

November 2009

Formation Beyond Words

Getting to Silence

The profoundest experiences of God's presence often occur in silence—yet silence is elusive.

Outer Silence

Silence is elusive partly because many places in our world are noisy. Once I invited a friend from Chicago to visit my family's farm in rural Indiana. Late in the evening after he arrived, we strolled together down a nearby gravel road to enjoy the moon. "It's so quiet here!" he exclaimed, "not at all like Chicago where things are always noisy. I love this quiet. I could pray here!"

My friend was unusually sensitive to sounds and silence since he had once been a world-class harpsichordist. Still, he had a point: the silence that gently wrapped itself around us that night was radically different than the constant assault of noise in Chicago.

Until the Industrial Revolution, the world was a relatively quiet place. Peasant farmers, whether in ancient Egypt or medieval Europe, as well as rural pastoralists, whether in ancient Palestine or early modern Kenya, lived in a far quieter world than most of us do. Of course cities like first-century Rome, with an estimated 1,000,000 people; or

fifteenth-century Tenochtitlán, with an estimated 200,000 people, were noisy with the sounds of people and animals. Yet these early cities were far less noisy than modern cities with their clanking trains, rumbling trucks, speeding cars, and screeching jets. Even in semi-rural settings, modern life can be quite noisy thanks to leaf blowers and lawn mowers, loud music from the neighbor across the road, and giant farm machinery in a neighboring field.

Therefore the first difficulty in searching for silence is finding a relatively quiet physical setting where our praying and worshiping will not be interrupted by unwanted noise.

Inner Silence

There is a further difficulty. As hard as it can be to find outer silence, finding inner silence is even more challenging. If we live in the quietest place on earth, our minds may (and often do) careen around rapidly among inner thoughts, emotions, and images. Our minds resist becoming quiet and still.

Why Is Silence Crucial?

Some form of regular silence is necessary for spiritual growth. In fact the search for inner silence—and the Divine Silence who inhabits it—has been a prominent theme in the history of Christian spirituality.

For example, the *Rule of Benedict* (6th century), easily the most influential rule in the western church, advises that "since the spirit of silence is so important, permission

to speak should rarely be granted even to perfect disciples, even though it be for good, holy edifying conversation;

for it is written, 'In much speaking you will not escape sin' (Prov. 10:19), and in another place, 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue' (Prov. 8:21)" (www.osb.org/rbl, chapter 6, "On the Spirit of Silence").

Thomas Merton, who was nurtured in the Benedictine tradition—specifically in the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists)—

continued on reverse



Eídon

A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament

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Searching for Silence (continued)

spent much of his life in silence. It is no accident that silence and spiritual perceptivity lived symbiotically in this prolific author.

Silence is necessary at a basic level because without it we cannot “hear” God “speaking” to us. How can we hear the Other when we fill our days with noise and inner monologue? God often chooses to speak in susurrations, and silence may be our only way, or at least our best way, to hear those susurrations.

At a deeper level, silence is essential because it allows us to become aware of a God whose divine life extends beyond our ordinary awareness. That is, silence is not simply about *listening* to God. It is more importantly about *apprehending* God.

Our ordinary awareness is largely constructed on information gathered from our five senses and then processed by our rational mind. But this ordinary awareness only accesses part of God's inexhaustible life. Another part of God, perhaps the larger part, lives beyond what we typically recognize in the course of our daily activities. To access this extended life of God, we must become spiritually aware.

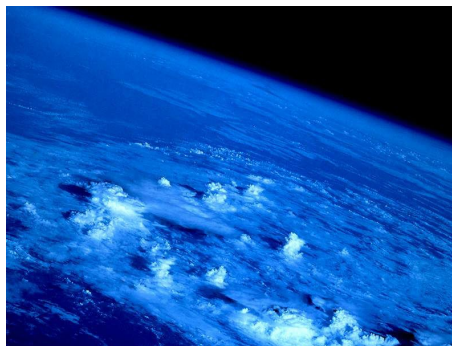
Silence is one of the main doorways to this spiritual awareness. Silence takes us beyond our rational minds to a place where we apprehend God in a different way than we normally do through the media of words and images.

In silence we become aware of our deep connections to Love. John of the Cross, in one of his

many attempts to describe what the spiritual awareness of God is like, said (he writes here about the human soul): “It seems to it that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for conscious of the living point or center of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries of this love” (*Living Flame of Love*, 2:10). Apprehending God is like being in an ocean of love that extends farther than our inner eyes can see.

Practices that Open Silence

Techniques will not lead us to this ocean of love that is God. Yet certain practices prepare us for the gift of inner silence, which in turn prepares us for the gift of spiritual apprehension. I suggest only a few of many possible practices.



1. *Work toward shaping a quieter way of life.* Turn off electronic gadgets. While driving in the car, turn off your radio and cell phone; while at home, turn off your television and computer. Learn to savor the silence. Take quiet walks in God's creation.

2. *Speak less and listen more in ordinary conversation.* This will be harder for extraverts, easier for

introverts. (Note the dangers of the tongue in James 3:1-12.)

3. *Find a contemplative way of praying.* One option is the Jesus prayer (“Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”). In eastern Christianity, the purpose of the Jesus prayer is to help you descend from your head to your heart. “Heart” does not mean entering your feelings, but entering the vast space of awareness where we commune with God.

Centering prayer offers another excellent route to silence (visit www.contemplativeoutreach.org for more on centering prayer.)

Sitting upright in a chair; closing your eyes; and breathing deeply, evenly, and regularly also helps to still your mind and body.

4. *Practice and discuss communal silence.* For instance, you might gather a small group of people who want to pray together in silence. While no other human can take you into silence—you must do the hard work of getting to the threshold yourself—communal silence can shimmer with the presence of God. There is something powerful about sitting with others who yearn for the same goal.

In his acclaimed book *Into the Silent Land*, Martin Laird writes that “There is no definitive map of this land of silence” (p. 2). Yet we may not need a map; for here, even if only for brief moments, we live in the heart and love of God.