

Along the track

Silence

There is nothing that resembles God so much as silence. Meister Eckhardt

Silence is a complex word – it can mean absence from speech, or perhaps being unaware of the noise or sound that surrounds us or it could mean being sent to Coventry, as it were, never mentioned or spoken to or about. It could mean the silence that surrounds secrecy. It can be a verb – creating stillness, silencing others. Then there is the punitive silence which perhaps every parent and teacher has used at times. We use silence to encourage the transgressor to own up! There are awkward or perhaps painful silences where no-one knows what to say, perhaps in responding to times of grief and anxiety, or the comfortable silence where we are at peace, where we feel that words are not needed at this moment. That is perhaps best described as companionable silence. It might even be described as the experience of being loved.

If we think about it, the silence that brings us closer to the sacred is perhaps a combination of most of those.

Recently I read an article about a person who decided not to speak for a day. He felt that he was arguing too much with others, being too angry or touchy. One day turned into another and then another. That quiet brought with it a revelation that whenever he was speaking with someone with opinions different from his own, he would simply interrupt to press his point of view. He came to understand that he hadn't been listening to anyone, because he was thinking all the time about what he was going to say back to them. His point of view was always more important. In his silence he came to realise that he had all these conversations continuing on in his mind, critiquing his interactions with other people – if only I had said this or that I could have won that argument.

Those inner arguments disappeared when he stopped speaking and he came to realise that over the years he had stopped listening, he had stopped learning. Those few days of not speaking stretched out for seventeen years! Yes, seventeen years! By choosing to ditch this main form of communication for so long, he discovered that there were plenty of others he could use instead. The response was interesting – some people got very angry with him, others just ignored him, some used the silence to work their way through what they were thinking, what they were arguing. And he learned a lot from all these reactions.

So he came to realise that: "I wanted to learn from listening — listening to people, listening to the environment, to nature. Every day and every year I found something that was just so wonderful." During that time, he went to university to get his undergraduate degree, masters and PhD, all while not speaking.

Not many of us could decide to take such a drastic step. It was a rather severe way of learning an important lesson. It is a bit of a cliché to say that life is not always what it seems – there are layers of meaning in everything, in what happens, in what we see and hear around us, in nature around us. We call that the mystery of life. Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote that 'God is the friend of silence. See how nature, trees, flowers, grass, grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence.... We need silence to be able to touch souls.' Ours as well as others.

Often though, silence is what we try to avoid. Life seems to be filled with noise, headphones of all descriptions sell like hot cakes. Social media calls us to respond immediately. We seem to live in the age of rage - people, situations, delays, not getting my way annoy the hell out of us!

Silence is not escapism, it is not running away from reality or ourselves. The silence we seek is the silence that touches the soul, the essence of who we are. It is a silence that is meant to help us, to help heal us of anger, and impatience, to help us to listen and more importantly, to hear, to begin to see that the world around us can be a grace-filled and peaceful place. It is a silence that takes us within and without. There is someone right now, right here, who is crying out for help. Whose voice are you not listening to today?

We don't need seventeen years. But perhaps that many minutes each day might transform us.

Regards
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