

'Sounds of Silence' Sermon

If you have come here today expecting to have an hour of uninterrupted silence, then I am sorry that you will be disappointed, although neither will I be following Geo. Bernard Shaw who when speaking about the original form of Quaker worship said "I believe in the discipline of silence, and could talk for hours about it."

My first attendance at a Unitarian service was also my first experience of silence in a service of worship, and I did have some reservations;

There was no order of service, so I felt I had to follow the person in front, who luckily seemed to know what was happening next.

I was unsure for how long the silence would continue, and was a bit concerned someone was going to stand up at some point and regale us with revelations!

But I have come to value the silence within a service of worship, and I can honestly say that if I had to choose one part and one part only, of a service, which I would keep at the cost of all others it would be the silence.

What about hymns? Yes, well hymns are important, they provide a chance to come together in song, an opportunity to participate in an uplifting, communal activity.

Prayer; prayer is important to many, who see it as a way of communicating directly with a Deity or the Divine, it can cut through our intellectual barriers and touch our hearts, or it can also leave us bored. But I think that prayers without a period of silence can seem to be just another step to be taken before the sermon, or as a marker in the service. The balance of words and silence are so important and I think that there needs to be time for silence before, or after, as well as during prayers for them to be truly meaningful.

Led, or guided, meditations can be useful as a way of navigating our own inner depths, but they can also be too prescriptive, not allowing us to explore the directions our thoughts are taking, or the guidance can be intrusive, interrupting our personal explorations.

Music, music has its powers, to raise the spirit, stir the emotions, to lead our thoughts in a particular direction.

We include, as part of our services, a piece of music possibly unrelated to the theme of the service, which can be an advantage in that if the sermon or theme doesn't 'speak to us' the music may well provide something which does!

Silence, silence is a powerful force within a service of worship; Ralph Waldo Emerson was known to have said that he liked "the silence before the service better than any preaching"!

But is silence just 'nothingness', an empty space? Well the evidence says 'no'. When Larsen and Galletly, two N.Z. neurologists studying the physiological effects of music, exposed their volunteers to periods of silence as part of a 'control', they found that respiratory frequency, heart rate, and blood pressure all decreased to below baseline levels. The authors suggest that although the music induced a lowering of these physiological readings, there was still some degree of arousal, and it was noticeable that significantly deeper relaxation occurred when the music stopped. They

concluded that there was insufficient attention paid to the effects of silence, and further research into the use of techniques such as meditation and yoga, was indicated.

So why is it so underused? The reasons are many. This may be because many are uncomfortable with silence. We have so little opportunity to experience silence. People cannot sit in a waiting room without feeling the need to break the silence with non-consequential remarks to perfect strangers; when you are 'on hold' on the telephone how often do you manage to avoid the now standard adulteration of a piece of pop-classical musak!

It may be that our aversion to silence stems from negative experiences of silence; having to be silent in church, as children perhaps.

There are also the negative connotations of silence, as used by those who wish to assert their position, to dominate or belittle others.

Silence can be hurtful, destructive, painful.

But the silence we aim to create and experience, and have others experience, as part of an act of worship is one of wholeness, care, communion, community, creativity and humility.

It may be that when we enter a period of silence, we really aren't completely silent. It is difficult, if not impossible, to attain complete silence on a Sunday morning, someone's stomach rumbles; someone coughs; a taxi can be heard pulling up outside the Church; and someone manages to knock their hymnbook off a chair! But with practice we can shut out these distractions.

I suspect, however, that our avoidance of silence isn't really anything to do with these distractions; but the more compelling reason is that silence invites us to, demands of us, that we enter the deeper, uncharted waters of our spirit, and we do not know what we shall find there!

"Be still and know that I am God," the psalmist writes. And 1 Kings 19:12 says, "God was not in the fire, or in the earthquake, or in the wind, but in the still, small voice."

To sit together in silence requires confronting the inner workings of our own minds. In silence, we see more clearly our thoughts and feelings, our hopes and losses.

We can easily shut them out, by compiling to-do lists, wondering if we should have emptied the washing machine before setting off for Church this morning, what is there in the freezer I can pull out for supper? And maybe the rain will have stopped by the time the service finishes!

But if we continue with the silence, we may feel the development of deeper knowledge, a greater self awareness, a greater understanding of what is our life. For some, these feelings are strange and unsettling. There is nothing to do in that silence but "be." There are no landmarks, no roadmaps, no structures to guide us, save for the rhythm of our own heartbeat, and the rise and fall of our own breath.

We can do this by sitting silently. In the most common form of Buddhist meditation, one sits silently, often for long periods, continually returning the awareness to the breath, it is this breath which is the breath of our origin, and of our departing.

Our word 'spirit' comes from the Latin *spiritus*, or 'breath'; in returning to the breath, we return to spirit, we hear the winter wind, we allow ourselves to cool into winter mind, we reach the source, the spring, the creative power out of which we come.

The Quakers see silence as an essential element of their services, they describe their approach to God as 'the ministry of silence' which 'demands the faithful activity of every member of the meeting. As together we enter the depths of a living silence, the stillness of God, we find one another in the things that are eternal, upholding and strengthening one another.'

But it is not just the Quakers who value silence. Dr. Charles Eastman, a Santee Sioux, writing as Ohiyesa says "He the American Indian believes profoundly in silence- the sign of a perfect equilibrium. Silence is the absolute poise or balance of mind, body and spirit. The man who preserves his selfhood ever calm and unshaken by the storms of existence-not a leaf as it were, astir on the tree; not a ripple upon the surface of the shining pool- his, in the mind of the unlettered sage, is the ideal attitude and conduct of life. If you ask 'What are the fruits of silence?' he will say 'They are self-control, true courage, endurance, patience, dignity and reverence. Silence is the cornerstone of character.'

Some find that they have an appreciation of silence thrust upon them.

Philip Simmons, a retired Unitarian universalist Minister, writes; "These days, my own relationship with silence grows more intimate. With Lou Gehrig's disease I face the loss of my ability to speak. Already my speech slows, my tongue grows unwieldy. Before hefting another syllable across my palate I consider more seriously whether it will improve upon silence. Because I'm too dense to get the message any other way, and despite my years of meditation, the fates are instructing me quite literally in the art of sitting down and shutting up. I'm being shown what is essential. But my situation only dramatizes the choice we all face. Whatever our personal circumstances, we can resist our fate and continue to suffer, or we can open ourselves to the fall into silence."

When a congregation enters a deeper silence together, the feeling in the room is palpable. The silence is rich and dense, and has a feeling of communality and cohesiveness, as if everyone has come together in that same rhythm of breathing, heart beat and 'being'. It is here, in this space, that the knowing comes, that the insights are gained.

This is described in the words from Rufus Jones, an early Quaker, which we heard earlier "Silence itself of course has no magic. It may be just sheer emptiness, absence of words or music. It may be an occasion for slumber, or it may be a dead form. But it may be an intensified pause, a vitalised hush, a creative quiet."

To make this possible, this silence can be neither too long nor too short. If it is too short, there is not enough time to enter deeply into ourselves, but allows only time for the shallowest of exploration, for skimming the surface.

If it is too long, those meditating or praying may find their minds wandering far afield. The meditative stance should always be alert, awake, and receptive. Silence before, during, or after a prayer or spoken meditation is useful if it helps the individual move into the depths of their own being, enabling us to feel truly held, and embraced by community and by love.

So let us now, with the help of a musical introduction, try to create such a period of silence.

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