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Junior Writers Competition

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“Be Still My Soul”

It was the summer of 2025 when I embarked on my first adventure. Well, multiple adventures. One involved travelling across the country to spend a week and a half in four different western states with nothing but a carry-on suitcase and airplane pillow. The other, however, was a one hour drive from my hometown to a 19th century mansion in rural Virginia. Yes, one could say that my interests are surprisingly diverse. My trip out west was full of fun and beauty; we were constantly moving, exploring, and attempting to place calls to our parents in bad service areas to ensure that they knew we were alive. I was always in a state of anxiety, excitement, or most likely a mixture of both. We climbed mountains, ate Food Lion frozen tacos in motel rooms, and blasted Ed Sheeran as we wound through the Great Tetons. In short, it was one of the best weeks of my life.

My week in a brick mansion with green ivy climbing up its walls, however, was at stark contrast with my American expedition. I was there to attend a sort of summer camp, if summer camps included deep conversations on existentialism, a rigorous prayer schedule, and discovering secret doors in the shelves of an attic library (yes, a library). I wish I could say I was romanticizing, but I would not need to. This camp was a week of training for classically educated high school students, well versed in the ancients and strong believers in Christ and His sacrifice. I applied that winter and it turns out, I fit their description. A few months later, twelve students stood in the Great Hall of the hosting family’s mansion, taking in the glass chandelier, rustic piano, and double staircase that weaved up both sides of the room. We may have entered as strangers, but from then on we lived our lives together, as if we had been born to live in the same house, cook the same food, and sit in the same silence. This camp offered something that very few have: a chance to reclaim your life using community, purposeful silence, and focused work. When we weren’t harvesting cucumbers from their garden, playing card games on the floor of one of their few air-conditioned rooms, or discussing the works of St. Augustine, we were encouraged to sit in silence. It did not matter where we

sat. It did not matter what time of day it was. It did not matter if it would interfere with our loose schedule. We were instructed to sit and listen. Listen to what, one might ask? Well, that's the thing, we were supposed to be listening to the world. Not our thoughts, or worries, or others voices, but our surroundings. It became an integral part of each day, and yes, it was difficult. And boring at times. And felt nearly impossible as soon as you settled down and the flood of thoughts came as if summoned by your peace. And yet, every day, we chose to sit and listen, as if charmed by the idea of stillness in a world that cannot stop moving.

The girls at the camp bunked in one of the many guest rooms located on the top floor. There was plenty of space, a nice bathroom, and I was able to snag the bottom bunk with the window. We soon learned that our room was near that of the hosting family's children, four boys to be exact, all under the age of seven. They were fast asleep by the time we trudged up to our bedroom after a few lively games of poker, but we often heard whispers of sound from under their door. We dismissed it the first couple nights, but nearing the middle of the week, one of the girls announced that the sound got louder at certain points, and that it sounded like a song. We were able to hear the song (hymn, actually) more clearly when we began listening to it, and it was "Be Still My Soul" sung by a children's choir. We didn't think much of it due to the fact that many kids fall asleep to music, but the more we paid attention, the more convinced we became that they listened to that one song. On repeat. All night long. The next morning, we asked their dad and he confirmed our suspicions. "Since our oldest was a baby, we played that one song all night," he said, "it is the only thing we have downloaded on that iPad and it is the only thing they'll sleep to." After assuring him that we did not mind the song, we spent the rest of the week humming it while we worked, playing it on their piano, and requesting it during our short prayer services throughout the day.

"Be Still My Soul", still sung in many different churches around the world, was written by a German woman named Katharina von Schlegel. Her poignant lyrics are usually paired with a melody composed by Jean Sibelius, a Finnish man who lived from 1865 to 1957. Schlegel wrote these words of hope and strength during a religious, social and political upheaval in Europe following the Thirty Years War. Each verse of this beautiful hymn begins with the comforting fact of God's constant presence. "Be still, my soul! The Lord is on your side", the hymn begins, continuing to proclaim that God will

“soothe your sorrows and your fears”. This hymn is based off of Psalm 46 which says “be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). It seems so simple, this phrase, and yet Christians and non-Christians alike struggle with it. We are constantly pushed to be the best, both by ourselves and others. We fight for the top spot, climb the corporate ladder, rake in thousands of dollars only to end the week wondering if any of it matters. Because at the end of the day, everyone wants the same thing and struggles for the very thing they already had if they had stopped to notice—peace. There are only so many opportunities to choose to be different. To stand out. To exit the crowds rushing for success, and instead take a few purposeful steps in one direction.

I am not, and never have been, immune to this culture of anxiety and toxic “motivation”. I often find myself sacrificing myself, my time, and my peace to be the very best out of everyone, rather than aiming to be the best version of myself. Every time I lose myself by falling into this toxic cycle of pushing myself to the edge, only to end up falling to the ground, I find myself returning to this verse; so simple, yet so important. We are not called to be more than who we are. We are only called to shine our souls and minds until we are free of the dirt and grime of this world. Nothing has been more transformative than making a single choice, everyday, to take a step back and embrace stillness. To shed the fear and strife that latches on when we are vulnerable, and instead embrace the life that we have been gifted. By choosing to be still, I no longer fear silence or rest, but revel in it. Because while everyone else is too busy pushing themselves beyond their breaking point, I and few others are taking notice of opportunities that come to us in the quiet. In the rest. God called us each by name and instructed us to “be still and know that I am God”. And now, each time I catch myself crying over something that truly does not matter, or staying up half the night to chase a dream that is not my own, I remember that I am called to be still. To listen. To wait. To breathe. And to remember that there is a God who calls me whole. Loved. Special. Perfect. When the world slows down, I am transformed into someone who is more than her grades or her abilities. When the world slows down, I remember that I am loved by God, chosen by Him, and reconciled with my inner silence.