## Thoughts on Solitude

## The Furnace of Transformation

Solitude is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude, we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self. Jesus himself entered into this furnace. There, he was tempted with three compulsions of the world: to be relevant (“turn stones into loaves”), to be spectacular (“throw yourself down”), and to be powerful (“I will give you all these kingdoms”). There, he affirmed God as the only source of his identity (You must worship the Lord your God and serve Him alone.”). Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter—the struggle against the compulsions of the false self and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.

In order to understand the meaning of solitude, we must first unmask the ways in which the idea of solitude has been distorted by our world. We say to each other that we need some solitude in our lives. What we are really thinking of, however, is a time and a place for ourselves in which we are not bothered by other people, can think our own thoughts, express our own complaints and do our own thing, whatever that may be. For us, solitude most often means privacy. We have come to the dubious conviction that we all have a right to privacy. Solitude thus becomes like a spiritual property for which we can compete on the free market of spiritual goods. But there is more. We also think of solitude as a station where we can recharge our batteries, or as the corner of the boxing ring where our wounds are oiled, our muscles massaged and our courage restored. In short, we think of solitude as a place where we gather new strength to continue the ongoing competition in life.

But that is not the solitude of St. John the Baptist, of St. Anthony or of St. Benedict. For them, solitude was not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it was a place of conversion—the place where the old self dies and the new self is born; the place where the emergence of the new man and the new woman occurs.

How can we gain a clearer understanding of this transforming solitude? Let me try to describe in more detail the struggle as well as the encounter that takes place in solitude. In solitude, I get rid of my scaffolding—no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract. Just me—naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken…nothing. It is this nothingness that I have to face in my solitude—a nothingness so dreadful that everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work and my distractions so that I can forget my nothingness and make myself believe that I am worth something. But that is not all. As soon as I decide to stay in my solitude, confessing ideas, disturbing images, wild fantasies and weird associations jump about in my mind like monkeys in a banana tree. Anger and greed begin to show their ugly faces. Then I try again to run from the dark abyss of my nothingness and restore my false self in all its vainglory.

The task is to persevere in my solitude; to stay in my cell until all my seductive visitors get tired of pounding on my door and leave me alone. The struggle is real because the danger is real. It is the danger of living the whole of our life as one long defense against the reality of our condition; one restless effort to convince ourselves of our virtuousness. Yet Jesus “did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:13). The wisdom of the desert (i.e. solitude) is that the confrontation with our own frightening nothingness forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ. Only in and through him can we survive the trials of our solitude.

We enter into solitude first of all to meet our Lord and to be with him alone. Our primary task in solitude, therefore, is not to pay undue attention to the many faces that assail us, but to keep the eyes of our mind and heart on him who is our Divine Savior. Only in the context of grace can we face our sin; only in the place of healing do we dare to show our wounds; only with a single-minded attention to Christ can we give up our clinging fears and face our own true nature. As we come to realize that it is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us, that he is our true self, can we slowly let our compulsions melt away and begin to experience the freedom of the children of God.

What does all of this mean for us in our daily lives? Even when we are not called to the monastic life, we are still responsible for our own solitude. Precisely because our secular milieu offers so few spiritual disciplines, we have to develop our own. We have, indeed, to fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord. Without such a desert we will lose our own soul while preaching the gospel to others. But with such a spiritual abode, we will become increasingly conformed to him in whose Name we minister.

The very first thing we need to do is set apart a time and a place to be with God and him alone. The concrete shape of this discipline of solitude will be different for each person depending on individual character, ministerial task and milieu. But a real discipline never remains vague or general. It is as concrete and specific as daily life itself. When I visited Mother Teresa a few years ago and asked her how to live out my vocation as a priest, she simply said: “Spend one hour a day in adoration of your Lord and never do anything you know is wrong, and you will be all right.” Like all great disciples of Jesus, Mother Teresa affirmed again the truth that ministry can be fruitful only if it grows out of a direct and intimate encounter with our Lord. “Something…we have heard, and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands, the Word, who is life. (John 1:1) This is our subject.

Solitude is thus the place of purification and transformation; the place of the great struggle and the great encounter. Solitude is not simply a means to an end. Solitude is its own end. It is the place where Christ remodels us in his own image and frees us from the victimizing compulsions of the world. Solitude is the place of our salvation. Hence it is the place where we want to lead all who are seeking the light in this dark world. St. Anthony spent twenty years in isolation. When he left it, he took his solitude with him and shared it with all who came to him. Those who saw him described him as balanced, gentle and caring. He had become so Christlike, so radiant with God’s love, that his entire being was ministry.

Henri Nouwen: *The Way of the Heart*

Scriptures on Transformation:

### John 15

### II Corinthians 3:4-18

### II Corinthians 4:6-18

### Galatians 2:20

Prayer of Confession:

*O Lord, who else or what else can I desire but you? You are my Lord—Lord of my heart, mind and soul. You know me through and through. In and through you everything that is, finds its origin and goal. You embrace all that exists and care for it with divine love and compassion. Why, then, do I keep expecting happiness and satisfaction outside of you? Why do I keep relating to you as one of my many relationships, instead of my only relationship, in which all other ones are grounded? Why do I keep looking for popularity, respect from others, success, acclaim and sensual pleasures? Why, Lord, is it so hard for me to make you the only one? Why do I keep hesitating to surrender myself totally to You?*

Henri Nouwen: *A Cry for Mercy*