



The Best Advice So Far

Thoughts
on living like
it matters . . .

because
it *does*.

ERIK TYLER

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR

by

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2nd Edition

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT
The Best Advice So Far

“Congratulations on a very practical, thoughtful and useful book. Great advice ... and compelling. I opened it to skim, but I kept on reading. Nice work. Thank you for what you are doing to change people's lives.”

— **Karen May**
Vice President, People Development
Google

“*Terrific*. Just the right amount of humor, not at all ‘preachy,’ and shows a real understanding of how others might be able to apply the advice.”

— **Bob Halloran**
***New York Times* Best-Selling Author**
Irish Thunder and Breakdown

Reviews from other readers across the country:

“You saved my life. Those four words ‘You have a choice’ ... I will never be able to truly express how thankful I am.”

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“The Best Advice So Far pulls you in with its relatability. It’s not one author telling you how to live; it’s a journey of shared experiences and insights delivered in a funny, real way that forces you to reflect on your own life in a positive and uplifting manner.”

— **Sullivan C., Denver, CO**

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— **Paul H., Dallas, TX**

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 37

Silence

I WAS AT A WINE TASTING in preparation for the wedding of my friends Matt and Kerri. This is funny if you know me. I was in the groom's party, so it made sense for me to be there, I suppose. But I am certainly no aficionado when it comes to wines. I really wish I were. I love the *idea* of knowing your wines and choosing just the right one to go with the braised short ribs. Furthermore, people who hold a wine glass well at a cocktail party just look cool. The inescapable reality for me, however, is that it all tends to remind me of the boxed Easter egg dye kits I used as a kid. But I digress.

One moment, I was standing there trying to remember if the current sample in my glass was a Shiraz or a Malbec, and the next, my friends Holly and Dib were whispering to me furiously in a corner, insisting that I come to Paris with them for a week the following month. Their treat.

The next weeks were a whirlwind. My passport needed to be renewed. I dropped what for me seemed an obscene amount of money on three pairs of Paris-worthy shoes and some belts, piecing together the rest of a suitable

wardrobe from a trendy friend's closet. I borrowed a large suitcase (so large, in fact, that I over packed and wound up paying an additional \$100 at the airport check-in). And I crammed my head full of French during all spare moments and driving time via audio lessons. This was the trip of a lifetime, and I was determined to live it to the fullest.

Our flight left at four o'clock in the afternoon and, accounting for the time change, had us arriving sometime past six the following morning. After retrieving our bags, a taxi brought us to the street where we would be staying. Unable to check in quite yet, we sat bleary-eyed at quaint round tables outside a little café, eating our first croissants of Paris and drinking cappuccinos. I remember breathing differently, more deeply, as if I were trying to infuse myself with the surroundings, with the realization that I was actually here in Paris. The city was just stirring from sleep. It was quiet. More than once, my friends and I exchanged silent smiles that resulted in welling up — sheer joy at the moment we were sharing. It was too electric to be considered serene. Yet we were too weary for it to have been excitement. It felt like Christmas Eve and contentment.

Afterward, we walked the Seine, taking in the beauty of every lamp post and bridge, waiting for check-in time. Then, we collected our luggage from the travel agency, pulling it along behind us in single file as we made our way to the sixth-floor unit where we would be staying. Once inside, we were all drawn to the first set of windows

to our left. Rising up over the lower rooftops, the Eiffel Tower was so close that we had to tilt our heads upward to see its height. Astonishing.

I'm tempted to reminisce about every detail, but I'll resist the urge and save it all for another book, since I do have somewhere I am alleging to go with my thoughts here. At the end of that first full day, I lay silently in my bed, looking out through the French doors that led to the balcony. The doors were open and a cool breeze flirted with the clean linen draperies on either side. The Eiffel Tower cast its orange glow into the night. I felt like I was trying to take a breath bigger than my body could accommodate. I imagined the others, friends whom I love and who love me dearly, lying in their own beds and having similar thoughts and feelings. My eyes got a sudden sting. If there ever were such a thing as the perfect moment, this was it.

Time slowed in Paris. Life was taken in moments, our thoughts never extending too far beyond the Croque Madame we were enjoying for lunch or playing "Magic Finger": pointing out the items of clothing we wish would magically appear in our closets.

Then one morning, we decided to trek to Notre Dame. Just walking across the cobblestone courtyard to the mammoth cathedral, I was already overwhelmed. It was as if each step were taking me further back in time until finally, reaching the steps, I was transported the full eight centuries to its beginning.

I have never experienced anything close to what I felt as I entered. It was as intense as grief, but without sadness. It was profound. I don't think I breathed for a full minute. But it was not the massive structure alone that overpowered me. It was the hush over the place. Even with thousands of people inside, it was quiet. Soft chanting reverberated among the columns and archways. Here and there, whispered voices rose. Metal tinked as people lit and placed candles. It was not devoid of sound. But it was *quiet*. It was as if everyone were keeping the same secret, agreeing without words to protect it.

Colored light from countless stained glass windows overhead sprawled across grand and dusty paintings, shifting continuously and ever so gradually, while shadows clung to other mysterious recesses. In one large alcove, men and women from around the world reverently awaited confession. In the main sanctuary, others sat in private reflection, interspersed among the rows upon rows of wooden chairs. I could not speak. But I had no desire to, as if speaking would break the spell of wonder that was in place. How many people across the ages have walked across these stones under my feet? Devout people. Murderers. The hopeless and the thankful. I took a seat and closed my eyes. This was not some experience brought on by any particular religious devotion or ideology. It went deeper than that. It was as if the quietude itself were a living thing.

I honestly don't know how long I stayed lost in that state. I would have been content to stay there all day and

into the night. But at some point, Dib gently nudged me. I turned to see her smiling with raised eyebrows. She mouthed wordlessly to me, *Ready?* As we exited back into the brightness of the day, an unshaven old man in ragged clothing stood in the courtyard with outstretched arms. His head was tilted back, eyes closed and smiling blissfully, as if he were feeling the sun on his face for the first time. Small birds perched along his sleeves and cap as if he were simply another tree. I had never seen such a sight in my life. Yet, having just left the serenity of Notre Dame, it did not strike me as particularly shocking. It made utter sense somehow.

OK, OK. While this really *is* what happened, and *does* reflect the way I felt, let's close the romance novel for a bit and talk about real life, shall we? Where is the practical advice in all of this?

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR:
Cultivate silence in your life.

You don't need to travel to far-off lands to benefit from this advice and practice. In fact, my enjoyment of the silent times in Paris was due in large part to my having learned to cultivate silence long before I took that trans-Atlantic flight.

I spoke at Penn State a couple of years ago, as a guest of my friend Chad. As I walked about the expansive campus, I passed or was passed by hundreds of students. I was struck by the uncanny ability of so many people to

make so little noise — more like ghosts than living, breathing humans. Some pairs talked quietly between themselves, but the majority looked down, following their feet to wherever it was they were going next. Buses crowded to capacity were likewise oddly quiet.

And yet it *wasn't* quiet.

I would venture to guess that more than 90% of these students donned earphones. Behind curtains of hair, under raised hoods, or simply staring straight ahead — they were shutting out the world around them with barriers of blaring, personalized noise.

But isn't this how most of us are? The small counter television pumps infomercials into the kitchen as we make our morning coffee. Morning joggers pound the pavement to techno beats. And standard driving procedure now includes deftly pressing buttons to switch between stations in an attempt to avoid as much commercial interruption between our favorite tunes as possible, while children watch DVDs from the back seat. I even know many people who cannot fall asleep without music playing or a television.

On the whole, we've become more and more uncomfortable with silence. Most of us certainly don't enjoy silence when it presents itself, much less would we actually seek it out. But why? What is so terrifying about silence?

Consider that stretch of time late at night, while you are lying in bed, but before you've fallen asleep. (Assume for our purposes that you are not wearing your headphones to

bed.) If you're like most people, this small crack of silence quickly begins to flood, like a hole dug near the shoreline. Memories. Worries. Conversations from the day. And we wonder — about everything from how the weather station can be wrong so often, to how we could have managed to stay at our present job so long.

It's not always heavy thoughts, though, is it? Random cartoon images bound through our minds, making us chuckle under the covers. We remember someone we haven't talked to in a while, and wonder how they are doing. Some of us create, thinking of the next idea for our book, or deciding if we will turn the light on and scribble down the song lyrics that just hit us.

Silence is powerful. It's also to a large extent unpredictable. And it's precisely that unpredictable power which I suspect we find so frightening.

“Cultivate” is one of those words that doesn't get dusted off much anymore. Yet I can't think of a better one to pair with this advice, because it carries many meanings, all of which apply here:

To set aside and prepare for use, so that something can grow.

To improve by labor, care or study.

To further or encourage.

To welcome or become friends with.

Let's look at each of these facets involved in the concept of cultivation, and see how it might apply to silence.

Silence leaves room for thought. Consideration. Reconsideration. In short, silence is one of the major catalysts for change and growth in our lives. Really let that sink in. If we are continually drowning out our own thoughts with noise, yes, it is "comfortable" — but comfort leaves us in exactly the same place tomorrow as we were today. When a farmer cultivates land, he sets it aside and prepares it, knowing that, while it may be hard work, it will pay off with the growth of new crops. So it is with silence. If you are long out of practice in setting aside times of quiet in your life, the first thoughts to rise to the surface may well be painful or uncomfortable. But you're daring enough to try anyway. And in so doing, once the volume is turned down, you realize that your marriage isn't what it used to be. Or that you've become a bit arrogant lately. Or that you've been angry at someone for a long time and not dealt with it. Or that you've wronged someone. *Acknowledging* the truth is the first step to actually *changing* things. We cannot change what we are unwilling to acknowledge.

For some, the "toil" of silence may be that your mind feels empty. Blank. And that feels uncomfortable. I would suggest that this feeling of the void of silence is false. While there are occasional times that we are so overworked or overwhelmed that we truly "zone out," most often the perception that we have no thoughts is

actually a cover-up of sorts. The mind so dreads the thoughts that come up that we snip them off even as they emerge from the soil of silence. It's so much a part of our defense, in fact, that we become unaware that we are doing it. If this sounds like you, try being silent around a central question. *How are my relationships lately? Who do I consider my close friends and why? What do I like about myself?* It doesn't really matter what you choose as a question. A focusing question like this pondered in silence is virtually guaranteed to foster self-awareness and solid thought.

That said, let's suppose that you actually do continue to work the soil of silence and begin to take steps to address the issues that turn up. You make decisions to correct less flattering character traits. You have conversations that have been a long time in the coming. Relationships improve. Before long, you find that an immense amount of internal static dies down. There is less *need* to drown it out with external noise. Like tilling rocky soil, it's hard work to address the thoughts that silence brings us — and the actions they might require on our part. But the payoff is enormous and life changing.

The second definition of “cultivate” speaks of improvement, through labor, care or study. You see, though cultivating silence may at first seem like labor, the silence begins to be filled not with difficult realizations, but with an entirely new sort of thoughts. As the silence becomes less of a chore, room is opened to learn more about yourself and others — about the world going on

around you. Greater care is taken in noticing the simple things that were being obscured by busyness and noise. In fact, you will find that even focus and memory improve as the mind has unbroken periods of quietness in which to process information and make new connections. You may find creativity that you had thought was lost to childhood. In short, things improve. Quality of life — of living — improves.

Now beginning to experience the newfound benefits of silence, you start to actually enjoy times of silence. You look forward to them. You look for ways to expand them, to “further and encourage” the things that happen when distractions are minimized. Perhaps you learn to journal your thoughts so that you can continue developing them the next time.

And then, little by little, you find that you are no longer afraid of silence. It becomes your friend and not your enemy. You finally get what was meant by the saying “Silence is golden.” You stop running from yourself and your thoughts. You instead become someone who listens to your thoughts, welcomes them, trusts them, changes and grows regularly, and knows the benefits this brings. And you’ve found something that, for the majority of people, remains always out of reach: peace.

Cultivating silence isn’t about adding “another thing” to your busy life — to spend hours doing yoga or meditating by candlelight (though, if you get to the point of loving silence, go for it!). It’s mostly about choosing to restructure events that already exist in your day. Try

driving one leg of your commute without listening to the radio or using your cell. Decide to walk to certain classes or do your Monday morning jog without headphones. Turn off the TV during meals at home. And remember — the goal is not silence for the sake of silence. It's not a punishment. It's a choice, one made with the goal of seeing personal change and growth.

I know there are those who will read this and think, "But you don't know my life. There is no time to be quiet." The young mother with the hyperactive two-year-old who never naps comes to mind. Still, while I truly do sympathize, making time for silence is perhaps even more important for you. Without it, life can quickly turn into being more machine than person, losing yourself and your relationships in the process. Be creative. If you can't get a babysitter for a few hours a week, consider trading off with a friend, where you take their child for a while one day, and they take yours another. Don't give in to the idea that you have no say in the matter. You do.

Finally, please understand. I am a musician and music lover. I love conversation. And I have my shows that I enjoy watching. I'm not advocating some austere lifestyle that would have you rivaling the convents and monasteries of the world (though several friends of mine find these places to be wonderful retreats when they need to create space to be silent). I'm simply encouraging you to become comfortable with silence and to build it into your life on a regular basis. Even the music in your headphones will begin to sound different.

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APPENDIX

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Chapter 37: Silence

1. Are you comfortable with silence? Are you intentional about cultivating silence in your life?
2. Who is someone you know who *does* cultivate silence in their life? How would you describe this person?
3. In an average week, not counting time you are asleep, how long would you estimate that you currently experience intentional silence?
4. If you can remember, what sorts of thoughts tend to emerge during times when you are silent (e.g., while you are in bed, before you have fallen asleep)?
5. What scares you about leaving room for silence and reflection in your life? What benefits do you think could come of it in your own life?

6. Is there one time slot in your current schedule that you could turn into a time for cultivating silence if you were intentional?