

Hello everyone. I read an article recently about a zealous Dutch seminarian named Hans Snel who decades ago had a simple conviction: people need more silence. His response was to make little lapel buttons that read, “**10 minutes**” in bold lettering, and he wore one of the buttons everywhere he went. Soon people began to ask him, “What is ‘10 minutes?’” He would answer with a question, “How much is 10 minutes?”

Hans would then tell the intrigued listener, those 10 minutes is only 1/1000th of a week (which incidentally is 10,080 minutes). The listener then saw that 10 minutes was not much time. Then Hans would challenge the person to spend 10 minutes in silence that week. It could be at a park, in their own home, or even in a church. The only requirement was that no speaking was allowed. He gave out his phone number and invited each of them to follow up with him if they wanted. What he began to hear from them astonished him.

Some individuals said, “O I did the silence, and ... I think God exists.” Some encountered God in a new way. As people stopped and experienced silence, they noticed what was going on inside them and realized that silence without fear is life-giving and restorative; many discovered a peace where God could reach them. Some came back to Church; some found a call to service they could never hear before. Somehow people discovered God gently waiting for them in the silence.

My first encounter with real silence was not so ideal. I dove into the deep end as it were, even though I hadn't even learnt to float let alone swim. I went to a 24 hour silent retreat where a large group of people were encouraged to stay awake through 24 hours in silence with God. It sounded exciting and I loved the idea of it. In truth it was a very unfortunate way to begin the journey into silence and I do not recommend it. Sleep deprived, surrounded by strangers, overly intense about the process and away from everything familiar meant the result for me was that I fell apart emotionally as my long-buried past came bursting through, invading my every day.

I discovered I had post-traumatic stress disorder, though I didn't know the name at the time, which had been long covered over with coping mechanisms. My best choice then was to face the messy reality of my past, so I began counselling and therapy which was a lengthy journey of healing and ultimately transformation. What had felt like a devastating experience became eventually a pivotal turning point of my life; what was hidden came into the light at a time when I had just enough inner resources, support around me and grace to guide me to that support which I needed. God was in the silence even though I did not know that at the time. God seems to take rubbish and turns it into wonderful loamy life-giving rich compost- all in his time. Even though the process of transformation from rubbish to rich soil is a rather messy prolonged one I highly recommend it and it can be the key to inner peace and abundant living in Grace.

However for many years after that I had a nagging fear of prolonged silence. I was concerned that I might fall apart again and did not want to lose the progress I had made. My next silent retreat was quite different. I prepared by discussing my concerns with a spiritual director who would journey with me over a 6-day period of silence interspersed with daily Mass, communal prayer and daily spiritual direction. It was in a lovely setting and I took long walks in green fields and in the bush, I read, did cross-stitch, swam at the beach, built sandcastles, ate well, slept well and was nurtured in body, mind and spirit in silence. I describe that experience as being gently wrapped in black velvet. God met me in that silence, and it was astonishingly life-giving, and I have loved silence ever since. My fear of silence is totally gone and spending time alone in silence with myself, the world and God is one of the highlights of my year. My annual 7-day silent retreat is a time of renewal, refreshment and re-creation and I know that whatever comes up, I am safe facing it within the frame of Gods mercy and love. That is my prayer for each of you.

We are about to enter Holy Week. That is a wonderful time when we are invited to be silent with the Lord, perhaps in the Holy Thursday Vigil after Mass, joining Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, perhaps on Good Friday morning, or Easter Saturday; try and carve out 10 minutes of intentional silence over those days to be aware of the presence of God and to be present with God, the ground of all love and mercy. If this idea is totally new to you, I suggest you don't go deep sea diving with your silence unless clearly led by the Lord to do so. Try 10 minutes within the frame of God's love and see what God brings gently to your heart and mind. Then be assured that whatever comes, God has you in the palm of his hand and will guide you surely to what you need. If you are aware of potential issues that might arise, talk to a trusted confidante, spiritual director or wise friend before you begin. You are safe and God is with you. If silence with God is familiar to you, share that experience with others and encourage them with your own stories of God at work in silence.

Easter blessings

Bev