

The river of grace found in silence

Carol Meyer | Mar. 1, 2011 | Eco Catholic

I've only been to a casino a couple of times, and to me, it was a bit of hell on earth -- constant clicking and clacking of machines, loud music, bright lights, and frenetic energy everywhere. To me, this kind of a place with its constant noise and stimulation symbolizes what is wrong with our culture -- glorifying incessant activity and sound. Even at home, many people have the television or radio on, lest that feared enemy -- quiet -- should sneak in their doors. And apparently jogging or driving are only made tolerable by listening to music or NPR or talking on a cell phone.

This reliance on sound, modeled almost everywhere we go, from the workplace to restaurants to church, has become an unexamined habit, one of the supposed perks of modern civilization. Little do we realize what we have lost in the din. Besides literal hearing for devotees of crashingly loud concerts, we've also lost an inner hearing that can only come from silence. Yet I suspect that deep down the yearning for stillness has never left us. After all, we are part and parcel of nature which is largely silent by divine design. Apparently being--unmarred by restless activity or noise -- is more than enough for our evolutionary elders, the rocks, trees, and sunshine.

I'm not sure how I came to love silence so much. Perhaps from a lot of contact with nature as a child, from religious training and meditation, and from reading self-help books about the inner life. I've always detested having the T.V. on in the background (or even in the foreground, for that matter), preferred quiet when working or driving, and taken time for silent retreats. I'm an extrovert and doer, but absolutely must balance that with quiet, alone time, especially in nature, if I am to be any use at all.

When I was younger, I used to go to clubs because I love to dance, but when the evening was over and I stepped outside into the silence of the night air, I felt so much more at home there. The contrast reminded me of what I really found satisfying. Silence always feels more full and rich to me than sound, a kind of refreshing balm that washes over me and envelopes me in comfort.

And reality seems better apprehended, and thus loved, by removing the distractions and limitations of noise or verbosity. "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10) would seem to confirm that. Various proverbs and quotes tell us that some of the most valuable things--wisdom, insight, clarity, and truth--can only be gained in silence. Jesus and the holiest of people all put a high premium on silence. It's hard to imagine the legendary guru sitting on the mountaintop popping in his or her earpiece to listen to tunes every chance they get, or constantly chatting and talking compulsively. An outward and inward calm and attentiveness to a deeper reality seems a necessity if one is to access the greatest potential.

I'm aware that one of the main reasons people have distaste for silence is that it gives them no place to hide. It allows issues, fears and pains to emerge. Maybe even loneliness. But I can tell you, if you have the courage to face and work through these unpleasant feelings, you will experience new freedom and joy as a result. And once you make friends with silence, it will be your lifelong ally, ushering you into an experience of God never dreamed of.

The coming season of Lent might be a good time to bring more stillness into your life. Turn off the television and radio, talk less and observe/listen more, stay attentive to what you are doing and find God there, do more quiet prayer/meditation where you learn to still your useless running commentary about everything, take more walks in nature and learn from its serene contentment, and just sit and do nothing more often.

Above all, don't be afraid of silence. You won't drown in it, lose yourself, be bored or repulsed. Maybe, just maybe, you will experience what Franz Kafka says in this quote: "You need not leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. You need not even listen. Simply wait. You need not even wait. Just learn to become quiet and still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked. It has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your feet." And just maybe, you will experience ecstasy too.

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