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**Listening as prayer**

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Few of us are prepared to sit outside in the freezing cold for thirty minutes in hopes of discerning God’s still small voice. But can you find your own version of the “twelve-month lesson”? Is there a location, a prayer practice, a time of day that you can commit to wholeheartedly, if not for a full year, at least for a full week or month to see how it might change your days, your perspective, and maybe even your life?

Spiritual director and retreat leader Diane Cameron says that too often today our lives consist of “discernment by Google.” Rather than sit in silence and contemplation, we search and search anywhere and any way we can. She recommends a more practical approach that begins with three steps. **Step 1:** “Frame the question you have about your life. Are you asking the right question?” **Step 2:** “Take it to prayer with a light hand, not begging.” In other words, don’t plead for answers but simply let God know you are there and listening. **Step 3:** Use visualization and imagination to “live as if” the situation you’re visualizing is true.

Cameron suggests going so far as to “live as if” a particular decision is absolutely true for a full week and seeing how it feels and what it means for you. Then the next week, live as if you’ve chosen a different option, and pay attention to the differences in feelings, in what’s moving through you. “We do this as contemplative practice,” she explains. Journal about it, notice your dreams, turn to God and say, “Show me where I am.” Over time, you should be better able to hear God’s still small voice and have it lead you toward becoming the person He created you to be.

“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

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“Silence creates an environment in which God can be heard and welcomed.”

—Norvene Vest, *No Moment Too Small: Rhythms of Silence, Prayer & Holy Reading*
Seek Out Sacred Silence

“Silence is God’s first language. Everything else is a poor translation.”

—Father Thomas Keating, Trappist monk and priest

When Becky Eldredge was a junior at Louisiana State University 20-something years ago, she took part in a Busy Person’s Retreat, where she learned how to pause in her daily life to make time for stillness and prayer. She devised a term for the sacred space within us where God resides: “the inner chapel.” She has used that term many times in her work as a spiritual director and has now authored a book with that title.

Making time for stillness, Becky learned, is key. During a Christopher Closeup interview, she explained, “What [being still] does to our body... is take all those heightened emotions and...adrenaline, and it starts calming it. So it does something to us physically. Then, it’s the gift of... coming into this silence and knowing it’s not an empty silence—knowing that in our Christian tradition... it’s making daily time to be with the one who completely loves us unconditionally, who offers us mercy like we can’t even fathom. It’s the Christ, the one we belong to.”

Author and filmmaker Cassidy Hall was moved to quit her job and visit all of the Trappist monasteries in the United States (17 at that time) after reading monk and author Thomas Merton’s book New Seeds of Contemplation. And Hall is well aware of the “tension” that we confront when trying to discern God’s still small voice amid the constant chatter and busyness of our day-to-day world. She notes that in Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, Merton states that it can be damaging for us “to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone and everything.”

Sometimes, it isn’t just the world outside keeping us from silence, but our own seemingly-endless anxious thoughts. Hall recalled a nun at Santa Rita Abbey in Arizona saying to her, “Sooner or later, you have to get to the point where you take on your own inner noise and let God take you by the hand and lead you along.”

Hall has a full schedule herself, co-hosting the Encountering Silence podcast, producing a film by the same name, and working on a documentary about Merton. She therefore recommends counting the silences “within our loudest days.” It could be as simple as a glance out a window while our children clamor behind us or the wind on our face as we take out the trash. She adds, “Silence is already here; it is already yours. Silence is the space between each word you’re reading, the pause between your daily tasks, the emptiness that connects us together, the knowing glance you give your partner... It’s so important to nurture daily silence, sacred pauses amidst the mundane moments of our lives where God speaks to us.”

An Honest Look at Life

In her book Present Over Perfect: Leaving Behind Frantic for a Simpler, More Soulful Way of Living, Shauna Niequest talks about how her successful life as a writer, wife, and mother began to take its toll as she tried to keep up with the obligations others told her she should take on. As a result of being overcommitted, she became physically, mentally, and spiritually drained—and forgot how to live with joy. She eventually chose to change the priorities in her life, which led to her world being transformed.

Niequest says, “One of the greatest delights in life is walking away from what someone told you that you should be in favor of—and walking toward what you truly love in your own heart, in your own secret soul. You were made by hand with great love by the God of the universe and He planted deep inside you a set of loves and dreams and idiosyncrasies, and you can ignore them as you go...”
long as you want, but they will at some point start yelling. Worse than that, if you ignore them long enough, they will go silent—and that’s the real tragedy.”

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—Norvene Vest, No Moment Too Small: Rhythms of Silence, Prayer & Holy Reading

“Listen with the ear of your heart.”
—St. Benedict of Nursia

WOULDN’T IT BE NICE IF GOD COULD SEND US HOW-TO INSTRUCTIONS on this project called life, or at least some obvious clues that might lead us in the right direction? We pray and reflect, looking for signs that we’re on the right path, but we often spend a lot of our time “recalculating,” like a GPS trying to guide us toward our intended destination after several wrong turns.