

## Savor Some Silence Each Day

One of the most gratifying trips I have ever taken was to South Africa to speak on resilience. And one of the most enjoyable parts of this journey was during the break between my presentations in Johannesburg and Cape Town to take a brief photographic safari in the Sabi Sands on the edge of Kruger National Park. In the morning, my wife and I joined others in an open Range Rover for a three-hour trip into thousands of acres of protected-wildlife area.

It was winter at the time, quite cool, and we were wrapped up in blankets with a hot water bottle to warm our hands. As we drove quite quickly across the open veld at the start of the journey, I could see the heads of giraffe above some of the trees. I was amazed at the quiet that seemed to envelope me, and I smiled silently at the small herd of agile springbok jumping in the distance. Although our goal was to see lions, elephants, Cape buffalo, rhinos, and hippos (and we did), this one early-morning moment was worth a trip halfway around the world. There is something about the feel of silence and being enveloped in a quiet wind that takes one's breath away.

Author and literary critic Doris Grumbach wrote in her book *Fifty Days of Solitude* about her experience of time alone in a way that helps me understand its value better:

There was a reward for [silence and solitude]. The absence of other voices compelled me to listen more intently to the inner one. I

became aware that the interior voice, so often before stifled or stilted by what I thought others wanted to hear, or what I considered to be socially acceptable, grew gratifyingly louder, more insistent. . . . My intention was to discover what was in there . . . [a] treasure of fresh insight?

Yet, Grumbach is also realistic about the doubt and hesitation that many experience when alone or quiet for an extended period of time. She added later on in the book:

How right Rousseau was about the modern person. Our points of reference are always our neighbors, the people in the village or our city, our acquaintances at school, at games, at work, our close and distant friends, all of whom tell us, with their hundreds of tongues, who we are. . . . Rarely if ever did we think to look within for knowledge of ourselves. Were we afraid? Perhaps, we thought we would find nothing there.”

Still, even forced solitude can bear fruit if we eventually open ourselves to it and the silence we experience in such situations. A person sent to prison in England surprised people when upon his release he indicated that he never minded the twenty years taken away from him. He felt that he probably would have wasted those years had he not been imprisoned. He then went on to share that he had not expected to miss anything about prison upon his release, but he did miss the good deal of reading and meditation he did while in jail. Those experiences brought him peace, a peace not readily found in the noisy, busy world where he now found himself.

When we embark on an inner workshop to foster our spiritual formation, silence and solitude are part of the rule of prayer we set out for ourselves. We seek to find some time during the day—even if it is only for a few moments—to sit quietly, gently clear our mind, look at an icon or something inspirational, and possibly use a centering word such as “Jesus,” “gentleness,” or another word that has deep meaning for us.

In doing this, we try to establish set times so the day does not sweep away these essential periods that center us and bring us home

to God and ourselves. However, we also need to look for the crumbs of “alonetime” (time in solitude or within ourselves when we are in a group) outside of these periods. It may be on a short walk at noon, when we are sipping a cup of coffee or tea alone in our office or kitchen, or during a drive home. The possibilities are endless, as are the places we can seek out: corners of libraries, churches, small city parks, a nearby forest preserve, or a jogging path. If we have a value system that savors some silence in our lives, the crumbs of alonetime can be quite nourishing. But we have to find them.