

Still-ness

NOUN

1. *silence; quiet; hush; calm.*
2. *the absence of motion.*

Stilling the Noise

Bob Chisholm

— *But I have stilled and quieted my soul —*

Psalm 131

It is very clear that my life needs stillness; two kinds of stillness. First, I need to simply stop moving, stay in one spot, and enjoy the discovery of the sights and sounds of the small area just around me. Second, I also need to find stillness inside, to stop the internal multitasking,

and learn to center on just one or two thoughts at a time. Yes, my life needs stillness, but it is very clear to me that my world will not provide stillness or help me find it. When twentieth century poet and playwright, T. S. Eliot wrote the pageant play, **The Rock**, he noted that we have ...

*knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
knowledge of speech, but not of silence,
knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.*

He wrote this in 1934. I wonder what he would think of the speed of life today.

Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” **The Jerusalem Bible** translates it, “Pause a while.” But perhaps the most contemporary rendering, **The Message**, translates it, “Step out of the traffic.” In other words, stop what you are doing. Take a deep breath. Relax.

In order to hear and understand God, my life need quiet and stillness because God will not force his way into my heart. My inner life is not taken by storm or by violence. In fact, it is not taken at all. It is surrendered. I must stop, become still and invite God in. And, like any important truth or habit, he will come in slowly.

Part of the problem is all the noise. It is hard to learn stillness when we are surrounded by all the noise. And I am thinking about several kinds of noise. The most obvious, of course, is the external noise, primarily our technology — our phones, radio, television, even simple talking. And for many it is constant. They wake up to it. They go to sleep with it. They call it “background noise.” And to this we can add the noise of our own hectic schedules.

And though this external noise is bad enough, the inner noise, the noise that no one but you can hear, can be even worse. For example, how easy is it for you to sit without doing something? How quickly do you reach for a magazine or a book? How soon before you turn on the TV? Or, even more relevant, how long before you pull out your smart phone to fill the time?

It can be hard to still the noise, because there is so much external and internal noise out there. But even religious noise can kill stillness. Howard Macy writes in **Rhythms of the Inner Life**:

*Even religious activity can become noise
that inhibits the stillness of waiting.
Many of us find it hard to believe
that God can be at work while we are at rest.*

Does this sound like you? The fact is, I may be in a hurry, but God is not. God has never been in a hurry. Religious noise is not a reflection of God, but it is still noise and can drown out God's constant, steady voice. As Kenneth Leech warned in **True Prayer**:

*There is no need to rush around
feverishly looking for a prayer life:
we need to slow down and look deeply within.*

But how does this happen? How do I make the change? Where do I begin?

Begin by turning some things off.

In his book, **Nurturing Silence in a Noisy Heart**, Wayne E. Oates writes,

*Another way of finding a place of silence
is to peel away all that is artificial or invented in the world of sound.*

He is saying that we cannot hear the natural layer of sounds, the wind, the birds, the rain, because they are covered over by the artificial layer of sound. Turn the artificial layer off and be amazed at natural layer.

You might also try what has often been called "Listening Prayer." Again, I turn to Howard Macy (Rhythms):

*To approach God with an incessant stream of words
is a filibuster not a prayer.*

Listening Prayer is very different. It teaches us how to wait upon God. As Henri Nouwen wrote in **Clowning in Rome**:

*Prayer is not a way of being busy with God instead of people ...
[It's] standing in front of him without anything to show, to prove, or to argue,
and ... Allowing him to enter into our emptiness.*

There is no question — we need stillness because we need him. We need his presence and his guidance. This is why we still the noise. We want to be still, so we can know that he is God.