



One can find silence on a meditation cushion, during a tennis match, in nature, or the everyday activities of life, the only requirement is a willingness to be open and listen. Silence is the voice of the universe, said early Taoist sages.

Thundering silence

**"And no one dare
Disturb the sound of silence."**

— *Simon and Garfunkel*

There is a holiness to silence. When you're a kid and you wake up to a hushed sound, you know without thinking that it is snowing. Snow is something of a miracle. Everything looks so different, but for me, it's all about the sound.

The sound of silence.

Woman's Studies scholar Ann McKinnon tells me that sound is different than visual stimuli — sound goes right into the body. Ask any film composer or music producer and they will tell you how sound equals emotion. A song can make tears flow. A few notes can create fear, anticipation, romance — the ears know before the eyes.

The space between notes, the backdrop of emotion, is silence. Silence — empty, cavernous, sweet, frightening — our aural reactions speak to us in ways beyond our awareness.

I know people who cannot bear much silence. Whenever I am in a hotel room, I flick on the TV before unpacking; the sound is my companion. The constant hum of a TV or radio tells us we are not alone. Many people cannot live without the sounds of their iPods, stereos, and satellite radios.

What is it about silence that we must avoid?

In many cultures, silence is embraced. Silence helps form the ritual of shared reverence. Anthropologist Rick Goulden states that elders among aboriginal cultures are greeted by the respectful and meaningful use of silence.

"Pausing before speaking, remaining silent after an elder speaks," says Goulden, "demonstrates that you are digesting their words and showing respect for their ideas and knowledge."

When sitting in silence, I think about things that perhaps I don't want to think about. My friend, Marie Weale, expresses a longing for lost family members that she didn't fully realize until she faced silence.

"Ironically, it was while being alone and sitting in silence that I learned the most about myself."

What happens when we listen to the silence? Certainly, there is no such thing as complete and utter silence. Feet shuffling, coughing,



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stirring, phone beeping, mind turning — we are never without a soundtrack of constant stimuli.

Greg Krasichynsky states that any "dead air creates a vacuum that must be immediately filled with some sort of information."

He asks a profound question: is silence becoming extinct within our culture?

Writer Joanna Cockerline tells me that "there are so many difference silences ... they extend from blissful to agonizing."

Donna Duke says that she's "very comfortable with silence but I live alone and so am used to it and need solitude."

For me, silence is a metaphor for the quiet mind. My mind is constantly turning. It seems there is always something going on in there.

Artist Cherie Hanson refers to it as the "hamster wheel," the mind running faster and faster until, in Cherie's words, it runs into itself.

Been there. Done that.

The still mind, the quiet mind, the unoccupied mind, the empty mind — what is there to be gained in reaching such a state? Yoga teacher Jeff Tomlinson calls this quiet state "the space where the mind wants nothing."

Wanting nothing is an idea we see expressed in many religions. It is strongly associated with patience in Christianity and with freedom from desire in Buddhism. Silence here becomes associated with spirituality.

So what does "the extinction of silence" say about the state of spirituality in our world?

I don't know. I do know that bestsellers like *The Shack* and *A New Earth* tell us something about our appetite for spiritual insight if not spiritual awakening.

Eckhardt Tolle tells us that "our innermost sense of self, of who you are, is inseparable from stillness. The equivalent of external noise

is the inner noise of thinking. The equivalent of external silence is inner stillness."

When Tolle says that true intelligence operates silently, I am reminded of how difficult it is for my mind to find stillness. But apparently this is OK. Life oscillates, so does our attention, so does our consciousness. So being aware of my mind is part of the answer, so say those who know more about these things than I.

No matter what tradition of thinking forms your history, silence is an opportunity to observe — yourself. Just look and just listen. What do you hear?

But what do you do if you are afraid of silence?

"Hello darkness my old friend," the famous song goes. "I've come to talk with you again." Marshall McLuhan tells us that "darkness is to space what silence is to sound."

In darkness, there is a kind of refuge from things that you can see to things you can't. In acoustic space, there is also a kind of refuge from the eyes, an escape from the dominance of seeing itself, but I will not lie to you: the anxiety remains.

I sometimes lie in bed at night thinking. My mind wanders and I find myself not thinking anymore but listening. I listen to the wind blowing leaves past my window. I listen to the house creak, the furnace vibrate, and the sound of the universe, which kind of sounds like a rocky beach with twisted wind-shaped trees and a sliver of moon.

I listen and pretty soon I am listening to myself breathe. I am listening to the blood flowing in my body.

I find myself listening to myself listening and then my thoughts leave me altogether and I am listening to something new, something that sounds remarkably like a snowflake fluttering in the black sky toward the ground.

What is the sound that a snowflake makes when spinning against the dark sky? What is the sound of being alive?

I am.

You are.

I am.

You are.

We are.

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