

Keeping Your Clock Ticking

A primer on the benefits and practices of solitude

Isaiah 30:15



Dallas Willard noted an experiment done with mice a few years ago. A researcher found that when amphetamines are given to a mouse in solitude, it takes a high dosage to kill it. Give it to a group of mice, and they start hopping around and hyping each other up so much that a fraction of the dosage will be lethal—so great is the effect of “the world” on mice. In fact, a mouse given no amphetamines at all, placed in a group on the drug, will get so hyper that in 10 minutes or so it will be dead. “In groups,” Willard noted, “they go off like popcorn.”

You’d think only mice would be so foolish as to hang out with other mice that are so hopped up—so frantically pursuing mindless activity for no discernible purpose—that they put their own lives at risk.

What Exactly Is Solitude?

Some people ask, “What do I do when I practice solitude? What should I bring with me?” The primary answer, of course, is—nothing.

At its heart, solitude is primarily about not doing something. Just as fasting means to refrain from eating, so solitude means to refrain from society. When I go into solitude, I withdraw from conversation, from others, from noise, from media, from the constant barrage of stimulation.

“In solitude,” Henri Nouwen wrote, “I get rid of my scaffolding.” Scaffolding is all the stuff I use to keep myself propped up, to convince myself I’m important or okay. In solitude I have no friends to talk with, no phone calls or meetings, no TV to entertain, no music or books or newspapers to occupy and distract my mind. I am, in the words of the old hymn, “Just as I Am”—just me and my sinfulness, and God.

Two Types of Solitude

I think about solitude in two categories. First, I need brief periods of solitude on a regular basis—preferably each day, even at intervals during the day. But I also need extended periods of solitude—a half day, a day, or a few days—and this is possible only at greater intervals. Frances de Sales, author of the classic *An Introduction to the Devout Life*, used the image of a clock:

There is no clock, no matter how good it may be, that doesn’t need resetting and rewinding twice a day—once in the morning and once in the evening. In addition, at least once a year it must be taken apart to remove the dirt clogging it, straighten out bent parts, and repair those worn out. In like manner, every morning and evening a man

who really takes care of his heart must rewind it for God's service.... At least once a year, he must take it apart and examine every piece in detail—that is, every affection and passion—in order to repair whatever defects there may be.

I try to begin my days by praying over the day's schedule—meetings I'll attend, tasks I must perform, people I'll be with—and placing them all in God's hands. Through the day, I try to take 5-minute breaks, close the door to my office, and remind myself that one day the office will be gone and I'll still belong to God.

At the end of the day, I like to review the day with God—to go over the events to see what he might be saying to me through them, and to hand any anxieties or regrets over to him. One of the great benefits of this exercise is that you begin to learn from your days.

When I was in athletics in school, we used to watch videotapes of our performances. They were sometimes painful to watch, but it was worth it to be spared from making the same mistakes over and over. It's the same here. For instance, when I began this daily review, I discovered I experienced much more anger than I ever thought. I began to be aware of the attitudes and responses that were guiding my life.

I also need extended times alone. One of the great obstacles you will likely face is that extended solitude will feel like a waste of time. We're so conditioned to feel our existence is justified only when we are accomplishing something. But also, for me, this feeling comes because my mind wanders so much. I used to think if I devoted a large chunk of time to praying, I should be able to engage in solid, uninterrupted, focused prayer. But I can't.

What I have come to realize, slowly, is that bits of focused prayer interspersed with these wanderings is all my mind is capable of right now. One day I hope to do better. But for now, I have to accept that a large chunk of prayer time will be lost to wandering. Brother Lawrence said it like this: "For many years I was bothered by the thought that I was a failure at prayer. Then one day I realized I would always be a failure at prayer, and I've gotten along much better ever since."

How to Spend a Day Alone

I was intimidated the first time I tried spending an entire day in solitude. Putting some structure on the day helps. Here are some suggestions.

Spend a brief time getting ready the night before. Ask God to bless the day, and tell him you want to devote the day to him. This day is your gift to God, but of course even more than that, it is a gift God wants to give to you. What do you need the Lord to give you? A sense of healing and forgiveness? Conviction for an apathetic heart? Compassion? A renewed sense of mission?

Arrange the day around listening to God. Here's a format I've adapted from Glandion Carney's *The Spiritual Formation Toolkit*:

8:00–9:00. Prepare your mind and heart. Take a walk, or do whatever will help you set aside concerns over other tasks. Try to arrange your morning so you can be in silence from the moment you first wake up.

9:00–11:00. Read and meditate on Scripture, taking time to stop and reflect when God seems to be speaking to you through the text.

11:00–Noon. Write down your responses to what you've read. Speak to God about these.

Noon–1:00. Grab some lunch and take a walk, reflecting on the morning.

1:00–2:00. Rest or nap.

2:00–3:00. Think about goals that have emerged from the day.

3:00–4:00. Write down these goals and any other thoughts in a journal. You may want to do this in the form of a letter to God.

—John Ortberg; excerpted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

What would you identify as your “scaffolding”? How can you get rid of it for periods of solitude?

Have you ever spent a large amount of time in voluntary solitude? If so, how did it go?

Does the schedule listed above look appealing or unappealing to you? Why?