Re-inventing the sabbath

By William Eaton

Montaigbakhtinian.com

April 2015

I

The point of this post is to call attention to the possibility and ramifications of observing a weekly sabbath. By this word, lower case, I mean a day of rest in which the "religion" is non-activity, or no compulsive activities, rather than anything involving work or other gods or religious institutions, yoga salons perhaps included. It could be said that the god I am interested in worshipping once a week is the god of non-compulsiveness. Perhaps s/he could be called the god of emptiness or of "just being."

My sense is that most of my fellow New Yorkers, or Manhattanites, no longer observe a weekly sabbath (day of rest) or Sabbath (day of organized religious observance). The reasons for this are many, one of them being that many people are forced to work for employers seven days a week. On the seventh day this work may be just an hour or two of e-mail or, say, doing the weekly billing, but this is work nonetheless. Another reason we have no rest days (and do not resist the impositions

of employers) is that we are afraid of unstructured time. What are we going to do if there's nothing we have to do? What thoughts and feelings might come into our heads?

I am sure that elaborate statistics on church (and synagogue and mosque) attendance are available. Over some period of time this attendance may be up or down. I would be interested to know further what people are doing during the time they are attending services and in preparing for them. My sense is that there is a great deal of organized and compulsory if not compulsive animation in such Sabbath-day activities. Certain types of clothes may need to be put on; certain bodily postures and facial expressions need to be assumed and maintained. There are ritual activities—group prayers, sermons, traditional meals.

Again, I take it to be similar for yoga and related disciplines. And, indeed, people quite like the rituals. Many religious services involve group singing, be it of a congregation or a choir, and this can be quite wonderful. But if such singing or yogic chants are part of a weekly program, these are compulsive activities, if not compulsory activities as well. This does not make the sounds or the sense of communion un-wonderful, but they do not involve the kind of rest or "just being" that I have in mind.

So I do not wish here to argue against these other ways of spending non-paid-labor days. My point is simply that this is not the sabbath/day of rest that I have in mind and am interested in exploring in life and in these paragraphs.

Excursus on vacations

My father once said that the purpose of vacations was to get depressed. He was someone who loved to work—as a scholar and teacher, gardener and carpenter. To find himself with nothing to do but visit ruins and museums and linger over meals, and in conversation,

without a book to read, . . . All this provided too many opportunities for depressing thoughts to come into his head. But the wise direction in which his proposition was pointing was that this was the value of vacations: these unwelcome thoughts and this deflation of sublimation, we might call it. During these unsettled, less structured days (of vacation), a few deeper insights might creep in, as between the cracks. And, in any case, returned home he was more than ready to get back to work, to his favorite sublimations, and this with renewed appreciation for how miserable he might feel without all these things he just had to do. (*Cf.*, Pascal, « Quand un soldat se plaint de la peine qu'il a, ou un laboureur, etc., qu'on les mette sans rien faire. » When a soldier, worker, etc., complains about the difficulties of his life, give him nothing to do. In the *Politics* Aristotle proposes that the Spartans remained secure while at war, but began to decline when they had won an empire, because they did not know how to live a life of leisure.)

I would modify my father's comment to read: a purpose of vacations can be to realize that we *are*, as a rule, depressed or otherwise unsettled. The compulsive behavior of our non-vacation lives is often a way of avoiding certain feelings or feeling more generally.

Depression is often connected to repressed anger. With Kierkegaard's help, we can get in touch with how anger may be fundamental to the human condition.

> How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks? . . . And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager — I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint?

We are aghast not only to have been given existence and mortality, but also by our need for others. As the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler observed, we human beings are forced to compensate for our physical vulnerability by forming alliances and cooperating, and this activity, far from relieving us of our feelings of deprivation and insecurity,

embodies them. Kant referred to the "ungesellige Geselligkeit des Menschen" (the unsocial sociability of human beings) and to our drive to achieve a rank among our fellows, whom we can "neither endure nor do without."

It would be easier, too, if our overlarge brains did not have such a capacity to recall, reflect on and dream about such things. And when our busyness is not a way to escape from our thoughts and feelings, it may be an attempt to escape from the fact that we do not know what to do with ourselves besides try to escape. Not to get too technical, but Freud's *Reaktionsbildung* (reaction formation) has its place here. We react to our anxieties by exaggerating the opposite of what worries us. A feeling of emptiness is covered by having too much to do, too many people to see (and too many essays to write). Unable to connect with other people, we make a show of love.

At a simple level it may simply be that we find insufficient what we do have to do: struggle to survive at least long enough to produce offspring and to raise them well enough so that they, in their turn, can survive long enough to produce offspring, and so on and so forth unto eternity. (And this is not the activity of parents alone; all humans are part of communities that may be thought of as existing to produce, protect, educate and encourage future generations.)

Of course these reflections have more to do with philosophy and psychology than with most people's Sabbaths or vacations (or un-vacations, shall we call them?). These events are designed to be so full of activities—be these must-see museums or family members or must-attend rituals, or eating, drinking, tanning, gambling, etc.—there is neither time nor space in which to get depressed (nor to reflect or read philosophy or psychology). It might be said, alternatively, that both on and off vacation we know very well what to do with ourselves: anything and everything to keep certain thoughts and feelings from slipping through the cracks.

II

We come then to my own exploration of observing a weekly sabbath. As a New Year's resolution, on Sunday, 4 January 2015, I began observing a weekly sabbath. Now concluding my third month, I have been learning as I go. This section includes my preliminary findings.

As I am a non-believer, my sabbath has not involved attending religious services. The initial rules have been just these two:

> (1) No work. (I.e. no writing and no reading of *Zeteo* manuscripts or e-mailing *Zeteo* staff or contributors.)
>
> (2) Computer off, and thus no e-mail or "text" communications at all. As I have no mobile phone, no mobile phone needs turning off.

These rules are straightforward enough and have not proved that hard to follow. There has been a moment of shock around 10 every Sunday morning when I think—What the hell am I going to do with myself all day? And by Sunday evening or Monday morning I find myself quite pleased to have ended up doing relatively little. Interestingly, too, I find my new Sunday habit seeping in to my Saturdays. Instead of using my Saturdays to frantically get ready for the computer-less, e-mail-less Sundays, increasingly I find myself tempted to get a head start on "just being." I ignore my to-do list and begin to wander, be it among books and half-finished writings, or around town, with the TV remote.

As I have a wired phone and message machine at home, people who need or want to get in touch with me on Sundays can call, and I can call them. As the rules do not include turning off the television, idle distraction has hardly been eliminated. I often watch a game, perhaps while working out, thoroughly but slowly, at the Y. And at 10 in the evening there is a one-hour radio show I like. I often walk to the Y, so there's 45 minutes there. I read a lot and am glad if my son or a friend joins me for a meal. Although I am not much of a drinker, one Sunday I had a glass of French wine which effectively short-circuited desires to be productive.

Last Sunday, after breakfast with a book, I took a cab to the southern end of Central Park, walked through the park to the Metropolitan Museum and wandered through a few galleries. I walked back to the southern end of the park, took a cab to a restaurant that has a jazz brunch, and read a book while having a not very good meal and half listening to the trio. On my way walking home I did the weekly food shopping. I spent several hours half watching not very interesting "March Madness" college basketball games while also going through a box of *adolescentiae vestigia*—stuff written when I was young. Most of these papers I relegated to a bag for recycling. Others remain scattered across my living-room floor, awaiting filing. I made myself dinner, talked on the phone with a "lady friend" (as the saying used to be) and with one of my sisters. I watched my beloved Rangers play a superb game of hockey, and went to bed.

This description speaks to questions that have arisen in these first months of my experiment. These questions touch on whether I have gone far enough. What should a day of rest exclude? For example:

- Should I exclude all work, to include working out at the Y and this rather massive, daunting task of going through the boxes upon boxes of *vestigia* waiting under my bed? Started down this path, should a sabbath also *not* involve shopping, going to a museum, . . . ?
- What about television (or the radio)? Were I an Orthodox Jew, I would not use electricity, and I can see great advantages in this. My Sundays would be in a sense emptier and thus, perhaps, fuller. They would also be more governed by the sun. When darkness came there would be little to do but get into bed—alone or not! Climbing the ten flights to my apartment, instead of using the elevator, would help keep me in shape and give me a better sense of where I live.

For Orthodox Jews, however, the Sabbath also includes ritual activities which are quite social—attending services, having certain meals with their families. While I am hardly against spending my sabbath or a part

of it with a friend or my son, I have, implicitly, ruled out ritual activities. I might some Sunday wander over to Quaker meeting (this being the religious activity with which I have, however atheistically and intermittently, been involved with in the past). But Quaker meeting has non-ritual, non-social aspects. There is no minister and no program, except for beginning in silence and ending after an hour. As a rule I spend the hour alone with my own thoughts and feelings, which can be all the more unsettling because scattered around the meeting room are a number of other human beings who are equally alone with their own thoughts and feelings.

And then there is this paradox:

- Clearly this sabbath of mine is itself a project, is itself a kind of compulsive activity.

III

I would like to stop here—midstream. I have begun a process, and it has begun well in the sense that I am finding the process engaging, informative and restorative. Among my less philosophical reasons for beginning the process were the following two. Intensive computer use makes me physically ill, and I have needed to take more and longer breaks. And—perhaps it is in the wake of my mother's death, or perhaps it is a matter of working three jobs—the past few months I have been experiencing a low-grade depression that can also be physically uncomfortable—as if, as the French say, I do not feel good in my skin. (Plus I have become inordinately irritable.)

My general sense of how to work through such depressions is to give in to them: instead of trying to "pull up my socks" (one of my father's expressions), it is more restorative to do as little as possible, let the socks sag yet more—let depression wash over and through my body and mind. Another paradox, my self-prescription: The more I feel I "should" do, the less I should in fact do. When the to-do list gets long,

go to bed early. Whether my hunches are valid or not, it does feel as if my Sunday sabbaths are helping both to combat the low-grade depression and to make computer use less noxious.

But again, all this is just a beginning. And, given that we humans indeed do not know what to do with ourselves or our large brains, it may well be asked what possible arguments there could be in favor of doing as little as possible or in favor of "just being." I have not forgotten three of four lines of graffiti that, back in the mid-1970s, were written on the side of a building, somewhere between the University of California at Berkeley campus and my home in the flatlands:

> Live without regret
> Love without restraint
> [the line I have forgotten]
> No more dead time

It might be said that with my sabbaths I am opting for more dead time. Or I am proposing that compulsive activity deadens time and that to live without restraint could involve doing as little as possible. ("Slow food" has become fashionable, a way of saying that it has become a status symbol and expensive. How then can I explore the possibility of slow love?)

Meanwhile I look forward to exploring the sabbath further, and will hardly be amiss to hearing from others about their experiences with similar experiments.

Credits, References, Links

William Eaton, **On just being**, Montaigbakhtinian, April 2013; soon to be published by **Serving House Books** as part of the collection *Surviving the Twenty-First Century.*

While I was working on this post, my friend and *Zeteo* colleague Ed Mooney was posting **philosophical reflections related to Spring Break**. Among other things, he quoted from Nietzsche's *Morgenröte* (The Break of Day or Dawn):

> The only thing that cannot be refused to these poor beasts of burden is their "holidays"—such is the name they give to this ideal of leisure in an overworked century; "holidays," in which they may for once be idle, idiotic and childish to their heart's content.

Alfred Adler, *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler: A Systematic Presentation in Selections from his Writings*, edited by Heinz L. Ansbacher and Rowena S. Ansbacher (Harper & Row, 1956), 129. The selection quoted in the essay was excerpted taken by the *Ansbachers from Menschenkenntnis* (Hirzel, 1927), 20-22. A translation of this book was published in the United States under the title *Understanding Human Nature* (Greenberg, 1927).

Aristotle, *Politics* (**page 1271b**), as translated by H. Rackham and originally published by Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1944. Accessed via Perseus.tufts.edu.

Immanuel Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View). I often rely on the English translation prepared by the Kant scholar Lewis White Beck. It appeared in *Kant: On History* (Pearson, 1963).

Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition* (Kierkegaard's Writings, VI), edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983).