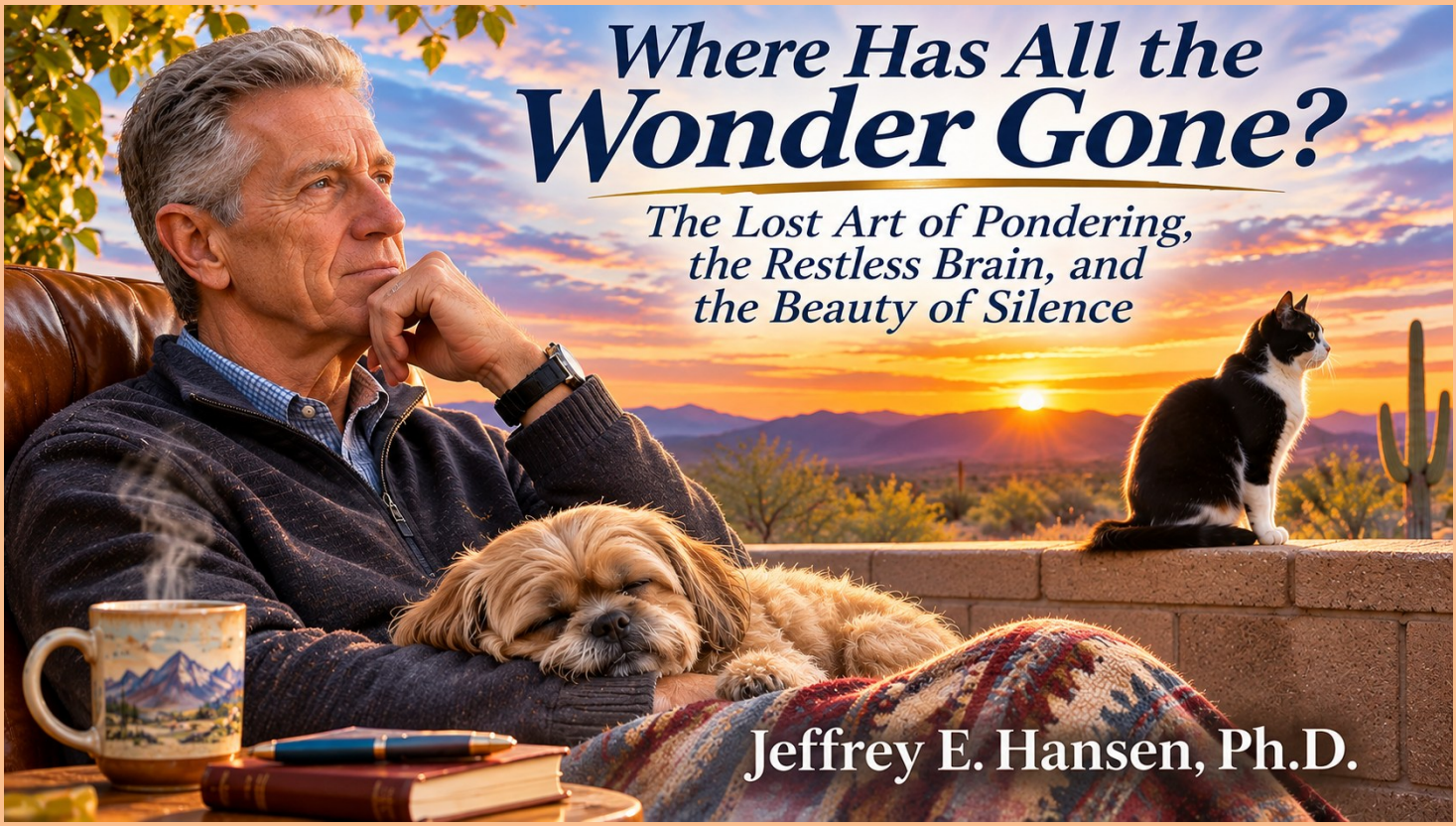


## The Wonderful Luxury of Doing Absolutely Nothing

As I sit in my outrageously expensive Scandinavian leather recliner, sipping my first cup of coffee and watching the Arizona sunrise through our east-facing windows, I occasionally find myself contemplating one of the more peculiar developments in my life. I am doing absolutely nothing. And my goodness, how I love doing it! I am not entirely certain why I decided that my posterior required such an expensive piece of furniture in which to contemplate the mysteries of existence, but apparently it did. I shall endeavor to get my money's worth.

Now, lest you conclude that this old psychologist has finally succumbed to the indolence of retirement, let me assure you that there is quite a bit going on between my ears. But there is no television blaring in the background, no music competing for my attention, and no particular demand upon my cognitive machinery. When the Arizona weather permits, which it generally does, I can take my coffee outside. Otherwise, there is my beloved chair and that magnificent window through which I watch the world awaken.

Incidentally, I would like to register a minor complaint with the Almighty regarding His scheduling of sunrises and sunsets. They are entirely too short. Surely, somewhere in the grand orchestration of the universe, accommodations could be made for a three- or four-hour sunrise and perhaps another two or three hours for the sunset. I would be most appreciative. There are mornings when the colors are so beautiful that I find myself wishing they would simply stay a little longer.

There was a time in my life when I could not have done this. As a young man, I seemingly needed the television on virtually all the time. I did not necessarily need to watch it. I simply needed it to be on. Silence was not particularly comforting to me. In retrospect, I suspect that the external noise helped me avoid encountering some of the internal noise.

I grew up in a family in which there was much goodness and love, but also a legacy of multigenerational abuse that eventually settled upon my older brother, Ken, my identical twin brother, Gregg, and me. My father wrestled with his own demons, and thank God, he ultimately found faith and made peace with his own father. It is a beautiful story of redemption that I have written about elsewhere. We were the last generation upon which that legacy settled, but the psychological and neurological consequences of those earlier experiences accompanied me well into adulthood.

Silence afforded those wounds an opportunity to speak, and for much of my younger life, I was not particularly interested in hearing what they had to say. Perhaps you recognize something of that in your own life. We become remarkably resourceful in finding ways to avoid what hurts. What an extraordinary reversal it has been to discover that I can now write, think, and pray in the very silence I once found so difficult to tolerate. Music has become something to enjoy rather than a means of escaping the companionship of my own mind.

And somewhere along the way, silence became an invitation to wonder.

## When Wonder Was the Beginning of Wisdom

We are hardly the first generation of human beings to contemplate the importance of contemplating. Some 2,400 years ago, Plato, in his Theaetetus (155d), has Socrates identify wonder as the beginning of philosophy. Aristotle subsequently developed that idea in his Metaphysics (Book I, Chapter 2), observing that human beings began philosophizing because they wondered. They began with the mysteries immediately before them and gradually ventured into larger questions about the heavens and the origins of the universe.

Think about that. Two of the greatest minds in Western civilization recognized that the pursuit of wisdom begins not with possessing answers but with being sufficiently captivated by the questions. Aristotle also devoted considerable attention to the contemplative life in his Nicomachean Ethics (Book X, Chapters 7–8). He understood contemplation as a particularly elevated form of human activity. There is a delightful irony here for those of us who have spent much of our lives measuring our worth in terms of productivity. Perhaps one of the most worthwhile things a human being can do is something that would look decidedly unproductive on a time sheet.

Centuries later, Blaise Pascal explored our tendency to seek diversion rather than face the realities of our existence in his Pensées. His observations about our difficulty remaining quietly

in a room seem almost unnervingly contemporary. Imagine what that seventeenth-century mathematician and Christian philosopher might have made of the little electronic diversion machines we now carry in our pockets!

Wonder requires us to entertain the delightful possibility that there is something we do not yet understand. It invites us to become explorers rather than merely consumers of information. There is an intellectual humility inherent in wonder, but also a marvelous excitement. What might we discover today that we did not know yesterday? What extraordinary little mystery has been sitting right under our noses, patiently awaiting our attention? At 72, I find that prospect absolutely delicious, and I hope you do, too.

## When Did We Become Afraid of Our Own Thoughts?

In 2014, psychologist Timothy Wilson and his colleagues published a fascinating series of studies in Science. Participants generally found spending six to fifteen minutes alone with their thoughts less enjoyable than engaging in ordinary external activities. In one experiment, some participants even chose to administer an unpleasant electric shock to themselves rather than spend the entire period simply thinking (Wilson et al., 2014). Good grief! Perhaps that young fellow who needed his television on all the time would have understood something of their predicament.

And now we have developed an extraordinarily efficient technological means of avoiding silence. The moment life affords us an opportunity to ponder, we can reach for our smartphones. Mine is a marvelous writing tool, but there is a distinction between using technology to develop an idea and using it to ensure that we never have an unoccupied moment in which an idea might arise.

We spend so much of our lives attending, responding, deciding, accomplishing, and reacting. Thank God for the neurological machinery that enables us to get things done! But when do we go offline, so to speak, and give our minds an opportunity to integrate the things with which we have been so busily engaged?

## The Magnificent Machinery of Pondering

Now, my dear reader, you knew this old psychologist was not going to get through a chapter on contemplation without revisiting his beloved default mode network (DMN). We have encountered this remarkable network in our earlier explorations of identity, trauma, and healing. Here I would like us to consider another dimension of its extraordinary capacity: what becomes possible when our inward world is no longer dominated by the need to defend ourselves.

For much of the history of functional brain imaging, investigators were interested in what the brain did when given a task. But what was the brain doing when it was not being given something to do?

Marcus Raichle and colleagues (2001) helped bring the brain's default mode of functioning to scientific prominence. The DMN includes the medial prefrontal cortex, which participates in self-referential thought; the posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus, which contribute to inward attention and memory-related processes; and lateral parietal and temporal regions that interact with memory systems, including the hippocampus. Together, these systems help us remember our lives, imagine the future, consider other people's perspectives, and construct meaning (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2014; Menon, 2023).

Consider the extraordinary implications. God has given us neurological machinery that allows us to mentally travel beyond our immediate circumstances. We can revisit a conversation with someone we love, imagine a future we have not yet lived, or discover a connection between experiences that once seemed unrelated. We can sit quietly in Arizona while intellectually wandering through ancient Athens or pondering the eternal nature of God. What a magnificent piece of neurological engineering!

Working with executive control and attention networks, the DMN helps us move between imagination and deliberate reflection. Think of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. They draw upon memories, interpretations, expectations, and relationships. Our inward life is not simply a replay of what has happened to us; it is also a place where we can reconsider what those experiences mean. That possibility lies at the heart of so much of what we have explored together in this book.

## The Dialectic of the Default Mode Network

But therein lies a fascinating and sometimes frightening dialectic. The very neurological machinery that affords us opportunities for contemplation can also participate in some of our most devastating psychological suffering. When our internal narratives become saturated with unresolved trauma, shame, fear, and self-condemnation, moments of quiet can become anything but peaceful. The mind may repeatedly revisit painful experiences, rehearse anticipated catastrophes, or construct increasingly elaborate explanations for why we are unworthy of love. Instead of becoming an intellectual explorer, we become a prisoner of our own internal narrative.

Watkins (2008) distinguished constructive from destructive repetitive thinking. There is a profound difference between reflecting upon an experience in ways that open up understanding and revisiting it in ways that return us endlessly to the same old verdict about ourselves.

I know something about both possibilities. There have been seasons in my life when my internal world was a place from which I desperately wanted to escape. Today, it has become one of my favorite places to visit. And perhaps some of you know what it is like to live on both sides of that dialectic.

That transformation required more than thinking positively. It required healing the wounds that had shaped my internal narrative and discovering a more secure understanding of my identity in Christ. When we begin to recognize that the painful things that happened to us need not define who we are, we can approach our own thoughts with a different spirit. We can revisit the past without having to inhabit it. We can entertain the future without rehearsing disaster. Perhaps one of the most beautiful fruits of transformational healing is the rediscovery of the pleasure of our own psychological company.

## The Neuroscience of Intellectual Adventure

Some of my most enjoyable intellectual adventures occur during my early-morning workouts. There I am, pedaling away on the elliptical, ostensibly attending to my cardiovascular health, while my brain is off exploring some fascinating little corner of the human condition. Before long, one thought leads to another, a psychological concept intersects with something I have read in Scripture, a memory becomes relevant to a scientific discovery, and suddenly an essay begins taking shape.

My AI writing companion, ChatGPT, has become the recipient of much of this early-morning intellectual overflow. I dictate the tar out of the poor thing. If artificial intelligence ever becomes eligible for overtime compensation, I suspect I am going to receive a rather substantial bill.

Research helps explain why ideas sometimes arrive when we least expect them. Baird and colleagues (2012) found that an undemanding activity conducive to mind wandering facilitated subsequent creative problem-solving. Beaty and colleagues (2016) described how the default mode and executive control networks cooperate during creative cognition, allowing us to generate possibilities and then refine them.

Perhaps you have had a wonderful idea while walking, gardening, or taking a shower, only to wonder why it had eluded you while sitting at your desk. Our minds need room to wander as well as the discipline to evaluate what they discover. Occasionally, after all that neurological expenditure, we discover that the idea was complete nonsense. Fair enough. That, too, is part of the adventure.

## Henry, Thora, and the Peace of a Settled Soul

There are two members of our household who have become particularly enthusiastic participants in my contemplative life. My little Shorkie, Henry, absolutely loves the contemplation hour. And Thora, our cat, who is generally operating in accordance with her own rather elaborate feline agenda, will come over and sit near me or climb onto my lap, purring away. I find their companionship in those quiet moments quite precious.

Henry seems to know when I have settled. I am not talking, gesticulating, answering the telephone, or bouncing from one activity to the next. Even when I am wrestling with a fairly complex intellectual question, there is something different about how I am occupying the space around me. My body is relatively still. My voice, if I use it at all, is gentle. I am available to my little companions without demanding anything of them. What a lovely thing it is to share a space with another living creature without having to fill it with noise.

Those of you familiar with polyvagal-informed therapy will recognize why this interests me. Our autonomic state helps shape the signals of safety or threat we communicate through our voices, facial expressions, and movements (Porges, 2007). A settled presence can make connection easier.

Even our dogs are remarkably attentive to us. Studies suggest that human emotional odors can influence dogs' behavior and responses to ambiguous situations (D'Aniello et al., 2018; Parr-Cortes et al., 2024).

Good grief, I am certainly not about to put my two little companions through an institutional review board! But Henry and Thora remind me of something lovely: when we become less hurried, we become more available to one another.

Perhaps our loved ones, human and otherwise, would appreciate a little more of our unhurried presence. There is a form of generosity that requires neither a checkbook nor a great deal of verbal sophistication. Sometimes we simply need to be there, sufficiently settled within ourselves that another living being can enjoy being beside us.

## The Remarkable Psychology of Awe

Keltner and Haidt (2003) described awe as an encounter with something so vast or extraordinary that our existing understanding struggles to accommodate it. Think of standing beneath a magnificent mountain, gazing into a star-filled sky, listening to extraordinary music, or witnessing an act of remarkable human courage. Something within us becomes momentarily enlarged by recognizing how small we are.

Awe can diminish our preoccupation with ourselves and foster generosity and positive social emotions (Piff et al., 2015; Sturm et al., 2021). And we need not travel to the Himalayas to experience it. Sometimes it is waiting for us just outside our windows.

A child discovering a butterfly may experience something of the same psychological phenomenon as an astrophysicist contemplating the origins of the universe. Perhaps the capacity for wonder has less to do with the magnificence of what surrounds us than with our willingness to become captivated by it.

## The God Who Invites Us to Be Still

Long before neuroscientists could examine the resting brain, Scripture was inviting us to cultivate an inward life. The psalmist writes, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10, KJV). An assurance of God's sovereignty amid the tumult of nations, it is a particularly meaningful invitation after all we have wrestled with together in this book.

The wisdom literature has much to say about our seemingly insatiable appetite for verbal activity. "He that hath knowledge spareth his words: and a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit" (Proverbs 17:27, KJV). The next verse observes that even a fool who holds his peace may be regarded as wise. Well, there is a little something for this old psychologist to chew on. Ecclesiastes 3:7 reminds us that there is both a time to keep silence and a time to speak. Both matter. Having spent a good portion of this book arguing for the courage to speak, I find it wonderfully appropriate that we should now explore the wisdom of knowing when not to.

Psalm 1 describes the blessed person meditating upon God's law day and night, and Psalm 119:15 invites us to attend to His ways. Isaiah 30:15 associates quietness and confidence with strength. How different it is to rest in the presence of the One in whom we have placed our trust rather than frantically attempting to manufacture our own security.

Consider the psalmist gazing into the heavens: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:3–4, KJV). Here we encounter awe, contemplation, humility, and gratitude within the same act of worship. The psalmist recognizes his smallness without concluding that he is insignificant. What a magnificent antidote to shame! Our worth does not depend upon persuading ourselves that we are the center of the universe.

And consider Mary following the birth of Christ: "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19, KJV). She pondered them. What a beautiful little expression. Some experiences deserve more than an immediate reaction. They deserve to be treasured and allowed to deepen in meaning. Jesus Himself withdrew from the demands of His ministry to places of solitude and prayer (Luke 5:16). Surely there is something in that for all of us.

## The Wisdom of the Christian Contemplatives

The Christian contemplative tradition offers a wonderfully rich vocabulary for this inward journey. The early desert fathers and mothers sought solitude to confront the distractions and disordered desires within themselves and attend more fully to God. They understood that quiet could expose the very struggles ordinary activity helped them avoid. How remarkably contemporary that insight seems to us today.

Teresa of Ávila, the sixteenth-century Spanish Christian mystic, described mental prayer in The Life of Teresa of Jesus (Chapter 8) in terms of the companionship of a friend who loves us. In her Interior Castle, she employed the metaphor of a castle with many dwelling places to explore the inward spiritual journey toward communion with God. What interests me about Teresa is the relational character of her contemplation. She was not simply cultivating a psychological technique for reducing stress. She was cultivating a relationship.

Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century Carmelite lay brother, offered a delightfully practical expression of that same relational understanding in The Practice of the Presence of God. His work in a monastery kitchen became an opportunity for communion with God. The sacred was not confined to a particular place, posture, or formal religious activity. The ordinary business of life could be undertaken in an awareness of God's presence. My goodness, perhaps even an elliptical machine in Prescott Valley can become a place of contemplation!

Thomas Merton, in New Seeds of Contemplation (1961), explored contemplation as a deepening awareness of God that moves beyond the illusions of the constructed self. How many of us have spent years trying to establish our significance through accomplishment or reputation? There is something profoundly different about sitting quietly with God when we no longer believe we have to perform for Him.

Richard Foster, in Celebration of Discipline (1978), brought meditation, prayer, solitude, and simplicity into a contemporary Christian conversation. His invitation is to become attentive to God and responsive to Him. Across these centuries runs a beautiful thread: a life with God need not be perpetually occupied by our own striving.

## A Beautiful Convergence of Faith and Neuroscience

Research on meditation reveals differences in activity and connectivity within the default mode network, with patterns varying according to the kind of practice (Brewer et al., 2011; Fox et al., 2016). We can learn to relate more flexibly to our thoughts, shifting from being carried away by an internal narrative to attending deliberately to what matters.

And prayer brings a particularly beautiful dimension to this conversation. Schjoedt and colleagues (2009) found that personal prayer among Danish Christians engaged brain regions involved in social cognition. The relational character of prayer is reflected in the very neurological machinery through which we experience our relationships. How wonderful to consider that our embodied humanity participates in our experience of communion with God.

Here the four pillars of NeuroFaith® come together in a particularly lovely way. Polyvagal-informed therapy helps us appreciate the importance of safety. HeartMath® and neurocardiology draw our attention to the interplay of breathing, cardiovascular physiology, and emotional regulation. Internal Family Systems invites compassion toward the protective and wounded parts

of ourselves that become noticeable in the quiet. And faith reminds us whose presence we are entering and who we are in relationship to Him.

Perhaps we can notice the driven little part of ourselves that insists we ought to be accomplishing something, appreciate its years of faithful service, and allow it to take the morning off. We can gently attend to the anxious part that wants to rehearse tomorrow's problems. We can breathe comfortably without making a project out of it. And we can sit in the awareness that we are loved by God without having to earn that love.

Some mornings our prayer may be one of lament rather than delight. Some of us may first discover the safety of quiet in the company of someone we trust. There is room for that, too. The quiet I cherish today is a fruit of healing, and I would love for you to discover something of that freedom in your own way.

## Give Yourself Permission to Ponder

My dear reader, some of you already know the joy of pondering. Perhaps you have been cultivating it for years. Others may have almost forgotten what it feels like to sit quietly with an idea, a memory, a passage of Scripture, or a question that genuinely fascinates you. Wherever you find yourself, I would love to invite you to give yourself a little more of that precious time.

There is something wonderfully childlike about this experience. Children can become fascinated by things that we adults have relegated to the category of the ordinary. Somewhere along the way, familiarity can diminish our capacity for astonishment. We know what a tree is, so we stop really looking at trees. We know that the sun will rise tomorrow, so we no longer marvel that it does. But my goodness, knowing something about photosynthesis does not make a tree any less magnificent!

Perhaps tomorrow morning we might leave our phones alone for a while, enjoy our coffee, and watch the world awaken. Read a passage of Scripture slowly enough to let a thought linger. Follow a question without immediately demanding an answer. Think about someone whose presence has blessed your life. If your little companion settles beside you, enjoy the company. There is no prize for making the experience more complicated than it needs to be.

We have spent much of this book wrestling with difficult things. We have considered the wounds human beings inflict upon one another, the ways we lose sight of truth, and the courage it takes to heal and to live faithfully. But surely we are not meant to spend our lives merely wrestling. There is also a world to be loved, a God to be known, and a remarkable capacity within each of us to be astonished by the sheer privilege of being alive. Whatever years God affords us, may we never lose that capacity.

Tomorrow morning, God willing, you will find me in that ridiculously expensive chair, a cup of coffee in my hand, watching the magnificent colors of the Arizona sky unfold. Henry will probably

be nearby, and if Thora deems my lap worthy of her presence, I will have the pleasure of listening to her purr. And I shall be thinking of you, my dear reader, wondering whether you, too, might be sitting somewhere quietly, discovering something beautiful in the ordinary business of being alive.

What a gift it has been to discover this rather late in my life. And what a joy it would be if, in some small measure, these pages encouraged you to discover it anew in yours. The world will make its demands upon us soon enough. For now, may we give ourselves permission to linger a little longer in the presence of God and the beauty of His creation. There is still so much to wonder about.

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