

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Healing Silence

with thanks to Roshi Joan Halifax for The Fruitful Darkness

The first thing you notice stepping off the south rim of the Grand Canyon is the silence. Suddenly, the silence. You can walk for hours into that mile-deep chasm and hear nothing but your own footfall and the creaking of your pack, your breathing, your heart pounding in your ears. It is utterly magical, the way the world goes quiet and your mind mirrors the silence ... not an empty silence, but a deep, deeply cleansing, and rearranging peace.

Poet Kathleen Raine wrote, “It is not that birds speak, but men learn silence.”¹ It is not that birds speak, but that we learn silence. When we get quiet enough to listen, there is birdsong, yes, but there is also the space between notes. And what happens in that space? Is it empty, or full?

One of my childhood griefs was the return home from summer camp. The end of camp and the end of summer just about broke my heart; my heart hurt. I remember so clearly sitting alone, tucked into my great grandmother’s wooden rocking chair, giving myself to the silence that would somehow fully integrate in me all that I had experienced over the past month: intense friendships, long river trips in aluminum canoes, bike rides across New Hampshire, and backpacking in the White Mountains, new songs, rainy days in the piney woods, and vast, starry nights. I wanted to contain it all, didn’t want any of it to slip away into the relative smallness or meanness of, say, middle school. It really was the silence that helped; I had no words to express either my joy at the experience or my sadness at what was lost to me.

I now understand that my deepest emotion, then, was loneliness; no one at home could even remotely understand how I had been taken and shaken not only by life in the wilderness but by the community with whom I had shared that wild ride. I sensed just enough, though, to begin to keep an

¹ Joan Halifax, *The Fruitful Darkness*, p. 24

eye out for the as-yet-unbefriended members of my tribe, and the silence made room for me to hear the call to a life's work in spiritual community.

Naturalist John Muir wrote, "I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in."² And here are the words of Lakota medicine man - *wicasa wakan* - John Fire Lane Deer:

The *wicasa wakan* loves the silence, wrapping it around himself like a blanket - a loud silence with a voice like thunder which tells him of many things. Such a man likes to be in a place where there is no sound but the humming of insects. He sits facing the West, asking for help. He talks to the plants and they answer him. He listens to the voices of the *Wama Kaskan* - all those who move upon the earth, the animals. He is at one with them. From all living beings something flows from him. I don't know where or what, but it's there. I know.³

This past Monday evening, when Arlington Street hosted our new friends from Bethel Pentecostal Church, we sat in a circle after dinner and talked about what the church might do to improve the odds for city kids to stay out of trouble. Rico Gethers, a Bethel member, shared that he spent 10 years running youth basketball programs in some of our toughest neighborhoods. For ten years, he opened the gyms and provided the sneakers, the jerseys, and the leadership to create a safe space for teenagers. Still, he said, he lost 80 percent of those kids to the Department of Youth Services.

When Rico Gethers said *80 percent*, I felt as if someone had slapped me, hard. It wasn't just hearing something I didn't want to be true. It was the enormity of it: Rico as David up against the Goliath of poverty, disrupted families, bad schools, no values ... and David lost.

What happened next in our circle is that, suddenly, many voices were raised; people had clarifying questions and comments and interpretations and new ideas. One part of my brain was tracking it, but, mostly, I had just dropped out of my head and into that tender, sacred sanctuary of the heart: I

² op cit, p. 25

³ op cit, p. 25

was just feeling the enormity and poignancy of the death of Rico's dream.

I wonder now what might have happened if we'd just sat together in silence for just a few moments, bearing witness to that death. Maybe - just maybe - we might have sensed the quickening possibility of something new being born.

We do it a lot.... I do it a lot. We fill up the silence; we disturb the peace. Of course we do! It's hard to manage our own big emotions, let alone try to negotiate in a room full of people we've only just met. But maybe we could watch that, and try - just try - to allow a beat or two to pass before we speak. Who knows what might surface from the depths?

Silence is so powerful! One of the hardest lessons for me in pastoral care training was not to try to make people feel better - at least not too quickly! - and to understand silence as a work of love. I was being "demoed" one day - my divinity school class was observing me conduct a mock counseling session - and I reached for a tissue to hand to my classmate, whose eyes had filled with tears as she spoke to me about a recent death. I reached for a tissue, and the professor cried, "Stop!"

"When you hand someone a tissue," she said, "no matter how good your intentions, you are telling them not to cry. They can decide when to get their own tissue; leave the box in full view. Just sit there!"

I put my hands between my knees and just sat there. My classmate recovered from the interruption and, after a few more minutes, began to cry. Soon, she was really sobbing. I moved to get up to go sit beside her, to put my arm around her.

"Stop!" cried the professor. My classmate looked up. "Your job is not to make it better. *You* can't make it better! All you can do is bear witness, and make room for the holy spirit. Just sit there!"

It's hard to believe I actually received a passing grade in that class! It's not like making room for the holy spirit is what I'd call intuitive. But when we maintain a quiet, attentive presence, we open an affirming space for the other person just to be ... and, possibly, to heal.

Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax writes, "For some, silence is a medicine. For others, silence seems like a poison and is actually feared. We in the

‘developed’ world seem to have many auditory strategies that insulate us from the presence of silence, simplicity, and solitude. When I return to Western culture after time in the desert, mountain, or forest, I discover how we have filled our world with a multiplicity of noises, a symphony of forgetfulness that keeps our own thoughts and realizations, feelings and intuitions out of audible range. Perhaps we fear that with silence we might hear the cries of our own suffering and the suffering in the world.”⁴

There is much, much more to say about silence, but perhaps it would be more sermonic to just invite us to share some. Silence can feel frightening, but it can also be incredibly beautiful. Beethoven wrote our final hymn, the *Ode to Joy*, after he had gone completely deaf. Imagine the experience of hearing the ninth symphony emerge from profound silence!

Here’s a beautiful poem to carry us into some shared silence, a time for reflection, meditation, and prayer. It’s by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda; it’s called, *Keeping Quiet*.

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth
let’s not speak in any language,
let’s stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines,
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

⁴ p. 30

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victory with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want nothing to do with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a great silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and then everything is alive.

Now I'll count to twelve
and you keep quiet and I'll go.⁵

⁵ *Extravagaria* by Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), 1958. Translation by Alastair Reid, adapted.

