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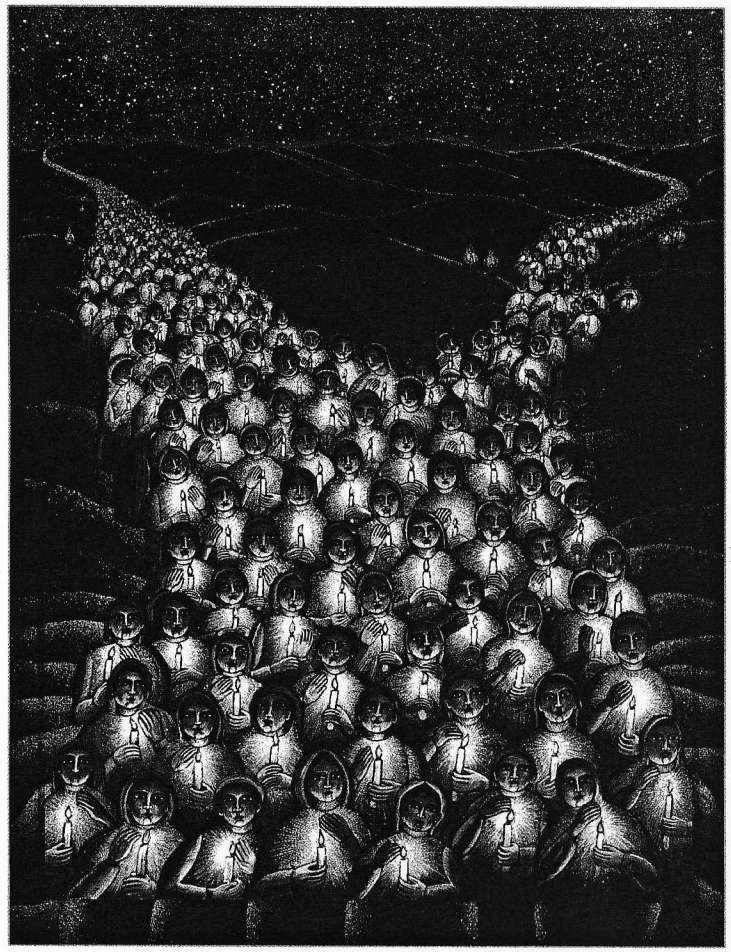

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Chapter 6

KEEPING SABBATH

Dorothy C. Bass

How often people today cry out in exasperation or despair, "I just don't have enough time!" There is so much to do: earn a living, fulfill a vocation, nurture relationships, care for dependents, get some exercise, clean the house. Moreover, we hope to maintain sanity while doing all this, and to keep growing as faithful and loving people at the same time. We are finite, and the demands seem too great, the time too short.

Those of us who feel time's pressure have lots of company in this society. In a surprise best-seller of 1991, *The Overworked American,* economist Juliet Schor reported that work hours and stress are up and sleep and family time are down for all classes of employed Americans. Wives working outside the home return to find a "second shift" of housework awaiting them. Husbands add overtime or second jobs to their schedules. Single parents stretch in so many directions that they sometimes feel they can't manage. Simultaneously, all are bombarded by messages that urge them to spend more (and so, ultimately, work more), to keep their homes cleaner (standards keep rising), and to improve themselves as lovers, investors, parents,

or athletes. Supposedly to make all this possible, grocery stores stay open all night long, and entertainment options are available around the clock. We live, says Schor, in "an economy and society that are demanding too much from people."

What's a person to do? U.S. culture has some answers ready. "Quality time with your kids" is the answer for parents. An exercise machine that reduces stress and burns off fat in only twenty minutes, three times a week, is the answer for the overwrought and the overweight. "What you need is a good night's sleep or a vacation" is the answer one friend offers to another. Each of these answers has value. Yet our circumstances require a stronger response, and we are too caught up in the swirl of our lives to devise one.

In this situation, the historic practice of setting aside one day a week for rest and worship promises peace to those who embrace it. Whether we know the term *Sabbath* or not, we the harried citizens of late modernity yearn for the reality. We need Sabbath, even though we doubt that we have time for it.

As the new century dawns, the practice of Sabbath keeping may be a gift just waiting to be unwrapped, a confirmation that we are not without help in shaping the renewing ways of life for which we long. This practice stands at the heart of Judaism, as we shall see, but it is also available to Christians, in different form. For many of us, receiving this gift will require first discarding our image of Sabbath as a time of negative rules and restrictions, as a day of obligation (for Catholics) or a day without play (in memories of strict Protestant childhoods). Relocating our understanding of this day in the biblical stories of creation, exodus, and resurrection will be essential if we are to discover the gifts it offers.

Unwrapping this gift also requires supporting *underworked* Americans as they wonder what Sabbath keeping might mean for them. One of the cruelest features of the American economy, which asks too much of many people, is that it casts numerous others aside, leaving them without sufficient work. A Sabbath-keeping community, as we shall see, would be a community in which this injustice would not occur. When Sabbath comes, commerce halts, feasts are served, and all God's children play. The equal reliance of all people on the bounty and grace of God is gratefully acknowledged, and the goodness of weekday work is affirmed. Relationships that persist

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.
When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.

WENDELL BERRY, *Sabbaths*

throughout the week are changed in the process. As the great Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "The Sabbath cannot survive in exile, a lonely stranger among days of profanity."

WHAT IS SABBATH?

The way in which time is organized is a fundamental building block of any community. So basic is this that most of us take the pattern we are used to for granted, as if it were self-evident that time must be arranged in this way. For all the spiritual descendants of Abraham—Jews, Christians, Muslims—time flows in seven-day cycles. Other cultures move through time in different cycles, however. In most ancient societies, rest days followed lunar phases or rotated on some other pattern. During the French Revolution, anti-Christian leaders tried to weaken popular religious traditions by abolishing the seven-day week. The rhythms of the week subtly pattern the days and years of our lives, and they are filled with meaning.

The Sabbatarian pattern—six days of work, followed by one of rest—is woven deep into the fabric of the Bible. The very first story of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures climaxes on the seventh day, the very first time there was a seventh day. Having created everything,

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD *your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the* LORD *made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the* LORD *blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.*

EXODUS 20:8–11

God rests, and blesses this day, and makes it holy. In this way, the Christian theologian Karl Barth has suggested, God declares as fully as possible just how very good creation is. Resting, God takes pleasure in what has been made; God has no regrets, no need to go on to create a still better world or a creature more wonderful than the man and woman. In the day of rest, God's free love toward humanity takes form as time shared with them.

Later, God teaches the people of Israel to share in the blessing of this day (Exodus 16). After bringing them out of Egyptian slavery into the wilderness, God sends them manna, commanding them to gather enough each morning for that day's food alone. Mistrusting, they gather more than they need, but it rots. On the sixth day, however, they are told to gather enough to last for two days. Miraculously, the extra does not rot, and those mistrustful ones who go out on the seventh morning to get more find none. God is teaching them, through their own hunger and nature's provisions, to keep the Sabbath, even before Moses receives the commandments on Sinai.

When those commandments come, the Sabbath commandment is the longest and in some ways the most puzzling. Unlike any of the others, it takes quite different forms in the two passages where the Ten Commandments appear. Both versions require the same behavior—work on six days, rest on one—but each gives a different reason. What is wonderful is that each reason arises from a fundamental truth about God's relationship to humanity.

The Exodus commandment to "remember" the Sabbath day is grounded in the story of creation. The human pattern of six days of work and one of rest follows God's pattern as Creator; God's people

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD *your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the* LORD *your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the* LORD *your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the* LORD *your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.*

DEUTERONOMY 5:12–15

are to rest on one day because God did. In both work and rest, human beings are in the image of God. At the same time, they are not God but God's creatures, who must honor God by obeying this commandment.

In Deuteronomy, the commandment to "observe" the Sabbath day is tied to the experience of a people newly released from bondage. Slaves cannot take a day off; free people can. When they stop work every seventh day, the people will remember that the Lord brought them out of slavery, and they will see to it that no one within their own dominion, not even animals, will work without respite. Sabbath rest is a recurring testimony against the drudgery of slavery.

Together, these two renderings of the Sabbath commandment summarize the most fundamental stories and beliefs of the Hebrew Scriptures: creation and exodus, humanity in God's image and a people liberated from captivity. One emphasizes holiness, the other social justice. Sabbath crystallizes the Torah's portrait of who God is and what human beings are most fully meant to be.

THE SABBATH IN JUDAISM

As Sabbath crystallizes the Torah, so Sabbath—*Shabbat*—is the heart of Judaism. When Jews who have become inattentive to their religion wish to deepen their observance, rabbis tell them with one voice: you

must begin by keeping *Shabbat.* But what does it mean to keep a day holy, to refrain from work, to honor God's creativity and imitate God's rest, to experience the end of bondage? This question has been on the minds of observant Jews, and in their hearts and actions, for millennia. Following Exodus 31, in which God makes the Sabbath the sign of an irrevocable covenant with the people of Israel, Jewish leaders have emphasized its special place in Jewish life and heard in its rhythm the structure that has kept Jewish identity alive amid terrible adversity. A saying affirms that "more than the Jews have kept *Shabbat, Shabbat* has kept the Jews."

Many centuries of debate and cultural change have shaped the law and liturgy of contemporary *Shabbat* observance, which varies considerably from one branch of Judaism to another. Infusing the practice as a whole, however, is a theology of creation and exodus, of holiness and liberation.

In observant Jewish homes, *Shabbat* begins each Friday night at sundown as a woman lights the Sabbath candles. It is a festive time; people dress up, the best tableware and food are presented, guests are welcomed. In some families, everyone turns toward the door, singing to greet *Shabbat,* which Jewish hymns personify as a loving bride who brings inner delight and as a beautiful queen who gives order and peace. Traditional prayers are prayers of thanks; indeed, mourning is suspended in *Shabbat* liturgies. Many families sing or read together after the meal. They will gather again the next evening for another meal at which they will bid farewell to the holy day. Finally, parents will bless their children and give them a bit of sweet spice so that the taste of Sabbath peace will linger on their tongues.

Jewish liturgy and law say both what should be done on *Shabbat* and what should not. What should not be done is "work." Defining exactly what that means is a long and continuing argument, but one classic answer is that work is whatever requires changing the natural, material world. All week long, human beings wrestle with the natural world, tilling and hammering and carrying and burning. On the Sabbath, however, Jews let it be. They celebrate it as it is and live in it in peace and gratitude. Humans are created too, after all, and in gratefully receiving the gift of the world, they learn to remember that it is not, finally, human effort that grows the grain and forges the steel. By extension, all activities associated with work or

. . . Indeed, one can never truly know the inward feeling of the Sabbath without the outward form. The Sabbath is not a theory to be contemplated, a concept to be debated, or an idea to be toyed with. It is a day, a day filled with hours and minutes and seconds, all of which are hallowed by the wonderful pattern of living that the nobility of the human spirit has fashioned over the course of the centuries.

SAMUEL H. DRESNER, *The Sabbath*

commerce are also prohibited. You are not even supposed to think about them.

What *should* be done? Specific religious duties do exist, including worship at synagogue and reading of the Torah. But the holiness of the Sabbath is also made manifest in the joy people expect to experience on that day. It is a good deed for married couples to have sexual intercourse on *Shabbat.* Taking a walk, resting, talking with loved ones, reading—these are good too.

To the eyes of outsiders, Jewish observance of the Sabbath can seem like a dreary set of restrictions, a set of laws that don't bear any good news. According to those who live each week shaped by *Shabbat,* however, it is a practice that powerfully alters their relationships to nature, work, God, and others. *Shabbat* is not just law and liturgy; it is also a shared way of life, a set of activities that becomes second nature, a round of custom and prayer that the youngest child or the oldest invalid can enter, a piece of time that opens space for God. Over and over, Jewish authors say of *Shabbat* what those who enter deeply into other religious practices also say: to experience its goodness, you must enter its activities. To find Sabbath peace, you must keep the Sabbath holy. "The real and the spiritual are one, like body and soul in a living person," writes Heschel. "It is for the law to clear the path; it is for the soul to sense the spirit."

CAN CHRISTIANS KEEP SABBATH?

Christians are fortunate when Jewish friends invite us to come to a meal on a Friday evening, to keep Sabbath with them. On our own,

however, Christians cannot keep Sabbath as Jews do. We know God most fully not through the perpetual covenant God made with the Israelites at Sinai but through Jesus Christ. Yet we also honor the Mosaic commandments, and we stand in spiritual and historical kinship with the Jewish people, of whom Jesus was one. In an authentically Christian form of Sabbath keeping, we may affirm the grateful relationship to the Creator that Jews celebrate each Sabbath, and we may share the joyful liberation from drudgery first experienced by the slaves who left Egypt. But we add to these celebrations our weekly festival for the source of our greatest joy: Christ's victory over the powers of death. For Christians, this victory makes of each weekly day of rest and worship a celebration of Easter.

The first day of the week was special to Christians as an Easter day from the earliest days of their community. Sunday, the day on which the disciples had first encountered the risen Lord, became a day to gather, eat together, and rejoice. It was not in those years a day of rest, however; these gatherings happened after the work day was over, and for several decades, Jews who became Christians continued to observe *Shabbat* as well. But these were years when Sabbath observance was changing for Jews as well as for Christians. After the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., the rabbis who reformulated Jewish practice for the new situation placed great emphasis on the Sabbath as a lasting sign of God's unique covenant with Israel. So Jewish observance was becoming more strict during this period. At the same time, Christianity was developing a separate identity from Judaism, and many people who were not Jewish were joining the church. Gradually, Christians of Jewish background stopped attending synagogue and observing Jewish law. Over the years, Sunday became their one-day-in-seven for both rest and worship.

The Gospels say that Jesus observed the Jewish Sabbath, though he ignored some laws that other teachers thought should restrict healing or eating in specific situations of need. "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath," he says in Matthew's Gospel (12:12). Later, Christians continued to treasure the Sabbath commandment, along with the other nine commandments from Sinai. They also came to believe, however, that its meaning had changed within the new creation God began with Christ's death and resurrection. The holy day from now

on, therefore, was not the seventh but the eighth, the day on which the future burst into the present. The appropriate response was to celebrate each Sunday with a feast of communion—one that looked back to Jesus' passion and resurrection and forward to the great banquet that would occur at the end of time. The result has been centuries of Sunday worship, usually crowned by the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Building on this shared heritage, later groups of Christians shaped their Sabbath keeping in many different ways. The strict Sabbath observance of the New England Puritans, for example, gave rise to "blue laws" in many American cities and towns, which long influenced the structure of time in this society. More recently, Reformed churches of Dutch origin have anchored an American subculture within which Sundays are still filled with family visits and theological debate. On the other hand, some groups have been suspicious of Sabbatarianism so strict that it might seem legalistic ("If any where the day is made holy for the mere day's sake, then I order you to work on it, to ride on it, to feast on it, to do anything to remove this reproach from Christian liberty," Martin Luther declared) or have emphasized, like the Quakers, that all time is holy with God. Sunday mass has been and continues to be central to Roman Catholics. A few groups, including the Seventh-Day Adventists, have made Saturday observance central to their identity.

Can We Keep Sabbath Today?

Even while the Bible, history, and the example of Judaism stir up a yearning for Sabbath within us, we are aware that taking on a Sabbath rhythm would not be easy—and pressures to work and spend are only part of the problem. Some other obstacles also make it difficult to retrieve this practice.

One is figuring out how to make Sunday special when it is no longer protected by legislation and custom. The arrangement of time by society as a whole is political, of course: how time is structured makes someone's life easier and someone's harder. Sunday first received special governmental recognition in 321, when the emperor Constantine decreed it a day of rest throughout the Roman Empire.

This spawned centuries of government-sponsored Sabbath keeping. In recent decades, however, the setting aside of Sunday as a special day has been losing force within American culture's politics of time. One reason is increasing sensitivity to religious diversity—a sensitivity pioneered by the Supreme Court in decisions that forced employers to respect the Sabbath practices of Jews and Adventists. Today, not only the laws but also the customs that once shielded Sunday from most commerce are disappearing, and Christians' day of worship and rest is not automatically "free" for church and family. Claiming its freedom will take effort and perhaps even sacrifice.

A second roadblock is the bad reputation many devout Christians have given to the day of rest and worship. In the centuries after Constantine, church attendance came to be required and profane activity to be banned on Sundays, though in fact these rules were often ignored. When religious reform swept through Europe in the sixteenth century, improving the people's use of their day of rest was a concern of Protestant and Catholic leaders alike. In the ensuing centuries, some Protestants worldwide not only required many hours of worship services each Sunday, but also made it virtually impossible for absentees to have any fun. Sabbath keepers were killjoys, it seemed. Little wonder that gloom still hangs over the Sunday memories of some who were children in more stringent times.

Today, economic forces are also nibbling away at the freedom of the day. In a vicious circle, people who spend more hours at weekday jobs need the other days for shopping, which prompts businesses to hire more Sunday workers, who join the growing percentage of the workforce who toil long, irregular hours, some trying desperately to make ends meet, others for the sake of more shopping. For millions of workers, long Sunday hours for rest and worship may be impossible within the current system. People who know the Sabbath pattern of creation, liberation, and resurrection nurture a dissatisfaction with this system, however, and can work for change. Keeping Sabbath, we grow in our longing for a system where all people have work at a living wage, and time for rest and worship too.

Will it be possible for twenty-first-century Christians who need Sabbath but also respect diversity, who need Sabbath but also yearn for joy, who need Sabbath but also struggle to make ends meet, to enter the practice of Sabbath keeping? Perhaps. But this can only

happen as we help one another to develop new forms rooted in the enduring truths of creation, liberation, and resurrection.

Unwrapping the Gift of Sabbath Keeping

In our situation, Sabbath keeping will require a good deal of inventiveness! Tilden Edwards, an Episcopal priest who has explored this practice in real life as well as in a book, urges contemporary Christians to be flexible, embracing not a renewed Sabbatarianism as much as a pattern of "Sabbath time." He recommends a combination of Sunday worship and play with a regular rhythm of disciplined spiritual renewal during the week. Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian minister, describes the "sabbaths" he and his wife observed every Monday, after their busiest day was over: a drive to the country, a psalm, a silent hike for several hours, a quiet evening at home. Pastors are not the only ones who must work on Sundays; others, too, sometimes need to find ways of keeping Sabbath on other days. Yet none of us should think that we can sustain Sabbath keeping, whenever it happens, all by ourselves. We need mutuality in this practice, which resists our ordinary patterns in so many ways. We need to help one another discover this gift.

Most often, Sundays will make the best Sabbaths, and not only because our schedules are relatively open on that day. Joining the assembly of Christians for the celebration of Word and Sacrament will remind us that Sabbath keeping is not about taking a day off but about being recalled to our knowledge of and gratitude for God's activity in creating the world, giving liberty to captives, and overcoming the powers of death. In addition, the friends with whom we worship can help us learn to rest and rejoice once the service is over.

What, besides churchgoing, is Christian Sabbath keeping? The answer must be tailored to specific circumstances and will vary considerably in different cultures and stages of life. It will be helpful in each circumstance to reflect carefully on both what is good and what is not.

What is not good on Sabbath, or in Sabbath time? We would do well to heed three millennia of Jewish reflection on the Sabbath

God of all glory,
on this first day you began creation,
bringing light out of darkness.
On this first day you began your new creation,
raising Jesus Christ out of the darkness of death.
On this Lord's day grant that we,
the people you have made your own by water and the Spirit,
may be joined with all your works
in praising you for your great glory.
Through Jesus Christ,
in union with the Holy Spirit,
we praise you now and forever.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION FOR SUNDAY WORSHIP,
Service for the Lord's Day [PRESBYTERIAN]

commandment. Not good are work and commerce and worry. To act as if the world cannot get along without our work for one day in seven is a startling display of pride that denies the sufficiency of our generous Maker. To refrain from working—not every day, but one in seven—opens the temporal space within which glad and grateful relationship with God and peaceful and appreciative relationship with nature and other people can grow. Refraining from work on a regular basis should also teach us not to demand excessive work from others. Commerce? Buying and spending are closely related to working too much; they depend on work, create the conditions for more work, and often *are* work. We could refrain from shopping on Sundays, making a choice that might complicate the weekly schedule at first but should soon become a refreshing habit. And worry? It may be difficult to banish cares from our minds altogether, but we can refrain from activities that we know will summon worry—activities like paying bills, preparing tax returns, and making lists of things to do in the coming week.

And what is good on a Christian Sabbath? Most important is joyful worship that restores us to communion with the risen Christ and our fellow members of his body, the church. For Christians,

every Sunday is Easter Sunday, a time to gather together with song and prayer, to hear the Word proclaimed, and to recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread. It is a festival, a spring of souls, a day of freedom not only from work but also from condemnation. At times, worshiping communities lose sight of this: hymns drag, elders judge, children fidget, fancy clothes constrain, and the minutes tick slowly by. In other congregations, joyful prayer and song burst through the seams of the worship service, and hours pass before anyone is ready to leave. The contrast suggests that we all need to remember that Sunday worship is not just about "going to church"; it is about taking part in the activity by which God is shaping a new creation. It is a foretaste of the feast to come.

After worship, what many of us need most is time with loved ones—not useful time, for planning next week's schedules, but time "wasted" on the pleasure of being together, perhaps while sharing our enjoyment of art, nature, or athletics. For others, and for all of us at certain points in our lives, hours of solitude beckon, hours for sleep, reading, reflection, walking, and prayer. In addition, we might explore the long tradition of visiting the homebound or inviting lonely ones to our table on the Christian Sabbath, when the joy these occasions bring can be experienced apart from the pressures of other appointments.

Churches must be careful, however, not to devour Sabbath freedom with "religious" or charitable obligations. Filling Sunday afternoons with church committee meetings, for example, is a terrible violation of this freedom. And it is a violation that unfortunately seems to be increasing, precisely because of the pressures that Sabbath freedom specifically opposes. Of course, it is difficult to find time to meet during the week, but part of the point of Sabbath keeping is to cause shifts in weekday priorities. In many churches, it is the people on the committees who most need to be reminded to keep Sabbath! Resisting the temptation to meet on Sunday would help them to say to one another, "God intends rest and liberation for you during at least one seventh of your time." Eating, playing, and taking delight in nature and one another in the hours after worship would be wonderful ways for congregations or groups within them to keep Sabbath.

Puritan Sabbath keepers agreed that "good Sabbaths make good Christians." They meant that regular, disciplined attention to the spiritual life was the foundation of faithfulness. Another dimension of the saying opens up if we imagine a worshiping community helping one another to step off the treadmill of work-and-spend and into the circle of glad gratitude for the gifts of God. Taken this way, good Sabbaths make good Christians by regularly reminding us of God's creative, liberating, and redeeming presence, not only in words but also through a practice we do together in response to that presence. But even beyond this, there are other benefits of Sabbath keeping, and these could spill over to bless the whole world. With a change, the saying acquires an applicability that reaches beyond the spiritual life alone, and beyond the Sabbath practices of Jews or Christians. Imagine this: "Good Sabbaths make good societies."

The practice of keeping Sabbath bears much wisdom for people seeking ways through the crises of these times and the stresses of contemporary life. "The solution of mankind's most vexing problems will not be found in renouncing technical civilization, but in attaining some degree of independence from it," writes Heschel. Sabbath keeping teaches that independence. Refraining from work on a regular basis is a way of setting limits on behavior that is perilous for both human welfare and the welfare of the earth itself. Overworked Americans need rest, *and* they need to be reminded that they do not cause the grain to grow and that their greatest fulfillment does not come through the acquisition of material things. Moreover, the planet needs a rest from human plucking and burning and buying and selling. Perhaps, as Sabbath keepers, we will come to live and know these truths more fully, and thus to bring their wisdom to the common solution of humanity's problems.

A good Sabbath would also make a good society by balancing the claims of work and celebration, for workers and celebrants of all sorts. In prayers at the beginning and end of *Shabbat,* Jews thank God for the blessing of work. Not working on one day is tied to working on the other six; Sabbath affirms the value of work and interprets it as an important dimension of human identity. Sabbath keeping bears

a longing that all human beings will have good work, as well as a longing that no one will be required to toil without respite.

Rest and worship. One day a week—not much, in a sense, but a good beginning. One day to resist the tyranny of too much or too little work and to celebrate with God and others, remembering thereby who we really are and what is really important. One day that, week after week, anchors a way of life that makes a difference every day.