



views from the hermitage

Practicing Silence

Naomi Wenger

At The Hermitage we often remark to new guests that we give the gift or “permission” of silence to one another. But why do we keep silence? Why is it part of contemplative retreat? We are not talking about ordinary quiet, but of a silence that is intentional. It requires effort.

Why we need silence

Why is this kind of silence worth cultivating? We discover the answer to this question by understanding our own nature. We have long and complex stories that weave together in marvelous ways. We are not all good nor are we all bad. We are sensing, thinking creatures. We interact with our environment by means of our five senses and our reason. But there is more to us than our senses. Memories of our past experiences allow us to relive or remember what we are not actually experiencing in time. Coincidences cause us to wonder if someone else can “read our mind.” Psychologists and brain researchers tell us that we are more than we even know. Our life experiences are just the “tip of the iceberg.” Philosophers, mystics and religious teachers through the ages have also described the human person as highly complex and interrelated.

Much of our psyche, or soul, lies outside the realm of consciousness. And if we are to be whole people, receiving the depths of our unconscious as fully part of ourselves even though we cannot communicate directly with it, then we need to allow for a way of communication between the conscious and the unconscious. Silence is one way to open the unconscious – the territory of the deep self and the place where God touches our lives.

In the Christian tradition, the practice of silence goes back to the life of Christ who often went off by himself to pray – to connect with his divine nature (Mark 1: 29-39; Matthew 14:13, 23; Luke 4:42-42; and Luke 5:15). And it was practiced as a lifestyle by the Desert Fathers and Mothers; men and women who left their homes and the comforts of

their lives to seek God in the silence of the desert. Their primary insight was: “that the secret of God’s will was written in the world [God] had created, that only a man [or woman] who had learned to be perfectly silent could ever come to read that secret” (Placa and Riordan). They sought exterior silence in the desert and interior silence in a life of disciplined prayer.

Because silence makes an opening to the unconscious and allows for more contact with God, it can open us to more love. But it can also open us to a huge inner struggle with spiritual forces. The safest way to practice meditative silence is in the context of religious faith with the religion as a corrective and guide on our way.

Anyone who wishes to use silence as the way to open the unconscious must practice. Even a lifetime of practice will render anyone merely a novice at the practice of silence. But, regular, even daily, practice may result in the rare glimpse and the occasional experience of God. But even better than the experience of God, the practice bears fruit in the transforming and re-ordering of the inner self, changing our deeply rooted behaviors, freeing us from merely reacting to events and allowing a more measured response to circumstances. In short, practitioners of silence can be more balanced and peaceful in approaches to life and, eventually, death.

Practicing Silence

So, how do I begin a practice of Silence? As with any practice, this is only possible if we desire it. Turning electronic connections off, refusing to answer the phone, preparing yourself to be uninterrupted for a time is the very first step. Set a time for quiet during which you will not be interrupted and do your part to eliminate noise.

Having a place for quiet is also important. Many practitioners have a certain chair, corner, closet, or room where they keep quiet. Some people insist on an uncluttered space; a space that is quiet in its visual appeal. If you sit down to quiet in a space that seems to “talk” to you or distract you in any way, move or move

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Advent Quiet Days

Desert Dance

Monday, Dec. 1 and Saturday, Dec. 6
9 am to 3 pm

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom... 35:1

Join us for a day of quiet Meditation, preparing our hearts for the Advent season. The theme "Desert Dance" is based on Isaiah 35:1-10, a traditional Advent scripture. We will use the theme of dancing as a metaphor for right relationship (confession), right receiving (hope), right timing (waiting) and right partner (incarnation). There will be sessions separated by times for personal reflection and quiet. The day is for stillness and expectancy, focusing on the incarnational God and the joy possible when experiencing this reality.

The retreat begins with Morning Prayer at 8:00 am and will conclude by 3:00.

Register by November 22. The suggested donation for the guided day retreat is \$50. We gratefully receive what you are able to give. If you would like to stay overnight before or after the retreat, please make a separate reservation for your stay.

Retreats in 2015

Lent Quiet Days

February 2 & March 2, 2015
9am - 4pm

Look for more information about these retreats on the web site after the New Year.

Hermitage Way Retreats 2015

- Wholehearted Leisure, May 9, 9-4
- Simple Living, October 3, 9-4

If you are interested in keeping The Hermitage Way, please plan on attending these retreats in 2015. The retreats are open to keepers of The Way and those interested in exploring what it means to be a Way Keeper. Additional information on The Hermitage Way is available on request.

Taizé Evensong

Second Sundays at 7:00 pm

Join us for our monthly sung prayer in the Chapel of the Transfiguration. Advent is a particularly poignant time for waiting in the gentle silence and lyrical chants in the style of the Taizé community. The Advent Taizé service is December 14, 2014.

Places for Silence and Solitude



The Prayer Room



A Woodland Stop



The "Lean Too"

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what distracts you. A ritual, such as lighting a candle can also help. The ritual is a signal that it is time for silence to begin.

Posture is a variable in the practice of quiet. Most westerners find it most comfortable to sit in a supportive chair. But some sit on the floor in the lotus-position (or not) or on a prayer stool or *zafu* (prayer cushion). Whatever posture supports your intention to be quiet is fine. However, you should not slouch or curl up. Attention is the word here. You are paying attention with your body in a quiet but alert position.

The next step is to quiet your mind - to release any and all thoughts that come to your awareness. Many practitioners of silence choose a word to use as a tool to return them to the awareness of God. Simply holding the word in the mind is a reminder of the intention to be present to God in silence and interrupts the diversion a thought has made. This practice of returning to a word helps you to release the thought (or other diversion), and gently return to your intention of keeping silence in the presence of God. Because we never get beyond beginning again each time we practice silence, this tool continues to be useful, no matter how seasoned the practitioner.

If you practice silence, you must also make a commitment to consistent practice. With consistent practice, you actually get better at releasing thoughts and become much more aware of the inner place to which attend. It is with consistent practice that you notice transformation.

The last thing to consider in a practice of silence is finding support for your practice. Joining a group that practices together regularly is just such a support. When everyone in a place is doing the same thing, there is tremendous synergy with your mutual intentions to be in silence. The support of like-intentioned people strengthens private practice. Likewise, going on a silent retreat can help a practice of silence. In addition, it is wise to seek personal spiritual direction if you begin to experience the depths of silence. A spiritual director or other teacher can help guide you to the goodness of God

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What have we been doing?

The Autumn season at The Hermitage is always full. There are numerous groups who use the space, many individuals on private retreats, and we lead retreats on several weekends. This is a snapshot of our fall.

Sustainable Faith

The Hermitage is a host site for the Sustainable Faith Spiritual Director Formation Program. The folks in this program meet together for 5 weekends over six months to study and receive instruction in the practice of Spiritual Direction. They have met in September and October and will continue the program next year in January, March and May.

Hermitage Way Retreat: Silence and Solitude

We continue with our commitment to hold a deepening retreat for each of the ten practices of The Hermitage Way. Seven persons participated in this fourth in the series. We also hosted seven folks at the Way Keeper Retreat in April on "Earth Stewardship."

Hermitage Jam/Feast of the Transfiguration Retreat

Our Jam workday was quite different this year with no berries to pick. Between the hard winter and the extraordinary production last year, the canes did not bear enough to make jam this year. We made jam from berries we had frozen last year. We also tackled some invasive species eradication projects and a few other tasks. We all worked hard and enjoyed the camaraderie.

The next day, about 20 folks gathered for the Feast of the Transfiguration Retreat using the Epistle of James as a guide for faithful living.

Anabaptist Spirituality Retreat

Our autumn topical retreat looked at the lives and witness of the founders of Anabaptism. We were encouraged by their yieldedness to the Holy Spirit and challenged by their commitment to faith despite persecution from or indifference of others around them.

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in the silence and help you avoid possible pitfalls.

Any “result” of the silence is wholly gift and not caused by practice. Rather, practice attunes us to receive what is given. But here is a danger—when the gift of presence comes, our tendency is to want to “stay in the moment” and hold on to the experience. We must let go of any experience of God. Holding on or clutching only asserts our will to be in control of the moment. What we learn in the silence is that we do not need to be in control.

Knowing Self, Others and God

A practice of silence can help you to know yourself, others and God better. How does that happen? One of the most common reasons for avoiding silence is that we run from our inner pain. There is a fundamental connection between awareness and heartbreak. When we are quiet we notice where our heartbreaks are. And sometimes, these are difficult to bear. So, in the quiet, our inner chatter begins. We flee into a “noisy” world we can control. A practice of silence brings us to confront our heartbreaks and our disappointments and offer them to God. Silence is revelatory. It shows us where our real needs and priorities are.

In the same way, silence shows us where there is room to grow. Just as seeds form in silence, so seeds of what is possible in us form in silence. Stilling our outer and inner noise allows us to be aware of what may be emerging in us. The practice of silence is a form of waiting. Waiting purges what is merely insistent and leaves only the absolutely necessary crying for attention.

But silence is beneficial for others as well. Someone once profoundly observed that if no one is silent, no one is listening. One of the gifts of silence, then, is that it allows us to truly see and hear others. Even when our practice of silence is done alone, it creates in us a disposition to listen. We become accustomed to expectant waiting and we can more readily apply this skill when we are around others. Silent presence is sometimes all that is needed for us to show our true care and concern for others. By quiet listening, we demonstrate respect and a desire for honest exchange rather than control. Silence is

the fertile soil of empathy. Our ability to share with and bear with others is increased if we can be silent.

Likewise, silence ushers us to the place where God dwells. Every religious tradition has as its centerpiece the silence of God. Sixteenth century mystic, John of the Cross, insisted that “silence is God’s first language.” And Jewish and Christian scriptures assert that before the universe and time were created there was the silent, formless void into which the first Word was spoken. But before speech was silence. Silence in the presence and pursuit of God is to be expected. It is where God dwells. As we meet God in God’s space, we converse in God’s language. This keeps us from playing God and allows God to remain mystery for us. If we “figure God out” or treat God like some greater Santa Claus who knows if we’ve been naughty or nice, but ultimately exists to provide for our every whim, then we are in charge of who God is and how God acts. God is no longer God for us.

In silence, we accept God’s pre-immanence over us. We let God be God and we accept that God may be speaking (which in fact is true). We show respect by listening. We allow for all the possibilities available in God rather than limiting our life to what we can imagine for ourselves. We check in with God to say “yes” rather than to demand our way.

Silence transforms us by the continual practice of releasing control of our thoughts and plans and submitting to God’s way. This is plowing the ground for exciting new growth, letting God plant seeds and seeing what comes up. This transformation is neither initiated nor controlled by us but can only proceed with our consent. So, silence is practice in saying “yes,” in letting go, and in being changed.

Finally, the practice of silence may well be what can save our fragmented, polarized world. Releasing and offering our inner being to God or to a friend or foe, is the universal offering of peace. It says, “I’m listening to *you*.” Out of that listening, all things are possible.

Thank you

We are grateful to the following individuals for their service:

- Tim Lichti: equipment maintenance
- Larry Somers, Bryce & Ryder Simmons: lawn mowing
- Family of Gene and Mary Herr: trail maintenance and grounds tending
- Marty Suter: housekeeping, yard work, baking, cooking
- The Crossing Educational Center: tree felling, wood cutting and splitting
- Alice Harms: resident volunteer
- Re-Roofing of The Hut and the Maintenance Building: Henry Braun, Willard & Kathy Fenton-Miller, Donald & Nina Lanctot, Verna Troyer, Larry Somers, Bryce & Ryder Simmons, Dave Cowles, Gabe Cowles, Jordon Cowles, and Rich Yeckley
- Dee Swartz: volunteer

host, cooking and cleaning

- Judith Anne Beattie: spiritual direction
- July Somers: cooking, cleaning, granola
- Deanna Risser: preparation of Form 990
- Ben Miller: painting exterior of Hanby Center
- Kevin & June Mears Driedger: volunteer hosts
- Alf Dreidger: resident volunteer
- Terri Pineda: resident volunteer
- Rich Yeckley: bookkeeping

Opportunities for Service

- trail maintenance
- wood cutting & splitting
- meal preparation
- volunteer hosting
- housekeeping
- Board service
- publicity assistance
- spring cleaning
- Invasive plant eradication
- garden development

Come Live the Hermitage Way

Would you like to come for a week to pray with us? We are looking for folks to work and pray through the days, experiencing our rhythm and listening with us for what God is doing in us and in the world. If you are interested, contact David at 269-244-8696 or contact@hermitagecommunity.org We are also looking for longer-term commitments. Let us know if you would like more information about keeping The Hermitage Way or joining the Resident Community.

Hermitage Calendar

December

- 1 Advent Quiet Day Retreat, 9-3
- 6 Advent Quiet Day Retreat, 9-3
- 14 Taizé Evensong, 7pm

2015 January

- 11 Taizé Evensong, 7pm
- 30-31 Board Retreat and Meeting

February

- 8 Taizé Evensong, 7pm
- 28 Lent Quiet Day, 9-4

March

- 2 Lent Quiet Day, 9-4
- 8 Taizé Evensong, 7pm

April

- 13 Taizé Evensong, 7pm

May

- 1-2 Board Meeting
- 9 Hermitage Way Retreat – *Wholehearted Leisure*, 9-4
- 10 Taizé Evensong, 7 pm

Retreating at the Hermitage

As Jesus was revitalized for being about his Father's business by periodic withdrawal to retreat and prayer, so The Hermitage seeks in its mission:

- To be a prayer community, available as a place of spiritual formation where scripture, silence, nature, group experiences, and personal companioning are cultivated elements of retreat.
- To provide a guesthouse away from daily tasks where pastors and other pilgrims can deepen their call and relationship with God, be refreshed in their whole person and be revitalized by the presence and promise of Christ.

If you would like to join us for a retreat of any length, contact us by phone: 269-244-8696, email: contact@hermitagecommunity.org or find us on the web: www.hermitagecommunity.org. We provide silence, solitude, Spiritual Direction, guided group retreats, space for groups to meet, community Morning Prayer, simple healthful food, walking trails, and a gentle atmosphere. You provide the willing spirit.

Board of Directors:

Ned Arnold
Judith Anne Beattie
David Cowles
Kevin Driedger
Patty Hogan
Jeff Miller
Margaret Pfeil
Deanna Risser

Resident Community:

David and Naomi
Wenger, Co-directors

Please hold the Board in your prayers.

Creating an environment of attentiveness to God



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But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God. This is the deep
calling to deep of the psalm-
writer, the bottomless ocean
we launch the armada of
our thoughts on, never arriving.

It is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms. What to do
but draw a little nearer to
such ubiquity by remaining still?

-R. S. Thomas, from "AD."

Contact us by Email:
contact@hermitagecommunity.org