

# The Special Time

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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If you ever talk to someone who lived in Cuba in the early 1990s, and they happen to share some of their story with you, you might hear something about a time called “The Special Period”.

This is the time soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Cuba lost much foreign economic support. The years 1992 to 1994 were the most markedly difficult for the Cuban population, with shortages of food, fuel, and infrastructure.

The official name for this time in Cuban history is “The Special Period in Time of Peace”. A perhaps cynical view of this name might be that it is a euphemism for a difficult and challenging time, when livelihoods and

lives were at stake. I see a good deal of truth to that. And I also suppose that the significance of that time in history also reflects its status as “special”, since it marked significant shifts in Cuban society, its politics and economics, as well as its culture.

Among the many outcomes of The Special Period, was a significant shift in agriculture, as the sugar cash crop became less useful, and the country diversified to more fruits and vegetables, as well as methods that were less reliant on industrial agriculture techniques. The economy also shifted, with wider foreign partnerships, and renewed interest in its tourism industry. Ingenuity came about, out of necessity, and people figured out ways to collaborate in order to get to work, grow food, and stay in community.

It'd probably be inappropriate for me to assess whether the net effect of this time was positive or negative. While many of the shifts were helpful to a recovery that was less reliant on one major benefactor, it came at considerable cost to individuals' quality of life, and major social unrest. There are mixed views on how The Special Period affected the population's health – malnutrition left many people susceptible to diseases... at the same time, the diversification of food production, and a shift from a meat-heavy diet to one higher on fibre and complex carbohydrates, also appears to have led to drops in diet-related ailments, including type-2 diabetes and heart disease. This, of course, is inconclusive.

Now, I don't know if we'll call the current time we're living through something *other* than "The 2020 Pandemic". I've seen a few candidates around. Some folks are talking about "The Great Quarantine", or "The Great Pause". Over the past couple months, I've sometimes made the case for something like "The Great Revelation", as we find an enhanced awareness of important issues in our time, which have become more sharply visible and more evidently critical. I don't know that we'd call it "The Special Period", but I suppose that, whatever we end up calling it, it may indeed qualify as a "special time".

One of the more elusive effects of this special time has been the phenomenon that many people are having trouble keeping *track* of time. The calendars and clocks still work just fine, but our perception of time can often feel warped, as many of our routines have been disrupted. Sometimes, it can feel like time is both going slower and faster than usual, all at the same time. Any day of the week can easily become "Blurnsday the something of Maypril".

And this can be true whether or not you find yourself having paid work at this particular time. If you find that you have... an excess of leisure, one day can easily meld into another, with a sense that time is still...

until a month suddenly goes by. And if you're currently in paid work, it is possible that the routine looks different, especially if you're working from home, when it's difficult to tell apart work and home spaces. A few weeks ago, I shared a video that offers some tools to help with that, but I want to go a bit deeper today.

Many monastic traditions have ways of keeping time in addition to clocks and calendars – using ways to *embody* time by giving each part of the day different meaning through specific activities. Since medieval times, what are called “books of hours” stipulated prayers for certain times of day, and each monastic order would have other duties during the day by which members could participate in the life of a monastery or convent. These ranged from cooking, to transcribing texts, to carpentry and masonry, to artwork, or from gardening and planting, to making cheese, or brewing beer.

Many of you have taken part in some kind of similar activity, either as your paid work, or as a way to unwind. Perhaps the most important aspect here is that those times can each be made special, either by what that activity offers others, or by what it offers you.

Now, setting aside the monastic model, there is an even more ancient tradition about making time special. In the Hebrew bible – the Tanakh – we find the tradition of the sabbath. In the Jewish tradition, that is counted from what is now Friday evening into the daylight hours of Saturday.

In the early Christian church, the sabbath got shifted to a day that commemorated the account of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – Sunday. And the commandment remained – to rest and feast. The feasting aspect is so engrained that, for those who observe Lent, it is not permissible to fast on Sunday – each Sunday is a “mini Easter” when fasting is not permitted, and feasting is the rule (if you've ever noticed that there are more than 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter, that is why – Sundays don't count in the fast).

The meaning of the sabbath is both simple, and perplexing. The commandment is very straightforward: “Thou shalt rest”. But it starts getting tricky when we try to figure out: “what is rest?”

Even in biblical times there were disputes as to what constitutes “work” and what counts as “rest”. In the tradition of rabbinical debates, we might see questions on how to categorize something as work and something as rest. And in the New Testament, there are stories where the followers of Jesus are challenged by religious authorities in relation to contravening the sabbath. I won’t list the specific answers here, they’re not always clear, but the important part is that the conversation is ongoing.

So, for those of you who may currently have... what feels like an abundance of rest, it might be difficult to figure out how to sabbath.

Well, if we stay with the biblical source for a bit longer, we get some clues. Part of resting on the sabbath includes a provision for worship. Now, in our specific circumstances, the meaning of worship can sometimes have broad meanings, but I find it helpful to think of it as a time to consider – and give due regard – to what is most important... our values, our relationships, our communities. Things that are sacred, things that are special. A sabbath can be a special time to nurture our spirits.

So, if your current “problem” is that you have too much rest, then seeking a sabbath can mean finding ways to... take a *rest* from rest. Or perhaps finding a difference between leisure time and rest for the sake of renewal. That can mean seeking, and maybe even finding, activities that nurture your sense of what is special. Some of them might have affinity to the monastic examples I mentioned: gardening, cooking, reading or writing. I suspect you may have your own ideas of what is important to you and what might work as sabbath-ing.

And if you have an opposite situation, where paid work is there, or may have even increased, then seeking sabbath is, of course, just as

important. Finding some time to do something other than your work, is a way toward a larger wholesomeness. It may mean having some time to get groceries, or connecting with family and friends. It could mean a hobby, another kind of work that is not your paid work, but a personal passion. It could mean finding time to play.

One of the things that strikes me from the different possibilities of sabbath-ing is the need to find a special time to let go of some responsibilities for a while, or perhaps take a *shift* in responsibilities. It could mean changing focus from the self to others, or from others to oneself. This might sound selfish, though, as I have observed before, I think it's more useful to think of it as self-full – which is to say, finding a way to feel more wholesome, so we may better serve ourselves and each other.

Now, having a whole day – a sabbath day – is helpful, because it allows a good deal of time... special time, to really get into something that feels like rest – whatever that may be. But some of your lifestyles, or chosen professions, or other circumstances, might not allow for something as seemingly-indulgent as a whole day.

My friends, sabbath can still find a way. There is something we can call “sabbath moments” – special times that we can take throughout the day. Most kinds of work allow for breaks, and meal times. These can be sabbath moments. Or that hour or two after work, to watch that favourite show, or make a call, or devote to something that helps bring a larger wholesomeness to your being – that can also be a way of doing sabbath. The practice of meditation, is a way of bringing sabbath in discrete moments, with every breath.

Muslims have daily prayer practices, several times a day – times to take a break from whatever else is going on, and considering what is most important. And there are larger times that are also made special. As the month of Ramadan comes to a close tonight, that special time is also celebrated with the feasting of Eid – a time marked by the sighting of a crescent moon.

My friends, how you find, and how you seek special time, will be your own task to figure out, and carry out. And yes, finding rest can sometimes feel like work, and it is work well worth it – a responsibility for ourselves and others. For in finding the special time, we can allow ourselves to feel the deeper meaning of time.

So may it be,  
In Solidarity,  
Amen

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*Suggested hymns:*

### **Opening Hymn #63 Spring Has Now Unwrapped the Flowers**

Words: Piae Cantiones, 1582

~)-| Music: Thomas Benjamin, 1940- , © 1992 UUA

BLACKBURN 7.6.7.6.D.

### **Meditation Hymn #108 My Life Flows On in Endless Song**

W: Traditional, Verse 3 by Doris Plenn

M: Robert Lowry, 1826-1899

SINGING 8.7.8.7.D Iambic

### **Hymn #204 Come, O Sabbath Day**

Words: After Gustav Gottheil, 1827-1903

Music: A. W. Binder, 1895-1966

SABBATH 7.7.7.7. with refrain

### **Closing Hymn #113 Where Is Our Holy Church?**

W: Edwin Henry Wilson, 1898-1993 ~)-| © 1992 UUA

M: Genevan psalter, 1551, adapt. By William Crotch, 1775-1847

ST. MICHAEL S.M.