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COACHING

THE POWER OF SILENCE

Last month I went on a 5-day Silent Retreat in Devon. It had a very powerful effect on me. It's also made me think a lot about how noise impacts on our lives – one I'm sure most people are unaware of. Let me share with you my thoughts on this, and then tell you about my Retreat as so many people have asked me about it.

How noisy is your life? How much quiet time do you have each day? An hour? 10 minutes? None? I used to wake up to my radio and it was my constant companion – in the shower, at breakfast, in the car, and at work. When I returned home in evening the TV or CDs replaced my radio. My old life was full of music, talking, news, films, soap operas, sport and the weather. The only time in my old life when it was quiet was whilst walking the dog or out running. I used to think these were peaceful times – and they were – but I didn't realise until now that they were the only times I had without man-made noise. Listening to the radio or watching the TV can be very enjoyable, but when, like me in the past, they are always 'on', then perhaps as I was you're using them as distractions from being with yourself. When there are no peaceful moments, you don't have time to be with your own thoughts, nor have the chance to get to know yourself.

The first time I became aware of my noise dependence/distraction from being with myself, was when my coach gave me a poem called *The Invitation* by Oriah Mountain Dreamer (see www.oriahmountaindreamer.com). The final lines of this poem are:

*I want to know if you can be alone
with yourself
and if you truly like the company you keep
in the empty moments.*

The whole poem touched me, but these lines made me realised I wasn't alone with myself very often. I had no idea whether or not I liked my own company because my *empty moments* were such a rarity. I realised my life had more than a few characteristics of being like a headless chicken! I was always on the go and always surrounded by noise. I decided it was time to make some changes.

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There wasn't one moment when I turned the music off so-to-speak. It was a gradual process. Let me share with you some of the things I've done over the last few years that have given me more quiet time, and as a consequence, has given me a more peaceful, less stressed-out life.

The Radio Alarm Clock. I always woke up before my alarm. I have a wonderful gift of being able to wake up at any time. Why did I need loud music on waking? Finally, I threw the clock out. If you need an alarm, perhaps consider getting a natural light clock? These alarms use light that mimics sunrise, slowly getting brighter allowing you to wake-up more naturally.

Switching the TV off. Start being selective about what you watch. My first decision was to no longer watch the late night news as it's just full of everything going wrong in the world. The graphic images are often distressing too. Watching this just before going to bed I thought, is not good for me. It was one of the easiest and best decisions I've made.

Meditation. I tried on and off for years with little consistency, but a holiday to Greece a few years ago changed that when I decided to spend sometime sitting quietly every morning. Now, most days I find some time, even if it's only for 10–15 minutes, to meditate. It really does help restore your inner peace.

Less time with the radio on. Having the radio next to me whilst I worked meant that half of me wasn't focused on what I was doing because I was listening to the chatter as well as the music. I consciously started choosing to listen to music instead of the radio. Today the bird song through the window is all I've needed whilst writing this.

The Silent Retreat

I had book marked Gaia House in Google more than year ago. But it was only when a friend challenged me that I took the plunge and booked. Five days of silence. How peaceful, I thought. It will do me the power of good to switch off for a while. Any of you reading this who have been on a silent retreat, will now be grinning at my naivety!

I arrived at Gaia House on Friday afternoon and was relieved to find that silence wasn't

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imposed straight away. We were given a guided tour and shown to our rooms. I found out my morning job was to clean bathrooms and loos (perhaps I'll arrive earlier next time!) and I had a chance to quickly find out the names of my two roommates before going to the Meditation Hall and the silence began.

Our daily routine began at 5:45 with the chiming of a Tibetan bell. By 6:15 we were in the Meditation Hall for 1 hour of Yoga, concentrating on our breathing, inner core posture and getting into positions very slowly – each movement with one breath. I may be fit and fairly supple, but I found holding some of these positions really hard.

7:30 and breakfast was served. Porridge, muesli, milk, yogurt, honey and fresh fruit. 30 people eating breakfast and you could have heard a pin drop.

At 8:15, our work hour began. My cleaning companion was Ben – I only knew that from seeing his name written on the instruction sheets telling us what we had to do. He was charming, holding doors open for me as I carried my cleaning stuff around, but it was so bizarre not know *anything* about him as we worked together.

From 9:30 to 12:30 we meditated using sitting, standing and walking techniques. Those first few days, we had instruction. *“Keep coming back to your breath. Be present. Let thoughts come – be aware of them, but don't follow them or hold to on them. Keep bringing your mind back. Focus on your breath”*. I meditate regularly, but this was different. My mind didn't want to let go of the stories it was creating! My knees started to hurt. My body wanted to move. And as the silence grew forever longer, my mind was in total turmoil. Thoughts about my family, of my clients, what I wanted to do with Red Dandelion, thinking about my future, replaying old conversations with friends and loved ones. The noise in my head was deafening! I realised that I spent very little time ever being present – in the now – I was distractedly more often in the past or future.

At 12:30 our hearty, vegetarian lunch was ready. Following was a break until 2:00. The first 2 days I was so exhausted from just concentrating on trying to follow my breath, I had a siesta! As I grew accustomed to our schedule, I roamed the wonderful gardens.

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Our afternoons had walking meditations in the garden. Walking meditation involves consciously moving your feet and legs extremely slowly so you feel the weight being transferred from one foot to the other and walking only 6–7 meters before turning around and walking back to where you started. I wobbled all over the place. Not only was my mind going awry, I couldn't even walk when it wasn't at my normal pace!

From 3:30 to 5:30 we did Yoga. Again, everything was done focusing on our breath. Our German teacher Helen had a beautiful melodic voice that was very soothing. I had to smile though as she taught us to use the *anus lifter* muscle!

Tea – as in the meal – was served at 5:30. Wonderful soups with a great assortment of breads. Then at 7:00 it was back to the Meditation Hall for more sitting meditation. From 8:00 till 9:00 we had a Dharma Talk (Buddhist teachings) and the day ended with a final 20 minute meditation.

The first 2 days seemed to be so very long. On Saturday evening Yanai, our spiritual teacher, said we had perhaps had come to Gaia House to escape the noise, hustle and bustle of our everyday lives. But now, even after just such a short time, we were probably wishing we could go back to it! And part of me was! On Sunday morning, practicing my walking meditation, still wobbling, I thought, "*What on earth am I doing here!*" I had chosen my spot by the hedge, next to the country lane. It was as if physically I wanted to be as far away from the house as I could be. I spied my car in the car park. I was so tempted! Just then, walking in the lane, I saw a mum with her 2 daughters who were perhaps 7 and 9. The eldest stopped and I caught the eye and we exchanged smiles. Then she put her hands together as in prayer to me and I returned her gesture of kindness before she skipped off to catch-up with her mum. And I realised this little angel was giving me a message. I *needed* to do this. It was important for my self-development so I could become a better coach. It was the turning point of my retreat.

On the last day, our silence was broken after breakfast. It was delightful to know names and hear what others had been experiencing in the silence that we had shared together. After a final lunch I got into my car to come home. My radio came on as I turned the

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ignition. The noise was truly startling on my senses, and I quickly turned it off. Driving back, my car, the wind and even the wheel noise on different road surfaces seemed so loud. Back at home, putting on the washing machine was almost unbearable. I was amazed at how sensitive to noise I had become in such a short space of time. It took a week before I was ready to switch the TV on – then it's only been on very briefly. Two weeks on, and my car radio is still switched off.

I still catch myself going to the future, reliving the past, but what has changed (as well as living with less noise around me) is that I'm now more aware of what I'm doing and I can be more present, spending more time 'resting in the now' and loving it!

To find out more about Gaia House, see www.gaiahouse.co.uk

And finally...

Telling you about this experience has been a departure from my normal Tips, but I hope it has none-the-less been of interest to you. And, as always, I love hearing from you – so do drop me an email if anything has struck a chord with you.

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