

Mediation, Mental Health And The Age-Old Jesuit Practice of Mindfulness

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Forced into quarantine due to COVID-19, thousands of miles away from home; I have struggled with silence, but eventually made peace with it, thanks to my Jesuit upbringing.

Over a decade ago, as a Jesuit novice, I ventured on a reflective journey called the 'Spiritual Exercises' - a month-long retreat that is the hallmark of a Jesuit's formation. We had no phones, no computers, no TV, no radio, no newspapers, no sports, no alcohol, no pizza, no magazines, no books. We were discouraged from speaking to each other, a rule some extremists among us interpreted as - no eye-contact, no smiling, no greetings. We were warned that our minds would start playing tricks and we would begin longing for human interaction on the lonely trail of self-discovery.

For 30 days and 30 nights, the rebel in me questioned everything about this training - the duration, the rules, the objectives - as nothing made sense then, besides the fact that we had to pass the test. I must admit, I am not even 1% as religious as I would like to believe I was then, and I have made peace with that evolution of self. However, 13 years on, as a student of mediation self-isolating in a 5mx2m box room, miles away from home, I feel indebted to the Jesuits for gifting me the experience of the 'Long Retreat', where I learnt to wrestle with silence and find meaning in the mundane.

Many of us are struggling to cope with the mental free time - formerly called "me time", when it wasn't dictated to us. Our lives are rich in movement - noises we hear, familiar faces we see, peculiar smells we inhale, preferred foods we taste, people and things we touch - and when the material world is shutdown, the body literally shudders to a depressing dull. Many people, studying or working from home, claim to be "bored" because they can't go outdoors - but, is it really the case of "nothing to do"? Could it be possible that, in reality, they are just anxious at the thought of discovering things about themselves during quarantine that they often snubbed because of busy lifestyles? Suddenly, there is no excuse for not entertaining the escaped conversations at home or responding to the professional feedback at the workplace, ignored for years.

Anna Howard writes about a tendency for some of us to be uncomfortable with silence in a mediation setting. Impatience in silence can be detrimental to our conduct as neutrals, nearly throwing us off our guard and causing us to interfere in ways we might regret. For example, asking a leading close-ended question or making an insensitive comment, which might make participants uncomfortable at the table. Does this restlessness to "do something" or "say something" stem from our lifestyles outside workplace? Are we conscious of our temperamental attitude towards silence?

Unable to tolerate 'quarantine companions', many people have locked themselves in their smart phones, TVs or laptops, attempting to run away from silence. Ironically, the news and the internet are full of 'positive' cases, deaths and other unhappy news related to Covid-19, making people anxious. Anxiety gets us distracted and unproductive, which can spell disaster for our professional lives. Nadja Alexander acquaints us with how continuous exposure to complaining can affect our mental health as mediators, and this is applicable to what we read, watch and hear in the online world we are currently quarantined in. Struggling with the daily dose of negative vibes myself, I returned to my Jesuit training to rediscover a pragmatic approach in these times of uncertainty.

Until last week, my morning schedule during self-isolation included - crawling out of bed, scrolling social media, grabbing a coffee, reading the news, updating my WhatsApp status to "still alive", heading to the washroom for my morning ablutions, checking my emails, reading the news, having my breakfast. It was like starting a car in the top gear or running on to the playground without a warm-up. Reading the negativity and cynicism on the news and social media would demoralize me within minutes of waking up to a new day - and this had to change!

During the Long Retreat, I remember how the days would begin at dawn with a session of meditation. No matter how sleepy we were or how loud our hungry stomachs growled, we couldn't break our fast before spending some time in reflection. So, for a week now, I have tried meditation - even if it means sitting at my table for a few minutes and simply focusing on breathing in and out. Meditation has equipped me with the mental energy to deal with all the chaos and nonsense spinning around us in the online world. I'm no longer frustrated by others' opinions, ideologies or moral standing. It also makes me comfortable with silence - I see no rationale in responding to the noise, or the lack of it. Pandemic or not, I recommend meditation as an ideal kick-start to a mediator's day.

Rewinding to the Long Retreat, we had to follow a strict schedule with specific time allotted for meals, exercises, walks, gardening, reading or reflecting on Spiritual Exercises by Ignatius de Loyola. We were responsible for our own commitment to this routine, and this drill was self-appraised at the end of the day, via another reflective exercise, we would call 'contemplation of the day'. It was an opportunity to introspect into the day and evaluate ourselves by our own standards. Were we disciplined? Did we succumb to temptations? Were we productive? How do we work towards making tomorrow a better day?

I find an uncanny resemblance between these contemplative exercises during the Long Retreat and the reflective practice that many mediators practice. Greg Bond writes about a simple exercise for self-inquiry that can help make us better users of the mediation practice - extremely relevant for all of us in quarantine, constantly engaging with people on social media. Similar to the Jesuit practice of 'contemplation of the day', it wouldn't hurt us to spend a few minutes, every night before we sleep, to reflect on our behavior during the day and whether it altered from our moral standards. This exercise isn't to pat ourselves on the back for a good day or beat ourselves up for a bad day, but just a sincere check-up. The beautiful part of this exercise is that you set your own rules, so you can't cheat yourself.