

# The Naked Eye

## Enough

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*How can someone with a constant compulsion for more ever be satisfied?*

Asked me to come to the kickoff meeting of a spiritual discussion group she was putting together in New York—a nondenominational “moveable feast” of freelance urban seekers looking for a monthly forum. She informed me that our first evening would be devoted to a new book entitled *Minyan: Ten Principles for Living a Life of Integrity*, by Rabbi Rami Shapiro, specifically his chapter on the Shabbat, or the weekly Sabbath. Since our start date was on a Friday night, this seemed somehow auspicious.

As a lapsed Jew who’d never read anything on Judaism that made a lick of sense to me, I opened the book with prejudice but was happily surprised by Shapiro’s willingness to link Talmudic views with other mystical traditions to bring them firmly into the modern day. Discussing Shabbat’s ancient sundown-to-sundown tradition of “non-doing, cessation, and renewal,” he throws out orthodoxy and emphasizes the poetry of this practice. “Live for one day as if you were at home in the universe,” he suggests. “Live for one day without trying to control the people around you and the situations in which you find yourself. Live for one day in a state of total acceptance. Do you grasp the wonder and challenge of this day? Not a day without desire; that is not possible. But a day not to act on those desires.” Such a sacred hiatus on a weekly basis could even give us, according to the good rabbi, a “foretaste of the world to come.”

Whether you believe in a world to come or not, the appeal of such a heavenly feeling was undeniable and

spurred a lively talk among us. Our hostess, a redoubtable figure in the publishing world for many years, reported that keeping the Sabbath (the first time in her adult life she’d taken regular breaks from a marathon workload) was “difficult but interesting.” A woman who’d grown up in an Orthodox family re-



membered that on the Friday nights of her girlhood, the entire neighborhood seemed to pause between parentheses of sunsets, as if the world itself were catching its breath after days of sweat and toil. A literary agent named Sarah Jane talked about the Book of Genesis, in which God worked mightily for six long days, then cooled His heels on the seventh. “Even the Lord could sit back and be satisfied that nothing more needed to be added to His creation,” Sarah Jane said. “Even He could stop and say, ‘It’s good already—enough!’”

*Enough.* That was the word that stuck with me and haunted me for

days afterward, echoing through my brain as if I’d never quite heard it before. When had anything ever felt like enough to me? When had I ever felt true *sufficiency*? When, for more than an accidental moment, had I been satisfied with things exactly as they were, with no need to edit, improve, aspire, arrange, push forward in some way? There was always something to be done, work to be finished, work to be started, improvements to be made, problems to be solved, issues to explore, ground to cover. Enough? Not in this lifetime.

In fact, the more I accomplished, the worse this dissatisfaction grew. Since finishing one book, I’d hit the ground running with another, and in the past three years there’d hardly been a day when I hadn’t felt pressed by something or other, worried about the future, upbraiding myself for not doing more.

Like many insecure writers, I had the irrational fear that unless I whipped myself like a mule on Methedrine, my muse would get bored and stop putting out. When I wasn’t actually writing, I was planning, taking notes, or worrying that I’d be dry the next day. As I told the group, I feared that a sabbath would interfere with my manic work life. (I think I called it “my flow.”) What I didn’t say, but realized afterward, was how extreme this compulsion was, that given the choice between being productive and being sane, I would gladly be prolifically nuts.

It was no surprise that I was burning out. Too many mornings lately, marching to my desk at dawn like a soldier, I’d sit staring at the computer

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Illustration by Timothy Cook

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screen, feeling absolutely gutted. Rereading what I'd done, I could see that this exhaustion was leaking onto the page: the crabby, cornered turns of phrase, the muffled yowling between the lines. It was suffocating just to read the stuff. I threw out the worst parts and forced myself to accept the fact that something had to change. My life had become a run-on sentence. I needed syntax—I needed to stop. But the thought sent a chill through my paranoid bones.

*Friendships, romance, meditation—even the way I did my housework—were all characterized by an inability to let things rest, to allow incompleteness and imperfection, to stop trying so damned hard. Trying too hard was my lifelong curse.*

The key to my fear was the word "enough," and how this crazy desire for more pervaded all areas of my life. Friendships, romance, meditation—even the way I did my housework—were all marked by an inability to let things rest, to allow incompleteness and imperfection, to stop trying so damned hard. Trying too hard was my lifelong curse. In school, whenever a teacher gave a five-page assignment, I'd write twice that much (and even that wasn't good enough). This unworthiness made me an overcompensator and later an addict, always trying to buck up my self-esteem, fill out the contours of a not-quite identity. I could even use spiritual practice to feel unworthy; when discipline sagged, I punished myself for avoiding the thing that helped the most.

This vicious cycle kept me a hungry ghost, caught on a wheel, but where did the insufficiency come from? There were the stock answers—narcissism, greed, childhood deprivation, raging materialism (spiritual and otherwise), an addictive culture that tells us we're starving when we're not. I could pin the blame on that great red herring—the ego—of course, the culprit struggling to puff itself up and falling short every time since it doesn't technically exist. But these generalities seemed academic and didn't really help. Looking closer, I began to perceive that this not-enough feeling stemmed more precisely from a chronic lack of faith—in myself, in my work, in powers beyond my control. Since I couldn't trust, I couldn't stop, convinced that if I shrugged, the world I'd built would come crashing down in a thousand pieces. As long as I was dominated by fear—of failure, of doing without—as long as I remained a slave of will, my hellish predicament would continue.

Seeing this pattern gave me pause. Though I'm not quite ready to observe a sabbath, I have vowed to step back when I need to, to stop running quite so fast, and to remind myself that inspiration comes from "breathing in." The morning after our second meeting at Toinette's (where we talked about the Ten Commandments—*don't even ask*), I left the city for the first spontaneous trip I'd taken in years. For six days, I hiked alone in the desert, resting my tired brain. Gazing at massive red rocks, enormous sky, open land, I gradually calmed down and found myself agreeing with God: The world was pretty good—you could even say it was enough. When I came home on the seventh day, this sensation trailed me. Everything looked surprisingly new—my lover, Manhattan, even the book. Pale pages flushed again; I remembered the colors I wanted to paint.

And I sat back down to work.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek's memoir, *Sex Death Enlightenment* (Riverhead), is now out in paperback. Responses are welcome at [MMATOUSEK@aol.com](mailto:MMATOUSEK@aol.com).

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