

Silence and solitude

I'm just old enough to remember this thing from the late '90s we called "boredom."

Anybody?

You digital natives have no clue what I'm talking about. Boredom? Is that like when you have a bad Wi-Fi connection and your Instagram feed takes more than two seconds to load? Um, kind of. Just multiply that feeling by, well, *a lot*.

If you were born after, say, 1995, then you can't really remember a time when infinity wasn't in your front right pocket. But I can.

There was a time when you'd be flying across the country, somewhere over, say, Minnesota, and you'd finish your book earlier than expected and just...stare out the window. With *nothing* to do.

Or you'd be waiting in line at your coffee shop of choice, five people ahead of you, and you'd have to just *stand* there. The extroverts in line would all strike up a conversation. We introverts would smile and

nod, secretly thinking, *Why, dear God, is this total stranger talking to me?*

Anybody remember this? Waiting at the bus stop, stuck in traffic, sitting in the theater before a movie, in the back of a less-than-enthralling poli-sci class with nothing for your mind to do but wander through the infinite realm of possibility?

And while it's easy to sentimentalize something as inane as boredom, none of us, honestly, wants to go back to a pre-digital world. We're more efficient than ever. I get more done in less time than I ever dreamed possible a decade ago.

But again, pros and cons. We now have access to infinity through our new cyborgesque selves, which is great, but we've also lost something crucial. All those little moments of boredom were potential portals to prayer. Little moments throughout our days to wake up to the reality of God all around us. To wake up to our own souls. To draw our minds' attention (and, with it, devotion) back to God; to come off the hurry drug and come home to awareness.

Now all those little moments are gone, swallowed up by the digital carnivore. The second we feel even a hint of boredom coming on, we reach for the appendages that are our smartphones: check our news feeds, answer an email (Reply All, click), read a tweet about Donald Trump's tweet about who-knows-what before we tweet about who-knows-what, look up the weather for Thursday, search for a new pair of shoes, and, naturally, slay at *Candy Crush*.

A survey from Microsoft found that 77 percent of young adults answered " 'yes' when asked, 'When nothing is occupying my attention, the first thing I do is reach for my phone.' " ¹

I mean, not *me*.

You.

Pretty much the only place we can be alone with our thoughts anymore is in the shower, and it's only a matter of time until our devices are waterproof, which, in turn, will trigger the apocalypse.

I allow myself that brief rant just to say that all this has profound implications for our apprenticeships to Jesus and our experiences (or *lack* of experiences) of the life he has on offer. How so? Simple: this new normal of hurried digital distraction is robbing us of the ability to be *present*.

Present to God.

Present to other people.

Present to all that is good, beautiful, and true in our world.

Even present to our own souls.

Once again, Andrew Sullivan, in his manifesto for silence in an age of noise, wrote this:

There are books to be read; landscapes to be walked; friends to be with; life to be fully lived.... This new epidemic of distraction is our civilization's specific weakness. And its threat is not so much to our minds, even as they shape-shift under the pressure. The threat is to our souls. At this rate, if the noise does not relent, we might even forget we have any.²

The noise of the modern world makes us deaf to the voice of God, drowning out the one input we most need.

I mean, how do we have any kind of spiritual life at all if we can't pay attention longer than a goldfish? How do you pray, read the Scriptures, sit under a teaching at church, or rest well on the Sabbath when every chance you get, you reach for the dopamine dispenser that is your phone?

To requote the Catholic father and social critic Ronald Rolheiser, “We...are distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion.”³

So, rant over.

Now, a question: Is there a practice from the way of Jesus that could help with this? A time-tested art form—or, if you prefer, spiritual discipline—that could set us up to thrive *right in the middle* of the chaos of modern society?

Answer: Yes. Absolutely. Actually, there are quite a few. We’ll talk about my top four for unhurrying your life. Let’s start with what I think are the most important of them all: silence and solitude.

Jesus and the quiet place

From the beginning, then.

At the end of Matthew 3, there’s a fascinating story about Jesus’ baptism. When he came up out of the water, there was literally a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”⁴ This is more than an emotional high. Or even a spiritual high. This is *the* launch-pad from which Jesus is sent out into the world.

But in the very next line, we read this:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him.⁵

Notice, the first thing Jesus did after his baptism was head straight into the desert.

Desert here doesn’t necessarily mean sand and heat. The Greek word is *eremos*, and it has a wide array of meanings.

It can be translated

- desert
- deserted place
- desolate place
- solitary place
- lonely place
- quiet place (my personal favorite)
- wilderness

There are stories—lots of them—in all four Gospels about Jesus' relationship to the eremos, but this is the first story. And I want you to see it because it's the starting place for his ministry and mission. But it's an odd story, right? Have you ever read that line—"Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil"—and thought to yourself, *What's up with that?*

I mean, if you've been reading the Bible from *Genesis* up to *Matthew*, you get that Jesus has to go toe-to-toe with the devil. The protagonist must face the bad-guy-to-end-all-bad-guys. Evil has to be defeated. You get that.

But why in the wilderness? Why alone? And why after forty days of fasting? When he's hungry?

For years this story made no sense to me because I thought of the wilderness as the place of *weakness*.

I read it this way: Isn't that so like the devil? To come at us at the end of a long day or a long week? When we're hangry and at our worst?

But then I realized I had it backward.

The wilderness isn't the place of weakness; it's the place of *strength*.

“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness” because it was there, and only there, that Jesus was at the height of his spiritual powers. It was only after a month and a half of prayer and fasting in the quiet place that he had the capacity to take on the devil himself and walk away unscathed.

That's why, over and over again, you see Jesus come back to the eremos.

Take Mark 1 as an example. Mark 1 is essentially one long chapter about Jesus' first day on the job as the Messiah. It was a marathon day; he was up early, teaching in the synagogue, then healing Peter's mother-in-law over lunch, then up late healing the sick and demonized. He must have been well beyond exhausted.

Yet then we read this:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place [eremos], where he prayed.⁶

You would think Jesus would have slept in, gone for a light run, and then had brunch with his disciples. Nothing says post-Sunday recovery like a farmer's scramble.

But instead Jesus was up early and out the door to the quiet place.

To clarify, Jesus went to the quiet place for a month and a half. Came back to Capernaum for *one day* of busy activity. Then he headed straight back to the eremos to pray.

Meaning, the quiet place wasn't a onetime thing. It was an ongoing part of his life rhythm.

But the story isn't over:

Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”⁷

Here’s my paraphrase:

Jesus, where have you *been*? You were amazing yesterday. Word’s out. *Vogue* is calling for an interview. TMZ is hiding outside Peter’s house. #Jesus is trending. We need you back, *post-haste*.⁸

And what did Jesus say?

Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.⁹

That’s Jesus for *no*.

Notice, Jesus came out of the wilderness with all sorts of clarity about his identity and calling. He was grounded. Centered. In touch with God *and* himself. From that place of emotional equilibrium and spiritual succor, he knew precisely what to say yes to and, just as importantly, what to say no to.

Hence: as the Gospels go on, you quickly realize the quiet place was top priority for Jesus.

There’s a story in Mark 6 where the disciples were just dead tired after a few weeks of kingdom work. We read:

So many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat.¹⁰

Ever feel like that? All you parents are thinking, *Every single day*.

And to his overbusy, overtired apprentices, Jesus said:

Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place [eremos] and get some rest.¹¹

Translation:

What you really need isn't a beer or a night out at the movies. What you really need is time alone with me. But to do that, we need to get away from all the noise and people.

So,

They went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place [eremos].¹²

Sounds nice. Time alone with Jesus at a spa by the Sea of Galilee. Organic tea, anybody? Unfortunately, that's not how the story goes.

Next lines:

But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

By this time it was late in the day.¹³

I love the realism of this story. There are times when what you really need is time alone with Jesus, but, well, life happens. *People* happen. You set aside time to Sabbath or pray or just take a night off with no plan, but then you get a text from your boss, a minor crisis at work. Your two-year-old swallows a Lego Kylo Ren. You google "Closest emergency room." Your roommate had a bad day and could use a chat. Two hours later she's still crying. Thousands of people are banging down your front door asking for you to heal them and

teach about the kingdom of God because they believe you're the long-awaited Messiah. Y'know, ordinary life stuff.

Sound familiar? You ever feel like, try as you might, you just can't get time to rest? You're in good company with Jesus himself.

But again, that's still not the end of the story. A boy's backpack and five thousand lunches later, we read this:

Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

Later that night,...he was alone on land.¹⁴

I used to read the ending to this story and think, *Wow, Jesus is so spiritual—up all night praying!* And he was. But notice *why* he was up all night praying. Because it was the only time he could find to be alone in the quiet! He was so busy that he literally didn't have a moment alone all day long, so all he could think to do was send his apprentices away and stay up all night on a mountain (the word *eremos* isn't used here, but a mountaintop at midnight fits the bill). Because he knew that time alone with his Father was even more important than sleep itself.

And we haven't even gotten to Luke's gospel yet.

In Luke, Jesus went to his quiet place no less than *nine* times. Just one more story; then I'll stop. I promise. This one is from Luke 5:

The news about [Jesus] spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.

Crowds banging down Jesus' front door was a regular thing. But look at the next line:

Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.¹⁵

In Greek that phrase “lonely places” is...Well, I’m guessing you know what it is by now.

I love this. Jesus “often withdrew.” He frequently got away. He made a point to sneak off to pray on a regular basis. It was a common habit in his repertoire.

In Luke’s gospel in particular, you can chart Jesus’ life along two axis points: the busier and more in demand and famous Jesus became, and the *more* he withdrew to his quiet place to pray.

Usually for us it’s the exact opposite. When we get overbusy and life is hectic and people are vying for our time, the quiet place is the first thing to go *rather than our first go to*. The first thing we lose is unhurried time to just sit with God in the quiet. To pray. Read a psalm. Take an internal inventory. Let our souls catch up to our bodies.

In seasons of busyness we need *more* time in the quiet place, not less, definitely not less. And if you’re running through your Rolodex of excuses right now—I’m a full-time mom, I have a demanding job that starts early, I’m an extrovert, I have ADHD, etc.—stop for a minute. Think about this: *Jesus* needed time in the quiet place.

I repeat, *Jesus* needed time.

And a fair bit of it.

You think you don’t?

Silence and solitude

Through the years this practice of Jesus has come to be called “silence and solitude.”

As simple as that sounds, there’s a lot to it.

So, a word on each.

First, silence.

There are two dimensions of silence—*external* and *internal*.

External silence is pretty self-explanatory: no noise. No music in your headphones. No TV, even in the background. No roommate playing *Fortnite* down the hall. No toddler screaming, *Packie! Packie! Packie!* No chatting to your mom over the phone while emptying the dishwasher. It's when you're up early or out in nature or in your room, and it's *quiet*. When your ears are humming with the din of silence.

Quiet is a spiritual discipline in and of itself. A millennium and a half ago, the African theologian Saint Augustine said entering silence is “entering into joy.”¹⁶

I'm writing this particular chapter from Melbourne, Australia. I spent the last few days teaching on a jam-packed schedule, and it was great, really fun, but *loud—nonstop* noise, people, activity, stimuli. Naturally, I woke up this morning extremely tired. But compliments of jet lag, I also woke up early and had plenty of time to get a run in before church. I ran along the Yarra River in Fitzroy Gardens, which is reminiscent of another garden, Eden. There was nobody in the park. Just me, the river, a light breeze playing with the eucalyptus trees over my head...and God. About twenty minutes into my run, I felt my soul wake back up. God's presence wasn't an idea in my head but a felt experience. All around me, *in* me. And I wasn't even praying, really, much less reading my Bible or doing anything spiritual in intent. It was just something about the quiet. Quiet is a kind of balm for emotional healing. And more: an unlocked, open door to spiritual life. As Saint John Climacus, the sixth-century Syrian monk who spent most of his life praying on Mount Sinai, so beautifully said, “The friend of silence draws near to God.”¹⁷

Nobody ever said the same about noise. In fact, C. S. Lewis, in his masterwork of satire, *The Screwtape Letters*, has the demons railing against silence as a danger to their cause (the ruin of a Christian's soul). Senior demon Screwtape calls the devil's realm a "Kingdom of Noise" and claims, "We will make the whole universe a noise in the end."¹⁸

Could that be why we let so much noise run roughshod over our lives?

Or is it something else?

Where does this strange urge come from to reach for NPR the moment we get in our cars? Or always have music on in the background? Or flip on the TV while we're cooking dinner? Or listen to podcasts during our workouts?

As easy as it is to blame the devil, could it be that we're using external noise to drown out *internal* noise?

Here's what I mean by internal noise: the mental chatter that just never shuts up. The running commentary in our heads on *everything*. The replaying of a lousy conversation with a friend over and over again. Our lustful thoughts for the girl or guy down the street. Our fantasies. And not just sexual; our revenge fantasies—imagining saying *this* or doing *that* to our enemies of choice. Our worry—the chipping away at our joy and peace with the hammer of "what if?" The obsessing over hypothetical scenarios, role-playing the future, catastrophizing. Idealizing. Dreaming of the perfect life, which in turn poisons our actual lives.

The clutter in our minds is like a mental hoarder, landlocked in his or her bedroom in a self-constructed prison. Some of us feel trapped in the toxic, unhealthy patterns of our own minds.

External noise is easy to quiet. Just turn off your phone. Power down the stereo. Lie on your couch. Or walk to the park. Or book a night at

a cabin close by. Or maybe even a monastery. Easy.

But internal noise? That's a whole other animal. A wild beast in desperate need of taming. There's no off switch.

The kind of silence I'm talking about is when you silence *both*.

So, that's silence.

Then, solitude.

Again, solitude is pretty straightforward. It's when you're alone, with God and with your own soul.

For clarification, by *solitude* I don't mean isolation. The two are worlds apart.

Solitude is engagement; isolation is escape.

Solitude is safety; isolation is danger.

Solitude is how you open yourself up to God; isolation is painting a target on your back for the tempter.

Solitude is when you set aside time to feed and water and nourish your soul. To let it grow into health and maturity. Isolation is what you crave when you neglect the former.

And solitude—as somber as it sounds—is anything but loneliness. In his masterpiece *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster wrote, “Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment.”¹⁹ In solitude we're anything but alone. In fact, that's where many of us feel *most* in connection to God.

As we said earlier, one of the great problems of spirituality in our day and age that so few people feel safe enough to admit is how separated we feel from God. We rarely experience God's presence

throughout our day. “Love, joy, and peace” does not describe the felt experience of many Christians. Often we come to church hoping for a God hit—a fleeting moment of connection to God before we return to the secular wasteland.

Could the antidote for this spiritual malaise be as “easy” as silence and solitude?

If our theory is right and the problem is more *our* absence than *his*, more about our distraction than his disconnection,²⁰ then the solution is fairly simple: create an environment for attention and connection to God; and I know of no better place than the eremos.

Why this is of life-and-death importance

Through church history most of the master teachers of the way of Jesus have agreed: silence and solitude are the most important of all the spiritual disciplines.

Henri Nouwen said it bluntly, yet eloquently:

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life....

We do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him.²¹

Notice the lack of nuance. No exceptions to the rule. No self-deprecating story to soften the blow. He’s just honest: if you don’t set aside time to be alone with God, your relationship will wither on the vine.

Again, this makes sense. Your relationship to God is no different than any other relationship—it takes time alone together. What would happen to my marriage if Tammy and I were never alone together? Never had time to talk in private, share our deepest, darkest secrets, our dreams, our fears? Make love? Just *be*, shoulder to shoulder,

alone together? Obviously our marriage would suffer, if not die eventually. The same is true of your relationship to God. And even to your own soul.

There's a saying in parenting literature: "To a child, love is spelled T-I-M-E." There's truth in that. And not just for parents and children. If you love God the Father and want a living, thriving relationship with him where you experience his presence all through the day, then you need to carve out time to be alone with him. Full stop. And relational time is wildly inefficient. It comes in fits and bursts. You spend a day together, but it's one short conversation you remember, a passing comment that changes everything.

Nouwen once asked Mother Teresa for spiritual direction; he was dealing with a number of problems in his soul and sought her wisdom. Imagine one of the greatest followers of Jesus of the twentieth century asking a saint for a little advice on how to follow Jesus. Oh to be a fly on that wall.

You know what she said?

Well, when you spend one hour a day adoring your Lord and never do anything which you know is wrong...you will be fine!²²

So, so simple. Two very straightforward practices. Just take an hour a day to enjoy God. Oh, and don't do anything you know is wrong.

So before you write me off and go back to your noisy life—and, I might add, before you write off Mother Teresa, Henri Nouwen, and *Jesus*, who hopefully carry more weight than yours truly—just think about what's at stake.

When we *don't* practice this Jesus soul habit, we reap the consequences:

- We feel distant from God and end up living off somebody else's spirituality, via a podcast feed or book or one-page devotional we read before we rush out the door to work.
- We feel distant from *ourselves*. We lose sight of our identities and callings. We get sucked into the tyranny of the urgent, not the important.
- We feel an undercurrent of anxiety that rarely, if ever, goes away. This sense that we're *always* behind, always playing catch up, never done.
- Then we get exhausted. We wake up, and our first thoughts are, *Already? I can't wait to go to bed...* We lag through our days, our low-grade energy on loan from our stimulants of choice. Even when we catch up on our sleep, we feel a deeper kind of tired.
- Then we turn to our escapes of choice. We run out of energy to do what's actually life giving for our souls, say, prayer. And instead we turn to the cheap fix—another glass of wine, a new show streaming online, our social media feeds, porn.
- We become easy prey for the tempter. Just furthering our sense of distance from God and our souls.
- Then emotional unhealth sets in. We start living from the surface of our lives, not the core. We're reactionary. The smallest thing is a trigger—a throwaway line from the boss, a snide comment from a coworker, a suggestion from a spouse or roommate—it doesn't take much. We lose our tempers. Bark at our kids. Get defensive. Sulk. Feel angry or sad, often both.

These are the signs and symptoms of a life without silence and solitude. On the flip side, here's the alternative:

- We find our quiet places—a park down the street, a reading nook at home, a morning routine that begins before the little ones are awake—and we “come away.”²³
- We take our time. Maybe it’s not a full hour, but we’re there long enough to decompress from all the noise and traffic and stress and nonstop stimulation of modern society. Sometimes all we need is a few minutes. Other times, an hour isn’t enough. Other times, we gratefully take what time we can get.
- We slow down. Breathe. Come back to the *present*.
- We start to feel. At first we feel the whole gamut of human emotions—not just joy and gratitude and celebration and restfulness but also sadness and doubt and anger and anxiety. Usually I feel all the lousy emotions first. That’s just how it goes.
- We face the good, the bad, and the ugly in our own hearts. Our worry. Our depression. Our hope. Our desire for God; *our lack of desire for God*. Our sense of God’s presence; *our sense of his absence*. Our fantasies; our realities. All the lies we believe; the truth we come home to. Our motivations. Our addictions. The coping mechanisms we reach for just to make it through the week. All this is exposed and painfully so. But rather than leaking out on those we love most, it’s exposed in the safe place of the Father’s love and voice.
- In our ears we sense his voice cut through the cacophony of all the other voices, which slowly fade to the deafening roar of silence. In that silence we hear God speak his love over us. Speak our identities and callings into being. We get his perspective on life and our humble, good places in it.

And we come to a place of freedom. Our failures slowly lose their power over us. As do our successes. We get out from under the

tyranny of other people's opinions—their disapproval or approval of us. Free to just be *us*, the mixed bag we are. Nothing more than children with our Father. Adopted into love. Free to be in process yet to arrive, and that's okay. In silence and solitude our souls finally come home. That's what Jesus meant by "abide,"²⁴ the verb of *abode* or *home*. The place of rest. We come back to our places of soul rest. To what Thomas Kelly called "the unhurried [center of] peace and power."²⁵

As I see it, we have two options.

Option A: we neglect this practice, make excuses, get sucked into the rat race, and face emotional unhealth *at best* and "spiritual oblivion" at worst.

Or B: we recapture this ancient yet timely practice and experience the life of Jesus.

The whole world is talking about this right now. You can't go three feet in a bookstore or peruse TED.com without hearing all the buzz around *mindfulness*. And mindfulness is simply silence and solitude for a secular society. It's the same thing, just missing the best part—Jesus. The way the story is usually told, mindfulness is a derivative of Buddhism, updated by secular psychotherapeutic technique. But there's a solid case that it's more Jesus than Buddha. More Sermon on the Mount than *Siddhartha*. More Saint Teresa of Ávila than Thich Nhat Hanh. But of course, our post-Christian culture is a reaction *against* Christianity, so Buddhism is in (which works well since it's essentially a religion without God) and Jesus is out. Okay, sure. But followers of Jesus have been doing this for thousands of years; we just called it *prayer* or *meditation* or *contemplation*. We have two millennia of tradition and wisdom and best practices to draw from.

Again, Andrew Sullivan wrote this:

Modernity slowly weakened spirituality, by design and accident, in favor of commerce; it downplayed silence and mere being in favor of noise and constant action. The reason we live in a culture increasingly without faith is not because science has somehow disproved the unprovable, but because the white noise of secularism has removed the very stillness in which it might endure or be reborn....

If the churches came to understand that the greatest threat to faith today is not hedonism but distraction, perhaps they might begin to appeal anew to a frazzled digital generation.²⁶

My fellow denizens of a “frazzled digital generation,” let’s go with option B.

Of course this is easier said than done. Most people find this practice extremely hard to do, and not just extroverts. Many would say it’s the most difficult and most radical of *all* the practices. (Cue what I said earlier about all the emotions you’ve been running away from sneaking up on you...)

And yet: it’s so easy that you just take a little time each day to be alone in the quiet with yourself and God. Ideally, you add in some longer stints, say, on the Sabbath (next chapter, keep reading) or a periodic retreat. But it’s more resting than working, more about *not* doing than doing, subtraction not addition. It’s “easy,” and (as is true of all the practices) it makes the rest of life even *easier*.

I grew up in a church tradition where we started our days with a quiet time. At the very beginning of our days, we would set aside a chunk of time to do Jesusy stuff. Usually there was coffee involved. Normally we read the Bible. Asked God to do some things in our lives. Confessed our screwups, our needs, our aches. Sometimes we just sat there. Alone. In the quiet. With God. And our souls.

Why doesn't anybody talk about that anymore? Or, when they do, why do people mock it or shrug it off as some legalistic hangover from fundamentalism?

I have a secret. Don't judge me. I still practice a quiet time.

Every day.

I wouldn't miss it for the world. It's usually the *best* part of my day, hands down. And I'm not even a morning person.

I say we bring back the quiet time. Rock it like it's 1999.

Here's to tomorrow morning, six o'clock. Coffee. The chair by the window, the window by the tree. Time to breathe. A psalm and story from the Gospels. Hearing the Father's voice. Pouring out my own. Or just sitting, resting. Maybe I'll hear a word from God that will alter my destiny; maybe I'll just process my anger over something that's bothering me. Maybe I'll feel my mind settle like untouched water; maybe my mind will ricochet from thought to thought, and never come to rest. If so, that's fine. I'll be back, same time tomorrow. Starting my day in the quiet place.

You?