

How Our Quiet Got Stolen  
Beacon UU Congregation  
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My friend Marie just wrapped up a 10 day silent retreat at a tranquil Meditation Center in California called 29 Palms. She was euphoric afterwards. Honestly, I am in awe. 10 days of silence? I recall attending a weekend silent retreat at the Insight Meditation Center in Barre, MA many years ago and went so bonkers from not talking that I ventured out into the woods during our breaks and babbled maniacally to myself. I guess that's not so crazy given that, during the pandemic, many people combatted loneliness and isolation by doing just that – conversing with themselves or with their pets, as possible. My pup Miss Billie and I had many stimulating chats.

When I lived in the Boston area, I frequently visited Kripalu, a Center of Yoga and Spirituality in the Berkshires where breakfast is a “silent meal,” and that took some getting used to when you are accustomed to schmoozing over morning coffee. On my first visit I remember the amplified sound of jaws chewing on vegan granola and scrambled tofu and spoons clinking against bowls of organic yogurt topped with brewer's yeast and agave nectar throughout Kripalu's cavernous, light-drenched dining room.

One can always aspire, right? So, at the start of visit 15 to Kripalu, I took one of the badges I saw others wearing that read: “In Loving Silence,” announcing that they would not speak while they were there...not just breakfast, mind you. Epic fail. God bless their sweet silent souls. Could you do it? If so, I salute you.

For a myriad of reasons, we live in a society that has trained our hearing sense to prefer (or at least expect) the clamor of human words and noise over the still small voice of the Spirit that resonates in the silences. We are perpetually distracted by radios, Netflix, Spotify, conversation, traffic, beeping cell phones and devices, the static of our thinking monkey minds; the opening words and readings and benedictions and announcements of our highly verbal liturgy.

Some of us welcome this distraction, while others aren't even aware of the condition. It's just "normal" -- a dissonant Universe of white noise. And then, some of us are squeamish with silence in the segues of our lives, the small moments. A restless voice booms....*what's the latest on Tik Tok* when the quiet becomes just a tad too real, noticeable, or prolonged.

In a Dharma talk by the spiritual Master Maitreya, he asks: "Why are we afraid of silence?" In response, I'd argue that silence is misunderstood as the antithesis of content. And because silence is often relegated to the "dark night of

the soul," it can be labeled as depressing and lonely. Some theologians even consider it the playground of Satan! Then again, much of our disdain for silence may reside in that acclimation to a world bloated with noise. As Maitreya points out, "There is little quiet in our lives. In the silence, you can listen to the soul. In silence, you can speak to the Divine. This does not mean you have to sit in silence, stiff and upright." "No," he writes, "it means you need to be aware of the quiet, listen to it, and not be afraid of it."

As I see it, Maitreya hits the mark squarely when he suggests that our fear of silence arises from the inevitable discomfort we're likely to experience as issues, authentic feelings, pain, and longing bubble up in active contemplation. In the Biblical Book of Kings, Chapter 19, we're told that God was not in the earthquake or the fire, but in the still small voice afterwards. Sometimes, that still, small voice says things to us we sorely need to hear, but which are sorely hard to hear. At times, the toxic chatterbox in our head blunts our ability to notice what matters.

There is an old joke that UUs are Quakers who don't know how to shut up. There may be some truth in that. I'm quite verbal. But this morning, we will try, by experimenting a bit with silence, adding an additional quiet respite after the sermon.

You may have heard the piece recently on NPR called "The Quietest Place on Earth." No, it isn't a California retreat center! Apparently, it's an anechoic chamber at a lab in Minnesota that is so silent that the background noise is measured in *negative* decibels. Experiments have shown that this room is a deeply disorienting place that will drive the average person mad in 45 minutes. That's the record. How do you think you would fare?

I'm not going to add 45 minutes of silence to our service, although from experience I can tell you that anything beyond two minutes has been annoying for some congregants over the years. My intention is that this little extra oasis of quiet will provide a taste of a valuable spiritual practice we can each choose to cultivate in our everyday lives, dropping more deeply into a place where we grow to recognize and listen to the voice, still and small, deep within all. And, where we might experience, as a result, a calm and joyful grounding that could impact profoundly on other areas of our lives -- our work and relationships, our mental and physical health, our self-esteem, our ability to focus, and our sense of belonging on this planet.

In a fascinating essay on this topic, the scholar Rubin Gotesky notes that "Silence in religious experience has always been considered one of the roots for attaining ultimate union with God, the Absolute, the "Arch-Good," Nirvana, or whatever humankind has deemed sacred." Buddha himself was known as the Silent Sage.

Silence is the language of the heart. The Quakers perceive it as essential for preparing the soul for spiritual experiences, and Pythagoras is said to have required of his initiates one to five years of absolute silence in order for them to attain a correct approach to knowledge.

In the Hebrew Scripture, silence is a vehicle for meeting the Holy as well as becoming wise. In Psalm 46, we find the famed admonition: "Be still and know that I am God." As a means of cultivating wisdom, silence is emphasized in Ecclesiastes in sayings such as: "A wise man will keep quiet till the right moment, but a garrulous fool will always misjudge it." I'd like to have *that* embroidered on a pillow! In the New Testament, little is said directly concerning the use of silence. Jesus does encourage his followers to seek isolation and the silence of solitary prayer, but there is no special emphasis on silence as a means of attaining union with God or Self.

Silence acquires extraordinary status among the Christian mystics and monks, beginning with the Desert Fathers of the first century. These ascetics emphasized the importance of silence in a variety of significant modes -- flight from man, non-speech, quietude, solitude, silent prayer, and contemplation, but they used these modes according to their own inner requirements.

It wasn't until the formation of later monastic orders, such as the Benedictines, that we find institutionalized rules applying to silence. Thomas Merton is a more modern exemplar of Christian contemplative practice. We don't have the luxury of a monk to retreat to places like Kripalu every time we need a silent Sabbath and we certainly can't encamp to a mountaintop cave and sit on a cushion facing the wall for the rest of our days. And, frankly, that isn't real world spiritual growth anyway.

Both Buddha and Jesus extolled the value of emptiness in *real life*. Like tranquil silence, emptiness cannot really be expressed or captured. But, unlike negative emptiness that represents scarcity, sublime emptiness is full of spirit. It is a kind of spaciousness, rather than a barren landscape.

Each year, as the 40-day season of Lent arrives (as it will on February 22nd) millions of modern Christians commit themselves to active contemplation and to some form of personal sacrifice in preparation for Easter on April 9<sup>th</sup>. The Lenten season coincides, by the way, with the forty days spent by Jesus fasting and praying in the wilderness (and possibly talking to himself and listening for the still, small voice).

Even though we are non-creedal Unitarian Universalists, we can join with our Christian neighbors in letting go of something we consider detrimental in our lives and adding something that enriches it. Giving up chocolate for Lent this year?

Facebook? Twitter? Tik Tok? If this helps you, ok...and I encourage that, given that the need to disconnect from media has become a public health crisis.

In his article, "How Our Quiet Got Stolen" (the source of my sermon title), journalist Johann Hari relays compelling evidence that we are developing what is called an attentional pathogenic culture – an environment in which sustained and deep focus is becoming more elusive. This is leading to poorer performance in school and at work, weaker relationships, and more mental health issues. Being constantly tethered to our cell phones is causing the same dopamine spikes as drugs and other addictions. Dopamine floods the brain with pleasure, but this wears off and leads to pain and craving.

One solution is to alter our habits. Lent is a container to begin that process. Personally, I will attempt to let go (once again and to the best of my ability), of succumbing to non-stop internal and external chitchat and noise, and committing myself to a season of more active contemplation. Will you join me?

The late, great Rev. Peter Gomes, long-time Minister of Harvard's Memorial Church, prepared a pamphlet for us students at the Divinity School, entitled, "How to Keep a Good Lent." I'll tell you that nowhere in this slim treatise does the Right Reverend Mr. Gomes mention chocolate. He does, however, suggest "three S's: Silence, Study, and Service." Regarding silence, he echoes Maitreya's words, writing that "the world is a noisy place, and even our small corner of it has more than its fair share of noise. Silence is therefore a rare and precious thing."

Gomes recommends fifteen minutes of silent reflection one day per week of Lent. I'd counter with an alternate suggestion that you attempt a minimum of five minutes per day of absolute silence in which you do nothing at all - no problem solving, no organizing, not even high thinking. This is a practice to begin now, regardless of the calendar.

Experiment. Take small one minute silent Sabbaths through out the day. Once you find your niche, and silence becomes natural, you may crave more, and you'll wonder how you got along before *without* this daily dose of contemplation. As you allow silence to wash over you like a cleansing wave, you may experience a Mysterious Presence that nurtures from within. Power down your devices. Look into the eyes of your companions.

All of us mere mortals, myself included, must experience both the agony and the ecstasy of quiet, just as the mystics and monks have for centuries. Surely, distractions there will always be. But, after a while we can learn to tame the dissonance as the calm soul of all things meets us with a whisper and an embrace at the door of a tabernacle of resonant silence.

May we open that door with joyful surrender and find a stillness just over the threshold. Let's practice this together in silence. Blessed be, blessed we and Amen.

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