



In solitude, we turn our
face toward the God
who so loves this world.

JAN JOHNSON

Stepping Back Before Speaking Out

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he tears welled up in my eyes as the conversation continued. I felt angry, sad, and hurt. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to cause conflict or hurt relationships, but at the same time I had more to say. My husband caught my eye from behind the sofa where the other people sat. He smiled kindly at me and nodded toward the door. I understood. It would be best if I left the room because I was getting upset. I didn't want to lash out in anger or say things I'd regret.

This occurred at a weekend with our small group from church many years ago. They were talking

negatively about some people I knew. I'd initially tried to speak up for them but did not feel heard. As I stood outside in the dark on the cabin's balcony, I cried in frustration.

We each face situations like this in which we feel caught between a rock and a hard place. When we care deeply about people or issues or circumstances, we struggle because we want so desperately for others to understand and share our viewpoint. But because speaking the truth in love can be so challenging (Eph. 4:15), we tend to either speak truth with harshness or say nothing in so-called "love." My experience that night long ago planted within me a desire to explain important things calmly and clearly when I believe God is directing me to speak up.

STEPPING BACK

Over the years I've learned that becoming a person who stands up for people and issues wisely and effectively begins with stepping back. Without times of reflection in which we interact with God in quietness, contemplation, and solitude, we may unconsciously attack people. But by taking time and finding space to be with God, we can process volcanic thoughts and emotions and begin to more clearly see the way forward. Walking through this process enables us to move from a desperate neediness to speak out into imagining what God wants in the situation and how we might partner with God in that. Soaking in God's peace provides clarity and empowers our words and actions to be redirected into an unpretentious, loving, even healing passion.

A rhythm of contemplation and action makes it possible to live life from the very center of ourselves where Jesus dwells. He himself practiced this rhythm. After teaching and feeding a massive crowd, Jesus withdrew into solitude to pray (John 6:1-15); we see this habit in many other passages, including Matthew 14:13, 26:36-46; Mark 6:31; and Luke 5:16, 6:12. During at least one of these frequent retreats, Jesus interrupted his seclusion to move quickly into action when he was asked (Mark 1:35-39).

Such times of solitude and silence are not turning our back to the world and its needs but turning our face toward God. We return more equipped to partner with God, who so loves this world.

A HEART EXAM

In these times of reflection, God often shows us what's in our heart: perhaps that we were hoping to gain "points" for ourselves or to control others. Such a

revelation can stun us as we begin to see how preoccupied we are with results or how accustomed we may be to an attitude of self-congratulation.

This sort of "heart exam" can be tricky because self-deception is so easy. We are likely to either accuse ourselves in a spirit of scrupulosity or give ourselves a pass. A clear hearing of God's heart requires a trust that God truly is for us and is careful not to tell us more than we can handle at any given moment. Then, as we reflect with a listening and prayerful mindset, God supplies Spirit-drenched clarity about ourselves and the situation before us.

For example, as a recovering know-it-all, I'm often self-righteous. Like Elijah on his way to Mount Horeb, I may think, *I'm the only one who gets this!* (1 Kings 19:10, 14). The sad truth is that I sometimes feel I'm better than others or that it's all up to me. That sort of grandiosity poisons not only our own souls but also any conversation we may have with others. They know our eloquent response is more about our having to be right than wanting justice to be done.

These sorts of convicting nudges from God are not scoldings—they are more like conversations with Jesus while sitting on a park bench together. Jesus lets us unload (as the psalmist did in those ranting psalms, such as Psalm 69 or 109) before helping us remember, as Walter Brueggemann notes, that prophets offer both clarity *and hope*. This means that not only does truth need to be stated tactfully, but it also needs to be drenched in confidence in God's ability to redeem any situation. And that redemption often occurs more smoothly when we have cultivated a heart of fairness, humility, and generosity.

Often, in times of solitude and silence, God opens our heart toward the very people we want to confront. We begin to see their brokenness, their earnestness, and even their inner goodness. God changes our perspective: It's often as if we are no longer sitting *across* the table from them in opposition but as if we sit on the same side as a friend.

ASKING GOD QUESTIONS

Taking time to interact with God when we desire to speak out also provides space for us to ask God what our next step might be. Activism without reflection can result in walking through every door that appears to be open. In the quiet, we can explore if an opportunity is truly God's invitation or if it may be one more temptation to assume we shoulder the burdens of the world. When we act primarily on impulse, we end up running on empty and then excusing ourselves because

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at least we got the job done. Eventually, trying to meet too many needs from too many people leaves us brittle and crabby, sapped of spontaneity and playfulness. Compassion fatigue is inevitable because humans weren't built to run on our own power but on the companionship and guidance of God.

With some rumination, we gain a more objective frame of mind. Then we're free to ask God practical questions about our situation, especially, *What do I need to know?* This kind of openness is crucial. Too often we limit our inquiry with God to *Should I or shouldn't I speak up?* But situations are usually more nuanced than that. God often shows me that, yes, this is indeed the door for me to walk through—but in a much different way than I anticipated. Perhaps I need to pay more attention to the people walking with me, pointing out their progress. Because I can be intense, God usually nudges me to lighten up! Drawing away into intimacy and conversation with God shapes us into healthy, whole persons who are eager and competent to partner with what God is doing.

Stepping back with God this way also allows us to interact with God about timing, which is crucial. The writer of Proverbs says in one verse to “not answer a fool according to his folly” but in the next to “answer a fool according to his folly” (Prov. 26:4–5). Sometimes people are in a space to hear us; other times they are not. How do we know? By slowing down and paying attention to the Spirit. If we won't be heard, exerting our energy in speaking up usually wears the other person out instead of persuading them.

Sometimes it helps to experiment with speaking the truth in love. Call it “putting on Christ,” if you will, by prayerfully rehearsing what needs to be said but with patience and kindness, without being rude or pushy, without insisting on your own way, without being easily irritated. This comes from an inward state of hoping

for the other person's best and persevering in love even if the other person rejects what you say.

PAUSING MIDSTREAM

There are times we can't move forward until we've truly owned up to our anger or our smarter-than-thou attitude. Now and then I get upset with a client at the center for the homeless where I volunteer. Perhaps they've insulted someone, but I'm too appalled or livid to speak up in a kind yet firm way. I need a good dose of solitude and silence, but there isn't time. So I retreat to the relative solitude of a stall of our women's restroom to ask God what I need to know about myself and about that client. Maybe I'm taking their comment too personally because it brings up past feelings of being walked on, underestimated, or overlooked. I need to remember that although I'm just doing laundry, I'm also there as a healer. No one likes a harsh healer. This sort of moment alone may be brief, but God can meet us there. If we're practiced at reflection, it's possible to do it this way.

Midstream reflection may also require another person's input—a safe, trustworthy person. The director of the Samaritan Center where I volunteer is this kind of person. So at times, I unload and she nods. She's felt the resentment, the sense of injustice we've all felt at times. I've seen her stand up in city council meetings and say tough things with gentle, grace-filled passion. Watching someone who lives this in front of us shows us the beauty of how it can be done. She has been this for me—and I hope I'm becoming that for others.

THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

When we approach people after having been in close interaction with Jesus, the Spirit gives us the capacity and energy to speak with a right heart of generosity and truthfulness. There's a sense of rightness felt on both sides. We're not trying to prove ourselves, and the other person knows it. Our self-worth isn't on the line, so we can accept whatever response we get.

As we participate in that rhythm of reflection and action, we no longer get so worn out because the Spirit provides the energy. We can finally speak up with that rarely seen mixture of serenity and passion. Then we exhale in surrender and trust, knowing that we have partnered with God regardless of what the outcome may be. It is never just up to us.

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