



Seeking Silence

Timothy Hursley

The Art of the Sturdy Decision



When I first came to know the House of Prayer, I was working as the managing editor of a local magazine. Executive Director John Willis and I are old friends, and when he described this special place to me, I knew it was a story that needed telling. This was one of many things I loved about my position at the magazine: I was responsible for finding great stories, working with the writers who told them, and sometimes writing them myself. But the major work of producing the magazine – the making of big decisions – was left to the editor. Our roles suited us, and we were a companionable team.

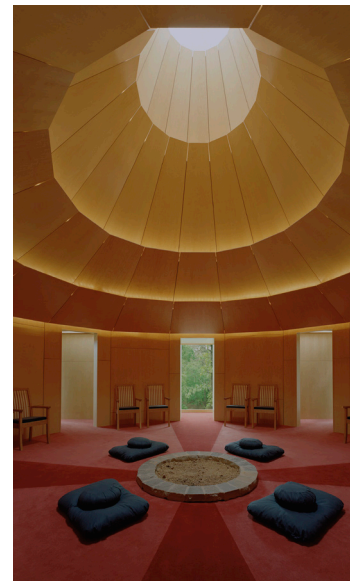
Then my editor left, and I was asked to assume that role. Suddenly, I had to make *all* the decisions, and I had to make them quickly. The decisions ran a dizzying gamut of scope and import – one minute I might be choosing what to feature on the cover, another, ruling on whether to hyphenate a phrase. For an objectivist who likes to consider all the angles and an optimist who sees possibility in many outcomes, the making of big decisions can be a protracted and exhausting process. Without the luxury of time, I simply had to train myself to say “yes” or “no,” right away, to many questions every day.

Is there anything less mindful than a hasty decision?

I came to feel that the only way I could make speedy decisions was to care less about them, and caring less about anything – especially something deeply important to me – is anathema to me. I found myself going on autopilot just to get the work done. The stress of

this conflict began to wear on me, and I began to consider making a change. And I began to visit the House of Prayer.

What it offered me was a kind of time that I had nowhere else: free of distractions, free of suggestions to lean on or people I could punt to, free of escape from a difficult decision that I knew I had to make. A visit



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was a commitment to making a decision on my own terms. Sometimes I would sit and think. More often, I would sit and not think, letting my mind work in the background. My favorite place to do this was, and still is, the alcove in the northwest corner of the prayer chamber, the one with the tree framed perfectly in its narrow vertical window.

The day I made my decision to leave the magazine, I stared at that tree and waited. I didn’t know what I was waiting for, but when a tiny lizard scurried up the tree trunk, I knew I was ready to go.

It’s a little bit ironic to me that the magazine brought me to the House of Prayer, and the House of Prayer brought me away from the magazine; at the same time, it seems perfectly fitting: The House of Prayer came into my life precisely when I needed it to. It’s still where I go to make all of my sturdy decisions.

Katherine W. Stewart
Board Member, Arkansas House of Prayer



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Arkansas House of Prayer is an interfaith haven, set apart in nature, dedicated to contemplative prayer, meditation, and quiet where all are welcome.

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Hours

Monday-Thursday 9 a.m. – 3 p.m.

Friday 9 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Saturday-Sunday 9 a.m. – 5 p.m.

Monday through Friday, please visit the office at St. Margaret's (across the parking lot) to obtain a visitor's pass.

From the Editor

One of my favorite things about being involved in the creation of any publication is watching diverse voices come together to form a cohesive and dynamic whole. Sometimes unity is achieved through a lot of direction and prodding; other times, it develops organically, almost as if by magic.

For this issue of *Seeking Silence*, three people of different ages, backgrounds, and perspectives – Sophia Said, Rev. Susan Sims Smith, and I – all wrote about contemplation in one form or another. We did not set a theme for this issue, nor did the three of us discuss our topics in advance. It just happened that way.

Divine inspiration comes in many forms, and the messages are waiting if we will only open ourselves to the silence through which they travel. What will you hear in the silence of the House of Prayer?

Katherine W. Stewart

Sacred Pondering

Much of my daily devotional time is spent seeking silence. I am hoping to hear Divine guidance, to be taught new ideas, to know my truest self, and to be given service for the Divine. So in silence I am wanting to be transformed, informed, loved, and sent out to serve. In addition to this type of quiet time, sometimes the longing is for a totally different type of silence, a silence I call *sacred pondering*.



Sacred pondering is when we are out of our planning brain's habitual ways of thinking. It is soft, gentle, and receptive. It has no component of anxiety and no answers. In one of my meditations I heard "don't plan, don't know, don't go." Oh my goodness that is difficult! We want to plan our lives, to know what to do, and to act. To live into this message we need the spiritual practice of sacred pondering.

In sacred pondering we are quiet, still, and reflective. We gently focus on a situation and we softly go back to it in love and receptivity. We hold the situation in our hearts. We let go of needing an answer, a plan, or an action. Sacred pondering is not planning nor is it problem solving. It is prayerfully, silently, and lovingly holding in one's heart a situation or person or an idea. If we are pondering, we imagine the situation, we refocus our attention on it, we circumambulate it with gentle love. Pondering is a slow process.

The House of Prayer is a rich place for pondering. The silence there allows us to move out of our planning brain. The beauty there allows our spirits to be lifted. The prayers prayed there surround us with the invisible support of thousands of other seekers who have come to this place to ponder things in their hearts. In this season of the fullness of the harvest, please take some time to ponder, so that Spirit may bless you in ways you cannot imagine.

The Rev. Susan Sims Smith
Founder and Lifetime Board Member
Arkansas House of Prayer

Contemplating God's Presence

Indeed, by the dhikr of Allah do hearts find peace.
– Quran 13:28

The Divine Inspiration to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) began with dreams that came true like bright daylight. Later, he would often go into the Cave of Hira for long retreats, during which silence prevailed and spiritual serenity surrounded him. He would engage fully in *dhikr*, contemplating divine presence before the Quranic revelations started dawning on him.

Dhikr literally means “remembrance,” and its centrality in Islam is evident in the fact that the term is mentioned 270 times in the Quran. It is a devotional practice to awaken remembrance of God through repetition of the names of Allah, aphorisms from Prophet Muhammad, and phrases of the Quran. In the context of silence and with the method of focused concentration on divine verses, a Muslim seeks to awaken God-consciousness. *Dhikr* is never vague recollection of God's presence or activity, but a clear articulation of His divine names or attributes.



Those who practice *dhikr* experience peace and tranquility in their hearts as well as a wonderful release from the stresses of daily life. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) calls remembrance, or *dhikr*, the best act of worship, and most Muslim scholars agree that *la ilaha illa Allah* – No god but God – is the best form of remembrance:

The first half of the phrase denies the inherent reality of the self and the world, while the second half affirms the absolute Reality.

Poet, scholar, and Sufi mystic Rumi attributes three parts to *dhikr*: The first is the denial of everything visible, the second is the journey into the human self, and the third part is the breathing out of divine presence.

Why are you so afraid of silence, silence is the root of everything
If you spiral into its void, a hundred voices will thunder
messages you long to hear.

– Rumi

Full remembrance (*dhikr*) entails actualizing all the perfections latent in the human soul, which was originally created in a divine image. Thus the goal of *dhikr* is to purify one's self by emptying it of worldly attachments, longings, and desires, becoming free of the ego, empty and hollow like a flute, so that the divine music flows through us, filling our void with His Beauties only.



According to Sufis, true remembrance is the *annihilation of the rememberer in the remembered*. It is a journey of self-discovery that begins with the knowledge of human inadequacy. This realization of nothingness yields a deep longing in the soul, and the seeker indulges in *dhikr* until all things manifest God, and the universe starts exhibiting signs of divine love. Once the veil is lifted there cannot be any remembrance, only total annihilation and a perfect state of oneness. May we all achieve that with the *dhikr* of our loving Creator. Ameen.

Nothing benefits the heart more than a spiritual seclusion whereby it enters the domain of true reflection.
– Ibn Ata'Allah Iskandari

Sophia Said
Board Member, Arkansas House of Prayer

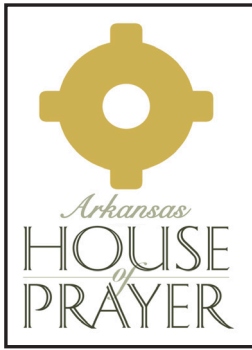
Thank You and Stay With Us!

Thank you to all of you who responded to our recent request to help support the repair of the meditation deck at the House of Prayer. With your generous donations, we have the funds for the repairs and we are excited to announce that the work has commenced! We are grateful for your financial support. As the final months of 2016 roll around, please be on the lookout in your snail-mail for the House of Prayer annual end-of-the-year appeal letter. This letter is our primary way to raise the funds needed for the 2017 operating budget.

Please remember that donors such as you are the primary source of support for the House of Prayer's mission. Without your gifts, we literally could not keep our doors open for people to experience the silence, grace, and guidance afforded them by praying in this sacred space.

In this season of thanksgiving we give thanks for your support.

Christie Beck, M.D., Board President, Arkansas House of Prayer
G. Richard Smith, M.D., Board Member, Arkansas House of Prayer



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From The Director's Office

We have had a busy few months!

September's Love Thy Neighbor interfaith event was the biggest and best since it began in 2011. Sunday, October 23 we hosted a group of monks from Tibet who meditated in the House of Prayer and shared their tradition and wisdom with a standing-room-only crowd at St. Margaret's. Thanks to the generous support of many local patrons, a crew began rebuilding our beloved Post Meditation Garden, the deck area that is a favorite of our visitors this time of year. We hope to have it re-opened by late Autumn.



As we approach another busy season of holidays, I invite you all to the House of Prayer for a few moments to pause, rest, reflect, and receive the gifts that come from silence.

John Willis
Executive Director, Arkansas House of Prayer

More Ways to Connect

Like Arkansas House of Prayer on Facebook
Follow us on Twitter @arhouseofprayer
To join our email list, visit our website
arkansashouseofprayer.org to opt-in today!

Join the Arkansas House of Prayer group on the Insight Timer app.
info@arkansashouseofprayer.org (501) 821-7773

Announcements

Holiday Hours

Arkansas House of Prayer will be open normal hours throughout December and the New Year holiday except for the following:

Saturday, December 24

Accessible by key fob and call box at front door during daylight hours.

Sunday, December 25 & Sunday, January 1
Open 7:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Accessible by key fob and call box afterward.

Save the Date!

An Introduction to Wisdom Christianity

Friday – Saturday, March 3 – 4

All events located at St. Margaret's Episcopal Church and Arkansas House of Prayer. Arkansas House of Prayer is located on the church campus at 20900 Chenal Parkway, Little Rock, and is a joint ministry of St. Margaret's and the Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas.