

The Resilience of the Rested:

How Practices of Sabbath Can Build Faithful Resilience and Renew Our Relationships in a Distracted and Restless World

Sara Minard cites the extensive research showing that the loss of social capital has resulted in people becoming more lonely, isolated, and depressed than ever before, and that our tech-driven market society leads to anxiety, depression, and violence. The antidote is Sabbath. When we step into it as a practice of stillness and contemplative prayer, it becomes easier to move away from the usual distractions of social media and material comfort. It gives us the ability to sit with the hard questions about what matters most to us, and bring to God the sufferings of our heart so we can tend to ourselves, and heal what hurts, before we turn to others.

In 2000, Princeton Political Scientist Robert Putnam, in his book titled *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (one of among the most cited and bestselling social science works in the last half century) studied the value of social capital in sustaining a democratic society. He found from 500,000 interviews and three data sets spanning 25 years that Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbours, and our democratic structures. While focused on the U.S., Putnam's warnings that our stock of social capital has plummeted and is impoverishing our lives and communities – the very fabric of our connections with each other – are not just an American phenomenon. This work, and the beautiful questions he asks about social connections and our

shared responsibilities to one another, is at the heart of the challenges we all face living in this technology-driven, post-modern capitalist marketplace, on a planet where the average surface temperature is rising so fast that certain regions are becoming uninhabitable.

Putnam's research encouraged countless scholars around the world to dive deeper into these difficult questions. Raj Chetty, at Harvard, used the same social capital data sets, overlaid his research on economic geography, and found that social mobility in the US, measured by the rate at which one escapes intergenerational poverty, is determined more by how economically homogenous a zip code is, and less by the merits of individual achievement¹. Similarly in the UK, a 2023 study by the Institute of Fiscal

Studies showed that moving up the social ladder in Britain has become harder than at any point in more than half a century for children born into poor households².

The measurable effects of declining social capital alongside the decline in social mobility on human and societal health have been cited by U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy in a recently published report. It turns out that people in the U.S. are more lonely, isolated, and depressed than ever before, increasing the risk of individuals developing mental health challenges³. As Putnam's work demonstrated decades ago, lacking connection with others not only fundamentally affects our mental, physical, and societal health, it also increases our risk of premature death.

Loss of social capital

Photo: Drazen Zigic / Getty Images



Joining social groups – even just one, Putnam found – increases our chances of living longer. It also leads to a more egalitarian, cooperative, and generous society, where “love thy neighbour” is not just liking something somebody said on Facebook.

Depending on where you live or what work you do, your life may seem relatively calm. But the world has been turned upside down by a pandemic that killed millions. Income inequality is higher than ever. The climate crisis has burnt towns to the ground. Disruptive technologies like AI are fundamentally altering the labour market. Fascism is on the rise (again). People are hungry, and in need of second chances. People could use a friend, kids need to be adopted, students need mentoring, local businesses need skilled employees, wildlife needs rescuing, and abuses need to be called out and people held responsible. Of course, we all have our own opinions about how to solve these problems, but are we doing anything to actually *solve* them? We don’t get together like people did before us, whether in social clubs or in churches or synagogues or mosques or bowling alleys. It is much more common to organize a virtual protest than to join a picket line and stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the service of a cause. *And yet we wonder why are we so lonely and anxious?*

Several decades ago, Professor Putnam found watching television robbed people of the rich social capital that formed the fabric of a resilient society, but no one could have predicted the extent to which cell phones would dwarf the effect of televisions on social life. The idea of looking up and into people’s eyes in a public setting instead of looking down at our phones seems inappropriate now, as does speaking with a stranger on public transportation.

We are living at a time when the domination of people, and by extension the natural world, through technologically-driven distractions has rendered almost unfamiliar the moral

virtues of reciprocity, connection, and selflessness expressed as neighbourly love, by the economist Adam Smith of Scotland⁵ and the carpenter Jesus of Nazareth. We have allowed the priceless attention of our minds and bodies to be monetised, as Matthew Crawford writes in *The World Beyond Your Head*, and “if you want yours back, you’re going to have to pay for it”⁶.

This personalised-but-never-personal online reality is leading to destructive, anti-social behaviours, especially for young people who link their self-esteem to their cell phones. Motivated by the fear of not being “seen”, the need to have constant attention leads to anxiety, depression, and violence, both to the self and to others. Fear of not being enough, or having enough, are easily deepened by the type of economic and social insecurity we see in the data. We see this especially among working-class middle-age white men in the U.S., who are more susceptible to being recruited by extremists, to be mass shooters, and most likely to commit suicide than any other population group in the country⁷.

Sabbath as Antidote to the Tyranny of our Tech-Driven Market Society

Can the ancient wisdom found in the practice of Sabbath as taught by Jesus help rescue us from the clutches of dehumanising social media and the rugged individualism of post-modern market capitalism? Can stillness and divine contemplation help rebuild the social capital we have lost and restore our sense of connection through shared social institutions (churches, temples, mosques, clubs, associations, networks), thereby tightening our frayed bonds and increase civic engagement?

If we want to access the stillness of the Judeo-Christian principle of Sabbath to recalibrate and reset our relationships with God and others, it requires some spiritual discipline. Rev. John Thatamanil of Union Theological Seminary in New York explains this challenge: “We say to ourselves, if I need to think more clearly, then I need to feel less”⁸, but it is precisely this binary thinking about how the body and brain works that has misguided human societies for centuries, given a false sense of security in deferring to markets, and justified

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acts of political and institutional violence. Daniel Kahneman, among other behavioural economists, empirically shows that the brain doesn’t work like this: there is simply no part of the brain, or what we refer to as the “mind”, that is doing the thinking, while another doing the feeling. In fact, the brain’s ability to feel is our primary way of “knowing”⁹.
We must begin by

letting go of what we mistakenly think is rational control of our minds, release the judgments we carry in our bodies from outdated social norms, and the hardest work, that of the heart, when we put the quality of our relationships in front of our market-driven desires and distractions that only serve our self-interest.

What makes this even more challenging is that even our everyday language has words that are shaped by market transactions: optimise, maximise, product, “spending” time, utility, efficiency, cost, price, trade-off, competition, currency. We have been schooled into believing we must treat our relationships as something that serves an end, something transactional, even extractive. This leads us to needing to account for our relationships, instead of just accepting them, and even finding rest in them.



The ability to be still
 Photo: Barbara Kukovec

Jesus warned of the power of markets and money on the minds and hearts of people (Matthew 19: 21-26; Luke 12:33; see also Hebrews 13:5; and I John 2:15-17) (Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 19: 21-26; Luke 12:33; I John 2:15-17), that it would become the idol that disciplines and draws out what is in our hearts more than anything else. Indeed, money and wealth have defined and shaped our relationships, to ourselves and to others, to the point where we have designed our economic and social lives around it. There are apparently no moral limits to markets in modern society, where everything is for sale. Unfortunately, we have used economic theories to create these systems that are formulated to undermine and devalue social capital, while rewarding the unbridled accumulation of capital and greed. As a result, wealth has become the most important signal of human belonging, despite the top 10% owning nearly 3,000 times the wealth of the average person in the bottom 10%.

Enter the digital age, where corporate employment is increasingly temporary and volatile, and where CEOs receive more than 344 times the annual average salary of production and non-supervisory workers in their industry. In this environment, it is no wonder

we find refuge in the “attention-getting technologies that direct us away from one another and toward a manufactured reality”¹⁰.

Sabbath as a Moment-to-Moment Practice

Jesus knew this transactional way of being would be our greatest temptation and distraction, and as Putnam warned, modern technology has only amplified it. For those who follow Jesus, the biggest crisis may be a mindset: believing the false narratives that we can be isolated from and build resilience to life’s challenges by resorting to consumption, domination, accumulation, and distractions; put together, these effectively undermine any chance of cultivating honest relationships and loving our neighbour.

However, when we refocus our attention on stillness and the practice of Sabbath, or ‘ceasing our striving’, of being present in the presence of the fullness of God (Psalm 66:11), of engaging in contemplative prayer, we are already on the way to honestly examining our hearts. And when we do, we see where we need to trust in God more and rely less on our own understanding. That said, approximately 40% of Jesus’ parables point out that the one

relationship, above all others, that will distract us from our relationship with God (Luke 16:13 and Matthew 6:24) is mammon (desire for money and wealth). Stillness and contemplation require a detachment from this immediate gratification of the material world, and an acceptance of a more integrated mind/body self, or the “hidden wholeness” we experience when we are walking with God.

In *Stillness is the Key*, author Ryan Holiday asks: “is there anyone not affected by the din and dysfunctions of our time?” He talks about how “all the great leaders, thinkers, artists, athletes, and visionaries throughout history share one indelible quality: the ability to be still while the world spins around you”. To find stillness despite distraction, he notes, enables them to conquer their tempers, discover great insights, achieve happiness and makes space for gratitude and wonder. His research shows that this is a truth found in all the wisdom traditions of the ancient world, “from Confucius to Seneca, Marcus Aurelius to Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, and from John Stuart Mill to Nietzsche”, and of course, with Jesus. Holiday argues that stillness is not mere inactivity, but the “doorway to self-mastery, discipline,

and focus”. He cites Blaise Pascal who in 1654 wrote “all of humanities problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone”¹¹.


Sabbath can be observed in many ways, but when we step into it as a practice of stillness and contemplative prayer, it becomes easier to move away from the usual distractions of social media and material comfort. When we quieten our bodies and thoughts, we allow ourselves to open up, to be held like a child, in complete surrender to the tenderness of Jesus. This surrender into stillness and silence gives us the ability to sit with the hard questions about what matters most to us, and bring to God the sufferings of our heart so we can tend to ourselves, and heal what hurts, before we turn to others. Christians often miss this step in practising Sabbath because we can be more concerned, like the Pharisees were in Matthew 15, about being “right in the Law” (righteous) than right in action (orthodoxy vs. orthopraxy). In this and other Scriptures, Jesus reminds us to self-reflect on the impact that our words and actions have on others, and to recognise the need to rest with ourselves exactly as we are, and seek the

peace that God brings for our restoration before we attempt to restore others.

When we practise Sabbath as stillness and contemplation, we cultivate in ourselves the soil of our hearts so that it can bear fruits of eternal value, and we can better serve others as a place where they can find rest, which is what our world so desperately needs. When we cultivate our ability to truly listen to our own hearts, we are then much better at truly listening to others, without needing to control the outcome. We are confident to let time and space be defined, first, by how best to love someone and tend to their needs and respond to them without needing to “fix” them, but, second, by simply accepting them as they are, just as Jesus accepts them exactly as they are.

In this way, Sabbath becomes a moment-to-moment discipline or practice, anchored in our love of God, that brings a renewed awareness, kindness, and compassion to our relationships. Jesuit Father Richard Rohr describes this stillness and contemplative prayer as a kind of seeing that is much more than mere

looking because it also includes recognising, and thus appreciating. The contemplative mind does not tell us what to see but teaches us how to see *what we behold*. We are moved, through the practice of contemplation, to ask more difficult questions, like the one civil rights activist Ruby Sales asks, *tell me, friend, where does it hurt?*

In short, practising Sabbath rest starting from within, integrating body and mind, unleashes the power of the heart to ask hard questions and do hard things, like putting our phones down, reaching out to that colleague or neighbour whom we find difficult, making time to form new social bonds in our workplaces and communities, and building new social institutions that trade on trust. When we reclaim our time, as argues Walter Brueggemann¹², from the “tyranny of now” that pervades market capitalism, we access the inherent power of connection, trust, and equanimity. Together, these Sabbath practices give us the resilience we need to step into this Christian moment and accept the responsibility of being *an agent of justice because we are a recipient of Grace*¹³. 

1. Raj Chetty, et al. “Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States” Harvard University and National Bureau of Economic Research, June 2017.
2. G, Anderson and S, Bandyopadhyay and I, Merediz Solà. (2023). Measuring wellbeing growth and convergence in multivariate ordered categorical worlds: Has there been any levelling up in the United Kingdom?. 23/42. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/measuring-wellbeing-growth-and-convergence-multivariate-ordered-categorical-worlds-has> (accessed: 5 August 2024).
3. “New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States”, www.hhs.gov (accessed: 10 May 2023)
4. Ibid.
5. Adam Smith, The theory of moral sentiments; or, An essay towards an analysis of the principles by which men naturally judge concerning the conduct and character, first of their neighbours, and afterward of themselves. To which is added, a dissertation on the origin of languages, Glasgow, R. Chapman, 1809.
6. Matthew Crawford, The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, pp. 10-12
7. Carol Graham, The Power of Hope: How the Science of Well-Being Can Save Us from Despair, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.
8. Quotation from a talk given by Dr. Thatanamil during a small online seminar hosted by the Center for Spiritual Imagination in the Spring of 2024.
9. Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.
10. Matthew Crawford, pp. 12
11. Ryan Holiday, Stillness is the Key, Profile Books, 2019, Introduction.
12. Walter Brueggemann, Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now, Westminster John Knox Press; Revised edition, 2017.
13. This is a quote from the late Pastor Tim Keller from a talk he gave at a Faith and Work conference in New York City circa May 2014.



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