

## *Finding God in the Depths of Silence*

People who are interested in issues of peace and justice surely recognize at this point in time how communication, vocabulary, and conversation have reached a very low point in our society. I think we are aware of that in our politics, but we are aware of it in our churches, too. It feels like the only way through this is a re-appreciation for this wonderful, but seemingly harmless, thing called silence.

How do you market that which is inherently unmarketable? How do you sell silence? How do you make attractive what feels like selling air or selling emptiness or selling something that, certainly to the capitalistic mind, would not immediately be attractive at all? Let's try anyway!

Silence is not just that which is around words and underneath images and events. It has a life of its own. It's a phenomenon with almost a physical identity. It is a being in itself to which you can relate. Philosophically, we would say *being* is that foundational quality which precedes all other attributes. When you relate to the naked being of a thing, you learn to know it at its core. Silence is somehow at the very foundation of all reality. It is that out of which all being comes and to which all things return. (If the word silence does not grab you, you can interchange it with nothingness, emptiness, vastness, formlessness, open space, etc.)

## Silent Compassion

What we do know is that all things are a *creatio ex nihilo*, that every something, by God's plan, first comes from nothing! If you can first rest in the nothing, you will then be prepared to appreciate the something. When nothing creates something, we call it grace!

Such silence was described in the very first two verses of the Book of Genesis. The first reality is described as a "formless void," and the Spirit is "hovering" over this silent void. The Spirit is silent but powerful. And the coming together of these two great silences is the beginning of our creation, at least in the Judeo-Christian story.

Silence precedes, undergirds, and grounds everything. We cannot just see it as an accident, or as something unnecessary. But unless we learn how to live there, go there, abide in this different phenomenon, the rest of things—words, events, relationships, identities—all become rather superficial, without depth or context. They lose meaning. All we search for is a life of more events, more situations which have to increasingly contain ever-higher stimulation, more excitement, and more color, to add vital signs to our inherently bored and boring existence. It really is the most simple and stripped down things that ironically have the power to give us the greatest happiness—if we respect them as such. Silence is the essence of simple and stripped down.

This need for stimulation is the character of America and most Western countries I am afraid. We must be honest about this. There are so many signs of deterioration of culture all around us. Everything has to be a little louder, a little brighter, a little newer, a little more expensive, a little classier, and especially a little quicker. And then the Americans will come. It is

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not, “If you build it, they will come,” but “If you make it fancy, they will come.” And we have grown used to this. We accept as normative what even the Roman emperors knew was a sign of decline: “Bread and circuses are all this people needs or wants,” they said. We close schools and build sports stadiums that look like cathedrals.

One of the most important experiences for me has been to teach in so many developing countries, where I came to the recognition that most of the world does not live the way we live. But even more sadly, they want to!

We must not think of ourselves as the norm or the goal. This is not necessarily a healthy society. We are not necessarily the best culture or the greatest, although I know Americans are trained to think that way. It is only easy to think that way if you have never been outside of America. We surely have some wonderful aspects to our society, and some very unhealthy aspects, too, including that we would not see silence as anything attractive or useful or necessary or important or even good. In time, we become more a shell with less and less inside or in the depths of things—where all the vitality is to be found.

We need to try to see silence as a living presence of itself, which is primordial and primal, and then see all other things—now experienced deeply—inside of that container. It is not just an absence, but, also by that very fact, a *presence*. Silence surrounds every “I know” event with a humble and patient “I don’t know.” It protects the autonomy and dignity of events, persons, animals, and all things.


We must find a way to return to this place, to live in this place, to abide in this place of inner silence. Outer silence means very




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little if there is not a deeper inner silence. Everything else appears much clearer as it appears or emerges out of a previous silence. And when I use the word *appear*, I mean it takes on reality, substance, significance, or meaning. Without silence around a thing, which is a mystery, nothing has meaning or meaning that lasts. It is just another event in a sequence of ever-quicker events, which we call our lives.

Without silence, we do not really experience our experiences. We have many experiences, but they do not have the power to change us, to awaken us, to give us that joy that the world cannot give, as Jesus says.



To live in this primordial, foundational being itself, which I am calling silence, creates a kind of sympathetic resonance with what is right in front of us. Without it, we just react. We are Mexican jumping beans, reacting instead of responding. Without some degree of silence, we are never living, never tasting, as there is not much capacity to enjoy, or to appreciate, or to taste the moment. *The opposite of contemplation is not action, it is reaction.* We must wait for pure action, which always proceeds from a contemplative silence.



Silence is not the absence of being, but it is a kind of being itself. It is not something distant or obtuse or obscure of which only ascetics are capable. But rather you may have already experienced deep silence, and now you must feed it and free it, and allow it to become light within you. You do not hear silence (precisely!), but it is *that by which you do hear*. You cannot capture silence. It captures you.

Silence is a kind of thinking that is not thinking. It is a kind of thinking which *sees* (*contemplata* means “to see”). Silence,






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then, is an alternative consciousness. It is a form of intelligence, a form of knowing beyond bodily reacting, which is what we normally call emotion. It is a form of knowing beyond mental analysis, which is what we usually call thinking.

By the age of seven, almost all of us have separated our body and our soul from our mind, and we give all of our credence to our mind, disconnected from our bodies, disconnected from our souls, which abide and grow more in silence.

Descartes was not wrong when he said, “I think therefore I am.” He was accurately describing the Western person. Our thinking is who we think we are, I am sorry to report. But we are so much more than our thoughts about things.



All of the great world religions at the higher levels discovered that this tyrannical mode of thinking has to be relativized, has to be limited, or it takes over—and rather completely takes over—to the loss of primal being. And pretty soon, words mean less and less; they mean whatever we want them to mean. (We must be honest here.) But this leads to more and more cynicism and suspicion about all words, even our own. This is our post-modern culture. We all use words to mean what we want—so that we can get what we want. It is an incestuous circle.



Listen to the character of whatever political debate emerges in this country: guns, health care, war, or whatever the recent reality show is. The words on either side mean less and less in terms of objective truth, and we have all come to know this. It becomes a game that we all are forced to play. The only way out is often to be silent—like Jesus before Pilate (Mark 15:5; John 19:9).

The soul does not use words. It surrounds words with space, and that is what I mean by silence.