

Beautiful Day

It's a beautiful day in our suburban Indianapolis neighborhood.

Through the open study window I can hear the large leaves of our quaking aspen doing their best imitation of waves lapping on the shore of Lake Michigan. Mourning dove wings whistle as they take flight, making room at our feeders for chirping goldfinches and ratcheting blue jays. Children, including my own, home from a half-day of school, dribble basketballs and laugh at each other's jokes (and, of course, at each other). Some seem to be playing a running game that elicits an occasional scream over the barely audible rhythmic *slap...slap...slap* of one foot pushing a scooter down the street. Our neighbor's mower is now parked in his garage, but the aroma of his lawn's offering to the day lingers. Blue sky, light breeze, snoozing dogs at my feet, a good book laid open on my chest, saving the spot where I stopped to soak it all in. "It is good. It's very good," said God. And so it is.

I am in the last two weeks of a twelve-week sabbatical leave and I wonder: Have the last ten weeks prepared me for this moment, this Edenic moment of receptive rest? This sabbatical leave has provided myriad moments of goodness and joy, of course. But, until this moment, nearly every one of them has been infiltrated – in mostly small ways, but occasionally quite large ones – with struggle, disorientation, worry, or weariness. It has been so hard to let go of doing, of the need to produce or accomplish something. Always something looms on the horizon, around the corner, or in the middle of my view, begging to be done, given attention, obscuring whatever is right in front of me.

I suspect that part of my problem is Continuous Partial Attention Syndrome (CPA). I don't know whether [Linda Stone](#) first coined the term, but she is one of the best at describing it. As a former Apple and Microsoft executive she knows what she's talking about:

Continuous partial attention is an always on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that creates an artificial sense of crisis. We are always in high alert. We reach to keep a top priority in focus, while, at the same time, scanning the periphery to see if we are missing other opportunities. If we are, our very fickle attention shifts focus. What's ringing? Who is it? How many emails? What's on my list? What time is it in Beijing?

It seems that no matter what I am doing, I am also waiting for the phone to ring, or a child to ask for assistance, or the dogs to give that stare that says they need to go outside – *now*. My mind flits about: Are the bills overdue? I really should fix that faucet. When am I going to get that form filed? Just now, as I was typing that last sentence, my phone alerted me to the arrival of five new email messages. What did I do? I set you aside, good reader, and turned my attention from this computer screen to the much smaller one on my phone to see who might want my attention!

Of course, there is also the long and ever-lengthening list of things that beckon for my attention from my place of employment. Ten weeks they've been piling up, and many of them were already undone or piled high when I left them behind to embark on this sabbatical sojourn. Like

spirits in a haunted house they beckon to me from the edges of consciousness, wisping into and out of my sight.

Very little gets my full attention for a significant length of time. Most everything gets short shrift, is dishonored by inattention, partially appreciated. I suspect that others have offered to me gifts that I have not seen or received. I know that many of the gifts I have to offer lay dormant, ungiven, thanks to Continuous Partial Attention. Consequently, my days are often littered with mini and maxi regrets and I'm left exhausted, somehow overfull but not fulfilled.

Frederick Buechner, whose writing has shaped me in ways too profound to propound, has said this about paying attention:

When Jesus comes along saying that the greatest commandment of all is to love God and to love our neighbor, he too is asking us to pay attention. If we are to love God we must first stop, look, and listen for him in what is happening around us and inside us. If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors. With our imagination as well as our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces, but the life behind and within their faces. [Beyond Words, p. 27]

Sabbatical leave has given me time to relearn that sort of attention giving, person by person, task by task, day by day, moment by moment. I began in a simple, small, even mundane manner. I started by giving long hours to the reading of books, rather than skipping through them snippet by snippet over lunch at Donatoes or, believe it or not, at stop lights on the way home from the office. I've read magazines and other periodicals from cover to cover as they arrive, rather than skimming headlines and piling them up for later (never to happen) perusal. I have even tried to complete the [Indianapolis Star's](#) daily crossword puzzle in one sitting each day.

With less success, I have also tried to move more deeply and regularly into contemplation and mediation. A few times each week I have set the kitchen timer for 10 or 20 minutes (to minimize the probability that my attention will be diverted to wondering about how much time remains) and then sat in my big, comfy, red-leathered chair. There I have breathed deeply, sat quietly, let my mind go as blank as can be, and surrendered myself and my full attention to Divine Presence.

By engaging my attention in these and other disciplines (especially in relationships and conversations) for most of the past ten weeks, I now realize how deeply I am infected with CPA and how difficult it is to be set free. I've made some progress, but I have a very long way to go. The real challenge, of course, awaits on the other side of sabbatical. So, I plan to give most of these last two weeks of extended Sabbath-keeping to plotting the path through CPA toward FFA (Frequent Full Attention – don't blame Linda Stone for that lame acronym, it's mine).

For now, however, thankful that some small fruit might be emerging from this extended break from routine, I'm going back to my big, red, comfy chair next to the open window and give my full attention to the sights, sounds and smells of this beautiful day.

William O. Gafkjen
9/10/2008

Sabbath for Others

As my three-month sabbatical leave winds down I've begun to realize that this leave has been as much for others – especially the people with whom I work – as for me.

Most of what I have read about Sabbath-keeping and sabbatical leave focuses on the Sabbath-keeper him or herself. Sabbath is a spiritual discipline that deepens one's relationship with God and with oneself. Sabbatical leave is a time for renewal, reconnection, research, retooling, and reporting. Taking this guidance to heart as I stood on the deck of the USS Sabbatical nearly three months ago, with a gallant wave to those gathered to bid me a bon voyage, I shouted over the rail, "I am off to remember who and whose I am!"

The journey has gone well; I have, indeed, begun to remember who and whose I am. About a week ago, however, just as the Sabbath-going vessel began to turn its big floating frame toward the same shore I had left, a warm sudden spray of a wave broke over the bow and splashed me awake while I sat reading in my big red comfy chair. It was the third paragraph on page 167 of Jonathan Sacks' fine book, **The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations** (Continuum © 2002/2007 reprint):

What the Sabbath does for human beings and animals, the sabbatical and jubilee years do for the land. The earth too is entitled to its periodic rest.

Whoa! There is much good to be gained for human beings from adhering to the prescriptions for various lengths and sorts of Sabbath. But getting humans to take an extended Sabbath gives the world around them a much needed break from their own ever-imposing presence! NRGV (New Revised Gafkjen Version):

What the Sabbath does for Bill, his sabbatical leave does for the people with whom he works. They too are entitled to periodic rest from him.

As far as I am aware, I have good relationships with my co-workers. And we work quite well together as a team. I am also painfully aware that my extended leave has meant more work for most of them. But it makes sense to me that my extended absence has also been good for them, as individuals and as a community. They certainly need a periodic rest from my idiosyncrasies, eccentricities and ways of working that may foster tension or stress. Some of the areas in which I work have also needed some fallow time in hope of rejuvenation or redirection. And, just as this sabbatical sojourn has provided me with the strong reminder that I am not indispensable, perhaps those with whom I work have come to see that even more clearly as well (though I hope not to the point of dispensing with me!).

Systems thinkers would probably also suggest that these weeks that I have been asea on Sabbatical have given folks a chance to reflect (intentionally or not!) on my role in our office system and, more importantly, their own roles, which have likely been highlighted or changed by the absence of a member of the system. What gifts do we each bring to the team (system)? How do we aid and abet, or hinder and harm, one another? How might we re-imagine our various roles and do our various tasks differently for the sake of our common mission?

I am confident that when I return to work next week I will experience the truth behind the old adage, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Thanks to Sacks I now suspect that as my sabbatical ship reaches shore, along with those who gather to greet me on the pier I will also discover the power of a new one: "Sabbatical leave makes the whole team grow stronger."

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