

Longing for Solitude



Eight hundred years ago, the poet, Rumi wrote: What I want is to leap out of this personality and then sit apart from that leaping. I've lived too long where I can be reached.

Isn't that true for all of us, especially today! Our lives are often like over-packed suitcases. It seems like we are always busy, always over-pressured, always one phone call, one text message, one email, one visit, and one task behind. We are forever anxious about what we have still left undone, about whom we have disappointed, about unmet expectations.

Moreover, inside of all of that, we can never be reached. We have no quiet island to escape to, no haven of solitude. We can always be reached. Half the world has our contact numbers and we feel pressure to be available all the time. So we often feel as if we are on a treadmill from which we would want to step off. And within all that busyness, pressure, noise, and tiredness we long for solitude, long for some quiet, peaceful island where all the pressure and noise will stop and we can sit in simple rest.

That's a healthy yearning. It's our soul speaking. Like our bodies, our souls too keep trying to tell us what they need. They need solitude. But solitude isn't easy to find. Why?

Solitude is an elusive thing that needs to find us rather than us finding it. We tend to picture solitude in a naïve way as something that we can "soak ourselves in" as we would soak ourselves in a warm bath.

We tend to picture solitude this way: We are busy, pressured, and tired. We finally have a chance to slip away for a weekend. We rent a cabin, complete with a fireplace, in a secluded woods. We pack some food, some wine, and some soft music and we resist packing any phones, iPads, or laptops. This is to be a quiet weekend, a time to drink wine by the fireplace and listen to the birds sing, a time of solitude.

But solitude cannot be so easily programmed. We can set up all the optimum conditions for it, but that is no guarantee we will find it. It has to find us, or, more accurately, a certain something inside of us has to be awake to its presence. Let me share a personal experience:

Several years ago, when I was still teaching theology at a college, I made arrangements to spend two months in summer living at a Trappist monastery. I was seeking solitude, seeking to slow down my life. I had just finished a very-pressured semester, teaching, doing formation work, giving talks and workshops, and trying to do some writing. I had a near-delicious fantasy of what was to meet me at the monastery. I would have two wonderful months of solitude: I would light the fireplace in the guesthouse and sit quietly by it. I would take a quiet walk in the woods behind the monastery. I would sit on an outdoor rocking chair by a little lake on the property and smoke my pipe. I would enjoy wholesome food, eating in silence as I listened to a monk reading aloud from a spiritual book, and, best of all, I would join the monks for their prayers - singing the office in choir, celebrating the Eucharist, and sitting in quiet meditation with them in their stillness chapel.

I arrived at the monastery at mid-afternoon, hastily unpacked, and set about immediately to do these things. By late evening I had mowed them all down, like a lawn that had been waiting to be cut: I had lit the fire and sat by it. I had taken a walk in the woods, smoked my pipe on the rocking chair by lake, joined the monks in choir for vespers, sat in meditation with them afterwards for a half an hour, ate a wholesome supper in silence, and then joined them again for sung compline. By bedtime the first evening I had already done all the things I had fantasized would bring me solitude and I went to bed restless, anxious about how I would survive the next two months without television, newspapers, phone calls, socializing with friends, and my regular work to distract me. I had done all the right solitude activities and had not found solitude, but had found restlessness instead. It took several weeks before my body and mind slowed down enough for me to find a basic restfulness, before I could even begin to nibble at the edges of solitude.

Solitude is not something we turn on like a water faucet. It needs a body and mind slowed down enough to be attentive to the present moment. We are in solitude when, as Merton says, we fully taste the water we are drinking, feel the warmth of our blankets, and are restful enough to be content inside our own skin. We don't often accomplish this, despite sincere effort, but we need to keep making new beginnings.

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