

# Making Time and Space for God

THE HOLY HABITS  
OF SOLITUDE, SILENCE,  
AND SECRECY

**D**ead space. That's entertainment jargon, the nomenclature of Hollywood and Broadway and Madison Avenue. It means any time when nothing happens—no sound, no motion, no image. In the entertainment world, dead space is death. It is the primal void. It is a voodoo curse. It is anathema, and to be avoided always.

One day, I was meeting with some people I work with in leading worship at church on Sunday mornings. I was critiquing the Sunday past, and the sharp edge of my criticism came down on a worship leader who had taken about thirty seconds—thirty seconds—to end one song and begin another. In my scolding and warning, I spoke that word: dead space. That was dead space. We don't want dead space. Eliminate dead space.

No one objected. No one even muttered. Everyone nodded. I smiled, triumphant. The great consensus-maker wins again.

It was not until months later that I realized I had uttered a word deeply, tragically amiss. It was not until then that I saw that with that one phrase I had bought into the claptrap and clatter of the culture of commotion, the cult of noise. I had become a destroyer of stillness, an enemy of silence. I had learned to call the living places, the

breathing room, dead space.

But here's the truth: the loss of dead space is killing us, inch by noisy inch.

How easy, how natural, it is to get caught up in the busyness and noisiness of life—work life, home life, leisure life, and, of course, church life. And in the midst of all that, we often lose Jesus; we lose any sense of his presence, his power, his love, his comfort, his conviction. How very easy. Then, in our panic and despair, we go looking for quick cures: If I go to a conference, or have an ecstatic religious experience, or have so-and-so pray for me, maybe I'll find Jesus and never lose sight of him again.

One thought rarely occurs to us: maybe killing dead space is killing me. Maybe I've been duped into calling dead space what is, in truth, holy ground, a place brimful of life, a large tract of the holy wild.

I want to look at three closely related holy habits—solitude, silence, and

secrecy. If I had to give a general definition of these three disciplines, I would say that they are holy habits for rediscovering that our culture's so-called dead space is really holy ground.

Or this—they are holy habits through which, to use John the Baptist's language, Jesus becomes greater, I become less. When John's disciples came to him complaining that Jesus was stealing the limelight, stealing the thunder, John replied that that's how it ought to be—he was only a groomsman, not the bridegroom, and Jesus must increase, he must decrease. All three of these practices—solitude, silence, and secrecy—help us to do that. They are holy habits by which we train ourselves to be still, humble, watchful. And so they help us break

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I KNOW THAT THE  
MORE TIME I TAKE  
AWAY FROM TIME—  
AWAY FROM  
THE TYRANNY OF  
CLOCK AND CALEN-  
DAR, AWAY FROM THE  
HOUNDING DEMANDS  
AND HEAVY PRESSURES  
OF MY LIFE—  
THE MORE MY MIND  
OPENS TO THE  
ETERNAL.

## [JESUS] NEVER INSISTED HE HAD TOO MUCH TO DO—TOO MANY LEPERS TO HEAL, TOO MANY DISCIPLES TO TEACH, TOO MANY DEAD PEOPLE TO RAISE, TOO MANY PHARISEES TO REBUKE—TO TAKE TIME FOR REST AND SOLITUDE.

our addiction to self-absorption and self-avoidance. Consequently, they help us to stop missing Jesus in our midst.

We are obsessed with ourselves and afraid of ourselves. And part of that fear and that obsession—both the key symptom and the main drug that feeds it—is our need for approval. One of the reasons it's so easy for me—and maybe for you—to lose Jesus is that I rarely go looking for him. I go chasing approval and fleeing rebuke. I'm on a great commission to exalt myself and, at one and the same time, avoid myself.

It's so important that you think right thoughts about me. I mean—oh, my—what if for a moment you thought I was lazy, gluttonous, gossipy, cowardly, stupid, inept? I have to keep very busy ensuring that you see me in the most heroic, humble, dignified, competent light I can cast on myself.

But sometimes, I get tired of living like that—addicted to approval and, consequently, losing Jesus just about everywhere. Don't you? If you still enjoy that way of living, then by all means, hold the course. But if there is even a tiny part of you that's weary and wondering if there's a better way to live, then let's talk holy habits. Let's

talk about learning to leave yourself alone.

Solitude, silence, secrecy. Jesus must become greater, I must become less. These three practices are, as I said, closely related. But let's look at each in turn.

### SOLITUDE

Jesus often sought solitude, what the Bible describes as lonely and solitary places. Mark 1:35 is typical: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." Or Mark 6:32: "At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place." One of the most convicting things I have recently come to realize about Jesus is that he was never, not once, in a hurry. He never insisted he had too much to do—too many lepers to heal, too many disciples to teach, too many dead people to raise, too many Pharisees to rebuke—to take time for rest and solitude. And then, rather than rushing out of that solitude, panicky about catching up with all the work he left undone, Jesus emerges clear-headed and slow.

Jesus was slow. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, come quick, come now! Lazarus is dying, demons are wreaking havoc,

people are hungry! Jesus, do something and do it now! But Jesus just strolls along, talking to this blind beggar, showing kindness to that prostitute, taking a nap, eating a meal. As Philip Yancey says, the one person who never suffered from a Messiah Complex—an anxiety about having to fix the world—was the Messiah. Jesus took time and took his time.

What is solitude? It is, first, a space we make for listening. But solitude is also a cure for loneliness. In 1950, sociologist David Riesman wrote a book that defined the failure of the American way of life. The book was called *The Lonely Crowd*: all our bravado, all our bright and gaudy celebrations, our malls and our dance halls, our clubs and our playgrounds, our condominiums and our suburbs—all of it had the net effect of further isolating and alienating us.

When I was in my early twenties, I went through a time of terrible loneliness. I felt abandoned, marooned. I didn't understand myself and felt there was no one else who did either. I tried to cure my loneliness with crowds. I would go endlessly to parties. I might be barely invited, maybe only heard rumors that a party was going on, maybe only had a distant acquaintance who had been invited—but wherever two or three gathered together, there I was also. But the crowd deepened my loneliness. In fact, I never felt so alone as when I was surrounded by dozens, maybe hundreds, of people.

Solitude is the cure for loneliness. It's the cure, because we discover that solitude is not aloneness. It is, rather, the place where the one who knows and loves us always, in all ways, the one who does understand us comes to meet us.

Robert Benson writes: "If we take . . . no time to be apart and listen for the Voice, give God some directives and



pointers and call it prayer, and do none of the things that the faithful who traveled this road before us would remind us to do, then we are likely to talk to God and never hear a response.” We’ll just keep losing Jesus.

Solitude’s other gift is that it takes us outside the rush and crush of time, and in doing so it reorients us to eternity. I believe one of the reasons Jesus moved so slowly was that he was so keenly aware of eternity. That at first maybe doesn’t make sense. We might think that those who are aware of eternity should have a greater sense of urgency and emergency about the fleeting moment allotted to us and fret about all the important things we must do while there is time. But, in fact, the opposite always proves true in practice: those whose minds are set on eternity are far more focused, far less pulled hither and thither by every crisis and whim and newfangled idea, than all the great time-managers lumped together. I know that the more time I take away from Time—away from the tyranny of clock and calendar, away from the hounding demands and heavy pressures of my life—the more my mind opens to the eternal. And when I return to my normal workaday life, I go slower and somehow do more.

Solitude, the act of leaving yourself alone, is a holy habit to break our sense of loneliness and urgency.

## SILENCE

In the gospels, the apostle Peter is the first to speak up, if it makes him look good. When he’s in church, with all the faithful listening, he gives the loudest, longest testimonies about his undying loyalty and to-the-death commitment to Christ. But when he’s in the workplace, or before the palace of the guards, where that kind of talk might get him in trouble, he clams up.

I derive a principle from that: in general, it’s best to speak when tempted for selfish reasons to be silent, and it’s best to be silent when tempted for selfish reasons to speak. That’s the holy



habit. When you are tempted to justify yourself, explain yourself, excuse yourself, exalt yourself, gossip, scold—it’s a good signal to button up. And when you are tempted to just lay low, let things sort themselves out, don’t rock the boat, don’t say anything that might cause trouble—that’s a good signal to speak out. Both speaking and silence should be costly. At their heart should be self-giving.

Are we always going to get it right? No. Is it a new law to be rigidly adhered to? No. Are there never exceptions to it—where I do defend myself, or tell of something I’ve accomplished, or hold my tongue when doing so might be to my own advantage? Yes. There are many exceptions.

It’s not a law; it’s a discipline. It’s a holy habit, one that ensures Jesus becomes greater and I become less.

There’s something else. Silence is for listening—to God and to others. A man at my church, Graden, told me about a millwright at the place he works. He’s the best millwright Graden’s ever seen. He is unerring in his ability to home in on the exact trouble spot in a machine, and then he’s swift and sure in repairing it.

Graden noticed for a long time that this man always left the lunch room ten minutes before everyone else. Graden thought, at first, he was going to check over the machinery. But then he followed him out one day and discovered the millwright never looked at a single machine. He just stood in the middle

of the room, eyes closed, and listened. In the silence, in the absence of workers working and talking, he could tune his ears to catch the most subtle pitch and timber, cadence, and inflection of those machines. He could hear what was working well, what wasn’t. And he could locate where the problem was.

Our lives swarm with noise, and in the din we have no place for listening. We know there’s a problem—things keep breaking down all the time—but we have no idea how to remedy it.

Silence is for listening. I think many of us don’t listen well. My own praying can easily descend into mindless chatter, where I get so busy talking to God that I talk past him. And I never hear anything he’s saying.

Many years ago, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt grew bone-tired of all the trivia and preening, the empty talk and the smooth talk, at White House receptions. Everyone listened to themselves, but no one listened to each other. So Roosevelt tried something. At a social gathering, as he met the guests, he would flash his huge smile, extend his firm and confident handshake, and say, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.” With only one exception, people smiled back and responded with comments like, “You’re doing a fine job,” or, “Oh, how lovely.” The one exception was a foreign diplomat. Without missing a beat, he responded, “I’m sure she had it coming to her.”

Apart from the discipline of silence,

prayer deteriorates into White House reception chatter.

The practice of the presence of God is rooted in the biblical teaching about God's omnipresence—the reality that God is here, now, always, everywhere. Psalm 139 is a primary text for this: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” The psalmist answers, emphatically and poetically, nowhere. In all places, at all times, there is God. That psalm

look at this, and to fix a general principle in our minds, is to view secretiveness and secrecy through the lens of pride. When I subject to honest scrutiny my motives for keeping secrets and my motives for telling them, I almost always find that I keep secrets and I tell them for exactly the same reason: pride. If revealing something shows me in a good light—or maybe shows you in a bad light—I want to tell for pride's sake. But if revealing something shows

down to motive, and the options are stark: either we do good things in order to be seen by others, or we do them in order to bring praise to God.

Secrecy is one of the most profound theological statements we can make. It is acting on the belief that the reward of God matters more than individual reward. It is trusting in the trustworthiness of God. If I don't believe that God sees the good I do when no one else notices—or if I resent that when

## LEAVE YOURSELF ALONE. ENTER SOLITUDE. BE SILENT. DO YOUR GOOD DEEDS IN SECRET. MAKE DEAD SPACE INTO HOLY GROUND.

opens with a declaration: “O Lord, you have searched me, and you know me.” Yet it closes with an invitation: “Search me, O God, and know my heart. . . . See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Silence is the room we create for the searching of God, where we hear his voice, and follow.

### SECRECY

Lastly, secrecy. Secrecy is not the same as secretiveness. Secretiveness is hiding what we should disclose. Secretiveness is Adam and Eve hiding from one another behind fig leaves, hiding from God behind bushes. Secretiveness is hiding something out of shame, out of humiliation, out of selfishness. But secrecy, as a holy habit, is hiding something out of humility. Another way to

me in a bad light—or maybe shows you in too good a light—I want to keep it under wraps for pride's sake.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:1, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order, to be seen by them.” He goes on to give three examples—giving, praying, and fasting—where we should do these things in secret so that our Father, who sees, will reward us. So be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before others, to be seen by them. It's that last part that we need to emphasize: to be seen by them. It's not that we never let anyone see us doing good deeds. Just a chapter earlier in Matthew, Jesus tells us to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). It all comes

others do notice it, God, not me, gets the glory—then I'll forever be fishing for compliments, finding subtle and not-so-subtle ways of getting applause, flaunting my so-called wisdom, boasting about my self-styled heroism.

Our lives are, ultimately, cosmic dramas lived out in full view of God and his angels—and, for that matter, the devil and his angels. Consider Job's suffering. What was that about? His friends didn't have a clue. In fact, they got it all wrong—they were convinced Job had this coming to him. What was it about? It was cosmic drama. God and Satan had a bet on the line: would this man stay faithful no matter what? The main audience, those who had most at stake in the outcome of Job's life, were not Job's friends, not Job's family, not even Job. It was God and the devil.

In the end, it matters not at all what others think about you and say about you. Your life is cosmic drama.

The practice of secrecy is simply taking that seriously. Leave yourself alone. Enter solitude. Be silent. Do your good deeds in secret. Make dead space into holy ground.

You will become less, it's true. But you will also become more. You will discover your true self and meet more often—lose less often—the Lord of the holy wild. For out of empty tombs and dead spaces comes the living Christ. Be still and know that he is God. Behold, the Lamb of God. See how he becomes greater. □

