

Text from the Tradition: The Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen (text drawn from pp. 35-6, 63, 44-5, 47-50)

Why Silence in Prayer?

“Silence is situated between solitude and prayer. Silence completes and intensifies solitude. Silence is a very concrete, practical, and useful discipline in all our [daily] tasks. It can be seen as a portable cell taken with us from the solitary place into the midst of our [life]. Solitude and silence are for prayer. The Desert Fathers did not think of solitude as being alone, but as being alone with God. They did not think of silence as not speaking, but as listening to God. Solitude and silence are the context within which prayer is practiced.”

“Silence, itself, does three things: 1) it makes us pilgrims, 2) it guards the fire within and 3) it teaches us to speak. Let us recognize how often we come out of a conversation, a discussion, a social gathering, or a business meeting with a bad taste in our mouth. How seldom have long talks proved to be good and fruitful? Would not many if not most of the words we use be better left unspoken? We speak about the events of the world, but how often do we really change them for the better? We speak about people and their ways, but how often do our words do them or us any good? We speak about our ideas and feelings as if everyone were interested in them, but how often do we really feel understood? We speak a great deal about God and religion, but how often does it bring us or others to real insight? Words often leave us with a sense of inner defeat. They can even create a sense of numbness and a feeling of being bogged down in swampy ground. Often, they leave us in a slight depression, or in a fog that clouds the window of our mind. In short, words can give us the feeling of having stopped too long at one of the little villages that we pass on our journey, of having been motivated more by curiosity than by service. Words often make us forget that we are pilgrims called to invite others to join us on the journey.”

“A more positive meaning of silence is that it protects the inner fire. Silence guards the inner heat of religious emotions. This inner heat is the life of the Holy Spirit within us. Thus, silence is the discipline by which the inner fire of God is tended and kept alive. Our foremost task is faithfully to care for the inward fire so that when it is really needed it can offer warmth and light to lost travelers.”

“A third way [of silence is that it] teaches us to speak. A word with power is a word that comes out of silence. A word that bears fruit is a word that emerges from silence and returns to it. All this is true only when the silence from which the word comes forth is not emptiness or absence, but fullness and presence, not the human silence of embarrassment, shame, or guilt, but the divine silence in which love rests secure. Words can only create communion and thus new life when they embody the silence from which they emerge. As soon as we begin to take hold of each other by our words, and we use words to defend ourselves or offend others, the word no longer speaks of silence. But when the word calls forth the healing and restoring stillness of its own silence, few words are needed: much can be said without much being spoken.”

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: The Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen by Christine Luna Munger

Most newcomers to contemplative prayer spaces are usually taken in or taken aback by the first experiences of silence, and its related discipline, stillness. In times marked dominantly by hurried frenzy, constant movement, and over-stimulation, many of us scarce experience slowing down, much less actual stillness; we rarely find places that are quiet, much less interiorly silent. Our times are marked by the breadth of a “more” characterized by consumerism rather than by the depth of the “more” characterized by contemplation. Consequently, silence, whether in solitude or in common, is often uncomfortable and awkward. When we first remember silence, it likely shows us our brokenness and need for healing before it shares the secrets of wholeness and aliveness.

Consider the example of the Christian season of Lent, marked by a spirituality of the desert. The Lenten season kicks off with the story of Jesus facing three temptations in the desert. Lent, then, is a time for solitude, silence, simplicity, and sacrifice. While small children are often encouraged to “give up” objects of desire such as sweets or soda, many serious adult seekers usually attempt to “add in” something to their Lenten commitments. An extra prayer period, every day; “really, this time I will do it.” Extra service to others. Extra, extra and more, more. Nouwen’s admonition of our tendency toward too many words shows itself in all aspects of our life. Adding “more” rarely resolves the pervasive sense of emptiness inside if most of life outside is marked by compulsive busyness. What might Lent look like if it were a time of pruning, of simplifying, of cleaning out? What might you have to work hard at in order to let go of?

The classic Christian term associated with the work of silence is “purgation.” Teresa of Avila calls it “recollection,” or gathering ourselves together. Evelyn Underhill calls it “simplification.” Whatever its name, it is a solid spiritual practice that forms the foundations of the spiritual life; it requires discipline and hard work in order to bear the fruits of wholeness hiding within. Contrary to common intuition, the hard work of silence does not cause exhaustion or emptiness; rather, its sweet fruits taste like aliveness and fullness.

Questions for Reflection: The Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen

- In your own experience, what makes up peaceful, healing silence and what makes up awkward, divisive silence?
- How do you sense the difference between full silence and empty silence?