

The soft sounds of my path

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

Like many heart-attack patients, I was put on a regimen of daily walks. I was told, with the doctor's index finger wagging at my nose, "Now, don't forget, every single day for at least a half-hour."

Knowing the alternative, I followed the cardiologist's orders. For the last year I have spent a half-hour each day on a quiet walk along the trails, through the grasslands and over the hills where I live.

What began as medical necessity has become personal luxury. That peaceful half-hour has become a treasured time out. It is my time to tune in to the quieter pace I now value so much.

Realistically, there is no way I have time for that walk. A half-hour, after all, becomes a lot of time out of a busy schedule. I have to work and my work is time-consuming. So I learned to make the time.

Time has been only half the problem. Finding relatively quiet places has been equally difficult. We live in buildings run by machines, use machines for our work, are transported by machines and use machines to prepare our food. They're all great and have freed us from lives of drudgery.

But these machines create a constant din — from the hum of the refrigerator or computer to

the clatter of trucks and buses. For health, sanity and simple well-being we need a break from it.

We need some time away from the amplified and echoed sounds of machine-aided living. In my case, the regional parks provide respite from traffic and din.

To my surprise, I found many others out on the park trails. Mothers with youngsters in strollers; senior citizens in jogging suits; office workers on their lunch break. Some move leisurely, others go along at a good clip. But all seem to relish the softer sounds of the park trail.

Is God found only in silence? Must sacred places be silent places? Are people who live with noise far from God? Can the young mother clinging to survival and sanity just as her screaming children cling to her be religious in the best sense? I think so.

The story of creation describes how God brought life and its sounds into a silent void. From the very beginning of Jewish history we hear over and over of the practice of making a joyful noise to the Lord.

The mother with a screaming child practicing acrobatics on her knees can well be in touch with the sacred.

But some relative quiet is certainly a human need. We have created a world of mechanical noises louder and more insistent than we can bear. We have developed the means to amplify sound to a level we cannot stand. Researchers say the assault is getting to us.

Becoming free of those sounds, even a little while each day, can be restoring. And that human restoration, which makes use of silence, can be very religious.

The housebound young mother who determines to make it to the park for some moments of quiet whenever weather permits may be making a decision as important to her religion as to her mental health.

One friend, a legal secretary, spends her breaks in the quiet of the firm's library, away from the clatter of typewriters and ringing telephones.

Such attempts to make life more humane can be important supports to our spiritual quest. For anything that assists us in the human journey to God can be viewed as a part of our religious life.

(Father O'Rourke is associate director of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)

FOOD...

...for thought

It didn't take the lawyer long to realize what had to be done. She began to look for ways to unclutter her life, to simplify and to turn down the noise.

Think for a moment about the young lawyer's predicament. In view of her situation, perhaps there are some essential questions we all must answer. Do people have a basic need for some quiet time? Is personal time for reflection necessary for growth?

Let's assume that you answered yes to both questions — and so did the lawyer. Do you think her problem was then solved? Or was it just recognized? Have you ever felt the need to simplify, to reduce the noise in your life?

The difficult part, the lawyer discovered, is finding the elusive way to carve out a portion of each day for ourselves.

In our day-to-day world, there are children to raise, bosses to please, creditors to pay and noise to tolerate. Whether we live on a cattle ranch out West, on Main Street U.S.A. or in an inner city, finding time to collect one's thoughts and call upon one's inner strength can be frustrating.

Think again about the young lawyer. How could she turn down the noise level in her life? If it's a concern in your life, how could you?

But after the first few months, the lawyer knew that something had gone wrong in her well-laid plans. And it wasn't her new job responsibilities that worried her. She was confident that her training and instincts would see her through even the roughest of times.

No, her job wasn't the problem, she realized. It was the hectic, frantic pace, so attractive in the beginning, that now seemed to be suffocating the young woman. It was especially the noise of the city, so constant, so pervasive, and so unlike the pastoral quiet of her college campus.

...for discussion

1. Have you ever felt frustrated over the lack of a quiet time in your daily life — a quiet time for yourself, or to spend with your spouse, or to spend with a friend? How do you think that kind of frustration might be handled? How have others you know handled that kind of frustration?
2. Bob Dylak suggests that setting the table for breakfast before going to bed at night could free a moment in the morning for quiet reflection or prayer. Can you think of something similar, a small step you could take, to free up a moment of quiet time?
3. Father Basil Pennington writes: "In the quiet spaces the monk hears God. He also hears someone else. He hears himself — his true self." What do you think Father Pennington means?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Getting It All Together, The Heritage of Thomas Merton" is a book on some main themes in the thinking of one of the best-known writers on spirituality in this century. A major interest of Father Merton's was the quest for silence, solitude. But he didn't see this only as a value for contemplative monks like himself. Thomas Merton was one of the pioneer contemplatives of our time. He discovered for himself that contemplation has two aspects: that contemplation is not only being up on the mountain, but it is also concerned with bringing the vision of the Presence of God down into daily life," says Benedictine Brother David Steindl-Rast, one writer in this book. (1984 Michael Glazier Inc. 1723 Delaware Ave., Wilmington, Del. 19806. Paperback, \$4.95.)

Conversion

to acknowledge his sinfulness and God responded with forgiveness.

This story is dramatic. But David's need of conversion was not unique.

Conversion is necessary for all people in maintaining a right relationship with God.

Conversion was at the heart of Jesus' preaching — conversion of a radical type. Jesus called for a complete change of outlook, of attitude, not just a change of conduct.

And St. Paul captured the implications of this call in his plea to the Romans: "Do not conform to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may know what is God's will, what is good, pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)