

IN PREPARATION FOR A SILENT RETREAT



**What do you want to do with your one wild, and precious life?
(Mary Oliver)**

Why silence and solitude? Why do I need this?

Some say one of the central weaknesses of western culture is our superficiality. We seem to be so easily satisfied with surface living – we skim along the top of each day, arriving at our beds at night exhausted from the busyness, unaware that our thin treatment of truth during the day has its own way of exhausting us.

It is worth going on a silent retreat for many reasons. Here are some suggestions.

*When we make room for silence we make room for ourselves ... Silence invites the unknown, the untamed, the wild, the shy, the unfathomable – that which rarely has a chance to surface with us.
(Gunilla Norris, Sharing Silence)*

God is infinitely patient. He will not push himself into our lives. He knows the greatest thing he has given us is our freedom. If we want habitually, even exclusively, to operate from the level of our own reason, he will respectfully keep silent. We can fill ourselves with our own thoughts, ideas, images and feelings. He will not interfere. But if we invite him with attention, opening the inner space with

silence, he will speak to our souls [not only] in words or concepts, but in the mysterious way that love expresses itself – by presence. (M Basil Pennington)

The solitude that really counts is the solitude of heart; it is an inner quality or attitude that does not depend on physical isolation... It seems more important than ever to stress that solitude is one of the human capacities that can exist, be maintained and developed in the centre of a big city, in the middle of a large crowd and in the context of a very active and productive life. (Henri Nouwen)

**A good journey begins with knowing where we are and being willing to go somewhere else.
(Richard Rohr)**

Wordless prayer ... is humble, simple, lowly prayer in which we experience our total dependence on God and our awareness that we are in God. Wordless prayer is not an effort to "get anywhere," for we are already there (in God's presence). It is just that we are not sufficiently conscious of our being there. (William Shannon, Silence on Fire).

Is God inviting you to go on a silent retreat? Begin with something small – a day or a weekend. Then you can build up your time as and when you notice the need.



We need to fill our cup on a regular basis for sustenance

Below are further thoughts on silence and solitude.

It costs us dearly to avoid spending time living on a deeper, more self-aware and God-aware level. Indeed, each experience we have, whether it is having coffee with a friend, going to a meeting, giving a presentation, or travelling overseas has the capacity to change us and mould us. However that can only happen if we choose to reflect on at least some of these

experiences. Without reflection, these things simply remain that – an experience. Today, with the increased wealth in the western world, and the technology available, means this generation is so very rich in such a wide variety of experiences – we are experience rich! But oh, so poor, in depth! How can we change this situation in our own lives, given that we *are* living in a busy context?

Reflection is most fruitfully done in silence and solitude. This may mean snatches of time in the car as you leave an interaction or last thing at night as you sit in quietness and review the day with God. Sometimes we need to structure our lives so that we can make sure we give ourselves these times with God – large fat chunks of time, over days or weeks, or small but never-the-less crunchy times. These are the times that feed us, and facilitate our inner growth towards depth.

This chapter looks at the gifts that silence and solitude bring to us – and this is not an emptiness of silence and solitude, but a God-saturated silence and solitude. That is what is awaiting us, if only we will be hungry for it. The second half of the chapter will include some suggested exercises toward helping develop silence and solitude as a personal practice.

Following the example of Jesus.

The Scriptures show clearly that Jesus practiced both silence and solitude from time to time. These four references may be useful to ponder upon:

Matthew 4:1, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The Holy Spirit led Jesus into this lengthy period of fasting and solitude. In Luke's account of this experience, it's interesting to observe that he says Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:1) when he was led into this, but that afterward he returned to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14).

Matthew 14:23, "And after he had sent the multitudes away, he went up to the mountain by himself to pray; and when it was evening, he was there alone."

Mark 1:35, "And in the early morning, while it was still dark, He arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there." The previous verses tell us that after dark "the whole city" gathered at the door of the house where Jesus was staying. There He healed many people and cast out demons. But before it was daylight again, he went to spend time alone. Jesus knew that had he waited until the morning hours he could never have had time for silence and solitude.

Luke 4:42, "And when day came, he departed and went to a lonely place; and the multitudes were searching for him, and came to him, and tried to keep him from going away from them."

If the Lord needed to spend times in silence and solitude, how much more then do we need to? It is indeed good for us to draw aside and spend time with God without any distractions.

It helps remind us that all we are and all we have, including the time we have, is only by the grace of God.

Jesus encouraged his followers to draw aside as a form of rest and refreshment: "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). Drawing aside can also facilitate discernment. Jesus did this the night before he chose those to be his first followers in Luke 6:12-13: "And it was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God. And when day came, He called His disciples to Him; and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles." Elijah desperately needed direction from God, and went alone to Mt. Horeb where he heard the gentle whisper of God's voice (1 Kings 19:11-13). Habakkuk stood alone and silent on the guard post, keeping watch to see what God would say to him (Habakkuk 2:1); and Paul went away to Arabia after his conversion so he could be alone with God (Galatians 1:17).



Is there an open door you are being invited to walk through?

When silence is the appropriate response

Times of silence in the presence of the Lord can be the only authentic response we can give. Notice the following verses:

Habakkuk 2:20: "But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him,"
Zephaniah 1:7: "Be silent before the Lord God!", and **Zechariah 2:13,** "Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord."

There may be times when you need to worship God in and with silence: when we are in a place of deep lament; we are dry and have nothing to offer; or when we are so overcome by the presence of the Spirit. Times of corporate worship in our churches need to leave space for people to be in different places in their relationship with God.

Silence can also be a surrender to the sovereignty and greatness of God. David affirms his sense of profound security in God in **Psalm 62:1-2, 5-6** "My soul waits in silence for God only; from him is my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken ... My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be shaken."

Isaiah 30:15 – "In repentance and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength." Faith is frequently expressed through prayer. But sometimes it is exhibited through a wordlessness before the Lord which, by its quiet absence of anxiety, communicates trust in His sovereign control.

God is always present to us, even when we are not present to God.

Origen has said that we are what we do with silence. What do we do with silence? Most of us fear silence, and so whether we are in a lift, walking or exercising, cooking, we have music, TV or radio on. There is usually some form of noise happening. Why is this? I think it is in part because we fear silence – it throws us back on our own inner conversations, our own company, our own inner voice and conscience. Inevitably too, this includes the company of God – the God who is always present to us, even if we are not present to God!

To choose to have a space in our day in silence with God is to choose to de-clutter our whole beings, in order to be fully present to and attentive to God. Have you noticed that when you are at a concert or play, there is that magical moment when the lights dim, the curtain twitches, and the whole audience is focussed on one thing, the parting of the curtains! There is a sense of great expectation, and if you look around, no one is fiddling or moving a muscle. Such complete focus involves our whole being – body, mind and soul. That stillness, that focus with our whole being (body, mind and soul) on the curtain of God's word opening to us, and that sense of expectation is able to happen wondrously in silence. Can we cultivate a habit of drawing aside to be so totally present, to this God who is totally and always present to us?

To have music, or not to have music?

Some people have spoken about how they find it helpful to have music on when they are on their own, particularly songs with Christian lyrics. This can indeed be helpful, and some

pieces have moved me profoundly. However, we need to choose wisely and we need to be aware that it too can become a form of escape from silence, but it just sounds more spiritual! It needs to be balanced with silence also. One of the disadvantages of lyrics is that the song can take us on its own journey and agenda, and whilst that may well speak deeply to us, it becomes more difficult for us to hear something 'out of left field' or surprising, that the Lord wants to bring to our attention.

It is interesting to note that music, like most art forms, are enhanced by silence or space. Music has silence annotated in the form of rests, and what would music be without these poignant silences? Paintings and photography have it in forms of spacing and colour choice; writing and speech have it, at times with profound effect. We often forget this. I was taught as a child to fill the whole page to the edges with paint. It is as if we haven't grown out of this, and we try to engage in the art of living as adults, but we are still painting furiously to all the edges.

One time I was asked to lead a walking silent retreat which involved participants new to the concepts of silence and solitude. One retreatant was a very gifted youth minister. After I had introduced the concepts at some length, I gave them all a verse from Scripture to reflect on as they walked along the National Park cliff walking trail. I was fascinated to notice that this youth worker immediately took out his iPod, put in the ear plugs and off he went. I smiled as I began to understand that for him, silence meant no talking, but music thundering in his ears was OK. Our culture of today is bombarded with noise, and it can be difficult to conceive of being in a sustained period of silence.

I had an interesting conversation with the Principal of a boys' college. He spoke of how he had been slowly introducing silence into the culture of the school, a minute at a time. By the time we had our conversation, teachers in the classrooms had begun this minute of silence; even at the school assembly, the Head student had begun following the lead of the Principal, in beginning the time with words to the effect: Let us spend some time in silence, acknowledging the presence of God with us". The length of time in silence was able to be increased, and fascinatingly, the Principal spoke of how the boys did not muck up at all, but rather lapped it up and seemed to grow in appreciation of this time of albeit imposed silence in their very noise-filled world. It seemed to provide a breathing space when they could simply be in the company of themselves. And God!

Different kinds of silence

As in any relationship, there are different types of silence. We have all had times when we have been extremely aware of comfortable, companionable silences, as well as awkward or tense silences. Some silences have the capacity to drain us, others are able to pour life into us. Simply notice what your experience is when you spend time with the Lord, and talk to him about how it is for you.

There are also different kinds of touch to be aware of in ourselves. Have you had the experience when a person gives you a hug, it can be an affirming hug, a giving hug as it were. Or it can be a hug where you sense they want something from you, almost drawing resources from you. There can also be a hug where you sense there is a sexual hunger. There are associated levels of comfort and discomfort with these, depending on your relationship with the person. The important thing that helps us in our journey is to notice how we touch others, and how others touch us. We can take this to the Lord. I was leading a retreat for beginners, and one lovely person, for whom retreats were a regular practice, just touched my shoulder each time she would pass me at a meal or in the hallway. I noticed this because she had not done this before, and her touch had the feel for me of wanting something from me. During a time of spiritual direction with her, I mentioned that she had touched my shoulder a number of times. She hadn't really noticed what she had been doing, and at first laughed it off. As she pondered this, it became clear to her that she was feeling bereft of God, and not able to communicate. She was so longing for a connection with the Lord that her hunger spilt over and caused her to try to touch God some other way. Becoming aware of what she was doing through physical touching, enabled her to identify what was going on in her relationship with the Lord.

Silencing our inner chatter

Silence isn't just absence of noise; it includes a choice in the presence of God to a cessation of exterior noise as well as the interior chatter that seems to continually take place. Our minds have been described as being like a tree full of active, chattering monkeys, leaping from branch to branch all over the place, rarely settling, always demanding our attention, full of nonsense and trickery, as well as wisps of wisdom - and all very noisy! We need to be able to pick these monkeys out of the tree and set them aside for a while. How do we do this? Further on in this chapter I will suggest a few practical ways we can by-pass the insistence of these monkeys, but for the moment it is worth simply acknowledging that most of the time, the content of this chatter that demands our attention, is a mix of mainly very unimportant flotsam and jetsam, with only a few worthwhile niggles worth pursuing. Silence, as we will see below, can enable us to allow God to set the agenda.

What can you hear God saying to you?

Silence can be painful

Many of us have a tendency to live our lives like a fast and furious Ferrari on a freeway. For some, it has been



like this for such a long time that when we finally do skid to a stop, we can be hit hard from behind by all the traffic that has built up behind us, one after another. When we have been keeping ourselves busy, we have often been doing so for a reason. It is hard to face some aspects of life: loss, pain, conflict, feelings of inadequacy, fears ... And so we run – or drive – at a fast pace to try to escape all of these things that ask for our reflection and attention. Yet they don't leave, but follow us in a long line of unattended 'traffic' – sometimes busloads! So when at last we do stop it all suddenly slams into us and knocks us flat. That can be painful, particularly when we are not expecting it. Hence these times of silence are not all sweetness and light, but can be times when we are indeed knocked to the ground, and can only start standing up again when together with God we start dealing with some of these long-avoided issues.

Hence temptations, fears, anger, grief, shame and all the unwanted and unwelcomed feelings and memories can surface when there is suddenly no activity or noise to help us escape what is there. This is why many of us fear silence and solitude, and I know when I come away to spend time alone I have a natural apprehension: what may the Lord enable to surface that I have been unaware of? And yet it is this same God, whose nature is always to have mercy who promises to be with us at all times and in all places. God does not expect us to do this alone, but rather the opposite: God waits for us to put things on the table so that together with God we can deal with what is there and journey into greater freedom and wholeness.

Some more useful quotes:

In silence all of our usual patterns assault us ... That is why most people give up rather quickly. When Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, the first things to show up were the wild beasts. (Richard Rohr)

I have calmed and quieted my soul, Like a weaned child with its mother ... Psalm 131:2

In solitude I make the frustrating discovery that often my mind keeps me flailing around rather than settling into rest with God. I begin to notice all the ways my mind distracts me from the very thing my soul is longing for, the experience of rest, union and communion with God. Oh, how our minds need to learn how to rest in the way the psalmist describes! (Ruth Haley Barton)

Be still and know that I am God ... Psalm 46:10 This shows there is a kind of knowing that comes in silence and not in words – but first we must be still. The Hebrew word for "Be still" literally means "Let go of your grip". Let go of your own understanding. Cease striving at the level of human effort, and in so doing open yourself to a whole new kind of knowing.

Our spiritual journey must lead through the desert or else our healing will be the product of our own will and wisdom. It is in the silence of the desert that we hear our dependence on noise. It is in the poverty of the desert that we see clearly our attachments to the trinkets and baubles we cling to for security and pleasure. The desert shatters the

soul's arrogance and leaves body and soul crying out in thirst and hunger. In the desert we trust God or die. (Dan Allender)

Solitude is the furnace of transformation ... [It] is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter – the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self. (Henri Nouwen)

As we allow ourselves to be made known in solitude, we discover that we are known by Love. Beyond the pain of self-discovery there is a love that does not condemn us but calls us to itself. This love receives us as we are. (Parker Palmer)

Silence and solitude is a condition of a helpless person. Like a beggar with open hands asking the disciples for help (Acts 3:1-8). We bring nothing but ourselves.

This devotional habit is not easy to develop because we lead busy lives and because we have an enemy aware of the stakes involved.

*Missionary martyr Jim Elliot knew of the battle: "I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds . . . Satan is quite aware of the power of silence." (John Blanchard, 1986, *More Gathered Gold*).*

Is God inviting you to go on a silent retreat? Begin with something small – a day or a weekend. Then you can build up your time as and

when you notice the need.

