

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE HANDOUT

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Silence and Solitude are the most radical of the spiritual disciplines in my opinion. The reason for this, I believe, is that they challenge us on every level of our existence. They challenge us on the level of culture. They confront us on the level of our human relationships. They challenge us on the level of our soul. To be in solitude is to choose to do NOTHING for extensive periods of time. In it we give up accomplishments of all kinds. Silence is also required to complete solitude. When we go into silence and solitude, we stop making demands on God. It is here that the reality that God is God and we are his, begins to realize in our lives. 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*

Busyness is artificial significance. Silence is not punishment. In Silence he says you have enough for the journey. Personal abundance, personal encounter. Get all the nourishment that you can out of every moment we experience with him. He is building us into his people that know how to endure. Whether with abundance or lack. Hold steadfast on the one who called us to himself. Rooted and grounded in love.

WHAT IS SILENCE AND SOLITUDE?

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 to experienced.

1 KINGS 19:1-19

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” 3 Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

4 But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” 5 And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” 6 And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” 8 And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

The Lord Speaks to Elijah

9 There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10 He said, “I have been very jealous

for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." 11 And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12 And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. [a]13 And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." 15 And the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. 16 And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. 17 And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. 18 Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

The Call of Elisha

19 So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yokes of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him.

OUR JOURNEY WITH SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Things we will learn through the journey.

1. Our Journey begins beyond words

- a. You don't know what it is but there is an angst or deep cry in our hearts. A desire or yearning deep within that nothing can satisfy any longer. An itch that can't be scratch.
- b. My journey began after my accident three years ago. I had a lot of time to think and be alone with my thoughts. Read books, Invitation to Solitude and Silence by Ruth Haley Barton. Her life resonated with mine. And there a counselor told her these words that stuck with 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."* This was a moment of self-discovery for me. That image of the jar with river water was where I was, and it made me see that a longing deep in my heart I've had was that of the clear water settling and that's what my heart longed to be, somewhere else.
- c. For the first time in a long time I was able to sit and see my life go in front of me like a movie in a tv. I lived a hurried life. I got married young. Mike and I were both in ministry. He was youth pastor and I was the children's pastor and we were both finishing school. We started our family young. I was still working, going to school and had my first child. Three years later came Mishael, and I was still in school and working. Things got too busy and decided to stop working. Focused on finishing my school. Then two years later Malaki came along. At

this point I had been a Christian for many years, but I could not seem to consistently love my husband and children like I should and knew the Bible called me to. So, I did what every mature Christians do, I prayed about it and shoved it down the back seat of my heart and mind. Did not want to think about it too much. And moved on. There was underlying anger, frustration, and a lot of confusion during that time. Why couldn't I break free to deeply love? What was motivating my crazy schedule? Why did I find it so hard to say no, especially when saying no hurt those especially close to me? I was lonely and longing for more. Where was peace, joy, love I would so often read in the Bible?

- d. It was here that I recognized the invitation to be still and know beyond my addiction to noise, words, people and performance-oriented activity that HE is GOD. Silence and Solitude were concrete ways of opening to the presence of God beyond human effort.
- e. 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. In Solitude and Silence, 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 (1):

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.

2. Our Journey will help us take our spiritual life seriously

We begin to quiet the noise of our lives, to cease the constant striving of our efforts, and decide to give God our undivided attention. We release the need to control things and set agendas. In silence we create space for God's activity rather than filling every minute with our own. Remember the jar. We don't need to do anything to cause the settling except leave the jar alone for a while. So, when we sit in God's presence, the sediment that is floating around in our souls begins to settle. We don't have to do anything but show up and TRUST the spiritual law of gravity that says, BE STILL, AND THE KNOWING WILL COME.

PRACTICE (2):

1. Identify your sacred space and time. Explore all the possibilities for a time and physical space in which you can be alone on a regular basis. Preferably you can identify a spot in your

home, outdoors or in your office that helps you to settle into a quiet and receptive state of being. Consider whether there are any spiritual symbols or artifacts you would like to bring into this space to help you to be present to the spiritual reality of God's presence with you. Feel free to experiment, noticing what works and what doesn't, until you find the best time and place for you. Once you have identified it, you may want to tell family members or roommates about your new commitment, so they can honor the time by not interrupting you and honor the space by staying out of it during your times alone with God.

2. Begin with a modest goal, especially if silence is a new practice for you. Ten, fifteen or twenty minutes of time spent in actual silence is realistic, depending on such factors as your personality, pace of life, reliance on words and activity. You can always increase the time as your capacity for silence increases. The amount of time is not nearly as important as the regularity of the practice.

3. Settle into a comfortable yet alert physical position. One excellent posture for beginning is to sit in a comfortable straight-backed chair with back and shoulders straight but also relaxed and open, both feet flat on the floor, hands in a comfortable position in your lap. Over time you may choose other prayer postures, but this is a good place to start.

4. Ask God to give you a simple prayer that expresses your openness and desire for God. Choose a prayer phrase that expresses your desire or need for God these days in the simplest terms possible. It is best if the prayer is no more than six or eight syllables so that it can be prayed very naturally in the rhythm of your breathing. Pray this prayer several times as an entry into silence and also as a way of dealing with distractions. Distractions are inevitable, so when they come, simply let them go by like clouds floating across the sky. Help yourself return to your prayerful intent by repeating the prayer you have chosen. Use your prayer phrase for as long as it captures what is most true about your heart's desire for God and link it with a body posture that also helps you express your spiritual desire.

5. Close your time in silence with a prayer of gratitude for God's presence with you or pray the Lord's Prayer.

6. Resist the urge to judge yourself or your experiences in silence. The purpose of time spent in silence is just to be with God in whatever state you are in and to let him be in control. Trust that whatever your time in silence was like, it was exactly as it should be.

3. Our Journey will bring some resistance

Elijah experienced resistance. He had defeated the prophets of Baal. By the time 1 Kings 19, we see Elijah exhausted from the spiritual, physical and emotional battle that he had gone through. He heard threats from the queen of the land Jezebel, and he became afraid. I totally can relate to this because I am at my weakest when I pour out the most. We may not be this far off, but we are considering this Solitude thing. Solitude is something we need, but doubt and resistance will rise up when we are about to enter in. The internal battle of push and pull begin.

We all come to solitude holding a lot: cares and concerns about our responsibilities, fear and uncertainty about the experience of solitude itself, longing and desire. The fact that we are holding so much and don't know what to do with it all can sabotage our efforts to enter in if we don't know how to pay attention and sort it out.

The question here is WILL YOU TRUST HIM TO TAKE CARE OF THESE THINGS? CAN WE TRUST THAT HE LOVES OUR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS MORE THAN WE DO AND HE WILL TAKE CARE OF THEM WHILE WE ARE GIVING THIS TIME AND ATTENTION TO OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM? WILL YOU TRUST HIM TO KEEP WORKING TO BRING FORTH HIS GOOD INTENTIONS IN OUR LIVES WITHOUT DIRECT INVOLVEMENT, AT LEAST FOR THIS LITTLE WHILE? CAN WE ACCEPT THE FACT THAT WE ARE NOT INDISPENSABLE AND ALLOW THE WORLD TO GO ON WITHOUT US FOR THESE FEW MOMENTS?

Before we do our next exercise, I want you to take a piece of paper and make list of cares and concerns weighing on you at this moment. Put this list in the envelope I gave you marked "TRUST"

If you are afraid of experiencing solitude, because we are new to this, what are some fears you have. Let's make a list of those and bring them to the Lord. Acknowledging my cares and worries invites me to trust God with what is "out there"; acknowledging this very intimate fear challenges me to trust God with myself, my heart, my soul, my longing and the fear that my longing will not be met.

PRACTICE (3):

As you enter into solitude and silence today, notice your own experience of the push-pull phenomenon. When have you noticed resistance (pushing you away from solitude) and desire (pulling you toward solitude) functioning within you at the same time? What are you noticing right now?

What cares and concerns do you need to entrust to God's care so you can be fully present with him in solitude? Allow them to surface, along with the emotions surrounding them. Then jot them in your journal or on a separate piece of paper. Release them to God through prayer or use a symbolic gesture like placing the page in an envelope and setting it aside. Notice how it feels to have a way of releasing care and concern as part of your routine of entering into solitude. You may want to incorporate this into your practice regularly.

Do you notice any fear or anxiety these days about the experience of solitude? When have you been aware that fear sabotages your efforts to enter more deeply into solitude and silence? Use words, phrases, pictures or images to help you express your fear to God. Don't waste energy trying to fight your fear; just let it be in God's presence, like a child who is comforted by a parent's presence when she is frightened. Listen for God's response.

What does your desire feel like, sound like, look like these days? How easy or difficult is it for you to stay with your experience of desire? Are you brave enough to own your desire, to say it and claim it as the truest thing about you, so that it can take you where your heart has been longing to go?

Close your time of silence with a prayer of gratitude for God's presence with you or pray the Lord's prayer as a way of transitioning to whatever comes next in your day.

4. Our Journey will bring us face to face with how we truly are.

When Elijah entered into solitude and silence, one of the first things he had to recognize was how tired and depleted he was on every level. He lay down under the broom tree and fell

asleep. In God's wisdom, He began dealing with Elijah's physical weariness and depletion – he let Elijah sleep. Then he woke Elijah up when it was time to eat and drink, provided water and food for him, told him to go back to sleep and then started the process all over again. God addressed his physical condition before he moved to his intellectual and emotional condition.

We need to stop fighting our exhaustions and surrender to them in God's presence. No matter how hard we fight our exhaustions, nothing will provide lasting solutions. Fatigue and depletion may be the first things we need to attend to as Elijah.

When we rest, we become more alert for when we need to be alert. So, does it mean that every time I'm tired, I'm in danger? Absolutely not. But there are two kinds of tire. "Good tired" This is the kind of tire we experience after a job well done, a task accomplished, an intense work out. If we are living in healthy rhythms of work and rest, this tiredness is a temporary condition, and when it comes, we know that after we take enough time to rest and recuperation, we will soon be back in the swing of things.

But there is the other kind of tired. "Dangerous Tired". It is a chronic fatigue accumulation over months and months, and it does not always manifest itself in physical exhaustion. In fact, it can be masked by excessive activity and compulsive overworking. When we are dangerously tired, we feel out of control, compelled to constant activity by inner impulses that we may not be aware of.

When we are dangerously tired, we don't feel much of anything, good or bad.

PRACTICE (4):

In silence, reflect on where you fall on the following continuum:

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| fully energized and refreshed | good tired | drifting toward dan- gerous tired | fully in a state of dan- gerous tired |
|----------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|

As you identify where you are on the continuum, don't rush to try to solve or fix anything; instead, give yourself time and space to notice what is true about you. Invite God into this moment by saying, "God, this is what is true about me. What are we going to do about this?" Allow yourself to become fully aware of God with you in these moments, loving you and extending compassion to you. Hear the words of Jesus spoken to you in these moments: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). What is it like to hear these words right now? Do you believe it is possible for you to find the rest you need?

Tell God what you need and listen for what he wants to say to you now.

5. Our Journey will give us the opportunity to rest in God.

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

I have 8 children and one of my favorite times with them was as babies the look on their

faces when they had just been fed. Their little bodies relaxed against mine. Skin to skin contact, such closeness. So much love I felt just looking at their little eyes, ears, noses etc. they would be fully present with me and I with them. We experienced each other at a level that was beyond words. All crankiness would be gone, peace and joy would fill their little faces.

If we are basically rested and energized, solitude helps us maintain this healthy state. We have to learn to maintain good rhythms of work and rest in our lives.

In solitude we learn to listen to our body's needs for rest and relief from the tension it carries. The more we are willing to listen to our physical condition and respond with greater care, the more we discover that the physical and the spiritual are not as disconnected as we had assumed.

Spiritual, Emotional, Intellectual, Social, Physical

PRACTICE (5):

Take three deep, slow breaths-long inhalations as well as exhalations. Close your eyes if that helps you to relax into your breathing. Let your intent be to rest your whole self into God, knowing you are as safe with him as a baby is with his mother.

As you breathe, notice what happens in your body. Where are the tight places that relax as you breathe? Is there any way your body wants to shift or change position in order to be more comfortable? Make whatever adjustments will deepen your rest.

Continue to breathe, resting openly and simply in God's presence for a few moments. Notice how things are with your body these days. What feels tired? What feels energized? What hurts or aches or feels tight? What feels good and strong and well? Does your body feel loved and cared for or unbalanced and abused?

Is there anything God seems to want to give you right now in response to your body's need: a few minutes to curl up and rest under a warm blanket, a quiet walk, time to just keep sitting and relishing his presence?

Allow yourself to rest in God in this physical, tangible way for as long as you can in your time of solitude. Close your silence with a brief prayer of gratitude for God's care experienced in these moments. Ask him to help you to remain in this resting stance in whatever activity you enter next.

6. Our Journey will give us the opportunity to rest our minds.

My heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. Psalm 131:1

Our minds are always going trying to fix our marriages, kids, friends and family members. Our minds are always busy trying to manipulate and control, trying to figure things out, holding on to the latest ideas. It try's very hard trying to make sense of things.

It is not in the thinking that we figure things out it is actually in the listening. God speaks things to us that cannot be understood through human wisdom or shuffled around and filed

away in the mind. (Romans 8:16; 1 Corinthians 2:10-13) At this level we find ourselves loved to the extent that fear is cast out, so we are free to hear and respond to the risky invitations of God. To hear at this level, we must rest from our striving. We must let go of everything our mind is holding on to in order to receive the revelation that comes from beyond ourselves.

It is not that we seek to ignore the intellect (or any aspects of ourselves for that matter) in times of solitude; instead we let the mind settle into the heart, the very center of our being where God dwells in us as redeemed people.

PRACTICE (6):

Take three long, deep breaths to help yourself settle into the silence. Notice how the breathing helps you release any physical tension that might be distracting you. Notice (if you can) the different levels of your being, particularly the difference between your mind and your heart. Give yourself a few moments to notice and experience what is going on in your mind and what is going on in your heart.

What is it you need to know in the stillness that you haven't been able to know in the noisiness and busyness of your mind? What is the "I don't know" place in your life that no amount of thinking and wordiness has been able to touch with any kind of answer?

Sit with God with your question. Say it out loud. Tell him how it feels not to have the answer, but resist the urge to grasp for answers, to force clarity that isn't there or cling to mental processes for figuring things out. Allow related issues, concerns and thoughts to present themselves, but don't dwell on them. Let them pass by like clouds in the sky. Rather than trying to figure anything out or grasp for anything, thing, rest in God's presence with your question.

If you notice yourself becoming impatient, ask, Am I willing to be patient with this thing that is unsolved in my heart? What would it look like for me to stop working so hard on this and trust God to work in his way and his time?

Sit in silence for as long a time as you have allotted. Close your time of silence by praying the Lord's Prayer, allowing the words and phrases to shape your response to your question and to the next activity you engage in.

Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

When we stop the music of our life to enter into solitude, we sit down right where we are at that moment, and that's where we meet God in our present delight or our present sadness. We meet God in tears of our life and the laughter of our life. We meet God in our most unnerving questions and in the answers, we are celebrating. No matter where we are on any given day, when the music stops and everything gets quiet, we sit down right where we are and allow ourselves to be there with him.

How desperately our souls need regular moments like that, moments when we rest in God and allow ourselves to be with God with what is most true about us.

PRACTICE (7):

Some days you can easily be with God with both gratitude and grief. At other times one or the other is predominant, and you need to go with what is most pressing. The following exercise is well suited to become a regular part of your extended solitude times as a way of resting in God.

Quiet yourself in God's presence by taking several deep breaths. As you silence the music of your life, is there anything that is hurting these days, any grief you have been holding in? It need not be anything thing momentous; it could be something that feels relatively insignificant such as a hurtful interaction with someone who matters to you, or being left out of something you wanted to be included in. Allow whatever is weighing on your soul right now to come to the surface-whether face-whether it seems big or small.

Let yourself experience the grief but do so with the awareness that you are not alone. You are in the presence of the One who loves you and bears your grief with you. Notice whether your body wants to express the grief through kneeling, lying flat on the floor, shedding tears or sitting in utter stillness, and allow that to happen. You may want to use these words as your prayer: "In silence my soul waits for you alone, O God; from you alone comes my salvation" (a personalization of Ps 62:1).

Is there something you are feeling especially grateful for these days? Where are you experiencing life and authentic connection with God and others?

Allow time to just experience your gratitude in God's presence. Don't feel you have to do anything except to bask in the goodness of God toward you. If you want to say anything to God or journal your thoughts, feel free to do so, but don't feel that you have to.

8. Our Journey will bring moments of emptiness.

Inner silence depends on a continual seeking, a continual crying in the night, a repeated bending over the abyss... For He is found when He is sought, and when He is no longer sought, He escapes us. Thomas Merton

The invitation to solitude and silence does not end with us sitting under a solitary broom tree eating angel-food cakes. Then strengthening of body and soul is a prerequisite for a journey ahead, a pilgrimage that leads into empty places of the wilderness.

When the angel of the Lord woke Elijah from his sleep the second time to offer him food and drink, he says, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

There is a journey ahead.

It was as if the angel told Elijah, Great, you have now finally left behind all the external trap-pings that just get in the way on the spiritual journey. You are starting to become empty

enough – empty of your reliance on yourself and empty of those things that satisfy only briefly – to begin hungering for a more substantive experience of my presence.

In Elijah's resting, he gained clarity and resolve that had been impossible for him to find when he was desperately tired. Elijah wanted to encounter God. He was willing to leave all behind for the mere possibility of finding God in some way that would heal the disillusionment of his life. He was willing to walk into the emptiness of the wilderness in order to find what he was looking for.

Dan Allender writes in *The Healing Path*,
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.

For the longest time I thought that dry, desert moments were punishment. And now I realize that the nourishment that God gives us before the dry, desert, empty moments are just provisions to help us make it through those moments. It is not punishment but a gift to be stretched and more depended on the Father or we DIE. In the vast emptiness of the human soul there is finally room for God.

PRACTICE (8):

All of us have places in our life that feel very empty; sometimes they exist simultaneously with places that are very full. The empty places are the ones we usually try to avoid, yet God is waiting to meet us in the midst of our emptiness. Where are the empty places in your life right now? Are you willing to acknowledge them and walk into them as Elijah did?

During your time in silence, sit with your hands gently open on your lap as a way of expressing your willingness to be empty in God's presence. Sit in the place of emptiness in your life and imagine that it is a receptacle for the very presence of God. Remember that we cannot not demand that God fill the emptiness on our terms. Let it be enough to experience your emptiness in a new way-no longer as a scary, dark and barren place but as a place of openness, receptivity and spiritual possibility.

9. Our Journey will give us the opportunity to face ourselves.

Solitude is the furnace of transformation... (It) is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter – 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 can see from Elijah's story, solitude and silence offer no quick fixes. Elijah walked in the outer emptiness of the desert for forty days and forty nights, and God still had not made himself known. There is a part of me that doesn't like this part of the story. I don't like waiting.

I think of times when I've been impatient. Waiting at the grocery store line. Taking kids to

the dentist. Or taking boys to get haircuts. I could choose to get up and leave but there is a problem. My groceries would not be bought, my kid's teeth would not get cleaned and my boy's hair would not get cut. Can you feel my dilemma?

When God finally made himself known to Elijah, he asked, what are you doing here, Elijah? When God asks us that question do, we come to him as we are with honesty, with the good, the bad and the ugly or do we answer with pretense?

We need to be willing to come as we are and to name it in God's presence. But we are so used to being shamed or condemned in the unfinished parts of ourselves that it is hard to believe there is a place where all of who we are – the good, the bad and the ugly – will be handled with love and gentleness. Solitude is this place, but it takes time to learn to trust it.

The waiting then is about becoming safe enough with God that we are no longer defending ourselves or hiding ourselves in his presence. It is about waiting for our egos to finally give up trying to control everything and make it look presentable. It is about accepting the emptiness that comes when we let go of our attempts at image management because we are finally ready to deal with truth, at least to the extent that we are able to bear it. All of this just takes time.

It took me a long time to become safe enough with myself and with God to allow the good, the bad and the ugly to come pouring out. But eventually the outer chaos settled down, and I could finally hear God's question, what are you doing here, Ruth? I finally could answer.....

No matter how many hours of darkness the watchman has to wait through, he knows from experience that morning will come. This is how we wait for God – with longing, with expectancy, with alert awareness, our whole self-straining to catch the earliest possible glimpse of this God who comes. When we do this, we open ourselves to the possibility of being met by God in the silence that follows the storm.

PRACTICE (9):

As you enter into silence today, take several deep breaths as a way of settling into these moments and becoming aware of God's presence with you – closer to you than your breath.

When you feel ready, hear God ask you the question he asked Elijah. What are you doing here? Sit quietly with the question, allowing it to penetrate all the way to the core of your being.

Allow your response to this question to emerge from your heart without trying to edit it. You may want to write your response in your journal, you may want to respond with spoken words, or you may need to just experience the emotion that comes. The point is to communicate with God as honestly as you can about what is drawing you deeper and deeper into solitude right now. It may be serious and weighty, but it doesn't have to be. Most recently when God asked me this question in solitude, it did not stir up the chaos I described earlier. This time my honest answer was:

I am here because I have been very zealous for the Lord, for what appears to be his purposes. Today there is no sadness, no discouragement, not even the familiar loneliness. There is this sense that everything is as it should be, but sometimes my zealousness gets the better of me and I push for what is not quite ready to come. I feel a familiar frenetic quality to my activity that indicates I am not as grounded as I would like to be. I am here because I need to find the ground of my being again.

For right now, let it be enough to say what is true about you and then just wait in God's presence.

10. Our Journey will give us the opportunity to experience His pure presence.

Solitude eventually offers a quiet gift of grace, a gift that comes whenever we are able to grace ourselves honestly: the gift of acceptance, of compassion, for who we are. As we allow ourselves to be 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

Elijah eventually found God, not in the storm, the fire, but in the still small voice. In the quiet.

THE SILENCE THAT COMES AFTER THE CHAOS IS PREGNANT WITH THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

The silence is unlike all other silences, for it is full of a Presence that makes itself know as a subtle stirring in the soul, a gentle blowing, a quiet whisper. For some there may even be a physical sensation, a vibration, a vision or a voice.

It takes time and experience to recognize this God who reaches out and seeks to communicate and commune with us. The fruit of Elijah's willingness to remain open to God in the midst of inner chaos created by self-knowledge was that he came to understand through experience that he was loved and valued just as much when he was alone, exhausted and not performing very well as he was when he was standing on a mountain top calling down the fire of God in front of heathen prophets and fickle followers.

When Elijah experienced "the sound of sheer silence" that was full of the Presence of God, there was no need for words or any kind of cognitive response. He wrapped his face in his mantle – a sign of absolute reverence – and he went out and just stood in the Presence. He let the Presence wash over him.

This Love does not lose track of us no matter what dark places we must walk into. It is a Love deeper than any abyss that we might fall into. It is a Love with the power to heal any brokenness we might encounter. It is worth any price we have to pay to find it.

PRACTICE (10):

As you enter the silence today, take several deep breaths as a way of settling into the quiet intimacy that you and God have been learning to share. Allow yourself to feel the safety of this time, this place, this Presence. Take a few moments to just enjoy it.

As you are quiet in God's presence, reflect on your response to God's question at the end of chapter nine: What are you doing here? Is there any self-awareness that has come to you in answering this question? Is there any area of your life where God is illuminating your need to be transformed?

As you reflect on the reading today, notice the place(s) where you found yourself saying, "That's exactly where I am!" Perhaps you are in a pre-awareness stage: you know something is not quite right, but you're not sure what it is. Perhaps you are in the midst of seeing yourself as you've never seen yourself before. Maybe you are at the point of desperation, finally willing to lie back and let God do the work of stripping away the knottiest layers of the false self. You may even be experiencing the silence that is full of the Presence of God, and you're not quite sure if you can trust it.

Whatever is happening in the silence today, just stay in it without trying to run from it. Tell God what you are experiencing, and ask him if there is anything, he wants you to do in response. Invite him to take initiative with you in regard to whatever you are seeing and follow any promptings that come. God has an uncanny ability to bring exactly what it is we need, right when we are ready to receive it.

Close your time in prayer today by reciting the Lord's Prayer out loud if possible. Particularly if you are needing to let go of one of the handholds of your false self, envision yourself joining with Christ as he prays this prayer with his disciples. Allow the praying of this prayer to anchor you in the Unchanging Reality of God's kingdom, even though it feels as if everything around you is shifting and falling away.

11. Our Journey will give us the opportunity to receive guidance.

Under the silent, watchful eye of the Holy One we are all standing, whether we know it or not. And in that Center, in that holy Abyss where the eternal dwells at the base of our being, our programs, our gifts to God, our offerings of duties performed again and again are revised in their values... If we center down and live in that Holy Silence which is dearer than life, and take our life program into the silent places of the heart with complete openness, ready to renounce according to God's leading, then many of the things we are doing will lose their vitality for us. Thomas Kelly

When we know the Love of God in a deep and experiential way, is only then we can be truly open and receptive to his will. Without knowing his love, it is hard to listen openly for the still small voice of God.

For many years deep inside I didn't think and believed that God's intentions for my life were deeply good, instead I lived in fear that if I really trusted him, he might withhold something good from me.

When we are settled in God's love at the core of our being, the waters of the soul become much clearer. It is interesting that Elijah never asked for guidance; guidance simply came in the context of his willingness to be with God in utter openness and vulnerability. God loves us enough to wait to that teachable moment.

God's intention was not for Elijah to stay in solitude forever, it was that he return to his prophetic ministry rested and recalibrated through the wisdom he had received. Now Elijah had guidance for how to go back more wisely with consideration for his true limitations.

PRACTICE (11):

Take a few moments to allow your body to settle into a comfortable yet alert position. Take several deep breaths as a way of entering into the silence and making yourself present to the One who is always present with you.

One way to discern God's activity and guidance is to pay attention to what gives us a sense of life and what seems to cut us off from a sense of life. As we become more practiced at noticing these dynamics without judging them, we can be more discerning about choosing what is life-giving in ordinary moments and in the larger decisions.

In your time of silent listening today, ask God to bring to your heart a moment in the last couple of days for which you were most grateful. When were you most able to give and receive love? Which moment seemed to have the most life in it for you?

Ask God to bring to your heart a moment in the last couple of days for which you were least grateful. When were you least able to give and receive love? Which moment seemed to drain life from you?

What wisdom, insight or further questions seem to arise from your awareness of moments that were life-giving and moments that were life-draining? Is there any way God may be guiding you to choose more of what gives you life?

12. Our Journey will be for the sake of others.

When we are experiencing ourselves as the beloved of God, accepted and cherished by him in all of our beauty and brokenness, our hard, rough edges start to soften. We begin to see others as beloved as well, and that is what gets reflected back to them when they look into our eyes. Not only does the love of God come to us in solitude, the love of God begins to pour through us to others.

There is nothing that fills like the Love that is God. There is nothing that transforms like the Presence that is God. There is nothing else that produces what the Silence of God produces within the human soul.

I'll finish with this quote from Catherine de Hueck Doherty, ...such silence is holy, a prayer beyond all prayers, leading to the final prayer of constant presence to God, to the heights of contemplation when the soul, finally at peace, lives by the will of him whom she loves totally, utterly, and completely. This silence, then, will break forth in a charity that overflows in the service of the neighbor without counting the cost. It will witness to Christ anywhere, always. Availability will become delightful and easy, for in each person the soul will see the face of her Love. Hospitality will be deep and real, for a silent heart is a loving heart, and a loving heart is a hospice to the world.

PRACTICE (12):

As you enter into solitude and silence today, allow yourself to sit quietly for a time-ten minutes at least-and just enjoy the presence of the One who is always present with you. Notice how your capacity to be present to God has changed or shifted as you have entered into the practices of solitude and silence more intentionally.

After you have spent time just enjoying God's presence, invite him to show you a time or times in recent days when the quality of your presence with others has seemed different. Perhaps you experienced an increased capacity to feel and trust love in a particular relationship. Perhaps you experienced a flash of wisdom or discernment that you were courageous enough to follow, and you were surprised by the result. Perhaps you were self-aware enough to hold back a critical or manipulative comment and offer a more edifying one instead. Perhaps in a difficult moment you rested into God rather than reacting with panic.

Ask God to help you to notice what he wants you to notice. Allow yourself to savor the transformation that this incident represents in your life.

Now identify the rhythms of solitude and silence that were in place in your life that seemed to bring this good fruit. Based on all of your experiences with solitude and silence prior to and during your interactions with this book, begin exploring and identifying your own rhythms for solitude and silence. Be as concrete and realistic as possible. As you feel ready, tell God of your desire and your commitment.

A DAY IN SOLITUDE: BEING YOURSELF WITH GOD

Solitude, at its most basic and profound level, is simply an opportunity to be ourselves with God. When Elijah entered into his time of solitude, he had experienced a great deal of success, but it had taken its toll. He was physically exhausted, discouraged and in need of direction. His first step into solitude and silence was to stop, to acknowledge the truth about himself and to rest in God's presence. He made no attempt to sanitize anything, fix anything or judge anything. He was free to be himself-just as he was on that day-in God's presence.

This is our invitation as well. We, too, enter into solitude in the midst of life situations that affect the way we are with God and what it is we need to receive from him. Just as time spent together enables human friends to grow more and more comfortable with being themselves in each other's presence, extended periods of solitude give us the opportunity to enter more deeply into the experience of bringing our whole selves into relationship with God. The purpose of this retreat day is to help you be with God right where you are so that he can minister to you right where you are.

As you enter into your day of solitude, choose a place at home or in a retreat center environment that feels comfortable and safe to you, a place that allows you enough privacy to be open and available to God. Begin by settling into a comfortable position in your body and sitting quietly for a few moments, breathing deeply. Become aware of God's presence with you and your desire to be present with God on this day. After you have calmed and quieted your soul, tell God what you need and what you desire on this day. Write in your journal if that helps you to be more specific

and concrete. You may want to reread Elijah's story in 1 Kings 19 as a way of settling into this set-apart time.

Notice whether or not you are physically tired, and if you are, allow yourself to do something that feels restful to you—take a nap, sit quietly in a chapel or lay on a blanket in the sun. You may need to rest for an hour or more; give yourself all the time you need to begin experiencing the restoration that will enable you to be alert in God's presence. As you give yourself to resting, be conscious of the fact that you are doing so at God's invitation.

When you have rested and as you feel ready, begin to notice what is true about you these days using the following questions as a guide. Take as much time as you need with each question, knowing that answering them fully and following God's invitations within them might take the whole day.

What is your physical condition lately? Are you tired, energized, satisfied with your level of health and fitness, eating well or not, caring for health issues and so on? Talk with God about these things and listen for his response.

What concerns and questions have been occupying your thoughts recently? How has your mind been working on these questions, and what is the result? On this day, spend time sitting in stillness with your question(s), or go for a slow, meditative walk carrying your question with you. Don't grasp for answers. Instead, remain in God's presence with your question in the spirit of Psalm 62:1: "In silence my soul waits for you and you alone, O God." See what happens.

What is the condition of your soul these days—what concerns are weighing on you? What joys or successes are you celebrating? Where do you hurt? Bring these to God today as a child would bring squeals of delight or tears of sadness or frustration to a loving parent. Allow yourself to experience everything that is true for you right now without censoring anything. Speak to God directly about what you are experiencing and invite God to be with you in that place.

REFLECTIONS AT THE END OF THE DAY

After Elijah had been in solitude for quite some time, God asked him again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It was a way of checking in to see, "So, how are you doing now?"

Elijah was still in a state that clearly indicated that he needed to make some changes in his life. In response to Elijah's condition, God graciously responded with some very specific instructions for his health and well-being as he returned to his normal activities (1 Kings 19:15-18). This guidance seemed to come not so much because Elijah asked for guidance but rather as a natural result of the fact that he had gotten quiet enough to hear.

So how are you doing now? Take a few moments at the close of this day to reflect on what happened between you and God during this time. Are there any shifts or changes that have taken place since you first entered into solitude? Is there anything that you know more clearly now than you did before you became quiet? Is there any guidance or invitation from God in this? How will you respond to God's invitation to you?

As you bring this day to a close, thank God for his presence with you throughout the day, and move gently and prayerfully back into your life in the company of others.

All these Practices taken from:

Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence by Ruth Haley Barton

Additional reading suggestions:

Sacred Rhythms by Ruth Haley Barton

The Way of the Heart by Henri Nouwen