

ONLY IN SILENCE

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The Belgian spiritual writer, Bieke Vandekerckhove, comes by her wisdom honestly. She didn't learn what she shares from a book or even primarily from the good example of others. She learned what she shares through the crucible of a unique suffering, being hit at the tender age of nineteen with a terminal disease that promised not just an early death but also a complete breakdown and humiliation of her body enroute to that death.

Her attempt to cope with her situation drove her in many directions, initially to anger and hopelessness but eventually to monasteries, to the wisdom of monasticism, and, under its direction, into the deep well of silence, that desert that lurks so threateningly inside each of us. Away from all the noises of the world, in the silence of her own soul, inside the chaos of her raging, restless insides she found the wisdom and strength not just to cope with her illness but to also find a deeper meaning and joy in her life.

There are, as John Updike poetically puts it, secrets that are hidden from health, though, as Vandekerckhove makes evident, they can be uncovered in silence. However uncovering the secrets that silence has to teach us is not easy. Silence, until properly befriended, is scary and the process of befriending it is the soul's equivalent of crossing a hot desert. Our insides don't easily become calm, restlessness doesn't easily turn into solitude, and the temptation to turn to the outside world for consolation doesn't easily give way to the idea of quiet. But there's a peace and a meaning that can only be found inside the desert of our own chaotic and raging insides. The deep wells of consolation lie at the end of an inner journey through heat, thirst, and dead-ends that must be pushed through with dogged fidelity. And, as for any epic journey, the task is not for the faint of heart.

Here's how Vandekerckhove describes one aspect of the journey: "Inner noise can be quite exhausting. That's probably why so many flee to the seduction of exterior background noises. They prefer to have the noise just wash over them. But if you want to grow spiritually, you have to stay inside of the room of your spiritual raging and persevere. You have to continue to sit silently and honestly in God's presence until the raging quiets down and your heart gradually becomes cleansed and quieted. Silence forces us to take stock of our actual manner of being human. And then we hit a wall, a dead point. No matter what we do, no matter what we try, something in us continues to feel lost and estranged, despite the myriad ways of society to meet our human needs. Silence confronts us with an unbearable bottomlessness, and there appears no way out. We have no choice but to align ourselves with the religious depth in us."

There's a profound truth: Silence confronts us with an unbearable bottomlessness and we have no choice but to align ourselves with the religious depth inside us. Sadly, for most of us, we will learn this only by bitter conscription when we have to actually face our own death. In the abandonment of dying, stripped of all options and outlets we will, despite struggle and bitterness, have to, in the words of Karl Rahner, allow ourselves to sink into the incomprehensibility of God. Moreover, before this surrender is made, our lives will always remain somewhat unstable and confusing and there will always be dark, inner corners of the soul that scare us.

But a journey into silence can take us beyond our dark fears and shine healing light into our darkest corners. But, as Vandekerckhove and other spiritual writers point out, that peace is usually found only after we have reached an impasse, a "dead point" where the only thing we can do is "to pierce the negative."

In her book, *The Taste of Silence*, Vandekerckhove recounts how an idealistic friend of hers shared his dream of going off by himself into some desert to explore spirituality. Her prompt reaction was not much to his liking: "A person is ready to go to any kind of desert. He's willing to sit anywhere,

as long as it's not his own desert." How true. We forever hanker after idealised deserts and avoid our own.

The spiritual journey, the pilgrimage, the Camino, we most need to make doesn't require an airline ticket, though an experienced guide is recommended. The most spiritually rewarding trip we can make is an inner pilgrimage, into the desert of our own silence.

As human beings we are constitutively social. This means, as the bible so bluntly puts it, that it is not good for the human person to be alone. We are meant to be in community with others. Heaven will be a communal experience; but, on the road there, there's a certain deep inner work that can only be done alone, in silence, away from the noise of the world.

<http://ronrolheiser.com/en/#.VpV7wezCanM>

Used with permission of the author, Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser. Currently, Father Rolheiser is serving as President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio Texas. He can be contacted through his website, www.ronrolheiser.com. www.facebook.com/ronrolheiser.