



Beyond Words: An Invitation to Solitude and Silence

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If the truth be told, it was desperation that first drew me into solitude and silence. I wish I could say it was for loftier reasons—pure desire for God or some such thing. But in the beginning it was desperation, plain and simple. There were things that needed fixing in my life, longings that were painfully unmet; I had tried everything I knew to fix what was broken and to fill what was lacking, but to no avail.

A grown-up pastor's kid in my early thirties, I was married with three young children of my own, on staff at a church that I loved, and just beginning to write and engage in a bit of public speaking. Seminary study rounded out a life that was full and challenging. But inside my soul was another level of truth that needed to be told, and desperation was probably the only force compelling enough to make me willing to listen.

In the midst of the outward busyness of my life was an inner chaos that was far more disconcerting than anything going on externally. Even though I had been a Christian for many years, I was struggling with some of the basics of the spiritual life. For one thing, I could not seem to love my husband and children consistently; an element of selfishness and self-centeredness that was frightening to acknowledge was being exposed in the crucible of marriage and parenting. At best, I was impatient with the demands of life in the company of others; at worst, I was angry that people wouldn't

just leave me alone to pursue my own dreams and ambitions.

At first I trivialized my struggle by categorizing it as something like an early midlife crisis, but the deeper truth was this: even though I had been a Christian for many years, I did not know how to love—really. Particularly when love was demanding or inconvenient or interfered with my own

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desires, I did not know how to die to myself in even the smallest of ways. True transformation seemed just beyond my reach.

As it turned out, my limited capacity to love was just the tip of an iceberg. There were questions of the deepest kind right under the surface of my busy life, questions that I could no longer quiet. There were ques-

tions about identity and calling . . . questions about the possibility of true transformation in the stuck places that I was just beginning to acknowledge . . . questions about what was driving the frenetic pace of my life. In the midst of much outward productivity, the interior spaces of my life echoed with the words, *There has to be more to the spiritual life than this.* Sometimes these words were quiet and wistful, full of a profound sadness. At other times they were feisty, fighting words full of a lack of acceptance: *This can't be all there is! And if it is, I'm not sure I want it!* Sometimes there were no words at all—just longings that were beyond words.

What does one do with such unwieldy aspects of the human experience? How does one capture in words the human heart's desperate longing for God in the midst of so much religious activity? What do you do when all the words and methods for seeking God—Bible studies, prayer journals, more and better preaching, self-help books, small group gatherings—come up so empty? I needed help of another kind.

The Journey Begins

Help came through a spiritual director, someone who was more experienced in the ways of the soul than I was and practiced at recognizing God's invitations in the life of another. I first sought her out for therapy because she was a psychologist, and I assumed that my "problems" were psychological in nature. I was hopeful that I could be "fixed" on that level. Psychological insight and process were indeed valuable

to a point, but eventually she observed that what I needed was spiritual direction. She asked if I would be willing for us to shift the focus of our times together to exploring my questions in the context of my relationship with God.

This was fine with me, but I was still expecting the answers to come primarily through verbal exchange. I was hoping for advice and a quick fix—in three easy steps if possible! I assumed that now, rather than doing psychological talking, we would do spiritual talking. And we did do some talking, but eventually this wise woman said to me, “Ruth, you are like a jar of river water all shaken up. What you need is to sit still long enough so the sediment can settle and the water can become clear.”

At that point I couldn’t even imagine what it would be like to be still long enough for anything to settle! I couldn’t imagine not having an agenda or a prayer list or a Bible study plan. Even methods that don’t work are better than no method at all!

I couldn’t imagine not using words—even if they were just formed in my head but never spoken. After all, I am a word person. My whole life revolves around putting things into words. If something couldn’t be put

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into words or processed with words or solved with words, what good could it be?

I couldn’t imagine letting go of my own efforts to fix and solve and make progress in my spiritual life. I was so used to accomplishing things through my own hard work and human striving that such seemingly nonproductive “activity” as sitting alone in silence was completely outside my normal categories.

A Hard Invitation to Accept

Richard Rohr has said, “A good journey begins with knowing where you are and being willing to go somewhere else.”¹ This was certainly true for me. Even though my mind had a hard time grasping what this settling would actually be like, the image of the jar of river water captured what was true about me. I was the jar of river water all shaken up, and the sediment that swirled inside the jar was the busyness, the emotions, the thoughts, and the inner wrestlings that I had not been able to control by any other means I had tried.

The image of the jar of river water that had been sitting still long enough for the swirling sediment to settle, for the waters of my soul to become clear, for me to see more clearly . . . well, that image called to me with the hope of peace, clarity, and a deeper level of certainty in God than I had yet known. It was an invitation to *be still and know* beyond my addiction to noise, words, people, and performance-oriented activity. It captured my desire for something beyond the head knowledge that was no longer sustaining my soul.

Even so, this was not an easy invitation to accept. Fortunately, my spiritual advisor had let me talk just long enough to realize that the answers were not presenting themselves through more talking. I had at least to open myself to the possibility that there might be something for me in the silence. But what sounded like a great idea when I was sitting in my spiritual director’s office was very difficult for this type-A personality who had been moving so fast for so long. In addition, the timing was really, really bad. I had a seven-year-old, a five-year-old, and a newborn baby, and I couldn’t believe God couldn’t have waited for a better moment to initiate such changes.

But even so, we pressed on and set a simple goal of ten minutes in silence a day. For the first year it seemed as if all I did was struggle to get to the ten-minute mark while noticing the inner chaos, the resistance, and the distractions that characterized my inner life.

However, with the support of one who seemed so sure this was what I needed, I stuck with it, and the most amazing thing began to happen. Although I was still struggling through the actual times of silence, I noticed that I was starting to calm down. There was a quiet center forming in me—a place of stillness within which I could see things more clearly, know God’s love on a deep, experiential level, and sense his moving in my life. When I acted upon the clarity I was gaining in these moments of silence, I found that the path God was leading me on—whether it was spiritually or relationally or vocationally—was somehow truer and more deeply satisfying than anything I had experienced up until that time.

A Step Further

Several years later, as part of a seminary class on spiritual formation, I was invited to enter into a whole day of solitude and silence. This was a first for me, but at the appointed time we gathered at a nearby retreat center to spend the day on retreat under the guidance of our beloved professor.

The morning was wonderful but, in some ways, very similar to what I had already been experiencing; however, when lunchtime came, we were told we would eat lunch in silence so as not to interrupt our attention to God by being pulled into social interaction. Our host guided us to a beautiful dining room with windows on three sides overlooking the grounds of the retreat center and the woods beyond. A hot lunch had been prepared, and the chairs were set up facing the windows so each person could look to the outside while eating. As we entered the dining room in silence, it was as if something broke open inside me. I was caught off guard by tears that started sneaking down my face, and I stood there snuffling with no Kleenex in sight, wondering what in the world was happening to me!

The first feeling I could even identify was sheer relief at knowing I wouldn't have to talk to anyone or do anything or serve anyone during this lunch. For once, my place with God in solitude was being honored, not managed or directed or interpreted. For once, I wasn't going to have to force myself into someone else's prefabricated plan for my spiritual enrichment! I was so glad we had been instructed not to talk because then no

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one could intrude by asking me what was wrong and trying to "help." I needed to be alone with what was happening inside.

Because I had space to feel what I was feeling, I was able to begin acknowledging truth I had not known how to name before. All of a sudden I was awake and alert to a level of exhaustion and overstimulation that I had come to associate with normal Christian living. As I stayed with these emotions in God's presence, I became aware of the weight of Christian expectations I had been carrying around without knowing it. There were the expectations around being a godly spouse. There was the weight of expectation around being a good parent and trying to balance parenthood with the demands of my professional life. There was the seriousness with which my husband and I took our responsibilities as church members, and all the busyness that went along with being a church-going family. There was the book I had just finished that had drained me of every last meaningful word I could think of. There were all my attempts to be a good neighbor, a good Christian, a good *everything!*

These had worn me down so completely that here I was,

overwhelmed with emotion at the simplest gift—someone fixing me a meal and allowing me the freedom to sit in silence with God while I ate it. I had nothing to do, nothing to say, no social interaction to try to figure out. How, I wondered, had my life in Christ been reduced to so much busyness, so many words, and such weighty expectations? How had I gone this far in the spiritual life without anyone ever telling me it was okay to stop talking and stop doing and just *be* in God's presence? What was I to do with the pent-up longing and frustration that were now expressing themselves in the tears streaming down my face?

It was a good thing we were not allowed to talk to each other because it would have been easy to run away into conversation or look someplace outside myself for answers. Instead, I had to snuffle my way through lunch and stay present with God, who was my meal-time companion. I had to stay with my longings in his presence and be honest about the ways in which my life *as I was living it* was not congruent with my heart's deepest desires. This was a stunning realization; after all, I had made most of my own choices in life. How I had I ended up here?

Lord, have mercy. What was one to do with such depth of longing?

A Place for the Soul to Come Out

Most of us are not very good at sitting with longing and desire—our own or someone else’s. It feels tender. It feels vulnerable. It feels out of control. It is a place where one human being cannot fix or fill another, nor can we fix or fill ourselves. It is a place where only God will do.

The longing for solitude is the longing for God. It is the longing to experience union with God unmediated by the normal ways we typically try to relate to God. This is a direct experience of God with nothing in between: an encounter that is not mediated by words, by theological constructs, by religious activity, or by my own or others’ manipulations of my relationship with God. It is place within me that is private and reserved for the intimacies that God and I share. What happens between the two of us in that place is not meant for public consumption. It is a place where I can give myself with abandon to the lover of my soul, knowing I am completely safe from anyone else’s curious gaze or judgmental glance. Here I *experience* intimacy with God rather than just talking about it.

Silence deepens our experience of solitude because in silence we choose to unplug, not only from the constant stimulation of life in the company of others, but also from our own addiction to noise, words, and activity. This kind of abstinence creates space for listening to the knowings that do not have

words and not feeling any pressure at all to put the depths of the human soul into words.

The longing for solitude is also the longing to find ourselves;

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it is the longing to be in touch with what is most real within us, that which is more solid and enduring than what defines us externally. This is the soul of

us, the place at the very center of our being that is known by God, grounded in God, and one with God. But it’s tricky to get the soul to come out. As Parker Palmer so eloquently describes,

The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, self-sufficient. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently by the base of the tree, and fade into our surroundings, the wild animal we seek might put in an appearance.²

We are not very safe for ourselves because our internal experience is one of such critique and judgment, and the tender soul does not want to risk it. And unfortunately, a lot of our religious activity is very noisy as well: now we’re just an organized group of people crashing through the woods together, making so much noise that there’s not a soul in sight.

There are very few places where the soul is truly safe—where the knowing, the questions, and the longings of the soul are welcomed, received, and listened to rather than evaluated, judged, or even beaten out of us. Solitude can be that safe place. In the experience I described earlier, my soul “came out” and told me things it was impossible for me to hear while I was crashing through the woods of my life making so much noise. I imagine my soul crouching under a leafy bush,

shaking its head, saying, “I just cannot talk to her when she’s like this!” It took half a day in solitude, capped off by a silent lunch, for me to get anywhere nearly quiet enough on the inside to know what was really going on. It took more time in solitude to invite God into that place to help me, rather than allowing others to rush in or allowing myself to rush out!

Radical Disciplines

The journey I describe here began over fifteen years ago. At that time, no one in the evangelical Protestant circles of which I was a part even used the terms *solitude*, *silence*, and *spiritual direction*. But I was desperate, and desperation is a really good thing in the spiritual life. Without desperation and the deepest kind of desire, I would not have been willing to enter such unfamiliar territory—the silent places of the soul where one is not sure what one will find, the risky quest for God beyond wordy prayers and content-laden sermons and Bible studies. Without the desire for something more, I probably would have just kept on doing what I was doing, beating my head against the same wall.

In the years since then, I have learned that the practices of solitude and silence are not merely self-indulgent exercises for those times when an overcrowded soul needs a little time to itself. Rather, they are concrete ways of opening to the presence of God beyond human effort and beyond the human constructs that cannot fully contain Divine Reality.

Solitude and silence are radical disciplines because they

Getting Started

1. **Identify a sacred space.** Explore all the possibilities for a time and a physical space in which you can be alone on a regular basis. Preferably you can identify a spot in your home, outdoors, or a comfortable place in your office that helps you to settle into a quiet and receptive state of being. Consider whether there are any spiritual symbols or artifacts that you would like to bring into this space to help you be present to the spiritual reality of God’s presence with you. Feel free to experiment with what works and what doesn’t until you find the time and place that work for you. Once you have identified them, you may want to communicate with family members or roommates they can honor the time by not interrupting you and honor the space by letting it remain set apart for your times alone with God.
2. **Begin with a modest goal**, especially if silence is a new practice for you. Ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes of time spent in actual silence is realistic, depending on your personality, pace of life, reliance on words and activity, etc. You can always increase your time as your capacity for silence increases. The amount of time is not nearly as important as the regularity of the practice.
3. **Settle into a comfortable yet alert position in your body.** Settle into a position in your body in which you are not distracted by physical discomfort, but also one that will not lend itself to falling asleep! One excellent posture for beginning is to sit in a comfortable straight-backed chair with back and shoulders straight but also relaxed and open, both feet flat on the floor, hands in a comfortable position in your lap. Over time, you may choose other prayer postures (see next point), but this is a good place to start.
4. **Ask God to give you a simple prayer that expresses your openness and desire for God.** This prayer is nothing more than a word or a phrase that “gathers up” your desire for God and helps you to stay present with it. You can enter into the silence by praying this prayer several times as a way of beginning and also as a way of dealing with distractions. Distractions are inevitable, so when they come, simply let them go by like clouds floating across the sky. Help yourself return to your prayerful intent by repeating the prayer you have chosen. You can use a different prayer phrase every day, or you can use the same one for as long as it captures what is most true about your heart’s desire for God. Be aware of what body posture helps to express your spiritual desire, and use this along with your prayer word or phrase.
5. **Close your time in silence with a prayer of gratitude for God’s presence with you, or pray the Lord’s Prayer.** Decide ahead of time whether you want to use a timer to let you know the time is up or just want to glance at the clock every so often.
6. **Resist the urge to judge yourself or your experiences in silence.** The purpose of time spent in silence is just to be with God in whatever state you are and to let him be in control. Trust that whatever your time in silence was like, it was exactly as it should be.

challenge us on every level of our being. They challenge us culturally because there is little in Western culture that supports us in entering into what feels like unproductive time for being (beyond human effort) and listening (beyond human thought). They challenge our relationships because they call us away from those relationships *for a time* so that we can give our undivided attention to God. They challenge the psyche because in the silence we become aware of those inner dynamics that we seek to avoid by keeping ourselves so noisy and busy. They draw us into spiritual battle because in silence there is the potential for each of us to “know that I am God” with such certainty that the competing powers of evil and sin and the ego-self can no longer hold us in their grip. *All the forces of evil band together to prevent us from knowing God in this way because it brings to an end the dominion of those powers in our lives.*

Only desire and/or desperation will carry us over the threshold into this brave new world.

We may experience some resistance early on, but when the desire is deep enough to overcome our resistance, we are on our way.

What I Know for Sure

These days, I seem to know less and less about how the spiritual life unfolds—really. So much of what is real happens in ways that are a mystery to me. But if you were to ask me what I know for sure, I would tell you that *the times when my loneliness and longing for union are most deeply satisfied are times*

I am in solitude. In the world of people and things, I experience moments that have a sense of completeness to them—moments of union with God and others—but oftentimes these moments are fleeting. No matter how beautiful such moments are, they are often fraught with a painful awareness of human separateness even from those we love the most, and I am left trying to manage my unruly tendencies to cling and grasp, control and manipulate, fix and fill.

But in solitude there is rest from all that. It is as if I come in touch with a deeper current of truth that runs underneath everything else: the truth of the oneness and unity of all things. In solitude, I know that even those things that seem irreconcilable are somehow reconciled through the person and work of Christ in the timelessness that is God. When I am in solitude, the Presence of God is so real and so full that there is nothing else I want. The people I love are with me in God’s presence beyond the surface choppi-ness that seems to separate us, and I am able to experience our ultimate togetherness in God. I am able to touch Love.

Then, when I do re-engage the world and live *from that place of union with God*, there is indeed a peace that passes understanding. The longing is still there, but the longing is not ultimate. It is God who is ultimate, and all of us are in God. Maybe nothing in my external world has changed, but *I* have changed, and that is what people around me need more than anything.

Endnotes

¹Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999, 45.

²Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004, 59.

About the Author



Ruth Haley Barton is the author of *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God’s Transforming Presence* and *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives*

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