

The Spiritual Practice of "Silence"

From "Spiritual Disciplines Handbook" by Adele Calhoun

"In a noise-polluted world, it is even difficult to hear ourselves think let alone try to be still and know God. Yet it seems essential for our spiritual life to seek some silence, no matter how busy we may be. Silence is not to be shunned as empty space, but to be befriended as fertile ground for intimacy with God."

Susan Muto

Silence

Desire	to free myself from the addiction to and distraction of noise so I can be totally present to the Lord; to open myself to God in the place beyond words
Definition	Silence is a regenerative practice of attending and listening to God in quiet, without interruption and noise. Silence provides freedom from speaking as well as from listening to words or music. (Reading is also listening to words.)
Scripture	<p>"But oh! GOD is in his holy Temple! Quiet everyone—a holy silence. Listen!" (Habakkuk 2:20 <i>The Message</i>)</p> <p>"After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper." (1 Kings 19:12)</p> <p>"There was silence in heaven for about half an hour." (Revelation 8:1)</p> <p>"But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." (Luke 5:16)</p>
Practice Includes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting a period of time in which you don't speak but isolate yourself from sounds (other than perhaps the sounds of nature) • driving or commuting without the radio or CD player turned on • leaving the TV off; spending time in silence with God alone • exercising without attending to noise; listening to God • having personal retreats of silence
God-Given Fruit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being attentive to the voice of Jesus • having freedom from negative habits of speech (deception, gossip, impulsive chatter, small talk, impression management, the need to express your opinion or critique) • freedom from addictions to noise or sound (radio, TV, phone, iPod, etc.) • receiving quiet from the chaos and the noise in your life • having deeper intimacy with God • growing in self-awareness as the silence invites the subconscious to move into deeper levels of knowing • developing increased listening skills

Silence

It is difficult to find silence in an age of technology and information. Silence challenges our cultural addiction to amusement, words, music, advertising, noise, alarms and voices. Silence asks for patience and waiting. And both silence and waiting make us uncomfortable. They seem so unproductive. We can't tell if we are *doing* anything in them. So when we come upon silence, we fill it. We cram it with something else we can learn or do or achieve.

We break the silence of travel with an iPod, Pandora or cell phone; the silence of the evening hours with the TV or computer; the silence of sleep with an alarm clock. Every part of our life is inundated with words—urgent words, random words, trivial words, hurtful words, Words with Friends, managing words, religious words and on and on. In the midst of so many words it becomes difficult to know which messages are really important and which ones we need to remember. To get through the flood of words we develop skills like skimming and scanning. We look for bullet points and bold print. We ask for summaries. We urge people to be brief and cut to the chase. And when we think they aren't saying anything significant, we simply block out their words to attend to our own internal flood of words.

This habit of glancing at words and people extends to our relationship with God. We want pithy, memorable sermons. We want more religious words to chew on. The trouble is there are so many other things we are trying to remember that the sermon evaporates by the time we reach the parking lot. Could it be that what we need is time alone with God and a lot fewer words? Do we need to put on the "Do Not Disturb" button and learn what it is to be available to God alone?

We need to realize that the world can go on without us for an hour or a day or even longer. We don't need to respond to every word and request that comes our way. The discipline of silence invites us to leave behind the competing demands of our outer world for time alone with Jesus. Silence offers a way of paying attention to the Spirit of God and what he brings to the surface of our souls.

In quietness we often notice things we would rather not notice or feel. Pockets of sadness or anger or loneliness or impatience begin to surface. Our own outer agenda looms larger than our desire to be with God in silence. And as the silence settles in and nothing seems to be happening, we often struggle with the feeling that we are wasting time. Everything we notice in this struggle can become an invitation to prayer. Like a can opener, the silence opens up the contents of our heart, allowing us deeper access to God than we experience at other times. As we remain in the silence, the inner noise and chaos will begin to settle. Our capacity to open up wider and wider to God grows. The Holy One has access to places we don't even know exist in the midst of the hubbub.

Jesus told his disciples, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear" (John 16:12). It is the Holy Spirit's job to keep the inner process of revelation underway. But in order for the Spirit to do his job, we need to cooperate and put ourselves in a place to deeply and reflectively listen. Be alone with God in the silence. Offer your body and your attention to God as a prayer.

As you quietly offer your body you can hone your listening reflexes. There is nothing you need to do here. This is not a time to come up with strategies for fixing your life. Silence is a time to rest in God. Lean into God, trusting that being with him in silence will loosen your rootedness in the world and plant you by streams of living water. It can form your life even if it doesn't solve your life. The anonymous author of *The Way of the Pilgrim* wrote, "I need peace and silence to give free play to this quickening flame of prayer." Let the silence lead you to prayer.

Reflection Questions

1. In Revelation 8:1 we read that there was "silence in heaven for about half an hour." What might be going on in heaven's silence?
2. How do you avoid or resist silence?
3. Do you like to fill silences with sound or learning—tapes, talk shows, news and so forth? What does this mean?
4. Where do you have silence with God in your life?
5. How much time each day do you give to silence (i.e., no words, printed or audible)?

6. Do you think God values time with you in silence? Explain.

Spiritual Exercises

1. If silence is new for you, begin with ten minutes. Setting a timer can help a novice who keeps watching the clock. The timer lets you forget the time and settle into the quiet. Intentionally place yourself in the presence of God and become quiet. • As you become quiet what do you hear—voices, traffic, your breath, wind, your heart, distracting thoughts? Let the noise go. Continue to let the quiet deepen. Be with God. • After ten minutes, reflect on what it was like for you to simply become still enough to hear the background. • Try this several times a day. What happens to you? The benefits of being silent are often seen in the fruit it bears rather than in the experience of silence.
2. While doing a task, turn off any background noise and continue the task by offering it to God. Be in the present, doing what you are doing with a listening heart. • What is it like for you? • What distracts you?
3. Go into silence. Begin to meditate on Psalm 37:4—“Delight yourself in the LORD / and he will give you the desires of your heart.” What does this verse say to you? • What desires has God put into your heart? What does God say to you about your desires? • Stay and wait. Ask for the freedom to delight in God and for ability to know and live out your God-given desires.
4. Go into silence, placing yourself in the presence of God with the words “Here I am.” • As distractions come to mind, let them go by imagining they are boats floating down a river. Let the current take the distractions away. Don’t follow the distractions. Gently return to God repeating “Here I am.” Let the current of God’s Spirit carry you. • What is this like for you?
5. Spend a half day in silence: no books (other than the Bible), no music, just listen. What surfaces? • How do you want to interact with God about his gift of silence? (See appendix 8, “Spending Time with God.”)
6. If you struggle with silent time, bring a timer with you to prayer. Sit in a quiet and comfortable place where you can attend to the Lord. Take some deep breaths, relaxing your body and quieting your mind. • Put the timer on one minute. Become still before the Lord. When a distracting thought comes to mind, count it, but drop it into the river of God’s peace. Let it float down the river. Count each thought that comes up and let it float down river. After one minute, how many thoughts have gone through your mind? • Set the timer for another minute. Repeat the same exercise. How many thoughts went through your mind this time? • Repeat the exercise one more time. Ride the river of God. • What do you find out about quieting your soul? • What was it like for you to do this? It takes time to quiet your thoughts; don’t become discouraged. Practice will help you learn how to best quiet yourself.

Resources on Silence

The Awakened Heart by Gerald May

Invitation to Solitude and Silence by Ruth Haley Barton

Sacred Thirst: Meeting God in the Desert of Our Longings by M. Craig Barnes