

February 21, 2016 / Stephanie Loveridge

Silence as Part of the Interior Life

Most of what I have to share is what I have learned and put into practice as a result of reading “Silence” by Thich Nhat Hanh, as well as some excerpts from “Illuminated Life” by Joan Chittister, as well as “The Way of the Heart,” by Henri Nouwen. I was first exposed to the “Silence” book in the Genesis mission group and was so impacted by it that I read it twice more. Much of what attracted me to the Church of the Covenant was the focus on the inward journey. Since joining this church, I have consistently tried, and often failed, to make time for silence and meditation. In the times I have sustained success, I have seen remarkable results. So what I share is my limited experience of living with silence as part of an inward life with God.

Interiority, the making of interior space, is the essence of contemplation. Interiority is the entering into the self to be with God. To practice solitude is to practice being in the moment. Silence is the lost art in a society made up of noise. In 1981, Henri Nouwen wrote that over the last few decades we have been inundated by a torrent of words. He says, “Wherever we go, we are surrounded by words; words softly whispered, loudly proclaimed, or angrily screamed...words, words, words, they form the floor, walls, and ceiling of our existence.” He goes on to say, “It has not always been this way.” That was 1981. I can only imagine what he would say in 2016. I think we have those same battles with words, as well as other types of noise now. Our iPhones are constantly dinging, making us ever more aware of the need to respond. Respond to someone or something. Each ding means something different. There is one ding for a FB message, a different ding for a text, another for email, and another ding for when it is my turn with “words with friends.” And like Pavlov’s dogs, we are trained to respond. We surround ourselves and immerse ourselves in clatter. The noise protects us. It protects us from thinking and listening to ourselves, the creation, and God.

Noise and the pace of life prevent us from getting times of solitude. What else prevents us from making time for silence? For myself, what prevents me many times from engaging in times of silence is poor planning and laziness. I stay up too late and am too tired to get up early and take time for silence and meditation, which mornings, for me, is the most effective time. I often struggle with perfectionism and think of making times for silence the same way I think about dieting and exercise, which is “If I can’t do it on Monday, the week is ruined. I might as well give up.” In reality, if I don’t take time in the morning, I can pray and be silent in my car on the way to work. I can take my lunch hour and go for a walk. I can read in the evening before bed. It is not

“all or nothing” and it’s these perfectionistic ways I am working to overcome. The spiritual life is all around us and happens at every moment; it only takes a few minutes to bring me back to the present moment in mindfulness. That being said, I do believe making time for silence, reading, and meditation is a discipline. It’s a daily struggle and one I don’t think I will truly overcome in this life. But the times I have put this discipline into practice, my day becomes much more meaningful.

What else prevents us for making time for silence? Fear. Fear to really look inside. We fill the vacuum of loneliness with technology and noise. We use these tools to “stay connected” and we are always connected, but we still feel lonely. We may feel an inner void of isolation, or feel unloved or that we lack something important. Having plenty of stimuli makes it easy to distract us from what we’re feeling.

Even when we’re sitting still, with no external stimuli, we often still have an endless internal dialogue going on in our minds. We are tuned into, what Thich Nhat Hanh calls, “Radio NST or “Radio Non-Stop Thinking.” If we aren’t aware of our thoughts, they run rampant through our mind and take up residence there, without an invitation. Often our thinking goes around and around in circles, so we lose all our joy in living. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are continually watering one thing or another in our minds – and, like a garden, what we prune and water yields fruit. When we water negative thoughts, the fruit may manifest as something we blurt out in a conversation, or in our behaviors. We can do a lot of damage to ourselves and to our relationships when we don’t pay attention to what we are watering in our minds. We may believe that we aren’t causing harm to others by just thinking something but the reality is that the thoughts going through our mind go out into the world. Just as a candle radiates light, heat, and scent, our thinking manifests itself in various ways, in our speech and our actions.

So what are the benefits of regularly seeking silence and contemplation?

1. **Other than the basics of decreasing anxiety and lowering blood pressure, silence helps to communicate on a different level with close to us.** Many of us feel that we have to fill the void with conversation. When I see an elderly couple in a restaurant and they aren’t chatting incessantly but smiling at each other, it makes me smile. They are communicating. Silence is communication of the souls. There is something magical about just sitting quietly with another person, and being in complete harmony with yourself and the outside world.

2. **When we practice silence, we breathe and ground ourselves in the present.**

Silence naturally stimulates a focus on our inward breath and outward breath. It brings us back to the here and now. When we make space for silence and reflection, and focus on the simplicity of breathing in and out, we naturally stop to consider the creation.

Silence forces us to look around at nature and be amazed. We notice the bluebird by our window (or in Chris' bird feeders) and the squirrel gathering his nuts. We remember that life is precious.

3. **Silence trains us to listen.** James 1:19 says, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger." When we finally still our hearts, mouths, and thoughts, we are able to listen. When we practice at listening to God, we can extend that listening ear to others. We are not trying to think of the next thing to say, or get the last word. We think about what the other person is saying, really hearing and digesting their words and meaning before responding. When we make time for silence, we are less easily irritated. We are better parents, better children, better significant others...

4. **Silence teaches us to speak.** A word with power is a word that comes out of silence. A word that bears fruit is a word that emerges from the silence and returns to it. A word that is not rooted in silence is like, what is described in 1 Corinthians 13 as a "noisy gong or clanging symbol." All this is true when the silence from which the word comes forth is not emptiness and absence but fullness and presence, not the human silence of embarrassment, shame, and guilt, but the divine silence in which love rests secure. In the creation story, God spoke the world into existence out of eternal silence. In Christ, the word of God, was manifested. In all this, the word of God does not break the silence of God, but rather unfolds the immeasurable richness of his silence. Monks go to the desert to speak out of the silence to the needs of their people. Words can only create communion and thus new life when they embody the silence from which they emerge. When our mind is racing and noisy, outward calm is just a pretense. But when we can find space and calm inside, we will radiate peace and joy and create a healing environment around us, without uttering a single word.

5. **In silence, we find clarity in our self and in God.** Going into the self, finding the motives that drive us, the desires that divert us, and the poisons that infect our souls

brings us to the clarity in ourselves and shines the light on the clarity of God. In silence, we confront the parts of the self that are too tired, too lazy, too distracted, too disinterested to make the effort to nurture the spiritual life. We face the fear, the self-centeredness, the ambitions, the addictions that stand between us and the presence of God. Silence often frightens us because it is silence that it is the very thing that brings us face to face with ourselves. It tells us what we're obsessing about. It reminds us of what we have not resolved within ourselves. It shows to us our own underbelly from which there is no escape, which no amount of makeup can hide, no amount of money or titles or power can possibly cure. Silence, in other words, is life's greatest teacher. It shows us what we are yet to become, and how much we lack to become it. By seeing ourselves clearly, we see God even more clearly. We are thankful for his presence in our messy lives.

6. **The practice of silence and contemplation makes religion real, or as Nouwen puts it, "It guards the inner fire."** Contemplation is not about going to church, though going to church should nourish the contemplative life. Contemplation is about making sacred space in a heart saturated with advertisements and promotions and jealousies and ambitions, so that the God whose spirit we breathe can come fully to life in us. The eyes and the ears are doors which receive information – we see and hear input. The mouth, on the other hand, is a door only for exit. The desert fathers feared this door would be left open and the inner fire would be let out, as a thief takes the horse from the stable. We should faithfully care for our inward fire so that, when it is really needed, it can offer warmth and light to lost travelers.

7. **The regular practice of silence reminds us that we are pilgrims.** James 3:2 says, "Every one of us does something wrong, over and over again; the only man who could reach perfection would be someone who never said anything wrong-he would be able to control every part of himself." James leaves little doubt that speaking without sinning is very difficult, and if we want to remain pilgrims in this land, silence is the safest way. The central idea underlying these teachings is that speaking gets us involved in the affairs of the world, and it's hard to become involved without being entangled. Not to say that we should take a vow of silence but, in looking back on our own lives, how often have long talks proved to be good and fruitful? Nouwen writes, "Would not many of the words we use be better left unspoken? We speak about the events of the world, but how often do

we really change them for the better? We speak about our own ideas and feelings as if everyone were interested in them, but how often do we really feel understood? Words often leave us with a sense of defeat. They can even create a sense of numbness and feeling of being bogged down in swampy ground ... the feeling of having stopped too long at one of the little villages that we pass on our journey, of having been more motivated by curiosity than by service to other. Words often make us forget that we are pilgrims called to invite others to join us on the journey.”

So how do we reclaim silence in our lives?

1. **We need make time for solitude.** Mother Teresa said, “God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer.” We must make time for reading, reflecting, prayer, and just silence. We make time for relationships that are important to us in our human lives, how much more so should we be with the Creator?

2. **We can reclaim the art of non-thinking.** Many Zen masters have said that non-thinking is the key to mindfulness meditation. Reclaiming your attention and bringing your mind and body back together for even just ten breaths can be difficult at first, but with practice, we can learn to be present and just be. Sitting for a few minutes a day and focusing on breathing, being aware of your breath is a start. If you fidget, go for a walk and be mindful of your feet touching the ground. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “As you are walking, you may see your mind being pushed and pulled around by old habit energy or anger or craving. Mindfulness recognizes it, and smiles to it, gives it a nice bath of mindfulness, of warm and spacious silence. With this practice, we are capable of letting negative energy go.” (attached a copy of some breathing meditations from Thich Nhat Hanh’s “Silence” book).

3. **Bring our thoughts back to the present moment.** This is another form of mindfulness and can be done at anytime, anywhere to find more pleasure in life. When we’re cooking, working, brushing our teeth, or doing the dishes, we can enjoy the refreshing silence of our thoughts and speech. One thing David shared with me is that when he is washing the dishes, he really concentrates on each fork. I started to do this when I wash dishes. Out of that came the thanksgiving for water (imagining African women carrying

water for miles just to survive), our well, plenty of food and a working dishwasher. All that came through being mindful of a utensil.

4. **Practice right thinking.** Most of us have problems to solve. We go around in circles in our minds and get nowhere. The more that happens, the more agitated we become. Right thinking requires mindfulness. If we have a problem, we need to entrust the issue to God (or what the Buddhists call store consciousness,) plant it in metaphorical soil, trusting that the earth and sky will make it grow. Let it be and be patient. Then one day soon, the solution will appear because we took refuge in right thinking. Mindfulness and concentration helped water the seed and care for it, and out of that grows the solution.

So, to sum up, I would challenge all of us to reconnect with the discipline of regularly seeking silence and contemplation, in body and mind. Consider starting with each thought; focus on grounding yourself in the present moment, practicing non-thinking and right thinking. And please share with us, your church family, what you are learning. Your sharing has truly inspired me to continue on my own inward and outward journey.

Breathing meditations from “Silence” book

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of my thoughts. Breathing out, I’m aware of their impermanent nature.** (Thoughts. Impermanence.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of my desire for wealth. Breathing out, I’m aware that wealth is impermanent.** (Aware of desire for wealth. Impermanence.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I know that craving wealth can bring suffering. Breathing out, I let go of craving.** (Aware of craving. Letting go.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of my desire for sensual pleasures. Breathing out, I know that sensual desire is impermanent in nature.** (Aware of sensual desire. Impermanence.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of the danger of craving sensual pleasures. Breathing out, I let go of my craving for sensual pleasures.** (Aware of craving. Letting go.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I contemplate letting go. Breathing out, I experience the joy of letting go.** (Contemplating letting go. Joy.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of the air. Breathing out, I enjoy breathing the air.** (Aware of the air. Feeling joy.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of the sun. Breathing out, I smile to the sun.** (Aware of sun. Smiling.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of the trees. Breathing out, I smile to the trees.** (Aware of trees. Smiling.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of the children. Breathing out, I smile to the children.** (Aware of children. Smiling.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of the countryside air. Breathing out, I smile to the countryside air.** (Countryside air. Smiling.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of the food on my plate. Breathing out, I’m fortunate to have food to eat.** (Aware of food. Feeling grateful.)

- ✚ **Breathing in, I’m aware of the fields. Breathing out, I smile to the fields.**