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# ENJOY THE SILENCE

A 30 DAY EXPERIMENT  
IN LISTENING TO GOD

MAGGIE ROBBINS  
DUFFY ROBBINS

**ZONDERVAN**<sup>™</sup>

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN 49530 USA



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*Enjoy the Silence: A 30-Day Experiment in Listening to God*

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Youth Specialties Products, 300 South Pierce Street, El Cajon, CA 92020 are published by Zondervan, 5300 Patterson Avenue Southeast, Grand Rapids, MI 49530.

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Robbins, Maggie, 1953-

Enjoy the silence : a 30-day experiment in listening to God / by Maggie Robbins and Duffy Robbins.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-310-25991-6 (pbk.)

I. Bible--Reading 2. Christian youth--Religious life. I. Robbins, Duffy. II. Title.

BS617.R55 2005

242'.63--dc22

2005010112

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Web site addresses listed in this book were current at the time of publication. Please contact Youth Specialties via e-mail (YS@YouthSpecialties.com) to report URLs that are no longer operational and replacement URLs if available.

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*Interior design by Mark Novelli, IMAGO MEDIA*

*Printed in the United States*

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## WORD

I, who live by words, am  
wordless when  
I try my words in prayer. All  
language turns  
To silence. Prayer will take my words  
and then  
Reveal their emptiness. The stifled voice  
learns  
To hold its peace, to listen with the  
heart  
To silence that is joy, is adoration.  
The self is shattered, all words torn  
apart  
In this strange patterned time of  
contemplation  
That, in time, breaks time, breaks  
words, breaks me,  
And then, in silence leaves me  
healed and mended.  
I leave returned to language, for I see  
Through words, even when all  
words are ended,  
I, who live by words, am  
wordless when  
I turn me to the Word to pray.  
Amen.

—Madeleine L'Engle

*Lines Scribbled on An Envelope While Riding the 104 Bus*



# CHAPTER ONE

## WHOLLY LISTENING

We'd been to this church several times, so the offer didn't catch either of us totally off guard. On the other occasions I had spoken at Mount Oak Church in suburban Washington, D.C., Maggie and I had opportunities to meet some of the folks in the congregation. We knew many of them held important and interesting government jobs. It was not unusual on a Sunday morning to be ushered to your seat by a Pentagon consultant, listen to a testimony by an FBI agent, or hear an offertory solo by a congressional aide.

But Steve Evans had a particularly intriguing job. He was in charge of all Secret Service agents working in the White House.

He approached us after the Sunday evening service and offered an invitation. He said he would like the two of us to come to the White House the next morning to meet the president of the United States.

Of course we were blown away. We couldn't believe it. We just kept thinking, "Gosh, what a treat this will be for the president!" So we said, "Great, let's do it!"

Standing in the back of the church, we worked through the logistics of the next morning. Steve made it very clear we needed to meet him at the west gate of the White House promptly at 7:30 a.m.—and we had to be out by 8:15 a.m. It seems there was a cabinet meeting scheduled for 8:15, and Steve had a sneaky suspicion the cabinet members wouldn't appreciate our presence in the room during the meeting.

He told us we'd have to leave the home where we were staying by 6:30 a.m. if we were going to make it to the White House by 7:30. That meant rise-and-shine no later than 5:30!

That Sunday night we went to bed at our friends' house with our heads spinning. We couldn't believe we were going to be standing in the Oval Office in eight short hours. It took us awhile to settle down to sleep, but finally we drifted off.

In what seemed like the middle of the night, we were awakened by a ringing phone. We couldn't figure out who would be calling at such an hour, but since it wasn't our phone, we ignored it. We heard footsteps crossing the kitchen floor to answer the phone. A moment later Carol, our hostess, knocked on our bedroom door and said, "Duffy, are you awake? Telephone for you. It's the White House!"

I opened the door, still half asleep, took the phone from her, and said, "Mr. President, I hope you're not going to ask us to stick around for the cabinet meeting tomorrow morning. We've got things to do."

I was greeted by an urgent voice. "Duffy, is that you? Where are you? Do you know what time it is?"

My brain was still lingering in the Twilight Zone, so I asked, "Who is this?"

"It's Steve Evans," was the reply. "Duffy, it's 7:45. I was calling just to make sure you guys were on your way. If you haven't left yet, there's no way you're going to get down here in time. We're going to have to cancel the whole thing this morning. I'm sorry. Maybe the next time you come to Mount Oak, we can set something up."

By the time I hung up the phone, my wife knew something was up. She heard only my end of the conversation, but she could tell something wasn't right. When I got back to bed, she asked what the problem was.

"Maggie," I said, "I don't know how to say this, but you're married to one of the only guys in the country who slept through a chance to meet the president of the United States."

I couldn't see the expression on Maggie's face, but I knew exactly what she was thinking. She was thinking—well, she was thinking exactly the same thing you're thinking as you read this story: *What a complete idiot!*

But before you close this book in disgust, let me make two comments about this episode.

Number one: It never happened. We made it up.

Number two: Actually, it did happen. In fact, it happened this morning. And it happens every day to millions of people. It's probably happened to you.

Not that you would sleep through a chance to go to the Oval Office and meet the president of the United States. Nobody's that stupid.

But people just like you—just like us—on days just like this one, pass up the opportunity to enter the throne room of almighty God and talk to the Creator of the universe. Every new day offers each of us a chance to get out of bed and spend some quality time with our heavenly Father. But most of us blow it off for a few extra minutes of sleep.

That's a pretty sobering thought. But it shouldn't make you feel like a disgusting, spiritually impaired, sleep

monger. That's not the purpose of this book. After all, meeting with God every morning isn't some religious hoop you have to jump through in order to earn his love. We spend time with God because he loves us *already*—unconditionally—and because we want to develop and deepen our relationship with him. Heck, it doesn't even have to happen in the morning! (Can we get an "Amen"?)

## AN AUDIENCE WITH THE KING

The purpose of this book is to invite you into the presence of God, to help you find a practical way to listen and speak to the One who desperately wants a deeper relationship with you. The practical method we're talking about is a devotional exercise called *lectio divina*, two Latin words that literally mean "divine reading." At the heart of this exercise is a very simple notion: *God wants to speak to us, but in order to hear him, we have to be willing to listen.* (For more about God's desire to make himself known to us, check out Psalm 19:1-4; John 1:1,14; Romans 1:18-21; 2:14-15.)

Just listen. Sounds simple, right? Wrong. You see, we live in a loud world, and often God speaks quietly.

The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And *after the fire came a gentle whisper.* (1 Kings 19:11-12)

There, *in that whisper*, was the voice of God.

## FINDING QUIET SPACE IN A LOUD WORLD

Suppose you're on a retreat and your youth leader gives you a passage of Scripture to read with these instructions: "Go find a place where you can't see anybody else and read this passage at least three times. Give yourself at least half an hour. Stay in that place and, in the silence and solitude, see what happens."

Let's say you find a place in the woods next to a babbling brook. The birds are singing. The breeze is gently blowing. You find the perfect tree stump, take a seat, open your Bible, and read the passage. Then you read it again. And, for good measure, you read it a third time. After trying really hard to be quiet for as long as you can, you check your watch.

Only five minutes have passed.

Oh, man, what the heck are you going to do for another 25 minutes?

You think through your options: study the maps in the back of your Bible, draw mustaches on the pictures of the little children on Jesus' lap, check to see if there are any illustrations in Song of Songs, or look for secret codes in the Book of Revelation. Finally, you decide to read your assigned passage once again.

This time, you find there's one particular word or phrase that keeps jumping out at you. You didn't think much about it on the first pass. But on your fourth reading, it begins to stick in your heart. You start to think about it.

There are still distractions over the next 25 minutes—the sounds of the forest, the ants crawling across a nearby log, the shadow of what appears to be Bigfoot crashing through the woods—but you keep bringing your attention back to that word, that phrase. And in that place of intentional listening, in that carved-out space of quiet, you sense God is speaking to you. That is *lectio divina*.

It's not a complicated spiritual discipline. All you have to do is read a passage of Scripture slowly and repeatedly, and then give God the space and time to speak to your heart through that passage.

*Lectio divina* isn't just an impressive name for an everyday Bible study or quiet time. With *lectio* the emphasis is not on content but on contemplation. *Lectio* is a discipline inviting us to listen at a deeper level. Bible study is an activity—it's something you *do*. You read a chapter, you underline key verses and words, you make notes in the margins.

*Lectio* begins with a word, a verse, a picture, a hint of God. Its goal is to move us from listening with the head to listening with the heart, from activity to receptivity. The emphasis is not on speaking or praying to God. Or thinking great thoughts about God. Or logging time on a spiritual stopwatch. Or notching a few more Bible facts on the walls of our brains. *Lectio divina* is a devotional exercise where the key is listening.

*Lectio divina* is about creating the space and time for God to speak to us. One writer described it as an exercise in which the mind meets the heart, so the heart can meet God. It's a quiet time that places a strong emphasis on creating *time for quiet*.

## ANTHONY OF THE DESERT

The practice of *lectio divina* dates back almost 18 centuries to a young Egyptian man named Anthony (251-356). Anthony was, what you might call, a hard-core believer. One day he heard a sermon on Jesus' words in Mark 10:21: "Go, sell everything you have.... Then come, follow me." And that's what Anthony did. He stuck around long enough for his kid sister to finish school, then he sold everything he owned and took off for the desert. And that's where he lived in solitude for the rest of his life. His only nourishment was bread and water—which he never tasted before sunset and sometimes tasted only once every three or four days. The only clothing he wore was sackcloth and sheepskin. The only thing he did from sunset to sunrise was pray.

Believe it or not, when other people heard about Anthony of the Desert and his lifestyle of silence and solitude, they thought it sounded like a good idea. An entire monastic community sprang up in the desert under the instruction and encouragement of Anthony and other "desert fathers and mothers." The people in the community were seeking to separate themselves from every distraction and obstacle that might interfere with their ability to hear God. They weren't just looking for cheap property and a high-carb diet. They were wrestling with the same issues followers of Jesus wrestle with today—stuff like wealth, lust, greed, success, and popularity. More than anything else, they wanted to hear God.

Now you might be thinking, "Wait a minute, Anthony of the Desert sounds like a nickname from WWE SmackDown!, and my folks will kill me if I run away to the desert, and my school has a strict dress code that doesn't permit sheepskin." But never mind any of that.

Eighteen centuries after Anthony, we can still practice habits that help us step away from the noise, stress, and distractions of the world in order to create silence and space for God to speak to our hearts. But those habits require discipline—namely, the spiritual discipline of *lectio divina*.

## *LECTIO DIVINA:*

### THE PRACTICE OF WHOLLY LISTENING

When Maggie and I were in middle school, seventh graders were required to take dance lessons as part of gym class. And let me tell you, those dance lessons were among the most awkward moments of our teenage years. You can imagine the passion in the air when the gym teachers called on five seventh-grade guys to ask some poor girls to dance. Some of the guys were still convinced that girls had cooties, so they weren't exactly chivalrous. In fact, most of the guys walked back and forth in front of the equally uncomfortable girls looking for a partner with all the tact of a sheik shopping for a camel.

The worst part, though, was learning the dance steps. One-two-three-slide, one-two-three-get off your partner's foot. You've been there. The gym teachers told us how wonderful it was for us to learn such necessary social graces, and how exotic it would be to glide across the floor with our partners. But most of us were so busy watching our feet, we barely even noticed we had partners. To us, the ritual of romance and grace was reduced to three steps and a slide.

You may feel the same sense of awkwardness in trying to master the steps of a spiritual exercise. We all know what it's like to hear mature Christians talk about

their wonderful times of prayer and meditation; meanwhile, we're floundering with "one—pray, two—read, three—be totally confused by what we just read, four—eat bread and drink water, five—slide, six—doze off, seven—go back to one." But *spiritual disciplines are not about getting all the steps right. They are about developing habits that will help us gaze into the face of our partner, Jesus, the Lord of the Dance.*

Obviously there's a lot more to *lectio divina* than a series of steps. No one is suggesting just going through the motions described in this book will usher you in to the throne room of God. Working really hard to listen is like trying really hard to fall asleep. Sometimes just the act of concentration itself becomes a distraction. We must remember it's not a matter of simply deciding to listen. God must decide to speak, also.

But we can prepare ourselves to listen well. Just as we might get ready for a special meal with friends—setting aside a time, inviting guests, setting the table, taking care to set the right atmosphere, eliminating any distractions—there is much we can do to prepare for our Divine Guest, to let God know he is welcome and his visit is expected eagerly.

A French Benedictine monk named Dom Marmion describes *lectio divina* in terms of four steps: "We read (*lectio*) under the eye of God (*meditatio*) until the heart is touched (*oratio*) and leaps to flame (*contemplatio*)."  
Understandably, when we first read those words—*lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio*—they seem strange to us. Like something off the dessert menu at Bertucci's. However, those four steps help us develop a habit of excavating our hearts and clearing our minds so God can take us to new depths in our relationship with him.

### **Step One: *Lectio***

Saint Benedict described *lectio divina* as cultivating the ability to listen deeply, to hear “with the ear of our heart.” In other words we open the door to our heavenly Guest by listening.

*Lectio* means reading. Not reading to get through something. Not reading to get the facts. But reading to get focused. Reading slowly. Refusing to be hurried. This type of reading is a form of gentle listening. Just as you can’t fully appreciate all the facets of a diamond by driving by it in a car, you can’t fully appreciate a Bible text by cruising past it at full speed on your way to the next paragraph.

To help you slow down, we’ve installed some verbal “speed bumps” throughout the readings in this book. You will come across phrases like “Read slowly,” “Don’t hurry through these verses,” and “Take your time with these words.” One of the real keys to *lectio* is expectant reading. God *is* going to meet you in this text, but it likely will not be through a pop-up message or an IM flashing across the bottom of the page. Sometimes he will speak loudly and clearly, but often you will need to listen for his “still, small whisper.”

### **Step Two: *Meditatio***

*Meditatio*, or meditation, is a concept that seems a little weird to some people. That’s because the word is used so many different ways and in so many different contexts. Does it involve chanting? Closing our eyes and trying to communicate with a rainbow? Going into a closet and smoking oatmeal?

Biblically speaking, meditation is taking time to think about something, to savor it, to deeply consider its meaning. For example, as the amazing events of the first Christmas unfolded around the Virgin Mary, we are told she “*treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart*” (Luke 2:19). Meditation is the act of pondering something in your heart.

Contemplative writers have compared meditation to the process of a cow chewing its cud. If you’re unfamiliar with the bovine digestive system, we’ll tell you cows have four stomachs. After food has been digested in stomach number one, the cow must, er, bring it back up into its mouth so it can be broken into smaller pieces for its adventure in stomach number two. It is that process of chewing and re-chewing that makes it look like a grateful farmer has rewarded every cow in his herd with a pack of gum to enjoy while waiting for the next milking.

*Meditatio* is taking time to chew and re-chew a passage of Scripture. Don’t just read it once and buzz on to the next mouthful. Take in the text, consume it, and then...chew on it some more. Joshua 1:8 reminds us of the importance of this process: “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

Have you ever eaten a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich that has too much peanut butter on it? You bite into the thing and it’s like oral quicksand. You don’t just swallow and move on to the corn chips. You chew, and then you chew some more. You take your time with each bite. That’s *meditatio*.

### Step Three: *Oratio*

After having listened carefully and read the text slowly, the next step in this dance of communion with God is *oratio*—talking to God in prayer. If hearing the Bible and meditating on its texts allows God to talk to us, *oratio*, or prayer, allows us to talk back to God. *Oratio* is conversation that informs us and shapes us.

Contemplative writers call this shaping process *consecration*. And, though that sounds like a physical condition resulting from a lack of roughage in the diet, it actually describes the process of offering ourselves to God in obedience. It's the response of an open heart that hears the voice of God.

As you move through the readings in this book, you'll notice we've given you questions and thoughts that might prompt you in your conversations with God. We've also provided some space in the book for you to journal your responses. You can write your thoughts directly in the book, or you may wish to use your own journal or notebook. It doesn't matter.

What does matter is that we respond to God in conversation and prayerful dialogue. It may be a response of praise, a response of thanksgiving, a response of petition (asking for God's help), a response of confession ("God, I'm sorry—I blew it") or a response of commitment ("God, I have wholly listened; now help me be more holy, and more wholly yours in this area of my life").

First, we open ourselves to God with concentrated listening. Then we respond to God with consecrated obedience. It is this rhythm of conversation and consecration that drives *oratio*, the third stage of *lectio divina*.

### Step Four: *Contemplatio*

The final stage of *lectio divina* is *contemplatio*, or contemplation. Resting in the presence of God. Imagine a small child nestled in her father's lap, saying nothing, but completely content in the closeness of that moment. Hearing his slow breathing. Feeling the stubble of his beard. Comforted by the steady arms and strong hands cradling her head.

Or imagine two friends sitting next to a campfire. They've talked about the day's hike—adventures shared, vistas seen, wrong trails taken. They've talked about where the journey led them and where it may lead them tomorrow. Now they share the silence, staring into the flames together, quietly, contentedly. Like basking in the rays of warm sunshine, *contemplatio* is basking in the presence of the Father. It is a time of silence, allowing our intimacy with God to go beyond the place words can take us.

In some ways this may be the most difficult part of the *lectio* exercise because it feels like we ought to be *doing* something. Father Luke Dysinger, a Benedictine monk, describes it in these terms:

In contemplation we cease from interior spiritual doing and learn simply to be, that is to rest in the presence of our loving Father. Just as we constantly move back and forth in our exterior lives between speaking and listening, between questioning and reflecting, so in our spiritual lives we must learn to enjoy the refreshment of simply being in God's presence.

Throughout the readings you'll notice instructions to "linger," "bask," and "savor." These are words inviting us to experience and enjoy the embrace of the Father.

## DANCE, CHILDREN, DANCE

Of course, if all your attention is focused on getting the right steps down, you're missing the whole point. The goal of this book is not to get you to dance the dance called *lectio divina*. The goal is to help you to grow closer to the God who invites you to join him in the dance—whether it's a salsa, a waltz, a tango, a *pas de deux*, or the cha-cha slide. Someday you may not even have to watch your feet. Your time with God will be as spontaneous and natural as your time with any other close friend. Until that time our prayer is that the readings in these pages will get you on the dance floor.