

Going on vacation

I have been a spiritual director for around 15 years. One of the things I see in my directees is that they need to slow down and pause.

Pausing is perhaps the most important part of living a spiritual life.

If you don't build in pauses into your life, each year, each week and each day, then you end up just running along the railway track of your life without ever noticing where you are going or where you are right now. It is like being asleep in the passing of your life. Someone said that an unexamined life is a life not lived.

So vacation time is a pause.

It is a little Sabbath.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the Sabbath has a primary place. It is one of the Ten Commandments.

The Sabbath is a day off. Over the centuries Judaism developed an extensive code about what you should not be doing. It may seem picky at times and legalistic but, at heart, it is about releasing people from the demands of work, of "oughts" and "shoulds". It is about a day of liberty.

The Sabbath began at Friday dusk and ended at the next nightfall. It was a time for people to be together. A time to eat food that was already cooked. No one had to wash dishes: They waited till the morning. You had time that day. You had space to be yourself. You had time to be with God. Nothing was competing for your attention. There was no agenda, no obligations, no task list hovering over you with a feeling of guilt or duty.

The Commandment about the Sabbath teaches us that God, who knows us pretty well as a species, wants us to be well, to be balanced, and to live in peace, harmony and in joy. And for that to be the case we need to have that deep un-interrupted rest.

Vacations are all that we in the West have got left of that tradition. Nearly everyone takes a vacation, if only a week.

Vacation is from the same root as Vacant. It is "empty time". You should not, on vacation, remodel your kitchen, do your tax returns, or discharge any other of the things on your "TO DO" list.

You should be empty, quiet, at peace and at ease. It is recovery time, down-time. The commandment tells you that this is not about selfishness or shirking duty. It is about honouring God's wisdom for us as people.

Lucy and I are going to stay in my sister's place in France. I love France. My parents would load us up in the car and drive to the ferry each year. We would all imagine we were seasick on the flat water of the crossing and then we would camp before camping was popular. My Dad, who spent the year being irritable and grumpy, would begin to resemble a human being with a sense of humour and fun. My mother

would only serve meals out of cans or of fresh bread and local cheese and fruit. We would read books, swim in rivers and do very little. That is close to our intention for this vacation.

I want to invite you to think about the Sabbath teaching behind the vacation tradition.

We would be well advised to honour this one of the Ten Commandments. We would do well to have a day a week absolutely off. Off meaning "No oughts or shoulds" No work, but a sweet unworried rest, a refreshment time and a renewal time. A period when there is enough empty space in that day to wander away from TV and Internet and sit with God for a while and tell him about your week. Sunday Church is a good part of that. One of the mums in another congregation said she came to church because at church no one could get at her, and she could be quiet and be still for one hour a week. She said it was like drinking cool water when you are parched and thirsty. That is a good description of Sabbath.

I also want you to consider having a 10-minute, half hour or hour long Sabbath every day.

Lucy and I begin each day with a half hour of silence, opened by prayers and a reading, closed by prayers and the sound of a brass prayer bowl being gently struck. Sometimes my prayers are deep, and other times my mind wanders like a lost sheep. But most importantly it is a time set aside from problem-solving, planning, thinking things through. It is time just to be still, be quiet, ponder and do all of that while sitting in the quiet presence of my God.

Take time for your self. Jesus gave his life for you. You are worth enough to give yourself the Sabbath time God has told you you need.

Happy prayer time! Happy Sabbath days! Happy vacation!