

The Importance of Silence to Spiritual Direction

by Anna Barker

**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual
Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

2022

“Only in silence the word,
Only in dark the light,
Only in dying life:
Bright the hawk’s flight
On the empty sky.”

Ursula Le Guin,¹

“When as Christians, we enter into a deep interior silence and our thoughts are ‘laid aside’ [Evagrius] ...and we have gone beyond the imagination and its working, where are we? It seems the only place we can possibly be is in our spirit; ”

Thomas Keating²

“Man’s unhappiness arises from one thing alone : that he cannot remain quietly in his room.”

Blaise Pascal³

“Silence is the language of God; all the rest is a poor translation”

Thomas Keating⁴

Introduction

I believe that silence is a key experience in personal spiritual formation as well as a taonga of the ancient and more traditional churches that we are rediscovering in the modern church. It is something we can experience both corporately and alone, and it is frequently encountered in spiritual direction.

Silence, stillness and solitude are separate but related disciplines that help us to notice, noticing being a foundational practice for the director and directee in spiritual direction. Stillness and solitude help us to experience silence :

“I frequently sit in silence and just breathe. The stillness is important. I can’t say there are any spectacular God moments, just peace. I often struggle to pray with words, so my prayer space is silence.”⁵

Stillness *is* important to achieving inner silence, especially when we are beginners!

I begin by distinguishing between interior and exterior silence, and then briefly review silence in scripture, before discussing various qualitatively different experiences of silence which might occur in a spiritual direction session ; illustrating these, where possible, with quotations from the participants in my survey.⁶

I will go on to discuss the practice of silence, focussing on Centering Prayer, dealing with distractions and being in the present moment⁷; then I give a summary of my questionnaire results before concluding.

Types of Silence

There are many types of silence that might arise in the spiritual direction session and so it is important that the director is already comfortable with silence and not intimidated by it.

Modern life is full of noise,⁸ we live in a distracted world where social media, TV, music compete for our attention. Many exercise to music, work with the radio on and relax with the TV - so silence has become a radical alternative - Several respondents told me that they chose to not have background noise in their daily lives on a regular basis. I would suggest that their taste for intentional silence is unusual in the general population, a view supported by Maitland's exploration of living alone and deliberately choosing silence - her family and friends thought her mad, even putting herself at risk⁹, demonstrating that silence is often considered a radical alternative.

Internal and External

Let us distinguish though, between internal and external silence. They are not the same, for those who have acquired the practice of inner silence it can be experienced anywhere. Also, many describe being in nature as silence, when in fact it is not.

"There's usually noise but it's what humans might misguidedly call silence: the rhythms and sounds of the natural world (wind, water, birds, ...)." ¹⁰

Escaping from the external sounds of music, radio, traffic, construction does not guarantee internal silence - although it can facilitate it. The desert fathers and mothers withdrew¹¹ from their presumably much quieter world to the silence of the wilderness in order to find silence within themselves. Laird tells us that external silence is the "soil" where healthy spirituality "takes root."¹²

Silence in scripture

MacCulloch shows how in older parts of the Tanakh¹³ silence was associated with death, defeat in war, dumbness and stone idols, all somewhat negative connotations. When God was silent, it was a bad thing.¹⁴ Creation is linked with speech.¹⁵ But then we find in the psalms and 'minor' prophets - "Be still, and know that I am God."¹⁶; "He will quiet you with his love"¹⁷ and "I have stilled and quieted my soul."¹⁸

As Heschel contends, the radical difference that Judaism offers is that it is a religion concerned with holiness in time, not space. "God is not in things of space, but in moments of time."¹⁹ The Christian faith rests on the shoulders of Judaism. For me, deliberate silence is like a mini- sabbath, a withdrawing from the world for a few moments - a day - a week, in order to be with God. The practice of the sabbath is experiencing something of resurgence in Christian circles²⁰, as we learn to be less busy and more present.

Jesus withdrew for 40 days,²¹ and I think we may presume silence.²² Mark mentions that Jesus went somewhere quiet to pray alone²³. Matthew and Luke describe Jesus as arguing with Satan.²⁴ MacCulloch characterises this as an imaginative portrayal of the battle with our thoughts that the ascetics would have recognised²⁵ - distractions. We will return to them, later. Jesus was silent before his persecutors²⁶ fulfilling the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah²⁷, where silence was associated with powerlessness and humility. And finally there is half an hour of silence in heaven, following the opening of the seventh seal²⁸, a full stop at the end of scenes of extravagant and vocal worship.

So the theme of silence is threaded throughout scripture. Now, let us look at types of

silence that might be found in or around spiritual direction.

Silences that might be found in spiritual direction

The uncomfortable silence

The conversation is unfolding fluently and then suddenly the directee stops and says nothing for a few moments. As fledgling directors, it is very tempting to jump in and finish the sentence or rack our brains for another question to reboot the dialogue. Why? Because we feel uncomfortable and/or we sense the directee is uncomfortable. We are learning that spiritual direction is not about us making things happen, to let go of control, and perhaps this silence is part of that learning process.

“Sometimes the silence will sit there because I have no other option – I have nothing to say! And so we wait in silence together – occasionally maybe comfortably; but more likely uncomfortably, at least for me.”²⁹ I was strangely encouraged by this comment, from a more experienced director.

And this highlights the role of **silence, as part of, and necessary to spiritual formation** - one of the early lessons in our formation as directors is that silence is ok! We begin to have a more relaxed stance and not to fear it. We start to be less “in” our heads, and let the ‘real’ director run the session.³⁰

“Spending time in silence allows me to lay aside striving, trying to be anything and just being at rest in God.”³¹

So it would be reasonable to expect that in the formation process many of the students will have to learn to become comfortable with our own silence before we are able to share it comfortably with others. This was borne out by descriptions of their feelings before making a long retreat (5 days). The majority of student respondents had only done a quiet day or a weekend prior. Many were “apprehensive,” “intimidated”, “daunted”, “nervous” and “anxious” ; but at the same time “up for it”, “looking forward to it”, “excited”.³² I suspect some of us would not have done it if it were not a requirement - but all of us were glad we had.

The hostile silence

The uncomfortable silence is perhaps a close relation of hostile silence ; we have all probably experienced the ‘silent treatment’³³ and perhaps this is one of the reasons we commonly feel agitated by silence. Silence can be weaponized e.g. when someone is “not speaking to you”. As discussed above, MacCulloch shows us that perhaps it was more common in the Old Testament to view silence negatively. If “the sheep hear my voice”³⁴, then what does it mean when God is not talking? Have we lost his favour? We may have to model to our directees the enjoyment of silence ; a common “problem” brought to direction is “I can’t hear God, God no longer speaks to me.” So part of our work is to help the directee explore non-judgmentally why this has been their experience.³⁵ We might work with ‘how’ to be in the silence, for there may not be answers to the ‘why’. Because of the negative connotations of silence that some people might identify with, the directee may struggle to be silent.

The inquisitive or active silence

Listening to God - perhaps our purpose in being quiet is to listen, so that we may hear God speak.

“Stillness allows me to hear holy whispers “I see you”, “trust me”, “I’ve got you”.³⁶

“Silence isn’t the end goal, the end goal is listening to God, to myself, to the world, to others, to become still and peaceful, to regroup, to let go, to recover.”³⁷

For many Christians this is perhaps the only reason for being silent, because they yearn to hear God speak to them personally. For many years this was my own experience. In the last decade I’ve learned that I can experience God as being with me without words. Woolley’s interviewees often began their silence journey with a desire to hear God³⁸. As directors we might encourage our directees to view this as a starting point and offer them an opportunity to engage with silence more deeply.

Where the directee is undergoing a discernment process, being silent to listen would be appropriate. We are quieting ourselves so that we can hear, and the director can assist in this process. In Le Guin’s poem, quoted on the title page, we see that words “need” silence. The silence can help us to sift through alternatives and gain clarity.

The counter cultural silence

“I don’t watch tv and I don’t use a mobile phone. I never have background music playing: if I

have music on, which is unusual, I give it my full attention and am not doing anything else”³⁹. This is almost eccentric behaviour in the modern world.

While most of the participants found silence to be pleasant and rewarding, many found it difficult, at least at first. It required an element of discipline to engage with it. “For a long time I confused Silence with Solitude – Solitude is very easy and wholly delightful for me. But Silence is difficult. And also desirable.”⁴⁰

The companionable silence

I recently sat with a directee in silence for a few minutes and just listened to the rain falling, with his evident enjoyment. I have sat with my own director towards the end of our sessions and there has been a palpable sense of companionship. There is comfort. There can be a shared awareness of God’s presence. This can be part of our offering as spiritual directors. This might not be possible in the earliest days of the relationship, but as trust is built between director and directee, it becomes feasible.

The corporate silence

Silence in worship services is not very common or lengthy in many denominations but Quaker practice stands out here, as an example of a group of people participating in silence together for an extended period. Silent waiting fosters our dependence on God.⁴¹ My own (singular) experience of a Quaker meeting was restful and relaxing.

Silent adoration is practiced in the Eastern Orthodox traditions (with Icons) and Catholicism

(of the reserved sacrament) both individually and corporately. We might encourage a directee to sample a different tradition - sometimes being in a different environment can lead to unexpected breakthroughs.

A retreat can also be somewhere to experience a corporate silence - we can become aware of our common desire to be apart with God and enjoy being together in a way that does not involve conversation. As noted above, this is a part of our formation process as directors.

The therapeutic silence

As directors, we are not counsellors or therapists, but we can expect that we will encounter our directees' life issues, experience and trauma and need to be able to work with them safely, explicitly in the context of how they affect the directee - God relationship, while discerning when it is appropriate to refer the director to therapy.

Centering Prayer⁴² is explicitly "designed to heal the wounds of a lifetime"⁴³. Keating discusses the three 'emotional programmes' that we run to deal with our inevitable childhood wounds⁴⁴ and how this practice heals us, By introducing us to interior silence, Centering Prayer can help us to deal with the dark side of our personalities.⁴⁵

"It provided healing space as I recovered and chose to deal with issues that I had previously pushed down. I found God in that silence – silence I had been too afraid to sit with for many years."⁴⁶

A note of caution here, we should exercise discernment - there are times when silence

might be unhelpful. For example, if the directee was experiencing intrusive thoughts, this could be a time where extended silence would be unhelpful and distraction useful.

The mysterious silence

There are many mysteries in the Christian faith - the Trinity ; the God who is both human and divine ; the God who sacrificed himself for us ; the dying God who rose again. Religion has been inherently mysterious from the dawn of time. We cannot see or touch our invisible deity - but somehow we can experience God. During silence, people often report that they have felt God's presence. In June 2021 I wrote in my journal "I want God to be mysterious - I don't need him to be straightforward." I have found that silence is a place where I can encounter the mysterious God - who doesn't explain or communicate verbally with me - and I have experienced this as a directee as my director and I sat quietly together.

The practice of silence

There are a number of different practices of silence that might be useful in direction. Popular methods include "Christian Meditation"⁴⁷ and "Centering Prayer"⁴⁸.

I will comment on Centering Prayer as taught by Keating and Bourgeault⁴⁹, and Laird's similar "contemplative practice"⁵⁰ as they are the methodologies I am personally most familiar with. Their work acknowledges its debt to historic teachings.⁵¹ Most of the questionnaire respondents had a fairly regular practice of Centering Prayer or similar.

Cataphatic and Apophatic

A difficult distinction, but a useful one, is the difference between cataphatic and apophatic

spirituality. Cataphatic practices engage reason, the emotions, memory, imagination and will.⁵² So bible study, Ignatian exercises, liturgical call and response, icons are all examples of Cataphatic practice. Apophatic bypasses the faculties and is wordless and imageless.⁵³ So silent prayer can be either of these - silently revering an icon for example is cataphatic, but Centering Prayer may become apophatic. I hope to demonstrate that it isn't automatically apophatic below.

Distraction

Bourgeault discusses our inclination to distraction, pointing out that our goal is not to stop the thoughts or distractions, but to develop detachment and let them go⁵⁴. Laird has a similar approach, but his brilliant metaphor of the "wild cocktail party"⁵⁵ - we are the "embarrassed host" - stayed with me for days after reading it. Our thoughts are like badly behaved guests, coming and going as they please, causing chaos! As the host we feel the need to control the guests / thoughts but don't know how. The sensation of being endlessly distracted by interruptions is a familiar one to most of us that have tried to just be present to our situation, to ourselves, and to God.

Laird deals extensively with distractions and where they can lead, in three stages of silence; he encourages us to move through them and not try to fight them. I doubt if anyone attempting a form of silence will be unfamiliar with the experience of "monkey mind".⁵⁶

"I find inner silence very hard, my thoughts are always busy making connections, reminding me of things. I find Centering Prayer extremely difficult and use it rather rarely in my own prayer, although when I am with others I feel supported and better able to pursue it. When

inner silence is given to me I am so grateful and I love it ...”⁵⁷

Similarly to Keating, Laird teaches that initially we use a “prayer word”⁵⁸ and silently repeat it, as our thoughts and ruminations rise up in our minds. Our intrusive thoughts tend to generate “commentary”.⁵⁹ We are re-programming ourselves to return to the present moment by using the word each time our mind runs away with itself. In the second phase we are beginning to notice the thoughts and not get caught in the commentary. On a recent retreat⁶⁰ it was suggested we label the thoughts with an “ing” word here, and then move on. I say silently to myself “ I’m remembering / planning / worrying” etc - and I found this helpful in not getting caught up in that thought. Laird moves onto a third stage where the ego, the “I”, the mind has ceased to be involved, but we are in some sense at one with God.

I think Laird is describing the same apophatic state that Bourgeault, Keating and Woolley describe - a state they reach in contemplation which is wordless and moving away from the thinking mind and the ego. I have only experienced this for myself momentarily, teasingly, so I cannot really speak to this ; however I believe that silent prayer can still be a worthwhile practice that brings the pray-er deeper closer to God. Woolley’s interviewees valued silence for “enriching their relationships with God, self and others”.⁶¹

The Present Moment

The practice of silent prayer also helps us to learn how to be present - for many, a hard thing. We reminisce, we ruminate, we remember; we predict, we catastrophise, we presume. But one of the things we help our directees with is grounding themselves, being

present to the conversation and themselves. This isn't a practice that comes particularly naturally to me - I have to cultivate it both for myself and my directee. Moments of quiet in the session can really assist us to slow right down and stay with the directee, help us to go deeper and not wider.

Almost all the questionnaire respondents practiced silence as part of their own personal spirituality, many of them regularly. I believe they have chosen this as a way to attend to their own spiritual health.

“ It is an essential part of my daily prayer, especially in Lectio Divina. I often use silence with an awareness of breath at various times during the day to call me back to awareness of the presence of God.”⁶²

“I garden a lot and in this, have an active, intentional practice of being present to the present moment, which is about being fully present, again cultivating an *internal* silence within the largely *external*, auditory silence [except for the sound of birds etc]”⁶³

Questionnaire Summary

I sent out a questionnaire to my fellow students and also to more experienced directors (see appendix 1) asking them about their “use” of silence in spiritual direction. One of them expressed it as “choosing” rather than “using” silence which was a helpful refinement.

I received 32 replies from 19 students and 13 experienced directors. Unsurprisingly 16 of them said silence featured in their sessions frequently or often, 14 sometimes, 2 rarely.

It was most often used at the beginning or end of the session (25) or 'as it comes' (26) with fewer respondents settling the directee (9) and 14 using it to give themselves **or** the directee 'time to think'. Not everyone practised silence (almost) daily - 11 out of 32 - but those that didn't, practised it intermittently.

Almost everyone found silence rewarding and pleasant - whether or not they found it easy or difficult.

17 of the respondents were Introverted, 12 Extraverted and 3 didn't respond /didn't know ; Every number on the Enneagram was represented except for 8! 5 respondents didn't respond / didn't know, the most prevalent number was 2 (6 participants) with 5 and 9 being the next most common (4 each). Interesting that these represent the heart (2), head (5) and gut centres (9).

I had wondered whether there was a pattern where, for example, the extroverts found silence harder - but there didn't seem to be much of a correlation. Lots of the extraverts thoroughly enjoyed it - although the introverts seemed to find doing it regularly easier - and the extraverts were more sporadic. So this response was very interesting -

"both of these [Enneagram / MBTI] are dealing with the EGOIC self only. Working with and through these frames of understanding is helpful, but only in terms of the EGOIC, which a discipline of silence is primarily there to work beneath."⁶⁴

At this stage in my own practice I am still at Laird's first doorway,⁶⁵ with only the

occasional glimpse through to the second⁶⁶, so this is rather beyond my grasp, but I would like to acknowledge it.

Conclusion

In conclusion I have found that short periods of silence are common in spiritual direction sessions and that unsurprisingly, many directors are keen adherents of silent prayer in their own formation.

I offer a summary of some ways in which we might incorporate silence in the session:

- Before the session - I often prepare by spending some time in silence and I find it helps me shift my mindset from focussing on my own stuff to being in a place to hold space for others.
- At the beginning - the directee and director have exchanged a few pleasantries, comments about how the day is going - and the director cues the beginning of a deeper conversation by suggesting a few moments of quiet.
- After a 'big' disclosure - "could we just stop for a moment here?"
- When we don't know what to say ... don't say anything!⁶⁷
- Towards the end of the session - as we feel the discussion has reached a natural conclusion - we might pause and wait, so that we might both let what has been said (or unsaid) settle into our spirits.

Clearly it is not a one size fits all situation; directors had different approaches to silence, but a common theme was the sense that silence allowed them to approach a deeper relationship with God.

Bibliography

Bourgeault, C. (2016), *The Heart of Centering Prayer*. Boulder, Colorado : Shambhala Publications, Inc.

Bourgeault, C. (2004), *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*. Lanham : Cowley Publications (Kindle Ed)

Gaultiere, B, (2016), *Your Best Life in Jesus' Easy Yoke*. Soul Shepherding (Kindle Ed)

Heschel, A.J. (2005) *The Sabbath*. New York : FSG Classics

Laird, M. (2006). *Into the Silent Land*. London : Darton Longman Todd.

Le Guin, U. (1971). *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Middlesex : Puffin Books

Keating, T. (2008). *The Heart of the World - an Introduction to Contemplative Christianity*. New York : Crossroad Publishing.

Keating, T. et al, (2017). *World Without End*. London : Bloomsbury

MacCulloch, D. (2013). *Silence - A Christian History*. London : Allen Lane.

Maitland, S. (2008). *A Book of Silence*. London : Granta Publications.

Pickering, S. (2008). *Spiritual Direction : a Practical Introduction*. Norwich : Canterbury Press.

Religious Society of Friends. (2013). *Quaker Faith and Practice. (5th Edition)*. Dorchester : The Dorset Press.

Ross, M.(2014). *Silence : A User's Guide. Vol 1 and 2*. London : Darton Longman Todd.

Scazzero, P. (2006). *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan.

Woolley, A. (2019). *Women Choosing Silence - Relationality and Transformation in Spiritual Practice*. London and New York : Routledge.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Using silence in your SD session

Do you use silence during your session?

- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Often
- Never
- Rarely

When do you use silence in the session? (Choose all that apply)

- Opening / closing
- As it comes
- I don't
- To calm / settle the directee
- To give yourself time to think

How do use silence in your own practice / formation?

- Freeform

Your experience

Do you find silence

- Easy (1) or Difficult (5)
- Rewarding (1) or Unrewarding (5)
- Pleasant (1) or Unpleasant (5)

Please answer by scoring between 1 and 5

Long retreat (5-7 days)

For students of the SGM formation programme, both past and present, you were required to make a long retreat of 5 days.

What were your initial feelings about making a longer silent retreat?

- Freeform

Had you done anything like it before?

- A quiet day
- A weekend
- 5 days
- 7 days
- Longer

About you

What denomination / church stream are you affiliated with :

- Anglican
- Catholic
- Methodist
- Baptist
- Presbyterian
- EPC
- Orthodox
- Other
- None

Do you consider yourself to be Introverted or Extraverted?

Do you know your Enneagram number or MBTI category? If so, what is it?

Footnotes

1. Le Guin, 1971, p.7
2. Keating, 2008, p.67
3. Pensées, quoted by Ross, 2014, p.22
4. Keating et al, 2017, p.56
5. Questionnaire participant comments
6. My survey received 32 responses from a mixture of my fellow students and more experienced directors.
7. A concept popularised by Eckhart Tolle in his book “the Power of Now”.
8. Maitland, 2008, p.3
9. Maitland, 2008, p.80
10. Questionnaire participant comments
11. MacCulloch, 2013, ch.3
12. Laird, 2001, p.6
13. MacCulloch, 2013, pp.13-16, Tanakh being the Hebrew Scriptures, Christian Old Testament.
14. E.g. Psalm 28 v 1 - God’s silence is associated with God not speaking. Psalm 13 - How long O Lord?
15. Genesis 1 v 3 ; MacCulloch, 2013, p.17
16. Psalm 46 v 10
17. Zephaniah 3 v 17
18. Psalm 131 v 2
19. Heschel, 2005, pp. xiii-xiv
20. Scazzero, 2006, ch.8; Gaultiere, 2016, pp. 147-156
21. Mark 1 vv 12-13
22. Silence in the sense of the absence of speech, although there would have been the noises of animals and birds, the wind - see note 10 above.
23. E.g. Mark 1 v 35
24. Matthew 4 vv 1-11, Luke 4 vv 1-13
25. MacCulloch, 2013, p.37
26. Matthew 27 vv 12-14
27. Isaiah 53 v 7
28. Revelation 8 v 1
29. Questionnaire participant comments
30. Pickering, 2008, p.36 - the Holy Spirit.
31. Questionnaire participant comments
32. Questionnaire participant comments
33. Pickering, 2008, p.107
34. John 10 v 27 (NKJV)
35. Pickering, 2008, pp.182-186
36. Questionnaire participant comments
37. Questionnaire participant comments
38. Woolley, 2019, p.153 - but they all ultimately felt invited to simply be in God’s presence.
39. Questionnaire participant comments
40. Questionnaire participant comments
41. Religious Society of Friends, 2.14
42. See below, next section
43. Keating et al, 2017, p.22

-
44. Keating et al, 2017. p.23
 45. Keating et al, 2017, p.25
 46. Questionnaire participant comments
 47. As taught by John Main OSB
 48. taught and developed by Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeault.
 49. Bourgeault, 2016, Part One
 50. Laird, 2006, p.3
 51. Including the works of Evagrius (4th century), Diadochos (5th century) and the anonymous author of the Cloud of Unknowing (14th century).
 52. Bourgeault, 2004, p.31
 53. Pickering, 2008, p.95
 54. Bourgeault, 2016, p. 30
 55. Laird, 2006, p.4
 56. A traditional and lively metaphor used in Buddhist meditation and borrowed by modern mindfulness practices.
 57. Questionnaire participant comments
 58. Laird, 2006, p.53
 59. Laird, 2006. p.62
 60. Sister Eveleen Retreat House, March 2022
 61. Woolley, 2019, p.118
 62. Questionnaire participant comments
 63. Questionnaire participant comments
 64. Questionnaire participant comments
 65. Laird, 2006, pp. 55-60
 66. Laird, 2006, pp. 60-65
 67. See the comment at note 29