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STEALING MOMENTS OF QUIET

FINDING GOD IN PRAYER

Is there a way in this noisy world to be still and listen to God? Or is such a treasure reserved for cloistered monks, ancient mystics, and long-dead saints?

By Michelle Franci-Donnay



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“I can’t even figure out what you’re asking in this problem! Where do I start?” moans the chemistry student in my office. Her overstuffed binder perches perilously on the corner of my desk. “Do I use the equation for pH? Or an equilibrium table? Or...?” Her words spill out as she madly flips through her class notes. All the while, the phone in her backpack calls for attention.

“Can you stop for a minute?” I gently inquire. She looks up. “Breathe,” I say insistently. She laughs, and then listens as I help her start to untangle the problem.

My students are often surprised by what they know and what they can hear when I ask them to stop and take a breath, to leave off scrabbling through their notes and their minds, and to be still.



TOO MUCH NOISE

When it comes to my prayer life, I could use my own advice. It sometimes feels as if I live in a riotous Broadway musical, with two tenors singing, “When, oh, when will dinner be?” while a baritone voice strikes up a countermelody in the wings—“Did the plumbers say when, oh when, they will be coming?”—all set to an orchestral accompaniment of the meowing cat, the beeping kitchen timer, and ringing phones (plural).

God, I want to cry, *are you here? Can you hear me? I’m having a hard time hearing you over the all the noise.*

I’m sorely tempted at times like these to take my cue from St. Arsenius (354–450), who, while living at the Roman imperial court, heard a voice telling him to flee the chaos and be still with God. Arsenius became a monk in the desert, listening to God in the desolate silence.

I can almost feel the shimmering desert heat as I bow in prayer in a small cave. I can hear the cool night breezes just beginning to gather. Alas, it’s just the heat from the oven as I bend over to see whether the pizza is done. And that’s the sound of the washer in its spin cycle. Absent any angelic hints to the contrary, I still need to get dinner on the table and the next load of laundry going.

Yet. But. Still. In the back of my mind, deep in my being, a tiny seed lurks. A longing for stillness and silence—for God—

remains. I hear the words of Psalm 46:11: “Be still and know that I am God!” Is there a way in this noisy world to be still and listen to God? Or is such a treasure reserved for cloistered monks, ancient mystics, and long-dead saints?

Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a Trappist monk, asserts that the gift of contemplative prayer—the ability to be still and know God—is a normal part of the life of prayer for every Christian (see “What Is Contemplation?”). God plants seeds of stillness within each of us when we are formed in the womb and waters them at baptism.

To be still, to know God deeply and intimately in the depths of silence, is not just for saints and mystics—it’s for *everyone*.

GROWING THE SEEDS

Seeds are small things with great potential. I marvel every year at the weeping cherry tree in the corner of my garden. A seed twenty-five years ago, it blooms magnificently each spring into a welcome umbrella of green despite the heat of summer.

Like trees, sheltering prayer life can grow from small seeds. Another Desert Father, Evagrius (345–399), wrote much about prayer. In “Admonition on Prayer,” he encourages the monks of his community to start where they are—to stretch themselves gently rather than race ahead.

Sixteen centuries later, it’s still good advice. Start where you are with your prayer life and stretch it gently. Be humble—don’t run ahead, or you may give up out of frustration.



LEARNING TO ‘BE STILL’

Here are three simple ways to practice being still with God. Try one—it might help your prayer life grow deeper roots and bloom more abundantly. Start small and remember to stretch gently, but start.

Steal time

Contemplation is sometimes called the art of stealing time. How much time can you steal from your ordinary routine without missing it? Most of us could spare three minutes, I suspect. Stephen Cottrell, the Anglican bishop of Reading in England, handed out egg timers at a train station and suggested people steal just three minutes out of their day to sit quietly with God.



Find three to five minutes a day, perhaps when you have to wait. Gather a bit of silence around you and remind yourself that God is present within you as well as outside you. Ask God for the grace to know him in the depths of your heart. Ask for the gift of stillness. If you drift away, just return to the reminder that God is there. When time is up (remember to start small), express your gratitude.

Experiment with times and places. I snatch time while I wait for my tea to steep. A good friend finds the car line at the elementary school to be her best time for prayer. When St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), a sixteenth-century Carmelite nun, was found deep in contemplative prayer in the kitchen by her sisters, she reminded them: “Our Lord even walks amid the cooking pots.”

Learn to linger for a moment with God and invite God to linger with you in the same way you’d enjoy the company of a dear friend. You may find that you want to linger longer, that you need to steal a bit more time.

Sneak out

Follow Jesus’ example and sneak out of the house: “Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35). Try meditating outside after dark or before dawn. Look up. “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:2).

One of my favorite things to do is stand in the middle of the driveway after I’ve taken out the trash and look up at the stars, a vast spangle of sparkling suns. Isaiah 40:26 tells us God knows each one’s name, and,

BEGINNING TO PRAY

At the start, it’s helpful to recognize three things:

1. Our prayer lives aren’t supported merely by our own efforts—God accompanies us on our journey to stillness and intimacy with him and helps us pray. As St. Paul tells the Romans, “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Romans 8:26).
2. God gives us the saints to show us how to be still and recognize God within the guise of what appears to be our ordinary human lives. Karl Rahner, SJ (1904–1984), says that the only path God has given us leads us through our everyday lives, as ordinary and as messy as they are (see “God of My Daily Routine”).
3. Even prayer that seems awkward or rough has its own grace. God doesn’t require us to come to him collected and polished but rather as we are. Listen to the psalmists, who admit their anger and frustration as well as their joy and trust. If our prayer seems inelegant or uneven, we can let the contrast pull us further into the vast stillness of God.

IS IT GOD?

Even saints and mystics have wondered whether they’re meeting God or only their imagination in their prayer encounters. You can trust soul friends, faith-sharing groups, or spiritual directors to listen to you about your prayer. When I struggle with doubt, my long-time spiritual director suggests I ask two questions: *What are the fruits of my prayer? Am I more loving of God and my neighbor as a result?*

“By waiting and by calm you shall be saved, in quiet and in trust shall be your strength.” —Isaiah 30:15

DIG DEEPER

Look: Where do you find or can you steal moments of quiet in your day?

Judge: How easy or difficult is it for you to quiet your mind and heart?

Act: What will you do to seek God in the quiet this week?





when he calls, they cannot help but answer. Be aware of God's overarching presence, of his immensity and intimate love. The entire universe cannot contain him, yet he knows each of us by name.

Listen up: "The heavens declare the glory of God." Cherish the freedom from the usual soundscape of demands. Listen for the still voice of God that Elijah heard, the breath of the Spirit stirring in the darkness. What is God's breath stirring in you? Don't strain to hear—wait. Stretch into God's creation for five minutes. Then give thanks to God for the works of his hands and go back inside.

Breathe

Many people are surprised to discover that the Christian tradition has long drawn connections between breathing and prayer. In a commentary on his *Spiritual Cantic*, St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) speaks of prayer as God breathing in our souls while our souls breathe in God. Just as the physical act of breathing puts flesh on our bones, so God takes flesh in us in prayer.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius of Loyola offers a simple suggestion for praying with breath. I find this method particularly helpful when my to-do list is dancing in my head.

Take a well-known prayer like the Our Father or Hail Mary. With each breath, mentally say one word or short phrase of the prayer. Let each word sink in, consider its meaning, and think about how it expresses our relationship to God. Breathe that word until you're ready to move to the next.

Ignatius says not to worry if you don't finish the whole prayer in the time you've set aside—just say the rest of the prayer in the usual way when time is up.

Try this for three minutes—in the car line or while waiting at the grocery store. Remember, you don't have to finish the prayer. Each breath—each word—puts flesh on your spiritual bones.

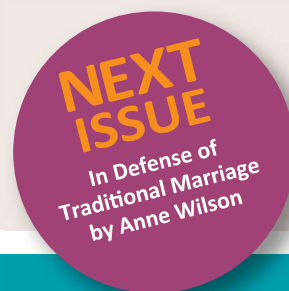
PRACTICE BEING STILL

Choose a path for prayer and then work with it. Take Evagrius' advice to start where you are. Our success lies in our intention and persistence, not in great spiritual insight. God planted these seeds, and he will help us nurture them. And remember that this is a practice. It's not something we must get right the first time and every time.

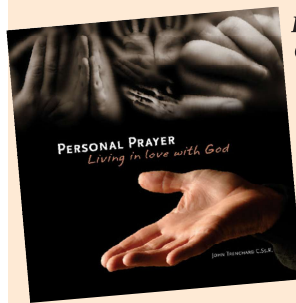
I treasured nursing my children at night. They would fall asleep in my arms, held close in safety and utter trust, filled with everything they needed to grow. I can't help but think that because we're created in the image and likeness of God, he too must treasure the times we let ourselves be still within him.

Steal some time to linger with God, sneak out to read what God has written in nature, and breathe in God. May you find joy and beauty in growing a practice of contemplative prayer. May you find that still point within the chaos and know that God is with you.

Michelle Franci-Donnay is a professor of chemistry, writer, wife, and (not incidentally) the mother of two teenaged boys. Her writings on prayer and spirituality have appeared in Give Us This Day, Phaith, and Liguorian as well as online at Ignatian Spirituality's dotMagis blog.



KEEP THE FAITH



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