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:A CONSIDERATION
HANNAH HARKINS

For Mom:
The one who taught me how to be found.

My cuticles are my giveaway. When I'm in an anxious season of life, my cuticles are red and torn around my fingernails.

I acquired the anxious habit of picking at said cuticles from my mom. I can recall watching her do this. She would quietly run her fingertips along the nail line, searching for a snag she could mess with.

I do the exact same thing. It's not a trait I list on my dating profile.

But anxiety is real and this is not an essay on anxiety.

If I had to guess, you've experienced some form of anxiety. Our country is over-medicated, numbed and on-edge somehow still. This is also not an essay on our less-than-stellar ways of coping.

We've never been more and less connected as a Western population. Add the implications and newly found rhythms of isolation per COVID-19 virus spread. Work from home. Zoom calls. Immunosuppressed challenges.

We are isolated. We've lost touch of what it means to be human.

When the pandemic gripped the world and didn't let up for weeks, I was thankfully stuck in my apartment with my friend/roommate at the time. I'm not sure how I would've fared being locked at home by myself. We watched shows and played (a lot of) Animal Crossing. I convinced friends across the country to get the game. When we played together, it felt like we were actually hanging out because our characters looked like us, but it wasn't real.

What *was* real were the tunnel-visioned spirals my anxiety sent me down. The idleness of the day created fertile soil for memories and disappointments and grief to bloom. My mom passed away in July 2019. And when I was ordered to stay home in March 2020, I was barely able to see through the smog that is all-consuming grief. Mom was my best friend. She was a lot of people's best friend. She loved Jesus really authentically, too.

That period of time was the beginning of my fight to understand anxiety and panic attacks and spirals and fixation and silence & solitude.

Earlier in 2020, I'd inhaled John Mark Comer's *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*. When the pandemic hit, I found myself in this bizarre, tangible opportunity to practice the slowing and rest I read about while having little-to-no obligations for many weeks in a row. With my Apple Watch in the drawer and a fresh conviction on how to start my mornings, I became obsessed with the idea of slowing and rest and specifically, silence.

Think about it: How often are you in literal silence? Maybe never? Many of us sleep with noise machines or box fans. We have music playing in the background at all times and the thought of silencing it is chest-tightening. I get it. I soOoOo get it.

I think that's why I was so fascinated by the idea of adding silence to my daily routine. I knew it would be a challenge because it's the opposite of what many do around me. Over the last year or so, when I'd share with

friends about my curiosity with silence and I'd ask if they ever did things at home in silence, my question was met with a resounding, "No." I was in good company.

If you couldn't guess by now, I lean easily into anxiety. I exist in a cycle of what ifs and what abouts. I identify as a One on the Enneagram, so my "Inner Critic" is reminding me basically non-stop that I could've done every single thing I do better. This constant evaluating process and source of self-inflicted disappointment keeps me constantly scanning the places around for how to best navigate within them. Anxiety is the child behind me on the plane kicking my seat and sometimes I get so used to rocking back and forth that I forget it's happening.

I look back on my early days of figuring out how to incorporate slowing and silence into my daily rhythms and can now--hindsight 20/20-- recognize my biggest challenge:

I was terrified of being alone with my thoughts.

Maybe you can relate?

I was scared of what I might think about, remember or be convicted of. I was nervous to recall difficult events. I didn't want to create too much head space to think about Mom or all the ways I'd "failed" Jesus in the past.

I was terrified to look God in the eyes, for lack of better words. Jesus felt accessible though. He felt like a friend and older brother. This perspective was solely a result of the grief I'd been covered in for the months prior. There's something about suffering that can draw us closer to Christ--more on this later. The Holy Spirit was a cool entity that I still don't fully understand but am learning to pray about.

But God...God the Father...He felt far. So the thought of *choosing* to be super quiet so I could hear my thoughts and process them intentionally and unintentionally with the God who I couldn't quite figure out (spoiler alert: we never fully will), convinced me that I needed to at least try. I didn't want to be afraid anymore.

It boiled down to this: I wanted to better know the God my mom trusted in her cancer diagnosis. I wanted to

actually know Jesus. I wanted my life to look brave and unworried and non-anxious.

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Today, I've found one of the major points of practicing silence is stepping into the opportunity we have to simply *be* with God. I first began to understand how to actually go about doing this from Cherie Snyder on the *Wild at Heart* podcast. She led the listener through contemplative prayer which I had never heard of or been taught before. Cherie spoke slowly, in a way that challenged my fast-paced approach to prayer. She paused between sentences which really tripped me up. It was jarring to see that I couldn't handle the slowness of the practice.

At first, the silence was off-putting. I felt my chest tighten a little when I turned the music off and noticed I was home alone. In the mornings, it felt bizarre to sit in bed and read without Gregory Alan Isakov playing in the background. It all just felt weird.

Unexpectedly, after about a week of making my spaces be literally quiet, I craved it. I woke up and no longer felt conflicted about being alone with the Bible or my journal. I came home from work and kept my devices off. I looked forward to walks with my headphones left behind. Choices became rhythms and those rhythms helped me breathe a little.

I tried my hand at contemplative prayer a few times and started getting the hang of it. In June 2021, I came across Ruth Haley Barton's *Invitation to Silence and Solitude*. This book teaches practical steps to finding daily silence and making space for contemplative prayer. It was just what I needed: someone to give me clear directions on *how* to do some of this. I learned that the practice actually looks like getting into a quiet place and praying and meditating. I had never meditated before, at least not on purpose. As I started incorporating her teachings, I noticed the anxiety from turning off the noise and dealing with myself decreased ever so slightly over time.

I think the first time I made space and time for silence I said, "Lord... So... I don't know..." Real deep. A couple

days later, after fumbling my way through the practice, I found myself crying in the middle of the timed session. Sitting alone in a silent, kinda-dark bedroom closet, I can honestly tell you I was sitting *with* God. And that moment.. Oh man, I wish I could chat with you over coffee and look you in the eyes and tell you this: finding yourself in the midst of the God who created you is life-changing. Simply *being* with God is life-changing. It settles your heart. It includes your circumstances. It slows your mind down for a moment. It gives clarity and assurance.

The more I've studied silence and contemplative prayer, the more I notice how little the Church talks about it. Most people spend their wind teaching on doing something with God: praying to Him, petitioning Him, crying out to Him, sharing your anger with Him, etc. While all this is important, the contemplative prayer that's best found in the silence allowed me to *experience* the love of God. I ~knew~ God loved me, but it wasn't until I experienced it did I learn I'd never actually known it.

Making the choice to pursue a quieter, slower and more prayerful life continues to feel monumental (and difficult!) in light of the culture I exist within. Most people have headphones in and the TV on. Most of the country is also overwhelmed and depressed. I recently heard that anxiety experienced for an extended period of time is worse for the body than smoking... So, there's that. If you choose to take this on, you will notice more people who are impatient, anxious, and avoidant. You'll see it in yourself more, too.

Fast forward to today and my house is pretty quiet all the time. My TV is only turned on to watch something specific. Music is heard sparingly. I love how settled my home feels. *To be clear: TV and music are not inherently bad. I had no control of them which was not good.*

If you consider yourself an anxious person, this practice is for you. If you're busy and overwhelmed, this practice is for you. If you follow Jesus and want to know Him like for real for real, this practice is for you. This practice can be for everyone, truthfully.

I can guess what you're thinking: "I don't have time. My house is noisy. I can't get a moment alone. I'm too anxious." I get that. What's been cool to see is you can carve out a little corner of silence in a crowded room when you get your mind right. I've tried it a few times and it's pretty powerful.

I recognize I'm not presenting any new information here. I feel like what I'm doing in this essay is bringing existing information to a new circle of friends. No one around me was arguing for a slower life and less distractions. Most people spend much of their time trying to fit Jesus into the rhythms of today's culture. "Most people" includes me, too.

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Since I can't sit with you, I wanted to share four simple steps I've found to be helpful in slowing down your life and figuring out how to start *being with God*. *deep breath*

1. **Start small:** Turn off the TV when you're not watching it. Turn off music when you're doing something thoughtful like reading or praying or journaling. (Maybe start reading and praying and journaling?) But start with tangible silence. If you dive too far into upending your rhythms and sell every device you own, you won't sustain the changes. I can promise you that. Give yourself permission to ease into this rhythm. You're going against almost everything Western culture tells you to do... Let it take some time.

2. **Write--with a pen--a list of characteristics and attributes of God.** Write them on a piece of paper and carry it around with you. Next time you're in line, look at them. Think about them. Be the person in line *not* on your phone. If this feels accessible, go one step further and "separate" the entities of the Trinity and specify attributes to each. There are things Jesus did on Earth that the Holy Spirit is not specified to have done, like being called a rabbi. The persons of the Trinity are not actually "separate", but I've found that paying unique attention to each has grown my understanding of how they work in relationship with one another.

3. Once you're comfortable in the quiet, **pause and pray**. Take out that piece of paper if it's helpful. Breathe deeply and slowly and repeat His attributes after each inhale. Let the truth of His nature in the midst of your circumstances be a balm. Let this feel a little weird at first if it must.

4. **Find that quiet spot at home and consecrate it**. Set a timer. Leave your questions at the door. Sit in the quiet and breathe deeply and think about Jesus. Go with the intention of simply *being with God*.

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You'll have to fight for this. You won't be consistent. I'm not. I am human. We are human. Let your frame be part of the story.

I hope you've read my heart on the pages here. I hope you've felt my sincere confidence in the knowledge of knowing our need to *be with Jesus*. Praying to Him is crucial. He tells us to ask God for help and intercede on behalf of others. But we've lost sight of (and even forgot) Jesus stepped away to quiet places to pray and be with

the Father (Mark 1:35). He did this often. If Jesus needed this, how much more do we?

So here's my prayer for you. I'm writing this prayer to be read by you for you. Read it slowly. Take your time.

Jesus... You are generous. You are not only Savior of the World, but You are Friend and Teacher. Teach us, Jesus. Teach us The Way to navigate this world. Show us how to steal away and be with the Father.

God, Abba, I ask that by Your Holy Spirit, You disrupt the patterns in our lives. Shake things up and make space for us to meet You in the quiet.

Holy Spirit, reveal Yourself as a compass in our lives. You are our Encourager, Guide, and Friend on Earth. Holy Spirit, we invite You into our hearts. Illuminate the ways we've hid from God in shame and remind us that He knows our frame and receives our shortcomings with forgiveness. Remind us that God simply calls us to Himself.

Draw us into the quiet. Whisper to our hearts and settle our nerves. Remind us that You've redeemed the yuck

and know our shortcomings. We bring nothing new to the table when we sit down.

Change our lives for the good and humble us to know we need it.

You are a good God, even when our circumstances could convince us otherwise.

So come, Holy Spirit, and do a work in our hearts and minds. We invite You in.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Last story:

As I mentioned before, my mom passed away a couple years ago. For some context, she was warm, maternal, and self-deprecating in her humor. She dealt grace like she knew how much she'd been given-- she was a follower of Jesus without ever making it about herself.

Mom was my best friend. We'd talk multiple times a day and update each other on small details that normally don't warrant a phone call.

Then she was diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic breast cancer out of the blue. She didn't carry the gene. Breast cancer didn't run in the family. She did the yearly check-ups. She ate pretty well. She did everything you're supposed to do in order to *avoid* a diagnosis like that. And yet...

There was a story that came to mind when I shared with friends that I was pulling this essay/ebook together:

Years ago when Mom was in the throes of aggressive chemotherapy and a clinical trial, she told me in passing how she got her mind and body to settle when she couldn't get back to sleep. I can remember this moment like it was yesterday because it altered the way I viewed her relationship with Jesus:

I start to think about His features, like His hands or sandals. I imagine He probably has callouses. I think about what it would've been like to hug Him, the texture of His clothing.

When she shared this, I was blown away that a woman who didn't deserve stage 4 cancer was humble enough to fixate on her Savior in the darkest moments of the night. She didn't self-medicate. She didn't throw things or cuss someone out.

She allowed herself to sink deeply enough into her suffering that it brought her eye-level with the God who knew it was coming (more on this in a later essay).

The night I finalize this draft and send it to my inner circle who has rallied, prayed, and encouraged me to finish something I started, I type these last words with tears in my eyes.

Not just because today is the two-year anniversary of her passing.

Not just because there's not a day I don't think of her.

Not just because I miss the way her perfume lingered in the room.

But because God, in a kindness I can't wrap my mind around, started revealing years ago the power in letting ourselves be found by Him in the silence.

The very thing I can't stop talking about today is the very thing that sustained my mom through the night.

If I could leave you with one last encouragement, it's this:

Let yourself be found in the silence.

Resources I referenced and find to be particularly helpful:

1. John Mark Comer's [*The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*](#)
2. Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile's [*The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery*](#)
3. Wild at Heart Podcast: This is where I was first introduced to the practice of contemplative prayer by Cherie Snyder. Here's a [link](#) to the specific episode.
4. Ruth Haley Barton's [*Invitation to Silence and Solitude*](#)
5. Erling Kagge's [*Silence: In the Age of Noise*](#)