

Solitude Renews Life **(Talk given by Sr. Julia Bathon, OSF ---2007)**

Each day of our lives we nourish ourselves with food in order to have the physical energy for our daily activities. Likewise, our spiritual energy requires its own nourishment. Solitude is one way to foster the spiritual realm of life and renew our spiritual energy.

What is the meaning of solitude? The dictionary defines it as “the state or quality of being alone or remote from others”. Each day of our life we face numerous people, situations and demands because we are a people who value being a part of the larger world. Solitude is not typically a part of our daily routine. Many people have a practice of spending a brief period of time daily in prayer, reflection, silence, but that is not solitude. If you live by yourself, you may have more opportunities for true solitude than others. However, it is very difficult to be in solitude in your home setting.

Many of you may live out in the country or at least away from the hustle and bustle of town or city life. You may live in an area that has a lot of quiet or natural environment to foster the simple life, but you are not in solitude. The home environment entices you to think about all that needs to be done. Daily life situations, and the people in our lives, have a way of demanding our attention in ways that keep us tied to the normal way things always are. Our communication devices--television, radio, internet, satellite, cell phones, etc.--bring the entire world to our doorstep in an instant--twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The noise of this kind of environment is pervasive and can be overwhelming. Have you ever felt like or even said to yourself “I can’t even think straight anymore.” Our minds, hearts and spirits become saturated with all the stimulation in the world today.

A few people find themselves called to live the life of a hermit—a person who has withdrawn from society and lives a solitary existence; a recluse. Sometimes this choice is made for religious reasons and other times because of personal circumstances. However, that is not the solitude that I am speaking of.

Each one of us, as a spiritual being, has a longing to reach beyond the earthly dimension of life to the deeper soul within. It is the longing to know our true self and how we are to be in relationship with God, self, other people and the world. Spiritual seekers of all ages and faith experiences have felt this call to find something more in their life. Meister Eckhart wisely noted: “Silence is the privileged entry into the realm of God and into eternal life. For silence is a language that is infinitely deeper, more far reaching, more understanding, more compassionate, and more eternal than any other language.” Silence is hard to find in the normal environment in which we live. Solitude enables us to enter into the silence and begin the journey to nurture one’s inner being.

Ruth Haley Barton in *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* writes, “Solitude and silence are not self-indulgent exercises for 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 efforts and beyond the human constructs that cannot fully contain the Divine.

The practices of solitude and silence are radical because they challenge us on every level of our existence. They challenge us on the level of our culture: 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 confront us on the level of our human relationships: they call us away from those relationships for a time so we can give undivided attention to God. They challenge us on the level of our soul: in the silence we become aware of inner dynamics we have been able to avoid by keeping ourselves noisy and busy. They draw us into spiritual battle: in silence there is potential of each of us to “know that I am God” with such certainty that the competing powers of evil and sin and ego-self can no longer hold us in their grip.” p. 31

The challenge of solitude is letting go of preconceived notions of what is expected and abandoning oneself into the unknown for a while, to begin to explore one’s inner dimensions. You can find phenomenal strength and wisdom within your personal being by allowing yourself the freedom, time, space and silence to enter those realms.

What is solitude? The practice of solitude involves scheduling enough uninterrupted time in a distraction-free environment that you experience isolation and are alone with God and yourself. It might mean going to a remote cabin, country home or more often a retreat center where you are out of your normal environment. This enables you to not get caught up in the usual activities that pull at you each day. It is typically different from a vacation because you are seeking a time and space to “be still”. I encourage people to make it a time with no agenda, a time with nothing to do and no place to go: essentially unplugging from the noise and pace of our culture. Find a place where you are comfortable, secure and not distracted by the outside world. With the convenience of cell phone and wireless internet this is often the hardest challenge to face. Can you shut down both and not be tempted to check in for a day or two?

Solitude is not loneliness. May Sarton says, “Loneliness is the poverty of self: solitude is the richness of self.” Loneliness is painful and a lack of being in relationship. Solitude is being comfortable being with oneself and using it as a time to grow. “Solitude is a condition of peace that stands in direct opposition to loneliness. Loneliness is like sitting in an empty room and being aware of the space around you. It is a condition of separateness. Solitude is becoming one with the space around you. It is a condition of union. Loneliness is small, solitude is large. Loneliness closes in around you; solitude expands toward the infinite. Loneliness has its roots in words, in an internal conversation that nobody answers; solitude has its roots in the great silence of eternity.” taken from *Letters to My Son: A Father’s Wisdom on Manhood, Life and Love* p.105 by Kent Nerburn Solitude is not running away from life, but it is an embracing of life. One goes away in order to return to life refreshed, renewed and ready to engage fully with all that is around one.

Why would I choose to practice solitude? The benefits of entering into solitude for a given length of time are: peace, freedom from the need to be occupied and stimulated, quieting the internal noise (better listen to God and/or self), renewed creativity, increased capacity for one's work in the world. Maybe life circumstances are the same when you come back from a solitude experience, but you are better able to deal with them. You have an inner peace that helps to continue your journey. Our culture promotes an attitude that we have to be productive in order to be of value. Solitude enables one to engage in the moment without having a laundry list of things to accomplish. We need more time when we are just "being" and not "doing". With our modern conveniences we can have daylight conditions twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, therefore the natural night-time of rest and "not doing" gets eliminated. Our physical, emotional, spiritual self gets drained and depleted rather quickly. Solitude can restore because the outer and inner noises are diminished to some degree. Some of our most creative geniuses in the world enter into solitude to get their creative spirit energy and insight.

Why do we sometimes resist solitude? We say, "I don't have time to go away by myself." How will all these things get done? When one does take time away, even if it is only two days, you will come back rested, refreshed and renewed. You will find that you are able to accomplish more than before you went off by yourself. Sometimes we may ask what would I do by myself. I tell retreatants who come to listen to your bodies. You may need to go to bed earlier, sleep longer or take a nap in the afternoon. Being on the go all the time, we do not realize how weary our bodies become in our daily routine. Once the body is refreshed and relaxed, you can deal with every other element of your life. I may not be sure I want to hear what my inner self is telling me. The wisdom of going away and entering into solitude is that this gift to self will enable you to face these challenges. People have made life changing decisions as a result of entering into solitude. The new perspective allows one to see options that may not be knowledgeable while at home in the normal circumstances. "Solitude is such a potential thing. We hear voices in solitude, we never hear in the hurry and turmoil of life: we receive counsels and comforts, we get under no other condition..." Amelia E. Barr

What would I do while in solitude? I already mentioned just resting: taking the time to reenergize your body, mind and spirit. Sit by the window with your coffee and watch the natural environment around you. The trees, plants, birds and other animals can be quite healing. They often give us insight about ourselves. One pastor commented that the birds at her bird feeder reminded her of the circumstances at her church. Some are picky and only want certain kinds of seed, some leave when others come, some are able to be at the feeder with others, some pick up after everyone else is done. Other things that can be done: take a walk in nature, read reflective books, sit in a quiet place or pray, meditate, journal. How sensually extravagant am I in my spiritual life? Isn't prayer itself a kind of "waste"? Definitely not! Certainly there are more productive things we could do with our time. If you want to do other things the list can go on and on. Listen to the call within your inner self. Other extravagances at prayer could be lighting a scented candle, burning incense, listening to music, writing poetry, drawing, and investing in a few spiritual helps.

I invite you to consider the role that solitude can play in your personal spiritual journey. Removing yourself from the busy schedule of daily living by going to a retreat is beneficial because it will renew your life. Retreat time and space give you the personal freedom to explore the inner dimensions of your existence without the interruptions from people, phone, internet and television. Take time to renew your spiritual self in order to live life fully.

In closing I would like to read a prayer by Joyce Rupp

Solitude

Companion of my Solitude,
sometimes I think that half of me
is well-lodged in another world.
On rainy days, in times of solitude,
my spirit pulls and tugs,
crying for home in that other space.

All the things here
that give my life rhyme and reason
fade from view.

I am left with the longing
to put down my sword
of busyness
and dwell in the land
of simple contemplation.

Raindrops on the cottage roof,
bird songs in the woods,
the taste of morning air,
the stillness of the woods,
all these draw me beyond
to where the other half dwells.

Companion of my Solitude,
keep encouraging me to take time
for my inward journey.

Help me to be faithful
to this essential element of my life.

Taken from Prayer to Sophia, p. 94 by Joyce Rupp

God bless you.

[“I lived in solitude in the country and noticed how the monotony of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind”](#)
Albert Einstein

[“In solitude, where we are least alone.”](#) Lord Byron

[“Solitude is not something you must hope for in the future. Rather, it is a deepening of the present, and unless you look for it in the present you will never find it.”](#) Thomas Merton Trappist

[“I feel the same way about solitude as some people feel about the blessing of the church. It's the light of grace for me. I never close my door behind me without the awareness that I am carrying out an act of mercy toward myself.”](#) Peter Hoeg

Language... has created the word "loneliness" to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word "solitude" to express the glory of being alone. ~Paul Johannes Tillich, The Eternal Now

Loneliness can be conquered only by those who can bear solitude. ~Paul Tillich

[Thomas Merton:](#)

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.

Solitude is the nurse of enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is the true parent of genius. In all ages solitude has been called for--has been flown to.

Author: [Isaac D'Israeli](#)

Source: Literary Character of Men of Genius (ch. X)

Every man should have his own Holy Place where he keeps lonely vigil, harkens for the Voices, and offers prayer and praise.
(Wabasha, Native American, in `The Spiritual Athlete')

Solitude, though it may be silent as light, is like light, the mightiest of agencies; for solitude is essential to man. All men come into this world alone and leave it alone.

[Thomas de Quincey](#) (1785-1859) British author and intellectual.

In solitude the mind gains strength and learns to lean upon itself.

[Laurence Sterne](#) (1713-1768) British writer.

We are often the last to recognize the many ways we continue to be held captive by our fears, habits and addictions. Silence and solitude can give us a space to begin noticing the inner workings of our self.