

Time to be

Taking time out

The Christian faith invites us to engage with the world: to prepare ourselves for service, to show compassion towards those in need, and to exercise responsible stewardship of the earth. Yet often as we grow in awareness of what needs to be done and what we ourselves could contribute, we find that valuable activity squeezes out prayer and reflection. Without our noticing, the pressure can grow until we have become stressed and weary, and commitments that once excited us have become a burden.

Each of us needs to find a balance between doing and being. Spiritual health entails being calm, focused and purposeful, free to accept some challenges and say no to others, and with time to relax and play. A balanced lifestyle is also a more compelling witness to our faith. The example of Jesus is of ministry rooted in prayer. He prepared himself by praying, and when tired or oppressed by the crowds he withdrew into solitude.

The many demands on us can make it hard to set aside time daily when we can escape from the bulging diary and the insistent telephone. Doing so may be hardest of all for those who care for others. Perhaps we are fortunate in having friends we can turn to for relaxation and support, and perhaps sometimes we need someone to take care of us, for example with massage, shiatsu or aromatherapy. At times we may also need professional support in the form of counselling or therapy. Or perhaps we simply need time alone, to unwind, to do nothing, to catch up with ourselves; to read, to paint, to think, to feel. Time to look backward and forward, to speak and to listen, to celebrate and to mourn, to lay things down and to take up new challenges. Time to pray, and to think about our lives and our relationship with God.

Times of quiet

A retreat is an extended period of quiet prayer reflection, lasting a few days or week or so. There are many different kinds: preached retreats, with talks; activity or theme retreats based on work with paint or clay, observation of the natural world, or the like; and individually guided retreats including daily one-to-one meetings with the retreat-giver, which relate specifically to what is going on now in you.

Shorter periods of silence can be experienced in drop-in days, in which people may come and go throughout the day, or quiet days, which often have a structure and a theme for the day as a whole. Usually music is played at mealtimes, and although there is no conversation there can be a real sense of companionship.

Where might you go?

A great many retreat houses offer retreats, quiet days, and space where you can simply be. Many diocesan houses not only run organised events and accept group bookings but are happy to welcome individuals too. Many religious communities invite individuals and groups to spend time living alongside them and joining them in their prayer and worship.

But there are also smaller establishments - individual rooms in local houses of prayer, for example, or annexes, summer houses and caravans serving as places to be.

Before you go

Make sure you know where you are going and how to get there. Try to settle other matters before you go, so that you are free to relax. Take comfortable clothes, and weatherproof outdoor clothes and footwear. You may also like to take a notebook.

A time of quiet is an opportunity to listen inwardly. If you enjoy creative activities such as art, knitting or tapestry, you may like to take the materials. It is tempting to use the time to catch up on reading, but reading can be a distraction.

What would you do?

You might like just to relax and rest. You might like to explore your surroundings - as you do, use your senses, and attend to the sights, sounds and smells. You might like to record thoughts, feelings, perceptions or insights, in prose or verse, or by creating images, perhaps using paints or clay. If you read, read only a little and then ponder what you have read, noticing your reaction to the text and its significance for you.

You may wish also to spend time in prayer, for others and for yourself. Words may be helpful or you may prefer simply to be inwardly still and quiet, receptive to the Spirit. At the end of a period of prayer, look back over the prayer time and recall what happened. Notice what you felt, and especially anything that surprised you. You may like to write down the details, so that you can refer to them later.

If it would be helpful to talk out loud, feel free to approach one of the retreat leaders (if there is one), a member of the community or the warden.

Going home

Before you leave, look back over your time of quiet. What have you done with the time? What have you experienced?

Have you become newly aware of anything? Have you made any resolutions? Is there anything you need to do now?

If you came back again, what would you look forward to? How would you use the time differently? Make a note of this. You might like to make a note in your diary, say three months from now, reminding yourself to arrange another time of quiet.

Ongoing support

Most of us find it helpful to talk with other people about what matters most to us, and the spiritual journey is no exception. Perhaps it would be good to speak with someone who has no involvement in your own situation: someone at a distance, maybe even a member of a different tradition.

You might find it useful to arrange regular spiritual accompaniment. At such meetings you could reflect on what has happened since your previous meeting, and have help in seeking the way forward.

Further information

Each year the Retreat Association publishes the magazine *Retreats*, which lists over two hundred retreat houses. Where possible the magazine gives their programmes, including quiet days, retreats and courses. The Association can also provide further information or guidance about retreats, courses and finding a spiritual companion, and publishes other leaflets which may be of interest, including:

- Theme retreats
- Open Door retreats
- Individually guided retreats
- Weeks of accompanied prayer
- Contemplative prayer
- Choosing a spiritual guide

The Retreat Association aims to foster the growth of the spiritual life by the practice of retreats. For information contact:

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