UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
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What Happens When You Immerse Yourself in the Sound of Silence?

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In 1950, the activist Audre Lorde wrote a poem titled "Memorial I":

> If you come as softly
> as the wind within the trees
> you may hear what I hear
> see what sorrow sees.
>
> If you come as lightly
> as threading dew
> I will take you gladly
> nor ask more of you.
>
> You may sit beside me
> silent as a breath
> and only those who stay dead
> shall remember death.
>
> And if you come I will be silent
> nor speak harsh words to you—
> I will not ask you why, now,
> nor how, nor what you knew.
>
> We shall sit here, softly
> Beneath two different years
> and the rich earth between us
> shall drink our tears.

Between the lines of that poem, I hear a caution that **when someone is suffering, if you do not come softly/lightly/silently, then an opportunity to offer comfort will often be missed.** Lorde's poem also reminds me of the Jewish practice of sitting Shiva for seven days when an immediate relative dies: a parent, sibling, spouse, or child. The practice of sitting Shiva creates time and space to be present to grief, and that seven-day window is an invitation for friends and family members to offer a ministry of compassionate presence.

My training in counseling and spiritual direction similarly cautions against presuming to say, "I know how you feel," and instead to recognize that, **"Each individual is the expert of their own pain, suffering, and experience."** Realizing that you can't be an expert on anyone else's interior life, frees you to practice what the Buddhists call "Beginner's Mind" in which you try to let go of feeling like you need to know the right thing to say or do, and give yourself permission to simply be present: softly, lightly, silently.

But sitting in caring, compassionate silence beside a longtime friend or loved one is not the only kind of silence. The poet Billy Collins, in his poem "Silence," says it this way:There is the sudden silence of the crowd

> above a player not moving on the field,
> and the silence of the orchid.
>
> The silence of the falling vase
> before it strikes the floor,
> the silence of the belt when it is not striking the child.
>
> The stillness of the cup and the water in it,
> the silence of the moon
> and the quiet of the day far from the roar of the sun.
>
> The silence when I hold you to my chest,
> the silence of the window above us,
> and the silence when you rise and turn away.
>
> And there is the silence of this morning
> which I have broken with my pen,
> a silence that had piled up all night
>
> like snow falling in the darkness of the house—

> the silence before I wrote a word
> and the poorer silence now.

Or in the words of the contemplative teacher Martin Laird:

> **Not all silence is the same.** There is the awkward silence of the road trip with someone we do not know quite well enough to be silent next to, the refrigerating silence of hardened anger, the reverential silence of dogwoods in winter, the vast silence of a cathedral, the focused silence of absorption in our sewing or a good book, the stunned silence of seeing the status of our pension fund. Each features physical silence, the absence of sound waves, but this silence is merely the outer form of other dynamics. (46)

In young adulthood, when I first began exploring the diversity of the world's religions, I had my first extended immersions into silence among Zen Buddhists, who invited me to enter the zendo, choose a cushion facing a blank wall, and "just sit" for forty-five minutes. As the saying goes, **"Don't just do something, sit there!"** My next forays into silence were among the Quakers, who invited me into an hour of silence in which speaking was only to emerge if the Spirit moves you. As the practice was taught to me, **"Let the next words from your mouth emerge from your best self, else remain silent."** As I continued to experiment with five-minute, twenty-minute, forty-five minute or ninety-minute meditation periods, I began to feel a shift inside myself. It felt like those times in silence were dropping an anchor into the earth such that when the storms of life inevitably arose, I found myself more grounded than I had felt in similar circumstances before I had begun experimenting with interior journeys into silence.

In my mid-twenties, I began to explore the contemplative side of the Christian tradition, including some five-day silent retreats in monasteries. For five days, I would have no access to television, cell phone, radio, computer, or any of the other technological distractions that pervade our modern life. I also did not know anyone else at these monasteries.

At first, I wondered how I was going to pass the time without being bored out of my mind. Full disclosure, part of the point of silence and solitude is precisely to bore you out of your "Monkey Mind." And, indeed, I found the actual experience of my brief stint into monastic life to be both scary and liberating. I took long walks on the surrounding land and got plenty of sleep.

I had time to read leisurely and to eat slowly. Most importantly, in the silence, I found myself in a time of recollection. **Five un-busy days in a row presented me with a more-or-less forced opportunity to reassess my life**: to ponder my past, present, and future without any technology or other person to distract me.

To give you a glimpse into the rhythms of monastic life, the monks at the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky rise at 3:15 a.m. for their first service of the day. And while getting up at 3:00 a.m. sounds terrible at first, it is manageable if you get in the habit of going to bed by 8:00 p.m. with no electronic devices to keep you awake. One advantage of getting up so early is that **many monks have essentially six hours of time (3 a.m. - 9 a.m.) for reading, studying, and meditating before their work duties begin midmorning**. That's an expansive amount of free time for self-care and spiritual growth — every day for a lifetime — that most of us cannot come close to matching. And it is one of many reasons that there are insights monastics of all traditions have to teach us who live in the world. If you are interested in learning more about the monastic life, one of my favorite starting points to recommend is a book called **An Infinity of Little House: Five Young Men and their Trial of Faith in the Western World's Most Austere Monastic Order**. It tells the story of five novices seeking to be part of the Carthusian Order. It's as if they set the TV show *Survivor* in a monastery — Which one will survive? Who will get voted off the island!

Few of us, however, feel called to spend our lives almost exclusively in silence and solitude. But new scientific studies are coming out all the time, heralding the benefits of spending more time in silence than most of us currently do in our frenetic, overstimulated, 24-7 world, although I'm heartened whenever I see stories of schools teaching yoga and mindfulness to young children as we also do in our Religious Education classes here. To take just one example of the benefits of contemplative practices: Some studies on pain management "have reported a [reduction of pain] after as little as four 20-minute meditation sessions. Some mindfulness intervention studies claim to use mindfulness induction techniques, which could be as short as one moment of paying attention to present sensory experience, non-judgmentally and non-reactively." Those words ***non-judgmentally* and *non-reactively* are key**. To share another insight from Laird, **"The opposite of the contemplative life is not the active life but the**

reactive life" (42). In other words, the choice is not between either spending all your life in cloistered silence or spending all your life frenetically in the world. Rather, **spending time in silence amidst your life in the world can greatly increase your capacity to be non-judgmental and non-reactive to whatever stressful situations come your way**.

We hear a lot about *mind*fulness, but equally important is cultivating *heart*fulness in one's meditation practice: opening yourself compassionately to whatever arises as you enter into silence. Regarding what may arise within us when we slow down, the Sufi poet Rumi says in his poem "The Guest House":

> This being human is a guest house.
> Every morning a new arrival.
>
> A joy, a depression, a meanness,
> some momentary awareness comes
> As an unexpected visitor.
>
> Welcome and entertain them all!
> Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
> who violently sweep your house
> empty of its furniture,
> still treat each guest honorably.
> He may be clearing you out
> for some new delight.
>
> The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
> meet them at the door laughing,
> and invite them in.
>
> Be grateful for whoever comes,
> because each has been sent
> as a guide from beyond.

Rumi is encouraging us *neither to repress* whatever arises within us, *nor to fixate* on it. **The invitation of entering into silence is to stop trying to ignore our inner life and instead offer hospitality, compassionate, and welcome to whatever emerges within you** — but then to gently take note of it, then practice letting it go.

Along these lines, I once heard a practitioner lament to the contemplative teacher Thomas Keating that, "During the last twenty-minute meditation period I must've gotten *distracted at least a thousand times*." Keating invited him to **reframe his distress and see the past twenty-minutes as a time when he had *one thousand opportunities to practice letting go* of what Buddhists call the "Monkey Mind."** Just as a beginning piano student or athlete is clumsy at first, you get better with practice. So too with contemplative practices: over time your powers of concentration and insight will strengthen.

Accordingly, I would like to invite each of us to spend at least a few moments experimenting firsthand with what happens when you immerse yourself in the sound of silence. Among the many wonderful contemplative practices in the world's religions from which you can choose, I would like to invite us to experience a Buddhist practice that is less familiar to many of us called nada yoga:

> *Nada* is the Sanskrit word for "sound," and *nada yoga* means meditating on the inner sound, also referred to as the sound of silence. (Interestingly, *nada* is also the Spanish word for "nothing.") **To detect the *nada* sound, [I invite you to] turn your attention toward your hearing. If you listen carefully to the sounds around you, you're likely to hear a continuous, high-pitched inner sound like white noise in the background.** It is a sound that is beginningless and endless.

Try listening for that sound now. I invite you for now to let go of any impulse "to theorize about this inner vibration in an effort to figure out exactly what it might be…. Bring your attention to the inner sound and allow it to fill the whole sphere of your awareness. In a small number of people, the inner sound is oppressively loud." If that is the case for you, I invite you instead to focus on your breath.

In a few moments we will pause for three minutes, after which I will ring the gong to invite you to return your attention to the room. For now, I invite you to put both feet on the floor. Straighten your posture — relaxed but alert. Open your heart. And as distractions arise, practice letting go, gently and with compassion, of whatever is seeking to arise within you. Then return your attention gently to the *nada* sound. What happens when you listen to the sound of sheer silence?