

BY ALAN BERRY

## The “S” Words

When I think about the student community of Emma, the “s” word that immediately springs to mind is SCREAMING. Though I really do think it is great that students love to scream, the three “s” words I’d like to focus on today may seem rather counter to the Emma screaming phenomenon. These words are silence, solitude, and stillness.

When you hear them, many of you may immediately think they have something to do with the spiritual life and indeed, they do. All of the world’s great religious traditions have found the disciplines of silence, solitude, and stillness to be very helpful.

It is my strong conviction, however, that these “s” words have a great deal to offer each one of us, religious or not. All of us have an inner life. We all have a thought life. At times we all carry on an inner conversation. I believe that we owe it to ourselves to cultivate our inner lives, and in particular, to seek to bring a greater measure of quiet and stillness into them.

I need to hear and apply this message in my own life. I don’t want hurry, noise, and frantic activity to have the final say in my life. I also don’t want worry and anxiety for myself, for those I love, and for the world situation to gain the upper hand in my inner life. Permit me to share several favorite quotes. The first is from Alan Tory, a 20th-century English immigrant to Australia.

*There is a contemplative in all of us,  
almost strangled but still alive,  
who craves quiet enjoyment of the Now,  
and longs to touch the seamless garment of silence  
which makes whole.*

Anne Morrow Lindberg, wife of Charles Lindberg writes in her book, *Gift From the Sea*:

*It is a difficult lesson to learn today,  
to leave one’s friends  
and family and deliberately  
practice the art of solitude  
for an hour or a day  
or a week.*

*For me, the break is most difficult...  
And yet, once it is done,  
I find there is a quality  
to being alone that is  
incredibly precious.*

*Life rushes back into the void,  
richer, more vivid,  
fuller than before!*

Some of you are undoubtedly thinking, “Nice try, Mr. Berry, but finding an hour in my Emma schedule to ‘practice the art of solitude’ just ain’t gonna happen!” Believe me, I understand, but I do have a couple of possible suggestions to consider. For starters, frequently heed the advice of Trudy Hall: “STOP, and take a deep

breath.” Second, find five to ten minutes a day to sit quietly and find two favorite spots to sit—one outdoors for good weather and one indoors. I have found my special Emma bench in a quiet corner of campus, that I have never seen another person use. During good weather, I try to go there for a 10-minute sit right before or after my lunch.

*I don't want hurry, noise, and frantic activity to have the final say in my life.*

A number of years ago I decided to take a day, go into the woods, and see if I could sit in one spot all morning and afternoon. I found a nice comfy flat rock and sat down. After a couple hours I was getting rather smug—thinking I was pretty impressive with this solitude business. Then I noticed that I was surrounded by piles and piles of little pieces of broken twigs. Apparently, I had been subconsciously picking up one twig after another and systematically destroying them. So much for inner stillness. Anyway, I guess it is good to have some humility when experimenting with such things.

Finally, a quote from Catherine de Hueck Doherty, a 20th-century Russian immigrant to Canada. In her book *Poustinia* she writes:

*Stand still, and allow the strange deadly restlessness of our tragic age to fall away, like the worn out dusty cloak*



*that it is—a cloak that was once considered beautiful. his restlessness was considered the magic carpet to tomorrow, but now in reality we see it for what it is: a turning away from oneself, a turning from that journey inward that we all must undertake.”*

My 2009 hope for all of us is for a greater measure of quiet and stillness in our inner beings. **e**

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