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Speaks

Essay #3  
THE POWER OF SILENCE

Traveling recently in England I came across a reminder of days long past. Durham Cathedral dates back to Norman times, and on its portal is a "sanctuary knocker" in the form of an impressive lion's head of bronze. In medieval times any fugitive from justice could strike it on the stout oak door and thereby claim the ancient and holy right of sanctuary. Once within the cathedral, he was absolutely safe from all pursuers; no man could apprehend or arrest him as long as he remained in sanctuary.

This has, of course, long since been abolished; however, in our day we are exposed to attacks far more insidious and hurtful than any bodily blows. The contemporary atmosphere is heavy with all sorts of fears; we are harassed by oppressive shadows of worry and insecurity, and we are exposed around the clock to all kinds of jarring noise. Great indeed is our need for silence and for sanctuary, and by this I do not suggest a running away from reality...rather, perhaps a turning back to reality, a reality that we all too seldom experience or feel amidst the distractions of the day. The life of every person requires silence and solitude. These rest periods, times of quiet, cushions of silence, are the shock absorbers of life.

We all need it, yet we have not come to accept solitude as a pursuit. All important today are the social graces. Anyone who does not mingle with others or who cannot sustain a perpetually meaningless conversation is considered odd, unfriendly, or even a bore. It is often distressing to parents when a youngster remains alone in his room indulging seemingly in old fashioned daydreaming.

Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century French scientist and philosopher said, "After observing humankind over a period of years, I conclude that one of man's great troubles is his inability to be still." Our hospitals today are crowded with patients whose illnesses are often attributable to tension and stress and the ever-present noise and confusion of life. There is so much campaigning today for more and better facilities for the care and treatment of the mentally ill, and obviously this is a widespread and valid need, but how much greater is the need for silence and solitude for all individuals, and for teachers, psychologists, doctors, and ministers with the vision to teach people to perceive the importance of meditation and creative thinking, contemplation, or of quiet, of sanctuary?

Every once in a while I reread Henry David Thoreau's Walden, a good tonic to our way of life. As you may know, he was a Harvard University graduate who "dropped out" of the nineteenth century Boston life and as a young man built for himself a snug, small, primitive house on the shores of Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts. Relying for his living solely on his own skills and ingenuity, he dwelt there alone for more than two years. He rejected worry and reduced his expenses to a point where he could provide for them with labor for a small part of his days; this freed him for reading and writing and contemplating and for long, solitary tramps through the woods.

Most of us would not be able to do what Thoreau did, but we can learn something of his philosophy and adapt it for our own existence. Our modern society requires the ownership and use of so many possessions, mechanical devices, and luxuries that we actually spend large portions of our time and money, vast portions of our life itself, on working for that which we could really do without, and for which we have little time or strength left to enjoy because we are so consumed working to pay for them, to have them repaired, and so forth. I do not suggest that we revert to pioneer days, but I do think that we owe it to ourselves to bring something of the solitude and simplicity of former times along with us today. In fact, I consider it an imperative if we are going to be spiritually and mentally healthy and creative.

I have so many times listened to people complain that they never have any original ideas, that they never feel the flow of inspiration, and I generally suggest that they take time to get still and listen. It is just as impossible for one who surrounds himself with the activity and clamor and ceaseless babel of conversation or the blare of television to experience the in-flow of unique, creative ideas, as it

is for pure water to flow through the same pipe with crude oil.

When we consider the word "listen" we think of the ears, but did you know that you really listen with your mind? Listening connotes receiving an inward vibration or response to an outward stimulus, and it implies sensitivity to it. Vibrations are everywhere, and we can and must cultivate the ability to hear and to heed the message of a transcendent spiritual source within and in the world around us. Shakespeare points to this in As You Like It when he acknowledges the existence of "tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything."

You are like a radio receiving station--every moment thousands of impressions are reaching you, and you can tune in on whatever you want. You may harken to the beauty of nature, or you may fix your attention on the filth of the city streets; you may take in joy or sorrow, success or failure, optimism or trepidation. We have the equipment to hear, but the capacity to hear rightly must be cultivated; we must listen selectively. When this habit is properly formed, we become receptive to higher vibrations of a cosmic flow from which all intelligence springs. It is absolutely astonishing what we can do when we walk and work under the direction of the still, small voice within. Now, our own form of guidance may not come with a stunning experience, such as that of Moses and the burning bush, but come it will, if we listen and expect it to. As Emerson says, "There is a guidance for everyone, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word."

A recently developed school of psychiatric thought holds that men and women are born with a spiritual urge as compelling as their instincts of sex and hunger. The leader of this approach is Dr. Victor Frankl, a teacher of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Vienna. He holds that while most persons today have conquered their bashfulness about emotional drives, they remain deeply troubled by the repression of their innate religious feelings. He calls this God-shyness, and he says that in order to achieve emotional health, people must overcome the notion that religion and belief in God are not valid needs and that it is unsophisticated to search for spirituality. In order for our lives to be meaningful, they must be firmly anchored to faith in God as a foundation of life. More of us are God-shy than realize it. Have you ever while praying felt like a stranger in a foreign land? This was because prayer has always been conceived as a sort of talking to God, but, you see, prayer must be a listening.

We need to know that God is forever speaking to us in the form of a creative flow, and that we must cultivate the attitude of listening in prayer, in quiet meditation and silence. All religions that have penetrated the occult touch the springs of spiritual demonstration over the physical realm, and have thus practiced a mental discipline that Unity terms the "silence", and by which others is called meditation. Silence or meditation is a time of recharging, not to obtain particular or specific answers, but to experience what one person calls the "contagion of the triumphant spirit."

In the deep silence of your prayer, lose the consciousness of problems and needs, and commune in complete abandonment with the self in total surrender. As Emerson says, "Man is an inlet, and may become an outlet of all there is in God." Seek solitude and quiet, lowly listen, and explore the depths of your own self.