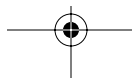


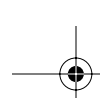
Introduction

To fill a book with words on moving *beyond words* into solitude and silence is a daunting task; it is laughable really, once one sees the irony. I have found myself alternately drawn to the task and strangely resistant.

On the one hand, I have been drawn to the task because my journey into solitude and silence has been the single most meaningful aspect of my spiritual life to date—a pretty strong statement for one who has been a Christian since she was four years old!

On the other hand, solitude and silence represent a continuing challenge for me. Though it has been well over ten years since I first said yes to God's invitation to enter more intentionally into these disciplines, I still find it challenging to protect space for these times apart which satisfy the deep empty places of my soul. Like you, I wrestle with the influences of the secular culture and even religious subcultures that in overt or subtle ways devalue nonproductive times for being rather than doing. And I struggle to trust myself to the mystery that is God in the silent places beyond all the things I think I should know. By now I know better than to blame my struggle on forces "out there." I am more aware than ever that I have my own in-



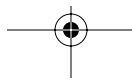
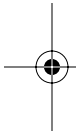


ner demons that are easily enticed—demons of desire to perform, to be seen as competent (at least!), productive, culturally relevant, balanced. I still battle these demons regularly when it is time to enter into these important disciplines.

But what a delight to keep experiencing God's invitations amidst all the challenges! And what a joy to notice that more and more the delight is overpowering the demons. For it is a wonderful thing to be invited. Not coerced or manipulated, but truly invited to the home of someone you have looked forward to getting to know, to a party with fun people, on a date with someone who is intriguing. There is something about being invited that makes the heart glad. Someone is seeking me out, desiring my presence enough to initiate an encounter.

The invitation to solitude and silence is just that. It is an invitation to enter more deeply into the intimacy of relationship with the One who waits just outside the noise and busyness of our lives. It is an invitation to communication and communion with the One who is always present even when our awareness has been dulled by distraction. It is an invitation to the adventure of spiritual transformation in the deepest places of our being, an adventure that will result in greater freedom and authenticity and surrender to God than we have yet experienced.

God's invitation is a winsome one, but it is not casual; it is an invitation from his very heart to the depths of our being. It warrants serious consideration because it is an invitation to a journey, a quest really, for something we have been longing for all our lives. Unlike a trip designed to get us somewhere as efficiently as possible, a quest requires us to leave familiar dwelling places for strange lands we cannot yet envision, without knowing when we will return. This journey requires a willingness to say goodbye to life as we know it





because our heart is longing for something more.

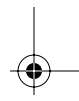
When we embark on such a journey, we understand there will be challenges along the way, unexpected encounters that stretch us to our limits and change the shape of who we are. We know we will emerge changed, bearing the marks of the journey on our soul and body. Our friends may not recognize us when we return; we may not even recognize ourselves!

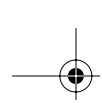
Such a journey requires commitment—willingness to press on through sunlit days and dark nights, unspeakable beauty and terrible danger, sometimes finding companionship and sometimes feeling utterly alone, sometimes sure we are headed in the right direction, other times afraid we have completely lost our way. It is that perilous and priceless journey inward to that place at the center of ourselves where God dwells.

My guess is that because you have this book in your hand, you are already sensing God's invitation to solitude and silence and a longing to say yes is stirring within you. This book offers spiritual guidance for your journey, helping you to hear God's invitation more clearly and giving you concrete ways of saying yes. Each chapter offers teaching and reflection on different aspects of the journey, but more important, there are practices that will help you to actually enter into solitude and silence. The practices are very simple, but don't be deceived: many of them involve significant paradigm shifts, and we need practice to actually make the shifts.

If you are the type that can't help reading through a book quickly in one sitting, go ahead and do that, but I encourage you then to go back through it, spending time with each reflection and the practice that follows. In fact, it would be best to stay with each chapter and engage the practice until God releases you and indicates you are ready to move on.

This book also offers perspective on what you might experience at



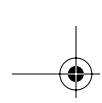


different points along the way. There have been several times in my own journey when I thought I was falling off the spiritual path and I needed someone to tell me, “This is what it’s like. You haven’t fallen off the path, you are right in the heart of the journey.” It is this kind of reassurance I want to offer, so you don’t give up too soon!

The prophet Elijah, whose journey into solitude and silence has been deeply reassuring to me along the way, serves as a biblical companion throughout this book. There is a difference between reading a story and living in a story, and I have lived in Elijah’s story for a very long time. When I began my journey into solitude and silence, it was so challenging and so far outside of my Christian experience that I needed a place in Scripture to land. I needed Scripture that would show me (not just tell me) that I was not alone in what I was experiencing and that the invitation to move from the known into the unknown was a trustworthy one. The concreteness, the humanness and the detail of Elijah’s process of moving into solitude and silence grounded me in spiritual reality when it felt as if the foundations of my life were being shaken to the core. Because Elijah’s story has informed my own journey so powerfully, I invite you into Elijah’s story as well, not so much to gain information as to allow you a place to settle in Scripture when your questions are swirling.

You might wonder why this book is about solitude and silence rather than solitude and Scripture, or solitude and prayer, or solitude and journaling. All of these elements of the spiritual life find their way into the book in different places, but I have chosen to write about solitude and silence because I believe silence is the most challenging, the most needed and the least experienced spiritual discipline among evangelical Christians today. It is much easier to talk about it and read about it than to actually become quiet. We are a very busy, wordy and heady faith tradition. Yet we are desperate to





find ways to open ourselves to our God who is, in the end, beyond all of our human constructs and human agendas. With all of our emphasis on theology and Word, cognition and service—and as important as these are—we are starved for mystery, to know this God as One who is totally Other and to experience reverence in his presence. We are starved for intimacy, to see and feel and know God in the very cells of our being. We are starved for rest, to know God beyond what we can do for him. We are starved for quiet, to hear the sound of sheer silence that is the presence of God himself.

The invitation to solitude and silence is an invitation to all of this, and the beauty of an invitation is that we really do have a choice. We can say yes or no. God extends the invitation, but he honors our freedom and will not shove in where he is not wanted. Instead, he waits for us to respond from the depths of our desire. When your invitation comes, I pray you will say yes.

