

**The Healing Power of Silence** □  
*by Sr. Anne Marie Walsh, SOLT*

We live in a wilderness, a wilderness of noise. Noise is not just about sound. It has to do with the constant barrage of stimulation to our senses, emotions and even our intellect, (read information overload.) The problem with all this noise, pure and simple, is that it is an obstacle to our own inner order and peace, and more importantly, to a living communion with God and with others.

For some reason, many of us either seem afraid of silence, or, more likely, we have lost familiarity with the wonders of silence. Yet it is essential to our physical and spiritual well-being.

Authentic silence is not emptiness. Things come to us in the silence. We hear new languages. We are visited by penetrating peace, insight, God Himself, His wisdom, light, His perception and understanding. In authentic silence we hear new sounds and enter new worlds. In silence we come to know our own hearts.

It is interesting to note how often people observe that the sounds God has put in creation: wind rustling in the trees, birds chirping, the lapping of waves at the ocean, are a balm to the soul. This stands in stark contrast to the agitation and disturbance created by the sounds of the modern world driven by mechanical energy and a volume, a pitch that does violence to one's nerves, stressing them beyond what they are meant to endure. Silence is almost completely exiled from our modern culture. Yet it is exceedingly important for us.

Silence in fact is so important to us that it may be one of the main reasons God has structured us to sleep a third of our days. We know that when we can't sleep, when our bodies and minds are deprived of the stillness good sleep brings, we become sick. Anyone who struggles with insomnia knows the anxiety and frustration lack of sleep brings. "If I could just sleep, I would feel better," is the all too common cry. For those saints who were able to pray the night away and not be ill-affected, it was because they entered a deep contemplative silence that so rejuvenated soul and spirit, the body was refreshed and strengthened by it.

In the Liturgy, given to us by God through Moses on Mt Sinai, and Jesus at the Last Supper, there are spaces for silence. That tells us that silence is part of a Divine Rhythm, part of the rhythm of life in Heaven...it tells us silence is a good thing, a medium for God's communication of Himself to us. The lives of Jesus, Mary and St. Joseph, in particular, bear striking witness to the inseparability of silence from great holiness.

In those who are progressing in prayer, in the inner experience of the presence of God, silence becomes a medium for God's deeper and deeper communication of Himself to the soul. St. Teresa calls one of the early stages of contemplative prayer, the Prayer of Quiet. God begins to suspend, or silence or still the human activity of the mind, the will, the memory, the imagination, the passions, so that He can communicate Himself more deeply. And in that, the soul itself begins to be healed of its defects and weaknesses and disorder. St. John of the Cross poetically describes this as: "My house being now all stilled..." He goes on to say that once there is this stillness (which comes through real purifications) the soul is now able to go out to find God without hindrance or distraction. This, by the way, is often something one sees in those who are going through the process of dying. They become strangely quiet in the months and weeks preceding their deaths. It is as if they no longer have words. In the activity of God in their souls, as they are being readied to enter eternity, they often go through, all at once, the purifications as well as the sweet visitations of the Lord, that the person who prays regularly, goes through over a period of time.

We are all interested in healing these days. This is the true healing we seek, that which comes to us from God Himself, the Divine Physician, which heals us from the inside out and orders our inner being to bring it into communion with He Who is our ultimate bliss and fulfillment.

If we want to be healthy, we must cultivate spaces of silence in our lives. Not the isolating silence so many live in, but a silence that nurtures peace within and communion without. One place to begin is to keep our Churches as sanctuaries of silence, not places for chit chat.

Another concrete step is to actually set aside real time for silence. Silent prayer. Not vocal prayer but a prayer of presence, of being, in silence, in the presence of the Lord, even for 5 minutes a day, preferably in a place where there is no outside noise. (That may be early in the morning before the rest of the family rises.) Simply ask the Lord to take you into Himself for 5 minutes, to be still and know that He is God.

Over 100 years ago, Maria Montessori noted that children have an innate need for intervals of stillness and silence, silence for her, meaning the cessation of every movement:

"One day I came into class holding in my arms a baby four months old, which I had taken from the arms of its mother in the courtyard. ... The silence of the little creature struck me, and I wanted the children to share my feeling. ... To my amazement I saw an extraordinary tension in the children who watched me. It seemed as though they were hanging on my lips, and felt deeply all I was saying. "Then its breathing," I went on, "how soft it is. None of you could breathe as it does, without making a sound..." The children, surprised and motionless, held their breath. In that moment there was an extraordinary silence; the tick of the clock, which generally could not be heard, became perceptible. It seemed as if the baby had brought with it an atmosphere of silence such as does not exist in ordinary life. This was because no one was making the smallest movement. And from this came the wish to listen to the silence, and hence to reproduce it." Maria Montessori (The Secret of Childhood)

She created the "Silence Game" in which children begin practicing this kind of silence for small intervals at first (even 30 seconds), and then for longer periods. There is a joy the children, (and the teacher) experience, when they are able to do this. They later come to ask for the Silence Game when things become chaotic or noisy, recognizing that this silence has the power to restore their inner peace and equilibrium. Then, as a year progresses, the silence begins to happen spontaneously, within the whole group. The children will look up when this happens, smile, and go back to their work. The natural, contemplative spirit of the child, over time, is released.

It may seem like passivity to focus on silence when the world is screaming for answers and actions to address it's many grave problems. Yet, "if The Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labor." Likewise, the walls of Jericho would never have come tumbling down, nor would the people have persisted in the right action, if they had not consulted and stayed faithful to the Lord's rather odd directions.

It has become an almost urgent necessity today, to ask Our Lord and Our Lady to lead each of us to the kind of silence we speak of. The release of a true contemplative spirit among us, one in which the Lord lives and moves us, will, in the end, be the key to the salvation of our modern world.

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