

## Pharisees, Puritans, Philosophers, and Poets

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### Psalm 8; Mark 2:23-28

Our knowledge of life in early colonial America owes a great debt to Alice Morse Earle, an American historian born in 1851 Worcester, Massachusetts. Earle wrote well and at length, not about huge, earth shaking events, but about the simple day to day life of an earlier era: Customs and Fashions in Old New England was one of her works, as well as Old Time Gardens, and Home Life in Colonial Days.

This week, thanks to the wonder that is the internet, I came across her work, The Sabbath in Puritan New England, from 1891. It is a folk history of the sabbath gleaned from the records of towns and churches across New England, and I can't decide if the stories it documents ring as quaint, or funny, or outright draconian. Earle describes some of the sabbath nuggets she unearthed:

In New London, we find in the latter part of the seventeenth century a wicked fisherman presented before the Court and fined for catching eels on Sunday; another "fined twenty shillings for sailing a boat on the Lord's Day;" while in 1670 two lovers, John Lewis and Sarah Chapman, were accused of and tried for "sitting together on the Lord's Day under an apple tree in Goodman Chapman's Orchard."

(Quite possibly, this event later inspired the classic Andrews Sisters tune, "Don't sit under the Apple Tree with Anyone Else on the Sabbath.")

Earle continues: In Newbury, in 1646, Aquila Chase and his wife were presented and fined for gathering peas from their garden on the Sabbath, but upon investigation the fines were remitted, and the offenders were only admonished.

[A certain] Captain Kemble of Boston was in 1656 set for two hours in the public stocks for his 'lewd and unseemly behavior,' which consisted in his kissing his wife 'publicquely' on the Sabbath Day,

upon the doorstep of his house, when he had just returned from a voyage and absence of three years.

[Elsewhere,] a Maine man who was rebuked and fined for "unseemly walking" on the Lord's Day protested that he ran to save a man from drowning [this may have been true or an exaggeration, I, myself was not there. In any case, it shows the ridiculousness of the sabbath blue laws]. The Court made him pay his fine, Earle writes, but ordered that the money should be returned to him when he could prove by witnesses that he had been on that errand of mercy.<sup>1</sup>

Small wonder, when they hear such stories, that so many people today associate the very term, sabbath, with a sort of narrow-minded strictness, as if making people a little bit more sour, dour, or miserable somehow serves the greater glory of God.

Yet that is the very message that is sent by the Pharisees in our scripture lesson from Mark's gospel this morning. Jesus and his disciples are out one sabbath day, not undertaking a long journey, which was forbidden, but just wandering in the area of Capernaum, making their way toward the synagogue. As they walk, they make their way through a grain field, and some of the disciples begin idly to pluck the heads from the grain to eat. This would have been an innocent, everyday practice, not harvesting grain, but just snapping off a few grain heads, rubbing them between their palms to remove the chaff, and crunching the seeds—we might think of a hiker plucking a couple of blueberries from a trailside bush and idly eating them while walking along.

But some of the Pharisees choose to make a thing of it. By the way, we can presume from their actions throughout the gospels that they are looking to pick a fight, as if following Jesus around waiting for him or his followers to misstep. They confront Jesus and say, "Look! Why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" They are **HARVESTING GRAIN.**

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<sup>1</sup> These passages are excerpted nearly verbatim (with minor modification for flow and clarity) from chapter seventeen of Earle's work, which is reproduced here:

<http://www.reformedreader.org/puritans/sabbath.puritan.newengland/sabbath.puritan.newengland.chapter17.htm>

(Don't they know that plucking grain heads can lead to sitting beneath apple trees?)

Now there is perhaps a bit of impish humor in Jesus' response: "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions."

Now, here's why I suggest that Jesus' response is exaggerated or tongue-in-cheek. He refers to an incident described in I Samuel chapter 21, where David and his men were on the run from King Saul. They were pursued, hungry, and in fear for their lives, when they came to Nob, the city of the priests, seeking food and weapons. They entered the sanctuary, took the bread of Presence, which had a symbolic religious purpose and could only be consumed by the priests, and they ate it, which would have been considered high sacrilege, and only justifiable under the direst of circumstances. Their emergency trumps religious law.

Jesus' comparison of his disciples plucking grain heads to this situation is a bit like saying— "My disciples were starving! It was the direst emergency!" It is an exaggerated or perhaps intentionally ridiculous answer, given in response to a ridiculous accusation; sort of like the Pharisees have accused Jesus and his followers of "unseemly walking" and Jesus is responding, "Well, we did it to save a drowning guy!" It is, I suggest, argument by hyperbole, which is the use of an intentionally extreme response to make a point.

And then we come to the heart of the encounter. Jesus looks at the Pharisees after this exaggerated exchange and says: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."

And what he means here is: the sabbath is not to be worshipped as a rule or as an idol. It has a purpose—which is to help us to know and encounter God. Now this, I think is an important point—we humans too often have a way of taking something that is intended to point to God, to help us to know God or experience God, and making it an idol unto itself. It is what many folks do with the Bible—insisting

on its inerrancy, turning it into a rule book, instead of receiving it as the story of God's love for us, worshipping the Bible instead of using the Bible as a tool to inspire worship.

And that is what the Pharisees and the Puritans have done with the sabbath—worshipping it as a rule or as an idea instead of recognizing it as a day to know, to encounter, to experience God.

I'll venture this—the disciples encountered more of God, wandering through the grain fields on a beautiful day, crunching on wheat kernels—seeing God's creation, feeling the sun on their faces, tasting the grain...than they encountered in the Pharisees judgmental finger-wagging and rule book thumping.

But now, I want to point out a sabbath error of a different sort—it is to go to the other extreme, to see the sabbath as a day purely for leisure or for chores...to see the sabbath as something so common, so ordinary that there is nothing more special about it than a day out of the office. I've often heard the old saying, "I can worship God better on the golf course than in church." To which I always want to respond—perhaps so...but DO you? Do you use that time to reflect upon God—to seek or see God, to meditate, to experience the world more deeply or more reverently? Or do you use it to golf?

The point of the sabbath is not to needlessly refrain from activity, as the Pharisees and Puritans urge—but it is also not to heedlessly go about our activities as so much of our modern culture does.

So, if the sabbath is not a day for idolatry, but it is also not a day for mere idleness, then what is the sabbath for? I'd like to suggest that the sabbath is a day for what I will call "walking like Wordsworth." The English Poet William Wordsworth famously composed his poetry while walking. He immersed himself in the beauty of the English Lake district, noticing with depth and intentionality the beauty that surrounded him. It is said that Wordsworth would walk and breathe and be—and if he became stuck on a line that he was composing, he would wander back and forth and back and forth and back and forth puzzling it through until a rut wore beneath his feet and the words worked their way out in his mind. The point I'm trying to make here is that he used his walks not merely as recreation, but as a time of deep thought, about God, or creation, or nature and human nature. It

was a time spent in reverent reflection, and creativity. Here are a couple of stanzas from his poem, “Lines Written in Early Spring.”

“I heard a thousand blended notes,  
While in a grove I sate reclined,  
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts  
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did nature link  
The human soul that through me ran;  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man.”

Do you hear in those lines the quality of reflection that Wordsworth is engaged in? He is listening to the creation around him—immersed in what he sees and experiences. I’m reminded of the verse from the old hymn: “to my listening ears, all nature sings, and ‘round me rings the music of the spheres.” But he is also contemplating—what is the place of humanity in the order of things? Where are we going? What is our purpose here? “Much it grieved my heart to think what man has made of man.” He is engaged in philosophy, creativity, theology—this is no mere hike, but intensive introspection resulting in deep thought.

The poet Wendell Berry says this about sabbath: “Sabbath observance invites us to stop. It invites us to rest. It asks us to notice that while we rest, the world continues without our help. It invites us to delight in the world’s beauty and abundance.”

What I’m seeking to convey here is that sabbath is not about stopping for the sake of stopping as the Pharisees would suggest, nor is it about stopping for the sake of relaxation as our culture would suggest, but it is about stopping to examine, stopping to be still and know that God is God, stopping to breathe and to be attentive. If we never stop to examine, then we are in danger of living an unexamined life.

It is not simply setting aside our busyness—it is quite possible to sit and do nothing but also to think nothing, or at least nothing very deep. I’d like to suggest that sabbath is a day for the big questions, for expansive thoughts.

It is a day for encountering the world as poets and philosophers do: The Psalmist writes, O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established (when I stop to contemplate the vast mystery and endless wonder of creation)—then I am led to the most expansive of thoughts: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals that you care for them?” What are we doing here? What is our place in the created order?

And the contemplation leads the Psalmist to an awed awareness—“yet you have made humans but little lower than God, you have given them dominion over the works of your hands.” The deep reflection upon the nature of God, and the place of humanity in God’s creation has led the Psalmist to a new and deeper sense of stewardship. That is what “walking like Wordsworth” does for us—it leads us to a place of wonder, contemplation, creativity, honor and awe. And when we are operating from a place of awe and wonder and gratitude and reverence, we do not think or act in ways that cheapen ourselves or diminish our neighbors.

So, here’s a task for today. Find even five minutes. Watch a cloud drift across the sky and ponder—where is it going...and where am I going? Observe a butterfly sipping nectar from a flower and ponder—if God provides so simply and beautifully for God’s creatures how has God provided for me? Find a seat and watch people passing by—and let yourself wonder: what are their hurts, their hopes, their dreams? And what are mine? What connects them to me? We spend so much time on what divides us—what connect us? Pick one person and without his or her knowing—offer a prayer. Ask God’s blessing upon that person’s life—wish for him comfort, wish for her an awareness of God’s love...and let them walk away having been unknowingly blessed.

Find a way—some small and simple way—as small and simple as a grain head snapped from a stalk of grain—to taste and see that the Lord is good.

If the sabbath is about rules—we’re cheating ourselves. If it is about idle rest and leisure we’re cheating ourselves. If it is merely a day for errands and chores, we’re cheating ourselves. But if it is a day for intentional reflection upon our lives in God’s presence: well then, we’ll be walking like Wordsworth. And then, we will have understood. Amen.

