

## The Gift of Solitude: Rest, Reflection and Return

Recently my wife visited London with her parents. Her travels overlapped with a transitional time for our family, which gifted me with some personal downtime and possibility of solitude. I am always perplexed at the beginning of unhurried time. It is almost uncomfortable. At first I anticipate the feeling of endless possibility that comes alive after lying dormant in the busyness of life. There seems to be opportunity that becomes uncovered in a way that just doesn't present itself in the rush of the everyday. My guitar I rarely play begins to call to me; neglected books sitting on my nightstand seem to cry out to be read; projects that have long been on the back burner of my mind somehow move to the forefront.

We are all aware of the joys that silence and solitude bring. Some thickness hangs in the undisturbed air and surrounding stillness, as the only words being spoken are the ones that are quietly tiptoeing through one's own head. Many have experienced the joy of waking up before everyone in the household and having the sunrise greet you noiseless and beautiful. Certainly, the morning's glow through the windowpane brings a calm and peace like none other that I can tell. Being alone on the ocean's coast has always enchanted me. Something about the expansive sea, the breakers recurrent crashing into the shore, the faint cry of gulls and the feeling of having such vast beauty to myself gives particular rest to my spirit.

Why does it seem that these life-giving moments are often few rather than many? Is solitude a scarce commodity or if invited, bountiful? Could it be possible to live a life that awakens and fosters moments of solitude?

Bon Iver and A Winter of Solitude

One story that seems to particularly lure me into solitude is that of Justin Vernon, but music lovers know him by his band name, Bon Iver (pronounced: bohn eevair; French for "good winter" and spelled differently on purpose). During the onset of winter, Justin sought solitude in a remote cabin in Wisconsin. What called Justin to the wild of the woods, one cannot say for sure. Some say it was due to parting ways with a lover and his longtime band mates that moved his soul to retreat. Others report that he had pondered such an escape for some time and life's circumstances opened wide the door for his wintry escape. Some feel it was a spiritual invitation that he simply could not ignore.

He sought the silence of the wilderness, the work of his hands and the hauntingly cold winter to provide the answers he was seeking. For three months much of his days were spent gathering and splitting wood to be burned for warmth but also collecting his thoughts and hewing into the depth of his soul. He describes the process of laying down communal comforts and taking up the mantle of solitude as bringing change and solace to not only his craft of music, but also his soul.

As described in his biography, "This special time slowly began feeding a bold, uninhibited new musical focus. This slowly evolved into days filled with twelve-hour recording blocks, breaking only for trips on the tractor into the pines to saw and haul firewood, or for frozen sunrises high up a deer stand. All of his personal trouble, lack of perspective, heartache, longing, love, loss and guilt that had been stock piled over the course of the past six years, was suddenly purged into the form of song."

Out of such solitude, Justin emerged with the album For Emma, Forever Ago. When you listen to the collection of songs you can hear the ache that comes from a broken man seeking to be restored. Close your eyes and you can envision the creaky cabin in the snowy woods of Wisconsin and, perhaps, hear the faint call of solitude. The melodic melodies produced by his monastic journey evoke a simple yet enchanting awareness that our souls crave such a time of contemplation and repose. Solitude gives birth to beauty.

#### Rest & Reflection in Solitude

Pursuing solitude requires certain boldness, an intentional choice one makes to enter into community with one's self. There is a courage one shows in carving out such time in a world where productivity is championed and making time for solitude can be misconstrued as procrastination.

Underneath all the clamor of life we are faced with the requisite duty of unpacking what we store away. Like returning to an old trunk teeming with memorabilia from life's former days, solitude offers us an opportunity to wonder at the internal workings of our hearts. It provides a stage for the act of self reflection, meditating on what is happening in the very present and letting the quiet of the external give space to ponder the internal.

Solitude was also a mainstay in the life of Jesus. We find Jesus seeking solitude in the wilderness during preparation for his ministry (Lk 4:1), rising before daybreak to pray in solitude (Mk 1:35), pursuing solitude to replenish from work (Lk 4:42), and often withdrawing in solitude to end his day (Mt 14:23).

Fostering solitude may mean enjoying a walk without our iPod. We might be inclined to use a day of the weekend for being satiated by a silent retreat rather than drinking in the spectacle of mass media. We could enjoy entering a labyrinth rather than the pleasures of a shopping plaza or pick up a journal over the New York Times.

#### Return from Solitude

Just as seasons change and the moon waxes and wanes crescent, so too changes our time in solitude. Like all gifts, solitude can become misappropriated when taken to extremes. Certainly we are not meant to be hermits. Though we are created to long for solitude, gaining rest and being fed by the experience, we are also called to life in community. We are benefactors of solitude's gift when in our return we channel our rest and reflection and bear fruit in our communities.

Upon returning we will find a heightened sense of awareness and enjoy a deeper joy in community. After examining the internal processes of our own souls we can then extend our care to the external world and relationships therein. The gift of stillness somehow grants eyes to see and ears to hear.

Like the ocean there is an ebb and flow in solitude, a time for diving deeply into solitude's vast waters and a time to return to the shore. May we hear the invitation to venture out of the shallows and swim.

- D. Jeremiah Simmons