

Friends and Silence

John Edward Southall (1855-1928) *a life-long and strongly convinced Quaker of the old school, was a printer who used his press from time to time for the spread of Quaker principles. This brief extract adapted from his publication The Power of Stillness (now out of print), describes his experience of silence as the vital element in his approach to religion and life.*

This is the one way to know God. ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’ God is in his Holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.’

A score of years ago a friend placed in my hand a little book which became one of the turning points of my life. It was called *True Peace* (now out of print). It was a medieval message, and it had but one thought, and it was this – that God was waiting in the depths of my being to talk to me if only I would get still enough to hear his voice.

I thought this would be a very easy matter, and so I began to get still. But I had no sooner commenced than a perfect pandemonium of voices reached my ears, a thousand clamouring notes from without and within, until I could hear nothing but their noise and din. Some of them were my own voice, some of them were my own questions, some of them were my prayers. Others were the suggestions of the tempter, and the voices of the world’s turmoil. Never before did there seem so many things to be done, to be said, to be thought; and in every direction I was pushed and pulled, and greeted with noisy acclamations of unspeakable unrest. It seemed necessary for me to listen to some of them, but God said, ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’ Then came the conflict of thoughts for the morrow, and its duties and cares; but God said, ‘Be still.’ And as I listened, and slowly learned to obey, and shut my ears to every sound, I found, after a while, that when the other voices ceased, or I ceased to

hear them, there was a still, small voice in the depths of my being that began to speak with inexpressible tenderness, power and comfort. As I listened, it became to me the voice of prayer, and the voice of wisdom, and the voice of duty, and I did not need to think so hard, or pray so hard, or trust so hard, but that 'still, small voice' of the Holy Spirit in my heart was God's prayer in my secret soul, was God's answer to all my questions, was God's life and strength for soul and body, and became the substance of all knowledge, and all prayer, and all blessing; for it was the living God himself as my life and my all.

This is our spirit's deepest need. It is thus that we learn to know God; it is thus that we receive spiritual refreshment and nutriment. It is thus that our heart is nourished and fed; it is thus that we receive the Living Bread; it is thus that our very bodies are healed, and our spirit drinks in the life of our risen Lord, and we go forth to life's conflicts and duties like the flower that has drunk in, through the shades of night, the cool and crystal drops of dew. But, as the dew never falls on a stormy night, so the dews of his grace never come to the restless soul.

We cannot go through life strong and fresh on constant express trains; but we must have quiet hours, secret places of the Most High, times of waiting upon the Lord when we renew our strength, and learn to mount up on wings as eagles, and then come back to run and not be weary, and to walk and not faint.

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