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Earth & spirit: The puppet and the cricket

Rich Heffern | Jan. 20, 2009

Three years ago I interviewed Jay Taylor, director of spiritual formation for the Pentecostal Assemblies of God seminary in Springfield, Mo. His students had been spending some weekends at a remote Trappist monastery. Taylor said the formation team was not interested in creating monks but wanted its students to learn the importance of inward-directed spiritual disciplines.

“It’s more than a little intimidating. It’s a shock when they experience their mind flying all over the place, hearing their inside chatter for what it is.”

Most of us live in a cacophonous world, and suffer for it in ways we’re not even aware of. Since the desert fathers and mothers in the early centuries, silence and a quiet mind have held an important place in the Catholic spiritual tradition.

Buddhists say the silence behind creation has a density to it, a physical-ness. It is teeming with possibility and potential. Silence is creative, healing and, most important, gives us wise counsel.

Healing? A hospice worker cited the cult status among terminally ill patients of the music of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. They called it angel music and asked to hear it as they died. Pärt, who lives now in Berlin and is tagged a “holy miminalist,” writes religious music. People weep inexplicably when they hear it because it’s music that is full of measures of silence. The sounds are there to surround the hush, and because of that each note is particularly lush.

In a delightful interview for a BBC documentary (available on YouTube), the Icelandic singer-composer Bjørk talks with Pärt, bringing up the silence matter.

“I like your music. You give space to the listener with silence. She can go inside and live there, in your music. Most music you just have to sit and listen to, but in yours there is question and answer, almost like Pinocchio with his Jiminy Cricket. The puppet is always making mistakes, causing others grief, sinning. The cricket scolds him but calms and forgives him as well. That’s what your silence is like.”

Trappist hermit Thomas Merton stressed the important role that spiritual back-and-forth Bjørk describes plays in our religious discernment.

“If there is no silence beyond and within the words of doctrine, there is no religion, only religious ideology. For religion goes beyond words and actions, and attains to the ultimate truth in silence. When this silence is lacking, where there are only the ‘many words’ and not the One Word, then there is much bustle and activity, but no peace, no deep thought, no understanding, no inner quiet. Where there is no peace, there is no light.”

“Why are you so afraid of silence?” asked the great Islamic mystic Jallaladin Rumi. “Silence is the root of everything. If you spiral into its void, a hundred voices will thunder messages you long to hear. Silence is the language of God; all else is poor translation.”

Last winter my wife and I spent a week in February in a little house without indoor plumbing in the Missouri Ozark forest. I woke up one morning about 3 and went outside to pee. It was 12 degrees above zero, with no wind. Directly overhead was a moon seen hazily behind an overcast sky through the filigree of the bare silhouetted branches of winter hickories and oaks.

The total silence around me was a presence of its own. It felt like the air around me was pushing in on me, like even my thoughts were muffled. I could hear the urgent rasp of my breath and see it in dense plumes. My steps made squeak-crunch sounds on the snow, but when I stopped -- and held my breath -- I was the only thing alive in the whole cold universe. My heartbeat chanted a liquidy lub-dup that I could feel.

Awake in the forest night, embraced by deep winter's socket-eyed, skull-faced skeleton, with only my own sounds, I noticed that in between the deliberate fleshy beats there was the briefest interlude of nothing ... absolutely nothing but the same silence that made the heavens and earth, the void from which everything emerges, the puppet with his cricket ... as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

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