

SILENCE SPEAKS TRUTHFULLY

Notes to a presentation by Michael Whelan SM PhD
Sacred Silence in Literature and the Arts Conference 2019
Friday 4 October 2019, Australian Catholic University, Strathfield.

(This presentation is a meditation. Silence is approached as an attribute of Being – not something we invent or impose. Something beyond mere absence of noise.)

1. Breathing exercise – 10 minutes. Explain briefly.

2. Read excerpts from Les Murray's "Noonday Axeman"

You are encouraged to read this poem before reading the following text. You can find this poem at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/noonday-axeman/>

The silence of the "noonday axeman" talks to us of the passing of time and with it generations of human beings; the silence hands us ordinary moments of then and now and the trauma of an existence that was just too painful for some. The silence claims our attention. It is our loss if we refuse to pay attention. It is also dangerous because the silence accuses us. It asks what of the trees and the human beings who walked among those trees before we came along to clear and split and saw and ringbark ... Those beings – trees as well as humans – we have traumatised or simply destroyed. They speak now in silence.

There is no arguing with silence. No negotiations. We must submit or run away. Our running away would be an evasion of what is true – a truth that cannot be found other than in the silence.

3. Learning to listen to silence:

Max Picard writes:

"Silence reveals itself in a thousand inexpressible forms: in the quiet of dawn, in the noiseless aspiration of trees towards the sky, in the stealthy descent of night, in the silent changing of the seasons, in the falling moonlight But above all in the silence of the inward soul – all these forms of silence are nameless: all the clearer and surer is the word that arises out of and in contrast to the nameless silence" (Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, translated by Stanley Godman, Gateway Edition 1948/1952, 26).

Silence may be found readily in nature. It is also to be found in art in its many

expressions. Picard again:

“Music is silence Silence is never more audible than when the last sound of music has died away” (Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, translated by Stanley Godman, Gateway Edition 1948/1952, 27).

And so the relevance of Theodor Adorno’s words I have used as an epigraph to this meditation:

“When I hear great music, I believe that I know that what this music says cannot be untrue” (Hans Kung, *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence*, SCM Press, 1991, 33).

I would like to give some attention now to the interdependence between speech and silence. It is an interdependence that evokes deep anxiety for many. Yet it is crucial if our communications are to carry any serious freight. Words need silence in order to live. Silence needs words in order to be discovered.

4. Silence and speech:

At the beginning of *The Rule of St Benedict*, the disciple is called to “listen with the ear of the heart”. This implies not only a profound *respect* for silence but an acknowledgement of the *potential* for silence itself to be *a place or experience of encounter*. Of the many and varied references to silence in *The Rule*, possibly nothing speaks more eloquently of silence than the brief and simple instruction to the Cellarer: “regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected” (Chapter 31: 10-11).

If we can listen to the unspoken – the silence in things – maybe we can begin to hear and see as Hopkins heard and saw:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came. (“As kingfishers catch fire”)

In his book on silence in *The Rule of St Benedict*, Ambrose Wathen OSB cites an Italian philosopher:

“Silence and speech are integrally related. One thinks in silence, reflects in silence, meditates and contemplates in silence. One listens in silence. But even more, silence is speech. Every word is born in silence and returns to silence. The

word is born in silence, lives in silence, culminates in silence. Silence is the father of the word, of speech” (Andrew Wathen OSB, *Silence*, Cistercian Studies: Number Twenty Two, 1973, xii).

The Jewish philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, offers a good reason for the necessity of holding in tension the interdependence of silence and speech:

“Knowing is not due to coming upon something, naming and explaining it. Knowing is due to something forcing itself upon us. Thought is a response to being rather than an invention. The world does not lie prostrate, waiting to be given order and coherence by the generosity of the human mind. Things are evocative. When conceits are silent and all words stand still, the world speaks. We must burn the clichés to clear the air for hearing. Conceptual clichés are counterfeit; preconceived notions are misfits. Knowledge involves love, care for the things we seek to know, longing, being-drawn-to, being overwhelmed” (Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, 1965, 109).

It could be argued that, in the West, we have largely missed the importance of what these thinkers – and so many others, especially poets and mystics – are saying. Westerners, for the most part, are strangers to the necessary relationship between silence and speech. This alienated life is implied in Unamuno’s observation of his peers a century ago:

“Don Quixote has not arrived at the age of *taedium vitae*, which is commonly manifested among not a few modern spirits in the form of *topophobia*: these people spend their lives running at top speed from one place to another, not from any love of the place to which they are going, but from odium of the place they are leaving behind, thus fleeing all places, which is one of the forms of despair” (Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, trans Anthony Kerrigan, Princeton University Press, 1990, 354).

Do we dare to stand still and face what “led (our) forbears to drink and black rage and wordlessness”? What is it about silence that can provoke so much resistance?

Blaise Pascal wrote in his *Pensées*:

“The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by John Warrington, London: J M Dent & Sons, #392).

Yet, he also said:

“I have often said that all men’s unhappiness is due to the single fact that they cannot stay quietly in a room” (Op cit, #269).

It is worth reading Pascal’s reflections on what he calls “divertissement” or “distractions”.

Thomas Merton might help us to understand this estrangement from silence:

“When we are quiet, not just for a few minutes, but for an hour or several hours, we may become uneasily aware of the presence within us of a disturbing stranger, the self that is both ‘I’ and someone else. The self that is not entirely welcome in his own house because he is so different from the everyday character that we have constructed out of our dealings with others—and our infidelities in ourselves. There is a silent self within us whose presence is disturbing precisely because it is so silent: it can’t be spoken. It has to remain silent. To articulate it, to verbalize it, is to tamper with it, and in some ways to destroy it” (Thomas Merton, “Creative Silence” in *Love and Living*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979, 35-36).

Merton writes further in the same essay:

“If we are afraid of being alone, afraid of silence, it is perhaps because of our secret despair of inner reconciliation. We have no hope of being at peace with ourselves We will never be able to face ourselves at all we will keep running and never stop. Silence makes us whole if we let it. Silence helps draw together the scattered and dissipated energies of a fragmented existence. It helps us to concentrate on a purpose that really corresponds not only to the deeper needs of our own being but also to God’s intentions for us” (Thomas Merton, “Creative Silence” in *Love and Living*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979, 37-38).

The British-born American philosopher and theologian, Denys Turner, represents the Christian tradition well when he emphasizes the way speech naturally brings us to a point of submission to silence:

“It is in the profusion of our affirmations that we encounter the limits of language, and then break through them into the dark silence of transcendence. It is through the fissures in our discourse that the darkness of the apophatic is

glimpsed” (Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 32 & 33).

Turner reminds us of a crucial distinction here that we must respect when we speak of Ultimate Reality/God. We must always operate within the interplay between the *kataphatic* and the *apophatic*:

The ‘*kataphatic*’ – from the Greek roots *kata*, meaning ‘thoroughly’ or ‘entirely’ and *phanai* meaning ‘speak’, thus *kataphasis* meaning ‘affirmation’ – says it is reasonable to break the silence at times, because there are some meaningful affirmations we can make of God and the actions of God. Thus we say, ‘God exists’ and ‘God is love’ and ‘God entered history as a human being.’ Such affirmations are worth making, they say something valid and meaningful. This is sometimes referred to as *via positiva* (‘the positive way’ or ‘the way of affirmation’). Karl Rahner is speaking within this *kataphatic* way when he writes:

“(T)he one who has retreated into the heart hears there in its depths, despite the night and in the midst of its silence, God’s quiet word of love” (Karl Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*, translated by Annemarie S Kidder, Orbis Books, 2010, 20).

This is the kind of affirmation that is readily heard “in the silence of the inward soul”. It is not a definition or an analysis or just another piece of information. It is an example of what St Francis de Sales might embrace within his motto: “Cor ad cor loquitur”.

The ‘*apophatic*’ – from the Greek roots *apo*, meaning ‘from’ or ‘away’ and therefore some kind of negation or breakdown, and *phanai* meaning ‘speak’, thus *apophasis* meaning ‘denial’ – says we must protect the ultimate incomprehensibility and unknowability of God by negating all affirmations. Thus we say, ‘God does not exist, God is more than an existent’ and ‘God is not love, God is more than what we could ever possibly understand as love’ and ‘Nothing we can say of or about Jesus explains the Incarnation.’ This is sometimes referred to as *via negativa* (‘the negative way’ or ‘the way of negation’). Meister Eckhart is speaking within this *apophatic* way when he writes:

“No man can see God except he be blind, nor know him except through ignorance nor understand him except through folly” (Meister Eckhart in Raymond Blakeney, *Meister Eckhart*, Harper Torchbooks, 1941, 200).

What I said of Rahner above can similarly be applied to Eckhart, except that we are here speaking of negation rather than affirmation. Both bring us into silence.

In Western Christianity, an excess of the *kataphatic* – and a playing down of the *apophatic* – has led to a loss of the potentially rich interdependence of silence and speech and with that, a loss of contact with reality itself. Speech that is not deeply rooted in silence is, at best, just a useful instrument to convey information and at worst mere chatter. Whether we realise it or not, we presume to replace the truth in silence – a truth that is *only* found in silence – with the perceptions that our thoughts and our words contain. St Augustine had some wise advice:

“You cannot assuredly see how much it would have helped you if you had only known how to be ignorant in what you do not know, and how this help is still open to you. For if understanding pleases you so much in human nature – and we must say that if our nature lacked this understanding, we would not differ from brute animals, so far as our souls are concerned – understand what it is that you do not understand, lest you understand nothing, and do not despise those who, in order that they may truly understand, understand that they do not understand what they do not understand” (St Augustine, *De anima et eius origine* (‘Concerning the soul and its origin’) IV, xi, 15).

The words of Job come to mind:

Then Job answered the LORD:

‘I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you’ (Job 42:1-5 – NRSV)

5. Detachment as an opening to silence

One of the crucial themes Christianity shares with most other religious traditions is that of detachment. Detachment is in the end about freedom – freedom from the false and illusory and freedom for the true and the real.

Silence and detachment are of a piece. Listen to the silence evoked by this poem.

I will pause for a moment or two at the end and let the poem have its way with you:

It is eighteen years ago, almost to the day –
A sunny day with the leaves just turning,
The touch-lines new-ruled – since I watched you play
Your first game of football, then, like a satellite
Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away,

Behind a scatter of boys I can see
You walking away from me towards the school
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free
Into a wilderness, the gait of one
Who finds no path where the path should be.

That hesitant figure eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,
Has something that I never quite grasp to convey
About nature's give and take – the small, the scorching
Ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay.

I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying that God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.

(Cecil Day-Lewis in *The Complete Poems*, Sinclair Stevenson, 1992)

Pause

Do you experience “the silence of the inward soul”, as Picard names it? Is there perhaps a shared silence between you and the writer of this poem? In what sense might it be true that there is potential for universality and therefore unity in and through silence?

A good poem – like any good work of art – calls us into silence. It is there that we deepen the awakening and enlightenment begun by sound or sight or touch. The work of art is the servant of silence. It is also thereby a source of transcendence.

Let's take this a little deeper. Listen to the words of St John of the Cross. Again, I

will pause for a few moments silence after this “poem”:

To reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing.

To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing.

To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing.

To come to the knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing.

To come to the pleasure you have not you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.

To come to the knowledge you have not you must go by a way in which you know not.

To come to the possession you have not you must go by a way in which you possess not.

To come to be what you are not you must go by a way in which you are not.

(St John of the Cross, from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk I:13, 11, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD).

Pause

One of the gifts of the journey of detachment is a silencing of the discursive mind and the liberation of deep human knowing. The wisdom of the best thinkers in the Western Christian tradition reminds us that the summit of knowing is found in not knowing. The true journey of knowledge leads us more deeply into silence. St John of the Cross reminds us:

“The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul” (St. John of the Cross, “Maxims and Counsels – Maxims on Love”, #21, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, Washington: ICS Publications, 675).

Thus:

“If you are able to understand what you are saying about God, it is not God.” (St Augustine, *Sermon*, LII, vi, 16)

“It is impossible for any created intellect to comprehend God ... (even) by the revelation of grace we cannot know of God *what he is*, and thus are united to him as one unknown.” (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q12, a7 & a13, ad 1)

This appreciation for the end point of human knowing is very much in tune with the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures. Thus Isaiah declares himself to be “lost” in the presence of God, who then anoints his lips and enables him to speak again – see 6:5-8.

When Moses asks the name of Ultimate Reality the response is an invitation to enter and trust the silence: “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:13-14).

6. Silence in symbols

Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, in her fine book, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty*, writes:

“In Western culture we have many bad habits to overcome that we have built up for centuries. Enamored of our own powers of analysis, we lost sight of mystery, and with its loss we stopped feeling the presence of God. We became obsessed with debating what revelation was saying, and we forgot those beyond us for whom there was only silence. We have allowed ways of thinking into the Christian life which have little in common with the gospel of a God so in love with humanity that he took on flesh to live and die with us. In doing this, we have privileged minds and ideas, and disparaged bodies and intuitions: in short, we have become less human. We have forgotten the beautiful vulnerability of the Last Supper as we tried to control the world through our intellect and power. Today, in what is becoming a world culture of symbol-making and symbol-sharing, we have an opportunity to take a fresh look at the arts as they disclose what is most beautiful in us and as they also unmask what is most destructive. In this they can do the work of the revelatory symbol and remind us that God is still speaking” (Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty*, Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012, 24).

Our obsession with analysis and definition might well be a mode of what Unamuno calls *topophobia*, a flight from what we cannot control, and a way of avoiding the language of silence that we will never understand until we learn to accept mystery. Symbols and rituals and art can be healing in this respect.

The psychiatrist, Rollo May, reminds us:

“We forget at our peril that man is a symbol making creature; and if the symbols (or myths, which are a pattern of symbols) seem arid and dead, they are to be

mourned rather than denied. The bankruptcy of symbols should be seen for what it is, a way station on the path of despair” (*Rollo May, Power and Innocence*, Fontana Books, 1976, 70).

Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu cites the Chinese artist and novelist, Gao Xingjian:

“Painting, and it is true of other creative modes of expression as well, begins where language fails” (Op cit, 27).

Gonzalez-Andrieu then goes on to point to the liberation of our knowing that results as analysis and definitions are replaced with – or at least expanded by – symbols. Heschel’s words come to mind: “When conceits are silent and all words stand still, the world speaks”. Symbols are mediators of silence:

“If the use of symbols is ‘another way of remaining silent Because symbolic language is the language of love that transcends words,’ then works of art can testify to the experience of love in those whose symbols we have been given in the work – the artists and the communities behind them. (*She is here citing Gustav Gutierrez.*) However, as with the biblical witness, what the symbols may record could just as well be experiences of radical doubt, the denial that there could be such a thing as love for God and from God, and a wrestling search for such a love. The wonder before such signs should lead us to compassion” (Op cit, 27).

Gonzalez-Andrieu says that “the process whereby artistic creativity is reached and expressed must move into the ineffable and the unnameable, into the ‘silence’” (Op cit, 74). She sums up:

“In speaking from the silence, the arts (even when they use words, as in drama) can evoke a spiritual silenced in their audiences: the silence of wonder. Yet, the symbols, at the same time as they reveal a first moment of encounter with divine gift, may also simultaneously reveal the speech about God of a community. What this means is that the revelatory moment cannot be neatly divided into silence and speech, but is full of multiplicity as it occasions and also expresses wonder. What is more, what may be evoked in the audience is action” (Op cit, 39).

7. Read Judith Wright's "Silence"

Silence is the rock where I shall stand.
The silence between this and the next breath,
that might be – is not yet – death;
the silence between lover and lover
that neither flesh nor mind bridge over;
the silence between word and word,
in which the truth waits to be heard;
the silence between world and world
in which the promise first was sealed;
the heart's silence between beat and beat,
in which myself and silence meet.

Silence is the rock where I shall stand.
Oh, when I strike it with my hand
may the artesian waters spring
from that dark source I long to find.

(Judith Wright, *Judith Wright: Collected Poems*, Harper Collins Australia, Angus & Robinson, 1994, 121.)