

RETREAT

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What happened when I was gone? I mean, I left on December 29th. I went on our pilgrimage to India. I stayed in India five weeks and almost a month in New Zealand, and America has gone crazy.

I bring you sincere love and greetings and a lot of puzzled looks and questions from the 10,000 Unitarians in Northeast India and the 50 Unitarians in Auckland. I have preached, and I have taught, and I have given lectures, and I have consulted for the good of these communities, and I have retreated. I have to tell you that everyone I met is amazed at what's going on in the US and in our church, for different reasons, and they all wish us well.

I've been watching from afar, and it looks nuts. I have been at a good distance from it, and I'm sorry. You've been on an emotional rollercoaster that I have not been on. That means that either I'm incredibly emotionally out of sync with you or that I'm here to tell you that there's a way to survive and thrive without the daily news beatings and getting wrapped up in the flood zone strategy employed by our White House right now. Because I've been sheltered from most of it, and I arrive here refreshed and, importantly, listening to a deeper place in myself than if I had been responding, at every moment, to what you've been through.

So, thank you for part one of my sabbatical. And here I am preaching on retreat, which sounds like a military strategy, if you're in that political roller coaster, rather than a spiritual heart set that nourishes the soul. In this sermon series, we are talking about a model for spiritual strength, for daily practice, for weekly worship, for monthly service, for annual retreat, and one-time pilgrimage.

Now, I did this a little backwards on the first part of my sabbatical, going on pilgrimage first, and then on a type of retreat to New Zealand. I've been pondering, though, what retreat really is, and if I

had one thing to say about it, it's that it's not a military strategy or a defensive removal of yourself from the world, although it might start with retreating a little from the news, the daily podcasts, the constant phone calls, emails, and other anxiety producing things. But it really begins. It starts to mature with finding some silence in your life.

I have had more resting in silence in the last two months than I've had in a long time. Mostly they looked like standing in places like this, in northeast India, or on the side of a volcanic mountain, with just the wind in my ears, in New Zealand, or reading from a book for uninterrupted hours, watching the sunrise in places like this, or sitting on a beach that is empty of people, or at a table with a cup of tea in an unbusied place. Sometimes it was doing the Wordle with the dogs on the porch of my host's house in India, as the sun rose and warmed us.

I admit I did go around the world to find this, but you don't have to. Retreat can be an event, it can be a moment, it can be a Friday evening at church, but it can also be an intentional hour, a self-imposed isolation, or time to seek silence. What we are looking for in all these things is a quality of silence that feeds our perspective on life and our surroundings, a pause that helps us step back from the daily anxieties to see more clearly, to feel, more fully and more present, what is going on around us.

"When we deeply relax, our attention unglues itself little by little from our preoccupations, our identifications. It moves, gropingly, toward the zone of silence. True silence is linked to the sensation of ourselves. It is in touch with an inner energy," said Henrietta Lannes, once a disciple and philosopher and teacher in the school of the Mystic G. I. Gurdjieff. She had worked in the resistance in France against the Nazis, during the Second War, and became a spiritual teacher in London after that. She was said to employ, and I quote, "a dangerous and exacting empathy which shocked her students into opening their eyes." "Silence is a tool of the spirit," she said, echoing many before her.

You've heard this lesson. You know this because you practice it every Sunday in worship. And no religion worth anything has avoided the urge of silence in our lives. The Buddhists have made a faith of it. The cathedrals hold it in the certain echoes between the notes of the organ. The Quakers don't speak unless the spirit moves. The Jews point to the 65th Psalm that says, "[foreign language 00:07:19]," translated creatively to say, "To you, silence is praise, God."

In Islam, silence is valued as a virtue. Each Muslim encouraged to think before speaking and to refrain from harmful and unnecessary speech. As the Prophet Muhammad said, "Whoever believes in Allah should speak a good word or remain silent." The silence in between prayers in the mosque holds hundreds together, shoulder to shoulder and breath by breath.

And what I'm talking about is not just not speaking. It is a deeper retreat from speaking, from doing, from worrying, from rushing around, from to-do lists, from appointments, from the list of podcasts you're still trying to get through. It is a breathing. It is a listening to nothing and everything. It is watching nature change. It is finding the moment that unglues us from our

preoccupations. It is the uncounted, unqualified moments of attention to the air around us and the feeling of being alive, without the need to describe it, or songs to interrupt it, or noise to cancel our attention. This is what you find in retreat.

Mornings in India and New Zealand, for the last two months, have been that for me, an ungluing of every demand, always and certainly a luxury in a time of fire and turmoil. But necessary, necessary fuel for my spirit, for which I thank you. These moments of retreat, for me, look like mornings I sat in the shadows waiting to receive the sunrise, teacup in hand often, noting the sounds of the wind, spiritual gifts I thank you for in a time of chaos here.

But what I knew in those moments, what I still crave of those moments is something you can have also. Retreat can be a weekend, a week or a month in meditation. It can also be an attitude of pulling back to nurture the soul, a few moments, a self-created peace, a quieting of the heart in preparation to meet the world, of finding stillness and silence, the kind that holds us, that we sing about.

And I know, also, the other side of this, that silence can be terrifying. One of the most intense moments of my life as a meditator was a moment of complete silence and void, which felt more like emptiness than anything I experienced before or since, like those paralytic dreams you have that you have to pull yourself out of.

When I was 22 years old, I was on a week-long retreat, a 10-day retreat in a Buddhist monastery in India. On the eighth day, out of nothing came a silence so terrifying that I had to rip myself from the meditation and leave the meditation hall to shake it off. The silence can be scary because it forces us to confront who we are and unglue the things we attach to, that keep us. But what it really does is let us glimpse a deeper spiritual issue, a greater love for ourselves and each other and God.

The mystic Sufi poet, Rumi, talked about this. He said, "Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." Rumi didn't start out as a 13th-century, Persian poet. He was a wealthy nobleman, and a theologian, and a sober Islamic scholar.

But all that changed when he met the wandering dervish monk, named Shams al Tabriz. As soon as Shams spoke, it is said that Rumi knew he had met his soulmate, and Shams had found a star pupil he had been seeking for for years. They retreated to Rumi's house for almost three months. Who knows what happened in there. Just saying, there are many ways to God, but the story goes, they both touched a source of light that was godly and inexplicable. Each man with the help of the other discovered the grace and truth he sought. Rumi described what he learned as an unbounded and compassionate universal love that came through the silence of his attention to things beyond the daily routine.

Rumi, now, is one of the most well-read or read poets in the world. In one of his poems, speaking to God, within and beyond that God of ground, of our being, he writes, "You are the essence of the essence, the intoxication of love. I long to sing your praises, but stand mute with the agony of

wishing in my heart." The heart of God's love comes in silence. "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field," he says. "I will meet you there. When the soul lies down in the grass, the world is too full to talk about."

In the silence is the retreat. We can all have, the silent moment in church after the prayer, sitting in silence with our faces in the sun, facing the world and knowing it is a series of rupture and repair, as history tells us. And yet, we will all go on, and we must not lose our grasp on love as love grasps us.

Silence is the teacher on retreat here. It is the teacher on retreat anywhere. It points to the deeper love that we defend in ourselves, among ourselves, and with the holy. It is in the silence that we can all have retreat. It is the silence that ends this sermon.