

7. The Discipline of Solitude

Settle yourself in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourself.

—TERESA OF ÁVILA

Jesus calls us from loneliness to solitude. The fear of being left alone petrifies people. A new child in the neighborhood sobs to her mother, "No one ever plays with me." A college freshman yearns for his high school days when he was the center of attention: "Now, I'm a nobody." A business executive sits dejected in her office, powerful, yet alone. An old woman lies in a nursing home waiting to go "Home."

Our fear of being alone drives us to noise and crowds. We keep up a constant stream of words even if they are inane. We buy radios that strap to our wrists or fit over our ears so that, if no one else is around, at least we are not condemned to silence. T. S. Eliot analyzes our culture well when he writes, "Where shall the world be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence."¹

But loneliness or clutter are not our only alternatives. We can cultivate an inner solitude and silence that sets us free from loneliness and fear. Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment.

Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. There is a solitude of the heart that can be maintained at all times. Crowds, or the lack of them, have little to do with this inward attentiveness. It is quite possible to be a desert hermit and never experience solitude. But if we possess inward solitude we do not fear being alone, for we know that we are not alone. Neither do we fear being with others, for they do not control us. In the midst of noise and confusion we are settled

into a deep inner silence. Whether alone or among people, we always carry with us a portable sanctuary of the heart.

Inward solitude has outward manifestations. There is the freedom to be alone, not in order to be away from people but in order to hear the divine Whisper better. Jesus lived in inward "heart solitude." He also frequently experienced outward solitude. He inaugurated his ministry by spending forty days alone in the desert (Matt. 4:1-11). Before he chose the twelve he spent the entire night alone in the desert hills (Luke 6:12). When he received the news of John the Baptist's death, he "withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart" (Matt. 14:13). After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand Jesus "went up into the hills by himself . . ." (Matt. 14:23). Following a long night of work, "in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place . . ." (Mark 1:35). When the twelve returned from a preaching and healing mission, Jesus instructed them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place" (Mark 6:31). Following the healing of a leper Jesus "withdrew to the wilderness and prayed" (Luke 5:16). With three disciples he sought out the silence of a lonely mountain as the stage for the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-9). As he prepared for his highest and most holy work, Jesus sought the solitude of the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46). I could go on, but perhaps this is sufficient to show that the seeking out of solitary places was a regular practice for Jesus. So it should be for us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* titled one of his chapters "The Day Together" and the following chapter "The Day Alone." Both are essential for spiritual success. He writes, "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. . . . Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. . . . Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair."²

Therefore, we must seek out the recreating stillness of soli-

tude if we want to be with others meaningfully. We must seek the fellowship and accountability of others if we want to be alone safely. We must cultivate both if we are to live in obedience.

Solitude and Silence

Without silence there is no solitude. Though silence sometimes involves the absence of speech, it always involves the act of listening. Simply to refrain from talking, without a heart listening to God, is not silence. "A day filled with noise and voices can be a day of silence, if the noises become for us the echo of the presence of God, if the voices are, for us, messages and solicitations of God. When we speak of ourselves and are filled with ourselves, we leave silence behind. When we repeat the intimate words of God that he has left within us, our silence remains intact."³

We must understand the connection between inner solitude and inner silence; they are inseparable. All the masters of the interior life speak of the two in the same breath. For example, *The Imitation of Christ*, which has been the unchallenged masterpiece of devotional literature for five hundred years, has a section titled "On the Love of Solitude and Silence." Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes the two an inseparable whole in *Life Together* as does Thomas Merton in *Thoughts in Solitude*. In fact, I wrestled for some time trying to decide whether to title this chapter the Discipline of solitude or the Discipline of silence, so closely connected are the two in the great devotional literature. Of necessity, therefore, we must come to understand and experience the transforming power of silence if we are to know solitude.

There is an old proverb to the effect that "all those who open their mouths, close their eyes!" The purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to see and hear. Control rather than no noise is the key to silence. James saw clearly that the person who could control his tongue is perfect (James 3:1-12). Under the Discipline of silence and solitude we learn when to speak and

when to refrain from speaking. The person who views the Disciplines as laws will always turn silence into an absurdity: "I'll not speak for the next forty days!" This is always a severe temptation to any true disciple who wants to live under silence and solitude. Thomas à Kempis writes, "It is easier to be silent altogether than to speak with moderation."⁴ The wise preacher of Ecclesiastes says that there is "a time to keep silence and a time to speak" (Eccles. 3:7). Control is the key.

James' analogies of the rudder and the bridle suggest to us that the tongue guides as well as controls. The tongue guides our course in many ways. If we tell a lie, we are led to telling more lies to cover up the first lie. Soon we are forced to behave in a certain way in order to give credence to the lie. No wonder James declares that "the tongue is a fire" (James 3:6).

The disciplined person is the person who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. The mark of a championship basketball team is a team that can score points when they are needed. Most of us can get the ball into the hoop eventually, but we can't do it when it is needed. Likewise, a person who is under the Discipline of silence is a person who can say what needs to be said when it needs to be said. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Prov. 25:11). If we are silent when we should speak, we are not living in the Discipline of silence. If we speak when we should be silent, we again miss the mark.

The Sacrifice of Fools

In Ecclesiastes we read, "To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools" (Eccles. 5:1). The sacrifice of fools is humanly initiated religious talk. The preacher continues, "Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few" (Eccles. 5:2).

When Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to the mountain and was transfigured before them, Moses and Elijah appeared

and carried on a conversation with Jesus. The Greek text goes on to say, "And *answering*, Peter said to them . . . if you will I will make here three shelters . . ." (Matt. 17:4, [italics added]). That is so telling. No one was even speaking to Peter. He was offering the sacrifice of fools.

John Woolman's *Journal* contains a moving and tender account of learning control over the tongue. His words are so graphic that they are best quoted in full:

"I went to meetings in an awful frame of mind, and endeavored to be inwardly acquainted with the language of the true Shepherd. One day, being under a strong exercise of spirit, I stood up and said some words in a meeting; but not keeping close to the Divine opening, I said more than was required of me. Being soon sensible of my error, I was afflicted in mind some weeks, without any light or comfort, even to that degree that I could not take satisfaction in anything. I remembered God, and was troubled, and in the depth of my distress he had pity upon me, and sent the Comforter. I then felt forgiveness for my offence; my mind became calm and quiet, and I was truly thankful to my gracious Redeemer for his mercies. About six weeks after this, feeling the spring of Divine love opened, and a concern to speak, I said a few words in a meeting, in which I found peace. Being thus humbled and disciplined under the cross, my understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the pure spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart, and which taught me to wait in silence sometimes many weeks together, until I felt that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet, through which the Lord speaks to his flock."⁵

What a description of the learning process one goes through in the Discipline of silence! Of particular significance was Woolman's increased ability from this experience to "distinguish the pure spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart."

One reason we can hardly bear to remain silent is that it makes us feel so helpless. We are so accustomed to relying

upon words to manage and control others. If we are silent, who will take control? God will take control, but we will never let him take control until we trust him. Silence is intimately related to trust.

The tongue is our most powerful weapon of manipulation. A frantic stream of words flows from us because we are in a constant process of adjusting our public image. We fear so deeply what we think other people see in us that we talk in order to straighten out their understanding. If I have done some wrong thing (or even some right thing that I think you may misunderstand) and discover that you know about it, I will be very tempted to help you understand my action! Silence is one of the deepest Disciplines of the Spirit simply because it puts the stopper on all self-justification.

One of the fruits of silence is the freedom to let God be our justifier. We don't need to straighten others out. There is a story of a medieval monk who was being unjustly accused of certain offenses. One day he looked out his window and saw a dog biting and tearing on a rug that had been hung out to dry. As he watched, the Lord spoke to him saying, "That is what is happening to your reputation. But if you will trust me, I will care for you—reputation and all." Perhaps more than anything else, silence brings us to believe that God can care for us—"reputation and all."

George Fox often speaks of "the spirit of bondage" and how the world lays in that spirit. Frequently he identifies the spirit of bondage with the spirit of subservience to other human beings. In his *Journal* he speaks of "bringing people off of men," away from that spirit of bondage to law through other human beings. And silence is one way of bringing us into this liberation.

The tongue is a thermometer; it gives us our spiritual temperature. It is also a thermostat; it regulates our spiritual temperature. Control of the tongue can mean everything. Have we been set free so that we can hold our tongue? Bonhoeffer writes, "Real silence, real stillness, really holding one's tongue

comes only as the sober consequence of spiritual stillness."⁶ St. Dominic is reported to have visited St. Francis, and throughout the entire meeting neither spoke a single word. Only when we learn to be truly silent are we able to speak the word that is needed *when* it is needed.

Catherine de Haeck Doherty writes, "All in me is silent and . . . I am immersed in the silence of God."⁷ It is in solitude that we come to experience the "silence of God" and so receive the inner silence that is the craving of our hearts.

The Dark Night of the Soul

To take seriously the Discipline of solitude will mean that at some point or points along the pilgrimage we will enter what St. John of the Cross vividly describes as "the dark night of the soul." The "dark night" to which he calls us is not something bad or destructive. On the contrary, it is an experience to be welcomed much as a sick person might welcome a surgery that promises health and well-being. The purpose of the darkness is not to punish or to afflict us. It is to set us free. It is a divine appointment, a privileged opportunity to draw close to the divine Center. St. John calls it "sheer grace," adding:

O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
The Lover with His beloved,
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.⁸

What does the dark night of the soul involve? We may have a sense of dryness, aloneness, even lostness. Any overdependence on the emotional life is stripped away. The notion, often heard today, that such experiences should be avoided and that we always should live in peace and comfort, joy, and celebration only betrays the fact that much contemporary experience is surface slush. The dark night is one of the ways God brings us into a hush, a stillness so that he may work an inner transformation upon the soul.

How is this dark night expressed in daily life? When solitude is seriously pursued, there is usually a flush of initial success and then an inevitable letdown—and with it a desire to abandon the pursuit altogether. Feelings leave and there is the sense that we are not getting through to God. St. John of the Cross describes it this way, ". . . the darkness of the soul mentioned here . . . puts the sensory and spiritual appetites to sleep. . . . It binds the imagination and impedes it from doing any good discursive work. It makes the memory cease, the intellect become dark and unable to understand anything, and hence it causes the will also to become arid and constrained, and all the faculties empty and useless. And over all this hangs a dense and burdensome cloud which afflicts the soul and keeps it withdrawn from God."⁹

Twice in his poem "*Canciones del Alma*" St. John of the Cross uses the phrase, "My house being now all stilled."¹⁰ In this graphic line he indicates the importance of allowing all the physical, emotional, psychological, even spiritual senses to be silenced. Every distraction of the body, mind, and spirit must be put into a kind of suspended animation before this deep work of God upon the soul can occur. It is like an operation in which the anesthetic must take effect before the surgery can be performed. There comes inner silence, peace, stillness. During such a time Bible reading, sermons, intellectual debate—all fail to move or excite us.

When God lovingly draws us into a dark night of the soul, there is often a temptation to seek release from it and to blame everyone and everything for our inner dullness. The preacher is such a bore. The hymn singing is too weak. The worship service is so dull. We may begin to look around for another church or a new experience to give us "spiritual goose bumps." This is a serious mistake. Recognize the dark night for what it is. Be grateful that God is lovingly drawing you away from every distraction so that you can see him clearly. Rather than chafing and fighting, become still and wait.

I am not referring here to the dullness to spiritual things that

comes as a result of sin or disobedience, but I am speaking of the person who is seeking hard after God and who harbors no known sin in his heart.

Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the voice of his servant,
who walks in darkness
and has no light,
yet trusts in the name of the LORD
and relies upon his God? (Isa. 50:10, [italics added])

The point of the biblical passage is that it is quite possible to fear, obey, trust, and rely upon the Lord and still "walk in darkness and have no light." We are living in obedience but we have entered a dark night of the soul.

St. John of the Cross indicates that during this experience there is a gracious protection from vices and a wonderful advance in the things of the kingdom of God. ". . . a person at the time of these darkneses . . . will see clearly how little the appetites and faculties are distracted with useless and harmful things and how secure he is from vainglory, from pride and presumption, from an empty and false joy, and from many other evils. By walking in darkness the soul . . . advances rapidly, because it thus gains the virtues."¹¹

What should we do during such a time of inward darkness? First, disregard the advice of well-meaning friends to snap out of it. They do not understand what is occurring. Our age is so ignorant of such things that I recommend that you not even talk about these matters. Above all, do not try to explain or justify why you may be "out of sorts." God is your justifier; rest your case with him. If you can actually withdraw to a "desert place" for a season, do so. If not, go about your daily tasks. But whether in the "desert" or at home, hold in your heart a deep, inner, listening silence and there be still until the work of solitude is done.

Perhaps St. John of the Cross has been leading us into deeper

waters than we care to go. Certainly he is talking about a realm that most of us see only "through a glass darkly." Yet we do not need to censure ourselves for our timidity to scale these snowy peaks of the soul. These matters are best approached cautiously. But perhaps he has stirred within us a drawing toward higher and deeper experiences, no matter how slight the tug. It is like opening the door of our lives ever so slightly to this realm. That is all God asks, and all he needs.

To conclude our journey into the dark night of the soul, let us ponder these powerful words of our spiritual mentor: "Oh, then, spiritual soul, when you see your appetites darkened, your inclinations dry and constrained, your faculties incapacitated for any interior exercise, do not be afflicted; think of this as a grace, since God is freeing you from yourself and taking from you your own activity."¹²

Steps into Solitude

The Spiritual Disciplines are things that we do. We must never lose sight of this fact. It is one thing to talk piously about "the solitude of the heart," but if that does not somehow work its way into our experience, then we have missed the point of the Disciplines. We are dealing with actions, not merely states of mind. It is not enough to say, "Well, I am most certainly in possession of inner solitude and silence; there is nothing that I need to do." All those who have come into the living silences have done certain things, have ordered their lives in a particular way so as to receive this "peace that passes all understanding." If we are to succeed, we must pass beyond the theoretical into life situations.

What are some steps into solitude? The first thing we can do is to take advantage of the "little solitudes" that fill our day. Consider the solitude of those early morning moments in bed before the family awakens. Think of the solitude of a morning cup of coffee before beginning the work of the day. There is

the solitude of bumper-to-bumper traffic during the freeway rush hour. There can be little moments of rest and refreshment when we turn a corner and see a flower or a tree. Instead of vocal prayer before a meal consider inviting everyone to join into a few moments of gathered silence. Once while driving a carload of chattering children and adults, I exclaimed, "Let's play a game and see if everyone can be absolutely quiet until we reach the airport" (about five minutes away). It worked, blessedly so. Find new joy and meaning in the little walk from the subway to your apartment. Slip outside just before bed and taste the silent night.

These tiny snatches of time are often lost to us. What a pity! They can and should be redeemed. They are times for inner quiet, for reorienting our lives like a compass needle. They are little moments that help us to be genuinely present where we are.

What else can we do? We can find or develop a "quiet place" designed for silence and solitude. Homes are being built constantly. Why not insist that a little inner sanctuary be put into the plans, a small place where any family member could go to be alone and silent? What's to stop us? The money? We build elaborate playrooms and family rooms and think it well worth the expense. Those who already own a home could consider enclosing a little section of the garage or patio. Those who live in an apartment could be creative and find other ways to allow for solitude. I know of one family that has a special chair; whenever anyone sits in it he or she is saying, "Please don't bother me, I want to be alone."

Let's find places outside the home: a spot in a park, a church sanctuary that is kept unlocked, even a storage closet somewhere. A retreat center near us has built a lovely one-person cabin specifically for private meditation and solitude. It is called "The Quiet Place." Churches invest millions of dollars in buildings. How about constructing one place where an individual can come to be alone for several days? Catherine de Haack Doherty has pioneered in developing "Poustinias" (a Russian

word meaning "desert") in North America. These are places specifically designed for solitude and silence.*

In the chapter on study we considered the importance of observing ourselves to see how often our speech is a frantic attempt to explain and justify our actions. Having seen this in ourselves, let's experiment with doing deeds without any words of explanation whatever. We note our sense of fear that people will misunderstand why we have done what we have done. We seek to allow God to be our justifier.

Let's discipline ourselves so that our words are few and full. Let's become known as people who have something to say when we speak. Let's maintain plain speech: do what we say we will do. "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay" (Eccles. 5:5). When our tongue is under our authority the words of Bonhoeffer become true of us: "Much that is unnecessary remains unsaid. But the essential and the helpful thing can be said in a few words."¹³

Go another step. Try to live one entire day without words at all. Do it not as a law, but as an experiment. Note your feelings of helplessness and excessive dependence upon words to communicate. Try to find new ways to relate to others that are not dependent upon words. Enjoy, savor the day. Learn from it.

Four times a year withdraw for three to four hours for the purpose of reorienting your life goals. This can easily be done in one evening. Stay late at your office or do it at home or find a quiet corner in a public library. Reevaluate your goals and objectives in life. What do you want to have accomplished one year from now? Ten years from now? Our tendency is to overestimate what we can accomplish in one year and underestimate what we can accomplish in ten years. Set realistic goals but be willing to dream, to stretch. (This book was a dream in my mind for several years before it became a reality.) In the

*The story of the development of these centers is described in her book, *Poustinia: Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1974).

quiet of those brief hours, listen to the thunder of God's silence. Keep a journal record of what comes to you.

Reorientation and goal setting do not need to be cold and calculating as some suppose. Goals are discovered, not made. God delights in showing us exciting new alternatives for the future. Perhaps as you enter into a listening silence the joyful impression to learn how to weave or how to make pottery emerges. Does that sound too earthy, too unspiritual a goal? God is intently interested in such matters. Are you? Maybe you will want to learn and experience more about the spiritual gifts of miracles, healing, and tongues. Or you may do as one of my friends: spend large periods of time experiencing the gift of helps, learning to be a servant. Perhaps this next year you would like to read all the writings of C. S. Lewis or D. Elton Trueblood. Maybe five years from now you would like to be qualified to work with handicapped children. Does choosing these goals sound like a sales manipulation game? Of course not. It is merely setting a direction for your life. You are going to go somewhere so how much better to have a direction that has been set by communion with the divine Center.

Under the Discipline of study we explored the idea of study retreats of two to three days' duration. Such experiences are heightened when they are combined with an inner immersion into the silence of God. Like Jesus, we must go away from people so that we can be truly present when we are with people. Take a retreat once a year with no other purpose in mind but solitude.

The fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others. There comes a new freedom to be with people. There is new attentiveness to their needs, new responsiveness to their hurts. Thomas Merton observes, "It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them. . . . Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say."¹⁴

Don't you feel a tug, a yearning to sink down into the silence

and solitude of God? Don't you long for something more? Doesn't every breath crave a deeper, fuller exposure to his Presence? It is the Discipline of solitude that will open the door. You are welcome to come in and "listen to God's speech in his wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all-embracing silence."¹⁵