

Holy silence

by [Belden C. Lane](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

In late June, weary of another long year behind a desk, I headed toward Ring Lake Ranch, an ecumenical retreat and study center in northwest Wyoming. A week in the high desert country of the Wind River Range, with time for silence and solitude, sounded just about right. I'd heard that Quakers have as many words for silence as Eskimos do for snow, and that they speak of various "stillnesses" as silky, heavy, light, dead, electric, even noisy. For months I'd needed desperately to explore something of that wide spectrum of quietude.

But as I approached U.S. highway 26 leading toward the Tetons and Yellowstone, I began to sense the full allure of the "Wind River Country" before me. I'd picked up a glossy booklet by that title from a rack of brochures at a motel in Thermopolis. Inside were listed all the wonderful attractions that lay ahead. Who could resist hiking through spruce trees to remote glacier lakes along the Continental Divide or sitting beside "spirit beings" portrayed in petroglyphs by ancient peoples? Who could turn his back on white water rafting down the Big Horn River through red canyons of Jurassic rock or square dancing on a Saturday night with ranch hands at the Rustic Pine Tavern in Dubois? I began to feel the siren call of "authentic desert and mountain experience," the hunger for a memorable vacation, the seduction of spiritual tourism.

How easy it is for North Americans to fall into a consumer mentality, even when we're on vacation or retreat, headed toward the stillness of empty canyons! I wanted to do everything at Ring Lake Ranch—go horseback riding, hike long trails through aspen trees along mountain cataracts, spot a grizzly on a distant slope, hear the howl of a wolf at dusk, study bright stars by telescope in the dry night air. I was eager to name new wildflowers and birds, to experience the badlands by moonlight, to acquire—instantly—the local lingo of the lifelong residents.

My temptation was to "get the whole Wind River experience." This is the charm of spiritual tourism, of course, but it is only another form of consumer frenzy, the fervid acquisition of knowledge, boogie fever. Even though I'd entered the wilderness, I was still compulsively "shopping," filling up the cart with new experiences and

frantically heading for the checkout lane.

We work as hard at playing, relaxing or seeking spiritual rejuvenation as we do at working, because we view it all as part of the same acquisitive exercise. We are consumers of experience as well as goods. We feel guilty if we're not continually acquiring new expansions of consciousness, becoming all we can be in a free market of endless applications of information.

That's why people often return home from vacations (and even spiritual retreats) exhausted. Under the stress of "having so much fun" or "being stretched in so many new ways" we frequently succumb to physical illness. Our bodies cannot sustain the feverish consumption of experience we demand of ourselves. And yet curiously, it is when we're physically "spent" that we at last feel immense relief—we have the permission to do nothing that we had been seeking all along. It's a comment on our whole manner of life, says Wayne Muller, author of *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*. We experience a release of pressure only when sickness strikes and our bodies collapse. That's the only time we don't feel guilty about not embracing new experience, the only time we can legitimately allow ourselves to stop. "If we do not allow for a rhythm of rest in our overly busy lives, illness becomes our sabbath," Muller insists. "Our pneumonia, our cancer, our heart attack, our accidents create sabbath for us."

Sabbath, Muller reminds us, is a profoundly countercultural injunction from the Torah. Sabbath demands that we stop this foolishness of throwing ourselves away in the endless quest for experience. God not only lures us to the Sabbath, but commands that every seventh day we stop and give up being a consumer. We are to take 14.3 percent of every 100 hours we otherwise "spend" to be still, to be conscious of where we are, whose we are and what we are doing. Otherwise we lose ourselves, and fail to learn with Gandhi that "there is more to life than merely increasing its speed."

It seems strange that God would consider the neglect of the sabbath to be as reprehensible as murder, robbery or deceit. To us, sabbath remembrance is the least important of the Ten Commandments. The idea suggests arcane 17th-century controversies once stirred up by repressive Puritans. We might be willing to consider honoring the sabbath as a "lifestyle suggestion," but as a commandment it's simply too much.

Yet this is how it comes. In the no-nonsense tradition of the Deuteronomic School, sabbath isn't an option to be exercised once we've finished our work and finally carved out a little time to rest. It liberates us from the need to be finished by requiring us to stop periodically whether we're ready or not. Indeed, given the context in which the third commandment is proclaimed (or fourth, depending on Catholic or Protestant usage), forgetting the sabbath is morally and socially dangerous. The failure to withdraw and center oneself breeds a restless discontent that makes all the subsequent commandments necessary.

Thomas Merton recognized this when he commented on the rush and pressure of modern life. "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence." It's a subtle but real violence, and fosters a thoughtlessness that allows us to tolerate other sorts of violence. If I'm continually searching for new experiences—relishing myself at the center of their vortex—I can ignore the mundane structures of injustice in the world around (and within) me. I'm simply too busy to notice.

The temptation hit me anew as I found myself confronting the seductive opportunities of the western Wyoming landscape. It took the power of the commandment against unrelieved hurriedness to remind me again of my poverty. Others may respond more readily to Jesus' invitation to "Come away by yourselves to a desert place, and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). Usually I have to be kicked in the teeth. It was a hard voice that I heard crying out in the wilderness, saying, "It's time to stop, for God's sake! You've hurt yourself and too many others in the consumer-crazy violence of your busy life. Just *stop!*"

Only then did I hear the soft, still echo of my own deepest longing. It's not ultimately new and exciting experiences that I seek most, not even experiences of wonderful places like the Wind River Range. What I truly want isn't anything that I can acquire. It can't be taken home as a vacation souvenir or journal that I can savor during the long weariness of the coming year. What I seek most is God alone, the God discovered in sabbath emptiness and silence, the God who cannot be added to a grocery list of other happenings and thrills, who cannot be managed or comprehended, who can only be loved. This God claims me before I dare to claim anything of my own.

This God is never fully “experienced,” much less named. The psalmist remains inarticulate, straining through the inadequacy of language to declare an intimacy for which he has no words. All he’s able to utter is the second-person pronoun. “YOU!” he blurts out in astonishment. “‘*Attah* You, O Lord . . . You are my God” (Ps. 86). Like Martin Buber, the psalmist stands speechless before the eternal Thou that lies beyond all experience. In the fervency of sabbath prayer, we haltingly stutter the words of the Gloria, “You alone are the Holy One, You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High.” The whole of creation cries out in stammering amazement: *Te Deum*. “YOU we praise!”

We mutter this pronoun to ourselves, like a child delighting in the first mystery of speech. Sabbath is a time for reminding us that what we love most we’re least able to possess. It strikes us at first as an exercise in futility, something inherently boring. We resist its uneventfulness and its repetitive character, two things that a culture based on a craving for novelty cannot abide. In sabbath nothing happens. That disturbs us, because sabbath is not about me and what I’m getting from the experience. It’s about God, the One I meet most intimately in the absence of activity, beyond words, beyond the twisted cravings of my fevered existence.

Sabbath, like making love, is something you can’t learn to do right the first time and then be done with it. “The perfection is in the repetition,” Muller declares. Only in the regular exercise of stopping and honoring the pockets of emptiness in my life do I give myself to loving and being loved. What else do lovers long for in their relationship more than moments of repetitive uneventfulness? These are the spaces they fill with love.

Yet one of the great ironies of life is that we don’t seem to be able to give ourselves to what we desire most. Even in the best of relationships, couples find that making love is something they have to plan for. In the hectic pace of everything else, it doesn’t happen automatically. Oddly enough, the exercise of our deepest delight requires something of an ascetic practice. Giving ourselves to our greatest pleasure won’t happen unless we prepare and open ourselves to it. Some of us have to be radically startled at times into recognizing what we’d been yearning for all along.

That happened to me the morning before I left Ring Lake Ranch. As I walked out the cabin door into a sunlit Friday morning, a bird came plunging out of the sky toward me, its wings outstretched above its back, legs trailing under its body, tail spread, as if plummeting toward a brook trout in the creek nearby. A hawk. No, an eagle, I

thought. Then I realized it was the osprey I'd seen building a huge nest up near the lake. It dove toward me and then abruptly veered away in a great smooth arc as if to say, "Pay attention. Watch what I'm doing. This is for you!"

Its angle of flight took it to the top of a tall dead tree beside the creek. Without even lighting on it, the bird grasped one of the tree's branches in its talons, broke it off with a loud crack and flew on toward its nest with the dry stick in tow. I won't soon forget the crisp sound of snapping wood in the clear desert air that morning, or the slow powerful wingbeats of the osprey as it made its flight toward home.

In a world saturated with experience, the leanest images are the ones that most grip our attention. They stun us by their thinness and singularity. An osprey suddenly alters its line of flight. A sharp crack shatters the silence. A Zen koan flashes lightning across the shadows of consciousness.

"Split the stick and there is Jesus," said the ancient Gospel of Thomas, suggesting that we sometimes find God in the most unexpected places. In that early morning moment in a Wyoming wilderness, the presence of unpreoccupied silence was suddenly revealed in the snapping of dry wood. In the deafening stillness on either side of that sound, I heard a silence that filled the place fully and perfectly.

Invitations to sabbath come to us in a call to give ourselves to what we'd been desiring most from the very beginning: a permission to enjoy what we'd been wanting more than anything else in our lives. Why do we spend ourselves so recklessly for trinkets and trash when desire beyond measure awaits us? "Gamble everything for love," said Rumi. The thirst for experience, the hunger of memory, the excitement of rewarding activity—none of it fills like the emptiness of God.