

A Reflection on Sabbatical

Sue Whiteley – churches of Christ in NSW & ACT
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Becoming a Sabbath Community: A Guide for Churches

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Planning my sabbatical

My sabbatical planning started about 6 months prior to the sabbatical by:

1. Noting desires for the Sabbatical and shaping the time and intent on paper.
2. Reading Ruth Haley Barton's book on Sabbath and sabbaticals
3. An appointment with Keith Farmer, a seasoned sabbatical guide, seeking his wisdom on my planning.

All were very helpful in the preparation. In addition, early on, I read over Abraham Heschel's book, *The Sabbath*. This book, while not new to me, emphasized afresh the different perspective on time, that a fruitful sabbatical demands. Without this ticking over in the background of my mind, I would have struggled more with feelings of guilt about doing nothing. The teaching legitimized the spending of time, not on productivity but more essentially time for relationships and the experience of rest and being with God. Therefore, time with God and time with others is to be prized and valued even when nothing could be presented as the by-product.

I recorded in my journal a few one liners to reground myself if I felt lost:

- My sabbath doesn't have to be justified by any doings even religious doings.
- The rest I get from 'doings' or even 'thinking' is the aim of the sabbatical.
- It's a time of great waiting for soul regeneration.
- It includes wrestling with the desire to be busy and productive.
- It is a freedom from drivenness.
- It is a time to enjoy God for his own sake not ministering sake.
- It is a time to call forth the soul each day rather than the mind.
- Letting go of the attachment to my 'working self.'
- Doing nothing allows God's rest to seep into me.
- Rest is received not forced.

My sabbatical (8 weeks) was preceded by an 8-week overseas Long Service Leave holiday. While technically not sabbatical, it was excellent conditioning for my sabbatical, in that it provided an immediate dislocation experience. I was aware that in the first month, I could feel myself physically unwinding. I was becoming more and more present to my different surroundings, more aware of my senses, more embodied. I would highly recommend to others that they place a holiday trip at the front end of any sabbatical. Because it was an overseas holiday, I was able to withdraw more easily from texts and phone calls.

The most helpful practice I found overall on sabbatical was 'harvesting'. Harvesting is about keeping track of a list of things that were memorable or you want to spend further time meditating on. It involves keeping a bullet point list of highlights, special moments, God moments and learnings. Harvest lists were often updated nightly as a kind of examen. "What happened that day?", and where/how was God felt today, were questions I reflected on nightly. Harvesting was a way of recording and savouring my experience. After many weeks, instead of looking back and wondering what I did during those weeks, I could look across the list and remember wonderful key moments which gave a sense of deep joy.

The early weeks were spent securing the rhythms I wished to establish.

1. Time with God in the mornings
2. Regular Pilates classes
3. Good sleep (in the early weeks 10hr)
4. Weekly massage
5. 1 hr long walks each morning.
6. Getting used to 'doing' nothing.
7. A hope of some relational connections with family and friends.

All of these went well during the first three weeks, although I came to realize that while I was on sabbatical, my family and friends were not and were still working to their faster rhythms and were not as available or spontaneous as I had hoped. A learning for next time, would be to schedule ahead so they have time available.

Week 4 a weeklong silent retreat.

The 8-day silent retreat had been booked 6 months in advance and driving to the airport I did worry that this might turn out to be a lowlight, not a highlight, as I couldn't imagine anything better than my overseas trip.

The journey there was set to be complete adventure, I didn't know a soul, and had never been to the area. The retreat was an incredibly rich experience and ended up framing my last 4 weeks.

Final 4 weeks of Sabbatical

Because the 8-day silent retreat was so powerful, it set the agenda for the following 4 weeks.

It spawned a brand-new hobby, and I had plenty of time to buy equipment and spend hours exploring doing new things. During the final weeks, I bought music to a beautiful piano piece I had heard during retreat, and I determined to learn the piece by heart and practice, I did. I hadn't played the piano seriously for 30 years. It was an unexpected delight.

Long Walks, Weekly Massage, Gardening

My sabbatical was punctuated with daily 1 hr walks, mostly around Hawley area and the beach. I hope to sustain this rhythm once I return to work. The health benefits have been a great.

Having a weekly massage felt indulgent but also felt necessary especially with tight shoulders and neck from years of desk work. And it took 8 weeks to notice a marked improvement.

I am a petunia lover, and spring is the time to get organized with lots of plantings, so I did enjoy a leisurely preoccupation with my garden. Tending my plants has been extra special this spring and it was lovely reading: *The Well- Gardened Mind*.

Family

I had determined to spend time with each of my children and my parents during the time. However due to my children's own movements interstate with work trips, my plans didn't really eventuate. My parents have been ill off and on and so were not in a place to do what I had hoped but I had been available to take the load off my sister and transport them to medical appointments. I was however able to have my granddaughter to stay overnight multiple times- something I wouldn't have had the energy for while I was at work.

Spiritual Direction and Inner Spiritual Work

I had 3 sessions of Spiritual Direction while on Sabbatical to process what I sensed God was doing, along with 2 sessions during the silent retreat.

My Core Values and Vocational Clarity

During sabbatical I have spent time reviewing and refreshing my core values. These have been underlined by various experiences and continue in clarity and increased vigour.

Joy

It had been my intention to welcome joy back into my emotional repertoire after I had noticed, of late, it has been missing, hiding or non-existent. I noticed a flash of its return when we enjoyed perhaps my favourite day on the overseas trip. It became my friend again, while 'playing' with my new hobby I noticed a joy bubbling up.

Writing

It had been my intent to write up some meditations during the time. While I wrote about 6, this did not have life for me and so I stopped and spent time writing other things that were more compelling at the time.

Conclusion

I found the sabbatical extremely rich, with no regrets. Although there were some things that didn't eventuate exactly how I had hoped, God introduced other elements that were more apt and suitable for the renewing of my spirit body and soul. These were intriguing and exciting.

I return to work with a rested mind and heart, a renewed vision and vocational clarity, a healthier body and a rejuvenated spirit. It has come about because of the grace and favour of God through his revelation and retreating opportunities. Planning and understanding the nature of sabbatical which grew throughout was vitally important in gleaning all the good out of this time.

Tips for future Sabbaticals

1. Start with a trip away.
2. Pre-arrange a silent retreat in the middle of the time and prearrange relationship connections. Prearrange a final two-day retreat in the last week.
3. Leave room for the unexpected to pop up.
4. Trust in the direction of a God who awaits your attention.

Post Sabbatical

The last week of my sabbatical was largely hijacked by events that took me away from a triumphant finish line. Then, I stagger started back to work. During the first week, I was impacted by the speed and weight of burdens that I discerned were alive in others. The re-entry was more strenuous than I imagined.