

Some Celibacy for Everyone

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Although the term *celibate* is ordinarily used to designate the condition of being unmarried, it has a broader and more positive meaning. Its Latin root, *caelebs*, and its Old English equivalent, *hal*, convey the richer meaning of being alone, whole, and healthy. To be whole and healthy carries the further meaning of being in good condition, undivided, complete. Thus *whole* or *healthy* describes a person who has a claim on some possession not shared with anyone else. When used to describe a tree, *caelebs* brings to mind one "not supporting vines."

My basic contention is that deep within each of us, married or single, is a celibate core that makes it proper, and even necessary, that we stand alone in seeking wholeness and completion from God. It is a space not shared with any other person.

This celibate core is a sacred center, not a literal or physical space. As such, it is close to the biblical notion of heart—that is, the vital center of life that is specifically human when a person is called on to be totally, freely, and authentically a unique and graced self before God. Within that sacred center or space, the Spirit of God dwells, prays unceasingly, and conveys God's desires for each of us in a language beyond words. It is a personal holy of holies, the inner sanctum of the temple of self, where only the self dare enter—a private enclosure into which none other dare trespass.

Thomas Kelley, in his Quaker classic *Testament of Devotion*, describes the specialness of this sacred center: "Deep within us all there is an amazing sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center . . . to which we may continuously return. . . . It is a dynamic center, . . . It is the Shekinah of the soul, the Presence in the midst."

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ENRICHED

To speak of claiming and tending one's celibate space is not to imply that this is inimical to, or in competition with, the bondedness with spouse, family, friends, or community to which each is called. Our basic human vocation is to be with and for others. The body of Christ, as well as the reign of God, are corporate visions. Indeed, it is in the proper use of celibate space that we learn to improve the quality of our human relationships. Nor is retreat to one's celibate core to be confused with a solipsistic preoccupation with self. It is, in truth, the loss of a false self in finding a true one. Nor does it imply an aloofness or indifference toward people and their needs. Rather, it kindles a warmer and wider compassion.

Claiming celibate space is not a matter of being either alone or together but one of opting for both solitary and solidary time in a healthy rhythm of alternation. As a matter of fact, the support of loved

ones enables us to venture alone into that holy, lonely, celibate space, as awesome as it is attractive. In turn, the aloneness of solitude appropriately spent disposes us to return better able to relate more deeply and more lovingly with others. We hope to bring back from celibate space more of a self to give in love and service. Or, to put it another way, the "we-ness" of community enables one to bear and to benefit from the "I-ness" of solitude, which in turn equips one to become more of a "we" with and for others.

Celibate space is where we learn to relate—to God, to self, to others. Essential to any genuine relationship is the continuation of the parties concerned to become increasingly established in their mutual otherness. To relate to another implies the establishment and maintenance of distinct, as opposed to merged, identities. The quality of our relationships is enhanced to the degree to which we are distinct in our respective identities yet united in our love.

GOD PROVIDES MODEL

The exemplar for all human relationships is the mystery of our three-personed God. Relations between persons are the bases of distinction within the Trinity, in which there is union without confusion and distinction without separation. To the extent that we mirror such union in differentness, we glorify the triune God and make real that part of the Lord's Prayer that says "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Proper relationship is impaired to the extent that we perceive (consciously or unconsciously) others as projections of ourselves or allow our identities to become confused with or absorbed by those of others. In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm describes three types of immature love: symbiotic union, which is based on mutual physical or psychic needs; passive-masochistic, which makes the self an instrument of someone else; and active-sadistic, which incorporates another. He describes mature love as union under the condition of preserving one's integrity and individuality. This kind of love is an experience of an overflowing giving of self. The attainment of such mature love, which bonds us more deeply with others, requires that we move beyond bonding based on dependency, co-dependency, possessiveness, exploitation. But it takes celibate space to find our own otherness. In finding it, we realize more and more that God is Other and that people are others—not just intellectual, imaginative, or emotional projections of our egos and needs.

In celibate space we are less likely to need words, images, or actions and more likely to seek a language of silence. As we enter that space, we find we can leave our egos behind, entrust our needs and fears to a provident God, and just "be there,"

quietly aware of and immersed in the mystery of the Other, ourselves, and others. Celibate space is the sacred geography of contemplation. It enables us to let God be God and others be themselves. Claiming celibate space, for both brief and extended intervals, can lead to real presence before God, self, and others.

PLACE OF PURIFICATION

A further value of seeking celibate space is that it can safeguard against any pietistic tendency to domesticate our religious experience. I am referring to an overly subjective and superficially sentimental piety that tends to tame the mystery of God. It is often accompanied by a naive and illusory desire that our relationship with God be all sweetness and light, an expectation that God will act as a pampering parent, that holiness is merely a matter of feeling good. In effect, the domestication of religious experience tries to capture the elusive presence of God. Nothing is more effective in combating the tendency to domesticate than the desert in which we grapple with our demons or the dark nights in which God purifies our hearts and transforms our desires. Celibate space allows us to enter the desert and the dark nights in which illusions are shattered and reality perceived.

As one enters celibate space to encounter the mystery of self, other people, and God, the appropriate attitude is one of reverence—that is, of deep respect, love, and awe in the face of the sacred. This reverence implies letting the sacred be—not tampering with it, not trying to control it, not shaping it to fit one's expectations. Conversely, such reverence also means that we do not allow others to trespass on the sacred domain of our celibate space. We do well to regard another's celibate space in the same way we do a sunrise or sunset—that is, not by trying to possess it or control it, but simply by appreciating it with awe and letting it be.

Such reverence is the opposite of arrogance and exploitation. It seeks to express itself in symbols and gestures that give visibility to the value of reverence. In the presence of the holy, we bow, genuflect, go unshod.

RESISTING SOLITUDE'S CALL

Perhaps the most obvious difficulty in tending celibate space is outright resistance. It is simply scary to tread on holy ground and to make ourselves vulnerable to the prospect of being alone and—more scary still—vulnerable to the pain of loneliness. So we use all kinds of rationalizations and other defenses in order to evade the call to solitude. Such evasions include finding refuge in accelerated activity (even ministry), insisting that we need to be with others to "make community," claiming we don't want to neglect our responsibil-

ities, limiting our Sabbath-time involvements to entertaining or distracting pastimes. Even if we do claim the space, it is tempting to find refuge in such distractions as television and escape literature. Even as I write, I am aware of the considerable energy (and grace) it took for me to overcome my resistance to going to a place of solitude and silence to write this. I found myself feverishly cleaning for days on end, putting off the moment of departure. Resistance can be formidable, but I am convinced that its presence is usually a signal, as well as a barrier just this side of new grace.

Perhaps much of the frustration inherent in tending celibate space comes from a naive expectation of an intimate relationship. The expectation is that life's journey can be shared completely with a significant other, a soulmate—be that a best friend or a loving spouse—who will so entirely know, love, and accept us that we shall never walk alone. Some seek such a merger in marriage, others in single or religious life, but it places unreal demands on any relationship. Furthermore, even if it were possible, it wouldn't be desirable to share that celibate space; it would be an unwarranted and irreverent trespass on sacred ground.

As human beings, we are created radically incomplete, meant to find completion in God. Each of us has an inborn thirst, hunger, and restlessness so that God can fill the space for God in our hearts. The psalmist expresses it thus: "As a doe longs for running streams, so longs my soul for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, the God of life." (Ps. 42). St. Augustine captures the same incompleteness when he prays, "Our hearts were made for Thee, O Lord, and they shall not rest until they rest in Thee." Celibate space is meant to be kept empty for intimacy with God and for gifts of God's choosing rather than of our own.

TRUST RISKS BETRAYAL

There is a common human occurrence that can shatter the unrealistic hope for a totally intimate relationship: the experience of betrayal. The Eden-like longing to be in a relationship of childish trust is often shattered when we are let down by a real or perceived act of betrayal by a significant other—be it a family member, a friend, or even a faith community. It is at such a point that we can realize that such primal trust or naive hope is not viable and that mature trust implies the possibility and the risk of betrayal. This experience can be overwhelming and possibly transformative—destructive for some, constructive for others. Some react destructively with vengeance, denial, resentment, or cynicism. Others respond creatively and are able to enter a more real world of consciousness, responsibility, and mature trust (which implies the risk of further betrayal). Betrayal can do for hope or trust what doubt can do for faith. To move beyond an

immature faith, a person must often experience a shattering of faith by doubt and questioning but can later reach a reconstructed and more mature faith. To move beyond immature trust or hope, many need to experience an act of real or perceived betrayal. The expectation of an intimacy that would involve the sharing of one's celibate core is shattered. Properly dealt with, an act of betrayal can eventually lead the betrayed to a mature trust and hope. The condition for negotiating such a passage is that the betrayal lead to forgiveness of the betrayer and reconciliation with the event of the betrayal. One may or may not find reconciliation with the betrayer, who may be unknowing, unwilling, or no longer available.

Perhaps the grace of such a dark night of betrayal is not just that one approaches life more realistically but also that one comes to realize that celibate space is to remain reserved; it is simply space that no one can—or must—fill. For anyone to enter that space would be a violation of sanctuary.

SOLITUDE ENABLES GROWTH

Difficulty in attaining celibate space can also arise from a well-meant but exaggerated notion on the part of a guide that his or her presence is required. Although the genuine presence of a guide can provide indispensable help to growth, there are times when creative absence or distance is called for. A helpful guide must be able to read the No Trespassing sign on celibate space. Presence can be destructive if it deprives us of the aloneness, or even the loneliness, we need in order to grow. We need the aloneness of celibate space to recoup and to renew relationships with others; we need the experience of loneliness to come to a deeper awareness of ourselves, as well as a more profound awareness of the presence of God.

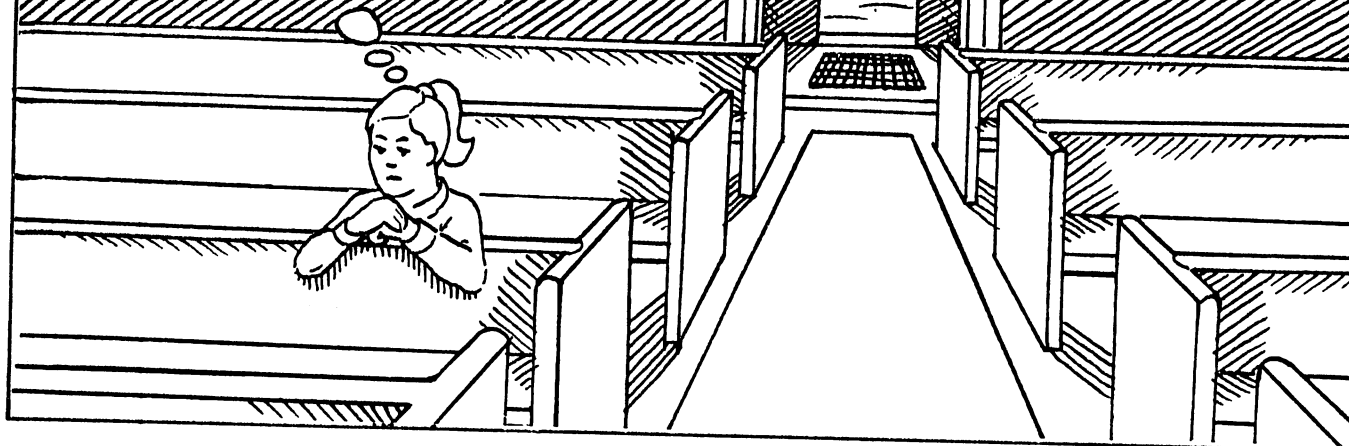
In *Love and Loneliness*, psychologist Clark Moustakas makes a distinction between being alone and being lonely. Being alone is a way of getting back in touch with oneself, especially after too much contact with and centeredness on other people. Being lonely is a significant experience, whether joyful or painful, of entering into the mystery of self.

With loneliness, there is a further distinction between "existential loneliness," which is part of being human, and the "anxiety of loneliness," which is a defense through which one tries to eliminate loneliness by seeking others or by keeping busy to avoid facing questions crucial to human growth. Being alone is an act of conscious choice that can enable us to come to grips with our relationship to others. As part of the human condition, being lonely can provide us with an opportunity to come to grips with ourselves.

Every real experience of loneliness involves either a confrontation or an encounter with the self. By *confrontation* is meant the direct challenge of

A Sign of an Unrealistic Hope

Lord, please send me someone with whom I can share my life so completely that I'll never feel lonely again.



facing a conflict and the willingness to experience negative feelings such as pain and fear intensely and deeply when those feelings are caused by a perceived betrayal, loss, or disillusionment. Although confrontation shakes us up, it forces us to use new energies and resources in coming to terms with life and in finding a way to the self. By *encounter* is meant a positive experience of self-discovery—an exciting meeting of the self with itself, during which we feel lonely yet at the same time connected to life, joyful in being ourselves, in touch with real life and the beauty of creation. It prompts us to say “This is really me, and I’m glad.”

TEST OF RELATIONSHIPS

Another obstacle to the claiming of celibate space has to do with the effect the claim sometimes has on others significant in our lives—family, friends, or community. It can awaken fear, anger, envy, jealousy, and even alienation in others when they perceive that their exclusion from our celibate space threatens our relationships with them. This difficulty is compounded when we feel guilty for occasioning such negative reactions. The overcoming of this obstacle requires a degree of courage, trust, and unselfish love on both sides of a relationship. It is not uncommon for good people to resist positive change in themselves or another because it

means abandoning an old self to which one or both parties have grown accustomed. As in the film *Days of Wine and Roses*, not a few marriages have broken up after an alcoholic spouse has achieved sobriety. Similar consequences may follow when the “betrayed” party perceives God as rival for the other’s time and affection. Both parties may need reassurances, in deed more than in word, that deeper intimacy with the God who is Love can only deepen genuine love between people. Perhaps the ultimate reassurance in this regard comes after visits to one’s celibate space, from which one hopefully emerges a more loving and committed person.

SOLITUDE AND SILENCE

As stated previously, being alone involves a conscious personal choice. Being lonely simply happens because we are human; to make loneliness fruitful, we must listen to self and to God. Two disciplines that create the environment of a fertile desert in which aloneness and loneliness can encourage growth are solitude and silence, for both brief and extended periods.

On psychological grounds alone, a strong case can be made for pursuing celibate space in solitude and silence. Of course, to the extent that we become more fully alive in the discovery of our human selves and recoup our capabilities of relating to

others, the glory of God is certainly more manifest during periods of solitude and silence, and the intent of the Incarnation is further advanced. St. Irenaeus proclaimed that the glory of God is the person most fully alive. Yet our Judeo-Christian tradition involves more than the journey to find self; the purpose of the spiritual journey is to find (or to be found by) God. The disciplines of solitude and silence help us listen to God as well as to ourselves. The desert of solitude and silence has always been the school in which holy women and men have cultivated listening hearts and been primed for spiritual discernment.

As a genuine spiritual discipline, solitude is neither a flight from the real world nor an escape from other people. We go apart so that we might better come together within ourselves, with others, and with God. Too much immersion in the mainstream of life can bring a surfeit of activity, involvement, distractions, and demands that leaves us depleted, scattered, and alienated. Solitude enables us to distance ourselves so as to regain perspective, sort things out, reorder our priorities, regain a sense of God's presence.

Solitude is the milieu in which we can best claim and tend our celibate space. In it we can find ourselves, rediscover others, and recapture the presence of God. It is the environment best suited to improving the quality of our relationships. Solitude is as much a human requirement as sociality. It provides a setting for the journey into self.

Seeking solitude entails being vulnerable to the risk of being alone and feeling lonely. It can be painful to dwell in celibate space. It can be scary to open ourselves to confrontations with our personal demons, with our frayed or neglected relationships with loved ones, with our compromised commitments, with our tepid relationships with God. The strength of our own resistance can keep us from solitude or, once we get there, can fill the gaps with a host of distractions that serve as anodynes that ease the pain. Consequently, silence is an essential adjunct to solitude. In silence we can better perceive the reality within and around ourselves.

This kind of silence is more than an absence of utterance or noise; it is a presence of the unspoken. Silence is not forgetfulness; it is remembrance of the forgotten, the ignored, that noise and activity have crowded out. Silence is a readiness to listen so that we can respond with refined thought and honest feeling. It is the seedbed in which ideas and emotions are groomed for expression and communication. Silence is not a closing out; it is an opening up to God and others. It is a path to becoming more creative and more human. It is not an immersion in daydreams and fantasies that separate us from the world of reality; it is a coming to terms with the reality of self and the world around us.

Silence is a unifying and healing presence in that

it bonds us with others whose griefs and gritudes, hopes and disappointments we share because we share in the human condition. Above all, silence is a presence of God in which we hear a voice deep within us calling us to high ideals and generous instincts. If we learn to listen to God and to each other, silence is the voice of God speaking to us. Silence can bring peace to our divided and troubled hearts, help heal society, reconcile enemies, and restore peace among nations.

Why is it that when we try to convey heights of thought or depths of emotion, words often fail us? The inadequacy of our attempts at verbal communication is almost an irreverence in times of sublime joy or profound sorrow. Sometimes the very best comfort we can offer to one grieving a loss, or the best tribute we can make to one celebrating a victory, is to provide a presence that lets our silence speak.

The silence that accompanies solitude, then, and enables us to tend celibate space, requires a listening heart—one that calls for a quieting within, a letting go, a staying with, an attending to. A listening heart calls for a genuinely contemplative stance toward ourselves, other people, and our surroundings, all of which can reveal the presence of God.

IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNEY

The challenges of claiming and tending celibate space are as awesome as they are attractive because that space is truly holy ground. One must be bold enough to risk seeking it and perhaps bolder still to dare to help others tend their own celibate space. Spiritual guides might contemplate the following concepts and related questions:

- Regular periods of solitude and silence better enable persons to claim and tend their celibate space.
Do our patterns of activity, evasion, resistance, or scatteredness indicate a need for recreative disengagement?
- At times, gentle confrontation can effect a benign iconoclasm that may enable persons in celibate space to face and disassemble idols in their lives.
What attachments, evasions, rationalizations, distortions, illusions, or demons (perhaps disguised as angels) seem to need honest facing?
- The motivation behind the decision to seek the aloneness of silence and solitude needs careful discernment.

Is the inclination to seek celibate space a true movement of the Spirit, or is it some form of escape from the responsibilities of life or a pursuit of heroics? Is this a time for contact with God alone or for prayer or action shared with others?

- Also needing careful discernment is a person's readiness for silence, solitude, and the confrontations that aloneness and loneliness may occasion. The timing is as important as the doing.

Is the person sufficiently intact at this point in life to face painful realities concerning self, or so vulnerable that it is more appropriate for him or her to be with others rather than alone?

- If motivation and timing are carefully discerned, one must trust that the Spirit who dwells within and invites will also enlighten, guide, and support a person in aloneness and loneliness.

Is the person sufficiently ready to risk the rigors of the desert and the dark night and to trust that quiet growth will come?

- A spiritual guide must know when to exercise creative absence—that is, when to stay out of the way, when not to intrude on another's celibate space. When it does seem appropriate to be creatively absent or distant, however, one can still assure the other of prayerful support, as the Spirit is active at deep and quiet levels.

Is this a time to comfort or to share the burden of another's pain? Or is it a time to allow the other person to stay alone with a deep experience of pain until God's intentions are clear and God's work is accomplished?

- The mystery of the other person and the mystery of self call for sincere and profound reverence. Though it is possible and desirable to understand and to empathize, it may well be irreverent, and even arrogant, to presume to understand and fully appreciate another's experience because it seems like one's own.

In helping another to tend his or her celibate space, is the guide assuming that her or his own experience of self is normative for the other person? Does the guide really respect and reverence that person's otherness and refrain from barging in where angels fear to tread?

- As one claims celibate space, relationships can be expected to change. It is important to monitor changes in attitudes and behaviors toward others after periods of solitude.

Are the quality of the person's relationships and the depth of his or her commitments enhanced or diminished after time alone?

CALLINGS MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

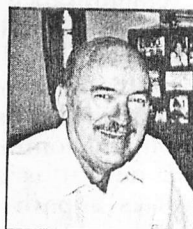
The call to be alone is not inimical to the call to

be with others; rather, each calling enhances the other. Distinctiveness is fundamental to relationship. As we find unity in distinction, we mirror trinitarian life. Claiming and tending celibate space enables us to relate better to self, others, and God. At the same time, it protects the realm of mystery. Reverence is the key attitude with which we enter celibate space. Difficulties that impede the claiming of celibate space include resistance to the prospect of what we may or may not find, unreal expectations of intimacy, an overprotective and intrusive presence of others, and the strain that tending celibacy sometimes places on significant relationships. Solitude and silence are requisite disciplines in the quest. These open the way for potential growth through aloneness and loneliness, whereby we come to terms with our relationships with others, ourselves, and God.

In choosing a model of claiming and tending celibate space, I can think of none more apt than Mary, the Woman Wrapped in Silence, whose "shrine her thoughts made gathered her beyond her exile / And enclosed a native place where all / She loved could cancel banishment, and hold / The votive pleading of her single prayer / That asked to be only in that place / Where He will be. . . ."

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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