

## **Silence and Sabbath**

**By Donne Hayden**

The anglicized word “Sabbath” is related to the Hebrew word *shavat*, which means literally “to cease.”<sup>1</sup> The Sabbath, then, is a day on which we *cease* or *suspend* all regular activities like work and play. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel says:

*Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time.... [One] who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil ... say farewell to manual work ... Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing the profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul.* <sup>2</sup>

Few of us engage in manual work these days, but more than ever we require a Sabbath, a ceasing, a full day away from the technology that surrounds us everywhere and all the time. One attraction of Quaker silence—and I believe one reason Quakers preserve it so zealously and jealously—is its potential for a true Sabbath, a time to cease, to be still, to be fully human, to experience the space around us without distraction, to relinquish our illusion of control, and to encounter a Presence more powerful than we are.

I recently gave in to the need to be more fully connected to the rest of the world and had the Internet installed at home. I resisted for a long time because I know (I’ve had it before), I know how *seductive* it is. On Friday, my day off, (my Sabbath, if you will), what I feared would happen, did. I lost the entire day—I got up early and, with my

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<sup>1</sup> “Shabbat,” Wikipedia.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in “Ecological Spiritual Delight” by Patricia Guthmann Haresch, *UU World* magazine, Vol. XXIII, No. 1, Spring 2009, page 23.

cup of coffee, sat checking email. That done, I realized I hadn't visited Ancestry.com in a while—"Hmmm. The family tree is pretty complete, but there are no photos—I'll just upload some of the photographs of Mom and Dad . . ." The next time I looked at a clock, it was 2:30 in the afternoon. I hadn't eaten, I wasn't even dressed, and I had to go pick up my grandson from school at 3:30. I *lost* a day! I uploaded a day of my *life's time* onto Ancestry.com! I feel such a sense of loss when I do that, a loss of the precious gift of time.

I'm not a Luddite (i.e., someone who resists and opposes technological change), I embrace much of technology; I completely love word-processing; I love the Internet. But I do think we may have too much of a good thing. The *onslaught* of technological options seduces and overwhelms us, and in the words of Rabbi Heschel, "We have fallen victim to the work of our hands."

More observations on this phenomenon. Last Friday night, the Mott Neighborhood Group, a/k/a "the Mott-ley Crew," met at the meetinghouse for a family game night. A small number of folks showed up, bearing snacks to share and games to choose from. We settled on Scrabble for the first hour or so and had two tables going. At my table, we talked about how seldom we do such things these days. Debbie Miller remarked that the last time she played Scrabble was when the electricity was off in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike. "We played Scrabble by candle light," she said, smiling at the memory.

Never mind all the elaborate technology, have you noticed the difference *electricity alone* makes in how people interact? *Just* electricity?

For instance, one summer day several years ago when I lived in Richmond, Indiana, during an early morning thunder storm, lighting struck a transformer at

Richmond Power & Light, and my neighborhood was without electricity for about eight hours. It was a hot day; by 10:00, I noticed the neighbors across the street (who had air conditioning) were sitting out on their front porch. I noticed them, perhaps, because my doors were open and they had called out to another neighbor, who was also outside. I didn't have air conditioning, so it took a little while longer for me to feel compelled to get out of the house, seeking a breeze of some kind. Eventually though, I too went outside and sat on my front porch. *Everyone* was outside. People wandered over to neighbors' yards and stood talking, or talked to people passing on the sidewalk. I had lived in my house four years, but on that day I met people I didn't know existed, people who lived a few doors down from me or across the street catty-corner. In late afternoon, the electricity came back on, and everyone disappeared back into their air-conditioned, televisioned, computered, microwaved, telephoned, Interneted houses. We no longer needed interaction with other people; our worlds were complete without it.

And it is not just electricity *per se*, but what electricity permits us to have and use. This I understood when my daughter came to see me one day when we all lived in Richmond. She and I both attended seminary at Earlham School of Religion; I lived near the college and my daughter and her husband lived in the historic Starr district of Richmond where wonderful old mansions had been chopped up into apartments and deteriorated into near slums. They rented an apartment in a house renovated by John Fitch, an ESR student engaged in urban ministry. He bought up old houses, repairing and remodeling them so that they were in good, livable condition, and then he rented them to low-income folks for what they could afford to pay. In exchange for help with remodeling and the Wednesday evening potluck & worship, my daughter, her husband and my 4-year-old grandson lived in one of the apartments for minimal rent. I was a

little concerned about their living there because it was a pretty rough neighborhood, but they moved into the house on 11<sup>th</sup> Street in late fall and lived there through the winter and spring and into the summer

One day when it was hot and humid, my daughter stopped by my house near Earlham College. We got some ice tea and went outside to sit on the porch, and after a few minutes, she said, “Where *is* everybody? We’re the only people around. It’s like a ghost-town over here.” We talked about the fact that, on her side of town, where few if any people had air conditioning, people were outside talking to each other all day long and into the evening, and kids played noisily everywhere. Those who didn’t have air conditioning also didn’t have a plethora of gadgets to entertain themselves with inside—no doubt most of them had television, but not the Internet, and probably not PlayStation or X-Box 360.

Another observation. This past December, Christmas Day was sunny and chilly, but not really cold. I took my dog for a walk that afternoon, through the hilly streets in Hyde Park, past picture-perfect bungalows with real slate roofs, large back yards in which were visible elaborate playground sets, landscaped front lawns—all the houses decorated for Christmas, lights twinkling even in the afternoon sunshine, ornamented trees in the windows. Everything but kids. Where are the kids? I wondered. I remembered Christmas Days of my childhood when, short of howling blizzards, nothing could keep us kids in the house. We were outside playing with the presents we’d gotten—riding new bicycles, trying out the new gun ‘n holster sets or setting up a tetherball. I still don’t know for sure where the kids in Hyde Park were that day, but I suspect many were inside playing with their new computer or video games.

Even people who use technology all the time are feeling the need for what tech writer Mark Glaser terms a “Technology Sabbath,” a concept that “is becoming more widespread, both in religious circles and among bloggers and media people who are overwhelmed with the always-on nature of the broadband Internet and smartphones.” The idea of a Technology Sabbath is to take one day a week to completely avoid technology. For instance, Glaser says,

*being that I am Jewish—though not very religious—I decided to shut down the computer each Friday night at sunset until Saturday at sunset, the traditional time of the Jewish Sabbath. I make exceptions when I need to get directions or check for a personal email. I still use my cell phone but try to limit it to personal calls only. While this day of technological rest can be a difficult routine, it has allowed me to stretch my time, spend more hours outside and be with people more in face-to-face settings.<sup>3</sup>*

Almost all of our technology is made possible by electricity, so I propose an even more radical “Technology Sabbath”—what if one day a week we unplugged completely? (Aside perhaps from heating & air conditioning, which make it possible to think about things other than how hot or cold we are.) What if one day a week, we used no electric lights, no answering machines, no televisions, no radios, no computers (not even battery-operated laptops), no Internet, no electric toothbrushes. As one writer suggests, if we “let the Earth rest one day a week . . . Consider the impact on the use of electricity and fossil fuel, the reduction of pollutants and emissions into the air.”<sup>4</sup> If everyone in this room—35-40 people—what if one day a week we *all* shut off the main breaker

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Glaser, “Technology Sabbath’ Offers One Day to Unplug.” June 5, 2008. *Media Shift* website, <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2008/06/technology-sabbath-offers-one-day-to-unplug157.html>

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Guthmann Haresch, “Ecological Spiritual Delight,” *UU World* magazine, Vol. XXIII, No. 1, Spring 2009, page 23.

switch. Imagine a day with nothing electric happening. When the electricity goes off, the silence has a different quality. Imagine the silence when the electric hum around our lives goes off.

If, however, we can't bring ourselves to go an entire day without using technology, or at least electricity, we can at least spend a quiet hour at Meeting for Worship. Perhaps we relish the silence of Quaker worship in part because it is a refuge from technology and other human-made distractions. We value the *ceasing*, the peace of a genuine Sabbath we find in silent worship where we can "care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul."

Let us end today with lines from John Greenleaf Whittier's poem "The Meeting." In these lines, Whittier, a Quaker, responds to a friend who asked, "If you want to worship God, why don't you go out in Nature?" (Nowadays even when we go out in Nature, we take technology with us—digital watches, cell phones, Blackberries, etc. ringing through the woods.) Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Whittier explained why he valued the silence of a Quaker meeting for worship on the Sabbath:

*And so, I find it well to come  
For deeper rest to this still room,  
For here the habit of the soul  
Feels less the outer world's control;  
The strength of mutual purpose pleads  
More earnestly our common needs;  
And from the silence multiplied*

*By these still forms on either side,  
The world that time and sense has known  
Falls off and leaves us God alone.*