

Living Silence

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Introduction

Living silence! How and why write about silence? Some years ago the scripture “Be still and know I am God” (Psalm 46:10) captivated me and held me. It became my mantra, I breathed it and prayed it and sat with it allowing it to unfold in me. With this verse came a companion *silence*. Silence seems to have sneaked into my life touching, molding and forming me ever so gently. Then another verse joined the first. And that is “In God we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) Again silence was its companion but this time it seemed to go deeper and wider. Finally the third and most recent verse “No utterance at all, no speech, no sound that anyone can hear; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their message to the ends of the earth.” (Psalm 19: 3-4) And yes silence is there too, this time it seems to say “it just is.”

Silence has become part of my life. In some strange way it is like a lover calling and inviting me into greater intimacy with the Beloved. So I have decided to explore silence further trying to understand it and what it means to me in my life and the significance of silence in spiritual direction.

The way I have gone about this is through a three-fold approach.

- By reading writers like Merton, Nouwen, Picald to name a few. I have also watched you-tube and videos on ordinary peoples experience of entering silence.
- My own spiritual practices. I started attending Quaker services, centering prayer days, and went on a silent retreat. As well as my daily prayer practices, which generally included centering prayer, lectio and often mass.
- I kept a journal where I reflected on how I lived silence in my ordinary life as a mother, sister, daughter, friend and neighbor.

So what is this silence? The dictionary defines it as "the absence of sound or speaking"¹A simple definition but unsatisfactory as this definition leads me to think silence is a lack of something, so therefore to be avoided.

I much prefer these words of Max Picald “Silence is more than merely the silence of noise; it is a primary reality in its own right which points to a life beyond the word and hence beyond the self. Absence of speech does not create silence; it simply makes it more apparent. Silence is not

¹ The Australian Oxford Mini Dictionary pg 438

merely the non-existence of something else, such as noise, speech, or music, as though it was a negative condition. Silence is a formative and autonomous condition of being."²

Thomas Keating said "Silence is God's language."³

And Barbara Erakko Taylor says "The hermit feels the presence of *silence*, and for the hermit, *that* is God."⁴

This is the silence I wish to explore.

The Two Faces of Silence.

Meister Eckhart wrote "There is nothing so much like God as silence."⁵

This face of silence needs to be clarified. The silence that is so much like God is a silence born out of love and spoken with love. It is a silence where healing, rest and life are experienced. It is a silence that teaches. This silence is fullness - A living Silence and this essay is on that type of Silence.

But before exploring this living silence I must address the other face of silence.

The "*deathly silence*".

This silence is a cold cutting silence. It is the "silent treatment", a silence used as a weapon to punish, hurt, control and exclude another. This may be the only type of silence someone has experienced in significant relationships.

There is a silence that too often shrouds' people who live with some diseases eg. Mental health illness, HIV/Aids. Here the silence is due to stigma, shame and fear and causes isolation.

There is also the silence of indifference, where an injustice is witnessed but it is ignored because "it is not my problem" or there is fear of the consequence, so we keep silent. This type of silence can make us conspirators of injustice, of evil.

These types of silence are a "deathly silence" that separates instead of unites. Joan Chittister in The Rule of Benedict states "Silence for its own selfish, insulating sake, silence that is passive-aggressive, silence that is insensitive to the present needs of the other is not Benedictine silence."⁶ Any silence that leads to hurt, suffering, isolation, injustice, hate and poverty, reflects nothing of God.

It is always good for a spiritual director to remember that this "deathly silence" may be the only form of silence a directee has experienced.

But now I will concentrate on the life giving silence that speaks of God. The silence that is born from love.

² Picard, Max "The World of Silence" sourced from *The Fire of Silence and Stillness- An anthology of Quotations for the spiritual journey*. Edited by Harris, Paul pg 112

³ Teasdale, Wayne *A Monk in the World* pg30

⁴ Taylor, Barbara Erakko *Silent Dweller* pg 14

⁵ Sourced from *The Fire of Silence and Stillness- An anthology of Quotations for the spiritual journey*. Edited by Harris, Paul pg 117

⁶ Chittister, Joan *The Rule of Benedict* pg60

Silence - Part of the Spiritual Journey

In the book *The Way of the Heart*, Henri Nouwen states that "Silence is an indispensable discipline in the spiritual life."⁷ Other writers suggest that to mature in our spiritual journey we need some silence and solitude in our life. It appears that in every major religion and spiritual tradition silence is a necessary part of the spiritual journey. Anne Le Claire in her book *Listening Below the Noise* says "Every religious and spiritual tradition has a history of silence, that silence itself is the most fundamental of all spiritual disciplines."⁸

We only need to look at the Bible to discover the rich place silence has in it.

In the book of Kings (19:9-13) Elijah was told to "go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass."

And then he experienced the wind, earthquake, and fire. We are told God was not in them but it was in the "small still voice" or a "gentle whisper" that followed that Elijah experienced God. The book of Proverbs tells us that the wise man is silent while the fool talks.

Jesus lived a life grounded in silence. By his life he shows us the importance and necessity for silence. Jesus went apart for 40 days prior to the start of his public ministry to commune with his Father. Through out the gospels we are told that Jesus went up the mountain alone at night to pray to his Father. Whenever I read the gospels account of His passion I am struck by Jesus' deep silence.

We have Mary, Jesus mother, pondering all things in her heart. This speaks of a great listening and silence.

There is Jesus' friend Mary who sat at his feet listening and Jesus affirms such actions.

In James 3:3,6 we are warned of the great damage that the tongue can cause if it is not disciplined.

Our sacred scripture tells us we need silence. Jesus lived from silence.

Through out the centuries we have had people that enter deeply into silence to hear a deeper truth, a truth that can not be heard when immersed in the culture they live in. These include the desert fathers and mothers, the Russian poustinik, hermits. From the silence they then offered the world a deep and lasting wisdom, which still speaks to us today.

We also have faith communities where silence is an intrinsic part of their life. The Quakers gather in silent worship waiting and listening with expectancy. There are various religious orders such as the Benedictine order where silence is very much part of their life. Joan Chittiser says in her book "The Rule of Benedict" "Silence is the cornerstone of Benedictine life and spiritual development, but the goal of monastic silence is not non-talking. The goal of monastic silence, and monastic speech, is respect for others, a sense of place, a spirit of peace.....it forms

⁷ Nouwen, Henri, *The Way of the Heart* pg 36

⁸ Le Claire, Anne *Listening Below the Noise* pg13

us to listen to God.”⁹ Surely that is what we all need. We need to be formed to listen to God speaking as a small voice within us.

Father Christopher Jamieson on the BBC program the Big Silence talks about how silence is a vital way into the depths of the human person where we can connect with God and self at a deep level. As he says silence is the gateway to the soul and the soul is the gateway to God.

Silence Today

Years gone by and in traditional cultures, silence was a normal part of life. But for us today in the western world it is generally neither normal nor part of our life. In fact it is feared. We are surrounded by noise. Our homes often are anything but a peaceful haven with its entertainment systems boasting surround sound, t.v’s in living rooms and bedrooms, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, blenders and computers hum away filling the home with noise.

When we go out for a walk the iPod goes with us giving us non stop music. We shop to the blare of music. We drive to the sound of music or talk back chat shows. We are surrounded by noise 24/7. Even in most of our church services our services are filled with words and music.

We must ask ourselves what effect does all this constant noise have on us? Living in an environment of constant noise leads us to be fragmented, on edge, anxious, this affects our physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. We loose our sense of harmony and belonging with nature, ourselves, our neighbor and God.

Noise ambushes us. It stops us from stopping and thinking. It fills us up so we are unable to hear the truth within us. Noise stops us listening to our true self it stops us hearing the song that God sings within us it also stops us from listening to others.

When surrounded by noise that is all we hear. We forget that there is another dearer and true voice with in us waiting to be listened too. The gentle whisper of the voice of the Beloved.

Anne D. Le Clair says “noise is a form of violence to us, but we have become so accustomed to it that it barely registers.”¹⁰

With constant noise we are less able to hear any other voice than the voices of society telling us that we need to be busy, to be doing things. Our worth is tied up with how productive we appear to be. We are judged by how productive we are. Today the question is how busy are you? We are bombarded with voices telling us to be in control, we deserve and need more, we can only be happy if we have the latest phone, car, bigger house, clothes. We end up living a life

⁹ Chittister, Joan *The Rule of Benedict* pg 60

¹⁰ Le Clair, Anne *Listening Below the Noise* pg 31

of deep struggle and unrest searching for yet another thing. That once acquired is like false gold- empty and worthless. The search then continues for yet another thing, which the voices of noise tell us we want and need to be successful and important.

Even in Christianity we are busy doing one more good thing. Listening to one more teaching or one more worship cd. But in all our doing and striving we are at risk of becoming fragmented and burnt out. We have forgotten Jesus telling us “to come away by yourself to a quiet place and rest awhile.”

We have become estranged from silence. Silence is so counter-cultural and too often it is feared because it appears as nothingness and emptiness but in truth it brings life and fullness. Thomas Merton writes “The reason for their talk is: death. Death is the enemy who seems to confront them at every moment in the deep darkness and silence of their own being. So they keep shouting at death. They confound their lives with noise. They stun their own ears with meaningless words, never discovering that their hearts are rooted in silence that is not death but life. They chatter themselves to death, fearing life as if it was death.”¹¹

Living Silence

Why silence? Wayne Teasdale in his book “A Monk in the World” recalls a conversation where Thomas Keating said: “Silence is God’s language, and it’s very difficult to learn it.”¹² It definitely is a journey, a pilgrimage, not to some far off place or foreign land but it is an internal journey the journey within one self- answering the voice of God seeking the call of love.

As I reflect on what silence has meant to me I have become more and more aware of silence as a teacher. An incredibly patient teacher, gently teaching me new ways of being. For if silence didn’t teach us then it would only be an absence of talking and noise.

Silence teaches us to listen. First we must encounter silence the physical silence. This is done by turning off our phones, tv, radio or going out into nature and becoming aware of the silence of nature and allow ourselves to be held by nature’s silence. It means not talking, being silent for some period and allowing the silence that surrounds us to be experienced. When the external noise and distractions have stopped, then what lies within is slowly revealed. Silence starts to teach us to listen to what is within us. We become conscious of what our body needs. We become aware of how noisy and busy our thinking is. If we allow ourselves to settle into the silence we find that our thinking slows down. Space is made within us so we can start to

¹¹ Merton, Thomas *No Man is an Island* pg 231

¹² Teasdale, Wayne *A Monk in the World* pg 30

distinguish the many voices we are bombarded with externally and internally. And in silence we learn to recognize and listen to the still small voice of God within us.

Silence teaches us to see. A new way of seeing- a “beholding”- seeing the sacred in what is around us. What was once a weed to be dismissed now becomes a thing of exquisite beauty and detail, something to look at and marvel over. In silence we learn to see ourselves. We become aware of what motivates us what our desires are, we start becoming aware of our own beauty and darkness and we grow in our understanding of ourself and God’s beauty, grace and mercy. And finally we start to be able to behold others. Not seeing them as a threat or foreign but beholding them with love, respect and openness. We start seeing them as sacred, made in the image of God.

In silence we learn to wait and ponder. Just as Jesus’ mother did. Not understanding but holding and allowing the un-understandable by head to become known deep within but often known without words. This is no easy or quick process. It is a slow gentle unknowing/knowing. It is holding mystery. This is so foreign in today’s culture. We have become so used to instant-instant telling, instant knowing. To be willing to stand in this stance of unknowing, waiting and listening, calls for great trust, love and courage.

When we are able to silently wait we learn to speak. As both Merton and Nouwen say “Silence teaches us to speak.”¹³ The words that are spoken from silence are words spoken with truth, with integrity. They have life within them. They carry with them the Word which they were born from. These words are words that touch another person’s heart- bringing forth life within them. They are words that another recognizes at a heart/ soul level as truth. They are words of truth and love. They are words of compassion and courage. They are words of a prophet. They have power to awaken another. They are words spoken from God, which bring light, justice, truth and love to a world needing healing.

Silence ever so gently teaches non-violence. As we grow in understanding of ourself, both the beauty and darkness and we start to see with eyes that behold, then we slowly and gently begin to live in a non violent way. The gentleness that silence uses to teach us then flows out into our relationships with our self, others and the environment.

Silence also teaches us a new way to pray. As we slowly embrace silence and silence embraces us we find that silence is starting to invade our prayer. We no longer have many words to pray. The desire now is to sit and listen, to wait just to be in the Presence of I Am. This praying goes by many names- prayer of the heart, prayer of union, contemplative prayer. It is the prayer of silence, the prayer of surrender, the prayer of lovers. It is the prayer of “letting go”, “emptiness”, “nothing” and “spaciousness.” It is the prayer of love where emptiness and

¹³ Nouwen, Henri *The Way of the Heart* pg 46

fullness are one. It is the prayer of unknowing and knowing. It is the silent wordless prayer where healing occurs but nothing appears to be happening. It is prayer of life, love and shadows. It is a prayer of grace it is done to us rather than us striving to do it or control it. It is the prayer of the humble.

Living silence today

As I said earlier, silence is not a normal part of life but it is so important. On the program Big Silence Father Christopher Jameson spoke of how silence is necessary for our soul. If we don't have silence our soul will wither. If we want to hear the still small voice of God we need to make space for silence.

Silence is gentle and slow, too often we are agitated and fast. So when we do meet with silence it may not be a very comfortable experience. This was shown so wonderfully on the BBC program showing 5 ordinary people entering silence of a monastery. They all experienced restlessness, anger, boredom, loneliness and unexpected emotions but over time and very gently inner stillness occurred leaving them feeling peaceful and hopeful.¹⁴

So the question is how do we live and experience silence in today's world. Silence is all around us, nature speaks silence. Even though nature is rarely silent, that is without sound, the sounds from nature are sounds that arise from relationship. The wind rustles the leaves. But beneath the sounds there is silence. Picald captures this beautifully when he says "the flowers are like silence that has thawed and glistens in the sunlight."¹⁵ He then goes on to say "the things of nature are filled with silence. They are like great reserves of silence."¹⁶ We in New Zealand are blessed with abundance of nature. If we take time to go out and be in it, see it with eyes open to wonder then nature's silence will gently touch and restore us.

We can start making our homes more silent. Turning off the tv, radio, phone, computer, even if it is for an hour. Talk less and listen more. Slow down and savor things. Taste the coffee, feel the sun and breeze on our body. Smell the fragrance in the air. Be alive to the present moment.

A daily prayer discipline such as lectio divina, centering prayer or meditation helps to create the space for inner silence. It helps to allow the whisper of God to be heard. This silence is then carried through the day.

¹⁴ Father Christopher Jamieson *The Big Silence* <http://www.worthabbey.net.bbc/links-youtubeBS.htm>

¹⁵ Picald, max *The world of Silence* pg 138

¹⁶ Picald, Max *The World of Silence* pg 138

Silence and Spiritual Direction

When reflecting on my experience of spiritual direction I realized that it had a huge part to play in my awakening to silence. When I started spiritual direction I was a very busy woman and there was no silence in my life. Life was busy, fragmented and incredibly tiring. Spiritual direction was probably the only place I experienced silence. And it took a few visits to even experience it but experience it I did. I renamed spiritual direction as the place of truth. For what happened was I was welcomed into an environment that was quiet, uncluttered and attractive. There was a physical stillness there and when I came with all my busyness the stillness and silence seem to wash over me. It was only then that I became aware of how I was feeling. But it wasn't just the environment that welcomed me into silence but also my director. She is a woman who is a companion of silence, she is able to sit and wait. She listens with an open heart and mind and there is a wonderful spaciousness to her listening and presence, so allowing me to feel safe and welcomed. I was a guest graciously received.

It was from there I started to hear the deep cry of my heart. Spiritual direction has been invaluable in giving me the encouragement to listen and dare to respond to the deep call of silence.

I now realize how important it is for directors to be friends of silence. Directors need to be in the process of being formed and shaped by this living silence. We need to be comfortable with silence and be learning from it. Silence needs to be emptying us and filling us. With silence we are more able to behold the directee, seeing the sacred and holy. It will be easier to sit listening with compassion and hope. And we will be able to companion another with trust and hope as they wait in darkness. And we will be able to offer a little piece of silence in a busy world. If we live with silence we can also help another to live more silently.

My Growing Edge

Early on in this project I came across a little reflection lying on my dressing table. I read it and knew the response immediately. It was Matt 13:45-46 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

What is the pearl of great price for you? *Silence* was my answer.

What cost is involved? *Everything*

Are you willing to pay that cost? *I don't know.*

And now as I end this project I have come to realize how deeply and persistently Silence has been calling. And I hold the answers to the questions knowing I have no comprehension what "everything" means. Nor do I know if I am willing to pay the price. As I go through my notes I come across these words of Cynthia Bourgeault "we try and make silence part of our life, rather than silence *being* my life. Enter silence with no intention of leaving it."¹⁷

So I pray the words of the Angelus

Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

Be it done to me according to your word.

Amen.

¹⁷ Bourgeault, Cynthia *Deepening the Silence* cd

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