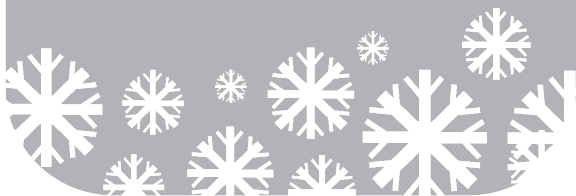


Winter meditations

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Chapter 1: *Silence*

Is anything as silent as a country landscape after a heavy snowfall? When the wind dies down, the clouds scatter, the morning sun glints off the crystals of freshly fallen snow, and the whole world is hushed. But the hush isn't fearful or anxious. It is a hush of contentment, fullness, and satisfaction. It is like the silence that comes to a child who crawls under warm covers after a day of playing outside in the snow, a sigh of quiet happiness that accompanies a gentle smile as the little soul drifts off to sleep. The hush that comes upon a winter's day after a fresh snowfall is the sigh of quiet happiness and the gentle smile of a world at rest.



Do you remember hearing and feeling this hush? Do you remember bundling up in a thick coat and heavy boots, in mittens and scarves, then venturing outside into that winter wonderland? Stepping into the sacred silence. Making the first footprints. Do you remember?

It may not be easy to recall. Our world has become noisy. Audible noise, visual noise,

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and mental noise have become such constant companions that many people flee from silence. If, through an unlikely coincidence, silence surprises us, we panic. We whip out a smartphone and turn up the volume.

Is our noisiness a good thing? After all, summer is natural, but it's noisy. Spring, too, has its noise. Noise has a place in the rhythm of the seasons. But so does silence. So does the quiet hush of a fresh snowfall.



I have always been an introvert. I value and am energized by alone time. So I was surprised when I entered religious life and discovered that, up to that point, my life had been exceedingly, unhealthily noisy.

In the novitiate, which comprise the first two years of religious formation, we follow a monastic regimen. The reasoning behind it is simple. A religious novice is attempting to discern whether or not God is calling him to a life of vowed poverty, chastity, and obedience. Discerning that call involves patiently sifting through the often-hidden motivations behind a young man's desire to become a religious priest. The environment of silence allows interior noise to settle and subside, like white flakes in an agitated snow globe after it is set down again.

A religious novice is also being introduced to a more intense spiritual life. This involves hours spent in prayer each day. It requires developing one's faith and interior sensitivity to discern the voice of the Lord. Silence fosters the development of this spiritual sensitivity and becomes a training ground for the self-discipline required to maintain interior silence later on, when the priest is sent back into the noisy world.

I liked the auditory silence. It was easy for me, as a thoughtful—maybe even brooding—introvert. What stunned and disoriented me was the visual silence. Television and movies were reserved for exceptional moments and limited to religious subjects. The images on the walls inside the cloister were few and consisted entirely of devotional content. We all wore the same religious habit and had the same haircut. You can imagine what a contrast it was to live in that kind of environment following years at the university and work in a major metropolis.

I felt keenly the lack of visual stimuli that had been my daily bread ever since I could remember: the nonstop bombardment of advertisers; the ebullient abundance of shapes and colors everywhere you look; the variety of clothing styles and colors; the incessant change of scenery as you move from home, to work, to the gym, to the store, to the mall, to a friend's house. All that was simply unplugged.

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What was the result? Surprising freedom. My sensory experience felt unshackled. I began to notice things I had never paid attention to before: the vibrancy of colors in the garden; the textures of tree trunks and stone and marble; the fragrances of the different seasons and of the weather changes; the taste of simple foods and water; the weight of humidity and the feel of the air I breathed as the temperature fluctuated.

When on liturgical feast days we would whip out the special vestments during Mass, listen to music in free time, or prepare something special for our meals, the sights and sounds and flavors would fill my senses in a way they didn't before. The noise of the world around me no longer drowned out the music of God's creation and providence. It was like being born again.



This experience isn't exclusive to my vocation. It is an experience we can all enjoy and that God wants us all to enjoy. God has so much he wants to say to us! Silence creates space for us to hear him better.

The prophet Elijah learned this lesson after a dramatic battle with the evil Queen Jezebel, which led him to flee to the wilderness and take refuge in a cave. There he waited for the Lord to show him what to do. Here is what happened next:

...A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

*1 Kings 19:11-13,
New International Version*

God wasn't in the chaos and the noise of the earthquake and wind. He was in the quiet whisper. This is how the Lord speaks to us.

Silence is necessary for hearing. Lovers prefer quiet corners for heart-to-heart exchanges. Amidst the din of a crowd they cannot hear the words they wish to speak to each other. Likewise, for us to hear the words of wisdom and love that the Lord wishes to whisper to us, we need to weave silence into our lives.

