaching about Sabbath, thought. In their view, Sabbath observance is what we work *toward*. As our most important and all-encompassing goal, it frames and contextualizes our planning, much as the desire to achieve a specific objective—a championship, a masterful performance, an exquisite meal or party—will require that we take the proper steps *all along the way*. Sabbath frames our entire life, helping us set priorities and determine which of our activities and aspirations bring honor to God.

So what is at stake in Sabbath observance is not simply that we manage to pause and refuel enough to continue on in our frantic and sometimes

destructive ways. The real issue is whether we can learn to see, and then welcome, the divine presence wherever we are. Can we link up as servants of God's covenantal love and see in that service our unending joy? Doing this, we will learn to realign all of our activities so that they better manifest a life of gratitude and praise. If we can do this truly, without the anxiety, worry, fear, competitiveness, and aggression that otherwise punctuate our life's patterns, then we will have caught a glimpse of heaven, a taste of God's own delight in a created order beautifully and finely made. Indeed, as Abraham Joshua Heschel once observed, "Unless one learns how to relish the taste of Sabbath while still in this world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come."¹ We are simply naive if we think that having wasted or squandered the many good gifts of this creation, we will not do the same with the gifts of heaven. Sabbath practice, on this view, is a sort of training ground for the life of eternity, a preparation for the full reception and welcome of the presence of God.

Eating as a Sabbath Witness

In light of the Sabbath's practical and far-reaching significance, an obvious question is, How are we doing? Does our culture reflect a Sabbath sensibility that has made gratitude and praise to God its foremost concern? Are our church communities—not merely our church services—daily marked by forms of celebration that mirror God's own delight in the works of creation? To answer these questions with the greatest honesty and precision possible, we will need to consider carefully the condition and health of all members of creation—friends and family members, but also the disenfranchised, the sick and feeble, the soil on which we walk, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the natural organisms that make up our biological neighborhood, and the geophysical processes that sustain us all—within our control or influence. Does our engagement with them indicate that we are grateful to God for them and appreciate them as a blessing to us? Do we honor God in our treatment of them, acknowledging that without them our lives would be impoverished or severely impaired? If we are truly thankful for the gifts of God, these same gifts will be cherished and cared for. If they are not well cared for, we will have to assume that gratitude and praise have been overcome by our anxieties, fears, obsessions, insensitivities, and arrogance.

I suggest that eating habits reflect one of our more profound, even if mundane, paths into the full awareness of God's care and concern. When we eat, we ingest God's life-sustaining gifts. At mealtimes and snack times we experience the fresh, sweet, tasty, diverse generosity of God. In the

handling and consuming of the bodies of creation we come into direct contact with the love of God, and so experience again and again the divine, hospitable love that brought all creation into being. Herbert McCabe has suggested that the generosity evident in our eating, when followed through thoughtfully enough, brings us (much like Thomas Aquinas's famous "five ways" for demonstrating the existence of God) to an appreciation of the mysterious and deep source of life we call God. "When we say grace we acknowledge our meal as an expression of God's love for us, as communication from God, as word from God." When our eating is informed by God's love and care, we participate in the new humanity of God made possible by Jesus Christ, who is called our true food and drink. "By saying grace, by saying thanks, we recognize this meal [the Eucharist], this medium of human unity as gift of the Father, as ordered to the greater kind of unity he is to give us in Christ."² Eating, we can now see, is one of the most fundamental ways we know for communicating our life together as a gift gratefully received and cherished.

The current state of food production, particularly meat production, gives us one of the clearest indicators that we have forsaken a Sabbath way of life and refused to order our economic choices according to Sabbath priorities.³ Though few of us have much direct involvement in the raising of food, we all eat and thus daily enact our interdependencies with the whole spectrum of God's creation. Thus eating, whether we recognize it or not, takes us to the heart of what a culture is about and what it sees as valuable and important. To think about Italy or Mexico or China as a culture, for example, is automatically to think about its people's food and their habits of food preparation and consumption. Does the character of our culture's current food production, distribution, and consumption show forth gratitude and praise?

Many of us are not in a good position to answer this question because we are ignorant about where food comes from and under what conditions it is produced. When we remember that for most of our history the great majority of people were directly or indirectly involved with the growth, preparation, and storage of food, the contrast is sharp. Given the insularity and artificiality of suburban life, we eat with unprecedented ignorance. Food is something we buy at a store, neatly packaged, at a relatively cheap price. Seeing, then smelling and tasting, its attractiveness and abundance, we are lulled into assuming that our food is responsibly produced. Our ignorance and our naiveté prevent us from inquiring beyond the slick packaging our food comes in.

If we were to examine further, we would quickly discover that our food industry bears all the marks of an anti-Sabbath mentality: sacrilege and ingratitude, obsessive control and profiteering, insensitivity and destruction. Today's food industry has reduced the gifts of God to "products"

or “commodities” that are manufactured and processed to maximize stockholder values. Much of our production of cereals and vegetables is premised on the use of massive amounts of fertilizers and pesticides—toxins and poisons that leach into our groundwater and runoff systems and finally contribute to large “dead zones” in our bays and oceans—and unsustainable rates of soil erosion and water depletion. Further, the cheap price and relative abundance of our current grain supply depend heavily on fossil fuel and the increasing exhaustion and gradual elimination of our soil base. The (misnamed) Green Revolution would not have been possible, nor can it be maintained, without cheap oil.

The ungrateful and deathly character of our food industry is even more pronounced in the meat production sector. Though our children’s picture books and many advertisements and commercials suggest that animal livestock are raised on family farms in which chickens, geese, pigs, sheep, and cattle have freedom to roam and to be, this is not the case. Of the ten billion animals slaughtered in the United States last year, the overwhelming majority were raised in massive confinement operations that gave them little room to move and little access to fresh air and sunlight. Pigs, born to root and roam as they socialize and look for grubs, are often locked in stalls that do not provide enough room for them even to turn around. Chickens are crammed, eight at a time, into wire crates no bigger than the drawer of a filing cabinet. These crates are stacked on top of each other in darkness, which means that chickens higher up defecate on those below. Illness and anxiety run rampant, and so heavy uses of antibiotics are required to keep the fowl healthy enough till slaughter. Being in wire cages, chickens often lose feathers, develop sore feet, or get hung up on stray wires that render them immobile or perpetually uncomfortable. Since there are tens of thousands of chickens in each “barn,” many of the dead simply stay in their crates until it is time for the living to be removed.

The human beings who work in these confinement operations find the conditions deplorable and cruel and so often do not last long in that employment. Agricultural work has some of the highest turnover rates and some of the lowest wages. No creature, whether worker or victim, should be compelled to live like this. How does the living of animals directly under our control honor God or reflect gratitude for them?

When factory-farmed animals leave confinement, their condition does not much improve. In some cases it worsens. Due to the deregulation of the slaughterhouse industry and the desire to maximize profits, animals enter what can be called a factory disassembly line. Rather than being killed in humane fashion, and as kosher methods of slaughter recommend, quickly and with as little stress and pain as possible, animals may be boiled, skinned, or dismembered while still alive. The speed of the “line” or “rail” that carries the animal through various stages of the butchering

process is simply too fast for workers to exercise the requisite care and attention. Besides being a torment to animals, the work is very dangerous to workers, who have disproportionately high injury rates. Safety regulations are not adequately enforced, and workers are prevented from banding together to lobby for better conditions. The misery of animals is thus compounded by the misery of workers who find no occasion for Sabbath delight or praise in their work.

Not enough people acknowledge or understand this dark side to the slick packaging and cheap pricing of our meat products. Indeed, it is quite likely that if we saw the meat industry up close (something the industry has worked hard to prevent), our eating habits and preferences would change dramatically. The issue, however, is not simply whether we should become vegetarians, particularly when we remember that many of our grain and vegetable crops are also produced in a destructive and unsustainable manner. The real issue is whether we can learn to grow food and eat in a way that reflects thanksgiving and praise to God.

My grandfather, I believe, understood what this meant. As a small farmer, he raised a variety of animals for sale and for food. His treatment of them was uniformly attentive and kind. In fact, his gentle demeanor would rarely turn to anger and frustration—and then usually only in response to another’s (my) mistreatment of them. In his view, every animal was a gift from God that merited our respect and care. Nowhere was this more apparent than in his treatment of our chickens.

In the summer he would regularly give up his afternoon rest period to find an especially lush, sweet patch of grass to cut as a treat for the chickens. After gathering the grass in a bucket, he would walk to the chicken coop with an air of sheer delight, for without fail the chickens would run to greet him and gobble down the fresh blades of grass. I would swear the chickens had smiles on their faces as they came running! Nothing made my grandfather happier than seeing the chickens so much enjoy his little offering.

From an economic standpoint, what he did was unnecessary, even foolish, because it took him away from what others would have considered to be his “important” work. Our chickens had plenty to eat and could roam the farmyard at will. They could get their own grass if they wanted it. I am convinced, however, that this little labor meant so much to him because it enacted a ritual of mutual delight. In these moments my grandfather recalled God’s proclamation of the goodness of the whole creation. He saw his chickens as a splendid gift from God that merited his attention, care, and celebration. His work was an act of worship, since it confirmed and contributed to the goodness that was already there. It also resulted in a more thankful life. When my grandfather sat down to a chicken dinner, as he often did, he ate with a realistic and palpable sense of the goodness and the costliness of creation—after all, these chickens had died so that

he could eat. Their death could not be taken lightly, nor could their living. And so their very being demanded our respect and care. His eating was a sacramental eating, because it affirmed the grace and beneficence of God made concrete in the midst of his living. It was a Sabbath eating, permeated by his thanksgiving and praise to God.

It All Turns on Praise

As Ellen Davis has reminded us, "Praise does more for us than it does for God." The reason we worship is not so that God will be impressed with us. It is rather that we will become less sentimental, less self-absorbed, and more realistic about the life God has given. The activity of praise serves the most important function of helping us correct and train our desires: "we praise God in order to see the world as God does."⁴ And so when the psalmist counsels us to praise God, he is interested in how this activity transforms us and effects a new and more honest relationship to the world. When we praise God, we commit ourselves to the world as it came forth and continues to be sustained by God's loving hands.

What does God want for the whole creation? If we are honest, we can readily see how that question has been usurped by another: what do *we* want from the world? As we adopt a posture of praise, however, our daily lives will be reordered so that the priorities of God take precedence. First among these priorities is that the well-being of all creation, ourselves included, be secured and celebrated. If we are serious about praising God with our lives and not just our words, we will learn to act differently, for it is in our mundane daily living that we show most honestly what we think all life is finally for.

Could it be that our anxiety and aggression, our desire to exert total control and exact maximum profit, follows from a basic inability to trust in God's beneficence and care? A case could readily be made that at the heart of our cultural malfunction lies a fundamental distrust in the goodness of God, a basic impatience with the ways of God and creation. Our temptation has been to step outside of our creaturely roles and try to be little gods ourselves, gods who will take by force the many things we should otherwise gratefully receive as divine gifts. This path, as our histories so clearly show, is the pathway of destruction and pain.

Sabbath reflection and observance can be a primary source of cultural renewal because it serves as the antidote to our misperception and destructiveness. Sabbath practices correct and refine our vision so we can see once again—as God saw at the conclusion of each day's creative work—how everything that is made is *very good*. Just as the Sabbath day is set apart and made holy, so can the thanksgiving and praise that are

nurtured and promoted in Sabbath time and place become the basis for sanctifying the world and naming it holy.

My grandfather, I think, saw the sanctity in all things. He made time to see the goodness of God on daily display in his world. His vision was informed by his faith in God as One who is faithful to us and ever generous in the divine showering of gifts. This was no abstract faith. It was grounded in my grandfather's attention to and care of the earth and its animals. Though his life was not without hardships and pains, it was permeated by the kindnesses and the sacrifices of countless others—family, friends, neighbors, dogs, chickens, sunlight, rain, earthworms, and countless microorganisms he never saw. In the face of all this generosity and blessing, he would have asked: How can we not be grateful? How could we ever stop praising God when there is so much for which to offer praise?

If we, practically speaking, are to move into more grateful and worshipful ways of being, we are clearly going to need to slow down our living and become more attentive to the evidences of grace that surround us. We need to extricate ourselves from social and economic patterns that multiply stress and increase creation's suffering and destruction. A good starting point will be to form a new relationship with our food. We need to stop thinking of it as fuel, as a possession we control to further our own agendas. We will then need to become better informed about where our food comes from and under what conditions it is produced. Clearly, not all purchased food is bad or harmful. But if we want to be more responsible and sacramental in our eating, we need to form closer attachments to the food system.

The best way to do this, of course, would be to grow some of our own food. In this activity we learn concretely and palpably (through our stomachs!) the meaning of patience and faith, as we directly engage the ways of divine grace. Failing such gardening, we can make a deliberate effort to form relationships with those who do raise our food by frequenting farmers' markets or participating in community-supported agriculture (CSA) ventures. Here we can learn about, and hopefully directly see, the grace and the costliness of life.

As our sensitivities expand and as our appreciation for the complex, gracious ways of God grows, we will gradually find that gratitude and praise are irrepressible. To experience God's *hesed* or covenantal love in the midst of our practical living is to enter God's domain of blessing and joy. It is to see how our anxious, often wayward, striving represents an affront to the multiple levels of grace that sustain and nurture us daily. As we learn to attend and respond to the creative, vivifying action of God among us, we will learn to participate in a Sabbath singing that is now attuned to and extends God's rhythms of delight and peace.

Notes

Chapter 1. Losing Our Way

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), p. 74.
2. Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (New York: Continuum, 1987), pp. 85, 127. McCabe further notes that *grace* is the Latin form of “thank you,” just as *eucharist* is its Greek form. To say thank you is thus to say something like “This gift makes me think of you,” and so recalls our dependence on others and (finally) God.
3. For further information on our current food industry, see Andrew Kimball’s *Fatal Harvest: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture* (Washington, DC: Island, 2002), Ken Midkiff’s *The Meat You Eat: How Corporate Farming Has Endangered America’s Food Supply* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2004), and Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).
4. Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Boston: Cowley, 2001), p. 34.

Chapter 2. The Meaning of the Sabbath

1. Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), p. 50.
2. Richard H. Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000). He notes, “The *tōb* [‘good’] refrain expresses God’s intense pleasure at creation’s every detail” (p. 86).
3. For an excellent treatment of *menuha* see Abraham Joshua Heschel’s classic book *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), especially pp. 22-23.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
5. Ellen Davis, “Slaves or Sabbath-Keepers? A Biblical Perspective on Human Work,” *Anglican Theological Review*, Winter 2001, p. 36. To say that we are to imitate God in our work does not mean that we can be perfect imitators or that we should follow all of God’s ways (ways that sometimes employ immeasurable force—forest fires, earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, hurricanes—to accomplish a