

What's the difference between family time and sabbath?

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Three years after the publication of *Sabbath in the Suburbs*, I continue to speak to groups about our family's experience of taking a day each week for rest and play (which looks very different now than it did during the year-long experiment, but that's another post).

People who've read the book will notice that we didn't spend the day doing "holy" activities. We didn't read scripture together or pray (except before meals) or even talk about God all that much. We often lit a candle to designate that this time was somehow set apart, but otherwise, there was nothing particularly religious in our observance. So what gives?

Or as many people ask me, "We already have family time together; what makes sabbath different?"

First, I don't believe in creating a division between so-called secular and sacred activities. In my tradition, we believe and profess that God is the Lord of our whole lives. Yes, there are times that we intentionally focus on our spiritual lives, through study or prayer or small groups or a worship service. But all of life is (or can be) an act of devotion to God as we understand God.

That said, I believe the language we use matters—in fact, what we name something changes the nature of the thing we're naming. It's great to have family time, and there's nothing wrong with calling it that. But invoking the word *sabbath* acknowledges that God is also present and that the things we do during this time can nurture our spiritual lives as well as our sense of family connectedness. It gives us a different vision and perspective on that time.

The other day I was listening to [Krista Tippett's \*On Being\* interview with social scientist Ellen Langer](#), and they were talking about this exact phenomenon. In one study, subjects were asked to evaluate a series of jokes and cartoons. For half the group, the researchers framed the activity as **work**; the other half, **play**. Those who were told to play reported a much greater enjoyment than those who were

“working” at the very same activity.

Similarly, Langer referenced a study of chambermaids—women who are on their feet all day doing constant physical labor. This group experienced actual physiological changes when they named their daily activity “exercise” rather than simply “work.” Fascinating!

So here’s an easy experiment for those of you who want to connect with this old, ancient practice that has such resonance for Jewish and Christian communities but don’t know where to start. Put the label of sabbath on something you already do: family time, your daily ritual of tea and Sudoku, even your workout at the gym. See what changes, what feels different. See if the activity resonates on a different level.

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