THE QUIET CENTER
AN EXCERPT FROM WHAT WE NEED IS HERE: PRACTICING THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY BY ROGER OWENS
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“Roger Owens takes us to the heart of Christian spirituality in this affirmative, practical guide. With well-formed biblical wisdom and a warm pastor’s heart, Roger gives us wise guidance on the ways we can meet and be met by a living, loving God.”

— Will Willimon
Retired United Methodist bishop
Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry, Duke Divinity School

THE QUIET CENTER: LEARNING TO BEFRIEND SILENCE

I call it the paradox of silence: We want silence, and we flee it. No one had to tell me about this paradox. I found it on my own.

My wife, Ginger, was attending a weeklong spiritual formation retreat. I was a busy pastor left at home with two even busier toddler boys. My only goal each day, besides survive, was to get the boys in bed early and enjoy a quiet evening. One night that week I had to put the older boy back in bed more than forty times. Quiet eluded me. One evening, though, I managed—after the boys finally fell asleep and after cleaning up the kitchen and getting the next day’s to-do list in good order—to plop down in the green La-Z-Boy to taste a moment of quiet while I struggled to keep my eyes open. That night I began reading an old, used, yellowing-paged copy of Thomas Merton’s book *Contemplative Prayer*. I have no idea where I got this book; I have come to believe providence put it in my hand. I’d never read a book by Merton before but was aware of his stature as the great twentieth-century contemplative monk and teacher of prayer.

The book begins with this warning: “What is written about prayer in these pages is written primarily for monks.” But he affirms that other Christians should “be able to read and make use of what is here said for monks, adapting it to the circumstances of their own” lives.¹ I hoped so, knowing that
no life could be further from a monastic one than mine. The book offered a vision of prayer that appealed to me. Merton spoke a language my own soul understood. I hoped even more that the kind of prayer he spoke about—the stillness the monks sought—might be possible for a busy pastor-dad trying to finish a PhD, visit the sick, preach decent sermons, and pay at least minimal attention to his family. I feared not.

So captivated by what I was reading, I forced myself to read on despite my fatigue when I came to Merton’s discussion of the relationship between “activity” and “contemplation” in the Christian life. One passage in particular struck me. Merton describes two very active leaders and preachers in history—one a pope, the other a busy abbot—and says that by looking at their lives, “we can sense that their contemplative experience is somehow deeper and richer” because of the grace God gave them to “preach to others.”

I had to stop, back up, and read that again.

Merton knows of people in the “active life”—which I took to be people like me—who are as deeply contemplative as the habit-clad, silence-loving, life-infused-with-prayer monks he lives with.

That passage awakened in me the possibility that a silence I’d never known but longed for might be possible for me. I had no cloister, no abbot, no bell ringing seven times a day to remind me to turn my heart toward God, no chanting of the Psalms in worship, no spiritual reading during silent meals, no hours alone meditating on scripture in my room—none of that. And yet, if he knows of contemplative active-life people, knows they have existed, maybe, I thought, I could be one. Maybe I could drink from the chalice of silence.

Here’s what happened (I later learned it happens to almost every one and will happen to you): When I tried to enter the silence by repeating a prayer word, a mantra—images, thoughts, and fears flooded my mind. Because a few years earlier I’d been mugged while in my car, a mugging that
involved a gun, a bang, broken glass, blood, and my thinking that I’d been shot. The images that came to me in the silence were frightening. The trauma of that mugging seemed to have wired a new circuit in my brain through which the images of this event looped as well as any like them that I have seen since. My subconscious attempted to hold them at bay by keeping busy: reading, singing, cleaning, thinking, coping.

But as soon as I sat and tried to be still, this Pandora’s box opened. We all have a Pandora’s box that can open when we sit down and turn off the noise. For some, the thoughts are dark and frightening. For others, they are deadly dull. We may despair in the silence, not about the macabre contents of our subconscious but about how boring our lives are.

Silence: As much as I longed for it, I learned to avoid it.

I don’t know anyone who has described this paradox more clearly than Henri Nouwen: “As soon as we are alone, without people to talk with, books to read, TV to watch, or phone calls to make, an inner chaos opens up in us. This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again...When we have removed our outer distractions, we often find that our inner distractions manifest themselves to us in full force.”

Is there a way to answer our longing for silence and avoid the risk of inner chaos?

**WHY SILENCE?**

Before we ask, “Is there a way?” we should consider a more basic question: “Why would we want to?” If facing our inner chaos is the fruit of stillness, why not just stay busy?

At a recent retreat, I delivered a talk about the practice of silence. With eloquence, wisdom, and wit (I imagined) I explored the practice of silence, its whys and its hows, so that those gathered might receive more fully this Christian
“given.” At the end of the presentation, before I dismissed the retreat participants to go into an hour of silent prayer, one person raised his hand. He had a simple question: “Could you state in one sentence what the purpose of silence is?” So much for eloquence and wisdom. At least I can still imagine my wittiness.

One reason we would choose to go into the silence is that Jesus habitually sought solitude and silence. At the beginning of his ministry, he spent forty days in the wilderness where even he confronted the dark side of silence. “He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan” (Mark 1:13). Jesus didn’t let the paradox of silence deter him from its formative necessity in his life before he began his ministry. And such withdrawal seems to be a pattern in his ministry. “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). Christians throughout the centuries—hermits who lived alone in the desert and spent their days in silence, monks who lived in communities but spent hours each day in silence, mystics who enjoyed being with God in meditation and contemplation—have looked to the practice of Jesus himself. They found in Jesus’ habit of silent communion with God a model for their own.

But these early practitioners also began to articulate a theology of silence. In prayerful silence, the desert fathers and mothers said we confront temptation and inner chaos and we learn how to deal with both our frightening and boring thoughts so that we can come to taste stillness. Stillness comes from the Greek word hesychia, a term that named an inner tranquility that made possible a life of availability and openness to God. At the beginning of our practice of silence, we realize that with all our thoughts, temptations, and distractions, a great deal of white noise interferes with our ability to be open and available to God. The practice of silence, of learning to handle thoughts, fears, and distractions, leads us to a place of deep openness, an openness that allows us to receive and respond to Jesus.
Christian mystics, like Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Avila, among others, took this a step further. They believed that in contemplative silence we could discover that God lives at the foundation of our very souls, in the depths of our being. We already have union with God. The practice of contemplative silence leads us to the place where we can realize this union. Silence helps us discover our union with God and allows our union with God to form our living.

Given the history of the Christian practice of contemplative silence, it’s important to pay attention to the fact that the practice of silence is, at its heart, a receptive practice, a practice of making us open and available to receive the presence and action of God within us.

Often because of our language of spiritual “practices” and “disciplines,” we think these practices of prayer, even silence, are things we do. They sound effortful, perhaps a way we can advance our projects of self-improvement or ways we can thrust ourselves along the journey of holiness. I’m doing it, we think. This is my action.

Ruth Burrows, an English nun who has written extensively on prayer and the spiritual life, corrects our thinking on this matter:

On our side prayer is simply being there: open, exposed, inviting God to do all God wants. Prayer is not our activity, our getting in touch with God, our coming to grips with or making ourselves desirable to God. We can do none of these things, nor do we need to, for God is there ready to do everything for us, loving us unconditionally...

Our whole concern in whatever we do must have as its aim to hold us ‘there’ in faith before God...We must bear in mind that all we are trying to do is to help ourselves to be present for God to love us.4

In silence we are present with God, who is the very heart of our heart, present with us, loving us from the inside out.
We can try to define what we do and what God does in the silence, and how it relates. But I prefer pictures. This morning my five-year-old daughter gave me a picture. I was praying, practicing silence, and she awakened earlier than usual. Almost silently she scooted on her bottom down the stairs and walked over to where I was sitting. I lifted her into my lap, where she curled up, putting her head against my chest. She didn’t ask for anything or say anything. She just laid her head on my chest where, I imagine, she could hear my heartbeat. I thought of the beloved disciple in John’s Gospel at the Last Supper, “leaning on Jesus’ bosom,” as the King James Version translates it (John 13:23).

That’s what we do in silence—lean against God’s breast, listening to the heartbeat of love for us that is closer to us than our own heartbeats and that outlasts our own heartbeats and that is steadier than our own heartbeats.

After the participant in the retreat humbled me by asking such a simple question at the end of my hour-long monologue on silence, I paused, and said, “In silence we can rest in our fundamental union with God.” I can’t state it more simply than that. But in my mind I pictured the beloved disciple resting on Jesus’ bosom, receiving the gift of Jesus’ presence. And now I imagine my own little girl in my lap, resting her head on my chest. We rest in the God who rests in our souls.

**OBSTACLES TO SILENCE**

But having some ideas about what silence is or why we might practice it—even having a longing for silence fueled by a deeper understanding of the “what” and “why” of silence—doesn’t remove the obstacles. Whenever I teach on silence, I ask what makes the practice of silence difficult. You will not be surprised that “distracting thoughts” usually tops the list. But let’s deal with others first, before we come back to that one.

Our external conditions can present an obstacle to silence. Our mornings are rushed. We work all day. We veg in front
of the TV or surf the web to wind down at night. Then we fall into bed. In between we do everything else we need to do, and there is no time left. When are we just going to sit for ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes?

On top of that, the house is a mess, and there is no comfortable place to embody a peaceful, calm presence.

The silence we are talking about cannot be reduced to external silence alone, but external silence and some order are often preconditions for the inner stillness we seek.

When a noisy, disordered life blocks the way to silence, the only question is this: How badly do you want it? How desperately does your soul long to rest in God? How acutely do you desire the heartbeat of God’s love to beat in and through you? As Quaker Thomas R. Kelly writes, “If you say you haven’t the time to go down into the recreating silences, I can only say to you, ‘Then you don’t really want to.’”

The best wisdom says you address this obstacle by establishing a “when” and a “where.” Without these, the practice will be nearly impossible. Can you put on your calendar twenty minutes at the beginning of your day—which could involve getting up a little earlier or going to bed a little earlier (which for most of us is not a bad idea)? Can you create a little order near one comfortable chair, put some flowers on a nearby table, and light a candle? You will be surprised how a simple, inviting space can call you into silence when a physically chaotic space, a space that mirrors the chaos of your soul, makes you want to run.

Another obstacle: “I just can’t do silence! Silence is not me!”

Recently I taught a seminary course in spirituality. We discussed and practiced silence together. I required the students to keep a journal in which they reflected on how the practice was going and to turn their journal entries in to me weekly. June, in her fifties, is a second career student-pastor. Early in her journal entries she wrote, “I’m scared of silence.
My mind is too busy. I can’t sit still. I don’t do silence.” She wrote about how impossible she knew this would be and that she feared wasting her time.

As the weeks went by, her journal entries changed. She began to write things like, “I’ve sat for ten minutes in silence each morning this week. I can’t believe it.” Then later: “Fifteen minutes! I’m beginning to wonder what I would do without the silence.” At the end of the term, she sent me an e-mail:

Dr. Owens, I have enjoyed this class tremendously and hope that I will be able to take another one of your classes in the future. I wanted to tell you that I am still practicing silence. It is becoming part of the rhythm of my life. For this I am most thankful and will always remember this class and you as the inspiration for bringing this precious part of my spiritual journey. Thanks for everything.6

Some people may be constitutionally unable to sit in silence, but most people need to hear that if June can do it, they can do it.

I’ve known the unlikeliest candidates who have managed to practice silence: folks suffering from post-traumatic stress, people plagued with chronic anxiety, restless souls fidgeting because of attention deficit disorder. If they can do it, I’m guessing you can too. At least it’s worth a try.

**THE FOUR Rs OF PRACTICING SILENCE**

But that first obstacle will make you want to quit if you start: Distractions, the obstacle at the heart of the silence paradox—the thoughts, feelings, emotions, fears, and anxieties that inhabit the chaotic landscape of our minds. We sit in silence, and we can’t stand it. We have to run away. What do we do? At this point, methods for silent prayer come into play, for most address this particular situation—what Buddhists call “monkey mind” and what Martin Laird calls “the wild hawk of the mind.”7
There is not one Christian way of practicing silence. There’s a family of ways, and while significant family resemblances exist, so do differences. Different trajectories in history, grounded in different theologies, written in different eras—though consonant with one another. And different practitioners of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have tried to package the wisdom of these Christian traditions for contemporary seekers.8

What follows is my own take on one member of the broader family. It is not the right way or the only way but one I have found most helpful and easy to explain. It has helped me live through and continue to live in the paradox of silence without running away. It has guided me to a sense of approaching rest in God. Close enough that I can almost hear God’s heartbeat. I offer it with the hope that it will help you as well.

The way of silence that has influenced me is the way that involves choosing a prayer word, a short word of significance to you that expresses or symbolizes your desire to be with God. The word I use is Jesus. Obviously, the name Jesus has a long history in Christian contemplative practice. The tradition of saying the Jesus Prayer—“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”—has had a storied history especially in Eastern Orthodox prayer, and many simplify that prayer to the name Jesus, the name of the One who makes our praying possible. But there are other options: shalom, Abba, peace. Don’t get hung up on choosing the right word. There isn’t a right word. Pick one and stick with it.

And then, sitting comfortably in the silence, slowly repeat the word to yourself, half of the word on the in-breath, half on the out-breath. Give this word your attention as best you can. Without trying too hard, simply pay attention to the word as you say it silently in your mind.

Now, I know what you’re thinking about me when I describe this method: This is what you tried, and this is where the images and thoughts began to drive you crazy. This is how you discovered the paradox. I thought you already failed doing this!
But that was before I knew the heart of the practice, what I have come to call (in stereotypical preacherly alliteration), the four Rs of contemplative silence: Repeat, Recognize, Release, and Return. When you grasp the work of these four movements, you will begin to open the gift of silence.

R number one: Repeat. Silently and slowly repeat the word to yourself, as I suggested above.

And then R number two: Recognize. Soon after you start saying your prayer word, your mind will wander. *Enter distracting thoughts stage left.* The content of these thoughts does not matter, whether of your happiest birthday party as a child, an exam you have to take tomorrow, or a traumatic event in your past. This practice helps us to stop judging our thoughts and start noticing when we have them. You notice—you recognize that you are thinking. You are engaged in internal dialogue; you are imagining a mental picture; you are caught up in a fantasy of revenge. You are thinking.

Most of the time our minds are working—thinking, dreaming, imagining. The practice of silence gives us the chance to recognize this. We simply wake up to the fact that we are no longer focusing our attention on a prayer word, and we are caught up in a thought. Our attention has been stolen; we are distracted.

You’ve had this experience: You’re driving to the grocery store, and about a half a mile past the store you wake up to the reality that you got so caught up in your thoughts you didn’t notice passing the store. You recognize this. This second movement of the practice invites us to do that—recognize. You repeat to yourself the prayer word and then notice—recognize—when your mind wanders from the word into a more attractive or fearful thought.

This is the point when we Release, R number three. We let go. A shiny thought has floated across our awareness, and the tendrils of our mind have reached out to grab it. We recognize this occurrence, acknowledge our lack of attention to the repetition of the word, and we let go. We release the thought.
We don’t fight the thought. We don’t judge the thought. We don’t say to ourselves, You idiot, look, you are thinking instead of focusing on the prayer word. But if we do say that to ourselves, that’s just another thought we get to release.

Q: But how do we release a thought—that’s the whole problem!
A: The fourth R—Return.

We release by returning to the repetition of the prayer word. We were repeating a prayer word; we were giving it our complete attention. Then an interesting thought floated across the horizon of our awareness and snagged our attention. So we left the repetition of the word in order to think the thought, to engage in this act of imagination or internal dialogue or scheming and plotting or whatever the thought was about. And then we woke up; we recognized our thinking that our “wild hawk of the mind” was off doing frantic circles in the sky of our imagination. So now, we release the thought gently (without commentary and additional thinking) and return to our repetition of the word.

At first, this can feel like moving through four separate steps, awkward and clunky. But because our minds are so frequently distracted, we get plenty of practice. After a while it becomes one almost unnoticeable movement.

Resting in our union with God, discovering that “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20), is a lifelong journey of letting go of our own agendas, images, and fantasies so we can live in constant communion with the Christ living in us. The practice of silence is a microcosm of that lifelong process. Every day, for twenty or thirty minutes, we can practice dying to the attractions and aversions that compel us so that we can, as we were meant to do and as we will throughout eternity, rest in God.

**DESCENDING INTO THE SILENCE**

Henry David Thoreau said, “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.”
want to put some flesh on this theory by painting a picture of what the silence can look like in practice. And because I know myself better than I know anyone else, the picture has to be of me. It’s a picture some nine years after my first exhausted and fearful late-night encounter with the paradox of silence, a picture of what’s possible.

Quaker Thomas Kelly talks about going “down into the recreating silences,” for me a literal experience because my “where” of prayer in the morning is the basement. I descend to the silence of the basement so that my life can descend into the depth of my own heart and join Christ there in the place where my life is “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

But the process doesn’t start in the morning. It begins at 10:00 pm when I stroll past my wife reading in the family room and tell her I’m going into the kitchen to get the coffee ready to brew at 5:50 the next morning. That’s her warning that I’m about to go to bed. Then I go to the bedroom, take off my watch, which has two alarms set for 6:00 and 6:15, and put it on the bookcase about five paces from my side of the bed.

Six o’clock am—the first alarm goes off. I walk over, grab the watch, and bring the watch back to bed with me. It goes off again at 6:15. Sometime between 6:15 and 6:30 I get out of bed, grab my Bible, journal, and a sweater, and head to the kitchen, praying I remembered to hit the auto-brew button on the coffeepot. The aroma that greets me tells me that I did. “O Lord, open my nostrils, and I shall praise you for coffee.” I fix my coffee, then descend into the cold basement.

I turn on the heater, sit down in the green La-Z-Boy, and put a quilt over my legs. I read the psalms for that day, then I flip to the Gospels. For fifteen minutes or so I do the kind of lectio divina discussed in chapter 1, dwelling with scripture, reading it, chewing on it. Letting it chew on me.

Keep in mind this important point: The way the practice of silence has been packaged and the way you can learn similar practices in non-Christian contexts often rips silence out of its natural home in the context of other forms of Christian
prayer—especially praying the Psalms and *lectio divina*. Silence doesn’t stand on its own, but it lives in life-giving mutual relationship with the other practices that make up a prayerful life of attentive availability to God.

A timer on my watch is set for thirty minutes. When I finish praying the Gospels, I start the timer, toss the watch in my lap, pull the quilt up to my neck, fold my hands in my lap beneath the quilt, take a deep breath in and out through my nose a couple of times, and then start. In my mind I say “Je-” on the in-breath, and “-sus” on the out-breath. “Je-sus.” Slowly. “Je-sus.” Three or four times, five if I’m lucky, before my mind starts thinking about the papers I have to grade that day or the van I have to take into the shop or the chapter on silence I’m supposed to be writing but which I can’t quite get organized. A parade of thoughts—a boring thought, an angry thought, an anxious thought. My stomach growls.

Then I recognize that I’m thinking. Do I say, “Rats! See, you are a failure. You can’t even repeat your word for one minute without getting distracted. You should have given this up a long time ago, buddy!”? No. As soon as I recognize what I’m doing, I release the thoughts by gently returning to my word: *Jesus*.

Eventually, while still saying my word, I hear footsteps. Ginger going to get coffee. Simeon, our ten-year-old, dashing into the kitchen after her. Mary Clare padding along the hallway. Silas—I don’t hear him; he’s practically a ninja. But I’m not thinking about these things. These noises—like the whir of the electric heater and the clicking of the furnace—are just so much flotsam and jetsam floating down the river, and I let them go by. I’m saying my word. Then this thought: *My watch must be broken. I’ve been here for an hour! Will it ever beep!*


Finally, muffled by the quilt, a faint, “beep, beep, beep” sounds. I turn the timer off, say a few prayers slowly, and
start to stretch. My mind gets busy again, but this time I don’t need to release these thoughts. Fortunately, I don’t need to cling to them either or fear them or perhaps most importantly, mistake them for the real me. They no longer become the lens through which I view the world, the center from which I live. I’m learning to stay in touch with a deeper center: Christ living in me.

I have this sense as I climb the stairs and emerge into this life of mine, this “active life,” that the silence accompanies me. The silence is becoming my companion because the silence itself is the very God who rests in the depths of our souls and in whom we rest. Of course, this Silence comes with me.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

Though we feel drawn to a silence so rare in our culture, the outer distractions and the inner chaos of our lives make us flee silence. And yet, practicing silence is like climbing into the lap of God, resting against God’s breast, becoming one with God’s heartbeat. So it’s worth trying. We enter silence in many ways. This chapter introduced one way—the four Rs—repeat, recognize, release, return. As you begin to practice silence, remember these aspects:

- Don’t worry about doing it right. There are several approaches; the key is to try one and stick with it. Be gentle on yourself when the going gets tough.
- Don’t judge your thoughts. When we judge our thoughts or get angry and frustrated by distractions, that’s just more thinking pulling us out of the silence. Instead, simply let go of the thoughts by returning attention to the prayer word.
- Don’t neglect a “where” and “when.” If you are going to practice silent resting in God, you need to have a clearly designated time and place. Establishing these is a key step to beginning and continuing the practice.
A REFLECTION EXERCISE

1. Why do you think so many people today hunger for silence and solitude?

2. When you try to be silent, what goes on in your mind? What emotional responses do the things you imagine trigger in you? Fright? Boredom? Excitement?

3. How do you think of spiritual disciplines? Do you consider them exercises you do or ways to open yourself to what God does?

4. Write a list titled, “My Life Conditions That Prevent Silence.” What on the list seems easiest to change?

5. If you had to pick a “when” and a “where” right now, what would they be? What would you have to change to make them work?

6. Try This: Find a place. Set an alarm for ten minutes, and practice silence. Journal about what this time was like.

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Notes


2. Ibid., 66.


6. June gave me permission to share her story and this e-mail, though I have changed her name.


8. See, for example, the writings of John Main and Thomas Keating.

Are you seeking a deeper, more authentic experience of God? Maybe you’ve attended retreats, read dozens of books on spirituality, or even consulted a spiritual director and found yourself still wanting more. Did you know that God has given you everything you need to live and flourish in a life with God? You can stop your restless searching and rediscover the gifts God has already given you.

In *What We Need Is Here*, Roger Owens calls you to return to 7 basics of Christian spirituality:

- Reading the Gospels
- Praying the Psalms
- Making friends with silence
- Finding Jesus in church
- Meeting Jesus through Holy Communion
- Embodying your spirituality
- Being with the poor

Writing in a style that is honest, accessible, and at times humorous, Owens weaves his own stories of struggle with insights from the history of Christian spirituality to help you receive and open yourself to these 7 “givens.” This book includes practical exercises and questions for reflection and discussion, making it ideal for individuals and groups.

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