A QUIETNESS WITHIN

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The Quiet Way as Faith and Spirituality

**The Depth in Which We Are Quiet**

The theologian Paul Tillich once wrote that we ourselves, as well as the world we live in, would be changed for the better if only we would seek "more rest for our souls." Our very actions in the world would be rendered more effective, he believed, if they were sourced in a more profound, creative depth, that is, "the depth in which we are quiet."1 According to Tillich, most of us but skim the surface of our lives, ignoring the depths of ourselves and "the deep things of God." This happens because exploring these deeps is uncomfortable and demanding. Yet he claimed that we cannot progress in the spiritual life, we cannot experience deep joy, unless we are also prepared to accept this uncomfortable and demanding way, risking and breaking through the surface of things to the depths. TilIich suggests that, in the modern world, our lives are in such constant motion that we do not even pause to consider more profound levels of being. We skid along the road of life "like hit and run drivers," leaving our souls grievously injured in the speed of the getaway.

What we fail to realize, says Tillich, is that the true road may not actually be the one we are following so frenetically and unreflectively. The true road—the road to our spiritual depths—may travel in a different direction entirely, but in our haste we miss the redirection signs. In the pressurized speedway of modern life, we have become oblivious to the existence of a truer pathway: "We hear the voice of that depth; but our ears are closed. We feel that something radical, total, and unconditional is demanded of us; but we rebel against it, try to escape its urgency, and will not accept its promise".2

Tillich's observations are not just symptomatic of modern life. In the fifteenth century, Thomas a Kempis, whose writings were so beloved of early and later Quakers,3 expressed a similar sentiment, believing it to be a symptom of the "modern" world he inhabited:

Lord, to what a pass have we come? We grieve over a worldly loss. We labour and hustle to gain some small profit, forgetting the harm to our souls, and seldom recalling it. We attend to matters of little or no value, and neglect those of the greatest importance. For when a man devotes all his energy to material affairs, he rapidly becomes immersed in them, unless he quickly recovers his senses .4

According to both Tillich and Thomas, the experience oJ personal suffering is often the driver that diverts us onto a more authentic path. Here we discover the depths of the spirit and our true life. And the name of this depth, "the depth in which we are quiet"? God, says Tillich, "this infinite and inexhaustible depth of all being."5

**Christian Origins: The Inner Quest**

In the early Christian tradition, another word for contemplation was *quiet* or *quietud*—quiet or quietude. The word conveyed a sense of resting, both in and before God. But this rest was more than just relaxation. Quiet—later leading to the epithet "quietism"—signified deep inner peacefulness, such as that acquired through the experience of the depths. Quiet became significant as a tenet of the Christian faith because Jesus himself promised, "You will find rest for your souls" and "My peace I give you" (Matt. 11:28-29; John 14:27).6 In the longer biblical tradition, "quiet" or "quietness" has an extensive etymology, based in the early Hebraic texts, the wisdom literature,7 and the New Testament epistles.8 The early Christian community, according to these epistles, prized a calm and peaceable spirit as an expression of the authenticity of the believer's faith. Quietude, in this sense, emanated from the secure depths of the believer's spiritual life.

The particular association between quiet (resting in God) and contemplation (attending specifically to the soul and to its connection with God in silence and often solitude) developed as a spiritual way of life when third-century Christian men and women ventured into the desert to live. In this primal place, away from the distractions of the everyday world, they explored the source of the tributaries of their faith. This way of life developed into monastic communities where solitude and quiet merged into a life of communal prayer and work. Had not Jesus retired to the wilderness for lengthy periods of solitude, prayer, and soul searching (Luke 4:1-13)? Had he not advised his followers when they prayed to avoid public displays of piety, but to enter privately into an inner room and close the door to the outside world (Matt. 6:5-6)? Had not the Psalmist stated, "My soul waits in silence only for God; from Him comes my salvation" (Ps. 62:2)?

Although their spiritual philosophy derived from the scriptures, mystics and quietists were often regarded as dissidents. Most traveled their route to the divine as spiritual adventurers and dissenting pathfinders who ventured the deeps of their own consciousness in order to find God. At their most profound, they explored, signposted, and articulated the depths and heights of spiritual pathways to God. In essence, quietist contemplatives embodied the inner quest. They sought in the depths of their humanity an authentic ground of eternal truth, a transformational encounter at the deepest level of being. As with Quakers, the quietist mystics practiced this quest through inner silence. For some, the silence shaped a way of prayer; for some, it shaped a way of "being" before God, or simply a way of seeking God. If there emerged anything of credo in this quiet way, it spoke of the questing spirit in the boundless compass of sacred mystery.

**Later Teachings**

The fourteenth-century Christian mystic Eckhart von Hochheim (also known as Meister Eckhart) writes, "In this silence, this quiet, the Word is heard. There is no better method of approaching this Word than in silence, in quiet; we hear it and know it aright in unknowing."9 A century later the monastic reformer Thomas a Kempis wrote a book of guidance for the spiritual life entitled The Imitation of Christ. This short treatise was widely published, and was especially prized by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Quakers. Founding Quaker George Fox kept a copy in his personal library. Like

church mystics before him, and Quakers after him, Thomas a Kempis believed that spiritual renewal required a radically obvious and uncomplicated solution: simply emulate the life of Christ and the unadorned, devotional faith of the earliest Christians. The way of quiet, he declares, is simplicity itself. Each believer should practice, with devotion, interior quiet before God. This in itself has relevance to the communal life of the spiritual community. This way of prayer and devotion teaches the practitioner to manage relationships and all the entanglements and problematics of community.

Most importantly, Thomas cautions, community can be demanding and burdensome; not only that, sometimes you, the practitioner, will be a burden even to yourself. Therefore know when to retreat to a place of quietude in order to reclaim and renew your spiritual self. No need for formalities or ritual, he says; just present yourself as you are before God. Paramount for spiritual development is to learn to live a sacred and transformed life. Therefore, in your own spiritual practice, learn to love solitude and silence in prayer, because in this quietness your soul will progress. Practice purity of heart, simplicity of purpose, and most of all the self-discipline this way requires. If you do so with integrity and humility, you will undoubtedly encounter directly the divine Source within yourself. However, he warns, there will be obstacles on the way. This is why self-discipline is needed and self-surrender to that which is greater than yourself. The rewards will be evidenced in the community, in the spiritual joy and freedom of mind you bring to it. But most of all, writes Thomas, "enter like Moses into the Tabernacle [the Tent of Meeting] to ask guidance of the Lord. Sometimes you will receive God's answer and return instructed on many matters, both present and future." But take refuge also in prayer, in the depths of your own heart.10

Some time after Thomas, Francisco de Cisneros, a Franciscan, bypassed convention by addressing ordinary people in everyday language. Spiritual knowledge, he believed, is for everybody, not just for those who possess wealth, social status, and education. The quiet way offers everyone the means of direct access to God. To practice it you need no channel or conduit for your prayers, no special language, knowledge, or ritual—just yourself. If you bring as many people as possible to experience the God within the heart and to know the simple reality of divine love where and as each person is, he reasoned, the outcome will be a reformed and renewed church. From a renewed individual emanates a renewed church, and from a renewed church, a renewed world. So his vision for the prayer of quiet, the practice of simple silence before a God of pure love, developed from a modest premise. Transformation in each person leads to transformation of the spiritual community to transformation of the wider world. Thus, there is no either/or separation between the individual and the wider community, but simply a both/and interrelationship.11

The connection between Quakers and such Christian mystics lay in their shared vision of what is possible if the way is made available to ordinary people in their everyday lives. For them, the way of quiet connects deeply to a more open, accessible spirituality, expressed and lived out personally and in community. This way is based, not in the structural formalities and dogmas of the church, but in the unalloyed depths of human and divine being. Its advocates perceive the original gospel message as radically simple and inclusive and its earliest purveyors as uncompromising risk takers in sharing it. There have always been courageous risk takers, men

and women venturers of renewal in the Christian tradition, calling people to the original undiluted source of the faith. The early Quakers themselves were a new generation of such venturers, plowing their audacious furrows through the rutted landscapes of religion in the seventeenth century.

**The Quiet Way as Mystery**

Now, as then, the quiet way is in essence a way of simplicity, engaging the heart and soul in the wisdom and emptiness of the still center, the sacred mystery within. Yet the quiet way also grasps the oars of the theological boat, heading it courageously into the prevailing currents of orthodoxy, neatly capsizing conceptual boundaries. This way invites on board apparently converse ideas, placing them in paradoxical proximity in a radical statement of inclusion. In emptiness is fullness; in surrender and self-dispossession, we find ourselves; in unknowing, we know; in losing the way, we return. Concepts of the divine as Presence—as present in the world and in our lives—coalesce with ideas of the divine as absence, as incomprehensible mystery. Similarly, the quiet way offers a spiritual topography of darkness, not as bleakness, but as dazzling luminosity and transformation, the spiritual wayfarer's teacher, guide, and healer. In the paradoxical proximity of these ideas, and somewhere in the space between these proximities, resides the truth of a God who refuses to be hostage to the limits of human reason and its constructs. The quiet way shapes the boundless compass of mystery as a sacred attribute of faith.

Mystery itself is what we know we don't know. Sometimes, mystery is what we can't know, given the limitations of this human plane. "Can you fathom the mysteries of God?" Job asks in the Bible, "Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens. What can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave. What can you know?" (Job 11:7-9). For the quietist, this not knowing expresses a quality of the sacred. Its hiddenness, its mystery, lives ever present, like a seed within the earth, resting in the loam of sheltered darkness waiting for optimal conditions to germinate, to be revealed.

Mystery, in its sacred sense, also suggests another kind of not knowing---an attentive, conscious unknowing. Mystery is a letting go of everything we think we know about God. Whatever we perceive God to be, whatever meaning we invest in the word "God," conscious unknowing means releasing our hold on our perceptions and images of God in order to let God be who God is. This is equivalent to a voluntary step into the transforming dark in order to make our faith more real.

A Kenyan friend, studying African creation myths, told me of a myth describing this transition from imaging the divine to a more authentic experience. At the beginning of time, God created the earth, its creatures, and humankind. However, humans would not let God be. They made constant requests, petitions, and complaints. Finally one night when they were sleeping, a wearied God decided to leave. When the people awoke and discovered God's absence they ran about in panic, calling for God to return. But after a while, they realized something had changed. Everything around them, the earth, the night sky, the creatures of the earth, even themselves, had acquired a sublime beauty. God had gone, yet only to be present in a different way than they had envisaged.

Previously, God had been created by the people in the image of utility, shaped to fit the stockpile of their own needs. As if peering down the wrong end of a telescope, they had missed the more expansive, more paradoxically truthful view they came to realize later. God in absence is yet present as God truly is. God, spirit, the eternal, is Presence itself. Moreover, in this Presence, in God-being, they were enabled to be present to each other as human-being reflecting God-being. As Quakers say, "There is that of God in everyone." Or, to put it another way, there is that of everyone in God. The American writer Annie Dillard, after an experience of mystical insight, aptly describes this process of conceptual transfiguration: "It was as if God had said, 'I am here, but not as you have known me."12

The early Quaker George Fox recorded a similar life-changing shift in consciousness. The realignment of consciousness was so profound and life changing for him that he was never the same angst-filled, desperate-for-answers, pacing-about-the-countryside, Leicestershire lad again. Following the torment and struggle of letting go of one kind of God—the God of the intellect—he found another. He was astounded by the encounter. For him, this was the Christ within, the very one, he said, who could "speak to my condition." "My heart did leap for joy," he wrote in his journal. The heart, for Fox, became a metaphor for a centered, inwardly focused faith—that is, a consciousness-changing faith. Soon after his initial transformational experience, he was to write in 1653 of the "mystery" of the second birth. By this he meant a spiritual rebirth, a new realization in the individual which accesses knowledge of God, who exists both beyond and before the advent of time. This mystery he connected to silence and to a God who is accessible through the way of stillness and peace.13 He later defined "the stillness and quietness in the pure spirit of God" as a 'condition which allows the mystery-the "veiled" and "hidden" things of God—to be revealed in a new kind of spiritual consciousness. 14

What they were all saying, from Job to the Middle Eastern desert mystics, to African mystical mythology, to Annie Dillard in the United States and Fox in England, is that whatever you thought of God previously, God is more than the very summit of your thoughts. God is more than human projections, wishes, rationalizing, linguistic forms, and ideas. Whatever we believe, our understanding of God will only ever be fragmentary, like the partial and hazy view of a whole landscape we glimpse through a misty mirror. The early Quaker mystic, Isaac Penington, wrote a similar sentiment to a friend: "Every secret thing, every spiritual mystery, but what God opens to thee, is too high and wonderful for thee. . . . The error is still in the comprehending, knowing mind."15

Therefore, we can only really know God by experiencing- - that is, by experiencing the fundamental being and character of God, which is pure love and Presence itself. As George Fox wrote in his letters to Quaker groups, God is accessible only through experiencing, and this occurs in the silence, when all words—all definitions, all thoughts, all rational intricacies- - have ceased. We need to enter a new world of being, he wrote, a world of silence before God; to die to our own natural wisdom, reasonings, and understandings, so that we can experience the life of God within. 16

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