

It's only when we stop – that we can start

J Shannon

readings: Genesis 2:1-3; Mark 2:23-28; "A passion for sloth" by Noel

Davies in *The Heart Waking – and braking into dance*

Last Sunday, I found myself living a cliché. It was like something out of a 1950s movie where you wake up one morning and you *are* your parents.

I went for a Sunday drive with Geoff and Liam.

And that got me thinking about the sabbath and how those drives were often the only family time working parents could fit in. It was the one time a family were all together. Anyone who owned a shop works 6 days a week – at least.

You can imagine: A nice drive through the country in a proud father's Rover 90 or maybe the Commodore. Perhaps an afternoon tea in a village tea shop 20 miles from home – perhaps a picnic? In my family, it was on the way to the lake or the sea to sail, fish, ski or swim.

I have bucolic Hollywood images in mind ...but in reality, kids fight in the backseat, fathers were often tired and snappy, mothers bored or mine, critiqued my father's driving. It was a curious tradition but one designed to refresh our eyeballs with new images and our souls with fresh experiences. An opportunity to create new family stories. Not a bad thing for a sabbath, I thought...as we (comfortable in our cliché) made up repeat gags and wondered at the landscapes we slid through: In awe of the rainforest; in grief for the burnt hills. At one point we were seriously in danger of crossing the Victorian border. Excitement! Drama!

We played out a variety of possible consequences.

We discovered taking a Sunday drive is relaxing - a meditation of its own. It allowed us to follow our thoughts, our curiosity in any direction. We had random, wide ranging conversations and in that, even intimate revelations. We arrived knowing each other better. – a fossil-fuelled program for general wellbeing. If you can get past the fossil fuel guilt, it was not bad value for money.

There is an emerging wellbeing industry. It is a secular and commercial takeover of the spiritual space. And it bothers me. Not the least of which it is an industry. There is an endless array of podcasts, programs and apps designed to separate you from your money. It is hard-sell calmness and expensive well-

being. The more you pay – the calmer you should be. Such an enterprise wobbles on the brink between self-care and self-obsession. It mistakes ‘spiritual’ for meaningful – yet it offers no meaning. And in some ways, by their very nature of getting programmed, or should I say, rammed, into our busy schedules, it is self-defeating.

It reminds me of when I used to break the land speed record to get to Yoga. I’d drive across town at breakneck speed, squeal into the carpark, run into the room, toss my briefcase in the corner and throw myself onto a mat. Every class began with the teacher saying, ‘now relax’. I would immediately have this urge to laugh.

Cynical as the laugh might have been, I would eventually empty my mind and settle down.

Julia Baird says what is crucial for calm (and wellbeing) is not so much to empty our minds of nonsense but to fill them with good and marvellous things. To notice the good and the beauty. Paul’s letter to the Philippians (4:8) says,

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

So how did the sabbath get so corrupted by rules? I have horrible memories of childhood friends who were forced to sit, read the Bible, pray for the whole sabbath day. They were not allowed outside. They endured hours and hours of church services and sermons telling them how bad they were and laughter was absolutely verboten. Where did this come from? Certainly not in the Bible I’ve read. While African American (and African) services can go for hours, it was like a party, a total celebration, full of spirit and joy. The one thing that sticks in my memory from childhood was that you left black church feeling better than when you went in.

How did we get from the sabbath – as in the day you do not work- to a sabbath where children are punished? Prayer can be work, study is work. They shouldn’t be but by their impost, they were. I do not believe this is what God intended. In Israel and the USA, the Orthodox Jewish families hire ‘others’ to come in and ‘work’ feeding the family, turning on lights, cleaning. Somehow, that’s OK. To me it is a perversion. What is work and what is prayer? In Celtic spirituality – they are the same.

I believe God wanted us to put aside distractions and **live** for a day.

Feeding my family is not work – it should be joy and celebration.

A Sunday drive makes sense **IF** it is intentional together time.

Baird asks what if we can fight distraction not by emptying our minds but by focusing them so that we become mind-full. That focus, absorption, immersion lifts us up into something other than ourselves.

That's what poets and artists do. They don't empty their minds, they pay attention.

Hafiz said,
A poet is someone
Who can pour Light into a spoon,
Then raise it
To nourish
Your beautiful, parched, Holy mouth

Distraction is the bane of society. And it kills holy moments. It is what keeps us from trusting each other. I was watching a Ted Talk from a Harvard Business Professor, Yes, I do that. I watch professors young enough to be my children teaching what I used to teach using the same techniques and ideas as we taught – as if they are something new. Sad, I know.

Anyway, she was working with a company trying to build trust and teams and one of the first things she noticed was that everyone in the meeting room was on their phone. Dah. They were all looking in their laps and texting, sometimes each other in the room. Fancy getting paid a zillion dollars to tell a bunch of young executives that earn more than you and I can imagine – **TO PUT DOWN THEIR PHONES AND LOOK AT EACH OTHER!** But someone had to say it. How can you build trust or a team when they don't make eye contact? Talk about a distraction. I go to the movies to be distracted. I play computer games to be distracted. Distracted is the opposite of present.

And that's where I am heading – the sabbath is about putting down distractions and focussing on each other and the experience of being alive. The joy of friends and family, the joy of reading a book – while doing **NOTHING** else; the joy of sitting in your garden and enjoying the fields of glory *you* created.

The sabbath is God's day to us that we might offer wonder and thanksgiving to God.

And take notice what is good.

Mary Oliver in her most famous poem, "a summers day", fed a grasshopper in her hand and studied it carefully as it ate. She watched it as it cleaned its face and stared back at her...and she said to the grasshopper,

"I don't know exactly what prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed
and how to stroll through the fields
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?"

To repeat our reading, Jesus said, "**The Sabbath was made for man – not man for the sabbath.**" (MK2:27)

How sad to me that some have wrapped themselves in rules and obligations. The sabbath to me should be a day of hyper-attention. Praising God wholeheartedly, enthusiastically. Celebrating fellowship. We could be memorialising roast lamb. We could be savouring memories slowly like fabulous lollies. We might wallow in experiences, tiny memories, from all our senses. We could be making new stories, noticing nature, dancing before God with gratefulness ...because tomorrow will be here soon enough.

I believe worship begins when we rise on Sunday morning and is in every point of the day from the joy of seeing one another again; to the taste and feel of familiar words such as the Lord's prayer – right through to swinging in the hammock and studying the clouds. Salvation is ours if we are paying attention. Theresa Avila thought so too.

She said in, *Laughter came from every brick*

Just these two words He spoke

Changed my life.

“Enjoy Me,”

What a burden I thought I was to carry –
a crucifix as did He.

Love once said to me, “I know a song,
Would you like to hear it?”

And laughter came from every brick in the street
And from every pore
In the sky.

After a night of prayer, He
Changed my life when
He sang.

“Enjoy me,”

So I repeat...

The Sabbath was made for man – not man for the sabbath.

And I pray, God of many wonders, thank you for this wonderful day. AMEN