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desolate places

Off Script

All great and precious things are lonely.

John Steinbeck

I was a little girl, standing in the middle of the broken driveway sloping down into the busy street. I can still see the cracks splitting the cement into an odd-shaped honeycomb, crawling like varicose veins marring the ground beneath my feet.

I stood there, heart pounding in my ears, hot tears flooding my eyes. I cried with my mouth open, stuck in a silent howl unable to make its way out of my body. I knew I had to stop before I could turn around, walk up the steps, open the screen door, and go back into the house.

There was no one to comfort me. No one to tell me why he wouldn't be coming back. There was no one to hold me after my Daddy left. Not that day. Not that night. Nor any year after that.

And that is how I learned to take care of me.

Surviving

I am very good at surviving. I am an expert at figuring out how to do things right and do them well. I am not afraid of working hard, swallowing whatever might get me down, and pushing through.

I am a good thinker.

What I'm trying to say is I don't want to be that little girl, frozen in the driveway.

Needy.

Lost.

Confused.

So, I manage. I cope and I please.

I can do capable: set goals, check lists, and construct new plans. But deep inside, where no one can see, where I seldom go myself, I feel restless.

Unsettled. Disconnected.

My heart feels lonely.

I don't really see it as loneliness. Most of the time, I don't know what is wrong. So I tell myself nothing is wrong.

That I'm fine.

But I'm really not.

Because, you see, I feel numb.

Feeling Numb

I find myself there whenever I'm stressed. I step into another space of being that is separated from my heart. On the outside, I'm doing everything I'm supposed to be doing. Being with others and getting things done.

I wait until the numb feeling passes somehow.

When I was younger, I'd occupy this space of numbness by keeping busy, being extra social, or finding well-meaning, purposeful activities. But as I grew older, I found myself heading in

the opposite direction more frequently and for longer stretches of time: withdrawing. Being alone by myself, mostly.

Some days, after working hard all day, I was simply exhausted. I'd ease the numbness by passing time, staying up late "chain reading," watching television, surfing the net, or whatever it took to distract me from feeling.

But since walking into PTSD, my old ways of coping aren't working. Stress, worry, and anxiety have wrapped around me like a cut-out landscape painted around my waking days and sleepless nights.

Life has gone on pause deep inside me, where my heart spins restless.

I'm stuck.

Even though on the outside you'd never know. Because I step through the paces in everyday life and rise to the challenges of the daily grind.

But the truth is, I'm not free inside.

What I need—and what I don't have—is soul rest.

It took writing a book to wake my heart up and ignite my soul again.

Journey Off Script

If you ask me how I'm finding soul rest, it hasn't come the way I once learned. I haven't been able to spend alone time with God the way I used to as a little girl. Then, I'd set aside time to sit at my desk, open my Bible, take out my notebook, underline it with the headings—who, what, when, where, and why—and start diving in. When I prepared Bible studies as a ministry leader, I'd exegete passages of Scripture and come up with closing application questions.

No, I haven't been able to find rest for my soul in ways tried and true in the past. I can't even fall asleep, much less breathe freely, without a heavy feeling clamped around my chest, against a

pounding heart. I can't even focus, much less memorize Scripture or pray like they taught us in Sunday school: praise, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

No, my journey of faith has gone off script—into my soul's whitespaces.

I no longer have the luxury of writing about spiritual rest behind the safety of studies, numbers, anecdotes, and experts' advice. I've never felt so desperate. For a lot of this journey, I have felt

guilty, unable to shake off my anxieties,
ashamed, tossing through insomnia-filled nights,
fearful of how others would judge me, and
trapped because I didn't know what to do.

My greatest fear was failing to find the freedom I believed came from walking with Jesus. It seemed that fear was coming true, as I found my heart and body gripped by panic and anxiety.

I never would have guessed in a thousand years my journey to rest would be paved with so much anguish. But the journey of the soul is one that Jesus is deeply and intimately familiar with.

I know this because Jesus has been living this journey with me.

You see, Jesus has been meeting with me in the desolate places.

Desolate Places

Desolate places.

They're the last places on earth you'd look to find soulful rest. These were the places within me I ran from, hard and fast, the places where stress and anxiety overtake us. They rob us of our moments, abduct us from where we are. But surprisingly they are locations for whitespace.

Desolation is where Jesus went to meet with God. It's where Jesus chose to retreat. It isn't where we'd expect the Son of God

to do his quiet time. It's the last place we'd think someone so connected to God the Father would go.

Yet Jesus sought out desolate places. When crowds pressed in around him for healing, Jesus was in touch with his needy soul. He withdrew.

Words written by those closest to Jesus give us a glimpse into his private world. Luke, a physician whose writing voice is punctuated by accuracy and specificity, tells us:

But Jesus often *withdrew to lonely [desolate] places* and prayed.
(Luke 5:16 NIV)

The Wilderness

I often drive to the mountains when I'm feeling lonely. I like to go in the morning when the sun hangs low, restless as it climbs out from behind the horizon. The ground is still soft, hidden under the frost of a winter's night. The hills lay bare, except for tree limbs stretching out like the arms of a child sleeping, tousled out from under her grandma's quilt.

I wonder what it'd be like to see Jesus walking up ahead, all by himself, quiet and slow. Would he walk like me, looking down at the ground, or would he look up into the distance, feeling the dirt stir as he paces through the morning air?

Eremos. It's the Greek word for *lonely*.

It means wilderness: *desolate*, solitary, lonely, uninhabited.

Deserted by others.

Deprived of the aid and protection of others, especially of friends, acquaintances, and kindred.¹

The wilderness. Where I'm exposed, unsure, and undecided. Where I am stressed and anxious. No one to help and so very much alone.

This is where Jesus found me.

And this is the place from which I'm writing to you today.

Making Room

Enjoying time with God and finding soul rest isn't a matter of self-discipline, of trying harder or setting your clock to wake up fifteen minutes earlier. If it was a matter of simply willing yourself to do quiet time, I know you would have done it. You always have.

The journey of faith has brought you to a different place now. When your heart is troubled, your body weary, or your mind consumed with dilemmas and uncertainty, your soul is longing for something more than checking another box off a list.

Jesus may have led you to a place like the one I am standing in right now, hungering for rest. We've never traveled this far, this deep into our spiritual journey. Your soul wants to wake up, so it can rest.

He's calling us to find a new place of rest that goes beyond our ability to create it.

We can't make it happen.

In the same way the wind blows the first cherry blossoms from their stems in spring, Jesus wants to come into our hearts and release us to rest.

To be free again.

To feel.

To want.

To need.

And to be loved.

This is what I call making room for spiritual whitespace.

Spiritual Whitespace

In art, whitespace is often referred to as “negative space.” It's the space on the page absent of marks or images. We might consider

the space as “blank,” but to the artist, whitespace holds beauty. *It is the key element of design that gives balance to a composition, transforming a cluttered collection of objects into an aesthetic expression of what we do see.*

Whitespace is anything but nothing. It is as important as the content being presented. When it is used, whitespace makes art come alive, injecting atmosphere and emotional depth, and creating movement in images that might otherwise appear static, disconnected, or flat. It is the *breathing room* the viewer needs in order to *experience* what’s being presented and *find meaning* in it, whether it’s a painting or a photograph.

Whitespace signifies space for a story.

It makes me wonder: Where are the whitespaces in my life?

So much of my stress has been driven by fear of empty spaces. I’ve skimmed over the deeper questions of desire and loss and made a life pretending they weren’t there.

I did it to focus on the present rather than deal with the past. I thought that was a good thing, because this kept me strong. But the parts of me that once felt alive and free have slowly receded.

My soul isn’t designed to be cluttered. It longs for space to taste beauty. To breathe. It’s always wanted what God intended for me.

My soul was designed for spiritual rest: spiritual whitespace.

An Awakening

Making room for spiritual whitespace takes us on a journey to awaken our hearts to God again.

To investigate. To ask ourselves: Where is the attraction that once drew me into the safety, pleasure, and freedom of being with Jesus? And how can I find those places—those whitespaces in me—again?

Making room for whitespace means taking the journey to confide in Jesus the way we would if he were standing right here in front of us.

When we make room for spiritual whitespace, we create space in our hearts,

a blank space for Jesus to write on,
a white canvas for him to paint onto,
an intimate silence he can speak into,
a cool, dark night sky to light a song or lyric within,
an open field for him to walk through,
an intimate café corner for him to whisper into, and
an empty seat in the window of your soul, so he can lean in
and wrap his arms around you as you both watch lightning
crawl across the sky.

Finding your whitespace is daring to discover the places in your heart that are virgin, tender, soft, untraveled, wounded, or broken—so Jesus can make those places yours and his.

He is whispering—

I am here.

*In between the cracks, where you've left yourself
standing there.*

In the whitespaces.

Needing rest.

I'm still here with you. As is.

It's not easy following Jesus into the whitespaces of the soul. I have wallpapered over many things, believing faith enabled me to move past them. But there comes a time when it takes more faith to fall apart with Jesus than to stay strong enough to stop it from happening.

The time came for me to go beyond wallpapered memories, because Jesus walks the desolate places. And this is where my journey to find God and soul rest began.



Pull Up a Chair—Share

Picture Jesus withdrawing often to lonely places. What thoughts or feelings does this image stir in you?

Where are you on the journey to find rest—surviving, numbing, or awakening?

A Whitespace Prompt—Try This

Sometimes, we carry preconceived notions about connecting with Jesus. Trying to figure out how to spend time with God may be the last thing on our minds when we are stressed. But Jesus can enter into whatever space we find ourselves. As is.

Read through this list and notice which image reflects your heart's desire for whitespace most closely today.

- a blank page
- a white canvas
- a quiet silence
- a cool, dark night
- an open field
- an intimate corner of a café
- an empty seat in front of a window
- ... [add your personal image]

What attracts you to this image? Notice how these images release you from the burden of creating rest with Jesus—opening your heart to experience rest with him. Rest is not something we engineer, but something we invite.

A Soul Conversation—Confide in Him

Tell Jesus how you are feeling right now in this moment. Lost, numb, tired, frustrated, or angry? Maybe your feelings are more subtle—content yet unsettled? Talk to Jesus now, friend to friend. Imagine him slipping away from everyone and everything else just to be alone with you right now.