Who turned up the volume?
NOISE. WE ARE SURROUNDED BY IT.

Recently I purchased a new winter jacket. The design of the jacket fascinated me. There were pockets built right into the lining for a cell phone, MP3 player and a PDA—Personal Digital Assistant. It was almost as if the manufacturers assumed that my life would be filled with noise, especially electronic noise.

Psychologists are now talking about a new form of noise that they are referring to as visual noise. Have you ever considered the visual chatter that assaults us daily? Billboards. Ads. Magazines. Web site pop-ups. Marketing campaigns. Posters. Images. Video screens. Oprah flickering in the background while a meal is being prepared. All this is noise that enters through the eye gate.
The reality: we live in a culture that excels in creating noise.
And we love it.
Don’t we feel naked and incomplete when we misplace our cell phone or PDA?
Don’t we feel like we’re cool when we put on our earphones and plug in?
Don’t we instinctively turn on the radio when driving?
Noise has become our constant companion. When this companion is removed we just don’t know what to do with ourselves.

Many years ago Mihalyi Csikszentmalyi, a famous researcher at the University of Chicago, undertook a massive research project to study human behavior and thought. In one of his studies he had several thousand people wear pagers over a period of several years. The pagers would go off at random times throughout the day. When the pager went off subjects had to write down what they were doing, what they were feeling and what they were thinking at that moment.
The goal of this research project was to amass a large amount of data that could be analyzed for patterns and insights into how most people do life. One of the interesting findings of the study related to the effects of silence and quiet on the human mind. When the human subjects were alone or away from distractions, busyness and noise, something interesting happened—their minds naturally began to focus on their frustrations, concerns, worries and insecurities. So immediately they would do anything or search for some activity that would get them away from the silence. Anything to avoid being alone with their thoughts.

Another reality to face: We find silence and quiet hard to deal with. The hectic rush of modern day living has caused us to form an estranged relationship with stillness. For many of us, experiencing silence is very much like meeting a long lost friend. We want to engage this person but we just don’t know where to begin because it has been so long since we had any meaningful contact.

C.S. Lewis argued that if the devil was going to distract us from God he would only need to major in three things: hurry, crowds and noise. There is something about being immersed in noise that disconnects us from the still and gentle voice of God. Maybe this is the dark side of noise. Noise—music, images, conversation—can be a very good thing. Yet, it can also be a readily available distraction that enables us to keep ourselves at a comfortable distance from life, others and God.

After doing the research mentioned above, Csikszentmalyi suggested that this might be why such “a huge proportion of time is invested in watching television, despite the fact that it is rarely enjoyed by the viewer.” The cable networks offer easily accessible noise that allows us to tune out everything else.

Silence might be one of the most elusive realities of modern day living.
A final reality to face: Our lives are simply way too noisy. God’s voice and his renewing activity are frequently squelched by all the clutter and diversions we let in.

James Janson once noted “how seldom is it that the soul keeps itself silent enough for God to speak.” This is one of the key issues in spiritual formation these days. Our faith communities must address the challenge of helping people become reacquainted with silence.
and solitude. The noise we allow into our lives must be examined. Hard questions need to be asked. Decisions need to be made. Noise audits must be conducted. Tough conversations need to be had.

The formation of a quiet mind and a calm soul is not something that one randomly drifts into. This requires much wisdom and intentional resolve.

Could it be that our culture’s obsession with noise and entertainment is simply a smokescreen? Could it be that we hide behind a wall of sound as a convenient way to avoid dealing with what lies beneath the surface of our lives? Could it be that silence and solitude are two of the greatest gifts that you could receive into your life right now? Could it be that managing the noise that we allow into our lives is a spiritual discipline that will help enlarge our souls?

Several years ago, my wife, Melanie, and I moved into a temporary home because the house that we were scheduled to move into was undergoing some major renovations. Those renovations were to be completed within one month. Due to the temporary housing arrangement we decided not to have a phone line hooked up. Why pay the phone company for a service that will need to be changed again in just a few weeks? Meals were not disturbed. Evenings were restful. If someone wanted to get a hold of us, friends would drop by and relay a message. This provided the opportunity to connect with these folks more significantly than we would have otherwise. It almost sounds like a modern day heresy to suggest that it is possible to live without a phone but it can be done! Maybe, for the sake of our souls, it needs to be done.

Physician Richard Swenson suggests that the next time you buy someone a gift, instead of buying them a cordless phone you should buy them a phoneless cord. This would be the kind of gift that would truly bless someone. Plus, it is much cheaper.

Go ahead and disconnect. Unplug the earphones. Turn down the volume. Pull the plug. It might be one of the wisest things that you have done in a long time.

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For Further Reflection:

Read Psalm 131. Do you think it is possible to live a life like the one that this psalmist pictures? How might it be done? The psalmist speaks of “being weaned.” Why is the language of weaning appropriate for learning the art of stillness and quietude? Read Psalm 46 as well.

Visit this Web site: www.shutdownday.org Do a Google search on Shut Down Day. Is this doable? Can you find any videos on the Web that celebrate or critique this day?

Madame Guynon, a spiritual writer in the 1600’s, noted that: “One of the reasons that we find silence and solitude so difficult is because we are preoccupied with ourselves.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Discuss with someone this comment by film director Federico Felline: Media (particularly television) “has mutilated our capacity for solitude. It has violated our most intimate, private, and secret dimension.”

Reflect on these comments by Thomas Merton, a modern day monk who died in 1968: “We do not live more fully merely by doing more, seeing more, tasting more, and experiencing more than we ever have. On the contrary, some of us need to discover that we will not begin to live more fully until we have the courage to do and see and taste and experience much less than usual.” —KJ