

**Sermon: “The Rest Revolution”**  
**3-27-22 by Rev. Shari Woodbury**

Rest is holy. Rest is a religious imperative. Rest is a radical act of self-love and social transformation.

I think most of us understand, rationally, that human beings need rest. Yet overwork is the norm in this country. It’s not just an economic necessity for many, it’s also a deep cultural value – Americans are taught to measure our own worth by how hard we work and how productive we are.

I have a vivid memory of expressing this viscerally myself about fifteen years ago. The setting was a visit to a reiki energy healer. I voiced a common feeling when, on the reiki table, my energies unlocking and my feelings unblocking, I spontaneously cried out, “it’s never enough!” ... It’s never enough. In that moment in my life, that was how I felt about the work I was doing in philanthropy: that no matter how much I accomplished, the hard-driving business leaders and professionals that surrounded me as board members and donors – people who measured their lives in billable hours and awards – would always want yet more from me. And perhaps I would want more from myself. I felt tired – and trapped. I couldn’t see a way out of this dilemma that I felt deep in my being.

Today many would name that internalized capitalism. A meme that has been circulating online provides a six-point list of how internalized capitalism shows up. (The version of this list I saw was from Therapy with Lee.) Keep in mind that this is not about whether you consciously believe these ideas or find them consistent with your own values – rather it’s about whether these messages play out unconsciously in your life. You might notice how many of these six points resonate with your experience – even counting with your fingers. Internalized capitalism looks like:

- Feeling guilty for resting
- Your self-worth is largely based on doing well in your career
- Placing productivity before health
- Believing that hard work = happiness
- Feeling lazy [if you rest], even when you’re experiencing pain, trauma, or adversity
- Using busyness as a way to avoid your needs.

If you like, you might turn to a neighbor, or post in the chat, briefly sharing how many of those six you ticked off as applicable to yourself. Or just take some deep breaths with me.

When Kathy Parker encountered this list, she suddenly saw with clarity how these ideas, taken deep into her being, had led her to a state of continual physical and

mental exhaustion. “I haven’t let myself rest,” she says, “because I’ve been so afraid of the shame attached” to labels like lazy and good-for-nothing. “But I am learning,” Parker writes. “I am worthy, no matter what gets done, or what doesn’t get done.” She invites others to join her in questioning these beliefs. What might result? “Liberation from the roots of capitalism entrenched in our society, so we may create space for rest, peace, joy, and wellness.”<sup>i</sup>

Yes. Yes! Rest is a radical act of self-love and social transformation.

Rest is also a religious value. In the biblical tradition, the seventh day is a day of rest. It’s right there in the creation story of Genesis – God rested on the seventh day, and we should too. Keeping the sabbath holy means ceasing to work.

In the Christian testament, Jesus models this rhythm of working and resting, too. He teaches, he heals – and then he goes off to a mountain or a desert, to some quiet place to rest in solitude and pray and restore his being. The Gospel of Mark depicts Jesus coaching his disciples to do this too. First he sends them out among the people, and then when they return to him and share of their work, “Jesus said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’” And so they do. (Mark 6: 30-31)

For Unitarian Universalists, the imperative to rest is right there in the FIRST principle that we covenant to affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We don’t have to earn the right to rest. We are inherently worthy. All people are inherently deserving of plenty of sleep, relaxation and recreation.

The mission of this congregation reinforces rest too: we aim to foster the whole person, compassion, and justice. Persons cannot be whole without rest. We cannot practice compassion – with others or ourselves – if we are empty and exhausted. And there can be no justice without the meeting of the basic needs of all people. Rest is a basic need.

Spirituality is about being human beings – not human doings... creatures with the spark of the divine in our innermost selves – so of course traditions like ours encourage us to care for ourselves and to rest. And yet... how well do we live it out? Overwork is built into our larger culture, many – perhaps most – of us are in the grip of internalized capitalism... and so perhaps it is not surprising that even here at church, where it is contrary to our values and purpose, overwork is very common.

This pandemic period has made that perhaps more visible. Some church volunteers have had more stresses and pressures in their lives and more easily burned out. We almost lost a long-time staff member to burnout last fall, and just said farewell to another who was overloaded in her two jobs combined and couldn’t sustain her part-time job with the church. (Even before the pandemic there was a pattern of overwork among our staff... and a revolving door of lay leaders who gave until they gave out, then faded away from church life.)

In a piece published in *The Guardian* this past week<sup>ii</sup>, journalist Alvin Chang observes that the pandemic has changed American workers – but not the underlying values of their employers. Epidemics and pandemics predictably alter not only patterns of living, but also the ways people think about their lives. One Yale historian is quoted from 2020 sharing that “Epidemic diseases ... pose ultimate questions ... about mortality: What is life for? What is our relationship with God?”

Chang reports that companies still expect “hustle culture and productivity,” even if work-from-home and hybrid models of work are here to stay. And even though Americans are already working longer hours than people in other developed nations. Despite a rise in labor strikes the past couple of years, a record number of employees quitting jobs, and a tough labor market for companies currently, those on the hiring side are still focused on “maximizing work output.”

In contrast, many workers are processing the trauma, stress, and grief of this time – changing their capacities and needs. They are less willing to be a cog in our “work-obsessed culture” than they were before COVID. Some workers want more meaning from their work; others are happy to limit the meaning of work to a paycheck, and limit how much work intrudes on their lives so they can enjoy free time; still others now place a higher priority on self-care and care of their loved ones. Many who have been serving in helping professions and public-facing jobs are already burned out and not willing or able to further sacrifice themselves, no matter how meaningful their work once was to them. The Great Resignation has included people in all sectors – including, by the way, a startling number of ministers and religious educators.

It seems that many workers are ready to shake off internalized capitalism. But employers are in denial. Plus, the historian of pandemics, Frank Snowden, points out, workplaces and society at large are “totally unprepared for the mental [health crisis] that will follow” in the wake of this pandemic – as has happened after other pandemics. A mental health crisis that will require – that does require – care and rest. Rest can no longer be optional. Rest can no longer be treated as a four-letter word. We have to change the DNA of American culture.

(Let’s take a musical pause.)

### *Music Interlude*

So Americans are the hardest-working and most poorly-treated among so-called developed nations. Why? The Protestant work ethic elevated productivity to a religious value, regarding idleness as dangerous, deficient. The founding of this country was deeply shaped by the values specifically of the Puritans – a people understood by social scientists to have had a “marriage of convenience with industrial capitalism ... which saturated [people’s] minds with the equation, time equals money.”<sup>iii</sup>

This might partially explain why the U.S. has a particularly extreme strain of capitalism – one with a miniscule percentage of workers belonging to unions... one tied for second-to-last-place with Malaysia for how feebly it regulates temporary work arrangements... one that has virtually no protections for workers against being fired (ranking “dead last out of 71 nations”).<sup>iv</sup>

There’s an evocative phrase for the economic form practiced in our nation: “low-road capitalism,” as sociologist Joel Rogers has called it. “In a capitalist society that goes low, wages are depressed as businesses compete over the price, not the quality, of goods; so-called unskilled workers are typically incentivized through punishments, not promotions; inequality reigns and poverty spreads. In the United States ... a larger share of working-age people (18-65) live in poverty than in any other nation belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (O.E.C.D.).”<sup>v</sup>

I’m quoting there from a 2019 *New York Times* article by Matthew Desmond that delves into the origins of our economic system. The title of the article says much: “In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation.” You can add that to the list of things my teacher never taught me: our severe form of economic life and values has its roots in slavery. Desmond writes of our founding, “Given the choice between modernity and barbarism, prosperity and poverty, lawfulness and cruelty, democracy and totalitarianism, America chose all of the above.”

Consider the startling fact that the practice of chattel slavery in this country ended just 159 years ago – that’s only two times the average American lifespan. A mere two generations, since the U.S. gave up the brutal institution that transformed a nascent, hardscrabble country into an economic powerhouse. Is it any wonder that the influence of slavery is still felt, not only by black Americans, but by all who must participate in an economy that took slavery as its first model for labor?

If this sounds like hyperbole, let me illustrate selectively from Desmond’s in-depth article. He writes that “many of [the management] techniques that we now take for granted were developed by and for large plantations.” This includes complex vertical reporting and accountability structures; careful tracking, recording, and analysis of productivity at the level of the individual worker; “double-entry record-keeping and precise quantification” of materials and labor, which among other things helped ensure that items were not disappearing that could be used as weapons in a slave rebellion; a uniform layout of workers on the land to support close monitoring – “bodies and tasks ... aligned with rigorous exactitude”; evaluation of capital assets and depreciation of assets (including the slaves based on age and health); expense and revenue sheets as well a full accounting manual that was cutting edge for its time.

The plantation was a productivity machine, and through rational, carefully-calibrated violence, it managed to increase the productivity of enslaved black people by leaps and bounds – in the 60 years leading up to the Civil War, the average field slave increased cotton picked by 400 percent. Desmond reports, “The cotton plantation was

America's first big business... and behind every cold calculation, every rational fine-tuning of the system, violence lurked." Historian Edward Baptist observed, before the Civil War, that Americans "lived in an economy whose bottom gear was torture."

"Like today's titans of industry," Desmond writes, "planters understood that their profits climbed when they extracted maximum effort out of each worker." Managers no longer wield whips, of course. They still surveil their workforce, often invisibly now with technology. And they are still laser-focused on productivity.

Don't misunderstand me, I'd much rather be a cubicle dweller earning low wages than a field slave. Anyone would. These are obviously not equivalent situations. But one is deeply influenced by the other. The existence of so horrendous a social stratum as chattel slaves made all other social positions look palatable by comparison. Desmond explains, "Witnessing the horrors of slavery drilled into poor white workers that things could be worse... American freedom became broadly defined as the opposite of bondage... a malnourished and mean kind of freedom that kept you out of chains but did not provide bread or shelter."<sup>vi</sup>

(Let us pause once more.)

### *Music Interlude*

These systems of oppression cost all Americans much, to this day. Not that the burdens of our low-road form of capitalism are evenly distributed. Part of the legacy of our history is that black folks still have to work harder and suffer more to make ends meet – and may, ironically, still be painted as lazy free-loaders anyway.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the rest revolution that is brewing is being led by marginalized people. Take Tricia Hersey, the black woman who founded the Nap Ministry. Her Nap Ministry web site explains, "We believe rest is a form of resistance and name sleep deprivation as a racial and social justice issue."<sup>vii</sup>

Yes! Rest is a radical act of self-love and social transformation. I love the Nap Ministry.

Hersey wants to make sure readers know that this is not a tongue-in-cheek humorous project. She writes, "My rest as a Black woman in America suffering from generational exhaustion and racial trauma always was a political refusal and social justice uprising within my body. I took to rest and naps and slowing down as a way to save my life, resist the systems telling me to do more and most importantly as a remembrance to my Ancestors who had their DreamSpace stolen from them."

She goes on, "This is about ... a deep unraveling from white supremacy and capitalism. These two systems are violent and evil. History tells us this and our present living shows this. Rest pushes back and disrupts a system that views human bodies as a tool for production and labor. It is a counter narrative. We know that we are not machines. We are divine."

Yes! We are human beings, inherently worthy, fully deserving of rest. And rest is not trivial. It improves the quality of our lives. It saves lives, period. Rest is a spiritual practice that meets our needs as human beings and our values as Unitarian Universalists.

So, what can we do? There are many ways to reclaim rest. Here's my Top 10 list of ways to get more rest yourself, and help transform American culture: *[drumroll]*

1. Notice any internalized capitalism you may have; as you become aware, try to embrace rest for yourself. Remind yourself that you are inherently worthy and you deserve rest.
2. Practice good sleep hygiene. If you don't regularly get a good night's sleep with enough hours of rest, you may need to get off electronics earlier, skip snacks after dinner, and keep a more consistent sleep schedule.
3. Affirm to your friends, loved ones, co-workers that rest is a legitimate and important human right. Back each other up in guilt-free rest.
4. Build into your life activities that renew you. This could be different things for different people: time in nature, connection with friends, exercise, beauty, playing with pets, a daily spiritual practice, and yes, take a nap when you need one. I hope worship and small groups here are a part of your self-renewal too.
5. Participate in church in a way that helps this place be a beacon of life-affirming, rest-valuing culture. I want to share a metaphor I love, which puts things in perspective for volunteers and workers in all kinds of settings. (I learned the same technique as a choral singer that this unknown writer describes.) It goes:

"Sometimes music requires players or singers to hold a note longer than they physically are able. In those cases, we were taught to mindfully stagger when we took a breath ... Everyone got to breathe, and the music stayed strong and vibrant. Let's remember MUSIC. Take a breath. The rest of the chorus will sing... Rejoin so others can breathe. Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song... We need your voice .., but you don't have to do it all."

I love the reminder of staggering breaths. There is no music without rests. There is also no mission without rests. When you need a break from volunteer work, take it. If a particular team is no longer where you are feeling called to serve, move on to one that is fulfilling for you now. Our church can be part of changing this inhumane culture of overwork and nurturing the whole person.

6. Do the best you can in your workplace to contain overwork. You may be going against the grain of low-road capitalist culture; look for those ways that you *can* set healthy limits and choose balance for yourself. And look for opportunities to shape the culture there, to benefit everyone.

7. Take your full vacation and holidays. If you are one of the many Americans who have a hard time using the modest time-off benefits you are offered, get deliberate about changing that. It may help to get support from a therapist as well as family. It helps me to remember that in France, people get 5-7 vacation weeks per year, 12 paid holidays, and they take 'em all without a second thought. Everybody does. We deserve that just as much as the French do. The economy will not fall apart.
8. Consider whether you need a longer period of respite to recover from this difficult past couple of years, with the grief, trauma, burnout, and changes in brain functioning that it has brought to many. Perhaps our example as a church will inspire you: with the support of your Board of Trustees, our three core staff members – our administrator, religious educator, and me as your minister – will each be taking one month of pandemic respite leave this summer. We are exhausted and we need to renew ourselves following two challenging church years, so we can return with fresh energy and creativity. (We will be practicing that staggering idea from music, so there will always be at least one of us on duty over the summer.) Do *you* need something like this?
9. Workers can make the most of this moment. Are you in a stronger position, with the current job market, to negotiate with your supervisor or employer about when and where and how much you work, your job description, time off, or other matters important for life balance? Or do you want to explore other job options that might support you better?
10. Learn more about our nation's history of capitalism, including its roots in slavery. It can strengthen your commitment to rest as a radical act of self-love and social transformation. We'll include links in the Joys & Concerns eblast.

Rest is holy. Rest is a religious imperative. Rest is a radical act of self-love and social transformation.

Dear ones, you deserve rest. You are worthy of experiencing wholeness. I do not want you to ever find yourself crying out, as I once did, "It's never enough!"

I invite all of us to join this journey, together. Welcome to the rest revolution.

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<sup>i</sup> "Challenging the Narrative of Internalised Capitalism," by Kathy Parker, <https://kathyparker.com.au/2020/09/24/challenging-the-narrative-of-internalised-capitalism/>

<sup>ii</sup> "Workplaces are in denial over how much Americans have changed," by Alvin Change. In *The Guardian*, 21 Mar 2022.

<sup>iii</sup> "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," by E.P. Thompson. In *Past & Present*, No. 38 (Dec. 1967), published by Oxford University Press. Accessed via Jstor.org winter 2022.

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iv “In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation,” by Matthew Desmond. In *The New York Times*, Aug. 14, 2019.

v (Ibid.)

vi (final paragraph drawing from Desmond)

vii <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/>