

THE IMPORTANCE OF SILENCE

Trish Munn

'I will lead her into the wilderness, there to speak to her heart.'

Hosea, chapter 2

'I had never felt before

The transforming power of silence,

Its genius in giving everything back to itself.'

Andrew Harvey

Years ago I spent some months with an enclosed order of nuns. They were a silent order, speaking only after lunch while peeling the vegetables for supper, and for one hour in the evenings during recreation. We were on retreat for seven days while I was there, and for that week there was total silence, by which I mean absence of speech, not so much as a 'could you pass the salt, please.' I found the first two days quite difficult, not in any significant way, just that I would sometimes forget I was in silence. But after a while I sank into the way of non-speech and was so comfortable in it I would have been happy to stay there. I was also aware of a much more subtle layer of experience within my contact with individuals in the community, and with the community as a group.

'Once verbalization stops for a moment, not only is there quiet but there is a feeling of contentment.

The mind has at last found its home.'

Ayya Khema

An abiding memory I have of my time there is coming down to the chapel at 5.30am each morning for silent prayer, as opposed to praying the psalms aloud together later in the morning. The chapel was dark, with just a lighted candle and the smell of incense. There was a very particular smell, which I come across from time to time in other places and I can never quite identify. Perhaps polished wood and incense and yesterday's vegetables. The prioress used to say ironically, it was the odour of sanctity. The silent prayer in the evenings never held quite the same call for me as those early mornings. But what strikes me now, as I write this, is the ease with which I was able to participate in that silence. I think the clue to this ease lies in the word 'participation'.

After I left the convent I continued the practice of silent prayer for many years. It gave rhythm to my life and held me in that place of silence that I've since moved away from. Over the years I've watched myself slip away

from this practice. It became very hard to remain in that still place alone. I had never been near therapy at that time. I realise now, that I had hoped that grace and spiritual practice would be a short-cut, that I wouldn't have to go into those wounded places, somehow they would all be taken care of and evaporate. I was doing a nobler thing, God would look after me. Well, yes. Well, no. As Jack Kornfield says in *A Path With Heart*, 'Many people first come to spiritual practice hoping to skip over their sorrows and wounds, the difficult areas of their lives. They hope to rise above them and enter a spiritual realm full of divine grace, free from all conflict. True maturation on the spiritual path requires that we discover the depth of our wounds: our grief from the past, unfulfilled longing, the sorrow that we have stored up during the course of our lives. This healing is necessary if we are to embody spiritual life lovingly and wisely. Until we are able to bring awareness and understanding to our old wounds, we will find ourselves repeating their patterns of unfulfilled desire, anger and confusion over and over again.'

And as Achaan Chah put it, 'If you haven't cried deeply a number of times, your meditation hasn't really begun.'

I was a Caesarian birth in the 1940s. At an educated guess I would have been bundled off immediately into a separate clinical space. I was not breast-fed and probably not handled much. There was a lot of unspoken sadness and secrets in my family. There was always an edge of what felt like threat but I couldn't have named it then.

The sense of my own existence is always at some level underpinned with a sense of nothingness and

meaninglessness, which sits at odds with quite a strong sense of purpose, not particularly of *my* life, but life itself of which I am part. While we were learning about primary patterning, what arose for me most when we accessed memories of implantation and conception, was that very early sense of nothing and the something like terror and desolation in and around that. I saw, felt, the bareness of that ground with absolutely nothing to hold on to and no sense of holding. This was really useful information. I have experienced the reality of living in those existential places, but what I *haven't* yet fully experienced, is living in those places with awareness.

There is here, a level of silence where terror arises for me. It's in sharp contrast to the experience of *fullness* in silence that I talk of earlier in this essay.

I have spent a lot of time over the past years puzzling over why I find it so difficult to go into the space which silent prayer and meditation offers. I accuse myself of laziness and lack of discipline. I'm sure in part that is true, but I have only recently realised that I hold a lot of fear around being in this space. As I attempt to talk about it, it slips away from me. I'm trying to find my way to touch on emptiness. Emptiness in the West is seen as negation, alienation, a feeling that indicates a fundamental flaw in character that must be quickly filled up. Mark Epstein says in *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, 'this flaw, which has been termed the basic fault, is often what one remembers in bodily form in meditation. The *basic fault* is the term coined by Michael Balint when he talks about the psychic remnants of inadequate childhood attention, a trauma so prevalent that it has spawned a chronic spiritual hunger in

Western culture. 'It is experienced as a kind of inner emptiness that is not at all what the Buddhists mean when they use the same word. These emotions from the Buddhist viewpoint, characterise the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts.'

Stephen Batchelor speaking from the Buddhist understanding says that, 'To know emptiness is not just to understand the concept. It is more like stumbling into a clearing in the forest, where suddenly you can move

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freely and see clearly. To experience emptiness is to experience the shocking absence of what normally determines the sense of who you are and the kind of reality you inhabit. For that moment we witness ourselves and the world as open and vulnerable. A life centered in awareness of emptiness is simply an appropriate way of being in this changing, shocking, painful, joyous, frustrating, awesome, stubborn, and ambiguous reality. Emptiness is the central path that leads not beyond this reality but right into its heart. It is the track on which the centered person moves.'

When I hear the Eastern approach to emptiness I begin to understand, not from my intellect but more from a felt sense, why I have such a response to the title of this essay. It's like a return home. If I ask myself, 'What wants to happen?' I instinctively go to the edge of that silent place. Something wants to tell itself to me from there. I also know that to move into that place it is essential that I first need to find a way to tolerate the almost unbearable anxiety that Winnicott speaks of. He remarked that the client who is afraid of breaking down does not fear an unknown situation, but a return to a previous unbearable state of dereliction. I am moved by this intuition and with my own intuition, I know that even the most carefully considered words will not meet the client in this place. This is a place that is pre-verbal and I would say could only be met by a therapist who has entered and found a way to tolerate their own state of dereliction. A client will sense this and whether or not the therapist can authentically give her the holding which was not available to her enough in her infancy.

Sometimes my therapist will check out with me whether or not I get a sense of being held in this place. I find that I don't know truthfully how to answer; I find that I first need quite a lot of time to become fully aware of the existence of this place that feels much more like no-place or a black hole place. I can sense that simply being given that time to be with it and get to know it can in fact give me a sense of that holding. What also becomes apparent is that I *never knew* it was something that was available to me now, and the absence of it in my infancy precluded any knowledge of its existence or non-existence. Since it is pre-verbal material, it will not work for me if my

therapist is too anxious to make sense of it with conceptualisations, interpretations etc. but only if he can keep me company in that place of wordless anxiety. In this silence there is no movement, no spaciousness, no rising and falling, but only a dead and dark silence that has the quality of annihilation itself. I cannot tolerate this place alone. It is only just now, after two years in therapy, that I realise I don't have to do it alone.

Winnicott talks about the state of unintegration, contrasting it to either ego integration or disintegration. By unintegration he meant something like being able to lose oneself without being lost. Mark Epstein writes in *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*, 'The capacity for being alone is a paradox since it can only be developed with someone else in the room. Once it is developed, the child trusts that she will not be intruded upon and permits herself a secret communication with private and personal phenomena.' He says that the best adult model that Winnicott could find for this was after intercourse, when each person is content to be alone but is not withdrawn. There are no questions about the other person's availability, but there is also no need for active contact.

Returning to my own experience of my inability to stay in silent meditation, Epstein quotes Winnicott as saying, 'In thinking of the psychology of mysticism, it is usual to concentrate on the understanding of the mystic's withdrawal into a personal inner world. Perhaps not enough attention has been paid to the mystic's retreat to a position in which he can communicate secretly with subjective phenomena, the loss of contact with the world of shared reality being counterbalanced by a gain in terms of feeling real.'

And later he, Epstein, says, 'A parent needs to discover how to *hold* a child not just physically but in silence. In fostering a state of unintegration by being present but not interfering, a parent creates a holding environment that nourishes a child. In so doing she sustains and encourages her child's psychic life.'

Without a continuity of this early silent holding it is very unlikely that a child will be able to move into those places of unintegration where she can safely lose herself. As a result, it is also unlikely that the mystic will feel real in her inner world, but will instead be on the brink of that unthinkable anxiety.

As a trainee therapist I am very aware that until I can be comfortable with all the qualities of my own silence and those of the client, I will have a very limited amount to offer.

Further reading

Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Bloomsbury, 1997

Mark Epstein, *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*, Thorsons, 1999

Mark Epstein, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, Duckworth, 1996

Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, Rider, 1994

Ayya Khema, *Being Nobody, Going Nowhere*, Wisdom Publications, 1987

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Editor's note: The author sometimes refers to therapists as 'he' and sometimes as 'she'. For reasons of style I have left this rather than replacing all gender specific words with the plural pronoun.