

**A DESCRIPTION OF DEEP SILENCE**

**A PROJECT/DISSERTATION**

**Presented to**

**THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY COMMITTEE  
at St. Stephen's College  
Edmonton, Alberta**

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

**by**

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0-612-30192-3

## **DEDICATION**

**To Sharon for her constant good counsel and love.**

## ABSTRACT

Silence is revered and practiced in all the world's major religions. Yet, there is very little written about the experience of silence. This research answers the question: "How is deep silence experienced and described?" The project/dissertation begins with a cultural analysis of the way silence is popularly regarded in contemporary North America; from here a preliminary phenomenological study of silence is undertaken resulting in an initial grammar of silence.

From this introductory basis, the qualitative research phase of the study begins. Three women and two men who are dedicated to the practice of silence are interviewed about their experience. An analysis of the interviews results in a summary description of silence. These qualitative findings are then compared and contrasted with the descriptions of silence found in the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers of the early-Christian Church, the writings of the Quaker movement, and in Max Picard's classic *The World of Silence*. After this review, a final integrated description of silence is presented, limitations to the study are noted, and ways this research may be of value in ministry are examined.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am very grateful to the Fort McMurray Catholic School District for a sabbatical study leave during the 1995 school year. This provision of time allowed me to discover silence as I researched and wrote about it. I wish to thank Cynthia O'Donnell, Dr. Carolyn Redl and Dr. Blair Hemstock of Keyano College for their kindness, and insightful criticism. A special thanks to Dr. Blair Hemstock for his detailed editing assistance.

The supportive and accepting atmosphere of the Doctor of Ministry program at St. Stephen's College allowed me to find the courage to write about silence, a topic I have been fascinated with for many years; for this, I'm very appreciative.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my wife Sharon's interest and support. I'm very grateful for her advice, criticism, and patient, loving encouragement.

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Researching silence: methodology, cultural background and terminology.....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Introduction.....	1
B. The research question and the methodology employed.....	5
C. Background to the study of silence.....	14
1. North American culture and silence.....	14
a. Noise.....	19
b. Information glut.....	21
c. Suspicion of the spiritual.....	25
2. The potential contribution of silence to spiritual living.....	27
D. Distinguishing deep silence from other forms of silence.....	30
<b>2. Preliminary phenomenological study of deep silence.....</b>	<b>38</b>
A. Initial descriptors.....	38
1. Interpersonal silence.....	39
2. The silence of rooms.....	41
3. Religious silence.....	43
4. The continuum of silence.....	45
5. Disturbing silences.....	47
6. Involuntary silence.....	48
7. Silence in symbol and gesture.....	51
8. Silence of awareness.....	52
B. A grammar of deep silence.....	54
1. The zones of silence.....	56
2. The silence in relationships.....	58
3. Silence resulting from attentiveness and awareness.....	59

<b>3. Qualitative research: personal interviews on the contemporary experience of deep silence.....</b>	<b>61</b>
A. The participants.....	61
B. The interview process.....	63
C. Antoinette Voute Roeder's profile.....	66
D. Fr. Thomas' profile.....	70
E. Fr. Martin's profile.....	73
F. Diane's profile.....	75
G. Sr. Patricia's profile.....	77
H. Summary of the participant's descriptions of deep silence.....	80
<b>4. Review of the literature: research in classic descriptions of deep silence.....</b>	<b>87</b>
A. The desert experience.....	87
B. The Quaker experience.....	98
C. Max Picard's <i>World of Silence</i> .....	111
<b>5. Describing deep silence.....</b>	<b>122</b>
A. Comparison and contrast of the qualitative research and the literature review.....	122
1. The occasions of silence.....	122
2. Descriptions of silence.....	124
3. Centre of silence.....	127
B. The numinous core of deep silence.....	129
1. The primordial source of life.....	130
2. Endless depths of stillness.....	132
3. Harmony.....	133
4. Naked awareness.....	135

C. Potential applications of research on deep silence.....	136
1. Deep silence and ministry.....	136
2. Deep silence and theology.....	139
a. John Macquarrie.....	140
b. Sallie McFague.....	141
c. Elie Wiesel.....	143
3. Deep silence and liturgy.....	146
4. Deep silence and spiritual direction.....	148
D. Limitations to the study.....	150
E. Personal reflection on this study of deep silence.....	152
<b>6. Works Cited.....</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>7. Appendices.....</b>	<b>162</b>
A. Transcript Interviews.....	162
1. Edited transcript of interview with Antoinette Voute Roeder.....	162
2. Edited transcript of interview with Fr. Thomas.....	188
3. Edited transcript of interview with Fr. Martin.....	204
4. Edited transcript of interview with Diane.....	224
5. Edited transcript of interview with Sr. Patricia.....	241

# **1. Researching silence: methodology, background and terminology**

## **Introduction**

In his book, *Touching the Rock*, John Hull describes how, after going blind as an adult, he painfully surrendered his sense of himself as a sighted person in order to construct a new self-understanding based on hearing and touch. In doing so, he developed an acute sense of hearing. For example, one morning while sitting by his bedroom window he began listening intently to the sound of falling rain. By listening closely, Hull could tell which drops were falling near his window and which were falling by the far corners of his house. He listened even more intently and learned to distinguish between the sound of the rain splattering above on the roof and the different sound it made below when landing on shrubs. As he continued to concentrate, different pitches of sound became distinguishable as the rain struck a brick or a window pane. The pitch even varied slightly depending upon which window pane was struck. Listened to all together, these sounds created intricate patterns with different layers and shapes (131-32).

This project/dissertation reports on a close, intense listening to silence. Silence, like the sound of rain, appears monotonous, dull, and one dimensional, but close attention reveals its distinctive textures, layers, and shapes. Some people today experience a dimming vision, a loss of their accustomed religious sight. They find in an acute sensitivity to silence a way to rebuild their religious selves.

Silence is an archetype of wisdom, and spiritual explorations into silence are a search for wisdom. Images for silence are amazingly similar, but even more striking are the common descriptions offered of the centre of silence, that point where the phenomenon thins and the numinous shines through. The numinous centre of silence is mysterious, enigmatic and deeply attractive (Samuels et al. 191). This project/dissertation describes the experience of deep silence, in order to, hopefully, awaken in readers a recognition of the presence and spiritual importance of silence in their own life.

Some brief biographical information may help the reader by providing a personal context for this project/dissertation. I was born and raised in New York City. My parents were Irish immigrants. My mother worked as a housewife, and my father worked as a bartender. I have one older brother. There is little in my early childhood or family life that explains my current interest in silence. As a child, I was outgoing and very gregarious. In the Catholic school and church I attended, silence was mentioned only in describing the life of Trappist monks and nuns. As children, we all agreed that a life of monastic silence was definitely not for any of us. In my neighborhood, there was a Carmelite convent. It was on a hillside overlooking the Harlem River and upper Manhattan Island. The convent was surrounded by a very high wall and appeared austere and peaceful. I don't recall having any interest in the sister's life of silence.

One of the few vivid personal experiences of silence I can recall from childhood was on those occasions when I made a visit to the parish church at a time when it was not being used for a service. We were encouraged as children to make such visits in order to drop in on God, as it were, and simply say "hello." I recall enjoying the silence and the emptiness of the Church building. Another memory of childhood silence was in elementary school Religion classes when a student would ask a question such as, "How long will heaven last." The answer: "Infinity." The question then deepened, "How long is infinity." The answer: "Imagine a gigantic beach ten miles long and one mile wide covered with sand ten feet deep.

Now imagine that a bird flies by every one hundred years and takes one grain of sand away. Now imagine how long it will take to remove all that sand. Well, that period of time would not even count as a second in infinity." I was impressed. I progressively lost track of the bird, the years, and the sand and sat silent, stilled by a momentary awareness of this strange otherness named God.

The only other experience of childhood silence I can recall was on the rare occasions I would go up alone to the roof of my five story apartment building. Up there, the noise of the street receded and you could look out and see the city stretch on for as far as you could see. There was a stillness on the roof. Apart from those instances my childhood does not contain any notable experiences of silence.

At age thirteen, I spent a summer on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania. A thick woods surrounded the farm. Walking through it was the first time in my life that I was ever really alone. I hunted for birds, squirrels, and woodchucks. The concentration involved in looking and listening for their movements and sounds created in me a new sense and appreciation for silence.

I slowly drifted from my religious childhood piety to an adolescence which morally left a great deal to be desired. I joined the army when I was seventeen determined to be a paratrooper. In the military, however, I discovered an inflexible authority system that would not tolerate my delinquencies. Shortly after my eighteenth birthday, I was in what I considered serious trouble and was very frightened. During this period, I frequently talked to God asking God to help me.

One day, feeling especially anxious, I went for a walk by myself in a park like area on the military base. I was attracted to a grove of tall pine trees and walking into them discovered the sun shining through the trees and lighting a small patch of earth within creating as it were a secluded, private chapel. I had a very strong sense of the presence of God there in that silent, still, hidden place; I knelt down and prayed for what seemed a very

long time. I prayed to get out of trouble. If I did, I promised I would change. On the surface, my prayer appeared, even to me, as filled with self-interest. Some change, nonetheless, took place deep inside me. As I left the grove, I knew that I was a very different person. My awareness of my self, my God, and even the trees and the sunlight had changed. I felt deeply peaceful. I knew then that everything would be all right, but I also reasoned that I was under an obligation to keep my side of the bargain. I wanted now to be a religious person. I didn't want to lead an immoral life. That was thirty seven years ago.

My interest in silence dates from that experience. I associate the reality of God with the silence of that grove. After the army, I joined a religious order and enjoyed the silence of the novitiate years and especially times of retreat. I recall being attracted to articles in religious journals which dealt with the practice of silence. When I continued with my religious studies in the mid to late 1960's, the Thomistic theology and the American nationalism of my youth disintegrated under the renewal of the Second Vatican Council and the moral failure of the Vietnam War. The spiritual sources I came to respect at that time were the Catholic Peace Fellowship, the American Friends Service Committee, and the Vietnamese Buddhists. By 1969, I resolved to leave the United States and my religious order. In 1970, I came to Canada. I married and raised a family while working in schools and parishes as a religious educator.

Silence still fascinated me. I made annual, week long private retreats and generally found the silence to be their most valuable feature. I completed a Masters degree in Theological Studies in 1981 and wrote a thesis on the conversion process in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA.) Looking back, what fascinated me about the RCIA were the many levels at which conversion occurred. I came to understand religious education as being as much a spiritual as an educational process. In religious education with adults, I wanted to somehow re-create in my classes that still place within a grove of pine trees where

God's healing and liberating light shone down amidst a deepening silence. I had a sense that religious learning leads to a silent, still, peaceful type of awareness and self acceptance.

All during this period, I read Thomas Merton. My wife and I were both very much effected by his writings and named our first child Thomas. Merton's love of silence and his constant reference to his need for solitude and silence struck me as commonsense.

If I analyzed my life-story for significant spiritual themes, the ones that would stand out are: silence, peace, quiet, and stillness. I have not come to know God as much by ideas or even through people as I have by an wordless awareness of the One whose reality is beyond what I can imagine. That awareness is rooted uniquely in silence. I value and love silence as a sacrament of the ineffable.

### **The research question and the methodology employed**

All major world religious traditions esteem silence as a necessary element in spiritual living. Effective communication, prayer, meditation, and worship all require silence. A renewed appreciation for silence and practical means for nurturing it constitute a significant spiritual service. Additionally, silence has been a theological concern since the fourth century. An entire tradition of Christian theology, the apophatic, views silence as a privileged means to encounter God. This tradition finds its clearest expression in early monasticism and in the Orthodox tradition as well as in the mystical theology of Eckhart, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila (Johnston 1982, 365).

In modern times, an appreciation of silence is best found in the writings of Thomas Merton and in the developing Buddhist and Christian dialogue. A unique interest in silence is also reflected in contemporary fiction and poetry. Beckett, Ionesco, Kafka and Eliot depict a world in which miscommunication and its resultant loneliness create a pervasive atmosphere of silence (Bien 4-25; Heales and Cook 39-46; Steiner 37-64). The work of Elie Wiesel, [referred to in greater detail in chapter five of this project/dissertation,] is dominated

by a particularly deep and disturbing sense of the silence of God in the face of suffering and inhumanity.

Poets, musicians, spiritual directors, liturgists, and pastoral counselors appreciate the necessity of silence, but there is very little of a practical or theoretical nature written about the experience of silence. What constitutes silence? Can silence be described? I wish to gain a greater sensitivity, awareness, and appreciation for the reality of silence through a qualitative phenomenological study of the experience of people who are "lovers of silence," who deliberately and regularly spend time with silence and for whom silence is an essential aspect of their spiritual life. I wish to determine how such people describe silence.

My personal interest in silence as a research topic deepened as a result of completing a course at St. Stephen's College taught by Dr. W. Paul Jones entitled "Theological Worlds." As part of the course, I completed numerous data sheets, life lines, spiritual autobiographical exercises, and questionnaires. By combining and analyzing them, I found that in every significant religious event of my life the themes of silence, quiet, stillness, and peace were present. The spiritual authors and theologians I respect most, such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and Karl Rahner, all develop the theme of silence (Piehl 87-90; Teahan 91-114; Weger 68-70). Studying Buddhist and Christian monastic writings on silence is a source of consolation and encouragement. My personality favors a quiet, introspective form of silent prayer and presence to God. Silence feels natural. Silence, for me, is the promise of a way home, a way to see in the darkness, a way to be in touch with the Mystery, a way to be in harmony with God. An ability to describe silence is of great personal value and is also of potential value to spiritual directors, retreat planners, pastoral counselors, and liturgists.

When I tell people I am researching silence as my project/dissertation, I receive one of two responses. The first and most common is an intuitive recognition that such a study would be fascinating and valuable. The other is bewilderment and an expressed suspicion that I am joking, which is then usually followed by the observation that the final project will

be two hundred blank pages that effectively capture the feel of silence. Both, however, are concerned with the difficulty of researching silence. Is it possible? A substantial body of research does exist especially in the fields of speech, audiology, psychology, art, music, and religion. Most of this research on silence deals with silence as the absence of sound or as the necessary pause between words in language or notes in music (Munoz-Duston and Kaplan 235-42). There is limited research available on the type of silence I wish to describe, deep silence. Deep silence is that unique form of silence that exists as an autonomous phenomenon, not dependent upon something else. Deep silence is a presence not an absence and it does not function in a dependent relationship to language or music. Deep silence, however unusual, is part of human experience. It can be described and the experience can be conveyed to others.

Silence, as the absence of sound, may be alternately studied from a quantitative or qualitative perspective. For example, one could complete a study of the experience of silence in Banff National Park using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative tools would measure the sound levels in different sections of the park at different times of the day by, for example, recording and charting the decibel readings on an audiometer. Qualitative data could be obtained from structured interviews with park visitors inquiring about their personal sense of the park's relative silence. The same reality, silence as an absence of sound, is open to both quantitative and qualitative investigation.

This is not the case with deep silence. Deep silence can be approached only through a qualitative study. The presence and the characteristics of deep silence are only available through personal disclosures by one for whom deep silence is a real and felt experience (Ely et al. 4-5). A qualitative study examines the "what, how, when, and where of a thing - its essence and ambiance. Qualitative research thus refers to the meaning, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things" (Berg 2). A qualitative study

researches the lived experience of silence as it is revealed in the lives of those who are familiar with deep silence and are able to speak of it.

Kvale notes that qualitative interviews are theme oriented not person oriented. Such interviews try to obtain a precise and specific description of an experience. The interviewer does not try to interpret any motivation to the acting or thinking of the person being interviewed. The focus is on the phenomenon and its meaning, not upon a psychological analysis of the interviewee. To accomplish this, the interviewer needs to know his or her own presuppositions about the phenomenon being researched so as to self-critically suspend them during the time of interview: "The task of the interviewer is to focus upon, or guide towards, certain themes, but not to guide the interviewee towards certain opinions about these themes" (Kvale 176). Qualitative interviews are guided by a deep respect for the experience of the person being interviewed. The interviewer avoids manipulating the unique manner and content of the interviewee's response: "The participant's perspective on the social phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (Marshall and Rossman 82).

My research question, "**How is deep silence experienced and described?**" is answerable only by such a qualitative phenomenological study. I wish to research the "life world" of others so as to understand their immediate lived experience of deep silence in such a way that others in reading the description may recognize and be awakened to the significance of their own experience (Van Manen 1984, 37).

Phenomenological research utilizes a unique way of thinking. One listens, observes, and focuses on a common experience in order to observe what one has lived through thousands of times before but never bothered to notice: the extraordinary intricacy in even the most everyday experience. To encounter this dimension demands a relaxed intensity. One attentively waits for the phenomenon to disclose itself. One does not control a phenomenon like silence. Silence discloses itself. A phenomenological listening to silence is a

contemplative study involving a focused, expectant, and receptive attentiveness. The resulting insights can only be expressed through a redescription of the phenomenon. The redescription functions well if it succeeds in isolating the essence of silence (Van Manen 1984, 38).

The phenomenological process resembles an archaeological dig of one's own consciousness. As the dust of inattentiveness, boredom, prejudice, and convention are carefully removed the skeletal outline, the form or what Van Manen terms the "meaning structure," of the experience under investigation slowly begins to appear (1984, 64). The disclosure of this primal form happens when the written phenomenological descriptions are accurate and vivid enough to evoke the essential themes and structure that constitute the experience.

Phenomenology, with nearly poetic attentiveness, discloses through words the lived sensation of an experience so that the reader is jarred into an awareness or a memory of it.

. . . phenomenology like poetry is a poetizing project: it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice into an original singing of the world. But poetizing is a not merely a type of poetry, a making of verses. Poetizing is a thinking on original experience and is thus speaking in a more primal sense. . . What we must do is discover what lies at the ontological core of our being. So that in the words, or maybe better, in spite of the words, we find "memories" which paradoxically we never thought or felt before. (1984, 39)

Through written phenomenological descriptions, one unearths the original feeling of silence until it rings with a sense and a memory, as it were, of something beyond the ordinary. Deep silence is, as Otto noted, a phenomenon that stands at the door of the numinous (210-14). A phenomenological study of silence brings readers to an encounter with silence and thus to a dimension of their humanity that is closely connected to the spiritual.

One never succeeds in telling all there is about a phenomenon. A phenomenological study is always a personal retelling of experience and is never the last word. This study of silence is not definitive; it is simply a particular description of silence. Even the best phenomenological study always remains simply another example of a reality that can never be fully described.

The challenge in studying silence arises from its seeming ordinariness, the sense that one already knows, what little there is to know, about silence. As mentioned previously, a common response to the research question is, "How can you study something which is nothing? Silence is the absence of sound; once you have said that your research is finished." This very common response indicates the deep power that language possesses to conceal, as well as reveal, experience. To study deep silence requires getting beyond the word "silence" to a reality that is not conveyed properly in ordinary language.

Peter and Brigitte Berger identify language as the most fundamental of social institutions. As one is socialized into a family and its sense of reality, one is socialized even more fundamentally into language which thereafter only allows one to see the world in a particular way. Language's regulating patterns direct, funnel, and stream one's consciousness to be more aware of some realities than others, all the while creating the illusion that one's words and categories accurately describe a reality which is purely external to oneself. Language's social construction of reality remains hidden and subliminal; one's linguistic categories and beliefs take on a deeply trusted sense of objective reality (73-81).

An awareness and understanding of silence is, therefore, deeply affected by language. English has only one word, "silence," meaning essentially the absence of sound, to describe what is actually a continuum of very different experiences. This is a major reason why a phenomenological approach, one which makes strange the accepted everyday sense of the word "silence," that suspends its conventional meanings, and which allows for a fresh experience of silence is required to adequately study it.

A phenomenological qualitative research study follows set stages. First one observes and describes the phenomenon by asking: "What is going on here?" Then one makes sense of the resultant descriptions through analysis by asking: "What are its features?" One then arrives at an initial sense of its meaning through interpretation by asking: "What is to be made of it all?" Then one goes back and deepens the resultant interpretation by gathering more data, and again repeats the process, thereby further refining the analysis until a saturation point is reached where one runs out of newly informative data. The goal is a description that results in increased awareness and thoughtfulness, one which reunites a reader with his or her own lived experience (Van Manen 1990, 30-34).

If one were studying, for example, even such an abstract event as "the experience of uncertainty," one could successfully employ the above qualitative steps without any additional refinement. The experience of uncertainty is diverse and sufficiently present in ordinary daily life so that working solely from personal experience one could uncover ample data for reflection. However, when the phenomenon is as experientially limited and unusually difficult to articulate as deep silence, a methodology that relies solely on the limited data of one's own observations will prove too restricted to be fully effective. When the phenomenon is as subtle as silence, it is best to begin with a study of one's own experience in order to obtain a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon with which to more intelligently approach the experience of others. The experience of others is then subjected to the same phenomenological analysis outlined above: "What is going on here?"; "What are its features?"; "What is to be made of it all?"

This study begins with a preliminary phenomenological analysis of my personal experience of deep silence, which provides the initial sketch or outline of deep silence. This initial understanding facilitates the beginning of the qualitative research phase of the project: interviews with people identified as lovers of silence. Their descriptions of silence are analyzed in order to create a composite description of the phenomenon. The third and final

phase of the study involves a review of the literature on deep silence, in order to establish a dialogue between the qualitative interviews and classic descriptions of deep silence. This dialogue serves to broaden the study and to identify any possible limitations or oversights..

Harry F. Wolcott describes this type of study as a dialectical process whereby one learns something, tries to make sense out of it, goes back and checks it against new experience, then refines the interpretation, and so on (11). This process is complemented by a method of "progressive focusing" whereby one begins with a close up preliminary focus on one's own personal experience of deep silence, then focuses more widely to study the experience of others, then expands the focus still further to contrast the developing description of silence against written classic accounts. The abiding concern throughout is to sharpen the emerging picture by constantly refining details in order to more adequately describe deep silence (18).

Qualitative research interviews require a participant's willing disclosure of personal experience. Those being interviewed disclose aspects of their life that perhaps they have never discussed with another person, or not to the degree that an interview situation invites. It is necessary to safeguard and protect the interviewee from unintentional harm or embarrassment. To ensure this level of personal security, responsible qualitative research requires: the informed consent of the one being interviewed, the opportunity to cancel one's participation at any time, the right to review and edit the interview transcript for clarity and accuracy, and the right to anonymity. Signed consent forms outlining the above are obtained prior to the interview.

Personal qualitative interviews also contain the potential to contribute to a participant's knowledge and self awareness. Involvement in the project could lead to personal growth as participants not only reflect upon their own experience but, through the reading of the entire project/dissertation as it develops, have the opportunity to contrast their experience with others' and thereby deepen their own self-awareness.

An adequate qualitative research project/dissertation on silence requires the following steps:

1. Every phenomenon occurs within a cultural context. There is no such thing as a culturally unmediated experience. To understand silence, one has to first know how it is commonly viewed and interpreted in one's own environment. This process makes strange the familiar and accepted understanding of silence so as to free it from convention and allow it to be viewed from a fresh perspective.

2. Attaining this clarity requires the development of a terminology for silence--clear, basic distinctions that allow deep silence to be set apart from other more common forms of silence.

3. In order to engage in a qualitative study of the experience of silence by others, one needs to understand one's own experience of deep silence. Therefore, a preliminary study of deep silence which focuses upon one's own experience is required. This study results in the creation of a thematic outline, which is then used as a starting point for the qualitative interview process with others.

4. The qualitative interviews involve the recruitment of elite participants. These are people who intentionally dedicate time to silence and are also able to speak about their experience (Marshall and Rossman 84-85).

5. The resulting interview transcripts are refined into "profiles," succinct descriptions of the individual's experience of deep silence [See pages 58 to 64 for a more detailed outline of the interview, transcript and profile process]. From these profiles a composite thematic description of deep silence is constructed.

6. A review of the literature on deep silence is then conducted in order to establish a broad dialogue between the interview derived descriptions of silence and the classic literature. As mentioned earlier, there is very little written on deep silence. Even Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen whose writings are so evocative of silence seldom say more than

a few words directly describing their own experience of silence. The only known sources which describe the actual experience of silence in detail are found in the saying of the desert monks and nuns of the early Christian church, the writings and reflections of the Quakers and in Max Picard's wonderful book, *The World of Silence*. This review allows the developing understanding of deep silence to be contrasted with classic descriptions from different times and cultures. Such a dialogue reveals the strengths and limitations of the interview data.

7. A summary thematic description is prepared which attempts to integrate all of the above descriptions of deep silence into one flowing account.

8. Points of divergence requiring further study are noted.

9. The value of silence in the practice of ministry is briefly considered.

10. A concluding personal note on the how the research affected the author's understanding of silence is provided.

Van Manen believes the validity of phenomenological research rests in its ability to depict for a reader, in a comprehensive and accurate way, the meaning of an experience. This study examines the phenomenon of deep silence from several different vantage points: personal description, qualitative research, and a review of the literature. These multiple approaches promote validity. The reader's judgment will provide the final and most important form of validation: the "phenomenological nod," the assent of a reader that this is satisfying; this reveals deep silence to me (1984, 27).

### **Background to the study of silence**

#### **North American culture and silence**

At present, the dominant North American cultural tradition is deeply suspicious of and resistant to the experience of silence. Guy Lavalley describes the sort of questions he

expects to encounter if he informs anyone that he spent four enjoyable weeks in silence during a recent retreat:

People would wonder: "Is this man for real? Is he strange, or worse? Did he freak out? Is he avoiding the world? Is he a cop-out? . . . What is the meaning and purpose of such prolonged silence? And what good can possibly come out of four weeks in silence?" (37)

The North American cultural fear and distrust of silence reflected in Lavalley's imagined questions are rooted in three causes: the pervasive noise of machinery, the socially created need for constant entertainment, and a profound suspicion of the spiritual.

Yet, within this dominant North American cultural tradition there is also an openness to the experience of silence that is reflected in the minority opinion of poets, mystics, farmers, naturalists, religious communities, and aboriginal peoples. Reginald Bibby notes a cultural shift underway in North America which involves a greater interest in and respect for the spiritual (138-151). A dialogue about silence with a noisy, spiritually pragmatic and information-driven culture is not only possible but is already underway. North American culture engages in an approach/avoidance conflict with silence; many want what it promises but flee from its approach. The following hypothetical incident illustrates this conflict:

*April was Dennis' favorite time of year. The nights were longer; 6:00 PM now and it was still bright and clear, and no mosquitoes. This was his eighth month of steady work driving sulphur trucks. At age thirty one, while not self-satisfied, Dennis felt he was doing all right.*

*On this route, Dennis customarily stopped just north of the hamlet of Wandering River. Apart from meals, this thirty minutes was the only break he allowed himself on the entire ten hour round trip. He pulled into the rest stop; parked the truck, and shut off the engine. He was immediately aware of the intense quiet.*

*There was a path just back of the rest stop which Dennis followed; it was well used and led just a short way to a bench on a concrete pad by the side of a pond. As he sat in the quiet, his attention slowly shifted to the pond. Ice still covered most of its surface, but at its edges the ice had melted back about four feet on the sunny side in front of the bench. The several inches thick ice intrigued Dennis. He wondered why it didn't melt down more gradually to form a thinner sharper edge. He couldn't think of a plausible explanation and so let the question go.*

*The quiet was suddenly broken when a raven left its perch on a tall spruce tree by the pond and flew toward the highway. The noise of the branch moving and the flapping of wings sounded surprisingly loud in the deepening quiet of dusk. But it was the strange burping, croaking call of the raven that effected Dennis. That odd, strange, human like sound caused Dennis to follow the bird's now silent path as it coasted behind the spruce trees lining the far side of the highway.*

*Dennis' awareness imperceptibly changed. As he returned his attention to the pond, he was not aware any longer of the melting ice, but rather he was now aware of the entire pond. His eye's didn't focus on any particular feature of the pond but rather saw it all. If it were possible, Dennis would have moved his bench back to get a broader view. He sat there, peacefully aware of how perfectly the pond was situated. His eyes scanned the shore and the trees without analyzing or focusing on them. He simply observed the pond. His attention was then distracted for a moment by another raven that was riding thermal currents high up in the sky. Dennis saw the raven and noticed an odd shaped cloud to its right. Again, his awareness shifted to the surrounding sky. Dennis enjoyed a general, unfocused awareness of the pond, the sky, and the*

*woods. It reminded him of sitting as a child by the ocean, playing with the sand and staring at the horizon dimly aware of the waves rolling in. He was not so much thinking as simply being aware, of waiting for thoughts to arise, if they did at all.*

*Dennis' breathing slowed further. He became expectant, as if he were sitting in a theater waiting for a film to begin. He was not feeling good or bad, high or low. He simply felt right. It was right to sit here, and it was right that a pond, with melting ice ringed with a woods should be here. He suddenly became aware of his unusual state of mind, and checked his watch in order to do something familiar and reassuring. He still had fifteen minutes left of his break. Part of him wanted to cut the break short and get his truck back on the road, but he chose to remain by the pond and now deliberately brought his attention back to it. He reassured himself, "There's no one here; relax; no one will see you." He found that by just looking at the pond, much as he once looked out at the ocean, he returned to a sense of peaceful openness. Dennis sat there and thought that Spring always felt good, like a homecoming after a long absence.*

*On the highway cars and trucks occasionally passed by, but the woods insulated their noise. The water rimming the edge of the pond between the ice and the shore reflected the sky perfectly. Dennis felt a similar stillness inside himself, as if this exterior scene of calm and stillness was linked to who he was. The stillness deepened further and Dennis felt as if the silence might suddenly tear open and reveal something or someone powerful. He waited for something to happen. He half-seriously imagined a bear would suddenly appear or an enraged moose would charge him. This foreboding slowly vanished, and the stillness deepened even further until it seemed primordial, as if the pond were emerging from the ice for the very first time. Dennis wanted to capture this*

*sense of stillness and quiet. He resumed looking at the pond, feeling as if he had missed something, as if the pond, or perhaps the raven, had said something to him, some word meant just for him. All he could remember was thinking, "It's right to be here."*

*When his thirty minute break was over, Dennis returned to his truck and got it started and back on the road. He put the radio on and began to question himself: "Maybe I should talk to someone. Sitting by a pond really shouldn't affect you like that. Somebody could get carried away with that stuff and there is no telling where you might end up."*

*He resolved to forget about it and turned the volume up.*

In North America, at the end of the twentieth century, Dennis' experience is both uncommon and typical. It is uncommon for anyone to stop and sit quietly for thirty minutes; those who do would generally be disturbed by a deepening silence much less by a primordial stillness and would in all likelihood break off the encounter. It is typical since Dennis will not, in all probability, share his experience of stillness and quiet with anyone, realizing that in North America a deliberate cultivation of personal silence is judged deviant and possibly indicative of mental illness.

Dennis' silence had three phases. He experienced a sense of quiet or absence of sound; then the silence deepened and became a unique context in which various sounds and movements occurred, and finally the silence further deepened to a point where it seemed to stand over apart from him as an independent autonomous phenomenon. These three distinctive dimensions of silence are deeply resisted in North America. The dominant sense of reality is one in which technological and mechanical noise combine with an interior dull weariness or information glut to support a cultural suspicion of silence, especially a profound and primordial silence. The three dimensions of silence that Dennis experienced (silence as absence, as function and as deep silence) are assaulted respectively in North America by

noise, media saturation, and a suspicion of the spiritual until silence seems endangered and driven to the margins of human life, where it struggles to survive.

### Noise

Silence, as the absence of sound or a state of quiet, is assaulted by noise. Since the 1960's there has been an awareness that noise is a potentially harmful and dangerous pollutant. This awareness peaked in the 1970's with the passage of Federal and local statutes regulating noise pollution. This legislation, however, is rarely enforced, except at industrial work sites and urban airports. There is, at present, no significant ground swell of opposition to noise. Noise is generally accepted as the sound of progress and anti-noise movements excite little popular interest. The reasons for this failure include the difficulties encountered in legally defining noise, and the lack of solid, consistent, research data proving the harmful effects of noise pollution.

Noise is difficult to define. It has three distinct but related meanings. First, noise can be considered as any sound, such as radio static, which varies randomly in intensity and frequency. Second, noise can be understood as a background sound which masks the reception of an intended communication such as the din of industrial machinery interfering with a conversation. Finally, noise is simply a sound which one doesn't want to hear such as an annoying clatter or a disturbing yell. Yet, it is obvious as Loeb notes that these definitions are relative since, "a certain sound may be music to the musician and noise in the second sense to someone listening to conversation and noise in the third sense to the person trying to sleep" (7). Although these definitions of noise are subjective in application, there is a common thread that unites them: noise is an undesired sound which creates an adverse effect in a listener (Schafer 18). While still subjective, this definition of noise does allow for a statistical determination as to what noises are most generally undesirable and adverse.

Medical research indicates that long and frequent exposure to excessive levels of noise is a stressor which likely increases the incidence of cardio-vascular pathologies, gastric disorders and hearing loss, while also impairing communication, sleep, learning, and psychological well-being. Because individuals vary widely in their susceptibility to the deleterious effects of noise, it is presently impossible to obtain absolutely conclusive proof, with the exception of hearing loss, that noise causes these disorders. Based on laboratory findings, Bragdon, in his book *Noise Pollution*, believes that noise is, in all likelihood, guilty of serious damage to human health while the charges are stayed for lack of final, unshakable, real-life data ( XVIII).

The present situation, wherein most North Americans live in urban regions in relatively noisy environments, is a comparatively new phenomenon. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the loudest noises in a town or city were from low technology sources such as the sound of a cart's wheel on cobble stones or the ring of a blacksmith's hammer. These are loud and disturbing sounds but are limited in duration and intensity. Schafer, in *The New Soundscape*, estimates that in the pre-Industrial period the noises humans heard were sixty nine percent natural sounds (such as wind, water, thunder, bird and animal sounds), twenty six percent human sounds (such as speech, singing, shouting, etc.) and five percent noise from tools and technology. In the modern period, the ratio of natural and technological noise is nearly reversed with six percent natural sounds, sixty eight percent the sound of tools and technology and twenty six percent human sounds. The sound of nature is now exceptional and the sounds of machinery and technology are commonplace and dominant (6).

Industrial sounds are equated with progress. James Watt, the inventor of the steam engine, recognized that noise is suggestive to most people of power. A motorcycle, outboard engine or vacuum cleaner which operates quietly does not impress one, for example, as much as a noisier model. Attempts to market quiet vacuum cleaners fail because the consumer

consistently equates the sound of a loud motor with its ability to clean. Quiet vacuum cleaners don't sell (Schafer 20).

Harmful levels of noise are even considered entertaining. The televised final game of the 1996 National Basketball Association's championship game between the Chicago Bulls and the Seattle Sonics, on June 19, periodically displayed on the television screen a decibel reading of the noise in the arena. Readings of above one hundred decibels were common. No one seemed concerned that damage to hearing begins at 85 decibels. Rock concerts, on occasion, approach the pain threshold of one hundred and twenty five decibels and are considered pleasurable by avid rock fans.

The constant and, at times, brutal levels of noise from mechanical and technological sources in cities today are unhealthy and damaging. Yet resistance to noise is very slight because noise itself now seems normal, even good. It is quiet that is now suspect, foreign, and threatening.

### Information Glut

Functional silence provides the context in which words and thoughts can be distinguished from one another. When one speaks, a relative silence is necessary between words and ideas in order for them to be coherent. This is the second level or dimension of silence, its functional role as the background or canvas against which words and images are distinguished. When a person thoughtfully searches to find the right figure of speech, word or comparison with which to express an idea, the silent source and background of thought is apparent in the extended pauses and hesitations employed, but all speech and thinking utilize such functional silences in a less obvious manner. Functional silence is best visualized as the empty space on an artist's canvas which allows figures to be distinguished as the silence in speech allows words to be heard.

In the story of Dennis, functional silence appears when he stops focusing his attention on particulars and becomes aware instead of the general setting of sky, woods, and pond, when he feels like a child beside the ocean aware, without straining or focusing, of the interlocked panorama in the backdrop of nature. Functional silence creates a receptivity to nature, events, and oneself. It feels like a fresh vision, a newness, a sense of the depth and origin of all things. Such silence requires openness and leisure.

North America is increasingly an information-based society, in which the general shared and mutually accepted sense of reality is that created by electronic media through their daily provision of news, data, and images. Television stories, news programs, sports events, and media stars dominate North American consciousness. Teachers, preachers, and politicians realize that to get and hold the attention of a class, a congregation or a nation requires using these popular images and stories. It is difficult to exaggerate the power of modern media to shape and affect consciousness. To reveal a serious ignorance or, worse, indifference to modern media personalities or television programs raises the question in some people's minds whether one has a sufficient grip on reality (Postman 164-171).

Michael Warren provides an allegory which illustrates this power. Imagine a country, he suggests, in which gardening is forbidden. All food consumed must come from government farms which are in secret enclosures. No one is allowed to till their own patch of soil or raise their own produce. In two generations the ability to raise one's own food is lost, and one is now fed solely by corporate produce. All living memory of farming is lost. Warren sees North America as this country and officially sanctioned commercial media as the corporate body which secretly creates the produce for our mind:

More and more in modern society, persons do not till their own meaning but rather tend to consume the significance produced for their consumption tilled almost entirely by others. . . Much of the meaning communicated to us electronically is tied to narratives that fed us a version of the world concocted

by persons we never see and rarely ever consider, but a version we tend to swallow even when we don't consciously intend to do so. (176, 177)

In a world of two-hundred-plus-channel cable television, fax machines, cellular phones, e-mail, Muzak, audio systems, CD-ROM, Internet and personal pagers, there is little space for silence. This constant flow of electronic information, whose meaning is created and largely filled by others, is so constant, so imaginative, so compelling and so desirable that one has little time or incentive to pause, to step back, to see the context, to hear the silence out of which it all arises.

Functional silence requires a certain degree of interiority or self awareness in order to be recognized and developed. This type of interiority requires quiet, leisure, openness, and freedom from manipulation. It is precisely these qualities that an information society discourages. The Media provide entertainment, propaganda, data, and trivia in such quantity as to produce a sense of glut, an existential weariness.

Writing in 1994, Douglas Rushkoff recounts the Amy Fisher/Joey Buttafuoco farce that so entertained North America two years earlier. Rushkoff sees in it a classic instance of how a story of utterly no significance becomes part of most everyone's conversation and yet the story is essentially a meaningless entertainment:

A quick surf through the TV channels on a weekday afternoon reveals that Geraldo, Donahue, and two other wireless-mike hosts are, simultaneously, doing shows about the Amy Fisher story. Geraldo's playing clips from three television movies . . . One of the movie clips begins with a reenactment of a "Hard Copy" press conference, where actors playing the tabloid news show's producers screen a tape they will air on the program that night. . . This tape, we learn from the "Hard Copy" narrator, was secretly recorded by [Amy's] boyfriend with his camcorder. The TV movie cuts from the actual videotape of Amy and her boyfriend to another television monitor, this one in the

dramatized home of Amy Fisher, played by Drew Barrymore, who is watching the episode of "Hard Copy" in her living room, shocked.

So on TV we watch Geraldo watch a monitor play a TV movie enacting a press conference where a tape is rolled of a TV show that in turn plays a tape - the actual, real-world tape purchased for the movie - made by a guy cashing in on a media scandal, only to pull out and reveal a third-generation American actress pretend to react as the real Amy Fisher might have.

By this time Geraldo takes a commercial break, during which an evening news special is pitched that promises to air a brand-new Amy Fisher tape made by another of her boyfriends . . . . Of course, all these media events are being discussed concurrently on computer bulletin boards throughout the country and the story has turned up in the form of an Amy Fisher comic book. This house of mirrors within mirrors is the American media scope. It is more than a mirror of our culture; it is our culture. It is where we spend our time, our money, and our thought. (19-20)

Many North Americans wake up with the news, read it at breakfast, listen to it on the way to work, at work, and coming home from work. Finally, they go to sleep after listening to the late night news. They do this because news is interesting, compelling, at times exciting or titillating. Also television broadcast news creates a certain stress, a jolt of fear and anxiety that is addictive. This media dominance of consciousness results in a feeling of dull glut, a loss of self awareness and presence. This constant diet of information does not lead to any particular insight or understanding, simply to more information that is quickly forgotten. George Steiner described it as a form of weariness:

There is a widespread intimation, though as yet only vaguely defined, of a certain exhaustion of verbal resources in modern civilization, of a

brutalization and devaluation of the word in the mass-cultures and mass-politics of the age. What more is there to say? How can that which is novel and discriminating enough to be worth saying get a hearing amid the clamor of verbal inflation? (46)

Media's current topics of interest arrive suddenly as crises demanding total attention and absorption and then fade gradually out of sight replaced by a new crisis leaving the viewer with a fullness of nothing in particular, a weariness that knows no relief except to keep tuned in to see what is happening. If the original crisis returns in more than a week the viewer often has difficulty placing it back into context, so much has happened since it was last featured.

The awareness of functional silence involves attaining a critical distance both from oneself and the surrounding environment, a stepping back to see the context, the background to one's thoughts and speech. Subjection to a constant flow of data, images, and conflicting ideas leads instead to a blurring of context, a loss of chronology, a confusion of themes and personalities until one is left like the character Chauncey Gardener in the film, *Being There* unable to tell where television leaves off and reality begins.

### Suspicion of the Spiritual

Deep silence is more than the mere absence of noise and the functional gap between words and sentences; it is the experience of an autonomous phenomenon that stands apart, that fills a space, that is present and tangible. Deep silence, for example, is most commonly encountered in entering a sacred space such as the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., or as the still atmosphere surrounding an elderly loving couple. Dennis encountered such a silence when the stillness of the pond deepened and he sensed a primordial presence. Deep silence upset and frightened Dennis; he didn't know how to respond to it or, indeed, if it was something to which one should respond.

There are some signs that this suspicion of silence is weakening in North America. There is a broad-based interest amongst religious people and the general population in spirituality. In the last twenty years, popular interest in the spiritual has deepened. Meditation training, self-help therapies and groups, twelve-step programs, yoga and other disciplines have become commonplace. Because of this burgeoning interest, deep silence does find a small, supportive, and interested audience. Others are discovering the joy of being quiet in back-packing, mountaineering and walking. It is not possible to know how much of this turning to the spiritual, this exploration of inner space, this desire to be at peace leads to an experience or appreciation of deep silence. Henry David Thoreau, in his Journal entries for the latter half of December 1838, is one naturalist who certainly knew of deep silence. There is not one major characteristic of deep silence that Thoreau does not note in these mere five pages of scattered entries (Keller 43-58). Undoubtedly, like Thoreau, some people today are discovering how vast and mysterious silence is. There is a great difference between 1838 and the late 1990's, however, because to come to deep silence today, a person has to be at ease with the first two levels of silence, silence as absence and as function. Because of modern noise and information glut, this ease or comfort level with silence is more difficult to accomplish. There is one additional factor that creates a uniquely modern obstacle to an encounter with deep silence: the contemporary "suspicion of the spiritual."

David Hay notes that this hesitancy toward the spiritual is compounded by what has been termed a hermeneutics of suspicion. This is a pervasive mistrust of personal experience, particularly religious or spiritual experience. One fears that one is misinterpreting or projecting sexual, political, or economic needs onto an imagined God. The resulting experience of self-alienation is then misunderstood as a form of spiritual confirmation when, in fact, it is a self-deception. Religion and spiritual experience are widely suspected of being comforting illusions created by individuals unable to face the harsh political, economic, and interpersonal facts of life. This atmosphere of caution and suspicion ironically itself creates a

"repression of the sublime," a deadening of spiritual awareness on the part of those affected (140 -142). Today, despite a resurgence of interest in the spiritual, there is still a great reluctance to discuss or take seriously one's own moments of sublime or vivid religious experience. There is a strong fear that one will be revealed as simply repressing, projecting or transferring psychic energy from "below" while claiming to receive it from above. There is a strong fear that upon examination one's experience will be reduced to a mere physical, social, or psychological cause. In this atmosphere, one will tend, like Dennis, to turn up the volume of background noise and repress the sublime.

There are recent indications that North America is, perhaps, moving toward a greater recognition of spiritual need. Reginald Bibby, in commenting on the state of religion in Canada, sees the imminent church crises regarding personnel, finances, and membership as perhaps a prelude to a deinstitutionalized period of spiritual renewal. Bibby wonders if perhaps the cultural pendulum has reached its most rational point and is about to swing back to a recognition of the numinous (95). Bibby is, of course, unable to answer this question; what is certain for the moment is that the contemporary period in North America is generally resistant to and suspicious of deep silence.

### **Potential contribution of silence to spiritual living**

Henri Nouwen has described a trip through Los Angeles as a trip through a huge dictionary, "Wherever I looked there were words trying to take my eyes from the road. They said, 'Use me, take me, buy me, drink me, smell me, touch me, kiss me, sleep with me.' In such a world, who can maintain respect for words?" (45-46). For Nouwen, modern life in North America means being inundated with words (45). Today, it feels as if the mind is being bludgeoned by words, and it at times shuts down under the relentless assault. When this is combined with the increasing noise of urban life, Nouwen's call for a "ministry of silence" makes sense (58). In North America, noise, as noted earlier, is normal and silence is

abnormal, but almost all religious traditions esteem silence. The potential spiritual contribution of silence is rooted in its biblical, theological, liturgical, and pastoral functions. A renewed appreciation for silence and a practical means for nurturing it would constitute a significant spiritual service in our time.

The Christian scriptures make very few direct references to silence and the overwhelming majority of those are to silence as an absence of speech or sound. Sometimes, though rarely, scriptural deep silence is made explicit, as in Elijah's discovery of the presence of God in a gentle soundless breeze (1 *Ki* 19:12), in the psalmist's command to "be still and know that I am God" (*Ps* 46:10), in Jesus' often going apart to pray and in his silent response to Herod's questioning (*Lk* 23:8-12) and in the Book of Revelation's half hour of silence in heaven after the seventh seal is opened (8:1). The scriptures, however, are not concerned directly in developing the explicit theme of deep silence. Biblical deep silence appears more clearly as a consequence of the central biblical themes of the utter transcendence, radical incomprehensibility, and ineffable nature of God. Deep silence is indirectly expressed in the biblical prohibition against the manufacture and adoring of images, and paradoxically in the excess to which the scriptures go in multiplying names and verbal images of God. The Bible creates an abundance of names and images for God which are taken from nature, and from political, family, social, and economic life. The numerous variations and often contradictory names and titles imply that God is unknowable by any name, image or concept. This hidden, implicit sense of God's incomprehensibility caused a long struggle in the early Church over the very possibility of a positive theology.

Elizabeth Johnson summarizes the reasons why the early Church struggled for so long in order to develop a religious language adequate to the nature of God:

God's unlikeness to the corporal and spiritual finite world is total; hence we simply cannot understand God. No human concept, word, or image, all of which originate in experience of created reality, can circumscribe the divine

reality, nor can any human construct express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God, who is ineffable. . . In Augustine's unforgettable echo of the insight of earlier Greek theologians, if we have comprehended, then what we have comprehended is not God. This sense of an unfathomable depth of mystery, or a vastness of God's glory too great for the human mind to grasp, undergirds the religious significance of speech about God; such speech never definitively possesses its subject but leads us ever more profoundly into attitudes of awe and adoration. (441)

As a consequence of this struggle, the early Church in the first six centuries developed a three-fold way of arriving at knowledge of God: affirmation, negation, and transcendence. One affirms an attribute to God such as love. Then one considers the nature of human love and negates it by seeing how far short it falls in throwing light on God's love. In the negation, one glimpses for a split second the totally incomprehensible nature of God's love. The negation is thereby transcended, and "In the end we are united to God as to an unknown (450).

A key figure in the development of the negative way is Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. For Dionysius, the way to know God is by a "knowing ignorance" (Pelikan 32). Silence, for Dionysius, is the best means of understanding God. Dionysius followed a two step methodology: first, demonstrate that God is beyond all categories, words or concepts and then approach the resulting transcendent, ineffable sense of God in silence (Rorem 130).

The scriptural theme of the total transcendence of God, coupled with the negative theological tradition of the first six centuries, continued in the mystical tradition of the Rhineland mystics (Eckhart, Tauler and Suso,) the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross (Johnston 1982, 365). In contemporary times, Roman Catholic monasticism, and the mystical theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church, are examples of those who continue an appreciation of deep religious silence as a

way to God. In this theological approach, one methodically arrives at an intellectual sense of the utter incomprehensibility of God and a resulting form of unique deep silence.

Spiritual disciplines directly related to an appreciation of deep silence are spiritual direction and prayer. Spiritual directors routinely advise directees to spend time in silence, but seldom inquire as to the nature of their silence or if the directees have any particular sense of their own silence. Silence is more typically considered as a blank space in which what is important is what enters it, (thoughts, ideas, feelings, interior movement of consolation or desolation) and not what is already there, the quality of silence itself. Spiritual directors and directees would benefit from the adoption of a terminology and knowledge of silence that would allow at least for simple distinctions to be made between the various types and levels of silence.

A significant number of people benefit from silence and from silent prayer or the prayer of quiet. Again, a basic knowledge of terms and distinctions would be of real benefit to understand another's experience. In inter-faith dialogue an understanding of silence would also be of value since the practice of religious silence is virtually universal. Silence is of significant spiritual value. Silence has biblical, liturgical, ascetical, ecumenical and pastoral functions. The acquisition of a basic knowledge of its characteristics and types contributes to spiritual living, and theological and pastoral knowledge. [The value of such an understanding of silence is further developed in chapter five section C of this project/ dissertation.]

### **Distinguishing deep silence from other forms of silence**

Silence is commonly misunderstood when it is described solely as an absence of speech or sound. Poets, philosophers and mystics have long noted that silence exists in various forms and in one form, deep silence, it is not an absence but a positive, vital, and powerful presence. Distinguishing deep silence from other forms of silence is difficult

because researchers create various categories for silence depending upon their research discipline and interests. As a result, there are a large and confusing number of categories for silence ranging, for example, from absolute to relative, explicit to implicit, fast to slow, interactive to non-interactive and determined to spontaneous. This project/dissertation follows a three-part classification: silence as absence, silence as function and silence in itself or "deep silence." The following concrete poem by Eugen Gomringer (qtd. in Jaworski 15) is useful to further develop these three categories:

<b>Silence</b>	<b>Silence</b>	<b>Silence</b>
<b>Silence</b>	<b>Silence</b>	<b>Silence</b>
<b>Silence</b>		<b>Silence</b>
<b>Silence</b>	<b>Silence</b>	<b>Silence</b>
<b>Silence</b>	<b>Silence</b>	<b>Silence</b>

By leaving a blank in the middle of the poem, Gomringer makes a visual point that silence is an absence. When the poem is read aloud and after one repeats "silence" seven times and pauses at the blank space in the middle of line three, silence is "heard" in that empty space. This emptiness creatively captures the popular understanding of silence as absence.

On a second reading, silence is not only revealed by its absence at the center of the poem, but is also now heard as the silent interval preceding and following each audible pronunciation of "silence." Each repetition of "silence" is surrounded of necessity by silence or else the poem could not communicate. Without intervening silences, the poem

degenerates into a single, unpronounceable, meaningless blur of sound, "silencesilencesilen." These silent intervals illustrate functional silence.

A third reading uncovers silence in itself or deep silence. Silence as absence and silence as function are uncovered by analysis, but a recognition of deep silence results not as much from analysis as from receptivity. In reading the poem aloud, a point is reached where the words recede and the white silent background of the page becomes dominant. The spoken sound of the words becomes less primary than the surrounding silence. Silence briefly becomes more present and more powerful than the written text. Deep silence is momentarily received as the autonomous, surrounding environment of all language and thought. These three silences permeate everyday life. To recognize and understand deep silence requires an ability to distinguish deep silence effectively from silence as absence and silence as function.

As noted, silence is most commonly understood as an absence of words or sounds. For example, in the sentence "She was silent not saying a word," the subject, "she," is silent by reason of her decision not to speak. This is the most common use of the word silence. It means the simple absence of speech. A similar sense of silence as absence is found in the relationship of quiet to silence. When a person leaves a place which is filled with noise and goes somewhere relatively less noisy, as when one leaves a city and goes to a remote cabin, the relative absence of background noise is termed silence. John Cage, a poet and musician, experimented with silence seeking to attain a pure absence of sound. He discovered, in the total quiet of an anechoic chamber, that he could not escape two sounds. One was the high pitched buzzing of his own nervous system echoing within his ears, and the other was the low beat of his heart and circulatory system resonating throughout his body (7). Hindu religious tradition, formed in part by yogic meditative experience, additionally recognizes sounds residing in the navel and lower abdomen (Tannen and Saville-Troike 7). Silence as an

absence of sound is always a relative concept. A total silence, a total absence of sound, is not attainable as long as there is a human listener.

Sociologists and psychologists study individuals and cultures who remain silent about disturbing and traumatic events such as incest or sexual abuse. Many articles describe how this silence inhibits recovery and prevents an effective social response. In this context, the only good thing that can be done with silence is to break it. Historical studies similarly examine how entire nations adopt official silence concerning past shameful events. Fifty years after the end of the Second World War, a general silence and ignorance in the offending nations still surrounds the Japanese treatment of Korean and Chinese civilian populations, French collaboration and acquiescence to the Nazi-dominated Vichy government and the Allied bombings of civilian populations in Germany. Government censorship, nationalism, and willful personal ignorance strenuously maintain a public silence on these shameful collective deeds. In a similar manner, feminist studies reveal how the voice of women is systematically silenced (Ruether 12-20).

A related sociological concept is the "spiral of silence." A disturbing event occurs. Rather than respond to the event, leadership chooses to remain silent, signaling to others in the organization that silence is the official policy. Silence now spirals to involve an increasing number of people committed to not speaking about the event (Noelle-Neumann 4-9). In all of these social examples, silence is an absence, a failure to speak or a message to others to remain silent. Some other unique instances of silence as absence include the tradition of military academy students punishing serious violations of their honor code by ceasing to communicate with the accused, the practice of religious individuals making vows of silence, the exercising of an suspect's legal right to remain silent and the use of enforced silence in solitary confinement. In summary, silence as an absence of speech or of sound is conceptually clear, easily understood, and widely researched.

Silence's second dimension, functional silence, is most easily observed in speech. As a painting requires a canvas, so language requires the background of silence for words to be distinct. As illustrated in Gomringer's poem, intelligible speech requires silence before, between, and following each word or else the spoken sounds collide and become indistinguishable. The functional necessity for silence in language is most clearly experienced when listening to a foreign language. Because the sounds and patterns of the language are unfamiliar, the silence between words and sentences cannot be easily distinguished, and the language is heard as a meaningless unbroken rumble of sounds. When one listens to one's native tongue, however, the intervening silences between words and at the end of sentences are meaningfully heard. Some bilingual speakers retain "a foreign accent in their use of silence in the second language, retaining native silence patterns even as they use the new verbal structures" (Tannen and Saville-Troike 13). Spoken language is most natural when its silences are native to the speaker.

Dauenhauer labels functional silences embedded in language as either "intervening" or "fore and after" (6-16). Intervening silence appears between words, creating a rhythmic, melodic pattern. Fore and after silences frame an utterance and thereby set a sentence or a paragraph apart from others. Fore silence does not call attention to itself unless it is too brief or too long. After silences, however, are noticeable and easily recognized. The impact of a sentence, heavy with meaning, spills over into the after silence and the speaker must carefully choose the length of the after silence to secure the intended meaning.

That such functional silences as intervening and fore and after silence are not merely an absence of sound is illustrated in American Sign Language (ASL.) The work of Ursula Bellugi, a neuroscientist studying the biological and genetic basis of language acquisition, establishes that ASL is a complete and unique language with its own grammar, and is not, as sometimes imagined, a simple sign derivative of American English. Functional silence in ASL exists in the relative stillness of the hands before, between, and following words and

sentences. ASL silence has all the richness, potential for irony, humor, and ambiguity as that found in spoken language. Those whose first language is ASL think in hand-signs not words. A moment of silence for the profoundly hearing impaired is when their mind ceases to think in signs and gestures. Silence clearly functions in the language of those who have never heard a sound (Radetsky 62-68). Therefore, silence also exists apart from any relationship with an absence of sound.

The grammatical conventions of punctuation visually depict silence. A period (.) represents a full after silence. A comma (,) represents a shorter intervening silence. On a printed page, the blank spaces between words, sentences, and paragraphs represent silence. For example, the white empty space on this page is a visual representation of silence, indicating that the words on the page are surrounded by, emerge out of, and return to silence. Japanese script has a form of punctuation termed a silence marker, spaced periods set within single quotation marks, (' . . . . '). This marker indicates a silent response or a period of silent reflection. In a novel by Kobo Abe, the silence marker is used as frequently as fifteen times per page (Tannen and Saville-Troike 4-5).

Functional silence is observable in other contexts besides language. Film and art convey silence. The films of Ingmar Bergman, for example, are widely noted for their intentional creation of silence. Russian films, in general, are marked by more frequent and deeper periods of silence than are Canadian films. Traditional Chinese and Japanese painting often have great stretches of essentially blank canvas set off with a minimum of representations. The sparse use of figures accents the silence (Jaworski 151-152).

Anthropologists study the social structuring of silence in communication. Some ethnic groups revere conversational silences and see them as a sign of wisdom; others, as Basso notes, appear to avoid conversational silences as a sign of poor manners or disinterest (67-86). Roles for observing silence are assigned by age, gender, and social status. Even within the same country, there are noticeable regional differences in the toleration of silence

in conversation. In the United States, for example, silence is least tolerated by residents of New York City, who are recorded as going to extreme lengths to keep a conversation as devoid of silence as possible, while residents of the West Coast are generally more tolerant of conversational silence (Tannen 93-110). Religious groups also see a functional value in silence. The monastic rule of St. Benedict mandates the time and intensity of communal silence in order to create a suitable atmosphere for work, study, and prayer (Walther 224 - 230). In these examples from speech, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and religious practice, silence functions to aid communication.

The third category, deep silence, is not an absence and does not depend for its existence upon any pragmatic, utilitarian function. Deep silence is both autonomous and real. Dauenhauer provides three examples of deep silence. The first is the silence of intimates. This silence is a general state that prevails between people who know each other very well. Some friends, colleagues or couples who spend significant periods of time together, reduce their conversation to a minimum. Their silence does not intervene their speech as much as their speech intervenes their general, deep, mutual silence. The meaning of their relationship is more clearly expressed in silence than in speech. Their speech serves mainly to sustain their silence (17-18). Dauenhauer's second example is liturgical silence. Here, silence fills a space. When one enters this area, one senses, above all else, silence (18-19). The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., where a black marble wall inscribed with soldiers' names creates an area of prevailing deep silence, is an excellent example of liturgical silence. Dauenhauer's third example of deep silence is the silence of the "to be said," where meaning resides beyond the words one hears. Both parties in a conversation listen beyond the words to what they judge to be the other's intention. They listen on two levels, to the words and to the silence, to the literal message and to what they judge to be the other's intended meaning. They listen to the silent language of the "to be said." What is said is embedded in the silence of what the other desires to express (19-24). Deep silence, in

these examples, is not experienced as an absence or a function. It exists in and of itself, as a positive, autonomous reality. In the presence of deep silence, one is naturally respectful (Dauenhauer 24).

## **2. Preliminary phenomenological study of deep silence**

### **Initial descriptors**

I was born and raised in New York City. I do not have any memories of enjoying silence or even being aware of silence as a child. The only childhood memory I have of seeking out silence is going onto the roof of my apartment building. The sensation of being above it all, alone, and observant, made the roof silent and still. I can recall going there when I was discouraged. I did not spend a great deal of time there. In fact, it was unusual for me to be up on the roof. Yet, the place lingers in my memory as an invitation to silence. The sky, the distant view of roof tops went on seemingly forever, and the relative solitude of the roof all served as an invitation to a wider perspective.

My first prolonged experience of silence was at age thirteen; during the summer my parents sent me to a farm in Pennsylvania. Farm life was a joy. The chance to work as an adult, to drive a tractor, to get up in the dark, to drink coffee and to go milking were new and fresh experiences. That summer also introduced me to the woods.

On occasion, I suppose to keep me occupied, the farmer would send me out hunting with a .22 rifle. This allowed me to be in the woods alone but with a purpose, and so I could spend time in quiet, yet I had a convincing explanation for being solitary. I spent hours at a time sitting concealed, a short distance from a woodchuck's burrow, waiting for the poor creature to emerge so I could shoot him. I would sit, be still, and wait, while listening

intently for any noise. This was my first training in silence. I'm sorry now that it was at the expense of the woodchuck, but I'm grateful for the initiation into silence.

I joined a religious order when I was twenty, and remained with it until I was twenty-seven. The first two years were in a novitiate located on a farm. Silence was the normal state; the novices spoke by way of exception. I enjoyed the silence and didn't find it burdensome. The silence of a monastery is unusual, and because there were over sixty young men living in a single building, the silence was far from total. Yet, the discipline of having meals and work periods in silence allowed for a space to be created around each person. The normal conventions of constant greetings and pleasantries were not followed and a mental leisure developed. When I left the novitiate and went to a university campus to complete my studies, silence vanished. It was no longer enforced, and was clearly out of fashion. Silence was seen as a Stoic discipline that had little or no spiritual value. I still appreciate silence. When I pray, I enjoy sitting quietly with God. I enjoy silent retreats, and walking alone is my favorite exercise.

The following are eight vignettes of silence, short personal experiences in which silence is described. They depict all my significant encounters with silence. From these vignettes, I will develop an initial impression of the phenomenon:

### **Interpersonal Silence**

Silence is found not only in nature but in interpersonal relationships and in communication as well. Silence is especially evident in human speech and thought:

*When we speak, there is a silence before the utterance, and when we finish, there is silence. Upon analysis it can be shown that silence exists as well between every word we utter. This "fore and after" silence is very difficult to recognize because it is so brief and does not exist apart from a statement. Fore and after silence appears to be merely the pre-*

*beginning and post-ending of an utterance. It fades in and fades out without a trace, trailing in and trailing off only in connection with a statement. Yet this silence is regulated and monitored as closely as any other part of our speech.*

*I meet once a month or so with a friend, who is an experienced church minister. There is a pattern to our conversation. At first, the talk is relatively lightweight: a review of the month's events, an updating of people, places and happenings. As we settle into topics of more depth and feeling, and focus on the events and people more central to our lives, the silence before and after each sentence widens slightly. If we then go on to speak of deeper concerns, the silence becomes rich, dense and palpable. There is an almost physical need to observe this silence; the more significant and weighted with feeling the material, the more dense and thick the fore and after silence. At this point, thoughts are closely intertwined with feelings and, rather than being first reviewed and then spoken, thoughts begin now to simply emerge out of the shared silence. The length of the silence, fore and after, becomes integrated with our feelings, breath and thoughts.*

*When silence is rich like this, I am less aware of the room's furnishings, the time of day, or background noise. The fore and after silence not only frames my sentences but also moves into my general perceptions. Increasingly, I focus on simply one thing, a thought struggling to distinguish itself from my feelings, which are themselves now framed in silence.*

*Fore and after silence can also become apparent during a difficult conversation. For example, I sometimes had strained silences with my oldest son when he was a teenager. I expect him to be moving his life along at a certain pace, and in a certain direction but he has his own sense of his life's pace and direction. At times, our views don't coincide and there is a strained silence. I sit searching my mind for a good opening line that will not be too judgmental. Yet, when I speak, the timing of my fore and after silence seems only to announce the strain of my thought. The pacing is off. At these times, I become aware of my son's face, my age, my concerns, and my loneliness as I have to let my boy go his own way.*

*This fore and after silence is so intimidating that I feel pressured to say anything, if only to break the awkwardness of the moment. Fore and after silence here proclaims the unsaid. Rather than serving to focus me in my feelings, I become focused instead outside myself, and I am very aware of my son's face.*

Every statement is framed by fore and after silence. It is as important as what is spoken. Silence pervades speech. As the emotional content of a communication becomes weightier, the silence becomes deeper, denser, and more prolonged. Thought, feelings and breath feel as if they are emerging out of this deep silence.

### **The silence of rooms**

A good architect attempts to capture a certain feeling in a building. Lighting, sound, colour, texture, and shadow all combine to create a style, a fashion, a sense of space. In a similar fashion, although less commonly recognized, every room has not only a sense of space but also a sense of silence.

Teachers, musicians and preachers are all aware of the unique silence of a classroom, a hall, a church or a theatre. A teacher will almost always visit a newly assigned classroom and take some time to stand still in the room in order to get the feel of it, to listen to its silence, to become at home with it. Before a performance, a musician will simply stand in an empty auditorium, or theater, and listen. A preacher will stand in a pulpit, or by a lectern and try to recognize the unique silence of an empty church. These individuals are not listening to a room's acoustics, but rather to the silence in that space. All of them recognize that their voices or music need context and to perform they need to know that context and feel at home in it. The context is silence and every space has a unique silence:

*I get used to the silence of a room gradually and imperceptibly, much as I get accustomed to light. In darkness, it takes ten minutes for our eyes to develop night vision. The light receptors in the eye very slowly modify and develop a different type of sensitivity. Similarly, when I first enter a strange classroom or lecture theater or even a hotel room, I slowly and almost imperceptibly adjust to its silence.*

*Adjusting to the silence of a room does not require any activity. Rather, it seems to require assuming an intentional presence and awareness of the space in order to sense its silence. This is similar to choosing to be present to a person in conversation. I can choose to merely listen or to listen with feeling, empathy and presence. Professional speakers and musicians develop an empathy for silence.*

*Every space has its own silence. Some spaces seem designed to root out silence. Fast food restaurants conspire to create a space where silence cannot hide. These restaurants with their frantic, busy, impatient and noisy air, create a sense of speed and decisiveness. A similar quality is found in shopping malls. Here silence is screened out by muzak, excessive lighting and sensory overload.*

*Other places where silence is hard to find are bus terminals, airports, and supermarkets. Spaces that welcome silence include restaurants that allow for a sense of leisure, art galleries, some churches, barns, large urban railroad stations, and the front porches of some homes.*

*When I was a child, the apartment adjoining my parents' was occupied by family friends, a stroke victim and her husband. The apartment was situated on the dark side of the building, and never received direct sunlight. In an effort to save money, lights were frequently left off. The space in that apartment had a unique silence. Mary usually spent the day there alone, with seldom a sound, not even a radio. When I entered the apartment, as I frequently did, the silence was inviting. She was at peace with that silence and nurtured it. If I travel back by memory to that apartment, I can recall its darkness and ambiance but what*

*stands out is its silence. Because we were neighbours, I didn't have to knock to enter. I simply tapped on the door and opened it, as it was never locked, and said, "Mary." The answer from out of the silence was always, "Come in, come in."*

The silence of interior rooms and living spaces is concentrated or diluted by design. Silence is found more often in spaces that allow leisure and that are not aggressively commercial. We attune ourselves to the silence of a room as naturally as we adjust to its lighting.

### **Religious silence**

Silence finds a home, a familiar and welcoming recognition, amongst, religious people. Silence is heard echoing the eternal and the creative presence of God:

*My childhood memories of religious silence are associated with the old Latin Mass, where, apart from the occasional hymn, the congregation was expected simply to maintain a respectful silence. As children we were also encouraged to "make a visit," which meant to go to church on a weekday or Saturday, when there was no service on, and just sit in the quiet and pray. I associate the presence of God with that sitting in silence.*

*Also as a child, I received a moral education that was quite legalistic. It resulted in a very strong sense of conscience, a voice from the stillness of inner depths that I took to be the voice of God. God resided in the silence of my self.*

*In my prayer since childhood, I have tried many meditative and contemplative methods. Now, I pray by sitting in silence and trying to let go of my thoughts and worries and just be observant of my breath. Usually it takes me about ten to twelve minutes to get focused and relaxed. Following this, the silence then becomes sweet: a deep, comforting, surrounding presence.*

*On occasion, I can settle deeply into the silence, and my breath becomes very slight and smooth. At such times, the silence feels like home. There is no need to say anything or think anything because whatever it is I wish to say or think is already present in the silence. This silence is accepting and supporting. It feels “like home” because it has a familiarity, a sense of origin about it.*

*I visited Ireland once with my father shortly before his death. It was his first and proved to be his only visit home. Ireland was, of course, my home too. Although much of Ireland was strange to me, it was somehow familiar because my parents had always spoken of Ireland. Letters would arrive from there; packages would be sent there. Relatives from Ireland, people unknown to me, were spoken of as if I knew them. So when I arrived there, it was home, strange and unknown, yet familiar. Ireland had a place in my mind and heart which I only discovered when I arrived.*

*Silence is a little like that. I’ve come from the silence and I will return there. I associate silence with God, the origin of all, the creative spark and power that arises from within me whose origin I cannot trace. At times the silence seems strange, unnerving, or oppressive, but usually it is sweet and refreshing.*

*I usually finish my prayer of silence by speaking very briefly to God. What I say is commonplace, but, once in a while, I feel a wave of love for God accompanied by a sense of connection with the compassion of God, which prompts me to sit and feel grateful for being close to the source of it all.*

Religious silence is a willed and deliberate welcoming of silence, combined with a conscious linking of silence with the source and origin of all that is. The response to silence in this context will be coloured by the image of God that controls an individual’s religious imagination.

## **The continuum of silence**

Silence is experienced on a continuum characterized by variations of intensity. This continuum is most commonly encountered in a place of quiet and solitude:

*When I go into the woods, especially in winter, the silence there allows the snow to crunch under my feet with a sharp and clear sound. The woods, covered in snow, sharpen and clarify every noise. This initial silence stands out as a background which intensifies even a slight sound, such as my clothes rustling when I walk.*

*For some, this silence is an almost foreign and forbidding presence. It takes time to adjust to it. Gradually its presence becomes normal, so that the sound of a snowmobile, or a chain saw, distant voices, or even the slight sound of a twig snapping is disruptive and jarring. This diffuse background of silence is the foundational or entry level in the continuum of silence.*

*If I remain in the woods and become accustomed to this diffuse silence, I can encounter a second level of silence which is more intermittent in character. It rises and falls with my attentiveness. If I am daydreaming, thinking about the past, or planning the future, I am conscious only of the diffuse, undifferentiated silence. It is when my attention gets more sharply focused that a more profound silence appears. I can deliberately choose to be aware of this deeper silence by reminding myself that it is silent and listening for it, thereby becoming aware of the silence surrounding me and everything. This is a simple choice to be observant and perceptive, much as I might remind myself to pay attention to someone who is speaking to me. I can decide to be aware of silence, to enjoy it, and to sense it as I might become conscious of heat or cold. When I do this, I go beyond the general diffuse silence, and I experience, however briefly, a more profound silence.*

*An even deeper level of silence is experienced not as a result of a conscious choice, but as a gift. For example, my attention can be awakened by a movement without noise, a*

*tree top bending in a breeze, or a raven flying overhead. Technically, of course, there is a noise in these actions, but, at this distance, it is too slight to be heard. So the movement appears silent and this illusion, this seeming absence of noise where it should be, can stir into consciousness a deeper awareness of the silence that pervades the woods and the thick silence that is everywhere present. It is these soundless motions amidst the stillness of the woods which announce silence by paradoxically seeming to threaten it. This third depth of silence feels as if it is reaching out, announcing itself and inviting recognition.*

*This active or dynamic type of silence also occurs when my attention gets focused on some particular: a twig that rises up out of the ice on a frozen stream, snow on a branch made transparent when the sun shines behind it, a bit of dirt on the snow, a rabbit's tracks crossing a trail. I become focused and aware and silence then becomes intense. Its volume is suddenly turned up and everything is flooded with its presence. It seems dynamic and alive.*

*There is a yet still deeper level of silence. I am only aware of it very briefly; it flees before perception. Trying to be aware of it is like observing my eye seeing. I know I see through my eye and for a brief millisecond I can become aware that my vision results from seeing through my eye. But I cannot remain with this awareness or I literally go cross-eyed. So too, in the case of this dimension of silence; it arises when I am most relaxed, at peace, simply walking in a woods, my mind stilled of its worries and concerns, with little self-awareness. I can very briefly be aware of the great stillness and peace of this interior silence. It does not seem at all extraordinary but, rather, is so ordinary as to be elemental, basic, natural and normal. I feel enwrapped in silence with no need for self-justifications; I simply am. Such silence remains as long as I do not try to pin it down, or to hold it; as soon as I turn upon it, I lose it. This silence is not dynamic, but rather feels like the foundation of all that is, the source of life itself.*

Silence exists on a continuum. Its first level is the awareness of a general diffuse silence that serves as the background to sound. A slightly deeper silence is encountered when, in an environment of diffuse silence, I choose briefly to focus on silence, to sense its presence. A still deeper level of silence is experienced when silence is triggered into my awareness suddenly and with power, as if it is reaching out to me. Finally, these silences I experience outside of my self can be felt to reside at my very centre, as my true identity.

### **Disturbing silences**

Silence is experienced at times as undoing my sense of self or as a threat to my perceived self-understanding:

*The Aran Islands lie about fifteen miles off the west coast of Ireland. Aran is covered with very small grassy fields, each surrounded by waist-high stone walls. The islands resemble a fine lattice work knitted out of stone by centuries of toil.*

*At one end of the island, surrounded by sheer high cliffs, is Dun Aengus, the crumbling, ten-foot-thick stone remains of a prehistoric fortress. The original inhabitants of Aran built this fortress for protection, presumably from pirate bands. It is a fortress which the enemy could enter only from one direction and from which the inhabitants had nowhere to flee but to their deaths, over the cliffs to the sea, hundreds of feet below.*

*The fortress is entered through a small archway. The effect upon entering is immediate. The area inside the walls is small, providing room for a few hundred people. The constant wind and the surrounding cliffs create a sense of danger, weakness and fragility. Imagining that people sought refuge in such a brutal and elemental place stills the mind.*

*There is a silence here that is thick. The stone, the wind, the walls, the cliffs and the palpable and still-present sense of potential threat that created this site bring a feeling of awe. The silence is not due to an absence of sound; the wind and the waves smashing below are*

*ever-present. Rather, the silence seems embedded in the rocks and the walls which offer a mute testimony to the savage and terrible nature of human life.*

*The silence here is beyond the prehistoric; it is primordial. This is a very disturbing silence that calls forth haunting images of fear, abandonment and terror. Such disturbing silences are found as well in everyday life: a telephone caller doesn't speak, but maintains an unbroken and thereby threatening silence; a question in conversation goes unanswered, or is ignored; someone we admire, trust or love lies to us. All of these events create a silence which results when our everyday sense of life is undermined. The thought arises: "Things may not be as I imagine." This is followed by an unwelcome silence.*

When our conventional perception of life and self is challenged, a disturbing silence appears which results from a sense of uncertainty and danger that undermines our self-confidence by intimating that life does not match our preconceptions. This silence suggests that our ordered, safe, rational world is an illusion.

### **Involuntary silence**

Stuttering is a little understood pathology of speech, the cause of which, despite extensive psychological and neurological research, remains unknown. A severe stutterer, blocked in speech, experiences a unique form of involuntary silence:

*I can't recall beginning to stutter; no one can. There has never been a time when I didn't stutter. Now, it is very unusual for me to severely block in my speech. Minor repetitions of a sound or a short pause in speech are more commonplace. Yet, as a child, I stuttered severely.*

*The earliest memories I have of severe stuttering involve the telephone. I had a painful time trying either to answer a phone or to make a phone call. Breaking the silence*

*on a telephone was especially difficult. I could hear the silence and wanted desperately to break it by either saying "Hello," or beginning my conversation, but, instead, the silence would persist and I would feel as if it were gripping my jaw and tongue in an uncontrollable rigidity. This uninvited silence is foreign and deeply disturbing. The silence that I experienced was involuntary and I struggled to break it. The more I struggled to break into speech, the tighter silence's grip became. The more important the communication, the greater the fear of blocking into silence and the greater the likelihood of blockage.*

*A stuttering block feels as if your body is rebelling against itself. A decision is made to speak and silence results. Imagine for a moment deciding to raise your arm, only to discover you couldn't raise it; instead, it stays frozen in position by your side. Such forced immobility is deeply disturbing.*

*My worst memory of stuttering is of my very first day in the army, when I was seventeen years old and lined up in a large field with hundreds of other new recruits. A sergeant in a small tower with a megaphone called out soldiers' last names. They, in response, shouted out their first names and middle initials, and ran to join their newly-assigned training companies. I stood in total dread. Finally, my name was called, but I completely blocked. There is no synonym for "Joseph P."*

*"McMorrow", "McMorrow" the sergeant said, over, and over, with everyone looking around for the seemingly deaf McMorrow. Finally, in frustration he said, "God damn it, McMorrow, I know you are out there somewhere. Where the hell are you, boy?" Finally, after what may have been a full minute of silent blocking, I was able to blurt out my name, and the roll call went on, while in deep embarrassment I ran to join an unknown group of recruits who now, I believed, regarded me as slightly demented.*

*The silence of stuttering is experienced as a mild threat by an audience, be it a single person or a group, who simply do not know how to react. Should they say something encouraging, or guess at the word and try to supply it, or simply remain silent and attentive?*

*The silence they experience is an interruption, an unnatural prolongation of the normal silence that pervades conversation. When that silence is sufficiently prolonged, it becomes threatening, and the listener wonders fearfully if the stuttering masks a much deeper pathology that may suddenly explode in some other fashion.*

*As a child and adolescent, I was subjected to play therapy, articulation therapy and a type of quackery called distraction therapy. The only therapy that finally helped me was one I undertook in my early twenties. This therapy not only forced me to befriend stuttering by accepting that I stuttered and always would but also taught me to modify my stuttering. The therapy began by deliberately making the stuttering worse. I progressed from deliberately blocking on words with my therapist, to blocking on the telephone with a stranger, to going to a store and deliberately and severely stuttering while asking directions from a clerk.*

*My assignment was to observe and mentally record what I was doing and how others were reacting. The experience showed I could modify my stuttering, if only to make it worse, and subsequently modify it to make it better or less severe. To do this I had to befriend the involuntary silence by not reacting to it with fear, flight, and struggle, but rather by recognizing the silence, relaxing with it, letting it be, and, if necessary, deliberately repeating the initial syllable of the first word I wished to say in order to slowly and calmly pass the block. This process of befriendng the silence was slow and difficult.*

*Whenever I speak publicly now, I like to stand at the podium, look out at the audience, and wait a moment or two and sense the audience's silence of expectancy. I like to wait until the audience approaches its limit of patience. I feel best speaking from silence to silence. I have the best chance then of being heard, and the best chance of speaking fluently. Fluency for me involves mastering silence as much as speech. The terror of stuttering is rooted in the involuntary silence that grips me and will not allow me to speak.*

Stuttering is an experience of involuntary, uncontrollable silence. The normal silences of speech become unnaturally prolonged and create a sense of panic in the speaker. In learning to speak, I learned to hold silence in my hands, until I became comfortable with its potential to aid or to destroy my fluency.

### **Silence in symbol and gesture**

At very dramatic moments, when what has to be said cannot be said because it is beyond words, a gesture is able to express the wordless content of our feelings, silently. Watching such a gesture reduces us also to a deep silence:

*I went to a funeral service for a young man who committed suicide. The boy's parents divorced some years before and never reconciled. The boy lived with his father. The father made all of the funeral arrangements without checking with the boy's mother. She arrived to discover the boy had been cremated. There would be no body to mourn at the service, simply a photograph displayed on a table at the front centre of the Church. She was crushed with grief.*

*At the service the mother and her relatives sat on one side of the aisle. The father and his relatives sat on the other. Toward the end of the service, the father stood and walked to the front of the church. The father appeared so burdened that his walk was painful to watch. His gait was stiff and uncertain, suggesting that, while going forward, he wished instead to go back. He removed some red roses from a bouquet near the boy's picture. In taking the flowers, he appeared nervous and self-conscious. There was a willed determination to all his movements. Everyone in the church watched him, puzzled about his intent.*

*It was when the father turned from the boy's picture with the flowers and began walking toward the mother that a deep, total silence enveloped the congregation. As he approached his former wife, the silence deepened. The father stopped where she sat, bent*

*forward and offered her the roses. There were a few seconds when she did not react, and the silence here was crushing. Finally, she put out her hands, accepted the roses and began to sob loudly. She stood and seemed lost and disoriented; then she embraced the now visibly frightened and trembling father of her child.*

*The emotion and the silence deepened simultaneously. The silent gesture of reconciliation in the giving of a flower powerfully expressed remorse. A deep peaceful sense of silence, where words and thoughts were absorbed by this gesture, permeated the Church. This is the power of ritual and symbol, which both generate and require silence.*

Wordless ritual creates a space in which silence and emotion mutually deepen and support each other.

### **Silence of awareness**

There are things and events which have a unique ability to trigger an awareness of silence. When my attention gets focused on an object, the sheer reality and wonder of it dispels surrounding noises and distractions. Silence emanates from it and draws me in:

*When my daughter was in kindergarten, she made a gift for me that I still have. It is a rock decorated to look like my head. The rock is more wide than high, about four inches by two and a half. It is a brownish colour. For eyes she used two small white paper circles marked with black dotted centers. The rest of the face is likewise pasted on bits of coloured paper. The head has hair on top in the form of thick reddish brown rug threads. I enjoy looking at that rock. I never tire of it. The rock exudes silence, and demands a kind of reverence. I don't think this power to evoke silence is due solely to its role as a symbol of my daughter's love. She has given me many small gifts over the years and none function as this*

*rock does to evoke silence. I think it is the direct, simple, primitive power of the rock itself, combined with the innocence and purity of the art, which demands a silent response.*

*I once lived near a waterfall. It was on the side of a mountain that emptied into Burrard Inlet, just north of Deep Cove in North Vancouver. It was not a large waterfall, but a stream cascading over a fall, from a height of about thirty feet. At the base of the falls, the water created a characteristic churning, pounding sound. After a strong rain, when the stream was flowing heavily, the falls developed a low roar. In watching the waterfall, I would on occasion look up and focus on a single large drop and follow it in its downward free fall. When I did, the sound of the waterfall would hush, and would return only when the droplet hit the water. Everything would fade away when I focused on a single droplet. The roar of the waterfall would not go silent, but the silence of the droplet grew louder and it hushed the roar. By giving full attention to a particular drop, the noise of the fall receded and, for an instant, I was aware of the silence behind the roar.*

*At the end of a long study day one January, when I felt especially weary, I went for a walk on the grounds of Providence Renewal Centre in Edmonton. Although I had walked on that path many times, I noticed, as if for the first time, a small tree which was staked and supported by guy wires. The tree had been pruned some years earlier and black circles on its lower bark marked the places where branches had been. The tree was not impressive. Yet for whatever reason, it attracted my attention. The simple reality of this tree, once acknowledged, imposed a silence. To see it, I had to stop talking to myself; I had to make room in my mind for its silence. When my attention slowly turned to appreciation, the silence deepened and sweetened. This taste of silence does not happen for me when I observe a car or look at a book. It happens only when the object has life and uniqueness.*

There is an aesthetic silence that appears when I am struck by the singular beauty or uniqueness of a thing. When I admire such an object, its presence imposes itself on my awareness and creates a silent stillness. This silence has a reverential quality.

### **A grammar of silence**

A grammar results from analyzing a language to determine its rules of usage, and its patterns which allow a language to communicate effectively and consistently. A grammar of silence in a similar manner determines if there is an intelligible pattern to silence. A good grammar is especially helpful to someone learning a new language because it introduces system and order into what otherwise appears a meaningless jumble of sound. A grammar of silence, likewise, discovers patterns in the usage, appearance and feel of silence. These patterns constitute a grammar, or a road map to the recognition and intelligibility of silence. Describing silence is difficult for three major reasons. First, silence is so deeply integrated into our perceptions that recognizing the presence of silence requires an unusual degree of self-awareness. Secondly, we do not have a vocabulary of silence. English uses only one word, silence, to describe a phenomenon that covers a wide range of experiences. Finally, silence cannot be pinned down and observed like a rock or a flower. To be observed, silence has to be experienced, and the experience affects the observation.

It is not possible to describe pure silence because describing pure silence would be like describing the air through which we see. Seeing requires one to ignore the air. Paying too close attention, or even being conscious of the air as a visual medium, is like closely observing your feet while walking rapidly downstairs. Such self-conscious attention will trip you up. It is only when leaves are rustled by the air, or snow is slowly falling through it, that we can briefly “see” the air that moves and supports the leaves and snow. Similarly, although silence is soundless, it is always “heard” indirectly.

In English, we do not have words which distinguish between variations in, or types of, silence. In English, silence is silence, as love is love. Whereas Greek has several words for love such as "philia", "eros" and "agape", English is limited to the one word "love" to describe our close, affectionate and caring relationships to realities as various as cars, flowers, baseball and people. As a result of this limited vocabulary, nuances in love are not easily described in English. Nor, for the same reason, are the nuances of silence. English vocabulary is of limited help in distinguishing one type of silence from another. The most descriptive words we have are quiet, stillness and emptiness; these words relate to silence but are actually describing other phenomena or qualities.

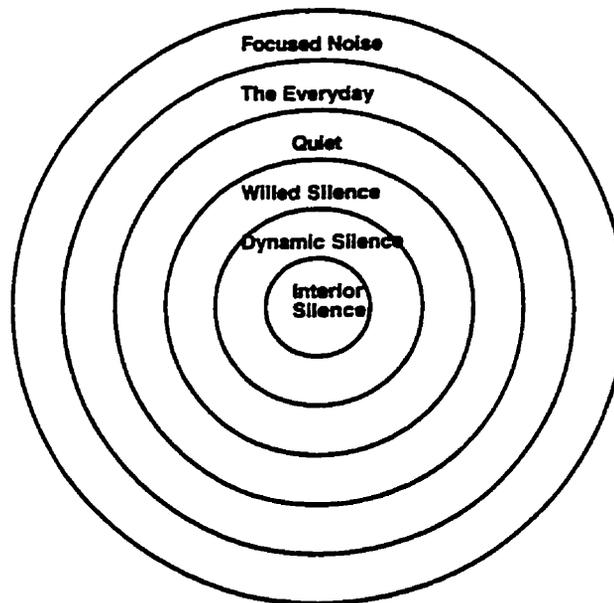
The final challenge in describing silence is that we are never mere observers of silence but always participants. Scientists recognize that when observing sub-atomic particles, the mere act of observing them affects the results because the particles are so infinitesimal, and the movements under observation are so incredibly brief, that the very act and the tools of observation affect the results. In a similar manner, the observer of silence is always part of the phenomenon being observed and as a result cannot help but distort it, by the mere act of filtering it through his or her individual perception, coloured as it is by values, experiences and beliefs.

Despite these limitations, it is still possible to experience, understand and communicate the reality and the role of silence. My experience of silence leads me to conceive of silence in three different but similar ways: as experienced in different zones, as experienced in relationships, and as experienced as the result of different forms of attentiveness. These three constitute an initial grammar of silence. Just as a language can be analyzed to determine its rules of usage, in order to promote clarity and meaning, so can silence be analyzed to determine its patterns of usage and meaning.

## The Zones of Silence

Silence is real, and exists everywhere. It is possible and accurate, however, to speak of silence as being concentrated, or more intensely present in certain places, times or situations. Just as barometric air pressure rising and falling affects our moods and perceptions, so does a concentration of silence affect our speech, thoughts, feelings, breath, and self-awareness. It is the effect that silence has on us that signals silence's presence and its concentration.

Silence is best visualized as a series of concentric circles, such as are seen in a bull's-eye, with the exterior circle or zone being the most dilute or weakest concentration of silence, and the centre zone representing the most concentrated silence. These zones can be visualized as follows:



The first zone is focused noise. Focused noise is found in environments that are intentionally planned to exclude silence. Silence is least concentrated in places where it is least welcome. Fast food restaurants, shopping malls, popular AM radio stations, and most commercial television programming are designed to exclude silence, and the self-awareness that silence makes possible, in order to promote sales.

The second zone is everyday life - the normal routine of work and leisure, family and friends, joy and pain. Silence is present, but is not normally noticed. When silence is noticed here, it is generally considered out of place, awkward, meaningless or sometimes threatening. The everyday is rooted in silence, but here there is little interest or motivation in becoming aware of silence.

The third zone is comprised of quiet and stillness. This is most easily found in nature and solitude, but these are not necessary to experience quiet and stillness. People raised with nature and with a degree of natural solitude would consider this type of quiet to be natural. Most of us, especially those raised in cities, find such quiet and stillness to be unusual and it takes a little time to become accustomed to the silence of a woods or a field. This silence gradually becomes a backdrop in the form of a diffuse presence to our thinking.

The fourth zone, willed silence, is experienced when, within a place of quiet and stillness, we decide to be aware of the silence. This fourth zone requires a conscious attention, a desire to be involved with silence and the decision to pay attention to it, to listen to it, and to appreciate it. This zone requires the practice of a deliberate presence to silence. Silence here stands out from the background of stillness and quiet, but its presence is fleeting and intermittent.

The fifth zone develops from the fourth in that one is already interested in silence and has some comfort with it, but the distinguishing feature in this zone is that silence here is dynamic and its presence is experienced as a gift that appears without being willed or chosen. Silence is experienced as a companion that suddenly appears. Silence in this zone is felt as being internal and external simultaneously. There is a sense of a homecoming or the recognition of an old friend. This zone, once experienced, remains attractive and alluring.

Finally, silence is most concentrated in the sixth zone, when a person seeks silence in the practice of stillness. Meditation is the normal path to this zone of silence. Sitting still, letting go of thoughts and feelings and allowing the resulting emptiness to become familiar,

results in an awareness of the deep silence at the centre of our self from which our thoughts, feelings, desires, and faith arise.

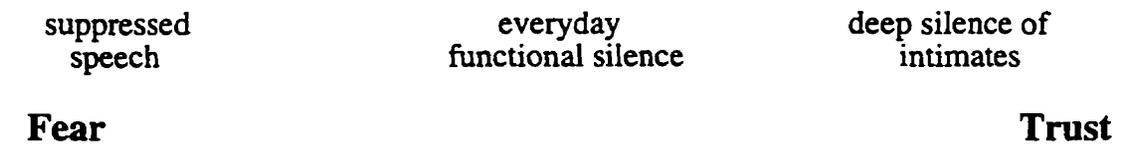
### **The silence in relationships**

A positive silence is experienced when, in speaking with someone we trust, we dare to slow down and search for words which adequately express what we feel. This type of silence becomes longer and deeper as a conversation develops in trust and self-disclosure. A couple may be so practised in love and mutual acceptance that long periods of silence characterize their daily life. This type of silence comprises the most positive pole of silence in relationships.

The deepest negative silence in relationships is experienced in situations of social oppression or personal rejection. Technically, this is not really silence but suppressed speech. The person keeping silence is suppressing his or her thoughts and feelings out of fear or self-rejection resulting from a long period of social oppression. The oppressed may feel unworthy of speech, or thought. Silence here is an unnatural burden and a tool of social control.

The mid-point of this polarity is the normal silence found in everyday, ordinary relationships - those moments of silence in conversation which have, at some times, a reassuring feeling and, at others, a feeling of tension and uneasiness.

The polarity of silence in relationships is represented by the following diagram:



As relationships move toward trust and meaningful personal self-disclosure, the silences in conversation tend to lengthen and have a quality of depth and solidity. In everyday functional silence, the silence is present but largely unrecognized. As relationships become marked by fear, silence diminishes into hesitations, repetition, chatter, cliché, subservience and, finally, suppressed speech. Suppressed speech, in relationships, is the opposite of mutual silence.

### **Silence resulting from attentiveness and awareness**

Different experiences of depth in silence result from different forms of attentiveness. In order for silence to develop, it must be noticed and appreciated. Silence is not discovered in the same way as the beauty of a sunset is discovered. Silence is subtle, hidden, and initially uninviting. The appeal of silence develops with one's growth in awareness and attentiveness. An awareness of silence develops along a lineal progression from unconscious appreciation to intellectual recognition, to aesthetic awareness, to felt enjoyment, to meditation, and finally to contemplation.

A deepening relationship with silence begins by being unaware of silence but unconsciously enjoying its company. Solitary activities such as hunting, walking, and researching, etc., are introductions to silence. An unconscious affinity for silence develops. This affinity is strengthened when a person recognizes that he or she enjoys silence. The recognition is usually part of an intellectual understanding of one's own personality: "I'm an introvert" or "I enjoy a certain amount of solitude." A person comes to value silence in a functional way: "I feel best and do my best work when I have some quiet time alone."

The awareness of silence is further deepened when it is linked with aesthetic appreciation, such as when silence becomes part of appreciating nature, art, music or literature. This happens when a person can see, read, or hear something beautiful and

respond to it by a brief or prolonged silence in which the person is drawn into the beauty and participates in it, initially without self-reflection.

From here the experience of silence is deepened when silence is desired for itself, when there is a felt conscious enjoyment associated with silence. A person consciously begins to structure into his or her life “ quiet time,” a time to relax, unwind, or simply be, and for the individual this requires silence. This seeking of silence can be done on a daily, monthly or annual basis. What’s important here is that silence is consciously sought.

A decision to meditate in order to learn silence is a further deepening step, one which relatively few people take. This involves a systematic searching for and exploration of silence. Silence is sought for either functional reasons, such as relaxation, stress reduction, a prelude to prayer or creative work, or as an end in itself, such as meditating for the simple reason of learning to sit still and empty oneself of noise.

Finally, the deepest form of silence is found in contemplation, the growing awareness of the presence of silence in everyday life, in relationships, in thinking, in speaking, in prayer. Silence is discovered in oneself and silence here serves a sacramental role as a symbol of the presence of God.

These three dimensions, the silence of zones, relationships and attentiveness comprise the initial grammar of silence. This grammar represents a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon and constitutes an operational model allowing the qualitative research phase of the dissertation/project to begin.

### **3. Qualitative Research: personal interviews on the contemporary experience of deep silence**

#### **The participants**

A phenomenological study on silence which utilizes personal interviews requires that those interviewed be an elite, that is they must be well informed with a certain expertise or sensitivity to the phenomenon (Marshall 84-85). Provided such suitable candidates are recruited, experience shows that in-depth, qualitative interviews in a phenomenological study will generally reach a saturation point where no new substantial insights are being disclosed, typically after about three to four interviews. With these qualifications in mind, I searched initially for a maximum of five persons who intentionally and seriously fostered deep silence in their life and were able and willing to articulate that experience. Having the one "extra" candidate allowed me to honestly advise those I interviewed that they could terminate the interview at any point and it would not adversely effect my work. No one broke off an interview; so as a result I completed five interviews.

Recruiting participants for the interviews was not difficult. I did not have to look for my first contact as she was referred to me by someone familiar with the proposed study. I met with her and described the project, and she readily agreed to take part. I next wrote to the abbot of a contemplative Roman Catholic monastery in the Mid-Western United States requesting assistance in finding people I could interview. He arranged for me to interview a

monk and a woman who lived in a nearby town, both of whom had extensive experience with silence. My last contact was a Roman Catholic priest in British Columbia. I had met him previously and knew he was very knowledgeable in spirituality and was moving toward a more contemplative style of living. I arranged to interview him and a colleague, a Roman Catholic sister, who was also living an intentionally, quiet, contemplative life.

These five, three women and two men, comprised my participants. All are Christian and four are Roman Catholic. All have extensive background in spirituality and spiritual direction.

The first problem I had to address before the actual interviews was: "How was I to present myself?" Was I a representative from theological academia detached from the phenomenon under study or was I a lover of silence? "The decision of how to present oneself is very important, because after one's presentational self is 'cast' it leaves a profound impression on the respondents and has great influence on the success or failure of the study" (Fontana and Frey 366). Because of the very rich, personal, academic, religious, and professional background of those being interviewed, it was not difficult to realize that the only way to present myself was as someone who wanted to learn from their experience in order to enrich my own practice and love of silence.

An additional problem was the possibility that inviting people to speak about silence created something of an absurdity, an inherent contradiction. I assumed the participants expected some explanation why I was studying silence. Even if the candidates loved silence and were dedicated to a life of silence, that did not mean they would necessarily be supportive of a study of silence. In the contemplative tradition, a certain privacy about spiritual experience is a sign of maturity. A study of silence sounded somewhat arrogant, even to me.

I tried to disarm this problem by addressing it in my initial correspondence and in my conversation with the participants just prior to the actual interview. I used the analogy that

theologians study and speak of God knowing full well that whatever they say cannot adequately describe God. Theologians go about their work hoping to make some contribution to people's search by simply pointing out the direction in which one might look for hints of God's presence. Silence is much less abstract than God and thus, presumably, is also able to be studied and discussed.

I am uncertain how many of those interviewed actually accepted this argument, but acknowledging the problem allowed the interview to begin on an honest footing. Because the participants all have a background in spiritual direction and are accustomed to an interview situation, I did not have excessive concerns about explaining the interview process.

### **The interview process**

Once the participants indicated they were willing to be interviewed an appointment was established. Four of the interviews took place near or in the participant's home. One was held in a local retreat house. All interviews were conducted in private. The interviews ranged from fifty minutes to two hours and fifteen minutes in length, averaging ninety minutes each. All the participants agreed to my audio taping the interview. They all signed consent forms outlining the ethical dimension of the interview, and permitted me to quote in future publications from the final edited copy of the interview transcript and/or the profile. The consent forms indicate that a pseudonym is to be used rather than the person's actual name, and also that any references to actual people, places or institutions will be changed to further safeguard anonymity. One candidate, Antoinette Voute Roeder, did not wish to use a pseudonym and as a result her actual name is used.

The interview itself was semi-structured. I established a set of questions derived from the two thematic descriptions of silence completed to that date:

**BACKGROUND**

- childhood.
- formative people, events, books, places.
- natural explanation for love of silence.
- significant incidents of silence.

**ATTRACTION TO SILENCE - RECENT**

- authors.
- events/places.
- people.

**TYPES OF SILENCE**

- how experienced = types and levels.
- where = space/things/people.
- when - time of day/conversation/at an activity.
- in nature.
- in people.
- in worship/prayer.
- disturbing silences.

**THEOLOGY OR PHILOSOPHY OF SILENCE**

- why practice silence.
- relation to spirituality.
- relevance.

**HOW TO DEVELOP SILENCE, HOW TO PRACTICE IT**

- how rigorous - how much discipline?
- systematic development or spontaneous.
- as part of prayer.
- meditation.
- how to preserve it.

**THREATS TO SILENCE**

- noise/activity
- media

**OTHER**

This outline, however, was never intended to be followed in a rigorous fashion.

Instead, I reduced the outline to three words: "background, practice, and experience" and

used these as a rough guide to start and to keep the interview moving. The questions followed a chronological recitation of the individual's experience with silence in order to lead to a description of the participant's experience of deep silence. What did silence feel like, especially at its deepest point?

This conversational style of interview encourages spontaneous insights and a good quality of sincere description (Berg 16-17). At the end of each conversation, the full outline of questions listed above was reviewed to see if anything important was omitted. In each case, the conversational style of interview effectively covered the entire range of possible questions.

I encountered only minor difficulties during the interviews. Essentially, the same problem reappeared in a slightly different form with three of the candidates. There is something deeply spiritual about silence and one's relationship to it. It seems somewhat unnatural to speak about it. With one candidate, the difficulty was resolved by sitting for a short while in silence until she could speak out of the silence and then the interview proceeded. With another, the difficulty was never really resolved; it was simply accepted that one can say very little about silence. Finally, with the third, the difficulty was resolved by recognizing that he was most natural and comfortable in describing silence by referring to classic mystic and poetic descriptions.

A transcript of each interview was prepared on a word processor by first creating a literal and complete printed record of the interview from the audio-tape recording. This was then edited for clarity and meaning by removing repetitions and digressions. The transcript was mailed, within four weeks of the interview, to the participants and they were invited to edit it further by removing and clarifying any words or sections that were judged misleading, confusing or inaccurate. All very promptly revised the transcript and returned it by mail. I again revised the transcript incorporating their suggestions and returned it to the participant for another review. In all cases, this once revised copy was accepted as accurate and final.

From this revised transcript a profile was developed. The profile is a summary statement of the participant's background, practice, and experience of silence. A profile uses the participant's actual words and images as recorded in the interview transcript to create, as nearly as possible, an accurate expression of their felt experience of silence. A profile is a type of extended vignette, "a focused description of a series of events taken to be representative, typical or emblematic. . . [it] has a narrative story-like structure that preserves chronological flow" (Huberman and Miles 81). The completed profile was mailed to the participants and they were asked to revise it until it fully expressed their sense of silence. Again, in all cases, this was completed after one revision. Throughout the process, the participants remained extremely cooperative, supportive, and very interested in the project.

The profiles exhibit a marked similarity in their descriptions of deep silence. The anticipated saturation point was reached. Additional interviews would not result in significantly greater clarity or detail.

#### **Antoinette Voute Roeder's profile**

As a child, Antoinette Voute Roeder was unusually solitary and observant. Close friendships were rare, and her parents allowed her a good deal of emotional independence. At age ten, she moved with her family from Holland to a small town in southern New Mexico. The experience of moving to a new culture and a totally different landscape further developed her natural tendencies to be receptive, observant, and solitary. She spent large amounts of time practicing piano and the discipline of discriminating sounds and the silence from which they arose contributed substantially to her vivid and physical sense of silence. Antoinette's gifts for close observation, for listening, and for expressive imagery are very apparent in her descriptions of silence. Her professional training in music and spiritual direction, along with her work in poetry, provide her with a vocabulary and sensitivity for the religious depths of silence.

For Antoinette, silence is a physical feeling which slowly and gently emerges into awareness. The feeling of silence cannot be generated or created. It comes on its own. Silence's arrival creates an alertness which is followed by a gradual awareness of a vast, hushed, and receptive space within. This place of silence is like a womb from which feelings and intuitions creatively arise. The feeling of silence moves slowly into her conscious awareness with a strong but non-invasive quality that invites Antoinette to be still and attentive. Her poem "Peace" captures this movement:

Your peace  
 that passeth all understanding  
 came and dwelt within me,  
 descended, and took possession of me:  
 a drop of utter silence,  
 eternal solace,  
 that rippled upon my soul,  
 embraced it,  
 and stayed all day.

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As silence comes into awareness, it feels as if it is arriving from the very centre of reality; silence feels vast, awesome, strange, totally other, yet benign and life giving. Silence is shrouded in an alien, ineffable, and incomprehensible otherness, while simultaneously signaling that it is hospitable and supportive. The events that trigger silence into awareness include nature, poetry, art, and music. Silence in nature is found, especially, in the act of seeing. Mountains ranged across a horizon consistently evoke silence. Still lakes that reflect the sky have a similar effect (Because Antoinette's poems are visual as well as oral, to be appreciated they need to be presented as one piece; this will require an uneven space on this page.):

"Stillness"

The early fog  
 lilts and lifts  
 rolls and rises  
 in perfect silence.

The mountain stands  
 as morning sun  
 melts night's shadows  
 in perfect silence.

The grebe returns  
 strong feet paddling  
 sailing the watery surface  
 in perfect silence.

Sometimes silence gives birth to stillness  
 but stillness is present in another way.

The fog, the mountain, the grebe  
 are.  
 Stillness lies at the heart of essence.

When stillness finds me  
 eternity unfolds.

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Some poems house silence. The poet's words capture silence. Reading such a poem involves a three-fold awareness of silence. Antoinette can recognize silence in the text, can feel it within herself and can also sense a still deeper form of silence that resides in the relationship, the space between the silence of the poem and the silence of her self. The initial recognition of silence in the text sets off an interior feeling of silence and a third form of silence, a depth of silence, appears, which invites her to put down the text and simply sit surrounded in and holding on to silence.

Antoinette encounters silence in those forms of art which have a quality of spaciousness and emptiness expressed in a simplicity and economy of line and form. The emptiness in such art holds the silence, as it were, gives it a place, a boundary where it can be encountered and allows her, for a brief moment, to feel beyond it to the silence it surrounds. Silence is abstract. So music, which exists in sound only for a moment and is "here and

gone," expresses silence in its ability to open up inner vistas to which one can respond only by letting the music be, letting it go back freely to the silence from which it came.

Antoinette begins her day with silent prayer. She begins by reading a brief selection. Usually a word, a phrase or an image will speak to her, and as the silence in the passage touches the silence in herself, she sits in the presence of the deep silence this creates. During the day, she tries to carry silence within her and nurture it. She wishes to be clothed in silence. If she is unable to spend some time in silence early in the day, her day feels fragmented. By entering silence, Antoinette shares in the very being of God. Nothing is so like the ultimate One as silence, "I am more wholly who I am in silence and God is more wholly who God is, and there is only that meeting place [silence.]" Her untitled poem reflects a sense of that encounter:

Wordlessness  
 The grace of wordlessness  
 No need to name  
 or describe  
 or gain control of with the wit  
 Awareness only  
 present  
 to the subtlety of wind  
 to limber lengthy pines  
 elegantly bowing  
 The ineffable caress  
 of God the Lover  
 in the vastness of this moment  
 Deeper  
     Deeper  
         Dropping down  
             No more words  
 Just blessed boundlessness  
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Silence has enemies: agitation that produces an inner mental whirl of thoughts, fear that scatters self-awareness making presence impossible, and exterior noise that is so intrusive the inner ear cannot overcome the distraction of the outer ear. The activities of Antoinette's day, her work as a poet, musician and spiritual director, are connected by a

common desire to be receptive and hospitable to silence. The poem, "Silence," captures Antoinette's sense of the essence of silence:

"Silence"

Silence, when it appears  
comes:  
an invitation to spaciousness,  
a vast realm in which to roam;  
limitless, boundless,  
infinite in depth  
At its center,  
a point so fine it cannot be found  
but only fallen into,  
lies stillness  
Stillness is silence purified,  
distilled, concentrated  
It lives  
between the exhalation and the intake  
of breath  
Stillness: suspended within the abyss  
of an eternal moment  
where all is perfect Balance

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### **Fr. Thomas' profile**

Thomas grew up on a farm, one of nine children. As a child and increasingly as an adolescent, he recognized a need for solitude and silence. Yet he was also a decidedly extroverted personality, who thrived on human contact and relationships. His spiritual biography is characterized by a life-long struggle between a desire for silence and solitude on the one hand and a genuine love for people and pastoral service on the other.

As a young member of a Roman Catholic religious order, he found himself both attracted and resistant to the appeal of a more contemplative life in a Trappist monastery. He felt as if silence and solitude attracted him "like a moth to a flame." He both approached and avoided a commitment to a silent life. Once ordained and involved in a very active pastoral ministry which immersed him in community and left him little time for prayer and reflection, he increasingly looked forward to the solitude of an annual silent retreat in a remote summer

camp. During this time a feeling was developing that something essential was missing in his life, something was not quite right.

In 1980 on a sabbatical leave, he chose a woman as spiritual director. Her presence impressed him deeply, and he connected this to her contemplative spirituality and to the fact that she daily prayed for extended periods by simply sitting in silence. She reminded him of a priest-counselor in his youth, who also practiced silent prayer. Both of them were deeply accepting people. These encounters created in him a now-conscious longing for a similar depth and presence. This sabbatical also introduced Thomas to the practice of centring prayer, chant, and silent prayer. The prayer of quiet or prayer of the heart became his practice. During this period he also met a woman who continues to deepen his understanding of what it means to be in love. He continues to discover, at the core of their love, a silent longing and presence to God.

A further development began in 1990 when Thomas took an extended three month retreat in a contemplative community. During this period, he struggled with and began to resolve what on the surface appeared to be more psychological than spiritual issues. Four years later, he returned to a contemplative community for a period of ten months; this caused him to realize that his now ten-year-old choice for a more contemplative lifestyle was authentic. He now knew that he was genuinely seeking God and silence was a vital part of that search. Since 1990, Thomas has increasingly centred his life on solitude, silence and the prayer of quiet.

Thomas describes his experience of silence in a wide range of images and metaphors. Silence feels as if it surrounds and embraces him with arms that, at times, are warm and soothing; at other times, silence's embrace is dark and empty. For Thomas, being in deep silence feels as if he is sinking deeper and deeper into a sponge that keeps slowly descending but yet retains a constant buoyant emptiness. Silence is like floating in a heated womb-like pool of water surrounded by endless stillness. His experiences of silence are not all peaceful,

however. At times, the silence is vibrant, as if he is on a water slide descending, twisting and turning through a darkened tunnel which threatens to drop him off into absolutely endless nothing. On occasion, silence creates a great uneasiness. It feels as if silence is trying to break in upon his self, as if it is tearing at his chest. Nature is the most frequent cause of his spontaneous encounters with silence. Birds flying overhead, the sight of deer on a hillside, the smell of a Spring day, the always different look of a familiar prairie horizon, the feel of the earth as he walks on it, all of these trigger a sense of the surrounding and deep silence in which they occur.

In all of these expressions of silence however, there remains the common experience of feeling more alert and more alive, a sense of ultimate safety and acceptance. Sitting still in silence creates a sense of deep well-being, presence and blessing: "All shall be well." What most endangers silence is trivia, wasting time and energy by excessive interest in matters of little consequence, allowing things that are innocent entertainment to take on an importance and an investment of time they don't deserve. What further endangers silence is becoming fixated by areas of conflict and stress which affect his life. On the one hand, in silence fears and anxieties well up as a central feature of silent sitting and prayer; on the other hand, these anxieties have the potential of stopping the silence.

For Thomas, at the very core of silence is a tiny, infinitely small point, a pin prick opening in which God is active and present. This indwelling point of the Trinity is the allure of silence. This is why silent sitting in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament is the ideal.

Thomas' current practice of silence includes two twenty minute periods of silent communal prayer, one at a mid-day Eucharist and the other at evening prayer. His main practice, however, consists in at least one and sometimes two daily sessions of sitting alone for one hour in silence. He creates a setting conducive to silence with candles, and incense. He enters silence either by a concentration on breathing, the use of a mantra or a type of

Buddhist body-awareness. Most often, Thomas simply sits and is aware of his breathing. He finds this daily practice of silence to be a necessity.

His sense of silence is nourished by contact with nature, a love of the earth that has been with him since childhood. His practice of silence also flows over into his attitude toward work. He tries to be single-minded, present to the task at hand. By means of silence, there is a greater connectedness among the variety of interests and activities, as well as a necessary way of holding together the complexity of his diverse, paradoxical and often inconsistent personality and activities. Silence is the holder, the container, the cup of blessing, which is able to embrace the divinity as essential oneness. Thomas continues to balance his love for solitude and silence with a need for relationships, for getting out of himself and not becoming "too closed in." A love for silence awakened in childhood slowly developed over time to become Thomas' chief means of being in the presence of God.

### **Fr. Martin's profile**

Fr. Martin was born and raised in the immediate environs of his present monastery. He describes his family as quiet and devout. As a child, Fr. Martin felt an attraction to silence, and he entered the monastic novitiate after completing a year of University studies. Fr. Martin's understanding of silence is based upon his near fifty years of monastic experience, the last twenty five years spent in increasing solitude and quiet.

Fr. Martin's descriptions of silence are concise with an intellectual quality which reflects his academic training, his long part-time teaching career as an English professor and his ten year journalistic experience as a newspaper editor.

When Fr. Martin sits in quiet, he becomes aware of a pulse, a beat, a rhythm that emanate from a still point. This "still point," a phrase used by T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*, can also be understood as the perichoresis of the Greek Fathers, the dance of the Trinity, the source of all that is. The still point within silence can also be understood as the great blast of

energy at the moment of creation, that "Big Bang" whose waves and impulses are still rolling on throughout the cosmos. In silence one encounters this basic pulse of reality. Meditational techniques which utilize a mantra or breath concentration focus a person on this basic rhythm. By bringing oneself into harmony with this rhythm, one comes into harmony with the cosmos, with all that is, and with the source of life, the still point, the ultimate one, the alpha and the omega.

In addition to daily Eucharist and private recitation of the divine office, Fr. Martin sits in silence during two formal half hour periods each day. He usually begins these sessions with the recitation of a mantra and then comes gradually to simply sit in silence. The mantra serves as a harmonic, a means of slowing and focusing the physical and mental processes until they come to reflect and be in tune with the basic pulse of life. This internal sense of harmony is perceptible and, in periods of silence, one comes to rest in it. The resulting experience seems perfectly natural and most ordinary. There is nothing more natural than relating to reality. The result of meditational time spent at the centre is described as a sense of wholeness, of things being right and good, a sense of being grounded and rooted. This silent centre of life cannot be manipulated or controlled. One only prepares to meet it and welcomes it when it manifests itself, but the process of meditation and taking time to sit does not control the manifestation.

Within this intentional silence, there are notable moments of awe, of an intense awareness of wholeness. Fr. Martin describes these as occurring when one comes to realize that what is experienced in silence actually reflects reality; one is truly a microcosm of a greater whole. What is occurring in one's heart is occurring throughout all of creation and one is in harmony with its activity.

The touchstones for authentic silence are reverence and simplicity. If a person's silence creates in them a reverence for creation, especially for humanity, a love and respect that is reflected in action and thought, then presumably that person is drawing near to the still

point. Time spent in such silence results in a desire to simplify life, to let go of unnecessary structures both organizational, ecclesial and intellectual. There is a movement away from complexity, activism and planning to a much simpler style of life.

In recent years, Fr. Martin has withdrawn from most community responsibilities within his monastery to live, as much as possible, as a full-time solitary on the monastery property, in order to be as fully as possible in harmony with the reality which silence mediates so well.

### **Diane's profile**

Diane was born into a large family in Montana. Her father was employed as a Sunday School superintendent, but for unknown reasons left this ministry and from that point on was opposed to religious practice. However, Diane's childhood, due to her mother's influence, remained filled with an unspoken sense of the spiritual. Diane describes herself as an unusual child, one who spent a good deal of time alone simply being observant. While still a young child, Diane contracted a severe case of tuberculosis. In the 1940's, the only treatment available was the isolation, solitude and the comparative silence of a sanatorium. Diane spent years secluded, resting and recuperating. During this period, Diane read and re-read the parts of her mother's letters which explained that some day Diane would understand the meaning of this enforced silent solitude.

After she recovered and returned home, Diane yearned for nothing more than a normal adolescence. She became a member of a musical band and wanted to be a singer. Although her life seemed finally to be normal, she felt something lacking. She married and had two children. Her marriage, however, collapsed and it was at this time of great stress and discouragement that she had a deeply religious experience which profoundly changed her outlook to strong faith and trust in God. Diane divorced and felt a persistent longing for solitude and silence in order to nurture her growing religious faith. She raised her children to

adulthood, experiencing the full joys, pains, and difficulties of parenting. She subsequently remarried and is now a spiritual director.

Diane lives a life of silence. Silence is a state of life to which she is drawn within her dual roles as wife and mother of grown children. Diane is drawn to silence and feels a physical need to respond to it. Silence is like an itch, a strong insistent yearning. Having accepted and lived silence, it is now such a part of her life that she could not give it up. Her life is structured to protect large blocks of silence. Essentially, this involves choosing to lead a somewhat secluded life, trying to restrict unnecessary travel, noise and distractions and engaging in occupations that foster silence, such as painting, gardening and spiritual direction. She spends time each day simply sitting in silence, aware of the presence of God.

Silence, for Diane, is reality. When she is most in touch with silence, she feels most in touch with the ultimate, with what really matters, with the source and the end of all that is. Silence is the necessary setting, the necessary medium for an engagement with God. Silence is as close as one gets to the Creator.

Diane speaks of levels of silence. Her explanations of these levels are not meant as literal definitions but rather as descriptive outlines of a process. To encounter silence, she goes apart into quiet and comes gradually to a stillness in which there are no thoughts. In this quiet stillness, silence comes to her of its own accord. When silence is recognized, she becomes even more still in order to honour its presence. This deep silence is a fullness of quiet, a depth of stillness. Deep silence is a totality of still silent presence. At its centre is acceptance; everything is okay; all is well. One lives in this reality by ceasing to strive or to seek, by simply being there.

Silence is tangible; it manifests itself, and conveys a most gentle sense of energy, movement and life. Silence comes as a gift, a grace like a tender embrace providing a sense of being surrounded by a personal yet transcendent presence. This silent presence moves in like a fog, a thick mist that comes closer and closer, until one is totally within it, aware only

of an interior hush. It is like being in a valley as the early-morning sun's rays are just beginning to shine through a stand of trees. So silence slowly moves in with its surrounding presence. The valley feels as if one is in the primordial, creative, womb of God. Diane listens within this still presence, not for a sound but for a type of wordless communication that, when received, creates an intuitive knowledge of God. When silence departs, she is left with a certain loneliness.

Birds, trees, a trickle of water in a woods, the flame of a candle, the public reading of the Word at a liturgy, the stillness experienced in spiritual direction, all serve as occasions for silence to be manifested. At times in the silence, Diane receives a word, something to be said to another, usually one of her directees. She doesn't seek such a word; it just comes. Frequently, it is of such a serious nature that she would rather not have the obligation to convey it. She also receives empty sterile silences that are heavy and dank, creating a sense of fear and uneasiness. In this situation, common sense is followed. She resists being drawn into a silence that hints of darkness and destruction.

### **Sr. Patricia's profile**

Patricia is a member of a Roman Catholic community of sisters. She is in her first year of living a contemplative lifestyle in a small religious community in British Columbia. She has extensive experience and training as a spiritual director.

Patricia does not readily use the word silence to describe her religious experience. Silence carries, for her, a negative connotation of a type of legalism that characterized religious life prior to the Second Vatican Council. She prefers to speak of "quiet," "prayerful awareness," "taking time to be with," "being present without words," "solitude time," and "being contemplative." The words quiet, solitude, presence, and unity describe her experience better than the word silence.

Patricia's childhood did not have memorable periods of quiet apart from summers with her family at a lake. She was not a person who spent periods of time alone, and was seldom separated from her family. In fact, Patricia never lived alone until a few years ago when she moved from living in a religious community to living alone in an apartment. Although this was a worrisome change, she now describes the resulting experience of solitude as a "real gift."

What stands out most in Patricia's childhood, that is linked to her present strong need for quiet, is a very early awareness of a relationship with God. "Right from the time I talked, I talked to God all the time." She did not consider this ongoing desire to speak with God, to spend time in chapel, to attend church often as anything unusual. It was simply her way of being, of wanting and needing to be with the "Other." Her need for quiet, for taking time, has been a steady and progressive feature of her life. Patricia's movement into a form of living marked by quiet, solitude, and prayer is one of slow steady growth, relatively unmarked by exterior crises or memorable turning points of conversion or insight. Her present way of life evolved naturally. The writings of Thomas Merton, and Kelly Nemeck and workshops given by Jim Finley are the most explicit sources for her understanding of the kind of life she is living. These sources confirmed the path she was already traveling. They made explicit and confirmed what she already knew.

Patricia is uncomfortable describing the quiet and stillness she encounters in prayer. She speaks of simply being present to God without words. She does not analyze her prayer periods or speak of them as having been good or bad, deep or shallow. She just recognizes that she needs to take time to be alone, present and attentive with God. In recent years this is not accompanied by feelings: "I don't feel God's presence in a warm fuzzy way. There was a time when I used to, but not anymore. . . it is kind of like 'here I am,' and that's it. I don't feel any wonderful, wonderful thing."

The quiet sense of presence and unity she describes is experienced occasionally outside of solitary prayer, usually in encounters with nature. This ordinarily doesn't happen when she is walking but rather when she is contemplating trees, flowers, sunsets and, especially, the still water of a lake. This looking at, this appreciating glance at nature in a non-possessive way, triggers a conscious sense of quiet union.

Patricia begins her day with one hour of quiet sitting. She also takes part in two communal silent prayer periods of twenty minutes each. Her solitary prayer differs from her communal prayer. Her solitary prayer is essentially methodless, pure sitting: "I just sit and be there. It is like sitting there with someone you love and just not saying anything." Her communal periods of silent prayer occasionally utilize centring prayer techniques, a mantra, or an intentional "gazing out" at nature. The communal periods, while similar to the solitary prayer times, have a different feel about them. She thinks this is most probably due to the fact that her solitary prayer takes place first thing in the morning when her mind is less active and engaged. For Patricia, quiet prayer has come to be her most valued spiritual practice. If deprived of the present contemplative structure of her day by reason of accepting new responsibilities, Patricia is clear that she would have to "carve out good chunks of time" to safeguard her quiet sense of presence. This time in wordless quiet is not a means to any end, but is an end in itself. "Sometimes I think this [practice] is crazy. But deep inside of me I know."

Patricia's love for and need of quiet, wordless presence to God developed progressively from childhood. It seems a natural outcome of fidelity to a life of prayer for over fifty years. She is able to trace her "prayer journey" through all its different stages and her present practice of quiet sitting is her current stage. Consequently, she finds it difficult to analyze the experience of quiet; it has evolved naturally "I don't measure. I [just] want to be there." The chief characteristic of her sense of quiet is a sense of union and presence that is essentially methodless sitting.

### **Summary of the participant's descriptions of deep silence**

These five men and women describe their experience of silence in similar and, in some instances, identical terms. All speak of an apparently physical need for silence; without silence they feel fragmented or lost. At the centre of silence, they report a dynamic stillness. Their methods to foster this stillness are, again, very similar. This chapter will summarize the common characteristics and minor differences in their understanding of silence.

As children, the participants were generally introspective, with a heightened sense of self awareness and an unusually strong sense of the reality and presence of God. All come from stable families. Some families were quite pious, some conventionally religious and some non-practicing. All have memories of quiet periods in their childhood and of feeling close to nature. Their religious awakening and development, however, follow diverse patterns. Some connect their contemplative spiritual development to crucial decisions and key religious experiences, resulting in an intense struggle to change their life-style in order to follow a path to quiet prayer. Others grew into a spiritual life of increasingly quiet prayer in a calm, progressive way, unmarked by intense conversion experiences or memorable spiritual insights.

As a group, they're very self-observant, especially regarding the movements of their own spirit. This perceptiveness is due to the extensive training in spirituality and spiritual direction they all have received. They observe their own moments of grace or malaise with a professionally discerning eye. Their skills in self-awareness have been honed by hours of listening to the spiritual observations and prayers of others. Most participants were mentored in silence directly by the example of others and all were mentored through reading the Christian contemplative tradition, particularly Thomas Merton. As a group, they are people with a clear sense of their religious journey.

All profess a strong need for daily periods of silence in order to quiet down, to step apart, to sit still, to observe, to absorb silence. All regard the practice of silence as their chief

means to relate to God. All would sooner let go of almost any other religious practice before surrendering silence. For them, nothing mediates the ultimate more clearly and powerfully than silence. Their daily communion with silence incarnates the real presence of God in an immanent manner.

All structure silence into their day. Their formal sitting in silence varies from thirty minutes to an hour, once or twice a day. This sitting in silence is just that, a clearing of time, space and demands to secure a moment where they can just sit and be present. For some, this consists of a relatively formal dedication of space and time by the use of candles, incense and posture. For others, their practice of silence is as basic as sitting still in their bedroom and simply being aware, in a methodless way, of the presence of the Other in the quiet stillness. All interviewees need this relationship with the ultimate which silence mediates. For some, meditational techniques, such as the recitation of a mantra or breath concentration or spiritual reading, further the relationship. For others, a more relaxed awareness serves better to deepen silence.

Silence cannot be generated, created or manipulated; it slowly and gently emerges into awareness, coming like a gift with a life and will of its own. Silence feels as if it is arriving from the very centre of reality, most real, natural and personal. Yet, silence simultaneously feels unusual or different; it seems vast, awesome and strange, while mediating a presence that is overwhelmingly benign and life giving. Silence arrives shrouded in an alien, ineffable, and incomprehensible otherness while also signaling that it is familiar, hospitable, supportive and life giving. This paradox may not be that extraordinary. One meets and is often drawn toward a person who has contradictory qualities, for example: close, warm and open but simultaneously hinting of a secret, hidden depth. Descriptions of silence that seem, at times, to ascribe a duality or paradoxical quality to it, may simply be describing a personality that is rich and alive, not easily reduced to a stereotype or a one-dimensional caricature.

The participants' selection of images to describe silence reflect this complexity: embracing arms that both comfort and challenge, a sense of sinking buoyancy, a floating stillness, a falling into nothing. Other descriptions emphasize the positive accepting nature of silence: a sense of a tender surrounding embrace, a slowly advancing fog that brings with it a deep interior comforting hush, a valley that is so still and alert that it feels like the womb of God. Yet, on occasion, this overall acceptance and warmth hints of a deeper dimension, capable of tearing into one's chest and breaking into one's very self. Silence seems alive, a creature that freely appears and vanishes, familiar but unknown, compelling and beautiful, but retaining a certain wildness and unpredictability, a fearsome gentle beauty.

To be in silence is to be in harmony, to be in rhythm with the pulse of reality, with the beat of the universe, with the seasons, with life itself. Silence invites one to be in tune with it, to rest in it and let it lead. Deepening silence is like an ebbing breeze on a lake that creates progressively smaller and gentler waves until its surface becomes perfectly still and clear. Silence is experienced as an end in itself, a sense of presence and unity much like a friendship, a relationship with one who is beyond words.

Apart from the silence of scheduled prayer or meditation times, deep silence is also encountered spontaneously. All report stumbling, as it were, upon silence and being pleasantly surprised by the unscheduled meeting. As in meditation, these natural encounters with deep silence cannot be forced or manipulated. Yet there is a pattern in these chance meetings.

Spontaneous encounters with silence are most often described in visual terms. One sees something and the sight sets off an experience of deep silence. For example, the sight of a horizon or a vista or the far stretching surface of a lake can open up an awareness of a similar vast inner, empty, silent space. The act which triggers the silence into awareness is alternately described as, "contemplating," "glancing appreciatively at," or simply, "looking at nature." This glance is non-possessive, gracious, and loving. It is the recognition of a world

beyond one's control, of a creation that is not one's doing, of a beauty from a source other than oneself that centres the awareness to hear a deep silence emanating from and surrounding the object. Visual objects which have this effect include trees, flowers, birds, a trickle of water in a woods, a candle's flame, distant horizons and vistas. Fr. Thomas additionally notes that the smell of a Spring day and the feel of the earth under one's feet have the same effect. The creatures most capable of evoking silence are birds. Their silent flight through the emptiness of space provokes deep silence more consistently than anything else.

Antoinette links these spontaneous recognitions of deep silence to the qualities of spaciousness, emptiness, and simplicity. She notes how a form of art which uses an economy of line and form has a similar effect. The sparsity of line and figure, "holds the silence as it were, gives it a place, a boundary where it can be encountered," and allows one to feel the silence it surrounds. She notes a similar effect in music which, of its nature, cannot be possessed but only appreciated and let go as it simultaneously "opens up an inner vista." Antoinette's descriptions of the silence encountered in reading a thoughtful poetic text also notes how the three-fold relationship of reader, text and the reader's response also depends upon a non-possessive appreciative recognition of beauty. This is complemented by Diane's insight concerning how the public reading of the Word, which we do not possess or control, at a worship service often has a similar potential to spontaneously trigger deep silence. Finally, Diane, Fr. Thomas and Antoinette note a particular form of deep silence that arises in the privileged relationships of spiritual direction and love. A unique form of deep silence occurs when two people are present together, appreciatively respecting each other's freedom and uniqueness.

Participants describe silence as becoming progressively more intense or deeper as one spends time with it. When silence is explored it reveals levels, depths and a centre. The centre is where silence is most profound and most deeply communicative. At the centre,

deep silence feels as if it is arriving from the very origin of the universe clothed with a primordial air, ancient yet contemporary, elemental yet infinite. Such silence above all feels natural, normal, and good. Antoinette notes a progressive deepening of consciousness in entering silence. One first becomes alert, then aware, then hushed and, finally, receptive. Diane speaks of similarly coming to quiet, then gradually to stillness and finally to a state beyond thoughts. "In this quiet stillness, silence comes of its own accord. . . [and as she recognizes its presence she] becomes yet more still to honor it."

Participants struggle for images to express what the centre of silence is like. Fr. Thomas speaks of a "tiny, infinitely small point, a pin-prick opening in which God is active and present." He feels lured to this "indwelling point of the Trinity." Fr. Martin uses an almost identical image when he speaks of following a rhythm heard in silence to the still centre from which it emanates. This centre is the creative "dance of the Trinity," the Big-Bang instant of cosmic creation still rolling out in perceptible waves and impulses. Deepest silence beckons one to harmonize with this most fundamental cosmic rhythm. The following lines from Antoinette's poem, "Silence," capture the above insights while also conveying something of the actual sensation of silence:

At its center,  
 a point so fine it cannot be found  
 but only fallen into,  
 lies stillness  
 Stillness is silence purified,  
 distilled, concentrated  
 It lives  
 between the exhalation and the intake  
 of breath  
 Stillness: suspended within the abyss  
 of an eternal moment  
 where all is perfect Balance

At silence's centre dwells suspended, balanced, concentrated, purified stillness.

All participants note a deep unity, presence, and acceptance emanating from this scarcely perceptible pin-point of utter stillness, a boundless, infinite sea of peace and acceptance. "All shall be well." By centring in deep stillness, one feels most natural, real,

accepted and integrated. Time spent in deep silence results in what Sr. Patricia describes as a sense of union and presence with the Other. Fr. Martin speaks of time spent in deep silence as creating a sense of reverence for all of reality, a desire to simplify and integrate life, a wish to let go of the non-essentials, a sense of wholeness and groundedness. Fr. Thomas describes it as feeling more alert, more alive, "a sense of deep well being, presence and blessing."

The encounter with deep silence is rewarding, and one safeguards it by embracing a certain discipline. Deep silence is endangered by fear, noise, needless agitation and immersion in trivia. Silence demands that one's life be structured so as to diminish needless complexities. Silence thrives when distractions and trivia are reduced in a healthy, balanced and sane manner.

The differences in the participant's experience of deep silence, whether considered individually or collectively, do not accumulate as a serious objection or challenge to the above synthesis. The participants' mutual experiences of silence are very compatible and complementary.

Some of them indicate a familiarity and recognition of negative silences which threaten and hint of evil, which carry a message of dissolution and meaninglessness. Others have never experienced anything but a gracious silence. Those who are familiar with negative silences simply side-step their presence and refuse to be drawn into them. The occurrence of negative silence amongst the participants is comparatively rare.

The participants approach silence using their natural talents and gifts. Some descriptions are intellectual, others are poetic, still others are simply descriptive. Some participants are reticent about silence, others speak at length. Some are very consistent in their descriptions, others use multiple images and approaches. Some are enthusiastic, others are reserved. Some are confident silence can be described; others are more cautious. Some are very disciplined in their practice of silence; others are relaxed, spontaneous and informal. For some, the word "silence" is rich in associations and meaning; for others, the word is an

obstacle to the experience of quiet stillness. For some, silence carries within it only infinitely deepening levels of silence; for others, deepening silence may occasionally contain a word or a message that is quite explicit and direct.

These variations in emphasis and perspectives are probably due to personality, educational experiences and natural modes of expression. The consistency in the description of silence is much stronger and weightier than these minor variations.

A life dedicated to religious growth in silence is not merely a theoretical possibility but is, as witnessed by the lives of our participants, a lived reality. Silence offers a context and a content that fosters spiritual sensitivity and understanding. Silence serves as a sacrament, a nourishing encounter with the source of life. Silence is an adventure into the ultimate.

## **4. Review of the literature: research in classic descriptions of deep silence**

### **The desert experience**

The best written sources which contain classic descriptions of deep silence are found in the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers of the early Christian Church, Quaker writings from the seventeenth century to the present and *The World of Silence*, a philosophical description of silence written in the early 1940's by the Swiss philosopher Max Picard. These three are the unchallenged classics of deep silence as there are no other major sources which provide such extensive and detailed descriptions. These three will be analyzed to determine when deep silence is most clearly present in human experience, the ways in which it is most typically described, and what constitutes the centre of deep silence.

During the third to sixth centuries, tens of thousands of Christians migrated to the Egyptian desert to live as hermits, monks and nuns. Here, silence, like water, was treasured as an essential element of life. Perhaps nowhere else in Church history was silence so esteemed. An analysis of the collected stories and sayings of these Christians provides a unique and valued insight into the nature of silence. Their sayings, over time, were edited into alphabetical and systematic collections. The alphabetical collection lists the sayings by the name of the monk or nun to whom they are attributed; the systematic collection lists the sayings by subject reference. In English, the alphabetical and the systematic collections are

available respectively in translations by Benedicta Ward and Helen Waddell. A more limited number of sayings from the systematic collection are also available in English translation by Thomas Merton.

The quest for a silent life began late in the third century with Anthony, an Egyptian layman, taking the gospel literally, selling his possessions and moving to the desert to be alone with God. Anthony's reputation for wisdom and holiness attracted visitors, among them St. Athanasius who wrote a biography of Anthony. Athanasius' work was extremely popular and inspired a popular movement. In the desert, three models of religious living spontaneously developed. The first was a pure hermit model, with individuals going off by themselves to lead secluded lives in imitation of Anthony. The second model also involved solitude and quiet, but was lived within very small formal monastic communities. The third centered in a remote, forbidding area named Scetis, well inland, southwest of the Mediterranean coast; here, several monks typically lived alone in their own hut or "cell" within walking distance of an "abba," or father, to whom they were disciples (Ward xvii - ixx).

It is within this third model that the unique form of literature, the collected sayings of the desert fathers and mothers, referred to commonly as the "Sayings of the Fathers," developed. These collections also contained a limited number of sayings attributed to desert mothers, Ammas. The survival of the sayings of Ammas, in the deeply patriarchal culture of the Christian desert movement, witnesses the presumed presence of significant numbers of Ammas. For the purposes of this chapter, this collective literature is termed simply "the sayings."

The most common type of saying describes an inexperienced monk seeking a "word" from an older Abba in the form of a question, usually a variation of "What should I do because I am troubled by. . . ?" The answers to these requests were originally preserved orally in Coptic and Greek and later collected into written Greek and Latin editions. The

sayings, a form of folk wisdom, are brief, forceful, blunt and uncompromisingly direct. They answer to individual requests for guidance and, as a result, are sometimes contradictory in content, as good advice for one is not always suitable for another. Alternating between incredible rigor and the most gentle concern and tolerance, the sayings provide insight into the experiences of men and women, living in silence, in an already very quiet and still environment.

Daily life in the desert is simple in the extreme. Shelter is "a stone hut with a roof of branches, a reed mat for a bed, a sheep skin, a lamp, a vessel for water or oil. . . [and] food [is] reduced to the minimum, sleep also" (Waddell xxiii). Books are not valued. Even a copy of the Bible is suspect as a pretentious luxury. The words of Scripture and the words of Amma or Abba, set to memory, are the essentials. Expounding upon ideas or thoughts, even religious ones, is considered distracting. The attainment of peace, joy, loving kindness, humility and deep silence--not book knowledge--are the measures of learning. Status and recognition flow to those whose lives attest to an existential wisdom tested by inner trials and exterior rigor. The hierarchical Church and civil officials have no role in organizing desert life. Any previous status in the world is repudiated and unrecognized. One becomes an Abba and Amma by community consensus. The great Abbas and Ammas are those who, tested by years of desert living, combine incredible rigor toward themselves with insightful honesty and gentleness toward others. The sayings reflect a painful struggle to remain sane and evenly balanced in a life which deliberately provides no diversion or entertainment.

Manual work meets basic needs. Basket weaving is the favored labor because the technique, once mastered, requires little thought. The mind rests in silence or engages in a form of repetitive prayer while one labors. A typical week consists of daily work, solitary prayer and devotions, hospitality to visitors when necessary, a Sunday meeting for the Eucharist and recitation of psalms. An interview with Abba or Amma for spiritual direction is arranged as necessary and in some cases this is extremely rare:

A monk once came to Basil of Caesarea and said, "Speak a word, Father"; and Basil replied, "Thou shalt love the lord thy God with all thy heart," and the monk went away at once. Twenty years later he came back, and said, "Father, I have struggled to keep your word; now speak another word to me"; and he said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"; and the monk returned in obedience to his cell to keep that also. (Ward xxii)

While extreme and even perhaps exaggerated, this example, nonetheless, underlines the importance of "the word" received from an Abba. The rarity and importance of a "word" also explains why it is memorized and preserved.

Silence permeates these sayings. While Waddell's translation provides no sayings grouped under the subject "silence" (there are eleven under "quiet"), silence is present as a factor in the majority of sayings. This project/dissertation's portrayal of the nature of desert silence consulted all of the sayings in the above collections.

Desert silence demands attention, care and work in order to create an environment free from distraction. This concern is reflected in the action verbs associated with silence: keep silence, guard silence, wait on silence, learn to keep silence, apply yourself to silence (Ward 42, 67, 236, 220, 22, 178 and Merton 1960, 47). Desert silence is an intentional creation, designed for a purpose; silence is not envisioned as simply sitting there like the sand. One builds and maintains silence through hard work and care. Silence thrives only where it is guarded and sustained. Silence is a living thing, a creature that requires safekeeping and nourishment. Deliberate, and conscious awareness ensures the safekeeping of silence. Abba Bossarion said that a monk, like an angel, is "all eye" (Ward 42). Abba John gives similar advice: "Watching means to sit in the cell and be always mindful of God" (Ward 91). Watching, waiting, sitting, being vigilant are how one develops this awareness (Ward 186, Merton 1960, 55).

Abba Poemen said that a brother asked Abba Simon, "If I come out of my cell and find my brother amusing himself, I amuse myself with him and if I find him in the act of laughing, I laugh with him, Then when I return to my cell, I am no longer at peace." The old man said to him, "So, when you come out of your cell and find people laughing or talking you want to laugh and talk with them, and when you return to your cell, you expect to find yourself as you were before?" The brother said, "What should I do?" The old man replied, "Be watchful inwardly; be watchful outwardly." (Ward 186)

Abba Simon's advice is extreme and seems inhuman when literally applied to ordinary life. Where is the harm in laughter amongst friends? However, if one is dedicated to discovering God as the central purpose of life, then indeed "watch inwardly, watch outwardly" in silence is good advice. Silence, because of its great value, requires attention and vigilance. An Abba advises, "Any trial whatever that comes to you can be conquered by silence" (Merton 1960, 55). Amusements divert one from silence, so reject them. The sayings insist on protecting silence by such dedicated vigilant active awareness.

Nowhere is this insistence on vigilance more focused than in sayings dealing with "the cell." One's cell or hut enshrines silence. Here, especially, silence is distilled and concentrated:

A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, "Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything." (Ward 139)

Someone said to Abba Arsenius, "My thoughts trouble me, saying, You can neither fast or work; at least go and visit the sick, for that is also charity." But the old man, recognizing the suggestions of the demons, said to

him, "Go, eat, drink, sleep, do no work, only do not leave your cell." For he knew that steadfastness in the cell keeps a monk in the right way. (Ward 10)

One can reduce prayer to a minimum, stop fasting, sleep as one wishes, relax all disciplines in general, but never give up the cell. One saying has a monk, troubled by a desire to give up his seemingly useless life of silence and solitude, going to an Abba who advises him to drop all his rigor and disciplines, pray once a day, but stay in his cell. This seems extremely lax to the monk who goes for a second opinion to another Abba who tells him, " Don't pray at all, just stay in the cell." He then goes for a third opinion to Abba Arsenius who tells him, in essence, "You've received good advice, follow it!" (Ward 203). The sayings state consistently that a life of silence requires an awareness which results only from time spent in one's cell:

[Abba Anthony] said also, "Just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with men of the world lose the intensity of inner peace. So like a fish going towards the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness." (Ward 3)

After many years, when one has attained a constant state of peace, a life without care and anxiety, then the cell can be left because its silence is now internalized . The great Abbas and Ammas can go anywhere and be with anyone and still remain peaceful, still in the silence of their cells (Ward 200).

The sayings generally regard speech negatively. Silence ranks higher than speech, even when talking about God:

When I am obliged to speak to my neighbor, do you prefer me to speak of the Scriptures or of the sayings of the Fathers?" The old man answered him, "If you can't be silent, you had better talk about the sayings of the Fathers than about the Scriptures; it is not so dangerous. (Ward 31-32)

In the desert, silence is preferred to just about any and all talk. Abba Pambo, a monk of great esteem, ordinarily refused to acknowledge that he even knew of a scriptural passage or saying, if asked to interpret one. A special danger resides in religious talk since it leads so easily to delusion, argument and endless speculation. Abba Moses agreed with a dying monk that there was nothing better than to "hold one's peace" (Ward 128).

Desert silence distinguishes between idle or trivial speech and the word. The most common request in the sayings is "Abba, give me a word," or "say a word." To stay in silence requires sustenance with words, but words are given rarely and only to those judged sincere:

Blessed Archbishop Theophilus, accompanied by a magistrate, came one day to find Abba Arsenius. He questioned the old man, to hear a word from him. After a short silence the old man answered him, "Will you put into practice what I say to you?" They promised him this. "If you hear Arsenius is anywhere, do not go there." (Ward 10)

Arsenius is not impressed with status and even tells Archbishops to leave him alone when he judges they simply want an entertaining word. A word given in response to a genuine request is clung to like a raft. Such a word, at times, is the only thing preventing one from slipping into the depths of anxiety and dread. As a result, only those who cherish words receive one. Abba Felix refuses to give a word to one he believes has no intention of hearing it (Ward 242). Genuine words are works of art, rare and capable of endless consideration. The Abbots and Ammas knew that babble as well as wisdom could arise from a seemingly silent monk. The test of a word's value is its ability to lead one back into peace and silence (Ward 171). Only words that deepen silence are "a word"; the others are idle speech.

Desert silence contains a moral motivation which is somewhat alien to modern sensibilities. In the desert, there is a horror of sinning in speech. The intimate accessibility of speech, the speed with which a thought becomes a word, the manner in which a word can

so perfectly express contempt, derision or slander frightens these men and women of silence. Speech is morally suspect and dangerous. Abba Poenen said, "If a man remembered that it is written: 'By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned,' (Mt. 12:37) he would choose to remain silent" (Ward 173). Coupled with a dread of sinning by insincere or needless speech is an even greater aversion to calumny, slander and false judgment. Many sayings deal with an outstanding Abba or Amma's refusal to judge or condemn:

A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you." So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him. "What is this, Father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another." When they heard that they said no more to the brother but forgave him. (Ward 139)

Desert silence is conditioned by a strong moral tradition that considers loose spontaneous speech an occasion of sin. Silence is motivated in part by a desire to avoid conceit, false judgment and lies.

Silence is embodied in the gestures, actions and speech of outstanding Ammas and Abbas. Their zeal on occasion can appear curt, rude and excessive:

[Abba John] was very fervent. Now someone who came to see him praised his work and he remained silent, for he was weaving a rope. Once again the visitor began to speak and once again he kept silence. The third time he said to the visitor, "Since you came here, you have driven God away from me. (Ward 92)

Abba Carion speaks of his own son, also a monk, as one who has attained silence (Ward 117). Some Ammas and Abbas arrive at a state of silence which remains more or less constant, manifest in their personality. Abba Theodore does everything in silence (Ward 245). Nothing embodies silence as clearly as one's speech and in speech nothing detracts from silence as much as boasting. When silence confronts idle speech, the outcome is predictable:

In a village there was said to be a man who fasted to such a degree that he was called "the Faster." Abba Zeno had heard of him, and he sent for him. The other came gladly. They prayed and sat down. The old man began to work in silence. Since he could not succeed in talking to him the Faster began to get bored. So he said to the old man, "Pray for me, Abba, for I want to go." The old man said to him, "Why?" The other replied, "Because my heart is as if it were on fire and I do not know what is the matter with it." (Ward 67)

The Faster is then told that he feeds himself through his ears and from now on he should fast in secret. The saying goes on to describe the Faster's continuing deterioration into madness. Such is the end of idle speech.

Those who model silence are not only non-aggressive but even non-assertive when speaking might cause embarrassment or loss of status:

Some brethren. . . were walking and the guide misled them the whole night. There were twelve of them and they all knew that they were lost and each one struggled not to say so. When day came and the guide realized that they had lost their way and said to them, "Forgive me, but I am lost." They all said to him, " We knew this but we kept silence." (Ward 218)

[Bonus'] life went by in a great silence and he was quiet in all his ways and in all things he lived as an angel might. . . and reckoned himself of no account . .

. it was all we could do to persuade him and he spoke to us a little about gentleness. (Waddell 61)

What makes one a person of silence is a desire not to call attention to oneself, to become invisible through ordinariness, to not stand out by nurturing peculiarities, "do not seek to be known for anything special" (Ward 148). Some sayings reflect disdain for common opinion: "Abba Pambo used to say, "The monk's garment should be such that he could throw it out of his cell for three days and no-one would take it" (Ward 101).

The three hundred year tradition of the desert, captured in the sayings, reveals an absolute respect for silence. Desert silence is only learned by practice and persistence. One "keeps" silence by intently watching over it. It needs time and attention to grow and requires a place, an incubator, a cell as its nursery. The silence of the desert is preferred to words, even the words of the Bible. Words are good and preferred to silence only when they proceed reluctantly out of silence for the good of another and only when their mission is to rescue someone in order to return them to silence. When silence is nurtured sufficiently in the protection of a cell, it lives within outstanding Abbots and Ammas in humility and clear speech. The silence of the desert is manifest in gentleness, compassion and tolerance. This silence is not a functional type of silence, utilized pragmatically to produce an outstanding man or woman. Rather silence, like air, is essential, an absolute requirement to sustain one's human integrity. Desert silence exists not for the sake of personal growth, but rather to lead one more deeply into silence, a silence in which personal growth becomes irrelevant:

One day Abba Arsenius came to a place where there were reeds blowing in the wind. The old man said to the brothers, "What is this movement?" They said, "Some reeds." The old man said to them, "When one who is living in silent prayer hears the song of a little sparrow, his heart no longer experiences the same peace. How much worse it is when you hear the movement of those reeds." (Ward 13)

Arsenius is not seeking silence in order to be fulfilled; he is extreme in his insistence on an absolute silence because it is a sacrament to him. Silence and stillness mediate God and Arsenius wishes to lose, not to discover, himself in it. The desert's anti-intellectualism, its rigor, its moral revulsion about seeming trivialities are all foreign to contemporary culture: however, the gentle, loving delight with silence, which produces such extraordinarily free and delightful human beings, remains fascinating and neglected.

In modern society, noise is constant and silence is occasional. In the early Christian desert communities of monks and nuns, the relationship was reversed; silence was constant and noise was occasional. This was achieved through a communal effort. The pervasive silence of the desert communities is socially constructed and is then further deepened in the cells of individual monks and nuns. It is in the cell that the depth of desert silence is found.

Desert silence is not described in the sayings as much as it is encountered. Silence results from the shock of recognition that occurs after one reads a particularly direct and unconventional saying. Those sayings that cause one to react with a type of shock or disbelief at the stark realities of desert life best embody the silence of the desert. One feels the silence in the sayings by momentarily experiencing the radical commitment to self-awareness they presuppose. These monks and nuns are committed to a disciplined life of awareness of nothing in particular except the sheer reality of each present moment. Such awareness requires time in solitude and disciplined attentiveness. The only recurring noises in the desert are wind, the rustle of leaves and shrubs, the sound of birds, and the occasional human voice. By attending to the surrounding sheer silence, a person's manner, speech, gesture, and personality are gradually reshaped and reformed. Abbas and Ammas are aware, awake and attentive.

At the centre of desert silence is a healing and transformative power. Silence echoes God and the closer one draws to silence the nearer one comes to God's peace, forgiveness and

compassion. To arrive at this centre requires humility, authenticity, honesty, trust, love and courage. Underlying it all is a highly developed and stark form of disciplined awareness.

### **The Quaker experience**

Meeting weekly in silent worship for over three hundred years, the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers as they are commonly known, developed a unique written record of their encounters with silence. Friends can not only recognize silence, but also distinguish a life-giving from a destructive silence. The Quaker experience of silence provides insights into the nature of silence itself, and provides an outline of the components of silence.

The Religious Society of Friends began in seventeenth century England through the ministry of George Fox, a young man caught up in the religious upheavals of the late Reformation period. Wishing to resolve his personal dilemma of how to come to a sure and sound faith, he consulted the various religious factions of his day. Their words and theories left him extremely dissatisfied until at last, in solitude, he had a deeply moving religious experience. Fox began at once to share his faith that God did not require the intermediary of religious clergy, scripture, creed, buildings, symbols or doctrine, but rather God spoke directly to all who would listen.

Fox's distrust of words and theories was not unusual. The then-current Puritan theology of a radically fallen human nature created a religious environment that deeply suspected all "merely" human thought. Fox did not trust autonomous human religious thinking with its fantasies, calculations and logic, but he did trust the Word of God as found in the Bible and the clear, plain, honest speech that built squarely on its biblical insights. Fox accepted this general line of Puritan thought but radicalized it by locating the Word not in the Bible but in his own heart. Here, in an interior experience mediated directly by the Spirit, he saw a direct experience of God was available for everyone.

Fox and the early Friends developed a worship service devoted to a silent communal waiting upon the Spirit. They adopted this practice of a silent meeting from the Seekers, a term in common use at that time for unorganized and little known groups of English men and women who, thoroughly disaffected by the civil war and religious controversies of that period, chose to meet together and wait in silent prayer for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The origins of the Seekers' worship is a matter of speculation. Some scholars see them deriving the service from the still surviving religious climate of the Middle Ages and the piety of the Roman Catholic Mass which linked prayer with a reverential type of silence. Others see the Seekers' silent service derived from mystical movements associated with Caspar Schwenkfeld, a sixteenth century Silesian reformer and founder of German communities of pious Christians called "Stille Frommen." Rebelling against the Church's moral corruption, the stille Frommen withdrew from institutional Church life and sacramental practice into silent waiting prayer (Harvey 7-10).

Whatever the origin of the silent meeting, early Friends met in silence and waited upon the Spirit to speak directly to them. Friends shared the message received with the others at meeting by a "vocal ministry," speaking briefly to convey the message received from the Spirit. Men and women, elders and children ministered equally.

Alexander Parker, a close companion of George Fox, wrote what is considered to be classic advice on entering into this silent meeting for worship:

The first that enters into the place of your meeting, be not careless, nor wander up and down either in body or mind, but innocently sit down in some place and turn in thy mind to the Light, and wait upon God simply, as if none were present but the Lord, and here thou art strong. When the next that come in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn to the same Light, and wait in Spirit, and so all the rest coming in the fear of the Lord sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the Light. A few that are thus

gathered by the arm of the Lord into the unity of the spirit, this is a sweet and precious meeting in which all are met with the Lord...Those who are brought to a pure, still waiting on God in the Spirit are come nearer to God than words are . . . though not a word be spoken to the hearing of the ear. In such a meeting where the presence and power of God is felt, there will be an unwillingness to part asunder, being ready to say in yourselves, it is good to be here, and this is the end of all words and writings, to bring people to the eternal living word. (Steere 1984, 26)

Parker's advice became the norm for Quaker practice. All wait in stillness upon the Spirit, nearer to them than their own words.

Quakers kept extensive records of their spiritual lives in the form of personal journals, biographies, essays, records of business meetings, travel diaries, pamphlets and histories. This writing focuses almost always on the leading of the Spirit through the word of the vocal ministry. The silence of the meeting for worship, in and of itself, is very seldom a subject of early Quaker writing. Quaker silence functions as the medium or context in which the word is best heard. The word, not the silence, is the focal point.

There is traditionally amongst Friends a reticence to disclose what happens in the silence. Those receiving a word or consolation of the spirit offer it to all, or allow it to remain in the silence:

A difficulty is created if . . . we allow ourselves to discuss together afterwards the experiences of the Silence. It is fatal to its integrity, and save for some quite clear and imperative reason must be rigidly excluded. Deep as is the fellowship of our Silence, yet nevertheless that which is in the secrecy whispered by God to the soul, ought to remain secret, unless charity, or clear need, demand that it be spoken of. (Hepher 142)

These two factors, the lack of interest in making direct references to silence and a pious reticence about what occurs in the silence, limit the number of references to silence, *per se*, in Quaker writings.

Yet, it is possible to construct from traditional and contemporary Quaker testimony an outline of the experience of silence from, as it were, the edges of their descriptions. The images, similes and key synonyms employed for silence found in these writings supply the materials. Early in Quaker experience, members began to note that the silence gradually became denser or deeper as a meeting progressed. A meeting typically began with the noise and bustle of people arriving and trying to settle into the silence. After a period of time the meeting became "gathered," "covered" or "centred." A current Quaker writer describes this process of entering into the deepening silence of a meeting for worship. John Punshon notes:

With deep, regular breathing, the surface distractions diminish and closing my eyes helps to accelerate this process. Somehow the power of silence becomes tangible at this point. After a few minutes of stillness I may have the sensation that my mental powers are being concentrated as a bird wraps itself in its wings and that I am coming in harmony with the other worshipers. This is the process known as "centring down." (62)

Thomas Kelly, quoted by Douglas Steere, also, describes its progressive effects; he is melted, quieted, released and made pliant as he enters more deeply into the silence (Steere 1984, 313). Pierre Lacout observes: "In this deep silence there is a Silence deeper still which is religious experience in its purest form" (Lacout 2). Hephner imaginatively compares these deepening levels of silence to changes in color: a drab silence is made up of busy, tired men and women at meeting, when "suddenly, or it may be very gradually, that drab silence changes . . . what was a dreary drab has become a tender grey . . . a presence with us, brooding over us, changing us, softer than any grey twilight cloud." He goes on to further develop the analogy to a deepening silence that is progressively blue, green, crimson and

finally white, which is described as the deepest silence where every heart is in perfect harmony (Hepher 217-222). The recognition of the progressively deepening nature of silence is widespread in Quaker writings and is a constant from Fox's day to the present.

In addition to a range of depth, Quakers note that silence has a variety of textures. Silence is alternately termed an absence of sound, a sense of expectancy, a sense of deep unity and a fleeting sense of an absolute silence (Heales and Cook 105). There are laboring and relaxing silences. Laboring silence requires willed effort, attention and consent. Relaxing silence comes to one of its own accord, with a life and will of its own (Lacout 9). Others label the various silences in a Friends' meeting for discernment as common, comfortable and listening silence (Loring 25).

Because in Quaker worship silence is always linked with the word, Quakers have reflected on the varieties of silence by analogies with human speech. A famous Quaker story captures this early interest:

In the Journal of John Woolman, there is a well known scene which took place in an Indian village along the upper Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. John Woolman rose to pray in a religious meeting held among the Indians and an interpreter who stood up to render Woolman's words into the Indian language was asked to sit down and let the prayer go untranslated. After the meeting, the Indian chief, Papunehang approached Woolman and through an interpreter said of the prayer whose English words he had not understood, "I love to feel where words come from." (Steere 1954, i)

Woolman is revered as an outstanding Quaker who practiced an heroic consistency between his moral beliefs and his personal conduct. This story reflects the consistency between his speech and his spirit.

Reflecting on this story, Douglas Steere, notes how common it is in ordinary conversation to recognize a level of meaning beyond the literal words we hear. We listen

naturally on two levels, one to hear the words and one to hear the silent depth of meaning from which the words proceed. This unconscious, silent meaning is felt by the speaker and intuited by the listener. Such silence does not formulate easily into words:

Language is indeed the foreground of reality, its articulate shore. But back of language and clinging to it, when it is real, is the receptive sea of silence.

Language is always tempted to make reality more articulate than it is. And the words of language are always being rebuked and overrun and swallowed up again by the silent ocean of existence from which they once emerged. It is obvious that without some form of language, existence would be hidden and mute, but only when words come up fresh and breathless, come up still moist and glistening from the sea of existence, do they carry power and authority. If this is true, it cannot surprise us that words made from other words, books written from other books, sermons preached from other sermons lack this authentic ring and power. (Steere 1954, 5-6)

Language finds its source and its continuing power in remaining close to silence. Words with power speak to the silence within. Words then, in themselves, when spoken or written embody a particular presence, felt experience or texture of silence.

While the texture and depth of silence varies, Quaker silence is distinguished by two constants: attentiveness and stillness. For a silence to be Quaker, stillness and attentiveness are necessary. To hear the silence at a meeting for worship, be attentive. Simple physical presence and staying awake do not suffice. An alert readiness, a special form of willed attention, is needed.

Letter writing supplies a good analogy; you use both voluntary and involuntary attention. To get started writing, you must will to gather the materials and take the time to sit down to write. You must concentrate on thinking of the person you are writing to, and imagine how they will receive your letter. You need to pay attention to what you intend to

say in order to begin. However, once underway, an involuntary form of attention gradually takes over. The writing process itself draws you in as you enjoy an involuntary, engrossed, unself-conscious relationship with the task of writing. In a similar manner, you initially pay voluntary attention to silence, but, at some point, silence envelops you and you remain in effortless, involuntary attention (Steere 1954, 36-37).

Paradoxical language best captures the attentive, disciplined relaxation needed to encounter Quaker silence. Such attention is an active listening, a silent busy idleness, a still attentiveness, a practiced spontaneity, a disciplined openness, an experienced confidence, a waiting to be surprised, a directionless gaze, a listening without an object.

Because they know how truly dead a sluggish silence is, Quakers stress attentiveness. A failure to pay attention cannot easily be redeemed when dealing with silence. Silence demands attention:

At the centre of silence: The will is at its highest activity. As an insect poised in the air, seemingly motionless, with wings in such rapid motion that they are invisible, is all the while sustained by its resistance to the air, so the will in this listening is not passive. It holds fast to its rest in God by sustained resistance to all that would drag it down, or invade its silence. (Hepher 130)

Deep silence then exists only in an attentive relationship; it does not happen by chance or accident. Such deep silence draws a person out of himself or herself. This effect is described as a self-emptying, or loss of self (Crom 15-17). Attentiveness is the required gateway to Quaker silence.

John Punshon emphasizes that by itself even a deeply attended silence is not enough to constitute a Quaker meeting; the silence exists only as a prelude to stillness. Stillness is the inside of Quaker silence. Punshon considers a silence that does not lead to stillness as simply the absence of noise (Punshon 6-8). Brinton quotes from George Fox's letters to make the same point:

George Fox lived a life of tireless activity, but this activity was rooted in inward peace and stillness. Throughout his epistles he calls on Friends to be still. 'Stand still in that which is pure after ye see yourselves' (Ep. 10). 'Wait in the Light' (Ep. 63). 'Standing still in the Light within and therein waiting, ye will see your Savior Christ Jesus' (Ep. 79). 'Wait in the Life which will keep you above Words' (Ep. 119). 'Be low and still in the Life and Power' (Ep. 146). 'In the Stillness and Silence of the Power of the Almighty dwell' (Ep. 201). (21-22)

Quaker silence moves from exterior to centred silence, to stillness. Punshon again makes a very interesting remark that not all stillness is the same: "Just as there is a Trappist way of stillness, there is a Quaker way" (12). Apparently the religious presuppositions you bring to the silence and the traditions of the community shape the stillness you experience. Quaker silence culminates in the gift of stillness.

This characteristic Quaker stillness is conveyed best in images not theories, and those images are found scattered throughout Quaker documents:

Two neighborhood wags wanted to catch Woolman out in a lie, or at least in a misstatement. One of them went to call on Woolman, and was conducted into the parlor, where he and his host sat down for a chat. By prearrangement the partner in mischief knocked at the door some minutes later; as Woolman left the room to answer the knock, the first visitor slipped out of the house by an open window. The second caller asked if his friend was there, expecting Woolman falsely to say Yes. But Woolman replied, " Well, I left him in the parlor." Clearly, Woolman would not allow his statements to outrun his own first hand experience. (Crom 3-4)

This story illustrates the special characteristic of good Quaker writing, simple, true to experience, not filled with "notions." Quaker spiritual writing resists the merely theoretical.

Like Woolman, it believes that words should not exceed experience. Quakers equate experience more with images and narrative than with theory. An analysis of Quaker images of movement, means and destination for silence will further delineate the unique nature of their silence. A Quaker enters the silence (movement) by utilizing certain actions (means) and arrives at a particular state (destination). The movement is from exterior to interior and from interior to the depths of the self. Images abound for depth: sinking down within, feeling the depth of power, setting out to swim alone in deep water, touching holy ground, sensing from where words arise (Harvey 7; Loring 25; Steere 1954, i; Walker 3). This descent arrives at stillness: a stillness of mind, a still pool, a stillwater reflecting the sky above, at pure stillness. Stillness has not so much a sense of being at one's centre as much as a continuing movement beyond, just out of reach, a place that beckons, a place beyond words and symbols, a place back of words, at the deep edge of our awareness, beyond our ability to name. One moves down in stillness into a space that resists naming (Bien 23; Harvey 26, 45-46; Hephher 90-91; Steere 1984, 261, 279; Steere 1954, 52; Walker 26).

This movement is accomplished by non-actions. These consist of letting go, relaxing, sitting, listening for a divine whisper, being aware of nothing in particular, waiting, gazing on the invisible, looking toward not at, settling into, letting yourself be led, surrendering, standing in the light. These non-actions require great effort and, as already noted, continuing attentiveness (Lacout 8-9; Steere 1954, 53; Tamura 19).

The place where silence ultimately leads is described as a house or a dwelling, an inner light, a unity, communion, beyond words, peace, gathered out of our own thoughts, a sense of order, meaning, pure stillness, the word of God, a clear spring, holy ground, where no words divide (Bien 5; Harvey 53-54; Hephher 130; Steere 1984, 26; Steere 1954, 1). By graced efforts, one discovers stillness in the depths of interior silence and arrives at peace, unity and meaning. One moves into silence, and arrives at stillness by surrendering and

trusting the Spirit who provides the word. There is a common rhythm in encountering silence.

Quaker silence is not an end in itself. The silence of a meeting for worship clearly exists for the sake of the vocal ministry. The priority of the word over silence is today almost a given in Quaker writing. Exceptions in both individual writers and in particular periods of Quaker history exist, but these few prove the rule that vocal ministry drives Quaker life as its source and inspiration (Tamura 14).

In the earliest Quaker history, a completely silent meeting is a very rare occurrence and symbolizes the absence of the Holy Spirit. Only in one period of Quaker history, from about the late 1700's to the mid 1800's, are silent meetings the norm. This time in Quaker history is regarded as the " Quietist " period, a time of spiritual dreariness and morbidity. Quietist Quakers appreciated silence (quiet) as the natural state of the soul through which the Spirit touched one's consciousness if it was still, peaceful, and centred. Human learning, study and culture mattered little since God's spirit worked freely in the most humble uneducated person who sincerely sought God's will through inner stillness. Quietist Quakers favored largely silent meetings and created an atmosphere where to speak out of the silence was something rare and burdensome (Harvey 39-40). "Introspection was developed sometimes to a morbid degree . . . and a profound distrust of mere human or 'creaturely' activity led to the neglect of intellectual activity" (53). Quakers became increasingly removed from mainstream life and culture, even from biblical study.

Quakerism was rescued from its Quietist phase by the general evangelical revival of the nineteenth century with its emphasis on Biblical literacy and the free expression of feelings (Trueblood 71). As a result of this experience, contemporary Quakers, by and large, interpret silence as the context or preparation for the emergence of the word. Many Quaker services, referred to as "programmed," do not have any time of common silence, but employ singing, vocal prayer and preaching.

Howard Brinton summarizes the inferior/superior relationship of silence and word that prevails in most Quaker writing: "In Quakerism the negative is not an end in itself, but a preparation for the positive. If the lower is quieted, it is only that the higher may have opportunity to assert itself" (19). The following appraisal from a Quaker writing in 1925, while more direct than most, is still not untypical of many contemporary Quakers' understanding of the relative roles of silence and word:

To spend an hour in prearranged unbroken silence, where there is not liberty to speak, is like being shut up in a hothouse. True, there may be wonderful and beautiful plants all around us, exotic flowers and fragrant scents, almost overpowering in their sweetness. It may be a wonderful experience to go through, now and then, but, to us at least, it would not be healthy to become dependent upon it, or to use it habitually. . . unbroken silence is like liquid metal, glowing and golden it may be. But spoken words (when they are living words from the depths of a living silence ) are like the die that stamps the shining gold with the image and superscription of the king. They give us the coin that we can put in our purses and use to feed the hungry. (Hepher 108-109)

Hepher understands silence for the sake of silence as an overly rarefied, individualistic quest which does not produce a life-giving spirit. Quakers enter attentively into silence because the living word is found in its depth. Without the word, the silence is meaningless.

John Punshon rejects the term "silent meeting," and insists that silence of itself does not constitute a Quaker meeting: "What goes on in the silence is far more important" (7). In Quaker history, the lesson has been learned that when silence becomes Silence, the spiritual life of Friends is diminished.

The only current writers favoring a movement toward a greater role of silence in the Quaker meeting for worship write from a non-traditional Quaker vantage point. Teruyasu

Tamura, a Zen Buddhist, was surprised at the level of resentment toward the Quietist Quakers. From his Buddhist perspective, with its different experience and valuing of silence, vocal ministry is the problem and remaining silent is the preferred path to spiritual depth (14).

On the other hand, Punshon speaks of those Quakers who: almost make silence an object, a thing to be experienced and taken on its own terms. The point here is that we accommodate ourselves to the absence of sound and allow it to mould our spiritual experiences. This has ( to some) the advantage of doing away with the necessity of a specifically Christian spirituality and permitting other kinds of belief to take a place within the overall pattern of Quaker worship. (72)

Contemporary Quakers, Brenda Clift Heales and Chris Cook, influenced by the theology of the thirteenth century Roman Catholic mystic Meister Eckhart, also argue for a greater role and a more positive assessment of silence in Quaker life. They wish to see Friends adopt, as part of their intentional ministry, the bringing of silence to a world that needs it (109).

To advocate a greater role for silence in Quaker life apparently requires reliance on a tradition outside of Quakerism. The Friends have no doctrinal authority, no hierarchical decision-making level, to rule on such differences. Through the patient process of dialogue, tolerance, experiment and discernment, Quakers gradually sift out where the truth for their common life lies.

In the relation between word and silence, Douglas Steere favors a balance. Quoting Max Picard, Steere believes that "perfect silence is heard to echo in the perfect word" (1954, 50). Writing from a literary point of view, Peter Bien also arrives at a balanced estimate of the respective roles of word and silence:

Every Quaker who sits in meeting week after week striving to . . . escape language altogether, in order to participate via silence in something

immeasurably more authentic, yet realizing again and again that this is impossible, that we are in words, others' words . . . . Like Beckett's characters we yearn to be lifted out of contingency and become like God . . . . we realize that we can escape neither self-consciousness nor naming without escaping ourselves, i.e. dying. So, while still in this life, we are caught - but caught deliciously, for the synergy between silence and speech releases extraordinary amounts of creative energy. (22, 24)

The tension between silence and speech, stillness and the emerging word, is a creative tension that cannot be relaxed without a resulting morbidity. The relation between Quaker word and silence is dialectical, requiring for its continued vitality alternating rhythms of eminence and neglect.

Over three centuries of Quakers provide a common witness to the reality and richness of silence. Quakers never speculate that perhaps their silence is unreal, a figment or a phantasm, some sort of comforting illusion or faith projection. This silence, thousands testify, is most real. Silence's variety surprises Quakers as it appears to alternately comfort, challenge, support, settle, still, upset, pester and lead. Only the attentive catch a glimpse of silence and they report that at its deepest level, at its core, silence is, as the smooth clear surface of a pond, perfectly still. In this stillness a tremendous power resides which is served not by control, but rather by simply letting it be, by listening to it and finally by obeying it. This silence gently leads by whispering a word. Silence exists not for itself but for the sake of the journey to the center where the word, always initially unnoticed, slips into awareness.

The primary occasion of Quaker silence is the meeting for worship. This liturgical and communal experience is so central to the Quaker understanding of silence as to constitute a measure or a test of what genuine silence is. When a Quaker writes of the secular experience of silence as found, for example, in nature or in conversation, that silence is described as a sub-set of the silence experienced in worship. The deep common silence in

the meeting for worship is the exemplar of silence. Individual Quakers are transformed over time and come to embody this silence in their manner of acting, thinking and speaking, so that one can speak of encountering silence in a particularly venerable and experienced Quaker.

Descriptions of Quaker silence reflect its liturgical origin. Silence is a gathering in the light; silence is a deep common peace; silence is the ground of unity with all people. Above all, silence is a gentle communal and personal stillness and calmness that shrouds a power which gently persists in calling one to ethical and social responsibility. Silence is the situation in which the absolute power that girds the universe is most deeply experienced in a gentle, calm stillness.

At the centre of Quaker silence is an absolute stillness which leads as close to the infinite as human nature is allowed to approach. If one is attentive to this total stillness, on occasion a creative and commanding word of life imperceptibly emerges. At the centre of Quaker silence is the Word. Silence exists to shroud the Word. One enters Quaker silence for the sake of the Word.

### **Max Picard's *World of Silence***

Published originally in German in 1948 as *Die Welt des Schweigens* and translated into English in 1952 as *The World of Silence*, Max Picard's analysis of silence is composed from his reflections on silence during and immediately after the Second World War. The experience of witnessing the destructive power of Nazi propaganda, coupled with a strong belief in the redemptive dimension of silence, compels Picard to write with prophetic passion. Picard's account of silence can be divided into three parts. The first deals with his philosophical understanding, the second with his poetic insights into the presence of silence in everyday experience, and the third with "Noise," the uniquely modern threat to silence.

Silence, for most people, has an elusive quality because it seems to exist only in a phantom dependent relationship with language. Silence appears when one momentarily stops talking or thinking, and as soon as someone speaks, silence vanishes. Speaking of silence may be like describing the color of air or the essence of the taste of water; it is possible perhaps, but of no practical or personal significance. Picard disagrees. Silence is both real and vitally important. Silence is present everywhere, at all times. One merely becomes conscious of silence at certain moments, such as when language stops. Silence is an "independent whole, subsisting in and through itself" (xix). Language offers the most commonly available site at which to observe silence. Without silence between and around words, ideas, and sentences, intelligible speech vanishes in a fog of sound. Silence provides the necessary space for words to be distinct, for sentences to be understood and for questions to be heard. Silence is an essential aspect of communication. Silence's function in language alerts one to its presence beyond language. For Picard, silence is much more than the simple absence of sound in speech: "One cannot imagine a world in which there is nothing but language and speech, but one can imagine a world where there is nothing but silence" (1). A reality without beginning or end, like Being itself, silence simply is (1). While language changes, silence remains permanent and substantial: "[Silence] does not develop or increase in time, but time increases in silence. It is as though time had been sown into silence, as though silence had absorbed it, as though silence were the soil in which time grows to fullness" (2). Silence, for Picard, is real, self-contained and changeless. Silence is original and irreplaceable; nothing substitutes for it. Silence, present from the first moments of creation, can itself engender anxiety due to its ability to evoke a primordial, prehistoric sense or feeling. Silence is a "basic . . . primary, objective reality" that points to nothing but Being itself, the beginning and end of all (5).

Paradoxically, silence--this real, autonomous, essential, basic phenomenon--is useless. For Picard, the real value of silence lies precisely in its uselessness (3). By useless,

Picard means that silence contains no commercially exploitable substance or value. Silence offers no hope for financial gain or any increase in personal power or fame. Hence silence is judged useless, a waste of time, a non-entity. Picard esteems silence because of its resistance to exploitation. Silence always remains whole, inviolate and integral, thereby offering healing, integrity and cleansing freely to anyone attracted by its "holy uselessness" (8).

In classic presentations of ontology, Being manifests itself in the transcendent qualities of oneness, truth, goodness, beauty and love. Picard understands silence as an aspect or reflection of Being and illustrates silence's presence in each of these transcendent qualities: beauty creates a stunned silence; love creates a silence that the words of lovers only increase and "make audible" (84); a clear courageous statement of truth allows language to rise above and stand out from the surrounding silence or noise of language; a truly good person commands silent admiration. The sight or realization of truth, beauty, goodness or love rings the event, person, or thought with silence.

Silence functions for Picard as almost the chief sacrament of Being. In silence, one almost touches or sees, as it were, the presence of Being. In silence one has a way to commune with the source of language and of all that is. Similar to grace, one cannot force, manipulate, earn or create silence. One simply welcomes and briefly recognizes silence as it recedes from awareness.

Picard provides images and similes for silence. These deal most commonly with silence in people, feelings, perceptions and language. Silence dwells in those whom the world considers useless or powerless: the homeless, the elderly, children, lovers, the sick, and the dying. Useless silence finds its home amongst the poor. Picard chooses a beggar as his outstanding example of a "man of silence" (50). Although desperate in his homelessness, to Picard this man manifests a freedom and a sense of reality that centres itself in silence. From a beggar, silence rolls out in waves. His every action and gesture evoke silence.

In a similar way the movements and speech of the elderly radiate silence. They speak to the silence, moving words, "like heavy globules . . . between their lips . . . trying to give back to the silence the words they received [in childhood]" (112). Sitting before their home in the evening, an elderly couple are in their every word and gesture an essential part of the surrounding silence: "Just as they led the cattle to water, they now lead the evening to the watering place of silence and wait till it is satisfied. They then slowly rise and lead it back into the warming light of the house (112). When the elderly speak "it is not an interruption of the silence . . . it is as though the word was simply knocking to see if silence were still there - and then it goes away again" (119). The silence of the elderly prepares them for their union with silence in death.

Lovers are familiar with silence. Picard describes them as "conspirators" of silence whose language conveys more silence than thought (84). The language of love is one in which the unspoken is more important than the spoken. Words, to lovers, are symbols pointing to a deeper silent reality; their language speaks more to create a common silence than to convey practical information (85). The language of small children is "silence transformed into sound," while the language of the adult is "sound that seeks for silence" (11). Children, fascinated with words, gaze after them, as they might watch a "ball in the air, watching to see if it will come back or not" (110). Children and lovers toy with language and seem intrigued with its power to evoke a silent response or mood.

Silence is present amongst the useless sick. Unable to be productive or to earn respect, the sick are a magnet for silence. The names of some illnesses inspire a particularly thick silence. It is as if invoking the dreaded name breaks the silence, lets loose the contagion and endangers the visitor. The busyness and bustle of hospitals is a cheerful attempt to defeat both illness and silence: "Often when a patient is lying silently, it is as though the sick person were merely the place where silence has settled" (215). A similar type of silence surrounds death:

Sometimes in a city a man suddenly collapses and dies in the midst of the noise of the highway. It is then as if all at once the shreds of silence, still lying around, amongst the treetops by the roadside, suddenly descend on the dead man. It is as if these remains of silence had crept down to the silence of the dead man in the roadway, and there is a momentary stillness in the city. The remains of silence are with the fallen man in order to disappear with him into death, to disappear through the fissure of death. The dead man takes the last remains of silence with him. (211)

Silence resides amongst the marginal and unimportant, the lovers, the children, the sick and the dying.

For Picard everything that exists has a "hidden fund of reality" that always exceeds one's ability to describe it (67). Anything is capable of leading us into silence, if we allow the sheer fact of its reality to become apparent. The first time we see an object that we judge to be truly unusual or beautiful, our first response is silence and it is the silence that allows us to form a relationship with the object before we assign it a name. Silence is a "tribute of honour to the object" (67). A sensitivity to this hidden fund of reality results in a way of viewing things that "sees the whole and not merely the parts" (68). A view from silence does not reduce phenomena to the economic or the political, but rather allows things to simply be, whole and complete without any diminishing labels. The simple unadorned reality of a thing triggers a perception of silence: "When an apple falls to the ground there comes a moment of stillness. It is as if the silence had held out its hand to try and catch the apple" (106). Snowflakes falling to a snow-covered earth are silence meeting silence (107). A "church tower stands high like a cry for help, like a cry turned into stone in the silence" (115). A simple clear perception of the unique reality of any object endows it with an aura of silence.

Birds serve as beacons of silence for Picard. When birds sing, they throw the notes of their song like balls against the wall of silence and catch them as they bounce back (102).

When birds are in flight, it as if "the silence of the air were being grazed [by their wings]" (115). Finally, the notes of a bird's song are "like a knocking on the wall of silence, asking it to come in" (165). The soundless flight and the playful song of birds have a unique ability to manifest silence. Common experiences of sound, as well as vision, can invoke silence. Silence is "never more audible than when the last sound of music has died away" (11); after an echo, "the silence becomes still deeper" (131). In conversation, when someone searches for the perfect word to describe a deep feeling, silence echoes in the sound of that perfectly chosen word (141).

Animals manifest a heavy, unbroken, "hard and coagulated silence" (100). Picard senses that the silence of animals is undesirable, and imagines that their cries, barks and roars are attempts to rip silence apart, to shatter it and be free (101). Animals bear silence as a burden and move "through the world of words like a caravan of silence" (100). This is especially true of cattle who carry silence in their brooding manner and blank eyes.

Silence is most easily observed in language. Speech arises out of silence and returns to it. As already noted, silence lies between and around every word, sentence and thought one speaks or thinks. Silence clings to every word as a reminder of its origin; speech "is nothing but the resonance of silence" (11). However, silence, like the world before language, is unfinished (7-8). Speech completes silence, gives it form and meaning by language's capacity to express truth, love and beauty: "Speech is more powerful than silence, it has a greater intensity of being" (14). Silence allows for conversation by serving as a listening third party. In a deep conversation, words come from outside "from afar, from the place where silence is listening . . . the words are spoken as it were from the silence, from that third person, and the listener receives more than the speaker alone is able to give" (9). In deep conversation, there is the sense of a common bond between speakers as each goes to silence to find the right word. Silence listens to their search and supplies the word.

The recognition of the necessary connection between speech and silence allows words to reflect their origin, the good, the true and the beautiful. Words cut off from their source sound "hard . . . aggressive . . . and lonely" (22). Silence refreshes and purifies language: "In silence language holds its breath and fills its lungs with pure and original air" (23). This recognition of silence as the origin of words, the listener to conversation and the refresher of language allows a speaker to be daring in searching for a word or a phrase: "Silence is for language what the net stretched out taut below him is for the tightrope walker" (22). Finally, silence in language sometimes invites a speaker to hold something back from audible words, allowing it to remain in the silence, whole and undisturbed (55). Silence contributes reverence, daring and freshness to speech.

Picard has a very keen sense of evil and the potential for human destructiveness that is concealed in language when it is put at the service of propaganda and ideology. Picard's word for this general abuse of language is noise. Noise is the enemy of silence, and, by extension, the enemy of the good, the true and the beautiful. By noise, Picard means all there is about modern industrialization, bureaucracy, ideology and technology that disconnects people from their linguistic, human and ontological roots:

Silence is today no longer an autonomous world of its own; it is simply the place into which noise has not yet penetrated. It is a mere interruption of the continuity of noise, like a technical hitch in the noise-machine - that is what silence is today: the momentary breakdown of noise. We no longer have definite silence and definite language, but simply words that are being spoken and words that have not yet been spoken. (25-26)

By noise, Picard does not mean ordinary sounds associated with definite events or objects. Such noise is natural, surrounded as in speech with a silence that returns as soon as the natural event stops. Rather, noise is a force that causes us to forget there ever was silence. Noise is a "continual buzzing," an atmosphere of constant activity so that words seem to

come from other words and not from silence (168-169). Silence, pushed off to the far frontiers of noise, waits "for the time when it can appear again. But only emptiness and nothingness are stationed in the frontiers of verbal noise" (169). Noise now appears natural, more natural than silence. One now assumes noise and even misses it when its presence is less obvious than normal. Noise makes involved listening impossible. Conversation becomes simply waiting for the other to finish so that one can "unload onto others the words that have collected inside us" (174). Noise is so omnipresent that it fills one, and one's speech is simply the overflow (174). As silence is to language, emptiness is to noise:

Therefore there is an emptiness in the worker's life after the day's work in the factory. The emptiness of the machine follows him home. That is the true cause of his suffering, the real oppression. The peasant, on the other hand, continues to live in the silence in which he has worked, after his work is over. The workman is mute, the peasant silent. (188)

Emptiness is the felt recognition of the presence of noise.

Radio, for Picard, symbolizes the triumph of modern noise. The radio, by its omnipresence since 1948, is now almost as basic and powerful a reality as silence:

Radio noise is therefore the new reality, and only what is contained in the noise, only what takes place through the mediacy of radio, is of any worth. An event seems real only when it is part of the noise produced by radio, when it comes out of it . . . , Anything you see yourself with your own eyes is suspect and does not become a real event until you hear it as part of the noise coming from the radio set. (199-200)

The acceptance of ever present radio-noise is to Picard a sign of deep contempt for language; all of this speech and no one is listening.

Silence, driven back now to the fringe of society, appears occasionally in an authentic word, in the quiet of dawn and the darkness of night, in the sick and the poor and the useless.

In this state of isolation and rejection, however, Picard still senses the potential and awesome power of silence:

Like some old forgotten animal from the beginning of time, silence towers above all the puny world of noise; but as a living animal, not an extinct species, it lies in wait, and we can still see its broad back sinking ever deeper among the briars and bushes of the world of noise. It is as though this prehistoric creature were gradually sinking into the depths of its own silence. And yet sometimes all the noise of the world today seems like the mere buzzing of insects on the broad back of silence. (6-7)

Silence will return; its seeming defeat is only a setback. Silence allows noise to become concentrated so as to be the more easily defeated when silence launches its surprise attack (227).

Picard's confidence in silence's ultimate victory is rooted in his religious faith which identifies Being itself with God and Jesus as the word of God. While Picard does not quote to any great extent from the Bible, he does adopt a biblically prophetic tone in describing the evil of noise and its eventual defeat. Picard's religious thought, however, is not a strong factor in his analysis of silence. Picard's philosophical concepts, rather than his religious ones, are more central to *The World of Silence*.

It takes little imagination to realize that if Max Picard, nearly fifty years ago, thought noise had become Noise, he would today be horrified by its volume and aggressiveness--horrified, but not surprised as he obviously forecast it. Would Picard, however, remain as confident that silence will ultimately triumph over MTV, ghetto blasters, 140 station cable TV, voice-mail, internet, CD-ROM, and video-cassettes, rather than simply radio? I think so. Picard's understanding that silence is a basic, real, essential dimension of our humanity, increases in value under the relentless assault of noise. Picard's gift at recognizing the

everyday reality of silence and clothing it in visible images and similes remains an impressive achievement. Picard's work provides an invitation to a more human way of life.

Max Picard describes four major occasions of silence: philosophical, linguistic, existential and perceptual. Philosophical silence, like being itself, is present everywhere at all times. Such silence becomes observable when being becomes manifest in moments of truth, goodness and beauty. When something profoundly true is said, a moment of silent recognition follows. Truth captured, for example, in a poetic insight elicits a stunning and prolonged silence. Beauty draws forth a silence of awe, while goodness calls forth a silence of recognition. As a person becomes increasingly sensitive to truth, goodness and beauty so he or she becomes more aware of the respective silences surrounding the good, the true and the beautiful. Silence manifests these qualities of being so well that at times silence feels like the very sacrament of Being.

Linguistic silence is easily observable and can even be measured, existing as it does in the lack of noise before, between and following words, phrases and sentences. The language of lovers, children, the elderly and poets respect the natural rhythms of silence and their sound thereby returns one to silence .

Existential silences are a particularly modern form of silence, resulting from the growth of technological noise which so fills western industrial society that silence now dwells only on the margins of life amongst the socially useless sick, poor and elderly. Here, silence hides, recognized only by those who respect uselessness.

Finally, every act of perception in which one truly sees an object and allows it to simply be without analysis or classification yields a silence that honors the singular nature of the thing. Perceptual silence recognizes that even the most common object is so involved, intricate and unique as to exceed the descriptive power of language. When one closely observes anything it becomes ringed with an aura of silence.

Picard describes silence as feeling original and ancient, as if one were handling a prehistoric artifact. Silence is fresh, real and irreplaceable. Silence mediates an awesome and powerful presence that is nonetheless shy and hidden. Silence feels deeply personal yet foreign, as if it were some unique aspect of our self that we have nonetheless difficulty recognizing or accepting, like an untamed dimension of our self that we are reluctant to acknowledge.

At the centre of Picard's silence is a stillness of existential insight in which one glimpses the very foundations of consciousness. It is as if one were standing during a storm on a bridge directly above one of its foundations embedded in the sea below and a huge wave, as it rushed back out to sea, drew with it so much water that the very foundation of the bridge was momentarily visible just before the next wave rushed in to again conceal it. With Picard, deep silence is the foundation of one's consciousness and is exposed only in rare moments to someone willing to look down into its depths. Deep silence can appear frightening and dangerous, yet all goodness, beauty and truth depend upon its benign supportive power.

## **5. Describing deep silence**

### **Comparison and contrast of the qualitative research and the literature review**

#### **The occasions of silence**

In the classic sources, silence underlies all of reality. Silence is the basis of language and thought. Therefore, in going to silence one is not fleeing the world of language and thought; one is rather experiencing the ground of all thinking and being. Yet to actually do this generally requires leaving the busyness and stress of everyday existence in order to discover silence at the margins of life: in a desert community, at a meeting for worship, in one's cell, at prayer or in a quiet natural setting. Silence, in practice, requires a protected space for cultivation.

Those interviewed agree that silence is the underlying reality in language and thought. They protect increasing amounts of time for silence and describe virtually a physical need for it. In this sense, the classics and those interviewed are in agreement: silence requires dedicated time and a protected space, even if that space is simply a small room in one's house.

Silence is a struggle. This is most apparent with the desert fathers and mothers. They see their relationship with silence as a conflict, a battle that is taking place in their cell and in their heart. Quaker silence is also described as an ethical struggle, whereby one strives to conform one's life with the word that emerges from the silence. The Quaker struggle also takes a social form in their communal opposition to war, slavery and social injustice. For

Picard, the struggle is with the forces embodied in Noise, the symbol for all that alienates and destroys one's authentic humanity.

Those interviewed are engaged in a struggle but do not see it as a battle with demons, the world or Noise. The participants rather use psychological terminology and speak of how silence challenges them to become more integrated human beings. Remaining true to their growing need for silence results, on occasion, in self doubt, misunderstandings and strained relationships; yet, their need for silence is such that they have little choice but to be faithful to the struggle.

Silence, in the classic sources, is recognized as a reality underlying all of life, which is best experienced at the margins of life through a process involving a struggle. In this struggle, ordinary social standards are reversed: the margin becomes the centre; the socially useless become the essential ones. The early Quaker movement had an apocalyptic tone and expectation. The little band of Quakers, although socially insignificant, believed themselves to be the spiritual centre or fulcrum of the world, from which the lever of their life and witness would exert the force to topple injustice and bring about the New Jerusalem. Part of this Quaker non-violent social revolution lay in finding and respecting goodness in everyone, including outcast slaves and criminals. The men and women of the desert deliberately cultivated an exterior poverty, even a strange eccentricity, happily suffering calumnies and slanders that destroyed their reputations, knowing that to be a nobody in silence was the best way to be a spiritual somebody. Picard's example of those who best embody silence includes only socially insignificant people: beggars, the elderly and the solitary.

Those interviewed are unusual only by leading a somewhat hidden mode of life. They are not notably poor or eccentric and do not speak of bringing about significant social change through their practice of silence; they, however, have abandoned ordinary notions of success. Money, status and recognition do not play a significant role in their lives. They are content, by and large, to be obscure. Thus for both the classic sources and the participants, to

experience deep silence and to cultivate a life of silence demands an unusual degree of commitment and a willingness to step apart from the ordinary routines of life, the ordinary ladder of success, in order to have the time to practice the disciplined attentiveness required in silence.

The classic sources speak of the grace-like quality of silence. Silence comes to them in nature and in people. They detect silence in outstanding Abbas and Ammas, in the sick and the elderly, in birds, in falling snow, in a hushed community and in their own heart. Silence for them is a dynamic, supportive, humanizing force. Those interviewed emphasize this dimension of grace. Silence surprises them by its appearance in nature, in vistas, in people, in poetry and art. They all regard silence as a surrounding and strengthening presence with a will of its own, revealing itself when and where it chooses.

The classic sources describe how silence has differing levels or depths of intensity. Quakers are most explicit in describing how a meeting for worship deepens as it gathers and centres itself. Picard encounters a deepening silence the further he is removed from Noise. Abbas and Ammas enter more deeply into silence the more they enter into the stillness of their cells. This description of deepening levels of silence is so present in the interview transcripts and profiles as to constitute a universal feature of silence. Silence deepens, and, as it deepens, it becomes increasingly still.

### **Descriptions of silence**

There is a general agreement, with some few exceptions, between the classic sources and those interviewed in their descriptions of silence. Silence is attractive, fresh and fascinating, a delicate beauty. The classics never find silence dull or uninteresting. It is noise, and the words arising from noise, that become boring, thereby dulling one's awareness. The interview participants are fascinated with a life of quiet and silence. It is not the least bit dull. There is a richness in silence, a sense of being in touch with something original and

vital that accounts for its fascination. All note that deep silence, even when encountered in its initial stages, needs to be welcomed and received with hospitality. Deep silence never appears uninvited. Even superficial experiences of deep silence, as on first entering a woods, require acceptance, nurture, careful labor, dedicated periods of seemingly wasted time and expectant attention. All detect a creative power and energy in silence, an accepting and ancient presence that is so vigorous as to be linked with the ongoing forces of creation itself. To deepen a relationship with silence requires living in harmony with it.

Those interviewed have a similar sense of the ambiguous nature of silence. They mention its otherness, its mystery, its fascination, its creative power, yet also experience it as a most benign, loving and caring presence. For both the classics and those interviewed, there is something about silence that remains always foreign and somewhat alien. Deep silence stands over against one and, in its presence, one feels observed and examined by a primordial force. Silence resists domestication. Silence does not answer to commands or calls and comes and goes as it pleases. Deep silence stirs memories of early childhood, when one is unable to categorize new experiences and life feels huge and undifferentiated, uncharted and pristine, filled with promise but also uncertainty. Despite the fact that people do develop an affinity for silence, do enter deeply into its stillness, do integrate it into their lives, silence never completely loses a sense that life at the edge of language, in the company of silence, is not without its dangers. Silence combines graceful support with a sense of primordial power. This creates a certain ambiguity. Quakers combined non-violence with trembling awe. The desert monks and nuns combined gentle care for each other and strangers with an almost inhuman commitment to their own personal ascetic practices. Picard combines a sense of silence's shyness and obscurity with a confidence in its ability to crush modern technological noise. Silence, paradoxically, is both compliant and inflexible, gentle and demanding.

Silence's otherness is closely linked to its seeming impersonality. Deep silence stands like a mountain and demands recognition by virtue of its sheer bulk, strength and rootedness. At the base of a mountain, one properly feels insignificant. Deep silence is like an incoming tide, a huge limitless sea that cannot be pleaded with or controlled. It is simply there.

The category, "personal," describes those aspects of experience characteristic of a human being, those which draw out or rely upon the unique features of being a man or a woman, which set human beings apart from the rest of reality. Both the classics and those interviewed note the personal and personalizing aspects of silence. The anomaly is that silence exceeds this category, but cannot be described simply as impersonal or ambivalent. Silence is best termed "supra-personal" (Otto 201), beyond the personal. The otherness of silence, its sheer, alien, enormity exceeds what can be usually described as personal; yet, silence draws people into a relationship that is deeply personalizing. Silence exceeds the personal in the same way that nature exceeds the personal and yet remains personalizing. Picard noted this in his more ontological reflections; silence is like Being itself, permanent, substantial, unchanging, beyond time and implicitly beyond the personal. The extreme ascetic practices, the insistence on a radical form of solitude and the disdain for human judgement, displayed by the desert mothers and fathers go against what is normally considered personalizing, but in silence these extreme practices produced some extraordinarily fascinating and delightful human beings. Quaker experience assumes that in silence one discovers the holy otherness of God which calls one beyond even the deepest stillness.

This sense of the ambiguity of silence is present in those interviewed but is not developed. Their sense of the personal dimensions of silence is more influential in their descriptions than is the supra-personal. It is in their relatively wordless prayer, through which they are simply present to an ultimate One who exceeds all categories including the

personal, that the participants' awareness of the supra-personal dimension of silence is most apparent.

### **Centre of silence**

The classic sources and those interviewed are very similar in their descriptions of the centre of silence. At its centre, one senses a deeply creative force which is so different and unusual that it is paradoxically described as a creative emptiness. To encounter deep silence involves a level of consciousness even more elemental than self-awareness. At the centre of silence is an absolute stillness shrouding a most dynamic and compressed power. This wordless revelation serves as a sacramental presence of the compassionate and intimate God.

The centre of silence exerts an attraction that, while leaving one free, nonetheless issues a strong invitation to live in harmony with it. The Quakers speak of walking in the light. The desert sayings advise one to learn how to live by conforming one's deepest self to the silence discovered in the cell. Picard can identify those who live in harmony with silence by their way of life. Those interviewed speak of the lure of silence and how a life of silence results in a desire to simplify life, to practice reverence and to deepen one's relationship with silence. For some, the centre of silence is explicitly identified with God and silence's harmony and rhythm are the creative life and activity of the Trinity rolling out from creation. Therefore, the centre of silence is natural, real, and good. It is in touch with the force of life itself and carries with it a sense of healing and peace. No one controls the centre of silence; it can only be welcomed and respected. The still centre of silence comes and goes as it will.

The Quakers are unusual in speaking of the centre of silence as "light." No one else uses that term in this context. By light, the Quakers mean that in the silence one is known as truly as if one stood in a most bright light with every aspect of oneself visible. All the sources, however, would agree that at the centre of silence is a presence that is all-knowing and that permeates one's mind and heart.

Picard and the desert sayings provide the most explicit descriptions of the centre of silence as constituting the very foundations of self-awareness. For them, silence can become so integrated into one's consciousness that one's speech, gestures, facial expressions and eyes depict silence. The participants speak of memorable women and men whose awareness is permeated with silence. The centre of silence, for them, is found within oneself and becomes rooted in self-awareness.

The Quakers are unique in stating explicitly that the centre of silence serves chiefly to bring forth a word. Max Picard hints at this point by acknowledging that language is more important than silence. Silence, for Picard, exists for the sake of language. In the desert, a word spoken by a revered Abba or Amma is valued because it stills one's mind and returns it to silence. Those interviewed do at times receive, as it were, a word from the silence. That word is either for themselves or another. But this is unusual. Usually they find the centre of silence is not a word but ever deeper levels of silence. The Quaker emphasis on the centrality of the word within the silence is unique.

In summary, the classic sources and those interviewed are in general agreement about the occasions of silence, the way silence is described and what lies at the centre of silence. The differences between the material found in the classics and the interviews is, in most cases, due to differences in cultural and religious assumptions. For example, it is quite appropriate for the desert fathers and mothers to speak of struggles with demons, while those interviewed would more commonly speak of battling anxiety, discouragement or depression. Some differences are due to the unique perspective of the person involved. Antoinette will speak of the silence of music, nature, art, poetry and sculpture, while another with different sensitivities and background might simply speak of finding silence in nature. Recognizing the general agreement, it is now possible to proceed with confidence and conclude answering the research question, "**How is deep silence experienced and described?**", by presenting a description of the numinous core of deep silence.

### **The numinous core of deep silence**

Deep silence conveys an ineffable, mysterious presence which challenges and inverts one's accustomed ways of perceiving reality. In deep silence, the context or the background which normally goes unnoticed in everyday perception now stands out with surprising clarity and distinction; for example, sometimes a thoughtful essay makes a particular point so effectively and imaginatively that one is stunned by the insight. When this happens, one immediately stops focusing on the particular, words of the text and rather looks at nothing in particular, being simply aware of the power of the concept. The text recedes and the imaginative, intellectual context becomes prominent. In deep silence there is a similar slowly building awareness of the context behind the text of life, the mystery surrounding every created thing, the Being behind being. In deep silence, for example, when a bush is stirred by a gentle breeze, it is the barely perceptible breeze, which is usually only in the background of one's awareness, that becomes the focal point or figure in one's perception. The sight of the wind-stirred bush serves now merely as the background to announce the usually ignored breeze. Words are spoken in conversation, but in deep silence it is the empty space surrounding the words that stand out with greater sharpness and clarity. The silence becomes the focal point and makes the greater impression. In everyday life, thoughts and feelings normally move around in a free-associative cycle in one's mind, but in deep silence it is the empty context in which they move, the mind itself, that feels the more real and substantial.

This change in awareness stirs a nearly forgotten feeling of originality and purity. It is as if a memory of early childhood were awakened, of a time when all the world was new, interesting and unnamed, of a time when there were few words to come between one's unguarded self and fresh experience. In psychological terms, it feels as if the ego steps aside and one's more original, more true self, emerges to receive clear, fresh, sense-experience. Common sights take on new sharpness and life. The sight of a tree or a bird remains simply that of a tree and a bird, but an aura of sheer fact now surrounds them; they appear not simply

as a bird or a tree but as this bird and this tree, original, vivid and real. In deep silence, everything is as it should be and this strong sense of a literal here and now carries with it a hint of Eden. The veil of familiarity is removed from the world. Such a clear state of awareness stops one still.

The expression "the map is not the territory" illustrates the semantic principle that words do not correspond directly to reality; words and concepts are maps for reality but are not the territory of life itself. In deep silence, one recognizes that reality is far more alive, mysterious and powerful than one's understanding. Deep silence reveals how prevalent are the accepted social stereotypes and fears which conceal life's depth and mystery. Deep silence reveals a profundity that one's accustomed outlook ignores for reasons of convenience, habit and prejudice. One detects another dimension, the spiritual, surrounding each creature, moment and event. Deep silence provides no categories to capture and understand this numinous sense. One simply sits still and allows deep silence to emerge.

### **The primordial source of life**

For Paul Van Buren, language blesses yet limits human life. The blessing results from all that one knows; the limit results from the fact that one can only know what is in language. What lies outside language lies outside human understanding. Language creates worlds, and everyone lives in a world bordered by verbal categories. Van Buren uses a very effective image to illustrate the centrality of language. Language and concepts create a platform, and this platform is what one lives on; this is one's world. At the centre of the platform are those ideas and beliefs that have the feel of everyday reality, our basic sense of life. At the edges of the platform are the unknown and the ineffable. To explore the edges requires building linguistic platform extensions to reach out conceptually into the unknown. One balances on the boundary, stretching out the edges of language in a creative attempt to explore the unknown. Humor, poetry and the words of lovers and theologians engage in this

risky balancing act, stretching language to the breaking point and thereby risking a fall into absurdity and silence (111). Theology creates rules for meaningful religious talk at the edge, the frontier, of the ineffable. The term "God" is the outer limit, the furthest one can venture into the unknown. God is the last linguistic marker before one goes over the edge into silence or nonsense. The word "God" leads to a silent apprehension of the reality beyond the symbol and mystics hover at the edge of language nourished by the awareness of the unknowability of what lies beyond the edge (130 - 131).

Using this same imagery, imagine that in deep silence one hovers at the edge of language, but rather than falling over into nonsense and meaninglessness as Van Buren suggests, deep silence instead advances over the edge of language and immerses one in its wordless reality while one is still sitting at the precipice.

If one repeats a word over and over, a point is reached when the word begins to sound absurd or ridiculous. Audible, verbal repetition dulls the word's uniqueness till it begins to ring of nonsense. Deep silence's non-audible, non-verbal reality allows words to regain purity and strength. At the edge of language, words emerge as if they are just freshly crafted, new, with intensity, clarity and meaning. In deep silence, it feels as if one has gone slightly over the edge of language, yet not into nonsense but into the place from which meaning and sense arise. If one sits and thinks, thoughts normally emerge in rapid succession. One thought triggers off another through a pattern of association. In deep silence, it feels as if one is at the very place from which thoughts arise. One sits there observing the stillness from which words emerge. It feels very much as if one is close to the moment just before Creation. One sits in stillness waiting for the Word to appear with explosive creative power.

### **Endless depths of stillness**

At the centre of silence is stillness, becoming ever more still as it becomes ever more silent. If one tiptoes into the room of a sleeping toddler and gazes at his or her face, one's efforts to be quiet are rewarded by sensing the atmosphere of deep silence surrounding this normally active child. It may be that the child, who is usually anything but quiet, radiates silence simply by way of contrast. One is accustomed to the child's noise, motion and constant activity; now, he or she is still, peaceful and seemingly beatific. Such a strong contrast creates in part the sense of peaceful silence.

However, if one remained in the room nurturing and enjoying that silence, it becomes deeper yet increasingly fragile. The child's calm, smooth breathing stills one's own, but the longer one remains in the room the greater the threat of the child awakening and shattering the silence. One feels torn between staying with this deepening stillness or leaving while it is still intact.

The stillness of deep silence is very much like parents enjoying the beauty of their sleeping child. It is a very fragile stillness. The longer one sits with a deepening silence the more still it becomes, but also the more fragile and precarious it feels. The stillness of silence always seems a prelude to an event. The longer and more still the silence, the greater the sense of expectancy and the more endangered the stillness.

It is not by chance that those who treasure the stillness of silence reject violence. People of all faiths who practice silence usually practice pacifism. Silent stillness does not coexist with violence, as the Quakers and monastic traditions witness. Silent stillness is the opposite of violence. Violence grows in intensity from agitated thought, to impulse, to rage and fury. Violence grows in increasing impersonality and insensitivity. Silent stillness slows down, centres and gentles one. Stillness is not impulsive or insensitive. Stillness is more deep and powerful than violence. If one can imagine the opposite of violence, one can imagine silent stillness.

Such stillness is living, not dead. This is not the stillness of concrete or steel, but the stillness of life reflected in a night sky, seen on the surface of a pond, captured on the face of a sleeping child. It is a living stillness that opens into a dimension previously unknown, inviting one to enter and receive. The more still one becomes the stronger is the desire to store it away for later nourishment.

Stillness feels primordial, as if one were viewing a fragment of rock brought up from the earth's core dating from the very first moment of earth's creation. Stillness is a living relic of creation dating back to the very origin of the cosmos. Touching this silence establishes a living link with the stillness before the cosmic explosion. Still silence pulsates with dynamic creative power.

The most common image to describe the stillness at the centre of silence is the calm surface of a lake which perfectly reflects the sky. This image hints of an endless, eternal stillness, going forever outward into space and downward into the earth's core. Yet it is also a fragile stillness, capable of being shattered by something as slight as a ripple.

The stillness of silence feels as if one is walking on a pond covered by a sheet of ice which gets progressively thinner as one approaches its center. The ice is perfectly flat and smooth. While one slowly and carefully steps out over ever deeper water, the stillness thickens as the ice thins. To go further seems increasingly dangerous but attractive.

## **Harmony**

The cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall recognizes that the desire to be in synchrony with others is so socially pervasive and powerful that it not only affects language patterns, producing regional variations in dialect, but even shapes one's manner of walking and gesturing. He terms this cultural, behavioral moulding as "group sync":

A striking example of group sync was once captured by one of my students on film as a seminar project. Using an abandoned car as a blind, he

photographed children dancing and skipping in a school playground during their lunch hour. At first, they looked like so many kids each doing his own thing. After a while, we noticed that one little girl was moving more than the rest. Careful study revealed that she covered the entire playground.

Following procedures laid down for my students, this young man viewed the film over and over at different speeds. Gradually, he perceived that the whole group was moving in synchrony to a definite rhythm. The most active child, the one who moved about most, was the director, the orchestrator of the playground rhythm! Not only was there a rhythm and a beat, but the beat seemed familiar. Seeking help from a friend deeply involved in rock music, who also viewed the film several times, we found a tune that fit the rhythm. The music was synchronized with the children's play and once synchronized remained in sync the entire four and a half minutes of the film clip! (76-77)

In deep silence one steps apart from the "group sync" of common social life to discover a more basic natural rhythm. Participants speak of individuals influential in their lives who radiated silence. These were people so immersed in silence that their speech, movement and mannerism were "in sync" with it. They create a desire in others to be "in sync" with them. Like the girl playing in the school yard, the bearers of silence have no idea whatever that they are setting the group's rhythm. The outstanding qualities of a bearer of silence are humility and reverence. When one discovers the stillness at the heart of deep silence, it feels as if one discovers the essential beat of the universe, what seventeenth century philosophers described as the music of the spheres, the pulse of reality. This discovery brings with it a desire to live in harmony with this pulse, to bring one's breath, movements, thoughts, even heart beat "in sync."

## Naked Awareness

Awareness is always awareness of oneself or of something outside oneself. For example, one is aware of a car coming along a street, or one is aware of feeling slightly elated. At times, however, one is not so much aware as overwhelmed; one's words and concepts do not capture experience as much as experience exceeds one's categories and wordless wonder results. Abraham Heschel describes wonder as a "state of maladjustment to words and notions [and] a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is " (11).

Deep silence is similar to what the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* described as "naked intent" (Johnston 1973, 21). One is present, aware only that he or she is present. There is a gentle, slow loss of awareness of self and of things. Normal awareness is replaced with wonder, the wordless sense of amazement that anything exists at all. This naked awareness, this sense of life beyond words, is useless. It is not programmable or marketable. It is not suited to commerce or even to inter-personal relationships. The practice of deep silence is the deliberate cultivation of wonder, the pursuit of a state of original perception before the distorting effects of stereotypes, prejudices and inflexible verbal categories.

Feelings can be distinguished from emotions. Emotions arise suddenly, are usually short lived and are due to a specific cause. For example, if one is crossing a street and hears nearby the loud oncoming screech of automobile brakes, the emotion of fear is suddenly present and is due to a definite cause. After being reassured that one is safe, the fear leaves and is replaced by relief, which in a short while will be replaced by yet another emotion from still another cause. Feelings on the other hand are more long term. They reside below emotions. It as if on the surface of our self there are waves of emotions, some intense and stormy, some calm and others peaceful, but underneath the swirl of emotions, in the depth of ourselves, we can detect long term feelings with a mood-like quality and density. This is reflected when one says, for example, after an emotionally demanding event, "I'm very

shaken by it, but I'm all right." One is emotionally stormy on the surface but still feeling fundamentally sound underneath.

One's relationship to deep silence occurs at the bottom of our feelings, the point where even the most fundamental and long lasting of feelings, such as self-acceptance, begin to thin. It is at this barren point of fundamental feelings that one encounters deep silence. The encounter, itself, does not evoke a feeling but rather an awareness of our nameless self.

### **Potential applications of research on deep silence**

#### **Deep silence and ministry**

How useful is a description of deep silence? This question, which is very reasonable in a research context, creates a problem when asked of silence. There is a long tradition that guards what Max Picard termed the "holy uselessness" of silence, its resistance to being put to work, to being conscripted in any project, religious or otherwise (3). This reverential attitude is critical of those who would use silence for a pragmatic purpose:

Where there is a lot of fuss about 'spirituality,' 'enlightenment' or just 'turning on,' it is often because there are buzzards hovering around a corpse. This hovering, this circling, this descending, this celebration of victory, . . . enrich the birds of appetite.

[but] there is no body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while in the place where it is thought to be. But they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the 'nothing,' the 'no-body' that was there, suddenly appears. . . It was there all the time but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey. (Merton 1968, ix)

Merton's caustic appraisal of spiritual birds of prey is a particularly strong example of a tradition whose roots trace back to Lao Tzu, the sixth century B.C.E. Chinese poet and

philosopher who stated: "The Tao that can be spoken is not the real Tao" and "One who talks [of Tao] is not aware" (Haught 113, 114). The Christian monastic tradition and the Quakers understand obedience to silence, but nowhere speak of using silence. Since those who know silence best caution strongly against its use, how can one justify considering how to apply or make use of silence?

One can justify it only by making a sharp distinction between silence and a description of silence. Silence cannot be used, or enlisted in a program, or made to serve in a system of thought; however, a description of silence can be used as a means to aid in recognizing silence because the sole route to an appreciation of silence is through language. The richness of silence can only be accessed if one knows it is there. All who love silence are indebted to Lao Tzu, the Quakers, Max Picard and the Christian apophatic tradition, not only for revering and protecting the integrity of silence but also for speaking of silence. One is forced to communicate about silence in the same way that one is forced to communicate about such other incomprehensible realities as love, death, and the ultimate. Like these, silence is real, experiential and mysterious. So one speaks of silence knowing that words about silence are not silence itself. A description of silence functions only to rekindle memories of the numinous dimension of silence in the mind of a reader who has already had the experience. At best a descriptive grammar opens people to a richer appreciation of what they already know.

Can a familiarity with silence then be useful? Yes. A familiarity with the various types of silence and an ability to distinguish between levels of silence can be put to use, but silence cannot. To offer a ministry of silence is a service the world needs. To claim to offer silence or to use silence is ludicrous. Silence freely manifests itself or it does not. One doesn't program faith, hope and love and yet one can offer a ministry of faith, hope and love. The same conditions apply to silence.

Many today appreciate silence. Henri Nouwen, in his book on desert spirituality, *The Way of the Heart*, sees a three-fold value in silence. Silence reminds us that we do not have the final answers to life's questions; it safeguards the integrity of our own emotions and feelings, and finally silence preserves the power of words (52-58). Nouwen promotes a ministry of silence but realistically notes:

For most people, silence creates itchiness and nervousness. Many experience silence not as full and rich, but as empty and hollow. For them silence is like a gaping abyss which can swallow them up. As soon as a minister says during a worship service, "Let us be silent for a few moments," people tend to become restless and preoccupied with only one thought: "When will this be over?" Imposed silence often creates hostility and resentment. Many ministers who have experimented with silence in their services have soon found out that silence can be more demonic than divine and have quickly picked up the signals that were saying: "Please keep talking." It is quite understandable that most forms of ministry avoid silence precisely so as to ward off the anxiety it provokes. (59)

Nouwen sees a ministry of silence as serving preaching, counseling and the personal organization of time and work. All these ministries call people away from a fragmented life "to that silence in which they can discover themselves, each other, and God" (64).

John O'Donohue sees a special role for silence in evangelization, because today the Church is faced with a new complex form of spiritual hunger:

It is in fact a new and diverse form of consciousness. The old answers and methods of religion are stuck in a different idiom and cannot even meet or recognize this. Church documents, exhortations and so much of its preaching have the tonality of an earlier, more uniform, authoritarian culture which modern consciousness has left behind long ago. Much of the language of

religion is caught in this 'time warp'. It attempts to speak with the voice of a vanished age to a fragmented culture that has outgrown it. This kind of religious language awakens little more than nostalgia. (266)

For O'Donohue, modern evangelization needs to awaken in people an awareness of the spiritual and this he believes requires the silence and solitude of inwardness (269). Others who explicitly recommend a ministry of silence include Morton Kelsey, Richard Starks, Brenda C. Heales and Chris Cook, Douglas Steere, and Anthony de Mello.

Because silence is so basic in religious living, its presence and practice are encouraged in a variety of settings. Spiritual directors continue to encourage periods of intentional silence during retreats and in prayer. Theologians explicitly or otherwise incorporate an understanding of silence in their methodologies. Roman Catholic liturgical documents refer to the value of silence in worship, and the Second Vatican Council recommends that contemplative communities safeguard their traditional practice of silence (Flannery 168, 663, 667). Silence, along with sacramentalism, mysticism and action, is one of the four major ways that world religions orient their followers toward mystery (Haught 81). When world religious leaders met in Assisi for a commemorative celebration for St. Francis, the only common way of worship available for Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Christians and Moslems was silence (Mejia 367-69). Silence is deeply ecumenical.

A detailed descriptive understanding of silence helps a person distinguish the various levels of silence and be sensitized to their corresponding affective dimensions. This allows for a greater awareness of the presence of silence, for example, in theological analysis, liturgical planning and spiritual living.

### **Deep Silence and theology**

Theologians struggle with silence, with the limits of language and with the ineffable. A familiarity with silence equips a reader to recognize how a particular theologian recognizes

and respects silence. Following are three theologians arranged in order of increasing appreciation for the necessary role of deep silence in religious thought. They are John Macquarrie, Sallie McFague and Elie Wiesel.

### John Macquarrie

Theological language, for Macquarrie, is built upon a more fundamental and less sophisticated type of religious language containing:

such diverse kinds of utterances as praying, praising, exhorting, blessing, cursing and . . . ritual acts, and deeds of love as well; crucifixes, paintings, statues; music, poetry and even silence. Theological language arises out of religious language as a whole, and it does so when a religious faith becomes reflective and tries to give an account of itself in verbal statements. (18-19)

Theological language builds upon the spontaneous, relatively uncritical use of devotional language and actions. At the core of this traditional language is the inexpressible.

Theological language will sound odd in so far as it is not everyday talk about familiar objects in space and time. Nonetheless, Macquarrie is confident that theological talk is possible.

The task of theology is precisely to struggle to find ways to express the inexpressible core of devotional language.

The theological method of a *via negativa*, through which the inexpressible is accepted as the beginning and final word in theology and theology is reduced to accepting in silence the fact that God is beyond all words and concepts, is decidedly and repeatedly repudiated by Macquarrie as an acceptance of irrationality that leads to agnosticism and Christian atheism. Macquarrie believes that one is forced by the human situation to both accept that God has granted some positive knowledge of Godself, and to set out to stretch language in order to pursue God. Stretching language to serve as a theological tool can be done in either of two ways, through analogy or negation. Macquarrie recognizes negation as serving the limited

function of safeguarding the inexpressibility of God, but beyond that he senses nothing but danger in the negative way:

It is hard to see how the knowledge of God said to be reached in this way could be other than wholly vacuous. It would scarcely be indistinguishable from agnosticism, and while indeed we hinted that a measure of reverent agnosticism is entirely proper . . . faith is possible only on the basis that God has granted some positive knowledge of himself. ( 26-27)

For Macquarrie, theology must pursue the way of analogy which:

claims that every positive characteristic of the finite bears some affinity to a corresponding characteristic of the infinite. . . The possibility which this way offers of talking intelligibly about God clearly depends on just how wide the gulf between God and created beings is taken to be, and on just how far language can be stretched without coming to a breaking point. (28-29)

The most fruitful analogy that allows for the meaningful and rational discussion of God is the analogy of being. Macquarrie repeatedly describes the *via negativa* as a path which, taken in isolation, leads inevitably to atheism (27, 213, 215). Macquarrie recognizes silence's legitimate role at the base of devotional language as a source of inspiration, and as a pious response to the inexpressible. Silence, however, has no role and is a threat to the theological enterprise, if it is allowed to develop into anything resembling a *via negativa*. Macquarrie, while recognizing silence sees it essentially as an absence, a limit, a boundary to the rational. For him, the serious consideration of deep silence is a threat to theology.

### Sallie McFague

For Sallie McFague, religious language exists on two levels, the primary and secondary. These two levels are linked by the choice or unconscious acceptance of a dominant metaphor. The primary level consists of one's feelings, sense experiences and

affective memories. There, beyond words, are the mute feelings from which words arise. The fundamental religious direction of life takes shape here. Here reside collections of religious words, images and symbols derived from childhood experiences, from stories, from Church, from one's own imagination which are organized under a few uncritical guiding metaphors such as "I am God's child," "God creates all," "God is just," etc.

From the choice of a dominant or root metaphor, secondary, conceptual religious thought develops. A chosen dominant metaphor allows one to create what McFague describes as a grid or map which logically and rationally guides subsequent thought. If one chooses the metaphor "God is love," then it is crucial to understand: "what is meant by love? What kinds of love are there? What type of love best approximates God's love? How does one live so as to love as God loves? How should the Church function and be organized so as to witness to the love of God? etc." Love will become the basis of everything. Religious language will be quite different, if a dominant metaphor such as, "God is truth" or "God is a just judge" is chosen. Secondary, conceptual, religious language returns one to the primary level of life, the feeling, affective and active levels, with an appreciation of the power and potential of the life found there.

McFague recognizes the *via negativa* as an option in developing religious language, but understands that the tradition has overwhelmingly opted to dare to speak of God and not to remain in silent, wordless adoration:

Augustine, the great Bishop of Hippo, notes that even the person who says the most about God is but "dumb," and yet, he adds, our only alternatives are to speak in halting, inadequate words or to remain silent. The Judaeo-Christian tradition, more than many other religious traditions, has chosen not to remain silent. In fact, this tradition and especially Christianity, and within Christianity especially Protestantism, has focused on and at times been obsessed by words, both " the Word of God" and human words about God. (1)

McFague, therefore, does not have a specific role for silence, but she does at several points acknowledge its presence. Words struggle to emerge from silence; feelings are rooted in silence. Silence provides the context of all thinking about God:

We feel more than we can express; we know more than we can interpret. Metaphor deals with expression and interpretation, not with the depths of human existence that lie even beyond words. . . This base, difficult as it is to stipulate, deals, it seems to me, with our sensuous, affectional and active lives at the most primordial level. There are some things that lie too deep for words, among them, for instance, the touch of another human being, what occurs in human silence. . . These are not metaphors, but the stuff from which metaphor is made. (36-37)

Additionally, concepts about God are based upon metaphor; they are words that function as a finger pointing at the moon. They are not the moon. Our words are not identical with what they describe. The utter transcendence of God is not describable. At some point, words should be put away and the silent reality of God acknowledged:

The last word as well as the first word in theology is surrounded by silence. We know with Simone Weil that when we try to speak of God there is nothing which resembles what we can conceive when we say that word. (194)

For McFague, theology begins and ends in a functional silence. Deep silence does not contribute substantially to her metaphorical approach.

### Elie Wiesel

Wiesel's autobiography, *Night*, begins in 1942, when he is twelve years old, in his hometown of Sighet, Hungary. Wiesel describes himself as a happy child, to whom prayer was as natural as breathing, whose life was lived in harmony with Sabbath, family, and Torah

observance. In Wiesel's memory, his childhood has a paradisaical quality; then childhood suddenly descended into hell. The Fascist government of Hungary, in 1945, deported the entire Jewish population of Sighet to the Auschwitz concentration camp. In one day, the religious world of a Jewish child mystic disintegrated.

Arriving at night at Auschwitz, Elie observed a huge cloud of smoke and fire belching from the crematorium chimney. Cloud and fire, Exodus symbols of God's presence, become symbols of God's absence. *Night* proceeds to reverse traditional Jewish signs, words and feasts which point to God's redemptive activity, into counter-symbols of God's absence and failure. The "chosen" are chosen for the furnace. Hitler, not God, is the one who keeps all his promises to the Jewish people. The one does not die for the many, but the many for an insane one. On the feast of Rosh Hashanah, the fifteen year old mystic cannot bring himself to join in the prayers of the other prisoners but instead prays alone: "Praise be thy Holy Name, Thou who has chosen us to be butchered on thine altar" (78). On Yom Kippur, Elie doesn't fast but deliberately savors his scrap of bread. The deepest point in this reversal of religious meaning occurs at the public execution by hanging of three prisoners, one a particularly innocent and kindly child. The execution, with its three gallows, resonates with the symbolism of Calvary. The two adults die quickly but the child lingers slowly strangling. The scene ends with Elie noting, "That night the soup tasted of corpses" (72). God is no more; nor is there any hint of potential resurrection, just a nauseous paschal meal.

This progressive loss of religious meaning is narrated by a fifteen year old whose transparent goodness, honesty and compassion serve to increase the horror and sense of God's absence. The book ends with the camp's and Elie's liberation.

As a sixteen year old liberated prisoner, Wiesel promised himself never to forget what he experienced, but also vowed not to speak of the horror for at least ten years: "I entered literature through silence, I felt I needed ten years to collect words and the silence in them. . . [in order to] purify every word" (Abrahamson 54). At age twenty-six, Wiesel realized that

his period of silence was over and produced in 1956 an eight hundred page Yiddish autobiography of his time in the camps. This was translated and revised into a French and two years later an English edition reduced to one hundred and twenty seven pages. In the revision, Wiesel removed every unnecessary word, sentence, character, and thought until satisfied that *Night* conveyed the silence he was seeking to express. Silence is what *Night* is about. Wiesel regards all of his subsequent writings as attempts to explain the silence of *Night*.

The deep silence of *Night* results from its style, plot and symbolism. Wiesel writes in a deliberately taut, economic style through which he understates the horror without any moralizing or self pity. Wiesel wants the reader to feel the silence, all that is left out, left unstated, until the silence screams and shouts ( Abrahamson 56).

Sometimes I strike out a sentence if I believe in it too much; I am moving towards silence. The thirteenth-century Hebrew poet Eleazar Rokeah says: "Some people complain that God is silent; they are wrong - God is not silent; God is Silence. It is to this silence that I would like to direct my words.

These are the kinds of words I believe in. (Abrahamson 57)

*Night's* dense, compressed speech understates the horror of Auschwitz until this silence of omission cries out of the spaces between the words.

The plot of *Night* is a journey into theological negativity. All accepted concepts of God, order, morality and humanity disintegrate revealing only the unknowable, incomprehensible, silent God who permits evil to flourish. *Night* deliberately proceeds to shatter all rational understanding of God, until the very concept of a just God is totally void. The symbols of creation, exodus, Sinai, law, feast, land, chosen, promise, messiah and redemption empty of meaning, become hollow and collapse, and create a silent, spiritual void in the reader who stands alone in a spiritually barren world.

The deep silence of *Night* arises from a sense of loss. It is the silence of a graveyard in which dead religious symbols are entombed, where one's attention can no longer be directed to any reality other than the memory of suffering, a place of no transcendent escape or refuge, a place of terrifying literalness. It is possible to be silenced by beauty, by the particular, unique, reality and harmony of an object; in *Night* one is silenced by a particular, unique, sordid and immense evil. Because *Night* refuses to find any transcendent religious meaning in the Holocaust, one can only hear in it the silence of the God who was once present to us in word and symbol. And yet, somehow Wiesel's silent integrity and personal holiness is deeper than deep silence. Wiesel's silence, somehow, screams a refusal to stop believing in a God one can no longer understand. Wiesel recognizes and conveys deep silence.

In summary, the theological use of silence is seldom explicit. Yet, silence is so basic in religious living that theologians must employ some understanding of its nature and importance in their methodology. A knowledge of silence which provides distinctions serves to sensitize one to its presence, type and function. Macquarrie illustrates a silence of absence, Mc Fague a functional silence and Wiesel a deep silence.

### **Deep silence and liturgy**

A liturgical planning team, equipped with a basic terminology for silence, can note the various types of silence in their worship. The silence of absence, or quiet, is first observed. Does the congregation observe a suitable quiet at appropriate moments? Is the Church building needlessly noisy with the sound of telephones ringing, doors slamming, refrigerators humming, etc.? Are the acoustics such that the necessary sounds of movement and speech ring crisp, clean, and authentic.

Are the functional silences effective? Are there suitable pauses before and after the readings and prayers. Does the liturgy manifest a proper sense of leisure and unrushed

silence, one that is not artificial or overly burdensome? Do people respond appropriately to the functional silences of pausing and waiting or is there a collective sense of "Lets hurry up and move on!"

Finally, are there ever moments of congregational deep silence when the community collectively has a vivid sense of the numinous presence in its midst? Deep silence in liturgy is best observed in its effects. Liturgical deep silence collapses social roles, creates a sense of communion, increases affective receptivity, lowers defenses and provides a feeling of divine presence acting upon those present. Joseph Dougherty notes that when the liturgy works all participants are drawn out of their various roles and dissolved into a single collective role, those who keep the silence. This collapse of structure creates in some a great unease, for others a sense of peace. Dougherty traces this unease to our individualistic culture which resists the creation of community (149-150). Quoting Ronald Grimes, Nathan Mitchell notes that liturgy is not goal-oriented but rather intends to tap into the "way things flow. . . a way of coming to rest [in the cosmic order]" (366). Silence creates the context to receive, a reverent waiting with expectation, a time not to be busy. Similarly, Kieran Flanagan observes that silence creates a rule-free zone in which participants can simply be. The outstanding feature of liturgical deep silence is a sense of being acted upon in this zone by an autonomous reality: the holy (209). Silence in liturgy feels as if the sacred one surrounds, shapes and moulds each member of the community. This being acted upon defies translation into common-sense terms. Silence is incomprehensible, mysterious, a perfect symbol of the holy. The otherness, power, closeness and subtlety of silence opens participants by lowering their natural defensiveness.

Silence speaks through one's feelings. The sacred Other moves and touches, and its presence is all the more real because it is not announced. In this way, liturgical silence resembles the deep silence of prayer and mysticism. Wittgenstein's aphorism is often quoted: "There are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest.

They are what is mystical" (Long 149). The silence of liturgy lowers our defenses and opens the filters we employ to regulate the amount and type of reality we allow into our consciousness (Johnston 1975, 56).

Liturgy provides a context for the display of deep silence's power and otherness. The ability to listen to the distinct variations in a congregation's silence aids liturgists by sensitizing them in a practical fashion to the role, function and purpose of liturgical silence.

### **Deep silence and spiritual direction**

Familiarity with a grammar of deep silence contributes to prayer and spiritual direction. Silence is the traditional context of private prayer. Ignatius, in the *Spiritual Exercises* does not speak of silence but rather speaks of solitude, of people withdrawing from their accustomed way of life in order to have greater privacy and freedom while they dedicate their "whole attention to one single interest" (Puhl 9-10). In practice, this means silence as an absence of distracting noises - no radio, TV, entertainment, needless communications, etc., in order to more easily feel the interior movements of the Spirit. From my personal experience making private retreats, the thirty-day spiritual exercises, and a twelve-day spiritual director's workshop, along with extensive reading in spirituality and spiritual direction, I can say with some confidence that the quality or depth of one's silence is very rarely, if ever, discussed or explored. Silence is typically viewed as the context or the empty interior space in which feelings arise. The value of silence is its provision of space and its creation of this context in which it is easier to observe and name what is happening within. Silence is simply an absence of noise and other distractions so that one can notice the consoling or desolating presence created by memories, moods, thoughts and images; hence, there is nothing to note about silence itself. The following incident from Francis W. Vanderwall's excellent book, *Spiritual Direction* is typical of this experience:

Once I had a retreatant who was very anxious about her next assignment. . . . I suggested she set aside Scripture for a while and pray the prayer of silence. . . . At our next conference the gentle tranquillity she was exuding clearly indicated that the Spirit had once again entered a soul and dwelt within her. (32-33)

Fr. Vanderwall's examples in his book indicate that he is a very fine spiritual director. But nowhere in the many examples of direction which he provides is silence itself ever discussed with a directee. Silence is the place where the spirit acts, but silence itself is not the action of the spirit. Even those most open and sensitive to the value of silence, such as Vanderwall, seldom discuss silence in itself.

A familiarity with silence has the potential to sensitize directors to the importance of listening and accepting the functional silence of pauses, hesitations and the deliberate silence of pondering, fear and uncertainty. Training in counseling already provides much of this sensitivity, but a spiritual sensitivity to silence can also contribute a particular mode of shared presence to silence. Additionally, an ability to describe silence allows for conversation and discussion about the quality and experience of silence itself. The above interview transcripts illustrate that there are people who are able and willing to speak of the presence of the ultimate encountered in deep silence. The qualities, effects and characteristics of this silence are common and a discussion of this type opens up an important dimension of contemplative living to spiritual dialogue. It is both possible and helpful to speak about what happens in deep silence.

The value of a description of deep silence lies in its ability to animate, outline, and identify a dimension of human experience that is little known. Such a description reveals that silence is more than a mere medium for spiritual communication; it is a communication in and of itself. Silence's value is not merely that a word emerges from it but that entrance

into silence constitutes a word of its own, a word that has endless depths of stillness and authenticity.

### **Limitations to the study**

John Punshon observes that "Just as there is a Trappist way of stillness, there is a Quaker way" (12). Apparently a Trappist silence would feel and be described differently from a Quaker silence. Every faith-community that has a tradition of silent prayer, worship, retreats or contemplative life also has developed a history of interpreting and describing its silence. The experience of silence cannot be clearly separated from the shaping influence of the tradition in which it is encountered. This project/dissertation studied silence from within the Christian tradition. Does a Buddhist experience a different silence than a Christian? I think the answer is yes. Christian silence finds at its centre a sense of presence because it believes that the numinous presence of God, although beyond words is nonetheless everywhere and without end. Christians, with some few exceptions, have great difficulty dealing with the ultimate symbolized as nothingness or total emptiness. Buddhist understanding of the ultimate finds such words helpful and descriptive. This study is then limited since it uses only Christian classic sources in its review of literature and only Christian subjects for its qualitative research. Further study is required to determine if the silence described in this project/dissertation is compatible with that encountered in other faith traditions.

The deep silence described in this study, despite some anomalous features, is essentially a very positive experience. Would another researcher, utilizing the same tools, come to a greater appreciation of the power and importance of negative silences, those that create fear, anxiety and dread by revealing that the ultimate is unknowable, inaccessible and perhaps non-existent? Would an atheistic researcher have greater sensitivity for the negative dimension of silence? Would the subjects he or she chose be more open to such a dimension

than the Christian subjects I chose? I'm uncertain how to answer this challenge. On the one hand, my research was open to discovering any source that treated deep silence in depth. To my knowledge, there are no sources that describe primarily negative silences. Yet, the everyday experiences of the common fear of silence, the existentialist analysis of life experience which reveals dread and anxiety as basic categories, the experience of psychotherapists and the reported destructive social power of "spirals of silence" that conspire to conceal oppression and crime, all testify to the reality and power of negative silence. Even the Christian-contemplative tradition cautions against immature individuals experimenting with solitude, and the prayer of quiet, without guidance are based on a respect for the power of negative silence. All I am able to conclude is that my sources and my subjects, at most, experience an anomalous threat at times in silence, but the overwhelming report is of an accepting deep silence.

A close reading of the interviews reveals a possible limitation in my interviewing style. During the actual interviews, I had a strong sense that I was "standing on holy ground." With the subjects I interviewed, silence is as close to their sense of God as it is possible to get. To ask about silence is to ask how they experience God. I was asking for sacred information to which I had no right. When I encountered resistance, I was in a quandary; "Do I have a right to probe into this person's experience of the holy?" I resolved the issue by probing only as far as I judged a respectful sensitivity allowed. If the subjects sent me clear signals that they did not wish to share their experience on a topic, then I felt no alternative but to respect their reticence. Would a more assertive style of interview yield greater insight into the nature of silence? I don't think so. The limitation here is inescapable. There are certain aspects of one's relationship with God that are simply not discussed with a comparatively unknown interviewer, a change in interviewing style would not yield significantly different results. I am satisfied that I obtained honest and complete responses to

my questions. A different style of interview would not have yielded substantially different results.

Finally, Max Picard is correct in describing silence as useless. The value of silence lies precisely in its uselessness. North American society is deeply pragmatic and is thereby biased toward measuring value solely in terms of usefulness. From a cultural perspective, this study is limited as a type of pure description with limited practical value. The appendices note some areas where a knowledge of deep silence contributes to greater awareness and understanding. This is as far as silence can be employed. For some this will be seen as a limitation--"too theoretical . . . what can you do with it?" Such a perspective needs to be reversed in order for the questioner to understand, instead, what silence can do with one's awareness

### **Personal reflections on this study of deep silence**

This project/dissertation is an accurate tracing of my own understanding of deep silence. I have been fascinated by deep silence for over thirty years. This study allowed me the great luxury of examining an experience that I intuitively knew was filled with personal meaning. As a result, I have changed. I am much more able, more comfortable and more confident in describing the reality of silence and how and why I am attracted to it. At the beginning of this study, I was very guarded and apologetic for my interest in silence. It was not something I casually revealed as it seemed a bit too unusual and too mystical for me. A love of silence, said aloud, struck me as boastful. I now see it simply as a fact. I love silence and find great meaning and strength in it.

The preliminary phenomenological study, in chapter two, was the best I could then do to describe deep silence. After completing the qualitative research and literature review, it was obvious to me how little I could initially say about deep silence. My insights were sound but undeveloped. I did have a sense of silence in language, in people and in nature. I

understood the deepening nature of silence and I had a sense of perceptual and negative silences. However, I had no terminology for the different types of silences and little critical distance between myself and silence. My descriptions of silence were tenuous and I had little sense of what lay at the centre of silence.

As I struggled to attain a critical distance, I grew in my ability to trust my own experience of silence. As my knowledge grew and was confirmed, so did my self-acceptance. The interviews were a delight. To meet five mature, healthy people who loved silence was strengthening and confirming. By this time, I knew that, for me, silence was more than an academic study. I have discovered that silence is my way to pray, to draw near to God. The silent dimension of life nurtures my spirit. The experience has been very broadening and decisive. I now wish to live in ways that allow me to enter more deeply and consistently into silence. A contemplative spirituality is necessary for me, if I am to be true to my own sense of self and of God. It is my hope that this study might encourage others to answer a personal call to a more silent, contemplative way of life.

Spirituality is the link between my ministry as a religious educator and silence. I have a very clear memory of a religious education workshop I attended in Victoria, B.C. in 1973. An exercise in the workshop had the participants choose from an assortment of photographs one that would express their religious education ministry. I chose a picture of a large concert piano sitting isolated on a beach just near the water line. I explained that I understood my work in religious education as requiring me to enter as deeply as possible into life (water) and then sharing with others (playing my song) what I had learned of life and the source of life. The only problem was, as on a deserted beach, play as well as I might I was not guaranteed an audience (deserted beach.) I was reminded of that picture and of my desire to develop the spiritual dimension in religious education when I recently read a report on Quaker schools in England which proposed that their traditional academic emphasis on being literate and numerate be balanced by an equal emphasis on being numinate. While the word

numinate is even more awkward and unfamiliar than numerate, the concept is interesting and promising. Educators insure that students emerge from schools familiar with reading, writing and mathematics. What if religious schools took on the additional obligation to insure that students were also numinate, that is able to "explore sympathetically religious attitudes and experiences and their social expressions" (Friends 102). What if religious education decided that its starting point was the spiritual exploration of common experiences such as: friendship, loneliness, presence, hope, faith, love and even silence?

I think there is an innate desire in children and adults to develop spiritually, to understand the depth of common experiences, to explore religious feelings and attitudes. The spiritual is understood by Carol Farran as the integrating and unifying dimension of a person, that which imaginatively creates an "overarching perspective" (188) or what James Fowler terms an "ultimate environment." (28-29). Robert Coles describes in *The Spiritual Life of Children* how the spiritual plays a unique integrating role in a child's development. Coles discovers in children's spontaneous remarks hints of the cosmology that shapes their horizon and self understanding. For example, a fifth grade girl wrote "I'm like I am now, but I could change when I grow up. You'll never know who you'll be until you get that age when you're all grown. But God must know all the time" (310). Coles notes,

The longer I've known such children, the more readily I've noticed the abiding interest they have in reflecting about human nature, about the reasons people behave as they do, about the mysteries of the universe as evinced in the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars. Sometimes the moral and spiritual power that certain children display can give me some release - help me learn about matters I might not want to acknowledge - as part of what I choose to call psychological "reality." (332)

A religious educator facilitates the innate human need to integrate the common experiences of life into a comprehensive and coherent outlook. Clifford Geertz notes that

when this is done in such a way as to establish "powerful, persuasive and long lasting moods and motivations...(which seem) uniquely realistic," one is in touch with the religious (436). My study of silence encourages me to further explore the common experiences of life convinced that they lead to the source of life.

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## **7. Appendices**

### **Transcript Interviews**

#### **Edited transcript of interview with Antoinette Voute Roeder**

Background: Antoinette Voute Roeder is a musician, poet and a Christian spiritual director. She is married and has a Masters degree in Music. Antoinette lives in Edmonton, Alberta with her husband.

#### **Looking back at your childhood what helped to sensitize you to silence?**

That's interesting. It's not something that I thought about. Immediately what comes to mind is that I have an enneagram number five, the observer type who watches and stands a little distance away and, therefore, is a receiver, ultimately. I have a vivid picture of myself (I was born in Holland, not far from Amsterdam. I am not an only child. I have two brothers who are older and a sister who is younger than I.) being very much by myself, alone a lot. I'm not actually sure why that was, but I think one of the reasons was that my parents were quite a bit older and they had their own life. In that culture and in that time, children were looked after by maids and so I spent a lot of time on my own. Certainly I didn't have parents who played with me. There was nothing like that. My sister was probably too young, and a totally different personality, so playing with her certainly happened, but not as often as it might have. I have a picture of myself standing by the side of the fence by the garden and looking out on the road and watching, watching, passerby traffic, and people, but very much

alone. A solitariness there. I don't see it as lonely but as alone and somewhat self contained. There is a sense of silence there, of quiet, of stillness. That is a sort of template picture.

Also the sort of activities that I participated in during childhood, the things that I loved the most, were reading and piano. Piano was a large part of my life from an early age. That early interaction between myself and an instrument, that listening for what I produced, and listening for whatever else was there underneath, this was cultivated at an early age and it was practically a natural tendency for me. Those are the things that come to mind.

**Were there any times, early in life, that you sought silence?**

I experienced silence in nature and in solitude. It seemed necessary to be alone to experience that. It is a different quality of silence when you are alone. I had to share a room with my sister until I was sixteen years old. Which in that respect strikes me as strange since there were other rooms in the house, but for some reason I did. So when we moved into this brand new house, I finally got my own room. That was an incredible luxury. To be able to go after school and hide away there and write. At that point it was not so much poetry, which is what I do now, but I was doing a lot of fiction writing. It was wonderful; one advantage of having older parents who did not mess around much with their kids was that they left me alone, and that was a great gift. Then there was always the silence in music. It is a coming home sensation. Even though it is a direct paradox, music producing silence, yet there was silence at the core of that.

**Were there any people in childhood that seemed like men or women of silence?**

I suppose, if anyone was, it would be my mother. To this day, I'm not sure if that was a silence of withdrawing or a silence that was truly at her core. I think there was some inner silence. She was a painter, an artist. That was a very private enterprise for her. She didn't talk a whole lot about herself, about her family. I think that is partially her personality, but also because she was very much overshadowed by my father. He was a blabbermouth. He very much domineered, and, anytime we had family meals, he was the one who held forth.

Actually, that created a lot of silence. Forced many of us into silence. Certainly the children, because children were seen and not heard. So, if I did speak out, chances were that I would be shot down in some way. You learned to keep yourself to yourself. So, that is all part of that framework. I didn't really think of that, but that is part of that context. But I do think there was silence in my mother and there always has been. When I think of other relatives, the relatives were all on my father's side, because my mother is British and her family was all in England. My father is Dutch, and we lived in Holland so I only knew my father's side of the family. They tended to be a pretty loud bunch. They were always talking and arguing. They were lawyers, and doctors, and professionals, and they all had very strong opinions. I have some of that too but in a quieter way.

I was quite a bit of a loner; I didn't have a lot of friends. My best friend was a piano, and I interacted with that. I had perhaps one friend in high school, but even that wasn't a close friendship. When I got to university, the same pattern continued. It wasn't easy for me to make friends. I didn't have any social skills. I was also a foreigner, and I felt that for a long time. We moved to the United States, New Mexico, when I was ten. It seemed a barbarian country compared to Holland. It was a huge cultural shift.

**The population density was totally different?**

It was like moving to a wasteland. We were in the very southern part of the state which is bordering on Texas. It was called Eunice. A tiny little oil town. My father went there to join a friend's medical practice. My Dad was an associate in his medical practice for the first year. The cultural shift was enormous, and it was devastating. It was really hard on the family, and I don't think my Dad ever considered that. For me, it increased the tendency to observe but not to participate. I felt very alien.

**Is there any particular sense of silence from that period of your life?**

We came over on a freighter, and we tried to learn English while we traveled. The trip took three weeks. We had a map of the United States, and we learned the names and the

capitals of all the states. But, of course, mispronounced many of them like Arkansas. I know we said Ar - Kan - Sis. Tucson was Tuck - son and so on. The main phrases I knew were "Yes," "No" and "I don't understand you." The last one came in very handy the first few weeks. Being young, we learned the language quite quickly. I should have been in grade four, but they first put me in grade three and then realized that my skills were much higher. The Dutch schools were more advanced any way. My math skills were at grade six level. Even here, the silence I knew was present when I wrote (letters, lots of them), and that silence grows inwardly because I experience myself as being so very different.

It was all desert there. Our little house was right on the desert. When we looked out, all I can remember seeing is scrub and rattlesnake kind of country and a big old rusted garbage can which I think they incinerated garbage in every week. To go to that type of landscape from Holland which is neat, clean, tidy and every horizon had a church steeple and its little village.

New Mexico was an awesome and fearful experience. The silence there was not a friendly or a happy silence; there was a lot of sorrow, sadness, and pain.

**What were the most significant silences in that period?**

This, initially was more a silence of separation, alienation and, at times, desperation: a hollowness. That was present in the first years. I can remember when I was in high school and had to move from one building to another for changes of class. I can recall going outside and entering into what I considered the real world. I mean being in school and being in class were not the real world. The real world for me was somewhere in nature or a place where I could commune with my inner self. That was not possible in school. School was always distracting. So I can remember moving from that one building to the other and looking at the mountains rising on the horizon. It was a wonderful sight. I've always found that mountains were like that. They spoke to me; they drew me; they called to me. Very often it was when a

poem was coming on that silence was apparent. Even though that of course meant words, there was a space there that I moved into. I very much equate silence with space.

**Would you pick up on that?**

It's a sense. It's a feeling. It is something I feel come on. It's a bodily feeling, a physical thing. I can't emphasize enough how physical silence is. It hinges very much on relaxation, acceptance of the self and things as they are. Awareness, alertness and being awake are required. It is as if in my body there is a silent place. I would call it my womb well. It is semi-dark, silent, empty and open to the whole cosmos. It is centered just below my navel.

Silence comes on and creeps in with kind of a body awareness of something. And then I just get this sense of something vast. It is not fearful. It is a very comfortable feeling, like being in the womb of the universe. It is dimly lit. Once I'm in it, I can't say anything about it because I'm in it. Maybe you would have to call that a merging process, or a unifying process, or a meeting place. Where spirit and Spirit meet. One is not differentiated from the Other anymore. I think that is where the creative process comes in. Words come, but this is part of being receptive. It is not anything that I produce, it comes. If we speak about this, we are also speaking about how God the Spirit comes and moves and what this means. It is not something that I generate. Like I say to my directees, we can dispose ourselves toward that; we can cultivate the ground, but there is nothing we can do beyond that. We have to wait.

There are times when something can set off a feeling and the feeling is one of being receptive, a sense of something which emerges out of silence, which you receive in a sense. What other than solitude and mountains can set off that receptivity?

I have experienced this with people in spiritual direction. I can feel it start as a tingling in my body, and this hushed place opens up and then I know something is happening. I can only think about it afterwards because at the time it engages me so

completely that I can't separate from it in order to comment on it. Later, after being with a directee, I will journal about it, or a poem will emerge from it. That is a sacred place, my God place. So it can happen with a directee, or when I am listening to music a vista can open up within me, and I am completely in silence. It is very receptive. It can happen in conversation with a friend. It is not anything that I have any control over. It is a breaking in. Earlier I thought of it as invading. But it is not invasive; it is very gentle, but it can happen suddenly without my being aware that it is going to happen. It is something that moves in, and I am a part of it.

**It is very difficult to be precise with this.**

You want to define it?

**What I'm after is why for example would you term that experience as silence? Why would you pick silence as the word and not something else? What is there in silence that makes it appropriate to describe this experience?**

Silence is definitely the quality of it. Silence is a quality, a texture, although I'm speaking of it as a place. It is many, many things obviously. It is a very comprehensive type of quilt. It is the quality of waiting, and of being attentive, and of stillness, and of all activity ceasing. I don't know if I can say anymore about that. It's a . . . You really get into realms that are beyond words.

**Which is what I mean. It gets very tough. So sometimes I'll be pushing you at something that perhaps doesn't really budge.**

I guess in regards to this, I've felt that this is an inimical process. It is something that goes contrary to my soul because one part of me does not want to talk about silence but wants to sit in silence. If you are going to write a thesis about silence, the best thing you could do is simply submit a set of blank pages.

**The question is " Why are we doing this?" I just think it is possible, I have a sense that it is possible, much like it is possible with love to make some distinctions and to be able**

**to try to express a certain quality, something that could be of assistance with someone else, that could trigger a recognition. Not that you are going to map out silence, by any means, but I think you can, especially through metaphors , images and feelings, assist someone to recognize, "Yeah, I've had that experience but I didn't fully recognize it. I see what you are getting at." To do that requires a certain pushing at the limit of words.**

It is kind of a paradox in itself. I can honor that. Silence is a paradox and can only be expressed in one, if we are going to use words at all.

**There is much about silence that doesn't make sense, and that is what makes it fascinating. Why I'm pushing at what sets off silence is that different people relate silence to different experiences, such as vistas that you mentioned. People frequently mention water, sky, and mountains. Could you think of things, even minor things, that call you to silence. They just work that way. Are there any things that do that for you?**

I don't know that I've been that methodical in finding where that is for me. Because, as I say, being a receptive type it almost always overtakes me. It is like a companion that is there and sometimes you pay attention to it. I have a spiritual practice I follow that puts me into silence. I also experience it at the piano. I can play at times and really get into it. Recently, I was playing and had the experience of the piece playing itself. I thought my fingers were playing it, but it was playing itself. I don't think I've ever experienced that before with any awareness. It may have happened but I didn't recognize it. I think this is one of those qualities of silence that I experience.

This is crazy; here I am talking again about something that involves receptivity and sound, but silence comes into it. It is something to do with the Wholly Other, with the mystical realm, which I have no control over, and we are really asking about particular things here.

**Well I found the one you were on to be rich, the "music that played itself." Does silence play itself?**

Yes, yes it does. For sure. I guess in some way I am present to that silence as I am present to that music. It obviously requires me to be there. Silence is always there. Silence is at the core of the universe and holds everything. It is underneath everything. But it takes me or you or some part of creation to be more silent, to be more in touch. I can't explain that at all. So perhaps that is a good analogy. Silence plays itself, but it requires me to be there.

Actually, when we talk about this, I get a sense that we are talking about God all the time.

**Yes. Two things. Lets pick up on the first one. Is silence sacramental?**

Yes, for me it is.

**Why? For you it seems obvious, but were I to ask that to ninety-nine out of one hundred people I don't think that is the response I would get.**

Well, I think I referred to it earlier. Silence is a place and not just any kind of place. It is a meeting place of my spirit and God. So it is always sacred and it can be anywhere, everywhere, all the time. Although I don't bring my awareness to it all the time, I know it absolutely, with certainty, and I know that everything is sacred in some way. So . . . yeah, I don't know if I can say more than that.

**Good, that's fine. Can you pick up on the statement you made earlier that silence is at the core of life?**

Well, it is already such a huge statement that it is hard to expand on it! Well, I think maybe literally I can make some association with astronomy, and the cosmos, and the little we know of it. I've had from childhood a fascination with astronomy. Not that I understand it. I don't have the math or physics to even glean what that is. But I have a sense of the awesomeness and the wholly otherness of it, the strangeness that is not unfriendly. It is a benign universe. I think I came into a full sense of that in high school, when I was able to

separate from the strong authority figures in my life and start thinking for myself. My sense of the universe became increasingly benign as I made a private conscious consent to be God's. Where were we going with this?

**You mentioned in New Mexico that the silence was not pleasant. Are there silences that do not remove the basic goodness of creation, but nonetheless are disturbing?**

I was thinking of the kind of silences there are. There are suffocating silences; there is the silence that represses and oppresses. There is the silence that has a very negative, critical connotation such as the silence you are not allowed to break, the silence in Church, or the silence of the child that is proper to a certain place. I've often felt that in Church. But in Europe, when you enter a great cathedral, the silence is there, but it is part of the building; it's part of the stonework, whatever. It is part of the history. But churches with people in them, it is common there not to have silence. It is part of the way we worship, and the way we worship just doesn't do it for me. That is why I would prefer to be a Buddhist, but I can't stand the stuff they have on their altars, that you have to bow to, reincarnations of the Buddha. It doesn't interest me. It's not relevant to me. I would rather have a bare altar.

There is the silence of "shut up we don't want to hear your voice." There is the silence of the stars that take us by surprise. There are stunned silences, brought on by awe or by shock, accident, something horrible. But these are not the silences that I'm talking about. It is a different silence. The universal silence is totally different. It contains all that. It doesn't eliminate that. But it is so much more. It's very hospitable. It is very inviting. A wonderful way to be. I would equate it with what the Buddhists call bliss. Your bliss place.

**Are there places you go seeking silence? Places in your home? A silence place?**

Yeah. In my home I have a study, a converted bedroom. So, when I close that door, that is a silent place. I can also have it in our bedroom. I do my spiritual practice in bed. My husband is an early riser. So, when I get up, he is gone out already. I wake up around six or six thirty, that is when I do my prayer time or my meditation time in bed. Sitting there and

being able to look out the window into the trees able to see birds and sky; it is a very good place to be. But this is not confined, as I said before, to a particular place. It is a place beyond the space/time continuum. I carry it within. Sometimes it is very inaccessible, depending upon who I am with. If people are disturbing, then I cannot find that place very easily. But it is a place within me. I can find it outside in the mountains, but water doesn't do it for me. Water disturbs me; it is too noisy and it is too active, unless it is an incredibly lovely lake. A mountain lake will do that, but the ocean never. I never feel that with the ocean.

Seeing contains silence for me. I remember walking in the river valley one winter. There was a flock of Bohemian waxwings that had gathered in a poplar tree when they suddenly swept down on a mountain ash, gobbling all the berries. When they took off, all at once in a cloud, their wings made a concerted rushing sound that made me think the Holy Spirit was passing over my head. There was this profound silence and observant waiting that took hold of me. It didn't last long, in its most intense sense, but the after-effects lingered. So waiting and looking also bear on the experience of silence for me.

Also there was an incident two years ago when I was sitting in our backyard under a crabapple tree. I had a hard time with a difficult directee and was journaling about it. At a certain point, that seemed finished. There was a release and I put it down. Then came the most amazing silence that crept into my body first: a complete relaxation and complete presence to here and now. I saw, as if with fresh eyes, everything at a glance. I wonder if God felt like this after God finished creating everything? I looked up into the crabapple tree. I saw two bluejays picking up the peanuts my husband likes to put out for them. I watched two butterflies in their loopy erratic flight among the flowers. I saw the blue sky and raggedy clouds and was aware of the air stirring ever so slightly. And I was filled with this deep pool of silence. Everything was in its right place in the universe.

**It needs to be still and an almost mirror like surface?**

Yes, that would be receptivity, when you see the sky reflected in it. That is similar to what we were talking about earlier.

**You mentioned God and silence as being beyond space and time. Could you pick up on the sacred quality of silence? It may be obvious for you, but why is it sacred?**

Silence was there before the Word, before any of this stuff was created there was silence. At this point, it becomes terribly difficult to describe the ineffable, the incoherent. **You are being very coherent. Feel free to be silent at times while you look for the right example or expression.**

[Long silence] The image that comes to mind is that I wish to be clothed in silence and that silence flows through my blood. It is the quality of God that God imparts to us as creatures and it is how we share in God's being. When I think of God's name being "I am who I am," which is pure being, pure essence, silence carries that for me. When I participate in silence, I participate in God. As I said before, I'm not sure if this is Christian; there is a merging but still a differentiation. I am more wholly who I am in silence, and God is more wholly who God is.

**Silence comes to you as it does, and then poetry results?**

They come together. They are wedded. Silence is the place where that can happen. Silence is a very creative place. Silence was before the Word, and it is from silence that the Word emerged. That is God's creativity.

**People speak of levels of silence. Have you a sense of levels or a range of silence?**

It can happen in different ways. It can be there suddenly all at once, and that is when I have no sense of it coming on. And then other times I can sense it coming on, and it is a very exciting place to be. I know something is happening, but I'm not sure what. But then the silence comes. It kind of announces itself. I started writing the other day, not with you in mind, about silence. These are the outer realms of silence:

[Antoinette reads] "When we agree to enter into silence, (and it is an agreement you see. It is a consent too, I think.) we enter into a great cosmic conspiracy, a secret known only to those who dare to seek it, and then known not literally but only by way of sense-less sensing. We agree to leave behind the known, the tangible, the reasoned out and logical and enter into a hidden tangled path with mythical creatures residing in the underbrush with wary eyes, noses turned to the wind, ears alert, hushed breath.

In the early phases of this journey we come face to face with a great truth: there is no silence to be had in the world. The fridge hums; the furnace goes on and off; pipes speak; walls and floors creak, and even when miraculously all those sounds cease, there are trucks, and airplanes, sirens, and shouts coming in from outside. If and when we manage to centre down enough, that those outward sounds are no longer relevant, we find the inner conversation and activity, if anything, even more distracting. Yet, "There is nothing in creation so like God as stillness." (Meister Eckhart.) And I interpret silence here as both stillness and lack of activity.

Silence is spaciousness. Silence is outside of the space/time continuum. Silence is a place, a place we carry within ourselves, our God-place (I said ourselves, but I can't speak for everybody, only for myself). We can do nothing to accomplish silence. All we can do is be disposed towards it. Silence will ask your permission to explore like the sensitive fingers of a blind person on your face. We will need to allow silence to explore, to uncover, to expose the tangled undergrowth and the mythical creatures, and then to probe even deeper to the darkneses we know nothing about, where the Sacred awaits us."

So those are some of the outer circles. I see it definitely as circles, as spirals that are there before we enter in to that deep silence. It depends entirely on where our attention is. It may be possible to live with an awareness of that silence all the time, but I doubt it.

**If you have any other writings on silence, I would appreciate hearing them.**

I have some fleeting thoughts first. Silence is at the core of the universe. Silence is a place. It is God paying attention to and listening to God. It is worship, a place of worship. It is a sacred place. Silence is also at the core of some poetry. I detect it in many of my poems. I reviewed some of them this morning and realized while I was doing it that I was in that place. The silent place in the poetry was meeting that silent place in me and that together creates another silent place. So something third is born of that. It doesn't show its face, but it leaves an aroma.

Silence has something to do with being, being in the present moment. I talk about fullness and emptiness. Fullness of presence filled to the very edges, to full capacity of awareness and attention. That very fullness of attention is at the same time completely empty: nothing tangible; it just is. It's pure essence.

Silence is the name of God.

**Could you expand on the way the silence in poetry meets the silence in yourself and a third silence is created?**

Those silences are all participating in the same silence but they are differentiated. The silence in me is able to receive the silence in that poem which is now completely distinct from me, because once drawn out of me it is something else. So the silence in that poem is its own distinctive silence. It meets the silence in me. Together, when they meet they become something else.

**I have a stone that my daughter decorated for me when she was very young. It seems to me that when I look at it the stone has a silence about it. Within myself there is a silence that is awakened when I look at that stone. There is almost a third silence in the**

**relationship with the stone. There is a certain quality of the silence in that relationship with an object that is very difficult to express.**

I agree with you. When you talk about stone, I sense the quality as heaviness.

**Is there any art, or sculpture that draws forth a silent response?**

Art, sculpture, whatever that is that draws forth silence, for me has to have utter simplicity and economy of lines, and a lot of space in it. So in a room, which is an architectural type of art, the less that is in it the more appealing it is to me. Because the emptiness holds the silence, and space holds silence. If there is a lot of clutter I can't find it there and need to clear a space. Visual art is very active for me. I love the Impressionists' stuff, the sense of visual life, the color, the fuzzy edges. But it is very active. It doesn't create stillness in me. No, I don't think visual art does it for me.

Maybe some sculptures because the lines can do that, especially if they incorporate space within the sculpture. It is always the holes that I am attracted to, the doughnut holes, the things that allow one to see beyond. Beyond and through. Clay, to work it myself, is very crude. I can't do anything with it. The art form needs to be abstract, like for example music is an abstract art. It's here and its gone. You can't pin it down. Music is not what you put in your manuscript, that is not the music. The music only happens when it is played. And of course that is very tragic. You can't recapture what was played one second earlier because it is gone. Now a recording is different, yet when you are listening it is still true. Perhaps that is one reason that I can truly relax to music. It is something you can't hold on to. That makes me think of Mary in the garden with Jesus, and Jesus says "do not cling to me." "Don't hold tight." There is something so appealing about that. You can't hold on to it. This is what silence is all about for me. It is something so indescribable and here we are trying to describe it, and dancing around it. There is great joy in doing that. I love it. I love the play of language, and words, and music, but at the same time it is the total otherness of it that is so

appealing. As I said before, it is seductive. It is like a lover. It is like a love relationship. It is the place where I am loved.

**Would you read some of your poems?**

I was amazed when I looked through my portfolio that I was talking about this stuff twenty years ago. I'll just give you this first one called "Santa Barbara imagery." We lived in Santa Barbara for seven years. This was in 1975, so it is twenty one years ago.

#### Santa Barbara Imagery

The mystery of eucalyptus trees:  
 clustered together, enshrouded by fog  
 dripping down their leafy, spicy fronds---  
 and buttons  
 dried and blueish grey among the fallen leaves,  
 scrunchy under my feet;  
 tall, thin, and scraggly,  
 and easily uprooted by strong wind,  
 they lean close together as if for support,  
 bark peeling off in ribbons. . .

The mystery of fog:  
 heavy, impregnable,  
 pressing in on my world,  
 forcing it to a very compactness  
 of here and now and nowhere else.  
 Mountains ranging the length of my vision---  
 gone,  
 as if never there.  
 The stillness. . .  
 and sounds that disturb it like ripples on a pond.

Completely cut off from whatever lies beyond,  
 the fog forms a haven for me.  
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There is something about fog, and mist and cloud that do that. There is that silence in them. This next one is from 1978, and I called it "Peace." Very short.

Peace

Your peace  
that passeth all understanding  
came and dwelt within me,  
descended, and took possession of me:  
a drop of utter silence,  
eternal solace,  
that rippled upon my soul,  
embraced it,  
and stayed all day.

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[Antointte's poems have a visual quality; therefore, they will appear always on a single page. This will necessitate, at times, a long space in the text.]

This one is called "Silence."

Silence

My friend is troubled.  
 She is looking back  
 upon her life  
 and finding only  
 pain inflicted,  
 love neglected,  
 integrity compromised.

She has sought you  
 on her knees,,  
 wept for light, for help,  
 for the means to see a way through.  
 With heavy heart  
 but listening ears  
 she has heard only  
 silence.

If she could only see,  
 grasp,  
 that this silence is not just  
 any silence,  
 but your holy, hovering,  
 healing place  
 of consolation,  
 mercy,  
 and renewal.

Even your silence  
 is a blessed answer.  
 In its wordlessness  
 your presence expresses itself  
 to me, to her,  
 to all who would listen  
 with the heart.

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This one is a really goofy one. I call it "Psalm play." It starts with two quotes, the first line is from Ted Loder's poem "Guide me into an unclenched moment" and the second one is from "Psalm five." The first sentence is "Softened by the silence," and the sentence from the psalm is "I hold myself in readiness for you."

Psalm play

"Softened by the silence"  
 "I hold myself in readiness for you. . . "  
 softened readiness  
 silent softness  
 soft holding  
 silent readiness  
 silent holding of softness  
 soft readiness of silence  
 given in readiness  
 to God's softening movements  
 that cause different contours,  
 making rigid lines fluid,  
 creating conversion.  
 Thanks be to God  
 for softening silence.

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Another one untitled.

Silence

Silence, when it appears  
 comes:  
 an invitation to spaciousness,  
 a vast realm in which to roam;  
 limitless, boundless,  
 infinite in depth  
 At its center,  
 a point so fine it cannot be found  
 but only fallen into,  
 lies stillness  
 Stillness is silence purified,  
 distilled, concentrated  
 It lives  
 between the exhalation and the intake  
 of breath  
 Stillness: suspended within the abyss  
 of an eternal moment  
 where all is perfect Balance

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And this one is called "Stillness."

Stillness

The early fog  
    lilts and lifts  
    rolls and rises  
    in perfect silence.

The mountain stands  
    as morning sun  
    melts night's shadows  
    in perfect silence.

The grebe returns  
    strong feet paddling  
    sailing the watery surface  
    in perfect silence.

Sometimes silence gives birth to stillness  
    but stillness is present in another way.

The fog, the mountain, the grebe  
    are.  
Stillness lies at the heart of essence.

    When stillness finds me  
    eternity unfolds.

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This one doesn't have a name either. The visual aspect of some of my poetry is important.

Wordlessness

The grace of wordlessness  
 No need to name  
 or describe  
 or gain control of with the wit  
 Awareness only  
 present  
 to the subtlety of wind  
 to limber lengthy pines  
 elegantly bowing  
 The ineffable caress  
 of God the Lover  
 in the vastness of this moment  
 Deeper  
     Deeper  
         Dropping down  
           No more words  
           Just blessed boundlessness

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I was going to ask at some point what was the centre of silence for you, the core but I don't think I need to now. That's very valuable for me. A poem says it better than analysis.

A poem captures it yet leaves so much open, depending upon what the reader brings to it. That is what is so wonderful about poetry. I think. In fact it is a vehicle for the not said. I have another one on spaciousness which is also related. In the look of it I tried to create spaciousness by leaving spaces between the lines. Again it is very sparse. I like that. This sound a little bit like Gerard Manley Hopkins, if you know his wonderful poetry. It is untitled.

Spaciousness  
 graciousness of space  
 clarity of perspective  
 economy of lines  
 un-clutter  
 Silent surfaces  
 open  
 free  
 Inviting, hospitable:  
 celebrating possibility  
 of presence,  
 of listening  
 to the inscape,  
 the unfolding into  
 the expanse of  
 ah!  
 divinity  
 duskly dancing  
 brightly pearling  
 centered and pouring  
 through  
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That is so abstract that one needs to live with it for a while. But it is that same sense of silence. Silence is a centering quality. It's a grounding quality. Well, I feel really amused because it is absolutely wonderful to be able to talk about silence. [Laughter]. It is so incredibly special, and yet to whom can you talk about it?

**I just spent a few days in Saskatchewan with people who love stillness and silence. And a good question is "Why would you drive so many miles for something that is right in your own room?" Well because there is something rich when it's common, more so than in simply shutting your door. Although I certainly value shutting my door.**

I agree there is a richness. That is God's "more." And when you can share that, it's great. It reminds me of some of the Quaker meetings I have been at, and it wasn't silent enough. There seems to be some incredible mental activity going on there.

**I read someone who described Quakers as having an "ethical mysticism." The silence is meant for a struggle. The quiet is for battle especially when you struggle with a decision, "Should I do this or should I not? Am I called to a path of action or not?" It**

**is waiting not so much for silence but waiting for the Word to emerge from the silence. It is a prophetic word that emerges, not a silent word. I was reading a Quaker who made the insightful remark that a Quaker silence is different from a Trappist silence.**

When you talk about the activity that is involved, in that, I'm reminded so much of a phrase that Simone Weil used. She talks about muscular effort as something to be avoided at all costs. I don't understand that struggle. When we talk about being receptive, struggle is not part of that. It can't be. It is more like Mary saying, "Let it be with me according to your word." Which sounds really submissive, like "let me be a doormat," but I don't think so. **It is amazing how there are different silences, even within the same tradition. Quakers have a range of opinion within themselves about silence and how to respond to it.**

Yes.

**When you are in deep silence. Is there a sense of presence?**

Oh yes, it has substance. Absolutely.

**I think some people in some traditions could have a sense of silence without a presence. I've never experienced a silence without a presence. Because I'm Christian, I don't think I could experience that and seeking it would be some sort of intellectual game.**

Yes, I have never experienced the nothingness of silence. That is a silence that might frighten me.

**Does silence have a faith dimension?**

Just like everything does.

**Do you practice silence, spend periods of time in silence as a deliberate practice?**

Oh yeah, I do it all the time. I have to. I wouldn't want to do without it anymore. It's something that when I do miss it, everything is fragmented all over the place. That is my grounding. And I find that I start always with words, usually a reading. Often from a short meditation book. I wonder if you experience this, you read certain things and the silence is

already there? The silence in me meets the silence that is there creating that third silence we spoke about earlier, which at that point is a dropping into silence.

**I know what you mean. Sometimes I read Merton and I pick him up and read just a few lines and shut the book. That is as much as I need.**

Yes, it is almost too rich.

**Anything more would ruin it.**

Well, that is my practice. Sometimes I start with a Scripture reading, but I must say it depends entirely on where I am. There are many weeks and months where Scripture says absolutely nothing to me. And then there will be a time again when it does. But I incorporate Scripture in my daily discipline. It's just a habit. It is sort of tipping my hat to somebody. I need to do that. And sometimes it means something and sometimes it doesn't.

Silence used to be something I really worked at because I wanted it. I think the more you want it the more elusive it becomes. But now it just happens. Sometimes it is hard to emerge from it. Sometimes the twenty minutes just goes by and I am ready to move on. I end with vocal prayer. I mean inner vocal prayer. Most likely intercessory prayer, although my thoughts on intercessory prayer have changed a whole lot. It used to be "God do this" and "God do that," and all this manipulative pleading. Now it is holding that person before God and that's all. That's about it.

I also experience that in yoga. I try to do yoga a few times a week and there is that incredible sense of timelessness again. That is a listening to the body and listening to the spirit in the body and in every molecule and cell and muscle and nerve ending, and the blood, and so on. It's much more than physiological. It is very grounding. That silence brings stillness with it. Those are my two main spiritual practices, yoga and sitting. Church. I don't do Church anymore. I go once in a while, when I think, "Maybe there is something there." Usually it is just another corroboration of, "No, it isn't there." I co-pastor a vespers service on Tuesday nights, and I'm not sure why I'm doing it. There is silence there. We created a

space for it. It's so funny when you are facilitating something you can't enter into it yourself. You are so aware that people cannot hold this for more than eight or ten minutes, so I have to be ready to bring them out of this before they start getting agitated.

**If I have to read at a Eucharist, I get so preoccupied that immediately after the reading I would have a hard time knowing what it was about.**

Yet at the odd time I can recall a reading. At my mother's memorial service when I was asked to read from "Isaiah chapter 44" , I think. It speaks about passing through the fire and the water. I read that in front of a very small congregation including my family. And I remember being so present. But then again something else takes over. I am an instrument and I am present, but it is the not-me that is more-than-me.

**There are some rare times when I forget there are people there; I just cease to care and I'm reading just for myself. But for me that is very rare. I'm sure it has occurred but I can't think of a specific time.**

That self-consciousness is a terrible cross. But for me it is changing in the last couple of years. Depending upon the context, the smaller the group the better, the darker the room the better, but then, if the reading speaks to me and I love it and it is something that I can play with, then very often it will carry itself.

**What I'm finding as a result of this study is that I always knew I loved silence, but I never told anybody. Maybe my wife, but not directly in those words. We spoke about prayer, solitude, and so on. I'm finding this study freeing, "I'm a person who loves silence."**

Well, that is the problem. Why would you tell anyone about silence. And why would they listen if you really wish to be silent! [Laughter] Maybe you do need to be very intentional about it or you wont do it. Give yourself permission to enter into some of that freedom.

**I would hope that this study allows people to enter into it more freely. I think silence is more common than most people imagine.**

I think you're right, and you can bring people's attention to that. For most it is unnamed. So when you name it, there is an opportunity to enter into it more fully.

**You had mentioned some people as being noisy and not conducive to silence. What other things in daily life wreck silence? Does silence have enemies?**

I guess, for me, activity or someone's state of mind. Like when there is a lot of mind grinding going on, when there are agitated states of mind, it is very hard to get into silence. Although there is that possibility of non-attachment, of putting space between yourself and whatever is out there. That's possible, but it takes a lot of effort and is not easy. One's inner state can sometimes make it impossible to enter silence. Even there, I have to put an appendix on that because I think we can step away from that with God's grace and find some silence. It may not be the same kind, but there will be something there. I wish to say that silence is possible anywhere and everywhere, but I'm not sure that I've experienced that. We had a refrigerator motor that drove me bats because it was so noisy. So we had some guy work on it; it is much more quiet now, but we also have a very powerful and noisy furnace fan and in winter, when it comes on, I sometimes find that I can't hear the silence in myself. So there is this real quality of being able to hear silence both with the outer and with the inner ear. And sometimes the outer ear is very, very, connected to the inner ear.

Another thing that really disturbs silence is fear, the emotion or feeling or anticipation of fear. Fearfulness. That is something that is so scattering that to center into silence is almost impossible.

**I think we have covered the topic really well. Is there anything in the back of your mind about silence that you would like to add?**

No, I would like to say that it has been very meaningful for me to have your questions. I may not have thought about those things before. I really appreciate your sense of being able to give silence, to allow silence, so I could get more in touch with it. **That was good. It was good you raised that, because left to myself I would simply have gone on.**

I could hear the silence get into my voice at that point. For me this was the unexpected breaking in, and the first time I've simply had to go with it, the first time that, in the company of another, I could not by any effort of will resist the pull of God. This was a very vulnerable and exposed moment for me, a moment I'm still "savouring" (in the Ignatian sense), inviting it to speak about the MORE of God and the MORE of God-and-me. It was the most important part of the interview for me: the lived, right-now experience of God's Silence.

**More on that?**

I guess it was surprising to me this morning, how aware I became of it and feeling a sense of helplessness around that. "Wait a minute; I can't do this anymore." To try to focus on silence when silence itself takes over and is really part of that fog and mist coming in then the brain doesn't want to do this activity stuff anymore. It just wants to be silent. I can hear that in my voice when I'm speaking about those kind of things and the spirit seems to be moving, there is a hushed quality about it. When I think about it, it seems to speak to me of my own emptiness. I have a sense of again coming home to what is really me, the way I would like to be perceived and received. All the other things don't really matter. People can at those times receive it from me in ways that I am not aware of. Certain people are very drawn to that.

**When I hear silence in someone else, I would like to remain with that. If I could live like that, that is the way I wish to live. I want that quality.**

There is something very holy about it, both present and presence.

**This has been very rich.**

Thanks.

### **Edited transcript of interview with Fr. Thomas**

Background: Thomas is a priest and member of a Roman Catholic religious order for over thirty years. In recent years he has responded to a desire for a more contemplative life.

#### **What in your childhood shaped or contributed to your present sense of silence?**

My background may give you some sense of that. I'm a farm boy. Grew up on a Manitoba farm out in the country, the oldest of nine children. So growing up in the country one of the things for me, and I don't know if I was aware of it then but I certainly am aware of it now, is how much I loved country life. How much I loved the ambiance, the prairie earth, nature, the skies, the kinds of birds and animals that are home for me. So a part of my own love for quiet, for solitude (the two are parts of a piece for me) is the appreciation of the setting in which I live. I think that is a childhood thing. Whereas much, as at times, I even hated the farm, with the dust, and picking rocks and, you know, stacking bales, all that kind of stuff, like weeding the garden on a hot July summer day, I think that at another level of me there was a love for the earth and for nature.

And then being in a large family and a small house. We were a poor family. We didn't all have our own room with our own headset and that kind of stuff. We didn't even have electricity until grade 11, in 1963. Didn't have television until I left home in 1964. So there was no TV while I was growing up. I found myself, even as a little kid, looking to have my own space, looking to have a place where I could be alone and then enjoying that.

It sounds funny, but during the winter we had an outdoor toilet which we didn't use because it was too cold, so we used the indoor can. So I set up my office out there and it was really funny. I had my clipboard on the wall and I fixed up the seat, by covering over the

hole. I had my desk there. I would go out there and spend hours in the cold of winter all bundled up without knowing that this was my hermitage. Some of my love for a hermitage came from that little outdoor toilet. It was green and white, green roof and white walls. I remember in the Spring being so disappointed when I lost my little place. I had no place to go. I was looking for a place that I could just be with myself. Little things mattered, like being up in the barn loft in the summer time and loving that space, not even knowing that I was looking for solitude or silence.

We had a couple of granaries on the farm. They needed to be emptied by Spring and so I would move into one old granary and that is where I would spend my summer. As soon as I could in the Spring, if the grain had been hauled and it was empty, I would clean it all out, maybe whitewash the walls a little to make it cleaner. No windows, but there was a lid in the roof and you could take that off and put heavy plastic over it to let some light in. You know, I put a bed out there and a desk and that's where I would live.

### **You moved out there?**

I actually moved out there. It would be early enough in the year. I remember studying in May, June, for exams. That was really my spot, the granary. That was my place. I just loved living in the granary every summer. It was always a disappointment when Fall would come and I was evicted. There is something in that experience which is related to what I am doing today. I was always inviting people in to visit me, like the neighbor kids. I would get them in there and then I would want to get them out of there because I wanted my spot back. That's like it is today. I get my own little hermitage set up, or my own little house of prayer, but I want to invite everyone in. It's like Merton, the last two or three years of his life when he moved into the hermitage there, really craving solitude and genuine in that, but then always inviting more visitors than ever, and he would be hiding in the bush, waiting for everyone to leave so he could come back. I catch myself doing the same thing now. But that was there back in the granary and in grade seven and eight.

So there is a love for nature, being part of a large family, an extrovert, loving large happenings and yet on the other hand looking for a place where I could just be alone, just be me with myself. That goes back to childhood.

**Were there people in childhood who were models of silence?**

You know I never thought of that before, but Dad was like that. Dad was an outgoing person, but he would spend hours alone out on a tractor working outside. He was good with silence, much as he enjoyed company and all that, yet he was all too willing to stop any work just to sit down and have company. I suppose there was something there that might have formed or shaped me at that time. I guess seeing him off in the distance in a field on a tractor, hour after hour out there picking rocks or whatever. He would be one person in my younger years . I think of other examples. But I think Dad would be the main one.

**Can you think of significant experiences of silence, even from childhood but moving on from there as well, to people, places, books, things that inspired silence or affected you?**

Well, upon entering the seminary or novitiate in 1964, I heard of Thomas Merton and *The Seven Story Mountain* and was really drawn by that. I was seventeen then, and I remember, and it was a conscious thing in me, there was the fear that I might have a calling to a contemplative or a monastic way of life. When I went to novitiate, a couple of miles down the road was a Trappist monastery. First monastery I've ever seen in my life and I was it drawn to like a moth to a flame. Attracted, but I was afraid it would destroy me. I was fascinated and really intrigued by these monks. We would go over there from time to time and yet I was so afraid that I would have a calling to this way of life, to the silence that they were living, that I was just praying that God would spare me. In fact in my journals in novitiate it was clear, when I look back on them, that I was bargaining with God: "I will give in and be a member of an active order if you don't make me be a Trappist." It was a real fear and yet I was just drawn to silence. Fascinated by it, and yet afraid of it.

So there was something there in my novitiate that I was really struggling with. Then in the seminary years, prayer was communal in the morning, afternoon and at night, plus the liturgical stuff. I couldn't stand being in the chapel for these half hour times. There were just people all over. We were forty, fifty, sixty persons perhaps at any one time in that chapel in the heyday of the seminary years. I was always trying to get out of there and you weren't allowed to leave without permission. I was part of the instigation in getting that changed. "Why can't we pray where we want to pray?" "Why can't we pray in our room; or why can't we pray out on the road; or why can't we pray somewhere else instead of being in this room?" I felt surrounded. Without using the word, I think I was looking for more solitude and even looking for a deeper silence than was possible in a room of fifty or sixty people even if they were quiet. I was one of the agitators to get the right to pray wherever we wanted and the very first day it changed I was the very first out of chapel. I would go to my room or to one of the classrooms, which was real dark, and I felt like I had some space, some solitude, some silence, some real quiet there. I just needed to have that. So those would be things that, in those years, affected me.

After I was ordained, something I did for a lot of years, maybe seven or eight years, was to go to a summer camp on an island up north. I used to go up there in the Springtime before it opened and that is where I made my yearly retreat. I just could not handle going to the group thing at the retreat house where the order would gather for four days of retreat. It didn't do a thing for me at all, but to go up to the camp and not see another human being was good. I was just glad to sit in silence. That was a really key thing, to be on an island and to be in solitude and silence. People thought I was nuts. I was an outgoing person, an extrovert, "you have to be around people all the time, you have to be talking all the time and interacting all the time," they said. People could never understand what the heck I was doing up there.. They thought I was just crazy. But I knew then, I was twenty-five or twenty-six, that I needed silence. I was never prepared for the life we were leading. It was coming and going all the

time. It was a very active life. I snatched moments of silence here and there, but that one week of the year was my salvation.

**As someone who is very sociable and enjoys people, have you ever experienced silence in people? I don't mean shared silent prayer, but when you are with people in normal circumstances do you experience silence?**

In high school, I was in a boarding school with one hundred and forty guys. We had silent periods, as in novitiate and seminary. We often had all three meals in silence; someone may have been reading aloud at meals but there was no conversation. From 8:00 PM on grand silence began. So you were with large numbers of people with the usual interactions going on but it was study or dormitory or meals or work or whatever, and yet you were not in conversation. You snuck conversation often, and you confessed that [laughter]. Is that what you are getting at?

**In part, perhaps I'm reading into it but at times I can be with people, people that I like, but at the same time I can get a craving for silence that is almost a distraction from being present. It sometimes interferes with being present.**

It is a longing to be silent. I do experience that a lot now, and I'm trying to remember how much of that was present then. I don't know if the enforced silence back then was welcome or was an imposition on me, something that I really wanted to have. My "silence muscles" were developed over a long time. I don't know that they were that present in my younger years. It is in the last fifteen or sixteen years that I experience a strong need for silence. I can see that there was something there, but my own extroversion and outgoing personality, the kind that thrives so much on the energy of conversation and interaction, by and large took over. Yet for me there was always a sense of something missing, something that didn't connect. When there were natural times of silence, I certainly appreciated them. At that point, I was not free to create my own times other than if I chose a silent retreat over an interactive retreat.

**You mentioned a change fifteen or sixteen years ago. What happened then?**

I went on a sabbatical and that was a turning point for me. I came to identify and be aware, even become intentional about my silence. It was an excellent renewal program and I had a spiritual director who by any definition is a genuine mystic, a very fine woman. First few times I met her, I was totally turned off, but was drawn to her way. She brought forth in me this longing for silence and silent prayer. During that year I found myself looking for more and more ways to pray simply by being rather than getting prayers in, and saying things, and doing things. She really in that eight or nine months activated my "silence muscles." That was a turning point for me. She talked about houses of prayer and recommended visiting some. I did and, upon my return to work, got into retreat work. People found that strange, this outgoing personality in retreat work which has an aura of silence and so forth. They couldn't associate that with me. The turning point was my learning about a contemplative way of life. My spiritual director was just drawn to that. A lot of my silence was a result of this woman's mentoring.

**Was she a woman of silence?**

Very much. She lived in silence all the time. And even though she was interacting with you, she was very present to you and everything around her. A real artist type of person. But you just knew that she is living in this centre of silence, in this temple of silence. Honest to God. I got to know that in her and wanted that in myself, living in silence like that. She was one person who fostered that in me.

**What was there about her, her speech, or her mannerisms perhaps, that was the tip-off that would make you, apart from her speaking about silence, consider her a person of silence?**

Her eyes, you know, the way she looked at you. She looked right through you. It was unsettling at times. Such a presence in her, such a presence of being, that you knew you had her whole presence when she was with you. She was in touch with me. There was

something about her presence, that to me was it. She was in the temple of her being, in silence. I didn't think of it in those terms at the time. She was the first person I knew then who could sit in prayer and just be for prolonged periods. I knew she did that, because she told me. I visited her apartment and saw her room where she sat and prayed and that really affected me.

Also I had a priest-advisor in high school. He was an artist, became a recovering alcoholic and recovering drug addict in later years, but he had such a quiet presence. Again it comes back to presence. When I would be in his company, I felt good, unjudged, honored and with nothing to hide. I still hid things from him, but knew with him I didn't need to.

That is a key with this woman. There was no judgement there. The more I would try out, "well you don't know this about me," or "how about this," it didn't phase her at all. There was no judgement there. I felt safe with both this priest and this woman. They were people whom I knew sat in silence. There was something unrushed about their being, present, unjudging, that got me going more than practicing prayer. They created a longing in me. I wanted depth and I felt so superficial. I was amazed that people didn't see it. My words were shallow. They could be in their room alone and I wanted what they had.

**What other things in that sabbatical year deepened your need and love for silence?**

Learning ways of prayer, centering prayers, symbols, use of incense, candles. I know that can become a bit gamish, but there is something about taking care to create a setting. The importance of symbol, chant, and silence all became clear during that year. The openness to other ways of spirituality, Buddhists for example, the Hebrew and Hasidic ways, and so forth. I began to be exposed to different ways of fostering prayer that expanded completely what prayer was for me. A lot of it kept coming back to the prayer of quiet or the prayer of the heart, the prayer of silence. That seemed to be the web that held all of these different forms together. Just sit and be and you don't have to do anything. I felt more and

more a longing for a life of prayer. All of that was happening during that sabbatical year. I was in a beautiful setting with people from around the world.

Also I began a relationship with a woman on that program that has continued for all of these years. This has contributed to my sense of silence although on the surface there is no link. I was determined when I went to this program not to get involved in any such relationships. I was ordained nine years and leading a very active life and didn't need any complicating relationship. This relationship was not simply falling in love, but there was a sense of "being" in love, a quality of being that I continue to experience. It was a key way to come to know what it means to be in love with God. For so much of my life, I tried to divide my relationship with God as a priest and a celibate and with women into a balancing act. I now see them as the same relationship. I could not know my longing to be in God and God's longing to be in me except through a deep personal relationship with this woman. At the core of all of that is silence. It's a mix between community and solitude; a mix between the engagement of relationship and silence. Over the last sixteen years, one feeds the other. Ironically, this relationship has done a lot to foster my love of silence. She doesn't really understand my way of life and its seeming uselessness. Nevertheless, this relationship created in me a longing for God, and silence is at the core of it.

**Let me see if I can summarize it. Your relationship with her deepened your sense of love and at the same time created a need for greater silence.**

It has to do with authenticity, and integrity, and a need to spend time with the great unknown one, the absent one, the invisible, the dark one, God. Most of my experience with God as an adult is with the God of absence, not the God of overwhelming presence. I cannot avoid silence. No, I do avoid it a lot; I mean that I can't do it well. I'm not in my own being. It has to do with encountering God, the absent God of the dark. It is all part of this deep silent appreciation of being in love.

**If you had to assign your sense of silence an image or a metaphor, what would it be?**

No one image would cover it. Silence is like being embraced, like being held by arms. That is something that I have thought about before. In the setting here with the hillsides wrapped around us, it is like that. An image of silence is arms that hold. Sometimes the arms are very warm and soothing, the image meshes with a sense of peace and of being loved. But sometimes the arms are there, but it is dark and empty. Arms that embrace an emptiness. Silence is being held by someone, but sometimes it feels that I only experience my own profound emptiness. Empty. Empty.

Another is like being in a pool of heated water, like in a mineral water bath. You can float in it with your nose sticking out. But you are all covered and hear no sound at all. Just water all around. Being held, almost like a womb setting.

Silence is a sense of going down, down, down, like in a Jell-O, but it is not sticky or messy, just going down but supported, deeper and deeper into layers like a sponge, maybe more like a sponge than Jell-O. Being held all around by that silence.

Or it is like being on a crazy ride, like a waterslide going around and around through the dark and turning and twisting. Silence sometimes is terrifying, dark and turning and you don't know where you will come out. You don't know where it is going, twisting and turning. Tumultuous. You get carried along and can't get off it. It is very tormenting at times. Darkness and strong feelings suddenly arise. I can feel an almost ripping feeling around my chest area, being worked over. I wouldn't want to say which is the more prevalent one, being embraced or the wild ride.

**When you speak of levels of sinking down in that Jell-O, is it possible to say what those are?**

It is a physical feeling of dropping. Not every time I sit in silence, but frequently, my breathing slows right down, followed by a sense of settling in as it becomes darker and darker. Yet at moments there are brilliant lights, a sense of brightness. In some sense more and more soundless and yet there are sounds that you hear that you normally don't hear. At

times I worry "where is this going?" It is not like this all the time. I wouldn't want you to think that. By and large the experience of silence for me is a sense of becoming more alert, much more alive. The so-called distractions, emotional and psychological reactions, are more vivid.

**Are there things that trigger silence, like walking about, seeing certain things?**

Birds flying over works every time. The sight of a deer looking at me, eyeball to eyeball, the sense of smell of a Spring day stops me and centres me. Almost a mantra. I love to look at horizons, especially far horizons. I can walk a trail a hundred times and yet the horizon never appears the same. The perspective, the infinite horizon does it for me. So in nature there is something, just the feel of the earth, you know you are grounded.

**Do you have any possessions, any objects that kick off silence?**

No I don't. Typically when I sit, I light a candle. To sit in front of the Blessed Sacrament is special for me. It is meaningful for me. I wouldn't want to pray for a long time away from the Blessed Sacrament. Incense sometimes help. I look to create a space without going too much into method. I like to use a cushion, and say to myself deliberately "this is my time." A lot of times nothing happens, but when I am going to have a sitting I like to say "this is my space, my place, I will light this candle, I'll sit before the sacrament." So there are some props.

**If you had to pick some times when silence was most significant for you what would they be?**

Well one that comes to mind is a few years ago when I was really sorting through whether or not I was going to go on with pursuing a contemplative way of life and I was in a retreat house on Holy Saturday morning. I started by looking at the gospel for the vigil that night. There was a line in there with the young men speaking to the women coming into the tomb looking for Jesus, " You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is not here." That line just hit me. It was several hours later when I realized it was still Saturday

and the rest of the day was going on around me, but I was simply not aware for several hours. That just hit me to the core. I could not leave that line.

I was totally silent in the sense that the moment was one of great presence, so alive and yet so oblivious of anything around me. That was a really profound moment in my life that helped to turn me around. I just knew then in that time, that is who I am. I am looking for Jesus of Nazareth who is crucified. He is not here. It was profound to know this is who I was, especially in the last few years of my life. The defining characteristic for me is that I am looking for Jesus of Nazareth. I had never known myself that way before. That was intense silence and yet inner stuff was happening.

I've had moments of deep tender love with the woman I mentioned. Moments of intense loving and being loved. Those have been silent, deeply silent. Also sitting with my Dad in the hospital before he died. He was in the hospital for months. The last day was a Sunday. I had a very busy weekend of work and meetings. I got to the hospital and my Mom had just left. We had no idea that he would die so soon. I sat with him that afternoon and it was so deeply, deeply quiet in that room. I didn't hear a sound. I'm sure there were lots of sounds, but it was a beautiful moment for me. I got the phone call the next morning that he had just died. It was very silent at that moment.

**That reminds of a similar experience at my Dad's death. I had never thought of that linked to silence.**

Yes. The word "safe" keeps coming to mind. It has been part of my vocabulary for the last couple of years. A sense of well-being. It doesn't mean that I have it made, nothing like that. But it is OK, a sense of being safe, being at home. I associate that a lot with silence. Even in the tumultuous kinds of silence, in the painful stuff, there is a non-judgementalism in the silence. One of the main connecting threads is not being judged. All will be well, all manner of things shall be well. It is okay as I am, as I am, as I am. A certain kind of well being, a certain kind of blessing. A feeling of being blessed. Not that it is there

every time. But that is what keeps me going back. I know that in that being, I am blessed, unjudged and I can't survive without it. My words are so much straw. No juice there, so shallow, so embarrassing. I can't do without it. The more I have, the more I have to have. Like a little bit doesn't do. You don't fill up on silence. The more you have, the more emptiness there is, the more emptiness I long for. Strange, silence begets silence.

**How do you link God and silence or do you?**

It's everything to do with this "I am one looking for Jesus of Nazareth," with being in love, with the profound conviction of my life that Christ Jesus is with me. In Paul's Second Corinthians at the end of it, "Do you not acknowledge that Christ Jesus is in you?" The sense of the indwelling Trinity, has been a long conviction, that goes way back before the sabbatical. It was deepened during the sabbatical. To have the peace that goes with this, I need some time in silence. It happens a lot for me in liturgy, in work. That sense of the Trinity being among us is there. That sense of indwelling is in the ordinary day to day events, but it needs silent time.

**Is silence a means to be with God or is silence the end, that which you are seeking in and of itself?**

Both. I value silence for its own sake. At time it is burdensome, but partially it is a means as well. That which most creates solitude for me. It is a way for integrity, for presence, for authenticity, for a way to know in my own being that I have deliberately placed myself in God's presence without trying to get in the way by thinking about this or that, or remembering this. I was there, and, if you weren't God, that is your issue. I was there, and I tried to be in your presence. At least I was there.

**Is silence sacramental for you?**

Yeah. It is. Effective sign, effective, reproducing, not always, so much is emptiness. But in the core of the emptiness is a sense of God, as active presence, as healer, God as anointer, God as unconditional lover, God as transforming, God working me over, God

moulding me, shaping me. God present and God active at the very core, at the very pin-prick core, tiny, tiny core, is an image of sacramental presence for me. Yeah. Part of sacramental presence for me is the sense of "This is my beloved Son." Part of it is the conviction, the deep down intuition, gut conviction that "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." That to me is found in silence. I slip out of the awareness of that, in a gut sense of that, without silence. It is not a great feeling, or tangible, it is primarily emptiness, but I know that I know, that I know that "This is my beloved Son." I know that more deeply, more persistently, more fully in silence than in any other sacrament.

**Of your religious practices, of which there are many, (such as being with people celebrating Eucharist, anointing, vocal prayer and Scripture,) if you had to let things go, where would silence come in on the list to be let go?**

The last one. Yeah. Especially if I could have silence in front of the Blessed Sacrament. I would let the rest go as much as I love them. I love liturgy. I'm even half decent at it, I think. I love liturgical prayer with people, the creativity and so forth. The last thing I would let go is silent sitting. I wouldn't even call it prayer.

**How far back would you have said that, five years ago, ten years?**

Not as far back at ten. No. Around 1990, six years. In 1990 I spent some months in an extended retreat. I felt burnt out, and it seemed good to get away. That triggered what has been the most recent phase of my life. I thought about a job change, about a more contemplative life. I first began to see this way of life as maybe a calling from God. I don't want to make it into too inflated a thing, but it was suggested to me by a competent spiritual director that I may need that. I intended to do a lot of praying and spiritual reading, John of the Cross and all. I hardly touched that stuff. I got into Bradshaw and family of origin stuff, and this dysfunctional stuff. I couldn't believe it. I never got into hard-core spirituality at all. I never have actually. So I was dealing with family issues, control issues, shame issues, manipulation issues in my life. All kinds of stuff that cracked open my deceit. It was in that

context I decided to go back for a longer stay on a part-time, working on an off campus basis. I came to see that "I was looking for Jesus of Nazareth," and came to realize that I cannot live without silence. Silence would be the last thing I would give up.

It had begun way back, but came to a clear focus during these recent years. The idea of a house of prayer goes way back to a 1982 directed retreat in which I imagined while walking in a park that I was taking people away to an island for a retreat. Remember that camp on the island I used to go to? Well, I wanted to take people on a contemplative experience there and see what it would be like. I planned this out, but it was too complicated. So I decided to do it in a retreat house. This is actually a repeat of that theme about going to a hermitage and then bringing everyone with you, and that whole pattern. I never got to that camp; it is still sitting there. But in that was the beginning of wanting to lead a contemplative life, with as much silence and solitude as possible. The seed for it all goes back to that walk in the park in 1982. I gradually came to see that I couldn't live without silence. More specifically though it is during the last six years that I have known this most clearly.

### **What is your practice of silence?**

I like to take a couple of hours a day, simply sitting. I can easily manage for an hour and the majority of the days I can get the second full hour in. It is mostly attention to breathing, the breath between the nostrils and lips, and that is my focus. I take a little bit of time to gear down and sit and be and watch my breath. I also practice a bit of concentration by being aware of my body beginning at the top of the head and going down slowly through the whole body. To do that usually takes about a good half hour or forty five minutes. That would be my main way of silence. The body awareness was taught to me by a Buddhist nun. I still use from time to time a mantra, the centring prayer I began way back. But less and less do I use that now. More and more I simply follow my breathing or simply be there. When I am aware of a need to, I go back to a simple awareness of my breath. I try to do that twice a

day and then be together for community prayer and Eucharist, with its twenty minutes of silence. Those would be my sitting times.

**When you are in silence like that (apart from day dreams, etc.), how do you know when you are really in silence? Is there a sense of change, sometimes I am there, but sometimes I am really there. Can you say anything about that?**

Most of the time it is just intending to be there, just be faithful to the practice. Much of the time I find it really long. The longer that I sit, the more difficult I find sitting to be. What makes it easier is that I cannot resist. More and more I just have to do that type of thing. The actual practice of sitting is becoming more difficult. There is a difference at times. Sometimes the time just goes. There is a moment of contemplation. But mostly it is just being there and coming back to the word, or the breath. Sometimes I wander off and plan homilies or whatever. I get "brilliant" insights that I think I just have to write down. Most of the time, however, is spent just sitting there and being there. I don't find it all that pleasant; I'm glad when it is over, but then I can't wait till the next time. It's crazy.

**Are there things that cause you to lose silence? Are there things you avoid for that reason, things that shatter silence?**

Well, I don't know if it shatters it, but certainly a lessening of silence. You know if there is too much trivia in my life. I kind of know within myself when I've overdone it, when I've pigged out. It might have to do with spending too much time watching television. Did you really need four videos, wouldn't two have done? Or something like that. A drink of scotch would be fine, but were four absolutely crucial to your life existence? It is a kind of dullness that comes from that. It may be too much reading of the newspaper. Do you have to have that many different accounts of the same thing? Do you have to read all these papers. There is, you know, a kind of shallowness there, kind of a trivia. Every now and then that is what I have to do I suppose in order to realize that it does lessen my silence.

Another thing though is my reluctance to go back to my journal. I don't know. I don't know what it is. I come up with all kinds of excuses. It is an avoidance. I say "I don't have anything to say. I don't have to write every day." But I know when I am avoiding that damn journal and what it represents. I think it has to do with honesty. I think it has to do with going beyond ordinary quiet and going to another kind of depth. I think there is a real connection between my time with this journal, and my time sitting before the Blessed Sacrament. If I avoid one, I avoid the other. If I avoid the journal, I avoid the silence and vice versa. It has something to do with indepth stuff, with facing one's being as it is today, not yesterday. It has to do with facing with my false self, with the self that I mistake for my true self. Somehow when I don't come to terms with that, when I'm living with some deceit, when I'm under some illusion, that buggers silence. I really want to avoid silence then.

**Final remarks?**

Silence is not just found in sitting time, but in the everyday doing of one's work. Silence has more to do with an attitude, working with some presence, doing one thing at a time. I'm not great at that so I'm not saying how it should be done, but I know when I talk about silence it is also about doing one thing at a time as much as possible. Even being here now, just do this for now. Trying to be a little more single-minded. One thing at a time. I still want to be alive, to be a passionate human being, but silence is about doing things more deliberately, more consciously, the ordinary things. The sitting part in chapel, in a sense, is the easy part, that is the breather, the vacation time, sit back and relax as long as those times seem to be. Silence is about how we do things, about the presence I bring to this moment right now.

**In your life right now, how much silence can you take? Is there a limit?**

I think there is. For me the limit, I don't understand it all, but I get unbalanced and unhinged and obsessed with certain issues with too much silence. There has got to be some relationships and interaction. If I spend too much time alone, and as much as I long for a

time of no distractions and no one around, I know that it is good for me, but if that continues too long something gets unbalanced and is not healthy for me. A certain point comes where it is not healthy. I need to come out of myself, not to get too closed in. A kind of negative energy happens, something gets out of whack, gets skewed.

**Have you ever written about silence?**

No. I never have.

**Any other thoughts?**

No, I think were finished.

### **Edited transcript of interview with Father Martin**

Background: Father Martin has been a Roman Catholic monk in North Dakota since 1947. For the last twenty-four years he has lived a life of increasing solitude.

**Could you tell me about your background and anything that may have contributed to your appreciation of silence?**

I grew up in the shadow of this abbey and always felt rather attracted to silence, and as an adolescent that attraction continued. I came here as a novice in 1946 and went through the regular routine of induction, vows, and seminary studies at our mother house. I was ordained and came back and taught. No, pardon me, before I came back I went to University to get a Masters in History, because they needed a prof. Coming back here to teach was a full program. While I was teaching, this is primarily during the immediate pre- and post-Vatican II periods, I began to realize that just changing rules and regulations was really not making much of an impact on people.

I had been thoroughly entranced by the Council itself and was eagerly promoting all the latest documents that were coming out and the progressive discussions about what the Church had to be in the twentieth century. It seemed to me that it really wasn't catching on.

When I thought to myself, my initial attraction to monastic life was actually to the prayerful part of the monastic life and once one got into it, particularly in our context here, there was simply more activity than contemplative passivity or inaction.

The urge grew to kind of withdraw for quote "deeper prayer." And that is what I have been doing. That was in 1972. I moved from the abbey to the hermitage in the bush. Until 1992, I was also teaching a college History class because there was no one here to do it. I kind of used that as a lever to get out to the bush. "I will, if you desire, continue to teach the one University course." I had been doing that since I went out to the bush, except for the last couple of years when I retired. So my solitary life has actually been semi- solitary. And even now I come over every morning for the Eucharist. I wouldn't want to celebrate any other way, because I think the Eucharist has to be celebrated in community. In the sense of being a solitary, I think I am kind of a contrived one. But it has been a great grace for me. I'm pleased with the opportunity I have.

**In looking back at your childhood, was there anyone in your life who contributed to your sense of silence?**

Well my father was very quiet. And the whole family is somewhat introverted in a reasonably wholesome sense. So I was never raring to go, or wanting to be in everything. There was probably a natural desire for a quieter existence. I fit in here as well as the next monk, and there were a million things to do all day long. We had a boarding school, here, and that takes a lot of time. We have been an active community from the very beginning. I think the original founder had dreams of a contemplative community. Well coming up to a new settlement, where monks were also supposed to function as pastors, wasn't really contemplative. The monastery here was always busy taking on functions that perhaps were not specifically monastic, but there was no else doing them. The monastery picked up the slack. I think younger people coming in now observe this activism, and I think they are looking for something deeper. I don't think any of them want to become solitaries, but I do

think they want a somewhat more withdrawn life. I don't think it is escapism; it could be sometimes. Today, society generally tends to look upon the solitary as an escapist. There is so much emphasis upon being active, actively promoting the gospel, working for social justice, and defending the rights of the down-trodden. They, of course, are as essential to evangelism as anything else, but I do think there is an obligation on the part of a monastic community to emphasize the inner life and, unless we have that, the activism on the surface is not going to be that productive or will build up the Kingdom of whoever rather than the Reign of God.

**Do you do anything special in your day to nurture silence?**

The twice daily stabilizing points in the solitude are two silent prayer mediations. I have one in the morning directly after the Eucharist and one before my evening meal. I look upon those as the two anchor points.

**I don't wish to pry into that but what do you do?**

Nothing.

**Nothing. Do you do nothing systematically?**

You're talking about the prayer periods?

Yes.

[Laughter] I do more than that. Yeah, it's silence. You know the centring prayer. It is not something we picked up from the Orient. This is our own tradition which, to a large extent, we lost and are perhaps now regaining. You are familiar with John Main and that whole development?

Yes.

Are you familiar with John Cassian?

**Only as a reference in other's works, I have read very little directly.**

John Main when he went to his guru in India realized that what the guru was telling him was what we had inherited from the Desert Fathers, from John Cassian in the fifth

century, about a hundred years before Benedict's time. This Palestinian monk had gone down to Egypt to find out " How do these men pray always as Paul in Thessalonians says we should?" So his conferences are very interesting. You should read them for your own delight, other than the practical information about silence. They were using a verse of scripture to keep them focused.

We didn't even realize here that the verse with which we began the office in chapel, in Latin in my day, was the verse which the Egyptian monks told Cassian to use. Benedict picked it up and it is in the Rule. That whole tradition has been obscured by the need to get out there and do something. So that is the practice. If you need to recite the mantra, you recite it. I don't use the Cassian mantra. It's too long.

John Main talks about the mantra as being a harmonic. He insisted that it be done constantly during the meditation. It acts as a harmonic. I was happy to find that out in his writings because I think that is precisely what it does. And the harmonic is an interesting, but hazy notion. The harmonic gets in touch with a rhythm that is basic to reality. It's something that is sounding deep within the system, the human system, because what is sounding there is identical to what is pulsing through the whole of reality. It is very interesting that the experts on the leading edge of physics and other sciences are coming to this same conclusion. They talk now about the web of reality. There is only one whole of reality. We are all parts of that whole. There is a kind of pulse of life in that one reality. What the mantra does is consciously join you to that harmonic that is already beating within you. The Hindu or Buddhist emphasis on the breath, well, that is part of that process of pulsation. What you are doing really is simply being conscious, and this it seems to me is the basic mystical experience, being conscious of the unity of all reality.

Now when you read in books about people who have had this type of illuminatory experience, they will talk of it in terms of seeing a leaf on a tree and realizing that is themselves. There is no difference between them and the leaf on the tree. That sort of thing,

the recognition, the awareness without any rational or intellectual analysis. There don't have to be lights flashing and archangels descending. It is just an awareness of wholeness.

**I heard a fellow in an RCIA group, a father of small children, say that when he was out bird hunting and standing in a field he saw a squirrel in a tree near him. The way he put it was, "Things were right. He was where he should be and the squirrel was where it should be and things were right."**

We get so taken up with the kind of fantastic visions we read about in say Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross and we think that this is the touchstone of the mystical experience. Well, it may have been for them, but it is not necessarily universal. Joan of Arc, for instance, I always wondered about that. I knew nothing about this until I taught Shaw's St. Joan. His preface is always more important than the drama. He wondered about these voices that come to St. Joan. Are they real? Does she imagine them? Is she hallucinating? How do they come? Well, she hears St. Margaret and St. someone or the other. There are two of them, that tell her what to do. Well, why those two? Because they are the patron saints in the local Church.

So you have an experience according to your circumstances. God accommodates the vision to the individual. So your friend who experienced the rightness of that instant is experiencing the kind of peace and wholeness that ought to prevail consciously as well as unconsciously.

**When you pray you use an mantra?**

To begin.

**And then you simply sit in silence. The kind of silence you come to is the same silence that comes to you as you are walking?**

Oh yeah. Yeah. In fact it will come when one is sleeping too [Laughter].

**Could you expand on that one? That's unique.**

I've awoken and realized that I was praying the mantra.

**Oh!**

An interesting sensation. I kind of sense the rhythm coursing through. It is not so much the experience of that, which is important. It seems to me, I'm growing aware more and more of the importance of reverence. Perhaps a touchstone of one's immersion in the mystery of reality. A sense of reverence. What would happen to society if society became reverent? Now we say we are losing our grasp of being a caring society. We are no longer a caring society. What do they say, "we are a society of greedy individualists who suffer from alienation"? Merton was already saying that back in the '60's. Imagine what effect a spirit of reverence would have.

It was interesting for me because, again, to really become ourselves, we have to be in touch with our roots, and as a monastic, I have to be in touch with my monastic Benedictine roots. One of the primary emphases is reverence for God and the presence of God and reverence for that presence in each other. Benedict goes so far as to say that the tools of the monastery should be treated with the reverence accorded to the vessels used at the sacred altar.

In terms of the results of coming to silence. I don't know how deep it is. The real proof of it, and probably the justification of it, is that spirit of reverence. If we aren't growing in that, then, I think, it is probably some sort of delusion. That sort of reverence for the Other already involves a type of silence. Does it not? Lets say a married couple is truly in love, they sit together in silence. They don't need to chat, to ask each other "how are you?" They don't need to tell each other how much they love one another. They are, as your friend said, "just right."

**With a real friend, even if I see them just once a year, the conversation just picks up where it left off, as if there was no interruption.**

That is so opposite, isn't it, to what we are accustomed to. There has to be constant noise. Younger people coming into the monastery, after they have been here for awhile, I

don't know how they can still listen to the kind of music that is part of their upbringing. To me it is just so chaotic.

**I have two children still at home, and of course, that is their music, and I have to live with it. I find it very painful to put it mildly.**

I can understand that because that is their context. But when they come here and are in another context, that they can still want that, or need it, I find incomprehensible. I'll never forget one time coming back from Good Friday services. The young monk in the car had to turn on the radio and it was that kind of racket. The older you get the harder it is to be patient with that kind of disposition.

**Have there been moments of intense silence in your life?**

Most of it comes during those two prayer periods. I experience some of the same when I am working in the garden. Hoeing doesn't require a great degree of intense concentration and I sense it then. Often it's because I have been using the mantra to keep my attention.

**Sometimes when I walk in the woods I have to concentrate when I first get there, to let go of baggage as it were, and then I settle in a bit and walk about and so on. Then I become aware of a kind of a will to be quiet. After awhile I become aware of the silence that is there. Then are moments when not only is it there and I can recognize it, but it comes forward and almost surrounds me. Not only was I observing it but it had surrounded me. There seems to be levels of silence and there is nothing I can do to control it.**

Thank God you can't.

**Why do you say that?**

Well, if you did, you would manipulate it.

**Yes, I sure would.**

That's why I am a little dubious about the West importing Eastern meditation techniques. We've found now that some of these gurus are using them with business executives to enable them to concentrate more purposively on that bottom line. Well, I'm sure that is not what the Buddha had in mind.

**Compassion was the purpose, if there was one.**

I think what you experienced was being possessed by the greater reality. Each one of us is perhaps a microcosm of that reality and then you find yourself immersed in the macrocosm of that reality, the bigger aspect of it. There are human techniques, disciplines you can use to create a sense, a feeling. They can be used to good purpose, but I think when you realize you are being immersed in something greater than yourself, then you are probably getting a lot closer to the very source of silence.

T. S. Eliot in the "Four Quartets" talks about the still point of the dance. It is always contradictory isn't it. When truth is experienced it has to be paradoxical or it isn't truth. I think Eliot has caught that. It wasn't a unique discovery of his. Julian of Norwich talks about the ground of being, and Eliot quotes her in a number of lines in the "Four Quartets," conscious of that whole tradition. The still point, I suppose you could say, is the origin of the great blast.

**At the beginning you mean. Stillness and silence which is somehow still rolling out?**

Exactly. This harmonic action is what you are experiencing, the music of the spheres. Scientists tell us you can still detect the impulses in space of the original blast. I sometimes wonder if that isn't the type of pulsation that is somehow ongoing and will be ongoing. When we finally come to the point of returning from whence we've come originally, we'll be in the centre of the dynamo. Well not in the centre of it, we will be it.

I came across an interesting note I had jotted down in my Jerusalem Bible. I use the scripture scheme that is used here in the monastic office. I think it is the third chapter of Ephesians about being grounded and built and measured into Christ. I had jotted down a

quote there from Thomas Merton from "The Inner Experience." An elaboration of it is that my inner self is God's "I am" in me. God is verb not noun. God is action not some static thing, being, or static non-thing. God is verb, the still point of the dance. I was always interested in theology in the seminary. They were talking about the Trinity. They use a Greek term "perichoresis." It's like a dance of vitality within the Trinity. The Trinity is this perichoresis, this dance of inter-relationship, of inter-penetration. It has always stayed in my consciousness. That is what life is all about, and that is what life will be ultimately. It doesn't do any good to write books on that. What is important is to realize this is the reality to which we are called, and which we may now experience at least in some slight form, if we are disciplined to receive it.

**Besides those two prayer periods do you have any other disciplines to maintain that rhythm or sense during the day?**

I have my regular vocal prayer periods which are in harmony with the monastic liturgy. I have my own form of it, privately.

**Silence seems to me to be almost sacramental, as near as I could get to God. The silence mediates God. Does that ring a bell?**

Yes.

**Is there anything closer?**

If one is still conscious of a kind of concrete sacramental form, then I suppose one is still in the world of objects; do you think? I wonder if a person is not called beyond that. We do need to be concrete. I wouldn't want to be without the daily celebration of the Eucharist, but I think ultimately we are called into something that goes farther than that. And I think when we are ready we will experience it. Are you familiar with Bernadette Roberts?

No.

A former Carmelite. She left Carmel and then I think she married and has raised a family and has either returned to Carmel or at least is living a kind of Carmelite life. She has

written a number of books on no-self and the experience of no-self. She says everything can go except the Eucharist, and I'm not sure she says this but perhaps even that has to go in terms of one's letting go of all the different kinds of physical or even intellectual frameworks and structures within which we feel we have to operate.

It seems to me that as long as we are within some of those structures we haven't let go yet. We're still clinging to framework. Difficult. I think there are three of her books out now. *The Experience of No-Self* was quite a breakthrough, I think, and it is difficult to grasp what she is putting into words. She says she went through (I corresponded with her) the whole mystical tradition of Christianity and the mystical texts of the East and she discovered that the one who was closest to what she experienced was Meister Eckhart. Do you know any German?

No.

I don't either. Matthew Fox has translated some of Eckhart's stuff and says his whole doctrine can be summed up in three German words that Eckhart used: *Abgescheidenheit*, *Gelassenheit*, and *Durchbruch*. Words that have a certain ring to them. *Abgescheidenheit* - let go, you must let go of everything. *Gelassenheit*, not literally but you can paraphrase it as "Let God," or "Let be." and then you will experience *Durchbruch*. Isn't that a nice word, "*Durchbruch*" ?

**I'm not sure if I'd want it.**

You have to be German to pronounce that or Scottish with a lot of guttural quality. "Breakthrough," if you let go and let God, then you have a breakthrough. That means all the lumber, all the institutional framework falls off. Then you are naked before God. **Sometimes when silence is at its best for me, I feel perfectly natural. This is simply the way that I am without anything special whatever. It is no big deal.**

That is the humorous aspect of it. That is why when the oriental mystic has his breakthrough, he bursts out in laughter. Enlightenment comes with a guffaw. Because everything just falls into place, it is so natural.

**When you pray you come to a sense of silence and during your day you have that sense. I was asking is there anything that functions for you as a richer sacrament, if we can speak like that, than silence?**

Nothing that seems striking to me. Perhaps just a sense of well-being.

**Does the expression "levels of silence" make sense?**

Yes, I smiled to myself when I saw your topic "deep silence." It is like subjecting what is beyond categories to categories to satisfy human investigation. I suppose there are degrees of immersion in God. Take one literal example, Dante's *Divine Comedy*; There are circles and the closer you get to the centre the more radiant the whole scene is. So I suppose there are degrees of immersion in the mystery of God and the call to experience that mystery. I think I'll need another twenty years.

**Do you have a sense of individuals embodying silence? Have you known people like that and can you put your finger on what there was unique about them?**

I think of two men, both gone now, from right here, this house. It seemed to me that both of them had arrived at a kind of interior peace. They both worked hard and when they were hardest at work they were the most quiet. They were never loud. They both had a good sense of humor. It had nothing to do with being morose or silent, as if their brain was empty. There was a kind of composure in both of them that was just naturally attractive. Although I think some people may have described it as dull.

Those two come to mind immediately. They had an influence on me. One of them was my novice master and the other one was my predecessor on the paper. They had a quiet dignity about them. It was attractive. Some of that has to do with personal discipline. Both men were highly disciplined men. Not that they tended to be robotic or automatons. They

had a self possession; in a sense they didn't need other people to be whole themselves. They weren't dependent. They had a wholeness within themselves in which they were rooted. They didn't need entertainment. Not that they couldn't respond to it. There was a wholeness about each of them in themselves that was attractive.

I think that comes from living out of one's own deep inner self. Catherine of Sienna is quoted by John Main as saying: "My me is God." "My me is God." Who I am at my core is God. Now think of that as an incentive to reverence. Mainly reverence for oneself. If you don't have it for yourself, you certainly won't have it for other people.

In the seminary I never heard of Carl Gustaf Jung. We heard of Sigmund Freud because we were told to avoid him; keep your distance from him, a bad influence. Never heard of Jung. It was only much, much later that I fell in love with Jung. Jung says (not on the basis of any religious creed but on the basis of his clinical experience of over half a century as a psychologist), the human psyche is stamped with the image of God. He was scorned by his fellow professionals for such a silly romantic notion. If you want to read something that will nourish you at the very centre of your being, read Jung's *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. It is kind of his autobiography.

**Are there any passages of Scripture or anyone else's writings that have a quality that bring you to silence?**

Merton's own text on solitude, that is kind of basic. I first came across David Steindl-Rast's writings and found them very nourishing. One gets the sense it is coming out of deep silence. It has that atmosphere, although he is a very active man. The last thing I read by him was his dialogue with Roshi Robert Aitken, an American Zen master in *The Ground We Share*. Brother David is active in terms of dialoguing with contemporary society. Very interesting man. He is a professional psychiatrist, or psychologist from the University of Vienna.

**He has been around for a long time. I heard of him thirty years ago.**

Oh yes, he must be in his seventies. I was thinking of Main, too, as a stabilizer in terms of silence.

It is pretty basic. Not just in Scripture in that psalm that is always quoted, "Be still and know that I am God." It seems basic. There is no praise that is not grounded in silence. Praise is the external manifestation of silence. It goes back pretty far this concern to practice the presence of God by concentrating on the inner self. I think it's found also when one reads Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross, not when you read his commentary but when you stay with the poem itself. The response, it seems to me, has to come from one's interior because there is such a tangible presence of the passion of love there that words would absolutely ruin.

**The translation in New Directions Press is lovely and you get some sense of that, but the commentary almost tries to take it back.**

Isn't that almost the normal result of verbalizing what is beyond verbal expression? As soon as you start expanding on this you practically ruin it, you destroy it. But nonetheless, the human mind demands expression. You would have to read even the poem in its original Spanish. I ran across a little quote recently in a contemporary article on John of the Cross for his anniversary a few years ago. The University of Salamanca, where he studied, gave him an honorary degree, the Doctor of Letters [Laughter].

**He virtually created the language.**

They recognized him as the greatest Spanish poet of all time. To respond to that poem you would have to learn Spanish. This boggles my mind, to study literature you read about these men in nineteenth century England, who to study Dante, would become proficient in Italian so they could read *The Divine Comedy* in the original.

**Are there any metaphors or images that describe silence at its deepest or stillest?**

A word comes to mind rather than an image. The word is awe. An immensity of wonder. Although there is a scriptural image in Revelations; I'm not sure exactly what this

means, but when they open the seventh seal in, I think, chapter eight there is a half hour of silence in heaven. This keeps coming to my mind. The seal is opened and for a half hour there is silence in heaven. That often springs to mind, "silence in heaven." I suppose the awe with which one can gaze at a really beautiful rainbow might say something about silence. The rainbow registers the total harmony of colors. You have again a wholeness that is experienced. I think I felt a bit of awe when I finally saw the recent comet. I had been watching for it night after night. I gave up. One night I went outside the house and it was absolutely stunning, absolutely stunning. All I could say was "My God." Perhaps there are instances, and the more fleeting perhaps the better, that give rise to the awesome and they are perhaps correlative of silence.

**It seems tied to perception. When I can leave my worries aside and just see things with clarity, and just let them be and admire them, I can't do that without silence. There is silence in the simple recognition of something.**

That sounds reasonable.

**Otto has silence as a sign of the numinous.**

It would also be related to the terms "*tremendum*" and "*fascinum*," tremendous and fascinating, mesmerising. Mircea Eliade develops those two aspects of the holy tremendous, magnificent. I suppose deep silence is another manifestation of "*tremendum et fascinum*." I think Eliade posits these of the ultimate reality, the holy. Also, now that I think of it, the *shekinah* the presence of the holy in the Hebrew Scriptures, the presence of the glory within the temple, the glory that possessed the Ark. I think that would be the same thing Eliade is talking about.

**A similar sense resides in the prohibition against images, God is beyond words.**

Well the Holy of Holies was empty, in silence.

**The same point was made in having so many titles for the divine. You could keep piling on titles and you never really described it.**

Yeah. Perhaps this is news for you, it was news for me. You've heard the title *El Shaddai* for God. The footnotes in the JB will tell you way back in Genesis or Exodus, this is the mountain God. The same word for mountain in Hebrew or Aramaic is breast. This is the profound nature of terminology, all of these associations. Maternal, and paternal love is the origin of all reality. Its impulse is maternal. Creation is an impulse of love, the breasts of God. In public it can get a bit embarrassing. At Laetare Sunday, the third Sunday in Lent, the opening antiphonal was about that. Rejoice, and it goes on to speak about being nourished at the breasts of Jerusalem. When these things are recited publicly you wonder what is going on in the popular mind. You think of the Song of Songs, the physical imagery for love and ultimately for God. The human connections that this set up are perfectly normal. Maybe our Victorian inheritance has made us squeamish about these roots.

**Are there silences for you that are disturbing?**

No, never. People have told me who have detected the demonic on the edge of silence, and it is has frightened them out of their wits. No, I perhaps haven't gotten deep enough [Laughter]. My silence hasn't gotten to the point where the devil would even bother [Laughter].

**I don't think that is the problem.**

Although, I went once on a visit to a meditation centre. You used a golden orb for meditation. You focused on the golden orb for half an hour and, on occasion, for an hour. It's astounding what comes out of that orb. My imaginative reaction to that, (you're not allowed to think) got off on a bad start because I was kind of intellectualizing this whole thing and it took a while to cut that out, "Just gaze at the orb."

After I caught on how to approach this exercise, I almost always visualized a journey, a road, going down to a valley and up through forests. It didn't alter much; it stayed with that image. Later on though, what I did see coming out of that orb were three reindeer heads one on top of the other. Well when my director got that write-up he was quite ecstatic, because

deer, of course, is the symbolic presence of Christ, the deer of God. Far more impressive to me, however, was a classic image of beauty that came out of that orb, a female head. I couldn't think of a better illustration of the phrase "classic beauty."

After that, I visited relatives in Chicago and on the bus was the image. Astoundingly beautiful! The classic beauty that is absolutely chaste. It just is incredible. If I had seen that woman prior to seeing the image from the orb, there would be a dependency there, but this was after. This is a kind of an incentive to go for the absolute, not in terms of spurning the merely human with all its flaws and unchaste connections. Go for the absolute because that is what mirrors the inner self. [I think classic beauty is the perfection of what is a material or physical illustration of the perfection that exists immaterially.] On the other hand, to keep things on a natural basis, a recurring image from that orb was a baby sitting on the floor and looking most forlorn.

**Was the baby yourself?**

The Jungian implication is the inner child, this eternal youth locked up inside ourselves on which we are patterned in a sense [Laughter]. I guess my eternal youth was feeling kind of lost. No it wasn't the eternal youth that was lost. It was my recognition of it or welcoming of it or developing of it that was in question.

**I was at a workshop once that asked to choose from a pile of color slides one that depicted our state. I chose one that pictured a sandy, deserted beach with a grand piano and a bench. My interpretation was that I was to go into life, the water, and get a sense of it and then come up and play it. But I was not guaranteed that anyone had the remotest interest in hearing me play. In some way that is still what I'm doing. At the time I felt a sadness about it.**

In a way, it is very encouraging.

**The fact that there is no one there?**

Yes. You can express this out of yourself without dependency upon something around you. We have the inner resources. We don't have to be dependent. Again that is not meant to promote isolation or individualism. We have all the resources within. That passage from Ephesians, I referred to, ends, " If we are rooted and ground and built on Christ there is infinite power within." St. John says that too, " We will do greater things than he has done because the Spirit is within."

**It reminded me of what you said before about those two monks from here who were people who had their own resources. You mentioned before, and I don't wish to pry into that and we can simply pass on that as I have some things that I don't share with people, you mentioned two prayer periods of deep silence. Are you at freedom to talk about those or would you sooner not?**

I don't know that I can say much more about it other than what I have said. It is an experience of wholeness. As you said, things are right. It is a kind of affirmation that makes one feel just happy to be. I suppose it is an expression of having touched the centre. One realizes there is a solid core within that one can be rooted and grounded in. For a six, that is important.

**Enneagram?**

Yes, everything we experience is modified by who we are. I find the enneagram very helpful. Not in terms of being able to pigeon hole either myself or anyone else. What the enneagram has discovered about human nature is pretty sound. Very helpful to people who wants to come to grips with themselves. For a six to experience affirmation is important.

**In doing a theology paper on silence, I read Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Have you read that book?**

No.

**It describes how as a fifteen year old he was taken to Auschwitz. It is a most disturbing book.**

I've run across references to it very often.

**It is disturbing also because I have seen him interviewed on television and have read other things by him and about him and he is a very holy person. Yet the book systematically destroys images of God. It reduces me to a silence that is kind of an intellectual silence because all my religious symbols are gone. Wiesel, hasn't abandoned faith in God, he simply doesn't know how to speak of God in any way that makes sense.**

I can understand that. We speak so glibly about what is beyond human phrasing. I suppose really all of our terminology and our imagery has to be smashed. Isn't that the problem with the failure of Vatican II? We Christians read the Hebrew Scriptures and wonder about the chosen people, and we read the gospels and wonder about the Pharisees, and yet we are as rigid, static and legalistic as the system that Jesus came to free. How can one say that without sounding as if you are undermining people's faith in the current state of the Church? Under John Paul II we seem to be almost in a state of restoration. That great breakthrough that undermined clerical control, everything that J. Helder Camara set up has been undone, apparently with the blessing of John Paul II. How can one adjust to that? It is going on almost everywhere. As a person, I can become kind of pessimistic and cynical. But I do think that what is happening now is only going to be a greater incentive for the new spring that is to come. We really weren't ready for Vatican II. Merton was really ironic, "Oh, Vatican II means that now we have Corn Flakes for breakfast?" There is an awful lot of framework, terminology, and ritual that have to go. And being human we will create it all over again. Have you read *A Canticle for Leibowitz*?

No.

The last issue of *Commonweal* had an article on it. I have meant to read that book a half a lifetime ago. Well, when I read the essay by John Garvey, I determined to read it. It is set in the future, the fourth millennium, and describes exactly this problem. How after being wiped out in a nuclear attack, the same structures get reestablished.

**Have you ever written about silence?**

No.

**I think we are finished. Can you think of anything to add?**

No, seems pretty thorough. I wonder what advantage this is to you in your work.

**Well, in the first part of my research I wrote as best I could what silence was to me, my experience of silence. In the second part I researched what the experts on silence had to say about it: Max Picard, the Quakers and the Desert Fathers. This third part involves talking to people who can be described as lovers of silence and trying to understand just what silence is for them. The final task is to put it all together in such a way that it might of value in either confirming people's experience or in part evoking a fuller sense of silence for people who have some limited experience with it. I really love silence, and don't know how I would live without it. I would like to be able in some limited way to describe silence, make some simple distinctions, in order to help silence be more recognizable.**

I don't mean to belittle the effort at all. It just seems to me that there is something just a bit contradictory about vocalizing silence.

**Yes there is. It is absurd.**

I'm perfectly in accord in what you say about encouraging silence. Why fear it when you are coming to experience the depth of your own being? That should be an ennobling thing. But let me ask you, briefly off the top. Can you think of one thing for instance that has been of value in listening to me?

**I've only done two interviews so far. Yours is a very intellectual sense of silence. The thought that is most unique or that remains with me right off the top is the sense of the rhythm of life, that beat, that central beat and coming in tune with that, in harmony with that, naturalness of that, loss of self in that. The freedom of that.**

It is something you already knew, isn't it. I'm saying what I felt, but it is actually what is already in the book isn't it?

**One thing that you said is very different. Sleep, that you would come from a sleep realizing you had been in touch with that basic rhythm, I never heard that before.**

I must admit that when I first experienced that, I felt triumphant [Laughter]. Something is actually happening. I'm getting somewhere. It's funny how one immediately makes this into an ego-trip. No, it doesn't have to be that. Again it is an encouragement. "Sonny, keep trying!"

**I find that I need encouragement, some recognition.**

We aren't isolated individuals, but members of a body, and that is profoundly true as well as being practically true.

**What you said about negative silence surprised me. I assumed an experience of negative silence was widespread, almost universal. That is different. Again I assume that, I don't really know. Maybe it is more the norm than the exception.**

Maybe that does come when one reaches a greater degree of silence where you are on the very edge of the divine and is that not where the greatest effort would be made on the part of the demonic to prevent this meshing? Perhaps there's a caution there for people to remain "incarnational" in their spirituality, remaining close to the humanity of Christ who embraced the cross for humanity's well being.

**That book, *Night*, shakes me. It gives me a sense of a deeply negative silence. Yet, I think in some way the writer is on the other side of that recounting that. So I understand silence as in some way sacramental and I understand your sense of silence as something to move toward. That is a first reaction.**

**We're done I think.**

Good.

### **Edited transcript of interview with Diane**

Background: Diane is a married mother of two grown children. She is a spiritual director and painter, and resides near a Catholic monastery in North Dakota.

#### **What in your background contributed to your present sense of silence?**

I was a child raised with eleven children. I wasn't raised in a religious home. It was a very strange upbringing. My father at one time had been a superintendent of Sunday Schools and for some reason, that we never did learn, he kicked that all over. He violently disliked any missionaries, and I was raised away up north by the border. There were lots of missionaries up there. We had my father on the one hand who really knew his Bible and would have nothing to do with it. We also had what we called traveling preachers. They could be anything from a Baptist to a Methodist. At the time I was an Methodist. My mother was, I realize now, a mystic. When I got a bit older and got to know her, she would say the most incredible things to me that really helped me become what I am becoming. There was no real religion, however.

As a child, I was in the sanatorium for many years and they said I would never get out. That was it. I was in a single room because they thought I would die within the year. My mother was very faithful about writing. She always told me that some day I would know why that happened to me. I thought those were just comfort words. Of course it took me awhile, maybe fifteen or twenty years, to realize it was a setting of the stage. Even then as a child I felt different than the rest of my family. I would go out among the trees. I always wanted to be alone. I thought I was odd. My family thought I was odd, though they were very kind to me. Then I got out of the sanatorium, finally. It was almost a miracle.

I had several very powerful experiences, we would say religious or spiritual experiences. One is when I was five years old. I was afraid of getting in trouble for being

late and while I was running home I came to know that God would protect me. I didn't get into trouble. I knew I wouldn't. That was my first powerful experience and it never left me.

But over the years I wanted to live, wanted a social life, wanted a career, so I let it drag. Every so often, I would be caught up short; there would be something that would remind me. The second experience was when I was an adult and driving into Calgary. I was by myself and had decided to leave my marriage and take the children. I was reflecting on the passage where St. Paul talks about the marriage of souls. I was reflecting and feeling very sad and thought if that is possible then why can't I make this marriage work.

At any rate, the car began to shake and I thought, "Oh boy, I must be ill." I had been working very hard helping someone. So I pulled the car over to the side of the road. I didn't really feel sick. The car was sort of vibrating and I felt very tingly. It was in September. It was a beautiful, beautiful day. I started up the car again and hadn't gone very far and it began again, but this time the steering wheel began to vibrate and I looked out the window and it was a beautiful scene. Everything, for the first time, I saw in 3-D. The greens were green, and the blues were blue. It was as though I had stepped into a world that I had never really seen before. It was so incredibly beautiful. I had this strange sense inside of me of light and joy and still I thought to myself, "There is something wrong with you." I stopped the car and looked around. It was so wonderful and it slowly subsided. I started the car again and the third time it happened was so strong. I remember thinking, "I am quite sure that if I said to this car 'I want to be home now,' I could be home." But by this time the whole car was vibrating. It was filled with light. There was an extreme, intense joy in me. I would say it was ecstasy. The outside world was brilliant. I suddenly said out loud, which sounded very foolish to me, "It is the Lord." It was like something exploded.

Then I knew that everything was going to be okay. That was the beginning. That experience lasted for two or three days. I went home to my husband, who was a school principal. I went to his school. I'll never forget it. He said, "What has happened to you." I

explained as little as possible. He said, "Well I can see something has happened." He went into the city that night and he bought me a rose, which is something he never did. He said there was an elderly woman on the street selling roses. He bought me this rose because of what had happened to me, even though he couldn't understand it. It was a very beautiful thing for him to do. Eventually I left and came here to very difficult and trying circumstances.

That was the beginning of realizing that there was a reality that I didn't even begin to comprehend. It was from that time on that I was forced to be quiet. First of all, I think I was drawn to be quiet. We have to be quiet. Then I realized I was drawn into solitude. The children were in school all day, and so I learned about solitude. Very difficult. Great wrestling. Great agony. Terrible things happened to me. Our house was hit by lightning. It was the monks who really sustained me, especially the Abbot. All this time I had a sense of the "Other." It was okay; all these terrible things were going on, still there was this Other that kept calling me, comforting me, and being with me. It really sustained me, and I began to experience a calling. I would sit and meditate for long periods of time; then meditation became dry and meaningless. I worried that something was wrong.

What really helped me then was that there was never a time that I didn't get a book put into my hands. I was Protestant, but the Sisters were absolutely wonderful to me. I discovered Julian of Norwich. She has been my mainstay all these years, her and the book of *Wisdom*. Something began to really shift in me. I began to realize that silence was inside of me. The silence changed. It manifested, if can I use that word; it became a tangible thing. So that many days, I would never turn on the radio. I would never go out and do a lot of visiting.

This silence is a very interesting thing. I became quiet, still. There was always that word still, "be quiet and still." I used to want to run. I just can't do it. Then one day, I was out in the kitchen being very quiet and thinking, "You know I just can't do this." It was just

as though a voice spoke to me and said "Don't run." I've never forgotten this. I knew then that we have to stand and face it. Stand fast. I think that when you go into those type of silences that we must be prepared to face the enemy. We don't like to use that kind of language anymore, but that's the truth of it.

I remember the day that I had a manifestation of silence. I made a pot of tea. I had been doing something as ordinary as ironing. Then I got out my cup and I went to pour the tea in my cup, and it was as though something surrounded me. There was an absolute silence and stillness, and I knew that slight act was the totality of all that was. That was the moment, the sacrament of the now. It was very fleeting, but you don't forget it.

One night there was an explosion as the transformer on the electric pole by my house blew up. The whole thing had blown right off the pole. The superintendent of the electric company came and said in twenty-five years he had never seen anything like it. There was a strange sense of darkness. I prayed to God that everything was okay and I didn't have to put a lot of money into repairs. They told me everything electrical would be ruined. I said to one of the monks, "This is really too much. Every summer we get hit two or three times by lightning, and these strange things happening in the house and now this. It is time to go," I said. He looked at me very quietly and said, "Now is the time that you should stay." That supported me in a way that said that you are not being silly or imagining things. That kind of support really sustained me. It was after that period that I really began to experience silence.

The more I experienced silence, the more I experienced a sense of reality. A sense of reality that is not holier-than-thou and is not religious. It is just the reality that He is so present. He is so present. One of the interesting things that happened to me over the last nine years in this silent thing is the flow of energy that I begin to sense. I only have one lung, so I am not a powerful person. But this energy I realized is a kind of life-source energy. I really began to feel it very, very strongly, not all the time. Even when I was sick, I would

experience silence. I felt it in my body like a sensation of movement of life. That took me into more silence.

So many days when I don't have to see anyone, I spend in absolute silence. First of all, I'm very quiet. My husband likes music and all this, so as soon as he goes, I turn everything off and become very still, very quiet, and it's like setting the stage for the Other to show himself in the totality of silence, deep silence. When that happens, it is so profound that there are no words. Yet, I can still go about doing quiet things. At times, I have to stop whatever I am doing, and I just stand there. We live out of that place all the time. Then it got where I didn't want to leave here. I feared that, if I went away, I'd lose it.

It was very difficult. I have seven members of my family who have had cancer. My brothers and sister and father and mother. This is why I make trips out to Boston. It was at first so difficult, all that noise and big planes. But life goes on. Right? I would have to find places to go where I could be quiet. But through the years now when I go out to Boston, wherever we go, it is with us, because it is within us, the Holy Spirit, always there. What we have to do then is find places of quiet and stillness so that we can fully experience the silence. Silence to me is quite different; it is a fullness of quiet. Deep silence is a totality of silence, stillness, presence and being.

**Is that type of deep silence, that is distinct from quiet, only apparent in recent years or were there seeds of that in childhood?**

I don't know. When I look back I think it was there and it is for everyone. But it is not easy. You have to be determined. It is not that we are unique, yet in a sense we are. I can remember (as you get older you can remember more) being very small and going out and speaking to the trees. I was a very lonely child, even with all those members of my family. The loneliness was this thing inside me. I recognize that is what it was, and the older we get the more lonely we become. We recognize our aloneness and it is part of that yearning to know.

It is like an itch to know this thing within me, this great yearning. What is it? As a child, you don't know what we want to be embraced by. You can have a thousand people embrace you and still feel sterile, even though you are comforted by that embrace and even loved. But I wanted this Other. It was like it got its hold on me when I was little. My mother was very superstitious. But I wonder now about superstitions. I've been reading Celtic spirituality and I think it is something in our souls. It doesn't let us go. You either enter it or you don't.

I was very fortunate to have those experiences that kept urging me: "Are you going to pay attention or not?" I wanted to be a singer. My friend had a band. I loved it. Can you imagine anything more noisy? But silence never let me go. Life of the party, but I always had a sense of watching, of observing myself. I had some very gray personal things happen with my children, one that will never change that can never be taken away. If I hadn't had the support of God and this silent reality, I'm quite sure I wouldn't have lived. I'm very serious about that. Even now, I think I can't sustain this kind of sorrow. We will be sustained because the reality will always sustain us. And I think that is what we need to do in our world. We have to learn to speak of this universal reality, of silence as a nurturing thing, as an absolute necessity for health and well-being, physically, mentally and spiritually.

We don't live in that deep silence; that is impossible. We live in silence and I know that is always within us. I'm quite convinced of that. Then when that grace comes, it is like a gift, that deep profound silence catches us. It is almost like an embrace. I think we live out of deep silence more than we know!

**When you speak of that deep silence, that real stillness, the silence that comes to you when you are doing dishes or walking, is that different from the silence that comes to you in prayer?**

There are levels of silence. For instance I can say to my family, "Okay that's enough, let's be still." Then there is this thing of being "quiet." We have to go into another room to

be quiet. So we do set it up at times and use the words differently. We can give up thinking about things and this becomes very still. We can give up the engagement of thinking and silence comes to us. I can experience that all the time. If someone asks me what I had been thinking about I would say "I don't know." I would only know it is a movement, an engagement. I can experience that out in the street.

And so silence comes to us. I have experienced it. If I have been working outside. I experience it. I find, too, that when it comes it is like a fog coming in. It comes silent and still, really still and quiet. I'll tell you how it actually happens with me. I'll see something, I'll be very still and quiet and practice my sense of silence. Then I'll look at something and think that is so beautiful and I always try to recognize God in it. That mist comes closer and closer. Finally, I'll find that I'm totally within that silence and it becomes so strong that I don't remember thinking or praying. I'm just there hushed.

But it is more than that, it is as though I'm having not a discussion but an engagement. There is such an Other. Yet I can't say that I saw God today! There he was, but you realize that you have been in the presence of the Other, And yet it is not so holy and sacred that we have to run off to a kneeling position, because if silence is the reality that is the way we should be living all the time.

**When you say that reality . . . go ahead.**

You told me that you were really drawn to silence, that is an indication that you should pay attention, which you obviously have been doing. So you obviously have been drawn to it and you will be drawn more and more into that, willingly or not so willingly, but you are being drawn into it. What I think happens to us and what is really happening is that you are entering that whole area of reality, absolute reality. So is washing the dishes, doing ordinary things and entering some very ugly or painful situations, reality. So there is that reality and there is the greater reality of Creator, of one who is in charge. There is someone who is in charge here. There really is. So powerful that it sustains us. That is reality.

**Is there anything that mediates God's presence to you better than silence? Is silence the way for you? Is there anything for you more fundamental or powerful in mediating the reality of God?**

That's really interesting because I find now that I recognize that reality in many different ways. Here, now, this is real, this is reality as we experience our discussion. Or someone comes and discusses their problems with me and that is real, or I go shopping and I can find it there too. Most of the time, I find it when I am doing things alone. It's the aloneness, always that aloneness. But no, I hope that I can show that in other ways, but for me personally if I go out to the hill I find a great stillness and silence in that little valley. It is like the womb of God and I realized there were some places that were better for me physically. It is very still and God can reach me more easily if I go to an area that I find particularly still. Very still, then he can reach me. It's like if you and I were out in a coffee shop having this interview, we couldn't do it as readily. But here you can reach me and I can reach you more easily. Yet, I can recall several sessions in noisy coffee shops in which I did finally experience that silent reality.

**What has been the actual or special places of silence for you?**

Strangely enough, it used to be in a place where I could be alone. Then it was always outside. Here, now, in this house. I have wrestled enough with it that the silence is here. When I come home, the silence welcomes me. But I have to be alone, now. Being alone is very, very important to me. Other than that, the valley is my favorite. I sit there. He is there. There are certain places.

**Are there people of silence, people who when you look back recognize them as people of silence?**

Yes, I think so. I think that even now people I am drawn to are people who like to talk, but are basically quiet people. As I got to know Martin over the years, although when we get together we talk and share a lot, and discern. Martin's life has been an incredible

example to me of fidelity in silence. So he is one. The previous Abbot very much so. Very, very silent man. He likes to visit, but very silent.

When I was a child, strangely enough, there used to be two Sisters who would visit near our home and I was very drawn to them. Fearful of them but very drawn, because they were so quiet. I used to hear the click of their large rosaries and, being Protestant, found it fascinating.

We are just scratching the surface of silence and stillness. I suppose the end result will be when we die, and we are received back into what? I am sure it will be silence. Maybe then we will be embraced in total reality.

There are days still when things get very busy seeing people and all. I still go up to the hill or down to the valley and there are no words. I walk and sit and I know if I wait it comes, an all embracing silence, no words, no thoughts, no speech.

**Does that kind of deep silence come and go as it will or can you retain it?**

I used to try to retain it. I think perhaps you can retain it a little while. But I think I have learned to let it come and then not hang on to it, to let it go. I could be here all morning and I would be painting and I will be very conscious of the silence, very conscious. But, you know, I think you have to practice that presence of God. I continue to do that. This sounds really trite but it is so real that if I do something and it turns out well I will always say, "That's nice God, isn't it?" I have been doing that over the years and so the reality becomes more and more real. When I do that, then I feel that the silence is becoming open to it. It becomes heavier. Words are difficult. But that mist is thicker. I put my brush down and look at what I've done and I'll look out the window and try to listen. Silence, for me, is connected to listening. I can't say what I am listening for, just listening to the silence. It surely has something to say to us, especially deep silence. That is the stance I try to take, listening. I have learned something. I may not know what it means. It is an intuitive knowledge.

**When you speak of listening, you mention quiet, stillness, silence and deep silence. How are they related? Do you experience something different as they deepen?**

You can hear silence. First of all, I say, for example, "Let's be still, stop our actions." Then I say, "Let's be quiet, still our bodies." Can you sense the change? On the one hand it is not listening, but it is listening because you realize that you are doing that, that it must be silence. When you watch the robins in the Spring and they cock their heads, I always say, "They are listening for worms." I sometimes feel that way. But I am listening for what? There is going to be speech within the silence and I think there is. But it is not speech that we would recognize. There is knowledge there and if you spend enough years listening, you will be taught. You don't have to go to school for this.

I've noticed that people who are very quiet stand a certain way. People who really like silence, like a friend who became an anchorite, have a particular way of standing. Very interesting. Lady Julian, in sketches they have done of her, always has that characteristic stance. They stand like the robins on the lawn. There is that kind of listening. What are they listening for? I found myself doing the same thing, which is rather amusing. We recognize that God has called us in or whatever. I've noticed that Martin, in the chapel when he gives his homilies, has that way of listening. Silence affects our stance. Our physical bearing is affected by it. We relax in it and it shows. I can recognize silence in a person's face, the great stillness behind it.

**You mentioned earlier fog or mist as images of silence. Are there other images of silence?**

Like the mist and the robin? To me, one of the best would be to draw a picture of silence. It would be early morning and down in the valley the sun would be just coming up slanting through the trees. I'm walking into it and it comes to meet me. There are times now when I do that. This happened to me in the Fall. It was a very foggy day. I knew that it would happen to me. I walked into the valley through the fog. It was so still it was

incredible. It was full of mystery, dark and still. I knew that, if I walked further, I would be right into that realm of silence as though silence personified had set up a dwelling there. And I did. Suddenly my inner speech was cut off, and I was speechless. I didn't say anything more. You are left with a yearning that you want to express in word and action. It is not possible and you just have to let it go and just be there. It is very strengthening. You can come out of that and feel very lonely because you have left something. It is very motivating in a way because it gives you life. You can go about your tasks and realize that you have regained your own silence. You go around people and don't do a lot of chattering losing your focus.

I would like to share that silence, but no matter how hard I try I cannot. You want the other person to know this silence and that is not possible. That is loneliness. As much as you love a person, you will not be able to merge with them as you can with the "Other." I have done that, I've taken someone with me. But what they see they see, what they feel they feel. I can only hope they will experience some of the silence. That is the best I can wish for them, but I no longer say, "Did you notice this or that?" I don't do that, because it is like trying to give them my sense of God. But it is always interesting, I've found, when I have tried to take someone and share, that later they will share with you and often say the very same things that you are experiencing. Unique, but the same. They will say, "I can't really say what happened to me."

**You mentioned the robin. There is something about birds that set off silence. Are there things that trigger silence for you?**

Oh yes, birds. They have that kind of effect on me. When I see the wild goose fly, Oh I just want to be. There is that great yearning, that reaching out. I can remember a very stressful incident in my life. I was very upset and was running through the snow. I just had to get to where I was going as fast as I could. It was a matter of life or death. I thought I would not be able to go much further because I couldn't breathe. Just then I heard this sound.

I looked over and saw a whole flock of cedar wax wings, the rosy breasted ones flying over my head. It was the most incredible experience. I stopped still and looked up and I felt a great flood come over me. I said "Oh, God." I really felt God had touched me. I was caught in the most absolute silence. There was nothing, no sound, except the sound of these birds, and I knew everything would be okay. Yes, birds. That is a personal thing. But yes.

The other thing that happens to you is that God is in everything, even the little stones. If you pick up a stone and carry it around with you, you begin to feel a certain life in that stone. So everything effects you. Go among the trees. That is another thing that helps me a great deal. I will go out to my little forest and put my bare hand on the bark of the tree and then I try to be very still. I still tell some of my people who come here to do that, especially if they are very anxious or unsettled, ungrounded. Find a tree; put your hand on the tree and don't think of anything except the bark on that tree. Feel the tree and its roots. That is very helpful in practicing stillness, quiet and groundedness. So that is helpful. Even if I feel tired and restless, I go to the valley and walk and look for a little trickle of water. The trees are very important. That is part of that whole Celtic spirituality.

**In winter, sometimes the top of a weed will stick up above the snow all by itself. I don't know why, but somehow those singular things can silence me.**

Those are important to pay attention to. Someone might meditate on that. I don't anymore. I might find a word that strikes me and I'll carry that with me all day. I'll be working quietly and I find now that I honor the guest when it comes by paying attention to it. I work a great deal in the yard now, in the summer, and I plant flowers. I planted this garden in memory of people who had died. That was a beautiful experience. Just the sky and the birds and it was very still and I actually experienced deep silence doing that. It is sometimes sudden. It happens when we are unaware of it. We are digging a hole in the ground, putting in this plant, dialoguing a bit with God and suddenly we become more quiet and recognize this engagement and become very still and perhaps have to stop digging the hole to honor

that coming. Well, maybe it is not so much of a coming, but honoring our recognition of its presence and the reality of it.

It's so sad you know. People and society are in such a mess, but we can't help people. We can't use the word God. I've had people tell me, "That is all bullshit." So, they won't accept that. But they will say there is something about being silent, or talking about nature, or what is happening to them. I always try to talk about the goodness that they have inside. If they can be really quiet and recognize their own self-worth, that's good, even if they don't want to use the word goodness. Many people do not know how to be quiet. They say to me, "How do you stand this?" It is a fearful thing, and indeed it is at times. But I wouldn't trade it.

Symbols are hard. The light of a candle is very good for silence; it's still and is just a light. But symbols are difficult. But if we went into the silence with them perhaps they wouldn't be as fearful. I'm sure you know many people who would enter silence that way.

**Do you have any other ways of bringing people into silence?**

I have people who are going into it very well. They are very busy. I have a rather strict thing about my own life and advise them to stop all that reading. One good book and a little bit of the Scriptures, because you can't be quiet and take in all that information. Cut out all those workshops. They run to umpteen workshops. How much can you learn after you have gone to ten workshops? Stop that. Stop running and go within to your own quiet place, recognize it and begin to work from there. That is the kind of a basis that I start out with.

Most of them accept it. They are glad to rest. It is so easy for them now to be able to say they were advised to slow down. I've done it myself. We have to stop running and taking in so much. So that is what I work on to get them still. It is a great joy. I had one. She was extremely nervous, no confidence, just jittery. It was a joy to get her to look at herself and affirm her own gifts and to trust her own judgments and be quiet. Women think, "I can't be quiet because I have so many tasks" Well, it is just a series of single problems.

It's amazing. I've learned it from experience. These are not just words. This is all there is. In time, it becomes one more skill, a mist. You see, but you don't see clearly; you sense, and yet not the totality of it all.

I think if you were driving a car and entered a profound silence, it seems wise to stop the car. It would be like if I was out walking or in the kitchen and there it was. So I just stopped. I don't think you can be doing anything at that time.

**Does your own practice of prayer and silence consist of being present to reality and inviting it into your life?**

That is my most frequent prayer. Help me to always recognize reality. It is not very religious; it is spiritual, part of who we are. I began to realize that we are always living in it all the time. I get excited about this sense of reality. There is something for real. I would look at something. I looked at a bird house one day; it was the first time I had noticed it and saw it and knew it was so much beyond that. There was a greater reality there in what I was looking at. So I thought, "well if this form can take this how much more can a bird or a tree or the sky or a human manifest it." It is permeated into everything. That creative thing is, as we would say, God. As Christians, we can use that terminology.

I know a wicca. She is extremely spiritual. She calls herself a good witch. We almost think alike. It is amazing, except, she doesn't like Christians. That comes from her background. This woman's quest is amazing, extremely spiritual. Very warm and open and loving. So it is spirituality that matters. She does recognize God. She doesn't want to use Christian terminology. We have to learn to let it go.

But yes, I do pray for an ever greater sense of that reality. It is interesting because it becomes a more lonely time, if I can use that. I don't mean to say that my life is very lonely, but I do have a great sense of loneliness. Sometime I do want to see some of my family or a friend. But this is different. You realize that the path you are on is a lonely quest. You can't give it up; it has a hold of you by now. So the reality becomes gracious. I feel very strongly

that God has really blessed me. I feel very much the reality of God. I am not always living that way. I get irritated when I get really tired. I just want to say to people, "back off and give me space." I get very tired because of my condition. Very irritated. One of my biggest faults.

Where does this come from, this desire for God. I have a sense of this "Other." I knew I will never get to know him if I am not quiet. That was true. When I was younger, the louder I got living a social life, the more unhappy I became.

**Have you had experiences of disturbing silences?**

Empty, sterile silences. Yes, I have experienced that. It is not a good place to be at the time. It feels dark. The mist is there all right, but it is dank. It's like heavy. I think we need a lot of discernment in times like that. There are times when we should leave that place. We are not ready to experience it. There are darkneses of not knowing, but I also believe that there are darkneses of the evil side. I would agree with that. One needs to discern if this silence is from God. Am I being called to a great abyss with no self at all, no knowing, no nothing? Should I wait to be shown? Or is there such an uneasiness in this silence, such depths of fear that we should leave it. God gave us common sense, and we should use it. If it doesn't feel right, move out of it. If it is from God, it will come back and you will learn from it. Your common sense will tell you. We have to be careful of that fine line of reality and unreality.

**Are there books or writers that you turn to if you are hungering for silence? You mentioned the book of *Wisdom*.**

I would say you were longing for quiet. If you are longing for silence, I would say not to read. There are not words in that place. Someone is saying something, but it isn't us. **Let me put it like this. Sometimes I find that Merton can trigger something in me. I read a little, and it touches something in me. I shut the book and sit in silence.**

We know that we know but it has to be unplugged and I think that is what happens. Reading a selection from Merton reminds us what we already know; it reminds us, and we sit in silence. Merton says something, and we sort of know it and respond with silence. In the book of *Wisdom* that happens for me but also because Wisdom is such a mystery it just pulls me along. Meister Eckhart was helpful and John of the Cross. We have to be still and silence comes. I couldn't afford workshops and God was good to me and knew I didn't need them. In later years, I did go to some workshops that were very helpful. One in Toronto was led by a Jesuit on spiritual direction and psychoanalysis, that fine line between counseling and direction.

**Are there things that threaten your silence, things you should avoid?**

Absolutely. One of them is resentment. Another is becoming very physically tired. I became ill on a visit to Boston recently, but I realize now that I can handle that but resentment gets in there and there is nothing that will drive out silence as rapidly.

**Does silence need to be already underway in someone's life for them to recognize it is good and deliberately nurture it?**

Yes, that's good, nurture it. That's the word. Lots of people run from it. Their day is filled with distractions. You can imagine how difficult it is for them to stay silent. All those noises, angers, and anxieties. Yes, you have to practice.

**In liturgy, do you experience silence?**

I try to [Laughter]. I try. When I go to a parish, I'm pretty hard put. I wouldn't go on a Sunday. This was kind of a prick in my conscience. But I thought, "surely you have grown up more than that," and I would go during the week and it would be very still. I find my silence in the Word. A lot of people find it in the Eucharist, but I must admit that I don't find it always there. I find it in the reading of the Word. It has always been the most profound thing in my life, that recognition of the Word. I have a beautiful quote to the effect that we have to learn how to be silent, because out of silence comes the Word. Up here, of course,

the liturgy is lovely. The monks know how to celebrate with silence. There are always nice pauses in between and they are not rushing to get through it. You have to listen for it.

**You said from silence comes the Word and it reminded me of the Quakers who wait upon the Word. Have you received a word in silence?**

Yes, it doesn't sound very humble but that is natural. At times when I am directing someone there can be a deep silence in which I receive a word for that person. If God has given me anything, it is that gift. I don't like using words like gift and so on; it sounds so pious. No, it's real. I have known others who receive a word from the silence. Someone will come and they are just full of things. I try to be really silent and I find the silence catching me. I really pray that I will receive what I need for that person. The majority of the time I receive it. It is interesting. You discern it. It comes from somewhere, from a silence deep down inside. You know it is true and it is not yours. It is not for yourself. It is not coming from your head. Quite interesting. It comes and then, being me, I say, "Uh, Oh, if I say it, it may be rejected." So I don't always believe it, but it touches them. The body language tells you. I dislike talking about this because it sounds like bragging. God knows.

Do you ask for a word at the beginning of the year? I do that. For the last two years it has been the same word, comfort. "Comfort people." It was very strong and I knew it to be true. Ask for it and it will come. We don't believe enough that He is going to do it for us. After all it is His work, and we need all the help we can get, and we will receive it.

**Your home is very silent.**

I try to nurture that so that when visitors come it can help. It is so silent some days. I derive a great comfort from it.

**Have you ever written about silence?**

I used to, but I don't anymore.

**If you remember something that you wrote which seems of value, let me know.**

Okay. I used to write poems trying to express the relationship, the unity of it all and then you realize how beautiful and simple it is. I'm very grateful for the time that allows me to experience silence, total and so still, no words. It is like being picked up as a child when you were hurt and being wrapped in your mother's apron. You would be comforted from all of life's worries. Silence embraces that. It lets us experience comfort.

I'm reading a book on Celtic spirituality. It is marvelous. I've been studying that for years. It is my background, and it really calls me. Great mystics and common sense. The beauty of the reality.

**Is there anything else you thought we would discuss that I haven't raised?**

No. For me, it is living in the presence of the reality. It is not seeking anymore. It is a state of being. When we are silent, we are not striving anymore. We just are and feel that energy.

### **Edited transcript of interview with Sr. Patricia**

Background: Patricia has been a member of a religious order of Roman Catholic sisters for forty years. She is an experienced spiritual director who recently chose to begin living a more intentionally contemplative life in British Columbia.

**Are there any events in your childhood that contributed to a sense of silence?**

I don't know. I remember very early in life having a very real conscious awareness of a relationship with Christ in my life. Real early. So I used to like to spend time in Church. I played the organ in Church from the time I was in grade nine to grade twelve. Like a lot of time spent in quiet, kind of like, or praying. The key thing for me would be a real awareness of a relationship from an early, early age.

We were at the lake all Summer, three, four months at a time, so I was in nature, water and stuff like that. I entered religious life right after grade twelve. I was at boarding school for a year. Again it had a lot more to do with, I would say, my relationship with God.

**Why do you relate that to silence?**

Well, just because silence is "being at home," for me, it is very much connected with "being at one with." So, for me, it is very connected.

**What are the most memorable experiences of silence for you?**

Spending a lot of time in quiet prayer. I think of chapels, especially in religious life, spending a lot of time in chapel. I can't remember any one. There have just been so many times of retreat. Everything was silent. I can't think of a particular one. There are moments of feeling at one with all of nature. There are moments of feeling at one with God.

**What if, for whatever reason, you could not enjoy the silence you have been accustomed to?**

What do you mean the silence I've been used to?

**When you sit in silent prayer with others, for example, that type of silence. What if that type of silence were to be taken from you?**

I don't know how it could be taken from me.

**I don't either.**

Because, if I couldn't, I would find another way. Like walking. I have a real need, I'm a high introvert. I have a real need to be "alone with." I would have a need for that.

**How far back can you recall knowing you had a need for that?**

Right from eight or nine years old. That is as far as I can remember. I guess my first experience of something, of "Other," is when my grandfather died when I was three and everyone was praying around the bed and all that. I remember clearly a sense of awe; there is something bigger here, someone bigger. That would be my first experience of "Other." There was a lot of praying, and nuns were there. Right from the time I talked, I talked to God all the time. Even as a teenager, I would come back from dances and have my conversations. I don't know.

**Did you as a child seek out silence?**

We would just sit by the lake as kids and there was this sense of awe for sure. Also, I went to Church often, on my own, to weekday Masses.

**Did you seek out silence to be alone?**

I don't think so, not as a child. I did seek out opportunities to be alone with God. Being alone with myself is more acquired. Although I'm an introvert, I am a relational person. I had to learn. I sought times to be alone with God, but I had to learn to be alone. It was not okay for me to be alone in a lot of ways. Physically. We were in community, and the biggest experience for me was moving out of community into my own apartment. Well, I nearly freaked. I had never lived by myself in my life. And so it was a big thing. I didn't know if I could do this. But it turned out to be a real gift. Since then, it has deepened and is okay.

**Is your sense of silence linked to solitude?**

Yeah.

**This is difficult, but when you sit in silent prayer is it possible to say what you do?**

I try to acknowledge an awareness of God's presence around and within. Then after that, I just am in God's presence desiring to be aware. I don't have any formulas.

**You don't use any mantra, or follow your breath. It is simply sitting?**

Yeah.

**When you do that, are you aware that sometimes it works deeply or sometimes it doesn't?**

Oh, Yeah. Sometimes I'm everywhere. I don't fall asleep. Other times I blank out. Other times there is just a very fleeting touching into something deeper and then out again.

**Can you put into words what that becoming deeper, I assume silent, means? Or does it mean silent?**

No, it is not becoming more silent. There is just a sense of being "at one with."

**I'll try to push you further.**

It is just a moment of being "at one with." It just all becomes one.

**Would you use the word silence for that? You didn't seem to want to describe that as silence?**

I might have a thing about silence. My associations with silence, like that is not my word. I would say quiet. To me silence is like a rule, "keeping silence here," or "keeping silence there." I don't like that word.

**Maybe I can define it a bit. The most popular sense is an absence of something, not talking, or an absence of sound. Silence functions in speech as a space of silence between words, or it functions in chant as a rhythm. What I mean by it, though, is the silence, for example, that an elderly but still loving couple have about them. An atmosphere of silence.**

That doesn't do anything for me. I wouldn't call it that. To me they are at one. Present to one another, without words. Maybe silence has a negative thing for me. I understand what you say, but I would never use silence as the word. To me it is being present to each other without words. They are present.

**When you sit in prayer in a sense you are not sitting in silence, but are sitting in presence?**

Yeah, I don't call it silence. I call it quiet or taking time to be with or solitude time or being contemplative. I don't use the word silence.

**This is fine. Don't worry. The only thing I value here is your sense of things. Nothing else is of value. I'm not seeking the right answer or something. I find it really interesting that you find it the way you do.**

I would go for solitude or presence, or unity.

**Is silence then for you a means or an end?**

I'm hesitating because I don't use the word. Are you asking is solitude time or quiet time a means or an end?

**Let's use quiet then.**

I do take an hour everyday in the morning. My quiet time.

**Okay, would that time spent, I assume if someone watched you they would say, "She is silent," is that time a means toward something or is it something in and of itself, an end in itself.**

Oh, it is an end in itself. As far as I am concerned. Yeah, for me it is. Being in God's presence, just to be in God's presence. Just to be aware of God. Be still and know that I am God kind of thing. Taking time to be aware of that. I don't look to it to accomplish anything. I feel a call to it. I didn't impose it on myself. To just be. Sometimes I think this is crazy. But deep inside of me I know.

**Does that sense of presence deepen?**

I don't know about that question. My awareness maybe?

**Yes.**

Does my awareness deepen during those times? I don't know. I don't measure. I want to be there. Maybe it is deep; maybe it is not. Who knows [Laughter].

**Do you ever finish up a session of your morning prayer and say, "That was good." or finish up one and say "That was bad?"**

No, I don't. Sometimes I may be aware that my mind is in high gear, but I don't say good or bad.

**If you had to finish this sentence with a simile or metaphor or with an example, or image of some sort what would it be. The sentence is: "Quiet is like, quiet reminds me of, etc."**

Quiet is being at one with. Quiet is an awareness of the God who dwells within. See, I really believe in the ongoing transformation happening in me. I really believe that. As far as stopping and becoming aware, I like to stay centred as much as I can. For me, it is to just be there, and be aware, taking the time wanting to be just more aware that God is at work.

But I don't know. I don't have any results. As far as saying this is a wonderful prayer or things like that. I don't do anything like that.

**That theme of presence and unity is the major theme running through it?**

Yeah for me that's it. Being at one with.

**Have there ever been times of disturbing quiet, or silence, when that quiet didn't mediate presence, but mediated absence?**

I don't always feel God's presence. No [pause], No [pause], No, No. No, I don't. Oh! No I don't. What I'm talking about is being aware of being in God's presence. I'm not saying I feel the presence. I simply take the time to put myself in God's presence.

**Can you expand that a bit?**

I don't know [Laughter]. I said a while back that I have moments of dipping into, but for quite a while. No, No, I don't feel God's presence in a warm fuzzy way. There was a time when I used to but not anymore.

**When did that end?**

Oh, gosh. A while back.

**Did your prayer change?**

Oh, Yes.

**In your prayer now, in your morning prayer, if I followed you right, you would be aware of wanting to be in God's presence, or being available in a sense?**

Right. It is kind of like "here I am." But I know you are here too, and I know you have always been, so here I am. And that's it. I don't feel any wonderful, wonderful thing.

**Could you, I realize how difficult these questions are..**

Yes, why did you pick this topic? Good Lord! [Laughter] It is hard to put words on all this.

**Yeah, it is. Yet it seems to be a very common experience to which people in fact don't put words, and, if someone put words to it, it could be of value.**

No, that's true.

**To bring you back to this terrible question. It seems to me that when you sit there that sounds awfully silent to me. That is the word that I use. Your word is quiet and quiet presence.**

Or in solitude.

**Yeah.**

I would call it taking quiet time.

**Now this is the tough part. If you are not that frequently conscious of God's presence in that warm way, what are you doing during that time? [Laughter]**

I'm just being there.

**How do stay focused in there?**

I don't know. I don't know. [Laughter] [long pause]. I don't know. If I'm way off the beam and I'm planning my strategy for the day, I just come back to being there. I'm afraid to say anything more. I used to a lot. I'm aware when I'm off. I just sit back and be there. It is like sitting there with someone you care about and just not saying anything. Sometimes I'll talk about something. The twenty minutes in silent community prayer is very different from my hour in the morning.

**Tell me, I assumed they were the same?**

For me during the twenty minutes I might use a centring prayer, or today I'm concerned for some people I know well. I bring a presence to those things. It tends to be more of a centring prayer and sometimes a more contemplative gazing into nature. For those twenty minutes I do different things. The hour in the morning for me is such that I would like to take another hour during the day but I don't have time right now. As time goes on, I will hope to do that. For me, the hour in the morning is different.

**You mention looking out at nature. Are there some things that spark off quiet, or presence?**

Oh yeah, nature does that a lot for me. Stars, the moon, the lake, particularly the lake. Water does it for me a lot. I don't feel locked in to any one way of doing this. There are some days I just look out at the beauty of it all and kind of in awe of the beauty and gaze at it. I don't know if that is prayer or not. I don't know what that is. But that is all I do.

Trees, flowers do that. Walking doesn't do it for me. "Looking at" is what it is about. When trees are beginning to come in with leaves. Sunset, especially water. Birds not as much. But since being here, birds more so. I have more time here to see them at the feeder and stuff. I have more time to take delight in them.

**Is the twenty minutes a more active time than the hour?**

No, not really. Sometimes. No, I have never used the whole time using a mantra. I don't know if you would call gazing out at the lake or the moon, active?

**Let me back up. I'm not sure either. I'm just searching around for the difference between them.**

No, it is simply a different time of day, I've been active already by the time of the twenty minute common silent prayer. The one hour prayer is in the early morning. It is different when I first get up. I just get up and go and sit. I've been doing that for some time. It developed out of that whole change in prayer, when I just couldn't pray anymore in the old way. I can't remember where it came from. I don't know. I tried different things. Only in time I realized that just sitting there was prayer.

**Of your various ways of being present with God, scripture, being with other people, celebrating Eucharist, where would you rank quiet prayer: as being most important, or third on the list, whatever?**

No, for me it would be a priority, first on the list.

**During quiet prayer does a word ever come to you out of the quiet?**

No, I get brilliant ideas sometimes [Laughter]. I want to write them down. No, I can't say that happens.

**What has been most puzzling about this interview?**

It's not puzzling. First of all other people do not usually question you about your prayer outside of a spiritual direction kind of setting. So it is interesting that someone would ask you how you do these things. As I said, I'm not used to putting this into words. So it is more grappling for words. And, of course, there has been change. It is different here than in my previous job. It is a little more centred here, not as scattered. So it is different.

**How would you feel having to return to that more busy life?**

I don't know what I would do. I would have to carve out good chunks of time. I don't know if I would take on as much. It does get busy here, but I don't feel frantic and scattered, and you just do it, and, if you don't do it, you don't do it.

**Does your sense of quiet prayer that you practice have roots in a book or a speaker?**

Oh yeah. Jim Finley of course. Merton's writings. First time I heard Jim Finley, everything inside of me just came alive. I wanted to weep. If something really touches you but you can't put words on it, you just know that what they are saying is exactly what you are feeling. I just wanted to weep. Finley was good. The writing of Kelly Nemeck. He has written excellent books on contemplation, and stages of prayer, and stuff like that. He was the one who said to spend an hour no less in a block. I forget his reasons for it, but he was clear on one hour blocks of time for prayer. I don't know.

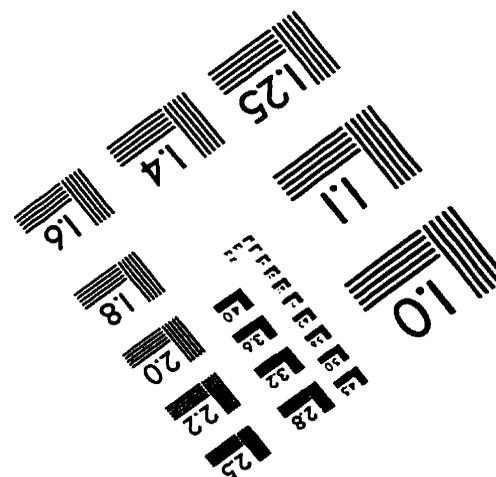
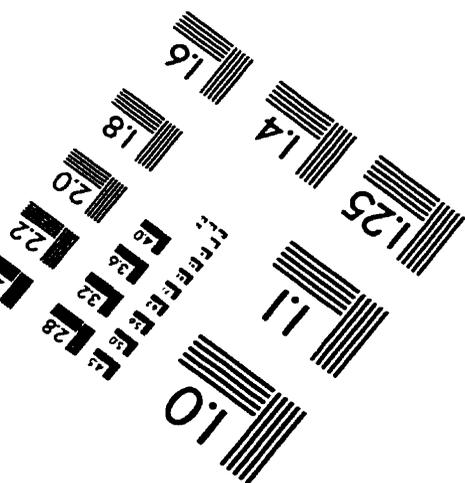
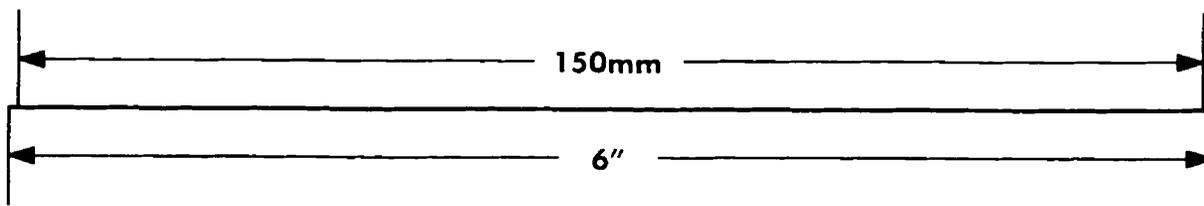
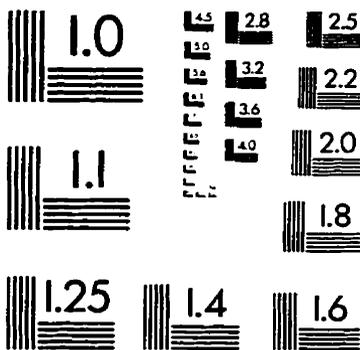
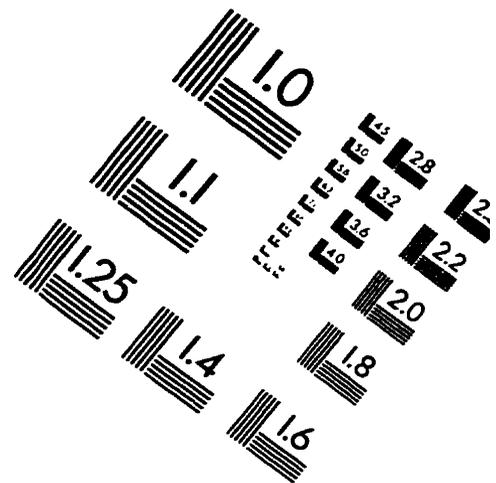
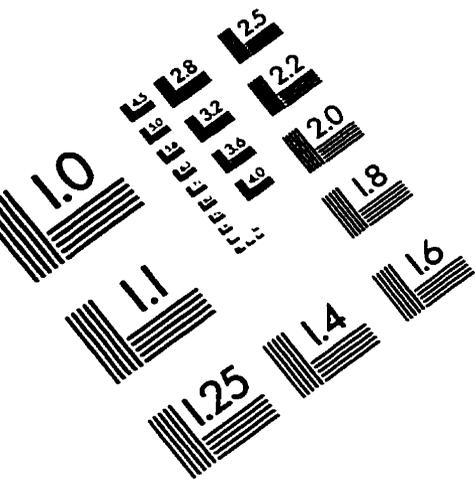
**What did Finley say. Do you recall?**

No. No. I heard him speak several times at workshops and listened to his tapes and I just, I don't know, I just kept saying, Yeah, Yeah. Really good.

**I think that's about it. You ever write anything on silence?**

Oh, gosh No! [Laughter] No! No!

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