

Listening in Quiet

Quiet minds cannot be perplexed or frightened but go on in fortune or misfortune at their own private pace, like a clock during a thunderstorm.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Sit still and keep my mind focused on some word or passage and experience calmness and quiet? You have to be kidding. As soon as I sat down, I thought of a dozen emergencies - my car needed new antifreeze (and the month was July); I had to call my college roommate (whom I hadn't talked to for twenty years); the newspaper was still out on the lawn and might get wet (thought the morning was bright and sunny) .

. . . It is reassuring to know I am not the only person who has ever felt remedial in the quiet prayer department. Becoming distracted by jumbled and unpredictable thoughts seems to be an integral part of trying to be quiet. When we become still, we hear all the internal racket. Our minds are like the car radio that cuts in and out, that picks up first this frequency and then that frequency on an isolated stretch of road. The thoughts are all the parts of our inner lives, clamoring to be heard.

The paradox related to this difficulty of sitting still and being quiet is, of course, that we also treasure silence. That is why many of us camp deep in the forest or go out into the desert to look at the stars or sail into an isolated cove or sit on the deck early in the morning with a cup of coffee - we love the quiet. Some part of us knows we are refreshed and stilled by whatever is contained in this precious Silence. We understand the "sacrament of pause." We have all experienced it.

It is to take such experiences of quiet in our lives, which are often sporadic and always far too infrequent, and re-create and enlarge their value that we practice daily quiet time as part of our spiritual practice. By being quiet, we find the place inside us where our greatest authenticity dwells, where we are most who we are and who we want to be. In silence, we find our own center, but most important, we also find the Presence of God.

Anthony Bloom, a medical doctor who later became an Eastern Orthodox priest, told a story about finding God in the quiet that I have never forgotten. Shortly after his ordination, Bloom was sent to conduct a service at a home for the elderly. A woman requested some advice about prayer. When he asked what problem she was having with her prayer, she replied that for fourteen years she had been saying her prayers a certain way and had never once in all that time perceived God's Presence. Bloom replied to the woman, "If you speak all the time, you don't give God a chance to place a word in."

Then he gave her new instructions.

She was to go to her room after breakfast, place her armchair in a position where the dark corners of her room were behind her, light a little lamp, and then take stock of the room. "Just sit," he said, "look round, and try to see where you live, because I am sure that if you have prayed all these fourteen years it is a long time since you have seen your room. And then," he added, "take your knitting and for fifteen minutes knit before the face of God." But she was not to say one word of prayer. "You just knit and try to enjoy the peace of your room."

The woman took the advice, although she didn't think it was very spiritual. But after trying the "knit before God" approach, she found that it worked. When she saw Bloom again, she told him that she had started off the experiment by saying:

Oh how nice. I have fifteen minutes during which I can do nothing without being guilty! ... I felt so quiet because the room was so peaceful. There was a clock ticking but it didn't disturb the silence; its ticking just underlined the fact that everything was so still and after a while I remembered that I must knit before the face of God, and so

as not simply an absence of noise, but that the silence had substance. It was not absence of something but presence of something. The silence had a density, a richness, and it began to pervade me. The silence around began to come and meet the silence in me.

The woman paused in her story for several seconds. Then she added, "All of a sudden I perceived that the silence was a presence. At the heart of the silence there was [One] who is all stillness, all peace."

The woman for the next (and last) ten years of her life - she died at age a hundred and two - practiced both kinds of prayer, the still silence and her previous vocal prayer. She was like the old peasant, Bloom suggested, who, when the priest asked him why he spent hours and hours sitting in the chapel motionless, doing nothing, answered: "I look at the Divine, the Divine looks at me, and we are happy."

A Sacred Primer, The Essential Guide to Quiet Time and Prayer
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