

Fumbling my way into contemplative prayer

I've been trying to follow Thomas Keating's advice: learn to be silent with God.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [November 21, 2018](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by [MTSOfan](#).

First, I fidget. I cross and uncross my legs, fold and unfold my hands, bow and raise my head. I discover muscles I didn't know I had, muscles that twitch, quiver, itch, and ache. So I waste several minutes wrestling my way into relative comfort. Comfort conducive to prayer, that is, not sleep. Because sleep will happen every single time if I let it.

Next, I set my timer for 30 minutes, close my eyes, and attempt to quiet my mind. Immediately my mind says, "No, thank you!" and takes off. I call it back; it takes off again. I call it back once more. It laughs. Often, my mind and I do this for the entire 30 minutes, while a practical, no-nonsense voice in my head scorns the whole enterprise: "Nothing remotely Jesus-y is happening," it says. "How can this silliness count as prayer?" I say nothing in response. I wait for my timer to buzz, toss a halfhearted, "Um, OK, thanks God, see you later," into the silence, and go about my

day.

That's what happens most of the time. But sometimes, every once in a while, for half a minute, 20 seconds, or a microsecond that stretches into an inexplicable forever, all restlessness ceases, all shallowness falls away, and deep touches deep. For a shimmering instant, I both feel and know that I am spirit, and that I live, move, and have my being in the Spirit who is God. I come home—briefly—to what's essential. I pause, breathe, and rest in love.

“God’s first language is silence,” writes St. John of the Cross. Commenting on this insight, Thomas Keating adds that “everything else is a poor translation. In order to understand this language, we must learn to be silent and to rest in God.”

I’ve been a praying Christian all my life, but it’s only over the past year or so that I’ve attempted to speak God’s “first language” in prayer. Ironically, I grew up in a faith tradition that highly values “quiet time.” My parents and Sunday school teachers expected me to spend time alone with God each day. But those quiet times were anything but. I talked *at* God, throwing words, words, and more words into the ether because I believed that carefully crafted chatter was the way to placate God. I took it for granted that effective pray-ers would receive guidance, wisdom, peace, and hope. They would experience exhilaration and even ecstasy. If they didn’t, they weren’t praying hard enough. *Pray* is an action verb, and God wants worker bees.

Over the years, I used elaborate formulas like ACTS—adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. I made prayer lists and kept prayer journals. I “popcorn” prayed, corporate prayed, and even tried (without success) to pray in tongues. The common denominator was noise: the external noise of words calculated to please a frustratingly distant God, and the internal noise of my growing doubts and fears.

I now see that my “poor translations” were all about manipulating God and placating myself. I craved validation. I liked spiritual highs, and I wanted concrete answers to concrete requests. Most of all, I longed to earn God’s favor with my words. Prayer was a vocabulary test, and I wanted straight As.

So fumbling my way into silent, contemplative prayer has necessitated a series of surrenders. A surrender, first of all, of my striving, worker-bee mentality. When I pray now, I don’t accomplish anything I can tick off a checklist. I’m not precise, efficient, or tidy. If anything, I waste valuable time, sitting and doing nothing. But

increasingly, I don't mind, because I'm doing that wasteful nothing with God.

Second, I've had to surrender my need to comprehend the spiritual life before I trust it. Silent prayer asks me to believe that God's work has little to do with my consciousness or emotional experience and that what happens in the silence is meant to be mysterious—even to me. Silent prayer takes Bible verses like “Go into your closet and pray in secret” and “My life is hidden with Christ in God” to a truly mystical level. In silence, my spirit somehow communes with God's. Communication happens. Intimacy happens. Love happens. I have no proof of this—just a hunch, the testimony of contemplative pray-ers far more experienced than I, and a growing faith in a God who likes to show up.

When I go for a run, I don't know the specifics of that particular run's benefits—calories burned, muscles strengthened, lung capacity increased. I don't need to know; I just tie my sneakers and head out. Likewise with silent prayer. “Silence is not a backdrop for form,” writes Cynthia Bourgeault, “and diffuse, open awareness is not an empty chalice waiting to be filled with specific insights and directives. It is its own kind of perceptivity, its own kind of communion.”

Finally, contemplative prayer has prompted me to surrender a controllable God for a wilder, more magnificent one. During those fleeting microseconds when distraction falls away and I rest in silent prayer, the divine presence I perceive is one I can't possibly describe with words. The God whose first language is silence is vast. I never have to find such a God; he simply is. I'll never find words to hold such a God; she holds me. I can't earn this God's love; love is the ground I stand on. In truth, this God always is, always holds, and always loves. But silence allows me to abide for a little while in that exquisite always.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Fumbling my way into prayer.”