

## Practices that create space for Christ to Transform: Solitude

“The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently by the base of the tree, and fade into our surroundings, the wild animal we seek might put in an appearance.”

Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 58.

The following reflections on Solitude come from:

Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), chapter 2, 29-44.

I had to stay with my longings in his presence and get honest about the ways my life *as I was living it* was not congruent with my heart’s deepest desires. This was a stunning realization; after all, I had made most of my life choices. How had I ended up here? *Lord have mercy*. What was one to *do* with such longing and depth of feeling? (31)

### *Solitude: a Place for Desire*

Most of us are not very good at sitting within longing and desire – our own or someone else’s. It feels tender. It feels vulnerable. It feels out of control. It is a place where one human being cannot fix or fill another, nor can we fix or fill ourselves. It is a place where only God will do. The longing for solitude is the longing for God. It is the longing to experience union with God unmediated by the ways we typically try to relate to God. By “unmediated” I mean a direct experience of God with nothing in between: an encounter with God that is not mediated by words, by theological constructs, by religious activity, by my own or other’s manipulations of my relationship with God. It is the practice that spiritual seekers down through the ages have used to *experience* intimacy with God rather than just talking about it. 31-2

*Solitude is a place*. It is a place in time that is set apart for God and God alone, a time when we unplug and withdraw from the noise, busyness and constant stimulation associated with life in the company of others. Solitude can also be associated with a physical place that has been set apart for times alone with God, a place that is not cluttered with work, noise, technology, other relationships, or any of those things that call us back into doing mode. Most important, solitude is a place inside myself where God’s Spirit and my spirit dwell together in union. ... It is a place where I can give myself with abandon to the Lover of my soul, knowing that I am completely safe from anyone else’s curious gaze or judgmental glance. 32 (emphasis added).

*Silence deepens our experience of solitude*, because in silence we choose to unplug not only from the constant stimulation of life in the company of others but also from our own addiction to noise, words and activity. It creates a space for listening to the knowings that go beyond words, and feeling no pressure at all to put the depths of the human soul into words. We enter into solitude and silence on the basis for our desire for God, and it becomes a place for being with our desire in God’s presence. Even if we also experience some resistance (which is quite normal, especially in the beginning), when the desire is deep enough to overcome our resistance, we are on our way. The most essential question in solitude is *How have I been wanting to be with God, and how has God been wanting to be with you?* 32-3 (emphasis added)

### *A Place for the Soul to Come Out*

This is our soul, that place at the very centre of our being that is known by God, that is grounded in God and is one with God. But it’s tricky to get the soul to come out... We are not very safe for ourselves, because our internal experience involves continual critique and judgment, and the tender soul does not want to risk it. Unfortunately, a lot of our religious activity is very noisy as well; oftentimes we’re just an organized group of people crashing through the woods together, making so much noise there’s not a soul in sight. 33

### *Unplugging and Listening*

If we are not careful, technology has a way of compromising our ability to be present to ourselves, to God and each other – all of which are fundamental elements of the spiritual life. ... all of this convenience wears me out... results in fragmentation. 34-5

No wonder we feel disconnected from God: we are rarely able to give him our full attention in solitude and silence. 35.

Solitude is an opportunity to interrupt this cycle by turning off the noise and stimulation of our lives so that we can hear our loneliness and our longing calling us deeper into the only relationship that can satisfy our longing. 36

We need rhythms of solitude, community and ministry (in the church gathered and as the church scattered).

It is being alone long enough to

- sitting with our desires for God
- sitting with our longings and loneliness
- sitting with our emotions, being attentive, not fixing; bringing them into the silence; into the presence of God; long enough to letting God fight for us
- experiencing the stillness of the presence of God and hearing his voice

**Practice solitude in a safe but isolated place for an hour in the next 24 hours.**