

## The Spiritual Practice of Silence

(Joe Colletti, PhD)

Within the context of religion, silence has long been understood as an important step in spiritual development. Silence has been encouraged in mind and spirit in order for transformative and integral spiritual growth to occur. Centuries ago, Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross promoted a prayer of simplicity within the Christian tradition which merely meant to sit in silence while looking upon God with a simple loving gaze. During the past several decades retreat centers have promoted contemplative prayer as a way of spending time with God in silence. The fruit of a prayer of simplicity and contemplative prayer is experiencing the presence of God amidst quietness.

The Christian scriptures also encourage silence. "Be still and know that I am God (Ps 46.10)" is a powerful verse when we understand these words as being personally spoken to us by God. "Listen to me in silence (Isa 41.1)" is another such verse as well as "Be still before the Lord (Ps 37.7)". We can respond by saying "It is good to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it (Lam.3.27-28)" or by saying "For God alone my soul waits (Ps 62.1)" or "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits (Ps 130.5)" as a way of heeding to God's encouragement to be silent.

Our religious experiences have also understood silence within a context of, and a relationship to, sound. One ancient religious saying notes God as saying to humans "You will never be able to hear my words if you cannot hear my silence." Within the context of worship, congregational members are often asked to be silent between prayers and songs and to reflect on what was just voiced. In Quakerism, silence is understood as an actual part of worship services and a time to allow the spirit to speak in the heart and mind of participants. Thus, silence and sound are intertwined—sound brings silence and silence brings sound.

### Silence and Integration

Within the context of integrating our urban experiences and our spiritual lives, not all sounds are pleasant. Our urban world can be filled with unpleasant and terrible personal incidents, community-wide events, and national tragedies. These are times when the spiritual practice of silence can be very effective. Such times can be initiated by you and just for you or by others and meant for you to join in with others. Either way, they are times

not to be ignored or avoided but seen as times to be used to integrate our urban experiences and our spiritual lives with or without others and either within a private or public setting.

The folk musician Paul Simon of Simon and Garfunkel wrote the song "The Sounds of Silence" in the aftermath of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963. His intent was to capture the emotional trauma felt by many of the country's residents through the lyrics of the song. The opening words are as follows:

"Hello darkness, my old friend,  
I've come to talk with you again,"

and the ending words

"The words of the prophets  
are written on the subway walls  
And tenement halls."  
And whisper'd in the sounds of silence."

These words and other words from songs that he has written lead Time Magazine to call him one of the "100 people who shape our world" in 2006.

Commemorative silence is another means by which silence is encouraged jointly and in public. It is promoted as a way of remembering the victims or casualties of a tragic event. During this time everyone is to quiet themselves and not speak, usually for one or more minutes of silence. One recent example is the time of silence that is part of an annual memorial concerning the events of 9/11. During these minutes of silence, participants are encouraged to remember and reflect on the activities that make up the commemorated event.

Silence can be very attractive when we think about it in terms of serene solitude with God. We may picture ourselves away from the people and places that make up our everyday lives. We may yearn to be high up in the mountains, at the edge of an ocean, or deep within a desert. It is within these circumstances that we may feel that we will experience God unlike ever before.

When we do find ourselves within these conditions we may experience difficulty keeping silent for a length of time. We may start thinking about the very people and places that we sought to escape. We may start thinking

about various things about ourselves. All of a sudden, we are unable to remain silent and feel attentive towards God because these very thoughts become distractions.

It is at this point that we realize that silence appears to be counterproductive and we ask ourselves why. Thomas Merton in his book entitled Contemplative Prayer (p. 90) provided some insight into this dynamic. He noted that we often expect silence to be a medium that results in hearing God speak to us. In other words, while we are silent we expect God to break the silence with words. However, he believed that silence is the message and not the medium. There is deep communion and communication between God and us through silence, and words will only obscure this union.

Other mystics remind us that if we are able to obtain lengthy periods of silence we need to hold ourselves in readiness to hear the nonverbal communication from God. Being ready to hear is necessary for they further tell us that while silent a person hears the words of distress, the cries of pain, and the pleas for help that rise from a suffering world and in turn learns to present these cries to God in intercessory prayer.

Breaking our silence and crying out to God in intercessory prayer may seem like an easy and desirable task. However, hearing the hurts and pains of the world may cause us to distract ourselves before we begin intercessory prayer out of our silence. We start thinking about seemingly trivial things and as a result avoid getting in touch with the hurts and pains of others. Also, we will eventually get in touch with our own hurts and pains by allowing ourselves to experience the hurts and pains of others. Therefore, while distracting ourselves while silent, we divert ourselves away from the hurts and pains of others as well as our own.

We should remember that the more and more silent we become the deeper and deeper we are able to go into ourselves. Ordinarily we do not enter such depths because we feel less and less in control as we journey further and further inward. As a result, too much silence may frighten us because being in the midst of such immense silence opens us to hearing the silence of God unlike ever before which includes hearing the hurts and pains of the world. William Johnston, in his book on Christian Mysticism, wrote

"The inward journey can be described as a journey into the depths of one's being, a journey to the true self and through the true self to God, who is at the center. Down, down, I go through alternate layers of light and darkness, meeting all the slimy monsters and frightening demons that inhabit the subliminal world. And if I progress far enough, I meet the

monsters of the human race. I meet the root causes of war, oppression, torture, hunger, terrorism. I meet hatred, despair, injustice, atheism, darkness, I meet archetypal evil. And, horror of horrors, I meet it in myself. In myself you say, how can that be? How can I be responsible for war, hunger, homelessness, hatred and despair. Alas, we are all responsible. For we all share in the collective acts of the human family. We are not isolated individuals but members of a living and conscious body."

## Conclusion

Silence can be a very effective tool of integration. It is a spiritual practice that allows us to take the hurts and pains of others and to integrate them into our spiritual relationship with God. As a result, we get in touch with our own wounds and learn to integrate them as well.

The seventh century Syrian monk Isaac of Ninevah wrote that

Silence will illuminate you in God... and deliver you from phantoms of ignorance. Silence will unite you to God.... In the beginning we have to force ourselves to be silent. But then from our very silence is born something that draws us into deeper silence. May God give you an experience of this 'something' that is born of silence."

Our integrative experience will only be as deep as our silence. In the beginning we may have to force ourselves to be silent by not allowing ourselves to be distracted from silence in order to avoid our own wounds and the wounds of others.

Experiences such as alienation, separation, isolation, and loneliness are both wounding and expressions of our woundedness. So are life's tragedies such as death, abuse, prejudice, addiction, sickness, and war. Integration, and thus healing, is furthered by a silence that in essence is deep communion and communication between God and us in which words will only obscure the union and impede the integration process.