

Quality time

by [Linda Lee Nelson](#) in the [January 19, 2000](#) issue

*Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*, by Dorothy Bass

Driven by her conviction that "the practices of living religious traditions have great wisdom to impart," Dorothy Bass examines Christian practices in "both their ancient grounding and the fresh and vibrant forms they take today." A historian of American religion and the director of the Valparaiso University Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, she here tackles the problem of time.

This is not another self-help book on how to use time more efficiently or successfully. Bass's emphasis is not on the quantity of time and how to squeeze the most production out of it, but on its quality. She invites her readers into Christian practices that heighten both the spiritual and relational dimensions of time, so that we may live with greater authenticity as people created in God's image—with an awareness of time as a gift rather than a burden thrust upon us by our daily planners, and with a sense of being "attuned to the active presence of God." Many of Bass's suggested activities for "opening the gift of time" are embedded within the shared activities of communities, not all of them Christian.

As Bass asserts, solutions for dealing with the increasing pressures of time—pressures that mar our days—will not be found in the writings of historians, economists or sociologists. Nor will the demands to get more and more done be met by e-mails, cell phones, faxes, palm pilots or any of the other inventions that lure us into thinking the workday has no end. Our trouble with time is a matter of the spirit, an issue of identity and conscience. Bass tells us that we have embraced a false theology: "We come to believe that we, not God, are the masters of time. We come to believe that our worth must be proved by the way we spend our hours and that our ultimate safety depends on our own good management."

Bass asks us to see time in a new way, not as something that controls us, but as God's first gift, as the medium of God's presence and activity and as the place of sabbath. To know time as gift is to know it as the "point of rendezvous with God," "the habitation of blessing"; it is to know that its rhythms and passing are beyond

our control.

Through glimpses into her personal and communal life, Bass shows us her own, sometimes painful transformations as she learns to "live well in time." Many of the most important evolutions in this process were nurtured by the rhythms of the liturgical year. She also relates practical and theological insights from acquaintances and scholars who have likewise tried to receive each day as the gift of God. Many of these deeply moving illustrations will be appreciated by parents, pastors, counselors and anyone else who tries to teach others to live with an awareness of God's active presence in our lives. For example, there is the parent who, at the end of each day, asks her children, "Where did God meet you today?" There is Eugene Peterson's reminder that the day begins not at dawn but at dusk, with God's long night of work within us as we rest. Morning is when we join in God's labor—when we join a work that has already begun. There is the wisdom of Martin Marty's morning practice of making the baptismal sign of the cross upon his body. That act places one firmly in the present day, letting go of guilt about yesterday and anxiety about tomorrow. There is the suggestion that families and communities mark with rituals "gifted pieces of time," especially a child's baptismal anniversary.

We also recognize time as God's gift when we respect the daily needs of the body, when we offer attention to the people and experiences of the immediate present, when we set aside a portion of each day for attention to God, when we remove impediments to the authentic use of time, and when we practice the sabbath, a practice that receives considerable attention in Bass's book.

Bass presents practicing the sabbath as a countercultural habit of claiming a weekly day for resting in God's blessings. When we live in the rhythms of the sabbath, "we begin to sway to a beat that runs counter to some of the other rhythms of our busy lives." We begin to "open creation for its true future," in Jürgen Moltmann's words. "This kind of time nourishes an alternative vision of how things could be. It sows seeds of resistance to the unjust arrangements that deny freedom both to those who must work without respite and to those who choose to do so." To keep the sabbath is to "practice, for a day, the freedom that God intends for all people." During the sabbath, we rest from consumerism and from worry-inducing activities, and we grant the creation a day of ecological rest. On the sabbath the meaning of God's work as Deliverer spills "over from worship into all the hours of a day."

The gift of sabbath is best received in community: "the stories, the meals, the gatherings, and the songs that prepare us to cherish creation, to resist slavery in all its forms, and to proclaim new life all week long." She loves the rhythm and complex framework of the liturgical year. Unable to open the gift of time with our own resources, unable to help ourselves, we enter the story and time of God by the Christian practice of living through the liturgical year, "a means of participation in the life of God." This practice reforms us through "a set of deep convictions about what time is for." Time is for repairing, serving and sharing, for "journeys that train us for living and dying."

Bass relates how the darkness and light of God's story "met and matched" her own. She was changed by "being drawn into a story in which life prevails over death." Bass writes, "Again and again, God has met me [through the practices of the Christian year], receiving my experience, embracing it, and giving it back to me renewed." She describes what all worship leaders hope to offer: a contemporaneous experience of redemption mediated by word and sacrament and located in the rhythms of God's story, in the themes of God's time.