



Can You Be Quiet?

We're sometimes afraid of the quiet, I know. Only infrequently do we seek it, though we should more often. It is in the quiet where we tackle and confront the tough stuff, the difficult problems, the questions we know we have to answer but find a lot of excuses to avoid. You know the excuses, right? Well, there's the email inbox, the meetings to attend, the calls to make or answer, the tweets to read (and respond to), and the Facebook page to read. Not to mention the news, the ball games, the soap operas, and the recorded TV shows we need to catch up on since we work all day.

William Deresiewicz, a literary critic of some significant note, spoke to the plebe (freshman) class at West Point last fall on the topic of solitude. During his lecture, Deresiewicz maintained that good ideas, even great ones are born out of solitude. Speaking to the future leaders of the Army, Deresiewicz pointed out that the changing nature of warfare will require them to think more "independently, creatively, flexibly" than their predecessors, that their operational environments will be more complex and fluid than ever before, and that they won't be able to succeed unless they can, in essence, *think* for themselves, come to independent conclusions, and then act.



Does Deresiewicz's description of the uncertain future sound familiar to you? It does to me. My personal experience tells me finding solitude is challenging but nonetheless imperative. If you reflect back, you can probably point to that "one good idea," that near-perfect solution you had some time ago and attribute it to your ability to think it through in solitude. When I talk to executives who understand the value of solitude but struggle to find it I advise them to:

- *Create a dedicated quiet time for yourself.*
- *Put it on your schedule as "quiet time" or "solitude."*
- *Shut yourself off: Close your office door.*
- *Don't answer email--it can wait, trust me.*
- *Don't answer the phone--turn your mobile phone OFF. If you can, have someone answer the phone for you and take messages. If you can't turn it off, use caller ID and don't answer it unless it's possible that the call is both important and urgent.*
- *Don't listen to the radio while at your desk.*
- *Make your quiet time your optimal time of the day. (I tend to be best at this from early to mid-morning.)*
- *Let everyone know that you're "thinking." They'll get used to it.*

While in the Army, a friend of mine was the aide-de-camp to the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, Lieutenant General Howard Graves. I remember my friend relating to me that one of the questions general Graves asked him during his interview to become the aide was, "Major, can you be quiet?" General Graves, a Rhodes Scholar, understood the value of solitude. My friend's answer was, "Yes sir, I can." He got the job.