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Beyond Words

A good journey begins with knowing where we are and being willing to go somewhere else.

RICHARD ROHR



Truth be told, it was desperation that first propelled me into solitude and silence. I wish I could say that 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, and 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 I loved, just beginning to respond to invitations to write and engage in a bit of public speaking. Seminary study rounded out a life that was full and challenging; it demanded all of the energy, focus and priority management I could muster. But inside my soul there was another level



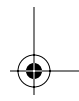


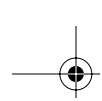
of truth that needed to be told, and desperation was probably the only force compelling enough to make me willing to listen.

In the midst of the outward busyness of my life there was an inner chaos that was far more disconcerting. It was particularly alarming to realize that 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 consistently love my husband and children; elements of selfishness and self-centeredness were being exposed in the crucible of marriage and parenting and were frightening to acknowledge. 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 a sort of 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 desires, I did not know how to die to myself in even the smallest way. True transformation in the places that really counted seemed just beyond my reach. I was beginning to wonder whether some of the core promises of the Christian life were true at all.

As it turned out, my limited capacity to love was just the tip of an iceberg. There were enormous questions right under the surface of my busy life, questions that I could no longer quiet. There were questions about identity and calling: Was there anything truer about me than the externals of gender-related roles and responsibilities? Was there anything more defining than how hard I could work, the level of excellence I could achieve and other people's assessment of that? There were questions about the possibility of true spiritual transformation: What about those stuck places I was just beginning to acknowledge—those places where I could not break free to love? Was

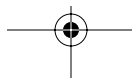


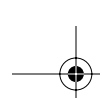


there any power effective enough to touch those intractable places here and now, or was my best hope for transformation some distant possibility beyond the grave? And there were questions about what was lurking deep in the subterranean levels of the soul: What was motivating the frenetic quality of my life and schedule? Why did I find it terribly hard to say no, even when my overcommitment hurt those closest to me? Would I come to the end of my life only to mourn poor choices that did not reflect what is most to be prized?

These were painful questions indeed, and attending to them stirred up emotions I had somehow managed to bury: pockets of anger about past pains and present injustices that covered deep wells of sadness. Waves of confusion about things I used to be so sure of. Undercurrents of loneliness and longing for more. But more of what—God, love, belonging, peace? I wasn't really sure how to name or articulate my longings, but they threatened to pull me into a powerful undertow. I was afraid that if I walked all the way into the emotions and questions that I had worked so hard to ignore and avoid, I might be overtaken. Perhaps my anger would cause me to lash out in ways unbecoming to a Christian. Maybe my sadness would be completely debilitating and I would be unable to pull myself out of it. Perhaps my confusion would make it impossible to teach with conviction. Maybe my loneliness would cause me to search for connection in the wrong ways and in the wrong places.

The more I tried to suppress my emotions and questions and the harder I worked to resist them or pretend they didn't exist, the more they seemed to wield a subterranean power over me. In the midst of much outward productivity, the interior spaces of my life resonated with words like, "There has to be more to the spiritual life than this." Sometimes the 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.

What does one do with such an unwieldy hunger? How does one attend to the heart’s desperate longing for God in the midst of so much religious activity? What do you do when all the familiar methods for seeking God come up empty? Where does a Christian leader go to articulate questions that seem dangerous and almost sacrilegious? This was *not* a good time to admit to any kind of spiritual emptiness or acknowledge any kind of serious questions about my faith. It was a time for being “good,” for being available when people called, for maintaining outward evidences of spiritual maturity and commitment commensurate with the opportunities that were coming my way. And yet these interior groanings were real and needed attention.



Help came through a spiritual director—someone who was more experienced in the ways of the soul, more practiced at recognizing God’s invitations in the life of another and willing to support them in making a faithful response. Our paths first crossed because she was a psychologist. I sought her out for therapy because I assumed that my problems were psychological in nature and could be fixed on that level.

Psychological insight and process were indeed valuable—to a point. Eventually, however, she observed that what I needed was spiritual direction and asked if I would be willing for us to shift the focus of our times together to my relationship with God and the invitation to spiritual transformation contained within the questions that I was raising. I had never heard of spiritual direction, but I trusted her to know what was best. So we made the shift.

As we entered into this new kind of relationship, I expected that





the answers would continue to come primarily through verbal exchange. I was hoping for advice and a quick fix—in three easy steps if possible! 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 that the sediment can settle and the water can become clear.”

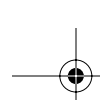
I couldn't even imagine what it would be like to be still long enough for anything to settle! I couldn't imagine not having an agenda or a prayer list or a study plan. After all, even methods that don't work are better than no methods at all! I couldn't imagine not using words—whether spoken or only formed in my mind. After all, I am a word person. My life as a writer and speaker revolves around being able to make sense out of things by putting them into words. If something couldn't be put into words or processed with words or solved with words, what good could it be?

Last but not least, I couldn't imagine letting go of my own efforts to fix and solve and make progress in my spiritual life. After all, I am an achiever. I had been working at things so hard for so long that such seemingly nonproductive “activity” as sitting alone in silence was completely outside of my normal categories.

But 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 I knew to be true about myself. I could not avoid the realization that 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, the inner wrestlings I had not been able to control. It was a moment of self-discovery—which is where all good spiritual journeying begins.

The image of the jar of river water helped me identify where I was,



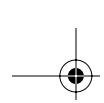


but it also captured my longing and desire to go somewhere else. To be still long enough so the swirling sediment could settle, the waters of my soul could become clear, and I could see whatever it was that needed to be seen . . . well, that image called to me with the hope of peace, clarity and a deeper level of certainty in God than I had yet known. In the desire this image stirred up, I recognized an invitation to *be still and know* beyond my addiction to noise, words, people and performance-oriented activity. It captured my desire for something more and different, something beyond the head knowledge that no longer sustained my soul.

But still, it was not an easy invitation to accept. Even though it seemed as if all I had known of spiritual life had become a yawning, empty cavity, I didn't like the fact that the only invitation I was getting was an invitation into more nothingness! What was I supposed to do with *that*? What I learned is that you stay with the feelings of desperation and let desperation do its good work.

As strange as it may sound, desperation is a really good thing in the spiritual life. Desperation causes us to be open to radical solutions, willing to take all manner of risk in order to find what we are looking for. Desperate ones seek with an all-consuming intensity, for they know that their life depends on it. Like the cancer patient who travels to a foreign country in the quest for cures that can't be found in familiar territory, spiritual seekers embark on a quest for that which cannot be found within the borders of life as we know it. We embark on a search for healing that has not been found in all the other cures we have tried. We have run all the way to the edges of our own answers; we have exhausted the possibilities and are now finally ready to admit our powerlessness in the face of the great unfixables of life.



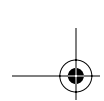


Although my spiritual director did not use the terms *solitude* and *silence* to identify the practices she sensed God was inviting me into, I know now that she was encouraging the use of two classic practices spiritual seekers have used through the ages to open themselves to knowing and hearing God more deeply. 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 effort 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 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 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 our knowing God in this way, because it brings to an end the dominion of those powers in our lives.*

Looking back on my own beginnings with solitude and silence, I know that without desperation I would have been much less willing to face these challenges. I doubt I would have been willing to enter into 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—and





stay there long enough for the waters of my soul to become clear. Without the desire for something more, I probably would have just kept on doing what I was doing. I needed to let the twin engines of desperation and desire lift me out of my stuck places into the realm where the spiritual life happens at God's initiative rather than the pushing and forcing that often characterizes my effort.



Perhaps you sense the same thing in yourself—something like desperation or desire that is creating a willingness to move beyond the familiar into uncharted territory. Pay attention to these stirrings of the soul. Rather than running from them, distracting yourself from them or suppressing them, let the dynamics of desperation and desire do the good work of inviting you deeper into solitude and silence where

the presence of God makes itself known beyond words.

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 within us.

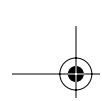
GUNILLA NORRIS, *SHARING SILENCE*

This is exactly what Elijah did. Elijah had just experienced great success, but Jezebel, the queen of Israel, was so threatened by the power of his prophetic ministry that she threatened to kill him. This sent Elijah over the edge of fear and

depression, and he ran for his life. Eventually he withdrew even from his personal servant and walked unto the wilderness until he collapsed under a solitary broom tree, so discouraged that he told God that he might as well take his life.

Eventually, Elijah's willingness to enter into solitude and silence opened room for God to minister to him in ways he had not yet experienced. Here he had the opportunity to face himself, to give





up control of his own journey and to experience God's transforming presence.

Rest assured that as you take your place under the solitary broom tree in the wilderness of your own doubts, questions and unfulfilled longings, you are in good company. Elijah and countless spiritual seekers after him have experienced God's presence in solitude and silence as they have pulled back from the noisy, peopled places of their lives. Here we sit our souls down and wait for that which comes from beyond ourselves. Here we give in to desperation and desire until God comes to us and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Practice

Settle into a comfortable physical position and take three deep breaths—inhale deeply and exhale slowly. As you breathe and become quiet, allow that which is usually unknown and unnamed within you to surface. Notice the dynamics that are drawing you deeper into solitude and silence at this time in your life. What is happening inside you and in your relationship with God right now that seems to be inviting you into solitude and silence? Do the words *desperation* and *desire* capture what you are experiencing, or is there another word or phrase that more accurately expresses what is going on in your interior world?

Allow these inner experiences and dynamics to come to the surface; feel them, name them, sit with them, express them to God if you wish. Today, let it be enough to create space for yourself and those things that are stirring in the interior places of your soul. Listen to them not as experiences to be avoided but as invitations to open yourself to God in new ways. When your time allotted for silence is over, thank God for his presence with you during this time of noticing.

