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Hesychia: The Practice of Stillness

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A JOURNAL OF THE CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL LIFE

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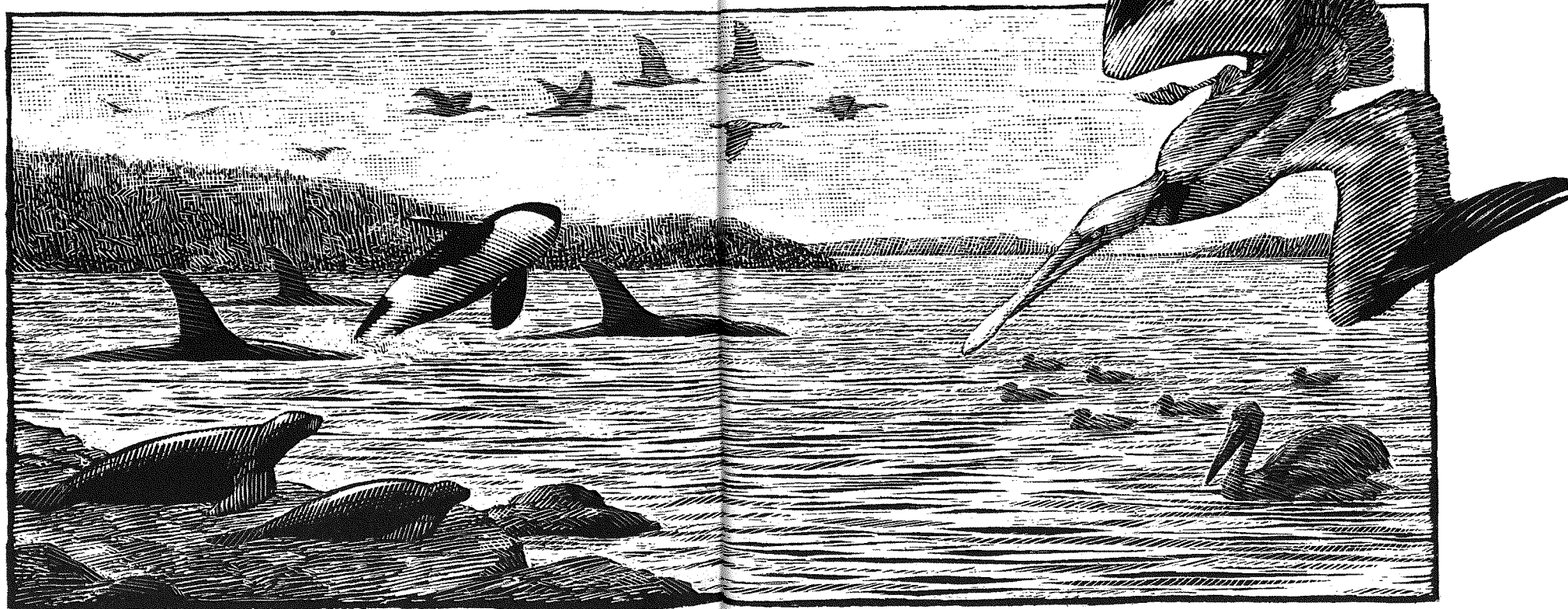
THE PRACTICE OF STILLNESS

by Douglas Burton-Christie

NOTHING in this place ever stands still. Swallows circle continuously in the sky above. Ospreys fly back and forth along the shore, often with gleaming, silvery fish squirming in their talons. Pelicans plunge into the surf. Whales surface and dive. A herd of elk makes its way north toward Whale Gulch, pausing for a time before turning south and moving back toward Bear Harbor. The long, golden grass sways in the afternoon breeze. The ocean rolls and churns unceasingly. At night,

falling stars streak across the sky. And yet, for all this movement, there is nowhere in the world where the sense of stillness and peace is as palpable and deep for me as it is here along this wild stretch of California coast. Sometimes I sit for hours doing nothing. I myself become a kind of still point amid the flux and change all around me.

This used to make me nervous; surely there was something I ought to be doing. But little by little I have adjusted to the strange wonder of this idleness, the spaciousness of it, the sheer pleasure. Some of this pleasure no doubt derives from simple relief I feel at being free, even if only for a time, from the obligations, activities, and responsibilities that comprise so much of my daily existence and which, in their cumulative force, often overwhelm me. Here in this place, my responsibilities and obligations are reduced to a minimum: cooking, cleaning,



tending to visitors. It is in fact a job of sorts. Along with my family, I have been serving as a camp host in this remote place on California's Lost Coast for the past nine years. Its very remoteness and the absence of rangers necessitates the presence of volunteers who will care for those few visitors willing to brave the narrow, steep dirt road that descends from the redwood forests into this wild coastal bluff. But in truth our responsibilities are few. Mostly we are asked to be a presence here. And that we do happily, living for a month every summer in an old ranch house that has been standing here for almost one hundred years. There is no telephone, no electricity. Just the

Something in us has to shift

wild beauty of the place itself and the invitation to enter into it, to slow down and let it enter us.

This sounds easy, and in a way it is. I have noticed though that it is generally easier for children than for adults. My daughter has been coming here since she was five years old. From the first moment she set eyes on the old house with its twisting stairway and creaking boards, the field running down to the cliffs, the old eucalyptus tree that had fallen in the middle of the field, she was "gone," disappearing for hours into the fields; creating a rich, imaginative world out of her mysterious, candlelit bedroom; or curling up for long hours with a book—and then another, and another. The pleasures of this place are easy for her to embrace, as is the prospect of endless days with no set agenda.

For the adults who come here, myself included, the transition is often more difficult, more complicated. For all of the obvious relief of slowing down and relaxing, there is also an uneasiness that sometimes creeps in. There are no email messages to answer, no phone calls to return, relatively few tasks to accomplish. There is nowhere to go. And there is real delight in being freed from all of this for a time. But old habits die hard. After the initial pleasure of all that time and space unfolding before you, a sense of disorientation sometimes begins to set in. After all, one depends on these daily, mundane activities to give shape and structure to one's days, one's life, even to define one's identity. Without them, who are you exactly? What *is* at the core of your identity?

Such questions rarely surface directly. Rather they seep in slowly. For me, it is often the passing of time, the sense of time slowing down that allows these questions to really begin calling for my attention. Gradually, but steadily, in the stillness and spaciousness of this place, I begin to relinquish certain habitual,

deep-seated elements of my formal identity. Or at least forget about them for a time. It always surprises and delights me, for example, to discover how few of the visitors who come to this place have any real interest in what I do "in the outside world," in my work, my accomplishments. It hardly ever comes up. Nor, in all honesty, do I miss this. I become simply a person sitting on the porch of an old cabin who seems to know something about the place, the best places to camp, the wildlife, where the best swimming hole can be found. I am pretty good at giving directions. And that's about it. Sometimes encounters with visitors shift into another register and we discover that we have something in common, a favorite author or filmmaker, or a common political concern. And then something wonderful happens: we take the time to talk about it, to explore it. We engage one another. And unlike the rushed, hectic character that I so often feel in such encounters in my daily life, this feels leisurely, relaxed, open, authentic. There is time to consider and respond, to dwell in a shared thought or feeling.

Often I am not aware of this in the moment it is happening. There is, rather, a lack of self-consciousness in such experience. It seems to unfold simply, spontaneously. Still, sometimes an awareness of what it meant comes to me later, in the recognition of the strong pleasure I felt at encountering another human being this freely and authentically, from such a deep, still place in myself. And I wonder: Why isn't this quality of awareness, this quality of being, available to me more often? Why does it seem so elusive? Must I really remove myself so completely from my life, drive eight hundred miles and disappear into the wilderness for a month in order to wake up to this capacity in myself?

To this latter question, I very much wish to answer "no." I want to believe that in the daily rhythm of my ordinary life, grounded in a steady commitment to at least a few moments of still prayer in the morning, I can discover something of this simple, free consciousness. And sometimes I do. Still, I am only too aware of how quickly it dissipates, how deeply I struggle to maintain a space of quiet at the center of my life. I know from long experience that sometimes I do have to remove myself for a time from the many and varied commitments and activities of my life to recover a sense of this spaciousness—this simple and deep way of being present to myself and to God.



FEW MILES up the road from this little house by the ocean, hidden away in a redwood grove, stands a small monastery. The women who live there, several of whom arrived in California from Belgium over thirty years ago, stand in the Cistercian tradition of Christian monastic practice. The monastery is a place of profound stillness. Indeed it often seems to me that stillness is close to the very heart of this place and this community, as it is for the entire Cistercian way of life. Here in this place, the day

begins with a common, disciplined practice of stillness: an hour of sitting meditation. It is an intimate and moving experience to sit in silence with others, to touch and be touched by such stillness. And one comes to realize over time that this simple practice grounds everything else that happens here—manual work, common prayer, study, dialogue, hospitality. It grounds the entire mysterious process by which one is drawn closer to God.

The ancient monks of the Egyptian desert had a name for this elusive but crucial aspect of the spiritual life: *hesychia*. The Greek word can be translated in different ways, depending on the context: stillness, quiet, tranquility, deep peace. In the monastic literature, *hesychia* is often synonymous with a certain quality or depth of prayer, or awareness of God's presence. John Climacus described *hesychia* as "worshipping God unceasingly. . . [an] inviolable activity of the heart."¹ The simplicity of *hesychia* was, for the early Christian monks, part of its power, its meaning. In this place of stillness, everything other than God faded from consciousness. God's touch, God's presence became palpable. One became conscious of living *in* God. "[The one] who has achieved *hesychia*," claimed John Climacus, "has arrived at the very center of the mysteries."²

But how was one to arrive at such a place? How was one to learn to let go of the things, the activities, the ideas that stood in the way of *hesychia* taking root in the heart? For the monks, this was the work of an entire lifetime. They realized that stillness was both an *end* to be sought—"the very center of the mysteries"—and the *means* by which one might gradually come to this end, that is, a *practice*. Stillness belonged at the

¹John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 268–69.

²Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 264.

beginning of monastic life and practice (Evagrius of Pontus believed it to be the foundation of everything else), but it was also a quality that one might expect to find in the lives of the most mature and experienced monks. It might involve at any given moment a withdrawal from unnecessary activity, a careful scrutiny of the character of one's relationships with others, a particular way of praying, a willingness to open oneself to struggle, or the gradual realization of a deeper level of honesty and transparency in oneself and in relationship with God. Stillness, in other words, became a touchstone for almost everything that mattered in the life of the monk.

To realize in oneself a deep sense of stillness, sometimes it is necessary to find a still place. For the early monks, this meant finding a place free of unnecessary distractions, a place where they could open themselves honestly and deeply to the stillness where God was to be found. One such place was the cell. To take up life in a cell—often a simple, modest dwelling in or near the desert—was to make a bold wager on the possibility of finding God, and oneself, in stillness. Yet it was anything but simple or easy to inhabit such a place. To do so meant facing oneself, without evasion or prejudice. It meant allowing oneself to become vulnerable in precisely those parts of one's life where the desire for security was greatest. Because of this, it was usually not long before one felt the acute temptation to leave, or at least to soften the intensity of the encounter. Abba Antony recognized this, calling his fellow monks to remember: "Just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so do monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with [persons] of the world lose the intensity of inner stillness."³

This saying holds a sense of sober awareness, rooted in the knowledge of how easy it is to evade the real work, here represented by life in the cell. For the early monks, the cell was both a real place (often the very center of their monastic life) *and* a richly suggestive symbol that enabled them to imagine an inner space so deep, so pure, so profoundly connected with God that nothing could shake one's sense of intimate relationship with the Holy One. To "loiter outside [one's] cell" or to "pass one's time with [persons] of the world," as the saying

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must
become
vulnerable

³Antony, saying 10, in *The Desert Christians: Sayings of the Desert Fathers. The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. and with a foreword by Benedicta Ward, SLG (New York: MacMillan, 1975), 10.

expresses it, was in fact to yield to the temptation to live in a condition of chronic and unrelieved distraction. It was to avert one's gaze from the very heart of one's life. Perhaps this accounts for the severity of some of the sayings about stillness; the monks' own experience had taught them that to forfeit this dimension of one's life was to sacrifice something utterly precious and necessary. Thus, Abba Arsenius warns, "When one who is living in silent prayer hears the song of the little sparrow, his heart no longer experiences the same stillness."⁴

At first glance, this saying seems appalling; it suggests a sense of boundaries so severely drawn that the person devoted to prayer dare not lift his or her eyes (or ears) in response to anything other than God. It also seems to suggest a sense of stillness so fragile that it can hardly withstand the slightest incursion or provocation. But I think Arsenius's words are, at their heart, less about denying or refusing the world than they are a reminder of the need to honor what is most precious and valuable in our lives—God alive within us. To attend to this mystery invites an awareness so strong and encompassing that all else pales beside it—even, beautiful as it may be, the little sparrow.



LATE IN HIS LIFE, Thomas Merton traveled to California to spend time at Redwoods Monastery and to explore the Lost Coast in the hopes of finding a place where he could descend into greater stillness and authentic prayer. He had arrived at a moment in his own life in which he felt the need to go deeper, to find a more honest way of living out his monastic vocation. And for him this meant questioning some of the basic truths he had been living with for many years, including a vision of monasticism that had become, for all its truth and beauty, too safe, too easy. From his perch along the wild, craggy Northern California coast, not far from the old ranch house at Needle Rock, he wrote:

In our monasticism, we have been content to find our way to a kind of peace, a simple, undisturbed thoughtful life. And this is certainly good. But is it good enough?

⁴Arsenius, saying 25, in Ward, *The Desert Christians*, 25.

I, for one, realize that now I need more. Not simply to be quiet, somewhat productive, to pray, to read, to cultivate leisure. . . . There is a need of effort, deepening, change and transformation. Not that I must undertake a special project of self-transformation or that I must "work on myself." In that regard, it would be better to forget it. Just go for walks, live in peace, let change come quietly and invisibly on the inside.

But I have a past to break with, an accumulation of inertia, waste, wrong, foolishness, rot, junk, a great need of clarification of mindfulness, or rather of no mind—a return to genuine practice, right effort, need to push on to the great doubt. Need for the Spirit.

*Hang on to the clear light!*⁵

This is an utterly personal statement, articulated by a man standing at a crossroads in his life, looking for a more authentic way of living. Yet it also speaks, I think, to a larger and more widely shared hunger—for honesty, open-heartedness, integrity, peace. Not any peace—certainly not a peace born of easy acceptance of conventions or evasion of the hard questions. Rather it is something closer to what the early Christian monks meant by *hesychia*—a deep, abiding peace, born of struggle and relinquishment, issuing from the costly work of facing up to the truth of one's life. The prospect of "break[ing] with [the] accumulation of inertia, waste, wrong, foolishness, rot, junk. . ." is both daunting and alluring. Few of us can deny the need for this kind of clarification and purification in our life, or the sense of relief that comes from finally giving ourselves to this work. Yet arriving at a place where this deep, cleansing work can begin to happen is itself a mysterious thing. Something in us has to shift. We must become vulnerable. A space needs to open up within us, even a small space. It was here in this space of *hesychia*, the monks believed, that the need for "deepening, change and transformation" could take root within and begin to blossom. Here in this stillness, one could begin to dream of entering into "the very center of the mysteries," into a simple awareness of God at the heart of one's life. One could be reborn.

⁵Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982), 48.