

In a recent article in the observer, Olivia Ovenden, writes of her journey out of social media, in particular her quitting of Instagram. It was like leaving an addiction which wouldn't let her go. There was a period of grief where life seemed dull and lacking in meaning. She had to learn to live again without the virtual world and its supposed friendships, without the curated world in which she'd existed for so long maintaining a fake persona. Its absence brought home its essentially isolating quality – she was no longer inhabiting herself. She had paradoxically to relearn the art of solitude – that is of being herself alone even among others.

Etty Hillesum is on a similar journey in learning to be herself alone and yet for others. She needs time away to be herself alone in order to be herself alone with others. We all have varying degrees of this need to be with others and yet also to be by ourselves – not simply to refuel but to find that 'necessary distance' that defines us over and against each other.

Saint Benedict is famous for promoting this in the idea of the cenobitic life – we are to be alone in community, to find ourselves as it were in the company of others, and the key to the search is silence – not total but sufficient to allow each of us to recalibrate, to find ourselves again, to hear God's word in us before we speak it again to others. It's the silence that is missing perhaps from social media, from this world now of total newsfeed and total entertainment. We are always 'out there' being ourselves for others and not knowing or daring to face who we really are. Jesus was no stranger to this struggle – he too needed time to be alone, to find himself, before losing himself amongst others. It's a necessary tension, ultimately creative. Monasteries are one way of doing this, not indeed of removing us from the struggle but in many respects intensifying it. It's called life and is intensely incarnational – life under a rule and an abbot, called to serve one another and yet to find ourselves in doing so: an art rather than a science, a lived prayer, an active grace. Or in the words of Etty Hillesum, increasingly certain that her people are facing annihilation and speaking once more to God,

'one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves'.

Is this not what we do to each time we come together to praise God?

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