

Silent Craving December 14, 2008

Ellen Button is a woman who writes a column for a Flint area newspaper, and she also teaches some college classes. In one of her articles, she shared an assignment that she gives to her students: the task of spending an hour in silence, the task of spending an hour with themselves. She imposes pretty rigid standards on what that time is to be like—no cell phone, no texting, no TV, no computer, no music, no homework, no playing with pets, no driving, no being in a crowded place; they must remain sober and awake. After completion of the assignment, students must hand in an analysis evaluating the role of silence, intrapersonal communication and technological impulses on their lives.

As you might imagine, her assignment is often met with outrage, and most students find it totally unreasonable. After all, they complain, they are busy people, and many of them have to juggle school with work, kids, relationships, and paying bills.

Nonetheless, Button insists on completion of the assignment.

I wonder how we would respond if given such an assignment? My hunch is that many of us would respond in the very same way as those students. After all, we too are busy people, especially at this time of year. We think that there is far too much pressing on us to waste an hour sitting in silence. What of worth is to be gained, given the state of the world around us? What would we do beside just fret and worry all the more?

The simple fact is that many of us shy away from silence, maybe because we find it uncomfortable and unsettling. We often try to fill any lulls in a conversation by saying something—anything! And we fill our lives with work and people and activities to the point that there simply are not enough hours in a day to spare even a few minutes in silence, let alone a whole hour!

And really...how can there be any such thing as total silence? Our world is filled with all kinds of noises and sounds, from traffic to horns honking, to the music playing on our iPods, and more. Even as I sat in my office at home, totally alone in the house working on this message, I became very aware of the UPS truck driving down the street, the second hand of the clock on my desk ticking, our cats romping through the house, the furnace kicking on, and that's just within a minute or two! It doesn't seem very plausible to find total silence.

I suppose there are some places in the world where we could come closer to finding some quiet than here in Indianapolis. We used to spend some time down at Lake Monroe near Bloomington, and there were evenings, especially in the winter, when we'd sit out on the porch, and the world seemed very quiet. But even then, we could hear a truck over on Highway 37, or in the early morning, we could hear the motor of a fishing boat out on the lake.

Someone talked about taking a few days away at the family farm in the countryside. However, she said that the place was so quiet that it nearly drove them crazy! Eventually they turned on the fan in the bedroom for some "white noise" just so they could sleep! We're just accustomed to all the noise of our daily lives that, when it's missing, it seems as though something is terribly wrong.

Silence also can cause us to feel very alone. One blogger shared that, since her husband's death in 2005, she had had to surround herself with sound. She said that silence was just too painful and difficult, and even soft music was too quiet. She said it had been the TV on 24/7, but just recently, she shared that she had finally been able to turn the TV off and be in her home and work in the silence.

And silence may make some of us uneasy, and probably for a variety of reasons. Being alone in the quiet can seem pretty threatening, because some of us are just not all that comfortable with who we are and what we are. Noise gives us an escape; we can avoid facing some of the personal realities. If we keep moving, on the go, busy, then we think that maybe the unpleasant things, the painful things can't catch up with us.

And yet, there's something about the downtime, the quiet, the silence that is healing and wholesome for us. The simple truth is that, no matter how much of an extrovert and outgoing person we are, no matter how much we enjoy activity and busyness and people, we will lose ourselves if we fail to allow some time of silence to be part of our lives.

Eileen Button, the college instructor who required her students to spend an hour in silence, shared some of the responses she received from the class members when they had completed the assignment. Many became aware for the first time of how much time they were spending with their computers and cell phones, and resolved to try to reduce the importance they placed on those believed-to-be essentials in their lives.

Others shared that they had an opportunity to consider things that they seldom took time to think about, like their future goals, the people they cared about, and their regrets. Some said they had reordered their priorities in that hour; others admitted to crying, and many shared that they were going to try to include more times of silence as a part of their daily routine.

If we could give it a try, I suspect we, too, might discover that it's something we all need. While I tend to shy away from an intentional quiet time and consider myself a pretty outgoing person, over the years I've discovered that I really need those moments of "downtime," of quiet, just to get re-centered, re-energized and renewed. Always being on the move and constantly with people can deplete our inner resources, and we all need time to get re-filled.

Eileen Button said of herself, "It's virtually impossible to write when I don't spend time in the quiet spaces. I cannot hear my own voice when I tune into the din of society's racket." And furthermore, she said, "We

are spiritual beings who require periods of silence in order for our souls to breathe and grow.”

Those last words are the ones that really got my attention, because I do believe that we're spiritual beings, and that our souls do need some quiet time in order to breathe, and yes, to grow. That means that it's not just about external quiet, but finding a way to quiet ourselves inwardly, so that we can really experience God's presence in our lives.

That may be harder for some of us to achieve, but I believe that there really are some benefits to be gained. In "The Spirit of Silence," John Lance wrote, "Silence teaches us who we are, ... nurtures our souls and renews our vision." I guess I would have to say that, although I'm convinced God is present in every moment and every experience of life, in people and places and happenings, I believe we all also need times of quiet to connect with the Source of Loving Goodness is a way that reminds us of who we are, and what really matters in life.

VIDEO: Continental Divide

PRAYER:

Message part 2

The Bible passage for today reminds us of the value of times of silence. It's the writer of the psalm, trying to speak God's impulses, who encourages us to "Be still, and know that I am God." Reading that verse, or seeing it in print, usually brings me to a halt, and reminds me of the importance of both activity and quiet, of being surrounded by people and sounds, and of being alone in silence.

There's another reason I chose this verse for today, and that's because of a dear friend of nearly 40 years who died recently of pancreatic cancer. As I was meeting with her family and preparing the funeral service, her husband brought out a journal that she had been keeping—a journal that had some inspirational quotes and Bible passages in the margins. The only one that she had circled was the one we have this morning: "Be still, and know that I am God."

My friend Kathy was one of the most spiritually together people I've ever known. She was a busy wife, mother, psychologist and teacher, and someone who touched and influenced a lot of lives. But as I knew and as her husband described her, she was more comfortable in her own skin than anyone he had ever known.

I think that was true because Kathy knew the vital rhythm of life. She was vivacious, talkative and energetic, active. And yet she filled her days with alone time and quiet. She was one who loved to get in her car and drive even across the country alone, stopping to walk into small rural churches, or often on trips west, to go into the cathedral of the plains in western Kansas, to light a candle and pray. She would often take her lunches alone, taking their boat, and going into the middle of the lake to be apart and quiet. She even took

up the very social sport of golf, and was the only person I know who preferred to play by herself.

She was comfortable in her own skin, because she had the balance that was right for her—the balance of togetherness and alone time, the balance of activity and quiet, and she made sure there were times of silence for her to stay connected with God, re-centered in her being, and at peace with life.

Even in her dying, she has reminded me of how important that is for all of us. Yes, we need one another to be caring, loving companions in life, but we also need to have time alone in the silence to remember what really matters, and what life is all about.

Have you ever collected a jar of river or creek water? I have, from the creek that ran behind my parents' house in Madison. It was always kind of fascinating to see what would happen, because at first, the water in the jar was pretty murky, even muddy, but if I set it on the ground for a few minutes, an amazing thing started to happen—the mud began to settle, and the water above became clear enough to be able to see through it.

I believe that's what it can be like for you and me when we take the time to be quiet—all the murkiness and lack of clarity in our lives can settle, and we can see more clearly what it's all about.

This holiday season, even though we can really get caught up in the hustle and bustle of Christmas activities, I hope that each of us is willing to make five minutes a day between now and Christmas to be in silence, to connect with ourselves, and to connect with God. I have a sense that, if we can do that, this may be the most meaning-filled Christmas we've ever spent!

Closing:

So, as we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will take the time to be still, and know that God is God.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

