

What Happens in Solitude?

Jan Johnson

Honestly, practicing a spiritual discipline was the last thing on my mind. I needed to vary my workout routine, so I began an arm-swinging aerobic walk in our housing tract. But my then-teenage daughter was embarrassed to have Mum turning the corner in faded pink shorts, so I retreated to a lonely canyon road, cluttered with garbage and swathed in mud.

Because I concentrate hard all day as a writer, I move out of my head and just “be” when I exercise. Out on the canyon road dodging gravel trucks, vulnerable to the heat and miles away from complex thoughts, I found myself alone with God. God showed up in everything around me. The tumbleweeds nested at the edge of the road stood for the stumbling blocks of my life—annoyances with those I loved, fear of doing difficult things, yearnings for a problem-free life. So I gathered up these bulky briars and hurled them off the cliff-like side of the road.

The mountains around me became symbols of God’s presence. I named the peaks for what I was hearing from God. The inviting manger-like ravine became “rest.” The sharply pointed peak became “Don’t forget to love” when we moved through a church split. As I panted, chugged water, and headed into the wind, those phrases became ways to live life. About that time, I’d begun attending a monthly retreat day at a retreat center. But no matter how engaging the speaker was, I found myself skipping the sessions to scramble down a steep creek bank to sit on a huge rock in the middle of the water. There I remained for the day. At that time, I had such lofty opinions of the spiritual discipline of solitude that I didn’t think these walks and rocksitting moments were heroic enough to count as solitude. But they did.

Solitude and its accompanying discipline, silence, are “absolutely central to spiritual growth,” writes Dallas Willard.¹ No one can expect to have a life in which God lives and moves and has his being, I believe, unless he or she regularly experiences solitude. The Gospel writers took the trouble to record Jesus taking huge chunks of time away from ministry and people (Matt. 4:1–11; 14:13, 23; 17:1–9; 26:36–46 Mark 6:31; Luke 5:16; 6:12). Why? I don’t believe Jesus did this to be a good example or because he’d picked up messages on his machine that God expected it. I believe Jesus practiced solitude because he loved being alone with God—“I and the Father are one” (John 10:30, NIV). Yet the word solitude or even the idea doesn’t appear in the classics as often as you would think. Instead, it is assumed. Many of the practices mentioned in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *Introduction to a Holy Devout Life* or *The Imitation of Christ* presuppose that a person is already practiced in solitude, which will provide a setting for trying out the recommended practices.

But, of course, solitude is not just about warm, fuzzy moments soaking your feet in a creek. You let go of all the work and people related things that make you feel important—appointments, telephone calls, speaking engagements. Nobody asks for your opinion in solitude. Maybe no one is even missing you! Where are you without those things that support your ego? When I first began taking off work for regular retreat days, I had to work hard not to think, But I could be working, achieving, doing! What good is this?

Good for revelation, it turns out. Henri Nouwen wrote (in describing St. Anthony) that solitude experiences “show that we must be made aware of the call to let our false, compulsive self be transformed into the new self of Jesus Christ. It also shows that solitude is the furnace in which this transformation takes place.”²

Solitude cracks the facade of our false self because in it we discover what we’ve used to feel productive and get through the day. For those of us who have used productivity for self-worth, this is radical. Our false self, hooked on productivity, has to say yes to whatever is asked, so we can feel good or look good. We have to make sure we do the best job that’s ever been done (to hear someone say, “That time Jan was in charge was the best event ever!”) It’s to hike down a “career path” faster and further than anyone else. It’s to hurry life away, doing many things at once. It’s to experience that adrenaline high when we can check off everything on our daily “to do” list.

But in solitude, we are useless. Nor is God “useful” to us. Bernard of Clairvaux noted how we falsely love God “for His usefulness; not for Himself.” ³ When I began designing my own personal retreat days, I often felt tempted to turn those days into a project, to manufacture revelations or tingly experiences. I had to counteract that by making no schedule for the day. Several days before, I

tossed books or articles or prayer ideas into a folder to take with me, but often I never touched them during the retreat day. Instead, it became a God-led day of hanging out with God and not feeling guilty for doing “nothing.” So now on energetic retreat days, I may read through a Gospel or meditate on several passages for an extended time. On others, I may curl up with a favorite book or get absorbed making a chart of all Jesus’ healings and comparing details about how Jesus interacted with the people he healed, and then praying about what that interaction looks like in me. Or I might spend the whole day gardening and pondering. I have no rules about what I do, just that I observe silence and solitude. I try to listen to what God leads me to do that day.

And even now I find myself waiting each minute for the solitude to feel rewarding, but it doesn’t seem to. Then afterward, I realize I loved it. I am much like Jacob after he awakened from his angel-climbing ladder dream: “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it” (Gen. 28:16, NIV). Enemies Show Up Perhaps the scariest element of solitude is the way the false self comes forward. “Time in solitude may at first seem little more than a time in which we are bombarded by thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from hidden areas of our mind,” says Nouwen.⁴ Especially on my canyon road walking days, I was plagued with what I call the committee that lives in my head. These voices are the unregenerated parts of the soul, our habits of thinking that arise from the parts of us yet to be healed.

My committee members include the following—perhaps you’ll recognize them:

The Looking Good Kid wants to be loved and valued. She works hard to be admired, out of fear of not being good enough. She plots to make sure I will never be rejected again. If I think I hear God saying, “Be perfect! Get it right! Don’t make any mistakes—then I’ll be proud of you!” this is not God, but the Looking Good Kid.

The Rescuer also wants to be loved and valued, so she thinks of ways to help others so they have to love me. As a result, busyness is next to godliness. If I think I hear God say, “Help people till it exhausts you. Make people happy,” that is not God but my Rescuer sabotaging my solitude.

The Attitude Police Officer wants everything done right. She evaluates, criticizes, and ruins my attempts to focus on God. She sabotages my thoughts so that I hear God correcting me—or someone else.

The Grouch feels sorry for me and thinks others should pay attention to me. She blocks the voice of God by saying, “You blew it again! Get with it! Nothing is ever going to work for you.”⁵

On my canyon road walks, these last two members often took over and rehearsed long, hostile speeches to those with whom I disagreed, plotting every point, entrenching myself in reasons I was right. Then would follow equally virulent diatribes against deep despair and myself over how my anger had taken over.

It took several years to replace these thoughts with prayer for those who irritated me. Yet that was what I needed to do, and it trained my soul to love when I wanted to criticize. Nouwen says the Desert Fathers insisted that solitude gives birth to compassion “because it makes us die to our neighbor.... To die to our neighbors means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus to become free to be compassionate. Compassion can never coexist with judgment because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other.”⁶ This is the quagmire in which the false self thrives.

Dismissing the voices of the committee members is best done gently. To be upset about my failings does not help. That only affirms that my spirituality is about me, not about God. I gently usher the members to the door of my mind without giving the enemy of my soul more airplay. Nouwen compared this process in solitude as the “experience of a man who, after years of living with open doors, suddenly decides to shut them. The visitors who used to come and enter his home start pounding on his doors, wondering why they are not allowed to enter as they receive less and less attention, they slowly withdraw.” Only when they realize that they are not welcome do they gradually stop coming.⁷ Time alone retrains your thought patterns and even your body.

Hearing God

The first step in hearing God is knowing who God is not—the false self, the voices of the “committee,” or habitual poisonous thinking patterns.⁸ In solitude, we become acquainted with them and practiced in dismissing them. This trains us further in “letting go of all that resists” God.⁹ As you let go of the committee members, you make room for God. “It requires a lot of inner solitude and silence to become aware of these divine movements. God does not shout, scream or push,” warned Henri Nouwen.¹⁰ Solitude helps you cultivate a listening heart.

Experiencing the companionship of God

People often confuse solitude with loneliness, but they are different. Solitude is the glory of being alone, but loneliness is the pain of being alone. Solitude is rich and full, while loneliness is empty and hollow. How do you make the switch? Elisabeth Elliot wrote, “Turn your loneliness into solitude and your solitude into prayer.”¹¹ In solitude you learn to “nourish in your heart the lively longing for God.”¹² As you practice longer times of solitude, that daily “quiet time” becomes easier to squeeze in. You love soaking in what God says, so you must have it every day. (I find that working out or riding my bike afterward creates seven more space to hear God daily.) Even when attending a conference or class that’s full of stimulating people, you see that you need to separate yourself for a while. You become attentive to the crazy voices in your head (“Everyone really likes me!” “I’m further down the spiritual road than some of these folks.”) and take time to repent—“think about your thinking.” You make the shift to praying for people around you rather than glorying in what others think of you.

Letting go of busyness

As you free yourself from the burden of being important, you also let go of hurry and busyness. Nothing makes a claim on you and forces you to run over people. You live more purposefully from a quiet center in life and are not distracted so easily. You enjoy leaving margins in life. It was a milestone in my life when I no longer found being called a “busy writer” a compliment.

When your body slows down on a regular basis, you notice the richness in nature. You love being “skin to skin with the kingdom of God,” as I’ve heard Dallas Willard say.

Teaches us how to be with others

Contrary to what some might think, solitude is not a me myself and I discipline, but one that changes the way you interact with people. Thomas Merton is famous for saying that “solitude is not turning one’s back on the world; it is turning our face toward God.”¹³ As we do this, God turns our face toward others because we see them differently. We come away from solitude more fit to be with people: “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19, NIV). We talk less, talk more slowly, and stop interrupting people because we take our silence with us. Because we slow down, we catch ourselves before we make those automatic slighting comments we regret later.

Being alone is actually good training for being with others. While guiding an underground seminary of twenty-five vicars learning to live in community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community.”¹⁴ Being alone creates a more selfless posture when you are with people. One of these improvements is that you have silenced yourself so you can better listen intently to others. In your solitude you experience a sense of powerlessness that leads you to drop your managing of people. Without realizing it, we use comments and looks to project an image of who we’d like to be, trying to give a good impression, maneuvering through mined conversations, plotting the best response, looking for affirmation, or refusing affirmation through attempted humility. After times of not talking, you don’t interrupt people or bombard them with, “Right, right, right” as they attempt to reveal their thoughts. In solitude you learn to offer a quiet, simple presence to God (sitting on the rock in the creek), and so you do the same with people. As Bonhoeffer says, “Chatter does not create fellowship.”¹⁵

Solitude could become a problem if you use it to isolate yourself. Bonhoeffer also said, “Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.”¹⁶ You develop a rhythm in your life of both. Solitude can also degenerate into a time of feeling sorry for yourself or beating yourself up. That’s why it’s often accompanied by other disciplines that keep us focused on the truth of God. You often will also pray or meditate on Scripture. For example, if you’ve spent time in solitude asking God to show you someone’s heart, you’re more likely to listen carefully to that person, wanting to hear that person’s heart.

Solitude is a place of having one’s false self revealed and replacing it with interaction with God. As that false self withers, solitude becomes a place of “purification and transformation.”¹⁷ In these rich interludes, companionship with God grows, and “it is from this transformed or converted self that real ministry flows.”¹⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998, p.357.

² Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Way of the Heart*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco. 1981, p. 20.

- 3 Bernard of Clairvaux. Great Devotional Classics: Revelations of Divine Love, Douglas V. Steere, ed. Nashville: The Upper Room, 1961, p. 15.
- 4 Nouwen, Henri. Making All Things New. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999, p. 72.
- 5 Johnson, Jan. When the Soul Listens. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999, pp. 127-128.
- 6 Nouwen, Henri J. M. The Way of the Heart. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, pp. 34, 35, italics mine.
- 7 Nouwen, Henri. Making All Things New. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1981, p. 72-73.
- 8 The second step is to focus on the kinds of things God is likely to say, which is a discipline of engaging Scripture in some way. But that's a different article.
- 9 Hall, Thelma. Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina. New York: Paulist Press. p. 33.
- 10 Nouwen, Henri. "Deeper Into Love." Weavings (September/October 1995) p.25.
- 11 Elliot, Elisabeth. "Turning Solitude Into Prayer" Cross Point (Summer 1997): 7.
- 12 Anonymous. The Cloud of Unknowing. W. Johnston, trans. New York: Doubleday, 1973, p. 47.
- 13 Merton, Thomas. New Seeds of Contemplation. New York: New Directions, 1962, p. 52-63 and Nouwen, Henri. Reaching Out: The Movements of the Spiritual Life. New York: Doubleday, 1975, p. 37-62, as developed and adapted by David Rensberger in "The Holiness of Winter," Weavings, (November/December 1996): p. 40.
- 14 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Life Together. New York: Harper & Row, 1954, p. 77.
- 15 Ibid. p. 78.
- 16 Ibid. p. 78.
- 17 Nouwen, Henri J. M. The Way of the Heart. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco. p. 31.
- 18 Ibid. p.20.

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