

Silence, Luscious Silence

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Technologically mute all our usual background sounds, and we don't get silence. Even the most rigorous noise-free chamber includes the pit-pat heartbeat of a human standing there experiencing it. Silence thus equals both more and less than complete auditory blankness.

At its quietest, my sparsely settled rural neighborhood offers a hush, a balm of birdsong, clear air and animal rustles. Along a five-mile circular route, I stroll without traffic rumbles, lawn mower whines or airplane hums. Contemplation syncs with nature's baseline of small, wild sounds. Worries fade, well-being flows and serenity spreads with the rhythm of my own soft foot-falls. Silence nourishes. It purrs.



I took up flute in my twenties, after I knew the musical basics from studying piano. Once I could play fluidly, I sought out living-room chamber music sessions – flute, violin, viola and cello, or flute, viola da gamba and harpsichord. A few times I joined an orchestral practice, where I had headaches counting, say, thirty-seven and a half bars of rest before the flute's next entrance. *ONE, two, three, four, TWO, two, three, four, THREE two three four,* and so on.

I couldn't let precise counting flag for even half an instant. Otherwise I'd mess up the symphonic interweaving of timbres and melodies for everyone. For a chronic daydreamer like me, the regimented silence felt like a strait-jacket.



In its original German, the dramatic last line of Ludwig Wittgenstein's 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* proclaims principled self-silencing in the

face of the ineffable. It runs: *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*. Because the ringing final verb “schweigen” has no elegant counterpart in English, translations of this highly rhythmic sentence clunk. “Schweigen” means the action of deliberately clamming up or holding back from speaking.

The book’s first English edition rendered the culminating sentence as “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” A later edition tried “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” Wittgenstein’s noble declaration thus became a bit wimpy and passive. Perhaps they should have assigned the translation to another native German speaker, Albert Einstein, who once remarked: “I have this to say about Bach’s works: listen, play, love, revere – and keep your trap shut.”



Knowing how to “schweigen” represents a vocational advantage for journalists. *New Yorker* writer Calvin Trillin furiously scribbled in his notebook when he interviewed sources, but much of the time he was jotting a reminder to himself: *Shut up. Shut up*. Silence amid conversational back and forth creates a vacuum that most others hasten to fill when you hold back. Try this, and your reward might be spilled secrets and the compliment that you’re a terrific listener.

Sometimes I wish a radio talk-show host had Trillin’s self-discipline. Guests are invited because of their knowledge and experience, and when the host goes on too long with her opinions and her take, I berate the host out loud: *Shut up! Shut up!* Open a space for the genuine expert to talk!



Silence can tease and twiddle with expectations. I naturally talk more slowly than average. I pause. My speaking contains silences unless I’m performing something I’ve rehearsed. After my sister sat in on a college class I was teaching, she asked a bunch of my students, “Doesn’t it drive you crazy when she stops in the middle of a sentence and stares out the window?” The students thought about it, and one replied, “No, because she always finishes her sentence.”

Johann Sebastian Bach deployed silence for suspense in the “Esurientes” movement of his 1723 *Magnificat*. Two flutes sweetly sing to one another while an alto lilt the Latin text for “He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.” Following a few minutes of this threesome, the flutes reprise their main melody, minus its final note. The absence rings in the listeners’ imaginations for a beat. Then the bass accompaniment gently completes the musical thought.



The strong, silent hero is a stock character in American westerns, played by Clint Eastwood, Gary Cooper, Henry Fonda and others. Someone who talks little, stands with a straight back and wears a stoic expression comes across as resolute, courageous and enigmatic. Viewers project rugged rectitude onto their reserve. Off the screen, men who fit this mold are thought deep, upright and steadfast. Those who speak less than others are keeping a rich inner life to themselves, admirers believe.

When I taught philosophy at a women’s college, a red-haired senior gazed at me one day and volunteered, “It’s really, really hard to know what you’re thinking.” Yet a fan club of students tried. At dinner in their dorms, they would pepper me with questions that had no place in a classroom. A trio of them once spotted me on a campus walkway and jumped up and down on their balcony hollering like cheerleaders, “Mar-cia! Mar-cia!” I generally sidestepped students’ personal questions, which left me freer to be a hero for them – and for myself.



Scrupulous biographers sometimes write, “The evidence is silent on whether X or Y.” We don’t actually know whether novelist Willa Cather had sex with women, for example, or what happened to D.B. Cooper after he hijacked an airplane and received a ransom payment. Fools rush in with pat theories and reckless speculation. Yet facts can be buried even deeper, so unknown that people have no prompt even to wonder.

Two things that happened during my thirties I’ve never told anyone. Is it

silence on my part if no one so much as suspects I'm keeping these secrets?



When traveling, I take long walks amidst locals and visitors from across the US, Canada and elsewhere. Where I come from, people don't say hello to strangers in that situation. So I don't. To my astonishment, runners have called a "good morning" to me from clear across the road, and others do this when they pass by closer up. They obviously expect an echo from me, but responding would cancel my tranquil inwardness. I just keep going.

Several times a couple approaching me on a sidewalk have chirped a "good morning" duet and behind, after I've said nothing, I hear that sudden intake of breath that means "Can you believe...?" I imagine the woman and man scolding me in whispers to one another. To them, stranger silence seems to feel aggressive, hostile, misanthropic and rude.



On the witness stand, attorneys can compel you to answer their questions, on pain of being held in contempt. They can even force you to give a certain type of answer: "Yes or no? That is a 'yes or no' question!" Outside courtrooms, there's no such leverage. People can laugh off your question, toss it back on you, stalk off into the sunset or vanish in 47 other ways without answering.

A long romance that I envisioned lasting far into the future dipped into a morass of uncertainty when my beloved began putting me off for reasons he wouldn't reveal. "Look, let me get my head together," he said, and flew off to camp solo in the desert of Big Bend, Texas. No postcards, no phone calls arrived to clarify his intentions. For more than a month in upstate New York, hope nevertheless fluttered into my throat every time a plane roared in for a landing. Finally I understood his message. Silence is the cruelest type of answer.



I live as far away from weapons, violence and the military as is possible in the United

States, and yet the figure of the sniper fascinates me when I encounter one in a thriller. His capacity for stillness captivates me. For hours he must lie wordless and without a twitch in his camouflaged spot in a swamp, on a rooftop or along the lip of a sand trap in a darkened golf course. And when the time comes, he must slow his breathing, calibrate the wind and control triggering within a micromillimeter. What other art requires such solitary, silent precision? Well, there's safecracking and bomb disarmament.

In *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Eugen Herrigel describes learning to become so focused and empty that his arrow would eventually launch toward the target on its own, apart from his volition. Over the years, Herrigel discovered how to attain a no-self spiritual alertness in which, as his Master put it, "the eyes hear and the ears see." It takes discipline to reach the silent whirl of the universe.



"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response." So wrote psychotherapist and Auschwitz survivor Victor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*. The tiniest interlude before reacting – a freeze, a beat of "What?", a gap – provides more options than reflexive anger, desperation or contempt.

That's why one of the Five D's for intervening when you see someone being bullied is Distract. Ask the bully for directions, or tell the bullied person hey, you like their jacket. Such a bolt out of nowhere cracks the emotional dynamic. Likewise, people credit a regimen of meditation for being able to withstand the stings and arrows of daily disappointments. I haven't tested this, but it makes sense that we shift from the autopilot of raw lashouts into neutral by cultivating inner silence.



I grew up believing that a mutual exchange of "I love you" propelled a couple into happily-ever-afterhood. But I married someone who quoted the ancient Chinese classic *Dao de Jing* to me: "He who speaks does not know. He who knows does not speak." Its obvious corollary: "He who says it doesn't feel it, and he who feels it doesn't say so."

With 40 years together, I accept his never having said my three magic words. Every day he teases me with made-up nicknames and gentle jokes. When I caused our credit cards and cash to get stolen abroad, he waved it off without blaming me and just helped solve the complications. When I was fighting a cough, he hunched out in a drenching rain to bring back five kinds of chicken soup. I count myself wildly lucky to have his silent devotion.

