

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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UNIT FOUR SESSION SIX: Work and leisure



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Once Abbot Anthony was conversing with some brethren, and a hunter who was after game in the wilderness came upon them. He saw Abbot Anthony and the brothers enjoying themselves, and disapproved. Abbot Anthony said: Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it. This he did. Now shoot another, said the elder. And another, and another. The hunter said: If I bend my bow all the time it will break. Abbot Anthony replied: So it is also in the work of God. If we push ourselves beyond measure, the brethren will soon collapse. It is right therefore from time to time to relax their efforts.¹



Despair and incapacity for leisure are twins.²



By their labor people ordinarily support themselves and their families, are joined to their fellows and serve them, and can exercise genuine charity and be partners in the work of bringing divine creation to perfection. Indeed, we hold that through labor offered to God human beings are associated with the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, who conferred an eminent dignity on labor when at Nazareth he worked with his own hands.³



Unless the Lord build the house those who build it labour in vain.⁴



But Martha was cumbered about much serving.⁵



¹ Thomas Merton, ed., *The Wisdom of the Desert*, New Directions, 1960, 63.

² Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, A Mentor Book, 1962, 40.

³ *Gaudium et Spes* ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World"), 67.

⁴ Psalm 127:1.

⁵ Luke 10:40. This is the King James Version. The New Jerusalem Bible says "Martha was distracted with all the serving". The Revised Standard Version says "Martha was distracted with much serving". The KJV has Jesus rebuke Martha for being "troubled about many things"; the NJB says "you worry and fret about so many things"; the RSV says "you are anxious and troubled about many things". Working or not working does not seem to be the issue here. The issue is the attitude and manner with which one approaches the situation. The Greek word which the KJV translates as "cumbered" is *perispao* which literally means something like *drag around*. This is the one and only occasion the word is used in the entire Bible.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**** Both work and leisure are core features of a healthy human life formation process.***



Our experience of work and leisure

Let us begin our explorations of work and leisure with some preliminary reflections. What are your spontaneous reactions to the following statements about work?

- “Work helps me grow as a human being;”
- “Work is only for making money – if I had enough money I would not work another day in my life;”
- “Work is about making/doing useful things;”
- “When I am not doing something I feel agitated, therefore I make sure I am always doing something;”
- “Work is a necessary evil – a drudgery that I do because I have to;”
- “Work is a way of serving the community;”
- “Work is about wealth and power – getting to the top of the social ladder;”
- “Work is about providing for the material needs of myself and others;”
- “Work is about good order – we must work to keep society moving ahead”.

What are your spontaneous reactions to the following statements about leisure?

- “Leisure is less and less part of my life these days;”
- “Leisure is an essential part of my life these days, more than it ever was;”
- “Leisure feels like I am wasting time;”
- “Leisure, like privacy, is a privilege only the wealthy can enjoy;”
- “I always seem to find another job to do when I set aside time for leisure;”
- “Leisure frightens me;”
- “Leisure is the ground of contemplation and peace in my life.”

Everything we have considered so far in this course is relevant to our understanding of work and leisure – their nature, role, necessity and interdependence in a healthy life formation process. How we think about work and leisure has a profound impact on each of us as individuals, on those near to us and on society at large.

Describing work

Let us begin by reflecting on an enjoyable experience of work. What is it like, and what actually happens within you, when you enjoy working?⁶ Obviously there is a degree of subjectivity in this, but it is not a bad place to start.

- Firstly, *aptitude*: In the first place, when we have some particular *aptitude* for the work – especially a natural talent – we are probably more likely to experience the work as enjoyable and therefore as good work than if we have no aptitude or natural talent for it. The same might apply if we have no particular training for it. In other words, the work that is enjoyable is in some way an extension or expression of *me* – I am able to express myself through it. It connects me with myself and the world in a more or less healthy and confirming sort of way. We only have to consider those times when we are asked to do something for which we have no particular aptitude and/or training. Failure and frustration are not conducive to a sense of self-worth, accomplishment or enjoyment. We generally do not enjoy work when we fail at it.
- Secondly, *meaning and purpose*: work can be experienced as enjoyable when we experience a depth of meaning and purpose associated with it – for example, when we create something worthwhile or do something useful and good for someone – especially when they appreciate it – or when it contributes to a career we enjoy, or when it results in income for the family, or when it is done as an act of freedom and generosity for another person in need or the work is simply perceived by us to have particular meaning and value.
- Thirdly, *connectedness*: Closely allied to this second factor, work can be experienced as enjoyable when it connects us with a world of people, events and things beyond ourselves, particularly, perhaps, when it is engaged with others whose company we enjoy or appreciate – for example, when we engage in a community project that brings some benefits to that community or certain of its members.
- Fourthly, *rhythm*: Relentless routine and repetition can make an otherwise enjoyable experience a terrible experience. A rhythm of life which includes a healthy mix of work and leisure can make both more enjoyable. And even a certain rhythm within work – a rhythm that breaks the relentless routine or application – generally makes for a better experience of work.

As human beings, one essential way of expressing our humanity – in its

⁶ It might be useful to compare this reflection with the reflection on what it is like to be prevented from working because of illness or to be unemployed. The latter experience in particular can be most debilitating. See again the discussion on “Form Potency” in this Course, Unit One, Session Five.

uniqueness and communality – is by doing and making, creating and building, serving and helping. In other words, work is an expression of our humanity as participants in the world. Potentially at least, work can express and foster our humanity individually and communally. At its best, it connects us positively and creatively with ourselves, other people and the world in which we find ourselves. In this sense, work is a specifically human activity. Perhaps we could speak of work as:

- that *human activity whereby we participate in the mystery of formation*
- *by accomplishing – or attempting to accomplish – useful and/or pleasing things*
- *needed and/or valued in a life that seeks to be civilized.*

Let us explore this a little more closely. If we think along these lines, work implies some connection with the Great Mystery, oneself, other people and the world, through actions that achieve some worthwhile end or outcome. Such a perspective allows us to include a great variety of human activities under the heading of *good work*. It gives priority to the dispositions we bring to the work, rather than what is actually done or even intended. Thus, one may do *good work* by driving a bulldozer in making a road, another by studying and thinking in order to write a philosophical article as part of an academic conversation, another by heart surgery and another by selling clothes, another by carving a statue and another by vacuuming a room, still another by sitting and listening to someone in distress or by bringing in a wheat harvest, and so on.⁷

It would seem to be generally more life-giving to engage the world with a radical sense of being a *participant* and *facilitator* rather than a *conqueror* or *controller*.⁸ The work, even if it does include some necessary elements of mastery can still be experienced as part of something much bigger and more purposeful and meaningful than just *this* task at *this* time that draws attention to *this* individual or group.

The work will be experienced within the context of an unfolding and evolving mystery of formation that is benevolent and meaningful.⁹ This or that

⁷ We leave aside the very complex ethical issues associated with certain kinds of work. For example, there may be ethical issues associated with ripping the landscape with a bulldozer – because it shows lack of reverence for the earth – or performing surgery under certain circumstances – because the talent and resources might be better employed elsewhere – or flying a passenger jet – because it pollutes the atmosphere, and so on.

⁸ This is not to suggest that there are not times when it is entirely appropriate to endeavour to *master* this or that. Thus, I may struggle to master a language or keyboard skills or the intricacies of the stock exchange. What we are saying is that these practical, workaday experiences of mastery are not the foundation of our engagement in the world. Beneath them and providing the foundational approach to life is the more radical disposition whereby we experience our engagement with the world as participation and facilitation rather than mastery or manipulation.

⁹ See Unit One, Session Two – “Formation Mystery”.

particular task may, in and of itself, carry little or no apparent meaning and purpose. As part of that bigger context, however, it is accepted and engaged as something meaningful and purposeful and – hopefully – valuable and/or useful to me and others. In other words, work – like life itself – is best experienced as something which shifts the center of gravity in my life – and in the life of the community – from ego towards Mystery. Work is an entry point *to* the Mystery and *for* the Mystery. It therefore implies some grounding in leisure. But we must return to that in a moment.

Our description also implies *producing* something. At least the *intention* in both the worker and the work, in *good work*, is to produce something of value or usefulness. The product might be anything, as long as it has some value and/or satisfies some genuine human need. We must allow, of course, for the possibility that on this or that occasion we produce something that has little or no use or value. Just because I failed does not mean it was not worth doing. Because of the intention it may be considered *good work*.¹⁰

In other words the focus is on the process at least as much as it is on the outcome. In this way, work can be experienced after the manner of a ritual – an activity in which we participate in a process, in which we receive even as we give.¹¹

Whatever we say about work in theory, the fact of the matter seems to be that, with the best will in the world, work is very often experienced as stressful or burdensome or boring or frustrating or unrewarding or all the above. The proper response to this fact of our lives may not lie in changing the definition of good work, but in recognizing those factors that might obstruct us in perceiving and experiencing work in a more or less life-giving way:

- There are some *cultural forces* active here, such as functionalism, consumerism, materialism, individualism, rapid change, “bottom line” thinking and so on – all or any of these can radically affect our thinking about and our experience of work; in which case the response is to become aware of these factors, how they operate in our lives and the possible ways we might – at the very least – mitigate their negative effects;¹²

¹⁰ G K Chesterton remarked: “If a thing’s worth doing it’s worth doing badly.”

¹¹ Some helpful reading on this theme: Karlfried Graf von Durckheim, *The Way of Transformation: Daily Life as Spiritual Exercise* (Allen & Unwin, 1971); Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (Arkana, 1985); Pema Chodron, *Start Where You Are* (Shambala, 2001); Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence* (Image, 1975).

¹² The process of focusing can be very useful here. Bear in mind the influence of any and all the intra-formative processes – our thinking, our willing, our remembering, our anticipating, our imagining, our feeling and the different levels of consciousness.

- There may be *personal* factors involved such as presence or lack of emotional resilience, challenge, talent, qualifications and maturity; individuals may also suffer from lack of ability/willingness to listen effectively and honestly to what is going on in their lives; other personal factors might include greed, selfishness, unreal expectations, and so on;
- Other relevant factors could include availability of suitable work, travel to and from work, physical work environment, staff atmosphere, ethical questions about the work practices, adequate or not so adequate equipment, inappropriate remuneration, and so on.

Again the *obedience* and *detachment* patterns are of practical relevance.¹³ Despite our best efforts, we might end up having to live with work that is not our first choice or work with people we would rather not work with or travel to a job that is very inconvenient or have to do tasks that we simply do not like doing. We must expect a certain amount of this brokenness that pervades life itself to be manifest in work.¹⁴

Describing leisure¹⁵

It might be helpful first of all to attend to the Latin roots of the English word, “leisure.” The Latin word is *licere*, meaning *to be allowed*. Implied in this is a certain freedom – we can yield to the heart’s deepest desire, the yearning of our very souls. We can have “permission” to relax, we are “allowed” to take a pause in the flurry of life and simply be in an inner space where we feel at home. It opens up space and time in which we are disencumbered and come home to ourselves and ground ourselves once again in the True and the Good, the Beautiful and the One. We might say that leisure is giving yourself freedom to be yourself, to be fully present for your life.

The *being allowed* thus translates into a disposition of active waiting, deliberate surrender, silence and stillness and listening, energetic openness to the more than that is present in every moment of our lives. This *being allowed* may be activated through rituals and symbols, celebration and play. It may be more or less formal, more or less informal. It may be communal or individual. Through all these ways of *being allowed* we touch our roots and may be restored to ourselves.

¹³ See Unit Three, Session Seven on “Obedience”, and Unit Four, Session Three on “Detachment”.

¹⁴ Recall the nature of the consonant life, one that is in tune with the True and the Real: firstly it is *congenial* (ie it is more or less in tune with who I most deeply am); secondly it is *compatible* (ie it is more or less in tune with other people in their congeniality); thirdly it is *conservationist* (ie it is in tune with the natural world); fourthly, it is *compassionate* (ie it is in tune with the brokenness of the world).

¹⁵ We do not have the space here to explore the closely related activities of play, celebration and festivity.

The pace and busyness of life can create an unfree, compulsive mindset that takes us away from ourselves – that blocks or even destroys the *being allowed*. This tendency towards diminished – and diminishing – freedom needs an antidote for it threatens the very dignity of the person. Leisure as *being allowed* is such an antidote.¹⁶

The Greek word for *leisure* is *skole*. The Latin translation of this word is *scola*.¹⁷ The English translation of *scola* is *school*. This probably will strike most Westerners as peculiar. The word used in English to name the place where we intend to teach and educate is a word which means *leisure*?¹⁸

It may also be helpful to think of leisure as *school* – a place of learning or education.¹⁹ Thinking this way picks up the active side of leisure, implying some kind of commitment to listening and learning and growing and being transformed and becoming more and more free. The whole of life, work included, can be thought of as *school*. In this place of freedom – of *being allowed* – we seek to be enlightened, to be strengthened with wisdom, to be educated, to arise as human beings. That *school* allows us to return to the workaday world feeling more in tune with ourselves and the world, thinking with greater clarity and perspective and wisdom.

One can easily think of leisure as walking along a beach with a loved one or by oneself, listening to a favourite piece of music, going to a movie or an opera, having a cup of coffee with a friend or sitting by oneself on a park bench, reading a good novel or taking up a yoga position to meditate, writing in a personal journal or playing a game of tennis with friends, digging in the garden or bushwalking.²⁰

¹⁶ Adrian van Kaam offers a helpful and relevant reflection on this when he discusses the twofold movement of life – “differentiation” and “integration”. See Adrian van Kaam, *Religion and Personality (Revised Edition)*, Dimension, 1964/1980, 3-9.

¹⁷ A more common word in Latin for *leisure* is *otium*.

¹⁸ It is worth reflecting on the development in the understanding of *schools* over the last eight hundred years – at least since the Schools of the 12th century. For example, we do not think of our schools as places of *wisdom*. They are, rather, places where you acquire knowledge of one kind or another. More often than not, today they are, in fact, oriented in a very functional way towards skills and knowledge that will enable people to get jobs and thus contribute to the GDP. If you want *wisdom* today, where do you go?

¹⁹ The English word “education” comes from the Latin words “e” meaning “out” and “ducere” meaning “to lead.” The Latin word “educere” means literally “to lead forth.” Education is leadership. Like Jesus calling Lazarus forth from the tomb, the educator calls forth the person. Remember the best educators – as distinct from the best “teachers” – from your experience of school. This understanding of education carries echoes of the word “originality,” from the Latin word “orire”, meaning “to arise.” Life formation considered in terms of “originality,” is understood as an inside-out process, a graced emergence. Thus we say formation is liberation. Growth is becoming free. Education, understood as a subset of life formation, may also be understood as liberation.

²⁰ We could ask whether some of the forms and manifestations of “leisure” in our culture are deserving of that name. For example, we place great importance on being entertained. This is typically passive. What is more, the entertainment requested by our culture typically has to be fast-paced and often enough extreme. What is happening? This might be more akin to an

What if we think of leisure, firstly and most fundamentally, in terms of a radical *inner disposition*, a disposition that embodies the conviction that life is a mystery to be lived not just a problem to be solved, a disposition that always seeks to engage the Mystery and participate in life on the Mystery's terms?

Maybe it is better to think of leisure in terms of our *attitude* or our *way of being present* – one of openness and engagement with the Mystery, a certain active submission to the rhythm of things – than of any particular thing we do? In this way, leisure is seen as part of our ongoing movement *into* the True and the Good, the Beautiful and the One being manifested in our daily lives, never an evasion or an escape. Leisure is the servant of a shifting centre of gravity, from ego-centrism towards Mystery-centrism.

Something has happened in the history of Western thought to completely change our understanding of leisure. Josef Pieper writes:

The original conception of leisure, as it arose in the civilized world of Greece, has, however, become unrecognizable in the world of planned diligence and 'total labour'; and in order to gain a clear notion of leisure we must begin by setting aside the prejudice – our prejudice – that comes from overvaluing the sphere of work. In his well-known study of capitalism Max Weber quotes the saying that 'one does not work to live; one lives to work,' which nowadays no one has much difficulty in understanding: it expresses the current opinion. We even find some difficulty in grasping that it reverses the order of things and stands them on their head. But what ought we to say to the opposite view, to the view that 'we work in order to have leisure'? We should not hesitate to say that here indeed 'the world of topsy-turvydom', the world that had been stood on its head, has been clearly expressed. To those who live in a world of nothing but work, in what we might call the world of 'total work,' it presumably sounds immoral, as though directed at the very foundations of human society.²¹

Pieper is citing Aristotle when he says that “we work in order to have leisure.” Literally, the Greek text says “we are unleisurely in order to have leisure”.²² For Aristotle, leisure is the center-point of human life about which everything revolves. The Greeks would have been bewildered by any suggestion that “we live to work”.

analgesic than a genuine experience of leisure, a way of evading the Mystery rather than engaging the Mystery?

²¹ Josef Pieper, *op cit*, 20-21.

²² The Greeks used the word “unleisurely” (*ascolia*) to refer to the daily toil of life and the everyday jobs we engage. The Latin word *negotium* – literally *neg* meaning *not* or *no* and *otium* meaning *leisure* – translates the Greek word *ascolia*. The common English translation of the Latin *negotium* is *business, occupation* or *employment*.

We could, of course, dismiss Aristotle and the ancient Greeks as irrelevant.²³ On the other hand we could explore the implications of giving leisure this foundational role, and work a secondary and subservient role in life. What would it be like if we did that? We might usefully ask questions like the following:

- What would it be like to be constantly busy without a pause, constantly talking without silence, constantly engaging other people without any solitude?²⁴
- Are holidays mostly times of “catching up” on rest, a sort of convalescent time?
- Is it possible to love at speed (Michael Leunig)?
- What do you need to do to maintain optimum energy and efficiency in your life?
- What does it feel like when you come out of a particularly busy spell and sit and relax, in silence and stillness?
- How do deepen your relationships with the Mystery, with yourself, with other people and with the world at large?
- What do you see as the biggest obstacles to leisure in your life?



²³ It is perhaps relevant to recall the overwhelming popularity of Mahareeshi Mahesh Yogi and the “transcendental meditation” movement of the sixties. An appreciation for the need of “meditation” or some other “structure” that creates “space” in which people withdraw from the busyness of the workaday world and connect with deeper sources of being, seems to have grown over the past forty years, indicating that the response to the Mahareeshi was suggesting something more than a passing fad.

²⁴ It might be useful to reflect on “Loneliness, Aloneness and Solitude” in *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume I*, 171-178.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

* *Both work and leisure are core features of our being in Christ.*

* *In work human beings are co-creators with the Creator.*

* *In both work and leisure human beings are potentially expressing their highest calling as intimates of God.*



The Sabbath

Crucial to any understanding of biblical revelation concerning work and leisure, is the Sabbath.²⁵ The precise origins of the term and its practice are obscure. However, the fact that the Sabbath features in the Decalogue indicates how profoundly religious a concept it is for the Jews. Scholars generally agree that the Sabbath belongs to the very earliest period of Israel's religious history.²⁶ The Sabbath is celebrated every 7th day and it is a day of release from toil for the purposes of relaxation and festival.

The Bible gives different reasons for the Sabbath observance. In the Decalogue of Exodus 20:8-11, the Sabbath is to be observed as a remembrance of God's creative work:

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath for Yahweh your God. You shall do no work that day, neither you nor your son nor your daughter nor your servants, men or women, nor your animals nor the alien living with you. For in six days Yahweh made the heavens, earth and sea and all that these contain, but on the seventh day he rested; that is why Yahweh has blessed the Sabbath day and made it sacred.

One scholar observes:

The hallowing of the Sabbath by God's free and sovereign will, as expressed in the Exodus version, would appear to be the ultimate and self-sufficient reason for Sabbath observance.²⁷

²⁵ The Hebrew word "Sabbath" or "Shabbat" comes from the root word "shavat", meaning "to cease" or "to desist".

²⁶ In the Decalogue – Exodus 20:8 – the command is to *remember* to keep the Sabbath. This seems to imply some longstanding tradition.

²⁷ Demetrius Dumm, "Work and Leisure" – unpublished paper. See Demetrius Dumm, *Flowers in the Desert*, Paulist Press, 1987 – especially Chapter One. Dumm's treatment of the Ten

The later version found in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 emphasizes the social and ethical dimension:

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as Yahweh your God has commanded you. Labour for six days, doing all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath for Yahweh your God. You must not do any work that day, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servants – male or female – nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your animals, nor the foreigner who has made his home with you; so that your servants, male and female, may rest, as you do. Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt, and that Yahweh your God brought you out of there with mighty hand and outstretched arm; this is why Yahweh your God has commanded you to keep the Sabbath.

The 25th Chapter of the Book of Leviticus reminds us that the Sabbath observance is far reaching:

When you enter the country which I am giving you, the land must keep a Sabbath rest for Yahweh. For six years you will sow your field, for six years you will prune your vineyard and gather its produce. But the seventh year the land shall have a sabbatical rest, a Sabbath for Yahweh. You will neither sow your field, nor prune your vineyard, nor reap any grain which has grown of its own accord, nor gather the grapes from your untrimmed vine. It will be a year of rest for the land. But what the land produces in its Sabbath will serve to feed you, your slave, male or female, your employee and your guest residing with you; for your cattle too and the wild animals of your country, whatever it produces will serve as food. You will count seven weeks of years – seven times seven years, that is to say a period of seven weeks of years, forty-nine years. And on the tenth day of the seventh month you will sound the trumpet-call; on the Day of Expiation you will sound the trumpet throughout the land. You will declare this fiftieth year to be sacred and proclaim the liberation of all the country's inhabitants.²⁸

Commandments is particularly interesting. He suggests that the Sabbath is actually a key to understanding the other Commandments.

²⁸ One commentator makes a useful observation on this text from Leviticus: “One of the most unusual laws that God imposed on Israel was a requirement to let the Promised Land lie fallow every seventh year (Lev. 25:2–8). This was not unlike the requirement for the people to rest every seventh day, or Sabbath (23:3), and therefore was called the sabbath year or “sabbatical.” The sabbath year seemed to enforce two concepts. First, the land belonged to God (25:23). He created it and put it under humanity’s management to “tend and keep” it (Gen. 2:15). Even after people first sinned, God charged them with the responsibility of restoring the earth, so far as that is possible, from the effects of the curse, such as natural infertility, weeds, pests, germs, pollution, and the like. Letting the land lie fallow would help in this regard by restoring the ground’s nutrients. A second reason for the sabbath year had to do with dependence on God. To go without a harvest every seventh year would be a powerful reminder that one is ultimately

Understood in terms of presence or an *attitude* or *disposition*, rather than a technical legal obligation, the Sabbath keeps before the people the sovereignty of God and their responsibilities under the Covenant with this sovereign God. A life lived in radical submission to and reverence for God will be one that seeks constantly to know God and God's ways and live accordingly. This is quintessentially the life of obedience, in the fullest sense of that word. It will be a life permeated with awe and gratitude, one that resists all forms of greed and exploitation of oneself, other people and land and water and all created things. The Sabbath mind is a mind eager to hear and heed the ways of God, it remembers God and the wonders of being made in the image and likeness of God, called to be creators with the Creator.

At stake here is probably the central struggle of our lives – the struggle between surrender in trust on the one hand and (anxious) mastery and control on the other. Thus, Sabbath goes to the heart of the human condition and brings us face to face with what turns out to be both our deepest fear and our greatest opportunity, potentially our greatest limitation and our most wonderful possibility. Sabbath is about:

- recognising the absolute transcendent Mystery that God is and living each moment in that recognition;
- promoting a shifting centre of gravity in our lives, from ego towards Mystery;
- approaching life with the greatest respect for the integrity of every creature, ourselves included, because every creature speaks to us of the Creator;
- providing a countervailing energy to any forms of greed and violence and domination and oppression;
- saying with our whole lives, all that we do and all that we are, “Into your hands Lord I commit my spirit”;
- embodying a certain presence in the world, one that speaks of awe and wonder and is always available for play and festival and celebration of creation and the Creator.²⁹

Jesus observed the Sabbath. He condemned any attempts to reduce it to a legal technicality, for such attempts are themselves violations of the Sabbath attitude. Legalism is an attempt to keep control, the very antithesis of the surrender

dependent on God. That's why God promised to send three years' worth of harvest in the sixth year – food enough for the remainder of the sixth year, for the unplanted seventh year, and for the first year of the next cycle (25:20). From the standpoint of our highly technological society today, the concept of a sabbath year seems thoroughly out of date. Yet the two truths behind the sabbath year have not changed. Ultimately, God still owns the means of production; we are simply workers using His resources. Likewise, we are still ultimately dependent on Him.” *Word in Life Study Bible* (Nelson Electronic Bible Reference Library).

²⁹ See Luke 23:46 and Psalm 31:5.

and trust implicit in the Sabbath. Legalism is grounded in anxiety – despite any protestations to the contrary. Sabbath provides the all-encompassing mood for working and living. It is the ultimate expression of leisure for the Christian. We pause, go apart, seek out that *being allowed* that emerges from the depths of our beings if we care to listen, and we go into that *school* that can teach us the ways of the Lord.



Snippets for meditation

(1) (From the Second Vatican Council:) “33. *Through their labors and their native endowments, human beings have ceaselessly striven to better their lives. Today, however, especially with the help of science and technology, they have extended their mastery over nearly the whole of nature and continue to do so. Thanks to increased opportunities for many kinds of social contact among nations, a human family is gradually recognizing that it comprises a single world community and is making itself so. Hence, many benefits once looked for, especially from heavenly powers, human beings have now enterprisingly procured for themselves.*

“In the face of these immense efforts which already preoccupy the whole human race, people agitate numerous questions among themselves. What is the meaning and value of this feverish activity? How should all these things be used? To the achievement of what goal are the strivings of individuals and societies heading? The Church guards the heritage of God's word and draws from it moral and religious principles without always having at hand the solution to particular problems. As such, she desires to add the light of revealed truth to humankind's store of experience so that the path which humanity has taken in recent times will not be a dark one.

“34. Throughout the course of the centuries, people have labored to better the circumstances of their lives through a monumental amount of individual and collective effort. To believers, this point is settled: considered in itself, this human activity accords with God's will. For human beings, created to God's image, received a mandate to subject to themselves the earth and all it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness (cf. Gn 1:26-27; 9:2-3; Wis 9:2-3), a mandate to relate themselves and the totality of things to the One who was to be acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all. Thus, by the subjection of all things to humanity, the name of God would be wonderful in all the earth (cf. Ps 8:7 and 10).

“This mandate concerns the whole of everyday activity as well. For while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator's work, consulting the advantages of their fellow human beings, and are contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan.

“Thus, far from thinking that works produced by their own talent and energy are in opposition to God's power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the Creator, Christians are convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's grace and the flowering of his own mysterious design. For the

greater humanity's power becomes, the farther its individual and community responsibility extends. Hence, it is clear that human beings are not deterred by the Christian message from building up the world, or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows, but that they are rather more stringently bound to do these very things.

“35. Human activity, to be sure, takes its significance from its relationship to human beings. Just as it proceeds from human beings, so it is ordered toward human beings. For when people work, they not only alters things and society, they develop themselves as well. They learn much, they cultivate their resources, they go outside of themselves and beyond themselves. Rightly understood, this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered. People are more precious for what they are than for what they have. Similarly, all that human beings do to obtain greater justice, wider community, a more humane disposition of social relationships, has greater worth than technical advances. For these advances can supply the material for human progress, but of themselves alone they can never actually bring it about.

“Hence, the norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and that it allow human beings as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it.”³⁰



(2) *“When an apprentice gets hurt or complains of fatigue, workmen and peasants have this find expression: ‘It’s the trade getting into his body.’ Whenever we have some pain to endure, we can say to ourselves that it is the universe, the order the beauty of the world, and the obedience of creation to God which are entering our body. After that how can we fail to bless with the tenderest gratitude the Love which sends us this gift?”³¹*



(3) *“Because Wholeness is what we strive for, the power to achieve leisure is one of the fundamental powers of the human soul. Like the gift for contemplative absorption in the things that are, and like the capacity of the spirit to soar in festive celebration, the power to know leisure is the power to overstep the boundaries of the workaday world and reach out to superhuman, life-giving existential forces that refresh and renew us before we turn back to our daily work. Only in genuine leisure*

³⁰ *Gaudium et Spes* (“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”), 33-35.

³¹ Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction” in George A Panichas, *The Simone Weil Reader*, David McKay, 1977, 449-450.

does a 'gate to freedom' open. Through that gate we escape from the 'restricted area' of that 'latent anxiety' which a keen observer has perceived to be the mark of the world of work, where 'work and unemployment are the two inescapable poles of existence'."³²



(4) "Be still and know that I am God."³³



(5) "In the abundance of his glory, may he, through his Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to your inner self, so that Christ may live in your heart through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, with all God's holy people you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God."³⁴



(6) "We were not undisciplined when we were with you, nor did we ever accept food from anyone without paying for it; no, we worked with unsparing energy, night and day, so as not to be a burden on any of you. This was not because we had no right to be, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to imitate."³⁵



(7) "After Adam had passed through the center of himself and emerged on the other side to escape from God by putting himself between himself and God, he had mentally reconstructed the whole universe in his own image and likeness. That is the painful and useless labor that has been inherited by his descendants – the labor of science without wisdom; the mental toil that pieces together fragments that never manage to coalesce in one completely integrated whole: the labor of action without contemplation, that never ends in peace or satisfaction, since no task is finished without opening the way to ten more tasks that have to be done. How few of us have the honesty to cry out with Ecclesiastes: 'Therefore I loathed life, since for me the work that is done under the sun is evil: for all is vanity and a chase after wind. And I detested all the fruits of my labor under the sun . . . (2:17-18).

³² Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Mentor, 1962, 44.

³³ Psalm 46:10. The English verb *be still* translates the Hebrew word *rephah* which means literally *slacken off*.

³⁴ Ephesians 3:16-19.

³⁵ 2Thessalonians 7-9.

*“Those are terrible words, we will not listen to them because they sound too much like despair, and despair is precisely the specter we would like to keep buried in oblivion by our ceaseless activity. For in fallen man action is the desperate anodyne, assuaging the pain of a soul that instinctively knows that it was made for contemplation – a soul that knows that action, which is itself necessary, is only a means to an end.”*³⁶



(8) *“The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments. In a religious experience, for example, it is not a thing that imposes itself on man but a spiritual presence. What is retained in the soul is the moment of insight rather than the place where the act came to pass. A moment of insight is a fortune, transporting us beyond the confines of measured time. Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time. To Rabbi Shimeon eternity was not attained by those who bartered time for space but by those who knew how to fill their time with spirit. To him the great problem was time rather than space; the task was how to convert time into eternity rather than how to fill space with buildings, bridges and roads; and the solution of the problem lay in study and prayer rather than geometry and engineering.”*³⁷



³⁶ Thomas Merton, “Spirit in Bondage” in *The New Man*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1961, 117-118.

³⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951/1998, 10 & 41.

Suggestions for further study

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Suggested exercises

1. This week make a special point of slowing down and doing reflectively some things you would normally do pre-reflectively – like washing your face, walking, closing a door, making a cup of coffee, setting the table, etc. That is, listen to what is actually happening inside you and around you. When you are talking with someone, focus on them and listen in a relaxed but attentive way to them. Become aware that you are *part* of something rather than *doing* something. Be attentive to the process as well as the product.

2. Make an honest assessment of your life: Do you have a healthy mix of work and leisure? Do you know how to be at leisure? What is happening in your life in terms of work and leisure? For the time being, do not try to do anything about it, just become aware.

3. What is your attitude to work? Who gets the benefit of your work? Are you part of the process or so caught up in producing the product that you miss the process? What energises you?

