

Entering Merton's "Friendly Communion of Silence"

By Gerald J. Schiffhorst

Increasingly, it seems, the riches of silence are being unearthed in places not ordinarily associated with spiritual reflection. One recent example, an article in *Harper's Magazine* by Mark Slouka, "Listening for Silence," is a provocative meditation on the ambivalence of silence as something both positive and negative. Writers on the visual arts, such as Anthony Grafton commenting on the relation of timelessness and stillness in the paintings of Vermeer, often speak of the spiritual permanence of the silence evoked by art. And, in academia, a proposal for a college curriculum in contemplation by Mike Heller of Roanoke College playfully envisions a major in silence; but his proposal is serious, with roots in both Quaker spirituality and in such texts as *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* by Mary Rose O'Reilly.¹

Although many great poets (Dante, Eliot, and Rilke among them) have created a language designed to express an inexpressible, wordless silence, and although many philosophers have said some suggestive things about the language of silence, it is to Thomas Merton, I think, that we must turn if we want to explore this elusive topic. For the contemplative tradition from which Merton speaks provides the richest soil for nurturing ideas that other writers have merely mentioned or suggested: that silence expresses the mysteries of the self in a "language" that transcends words and time in an effort to reach God.

It is appropriate that the second volume of Merton's recently published journals has been entitled *Entering the Silence*. Before quoting from this and other Merton texts, I would first like to sum up briefly what others have said about the relation of silence and presence in the context of Christian spirituality. Despite the usual dictionary definition – that silence is the "absence of sound or noise" – silence is not really about absence; it is not merely the opposite of sound and speech. Genuine silence is not about emptiness or negativity but about presence. It seems, that is, to have its own independent existence as a positive force; it is part of language and the possible source of its power. As Romano Guardini, writing about prayer, has said, "silence opens the inner fount from which the word arises."² If we listen closely to the wordless spaces between our thoughts and practice extending those spaces, I would add, we can find deep silence. When the soul is open



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in this way, there is no room or need for words. Silence makes itself manifest and is just as real and significant as the light suffusing my desk.

Most writers who have mentioned silence do so as the polar opposite of sound and speech and do not discuss silence as an enduring condition that sound interrupts. The Jesuit scholar Walter J. Ong says that we can encounter God with spoken words, but since human words do not endure and silence does, “encounter with God is even more encounter with silence.”³ God’s word, which occupies time without disappearing with time, is like silence, which is “even more communicative than words” (Ong 187). For Ong, the spoken word is the central sign of human presence, yet silence evokes a more stable spiritual presence.

To discuss silence is, most obviously, to discuss the kind of presence that contemplation, whether existing in a religious context or not, immerses us in. As both Eastern and Western spiritual masters have long known, inner stillness is essential to contemplation, which Merton defined as listening in silence. In the contemplative monastic tradition, silence concerns the flow of the self that springs from God and that connects the individual to God. It is inseparable from stillness, which Guardini described as the “tranquillity of the inner life, the quiet at the depths of its hidden stream. It is a collected, total presence, a being all there, receptive, alert, ready” (Guardini 16). Rather than being seen as a failure to communicate, as in much modern usage, silence goes beyond speech, which exists in time, to evoke presence, which is closely associated with the silence of eternity.

Although silence is inseparable from the Western tradition of contemplative prayer, it is not limited to prayer: any intense savoring of the present that removes us from the world of words and time can be seen as silence, which is the language of the soul. The soul speaks in prayer and in poetry, both of which Merton explored in terms of deep silence. In several journal entries in January, 1950, he speaks largely to other monastic priests about how “terribly important” it is to keep silent:

If we said only what we really meant, we would say very little. Yet we have to preach God too. Exactly. Preaching God implies silence. If preaching is not born of silence, it is a waste of time. Writing and teaching must be fed by silence or they are a waste of time. There are many declarations made only because we think other people are expecting us to make them. The silence of God should teach us when to speak and when not to speak.⁴

Later that month, he warns about loving silence not for its own sake “but for the sake of the Word” (ES 404), making the distinction between the solitude that leads to life and that which leads to the dead-end of the self. The essential difference involves relatedness.

In later writings, Merton helps us see silence not as an isolating experience but as a communal experience of presence. In fact, solitude and silence lead, paradoxically, to love. In *Thoughts in Solitude*, he says that when we can put aside words and stand face to face with the “naked being of things, . . . we find that the nakedness of reality . . . is clothed in the friendly communion of silence, and this silence is related to love.”⁵ I think what Merton means by a loving, “friendly communion” of silence is that we are spiritually related through wordless prayer with all those living around us who engage the inner life in pursuit of a union with God. We share eternity with those who in different ways participate in the same present reality. Or, to put it more simply, in some areas we can understand one another without words because we become part of a spiritual world more “real” than that of one-dimensional everyday reality. Such a multidimensional world surrounds and sustains the ordinary.

The word *friendly* is significant, I think, because one of the popular connotations of silence is that of hostility. And Merton wants to emphasize that coming together in silence is anything but alienating. In *The Springs of Contemplation*, he says that the community is presence, not an institution. "Real silence is not isolation . . . it can be a powerful form of communication."⁶ Genuine silence, he goes on, is a result of spiritual maturity. While silence is a form of presence, presence must also include some sense of distance, and silence serves this function. We need to keep a certain distance to remain composed and at ease and to keep our identity, Merton insists, making clear the distinction between the distance necessary for psychic wholeness and isolation from true community. If our actions and existence tend to be noisy, he continues, our being is silent: there is a ground of silence that is always there when the actions cease.

A central and recurring motif in *New Seeds of Contemplation* is the communal power of silent presence. Through contemplation, Merton writes, "we are all One in Him." Even here on earth, "the more we are one with God, the more we are united with one another; and the silence of contemplation is deep, rich, and endless society, not only with God but with men."⁷ He goes on to show that the contemplative is not isolated: "Love comes out of God and gathers us to God in order to pour itself back into God through all of us and bring us all back to Him on the tide of His own infinite mercy" (NSC 67). Merton does not envision the contemplative life as a "heaven of separate individuals" but, in an image that seems indebted to Dante, as a "sea of love which flows through the One Body of all the elect, all the angels and saints," whose contemplation, to be complete, has to be shared (NSC 65).

While I tend to associate contemplative silence mostly with Merton's monastic tradition, Quaker spirituality also offers significant reminders that group silence leads to communion with God and that prayer does not happen to souls in isolation. As John Hostetler observes in a different context, "silent discourse prevails where people are deeply involved with one another. The collective awareness is developed to such an extent that it becomes a religious experience, and it can be neither uttered in sound nor communicated in words."⁸

Rather than being seen as a failure to communicate, the silence suggested by Merton and by T. S. Eliot goes beyond language in creating presence. In Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," silence is the "speech without word and / Word of no speech." Speech is of time whereas silence is of eternity; that is, silence opens up a dimension of reality beyond time and space.⁹

The contemporary monk David Steindl-Rast has eloquently described the mysterious presence of silence. We come, he says, out of the darkness and silence of the womb into a world of noise; but through prayer, we can re-create the maternal aspect of spirituality whereby we are enclosed, safe from fear, in silence. Through silence we "merge with the loving mystery in which we are all immersed."¹⁰ Trust in this mystery will bring us peace and freedom from fear.

If, then, we understand silence as related to healing love, perhaps we can see why so many mystical writers have described God as silence. That is, just as language is basic to human nature, silence is fundamental to God, even though we must first know Him as the Word. Merton is not alone in reminding us that we are only able to connect our inner silence and stillness to the silence and stillness of God by creating a place deep within: it is only there, at the center of the self into which we enter, that God communicates to us. We then listen deeply, waiting for the silent word.

Through prayer we enter the silence from which we came, having emerged from the silence of our pre-existence before we one day re-enter the eternal silence. That we share this silence with the dead and the unborn is less remarkable, I think, than that we share it with all those living around us

who engage the inner life. Thomas Keating, who has done so much to revive the tradition of contemplative prayer, speaks of prayer as an opening to God. He does so in terms that bring us back to his fellow Cistercian's notion of a "friendly communion of silence":

By opening yourself to God, you are implicitly praying for everyone past, present, and future. You are embracing the whole of creation. You are accepting all reality, beginning with God and with that part of your own reality of which you may not be generally aware, namely, the spiritual level of your being.¹¹

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1. Mark Slouka, "Listening for Silence," *Harper's Magazine* (April, 1999) 63-68; Anthony Grafton, "Vermeer's Mysterious Theater," *The New York Review of Books* (11 Jan. 1996) 28; Mary Rose O'Reilly, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998). I am indebted to Paul M. Puccio for sharing Mike Heller's unpublished paper, "How Quaker Principles Emerge in Composition Practice," delivered in 1998 at the College Conference on Composition and Communication.
 2. Romano Guardini, *Preparing Yourself for Mass* (1939; rpt. Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1997) 11; subsequent references will be cited parenthetically as "Guardini" in the text.
 3. Walter J. Ong, SJ, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 161; subsequent references will be cited parenthetically as "Ong" in the text. The work of George Steiner is also important to anyone interested in the relation of silence and presence: see *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967) and *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
 4. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 2 - 1941-52*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996) 396; subsequent references will be cited parenthetically as "ES" in the text.
 5. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 85-86.
 6. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 7.
 7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 66; subsequent references will be cited parenthetically as "NSC" in the text.
 8. Dale Salwak, ed., *The Wonders of Solitude* (San Rafael, CA: New World, 1995) 21.
 9. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 1963) 98.
 10. David Steindl-Rast, *The Music of Silence* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) 119.
 11. Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (New York: Continuum, 1997) 43.