

# The Trouble with Solitude

Wesley D. Tracy

**I**F YOU ARE LIKE ME, YOU hunger for solitude, silence, and Christian simplicity. That's good; we need a lot more of those commodities.

There's a lot being written on these themes. In the secular bookstores you find a lot of ABC spirituality—politically correct stuff designed by mass-market editors who make sure that the books will not offend an Atheist, Buddhist, or Christian.

One such book, *Simple Abundance*, was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for a bunch of weeks in 1997. At several points I figured that the author must be a closet Christian muzzled by an ABC editor. On the other hand, she sometimes seemed seriously out of joint with the Christian ethos. For example, one of the author's "favorite perk-ups" is to take five \$5 bills and hide them in the pockets of five different coats or jackets and then forget all about them. The next time she wears one of those garments, she finds \$5 and feels good all over. Is this Christian simplicity? That may be cute for Mann County matrons, but try recommending that stunt in Tanzania, where our Nazarenes live on \$130 a year!

We have brought you better material than that in this issue. Don't miss "A Day in the Son," "The Gift of Simplicity," "Rest and Revolution," or General Superintendent Bond's "In Quest of the Deeper Life."

## Solitude and Risk

But for all our need for solitude, a warning or two seems appropriate.

1. Solitude can be selfish. We can walk away from real needs and demand our time to do our own thing. This is "I gotta be me" self-

ishness sanctified by self-righteousness. Henri J. M. Nouwen says this is not Christian solitude, but a demand for one's dubious right to privacy. Privacy is good, solitude is healthy, but they must not become selfish.

2. Solitude can be a mere break for the people-tired. Or therapy for people trying to find them-selves. A popular ballad tells of a wife and mother who leaves it all behind with a message to her husband, "When I find myself, you'll be the first to know."

3. Solitude can become a mere retreat to recharge our batteries. Who doesn't need that? But it should be so much more than "the corner of a boxing ring where our wounds are oiled, our muscles massaged, and our courage restored by fitting slogans" (Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 26-27).

## Solitude and Possibilities

1. Solitude can be the arena of divine encounter. "Settle yourself in solitude, and you will come upon Him," St. Theresa wrote. And that is what makes solitude so terrifying. Encounter with the "wholly, holy other" makes us tremble to the core. We cannot stand the blazing holiness of God for very long. How quickly we retreat to making solitude a mere break from people traffic, a therapeutic interlude for mental hygiene, an exercise of our right to privacy.

2. Solitude can provide confrontation—in fact, you can count on it. For all the grace that you have heretofore received, God will show you in solitude that there is yet much work to be done in your heart. There is no holiness that does not admit of

continual increase, John Wesley testified. We know it is true. In solitude—with no phone to ring, no friends to entertain, no television to distract, no meetings to attend—the light of God will shine relentlessly on our prejudices and budding resentments, our thirst for praise and hunger for money, our lack of faith and our molasses-slow obedience. If these confrontations never happen, we may live our whole lives "as one long defense against the reality of our condition," wrote Nouwen (28).

3. Solitude can lead to transformation. Recognizing the drastic extent of our need and our utter inability to fix ourselves, we may surrender ourselves totally to Christ and emerge from solitude a new man or a new woman. Solitude is for transformation.

4. Flip the coin of *solitude*, and you will find *service* on the other side. Many of the books on the spiritual disciplines don't even have a chapter on Christian service. John Wesley taught us that one way to get sanctified is to

**How quickly we retreat to making solitude a mere therapeutic interlude.**

plunge into service, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and telling sinners about Jesus.

Maxie Dunnam was right when he wrote in *Alive in Christ*, "A spirituality that does not lead to active ministry is an indulgent preoccupation with self, and therefore grieves the Holy Spirit and violates the presence of the indwelling Christ."