

## The power of silence



I recently discovered this image created by Leonard Peng illustrating an article in Nautilus from last summer called, “This is Your Brain on Silence.” written by Daniel A Gross. I love the way it shows the attunement of heart and mind that can happen in meditative silence. It also reminds me of Float therapy, a sensory deprivation therapy that we, amazingly, have in our area! Its heals through deep meditation sans sensory input. Gross explores the neurological research on noise and silence and includes the ingenious Fins coming up with a new marketing plan for tourism in 2010. Silence. They realized silence is a priceless commodity in our culture and invite people to come visit their land to experience the silence! I’m ready to go!



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In two different studies, one involving music and one involving mice, the power of silence surprised researchers. In a study of the effects of music on brain function, the blank spaces between the songs had the most startling affects. The subjects showed dramatic relaxation measured by the affects on the bloodstream including blood pressure, carbon dioxide and circulation in the brain. It seems the contrast between sound and silence releases the brain from concentrated attention and brings relaxation and health. (Luciano Bernardi on the physiological effects of silence in the journal *Heart*, 2006) The mice responded to accidental silence of two hours a day by developing new cells in the hippocampus, controlling memory and senses, that appeared to become functioning neurons and integrate into the system. (studied by Duke University regenerative biologist, Imke Kirst, 2013)

When sound waves reach our ears our amygdala's are stimulated, the center of emotion and memory. This can be the song that takes you right back to that middle school dance party. It can also be a release of stress hormones increasing levels of adrenaline in case we need to fight or flee to protect ourselves from that lion that was chasing us when we lived in Africa long time ago. Some neurologists posit that chronic noise and cortisol flooding can lead to high blood pressure, decreases in our immune system, and heart disease to name a few. Silence can have the reverse affect flooding our systems with relaxation and creativity instead. Think about the relative silence of the shower and the things you remember or problems you solve between shampoo and conditioner. That's the power of silence.

Much research also shows the power of meditation to change our neurochemistry and alleviate the effects of stress and increase our physical health. I know these things now but I stumbled on them through experience when I began exploring contemplative prayer as a follower of Jesus years ago.

As the Social Services Director of a small, exponentially expanding non-profit 20 years ago, I worked with people affected by poverty, mental illness, addiction, and homelessness. The work brought creativity, cultural diversity, intellectual challenge, joy, and interpersonal struggles and despair. It rocked my understanding of God and justice and hope. In the same season, we adopted our first child. We didn't know it at the time, but she has a brain injury from exposure to alcohol in utero, a FASD. FASD has a way of bringing lots of chaos and confusion along with it. Trauma, attachment, FASD and our lack of understanding of those things made our home a very chaotic and sometimes violent

place. I realized I couldn't do the work of the non-profit and parenting without finding a balance between action and contemplation in my life. I started searching.



visitsanjuans.com

First step: we sold our house and lived on the money in Vancouver, Canada for a two year sabbatical! I began taking silent retreats with friends in Vancouver and found healing in the times of silence. We shared simple meals on retreat but otherwise had solitude. I spent time hiking in the forest, reading, walking the labyrinth, sleeping, praying, drinking great coffee (it is the Pacific Northwest-ish) It changed me. I worked on forming a “rule of life” for myself, intentionally choosing a balance between work and rest, relationships and solitude, giving and receiving, silence and celebration. And we moved back to Texas and adopted two more kids.

Through a search for a spiritual director in Dallas, I ended up in HeartPaths Centre for Spirituality training in contemplative practices and becoming a spiritual director. When I was introduced to centering prayer in the form of Thomas Keating, something began to shift in me. Here are a few excerpts from my journal at the time.

Nov 6

“I am grateful for this morning. For stillness and quiet under the blue fall sky. Breathing in and out—feeling the tingling aliveness of the cool in breath and the warm exhale going back out into the world in compassion.”

Nov 8

“Today seemed like the first time. The first time I’ve even tried to meditate. To contemplate. I wonder what it is—this opening and emptying. Is it emptying? So many thoughts flow through my mind. I experienced frustration with it today. So many things creeping in. I don’t even know they’re there until I’m half way through them. What am I trying to do? To be in God.”

Nov 10

“What am I doing??? Sitting still and straight. Just being. How is that not a waste of time? What is happening in me? To me? I’m not at all sure. Why am I doing this?”

Dec 3

“Release. Release my eyes. My jaw. My forehead. Release rejection, jealousy. Release planning. Release holding it all together. Release into love. Release into flow. Release into love.

I feel like you are trying to crack open my chest and make room for more of you. For me. Not violently but gently.

Watching me forget, remember, follow a flitting thing across the field and twirl back again (like the young girl I once was in the field)...

Meditation scoops out a place seeing beauty, sensing beauty to fall and root in me, yes?

I can breathe when I release.”

Dec 16

“Centering prayer has drawn me into a new, open, spacious place within the mystery we call God. In just the last couple times I’ve practiced it, I have felt an opening up and releasing into the mystery of the Divine Presence. Being in a place without words and images is amazingly restful, and I carry a lightness and openness with me throughout the day.”

It was a very mysterious process, but I began to find that I could sink into it.

I continued the practice of silent retreats but began to notice though my external environment was quiet, my internal one was very noisy. Whether I was reading or thinking or wondering what I would eat next, there was always chatter in my mind. I remember lying under a cotton wood tree as it danced with the wind and looking up into the Texas blue of a fall sky. And not experiencing peace. Being in my mind was like being at Cynergy movie theater with all the noise and people and smells and lights. ACK!! Anxiety and stress flooded me with cortisol as my mind WOULD NOT SHUT UP. I needed new tools.

I learned to create space between myself and my thoughts through studying DBT and Buddhist meditation teacher Tara Brach. I haven’t stopped thinking during meditation or silent retreats, but there are times when I can witness my thoughts without identifying with them. One way to work with thoughts is to imagine them as boats floating along a river and see them but choose not to jump on board and ride down the river. I can notice the thoughts coming up (its great information about what’s driving me), and be hospitable to even the parts of myself I wish were different. Maybe offer a, “Thanks for the information, I’ll let you know when I need your help. Please sit quietly over there for a while.”

Cynthia Bourgeault talks in [the Heart of Centering Prayer](#) about the power to rewire our brains being in the coming back to silence rather than the ability to maintain internal silence nonstop. Our responses to stimuli dictate the neural pathways our brains follow. If we are able to release and respond with openness, our frontal lobes are engaged. If we respond with constriction, our amygdala engages. Flight, flight, or freeze happens. Wizard vs lizard brain. When we have a practice of stillness and silence that incorporates letting go of our thoughts as they happen, we exercise this response of release and openness and find it making its way into our daily lives. We discover we can pause instead of reacting. Release our automatic response and choose compassion and service to ourselves and others. For me, this is the way of Jesus. I’m not as kind or patient or compassionate when I skip stillness and silence. My pausing muscles atrophy. My kids notice and say, “Hey, Mom. I think its time for a retreat.”

The pause silence creates for me also opens my awareness. I spent this summer reading the Divine Milieu by French Jesuit priest, paleontologist, and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He believes that our world is constantly evolving at every level: physically, spiritually, relationally...on and on toward greater consciousness. His equation is awareness + response = consciousness. The margins of my book are filled with exclamation points and YES! I remember a visit from my dad during an especially painful time in our family a few years ago. Mental illness filled our home with chaos, fear, tears, and yelling. I was walking him to his car as we said goodbye and he said, “Lynn, I don’t know how you do it. How you survive.” I said, “I look for beauty and goodness wherever I can and hold on to it.” I realized after saying it to him, that my meditation creates the spaciousness that allows me to notice beauty and goodness around me even in the hardest times. Sometimes just one tiny thing a day. But the noticing, stopping, savoring gives me strength to keep going and not surrender to despair. It might be bright yellow flower on the Gold Star Esperanza in my garden in its first, surprising bloom of the season. Maybe the wind going from hot to cool as fall finally comes. It always comes through my senses, and it is what keeps me alive. I resonate with Teilhard saying near the end of his life,

Throughout my life, by means of my life, the world has little by little caught fire in my sight until, aflame all around me, it has become almost completely luminous from within.

Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin  
quoted in The Divine Milieu, p 46

Silence brings awareness of the luminous.

The challenges of neurobehavioral conditions, the strength and beauty in our family and being forced to evolve through it all in order to love has transformed me. My children are my spiritual teachers. I am again leaning into the balance of contemplation and action through my work. I'm training, consulting and supporting professionals and families affected by neurobehavioral conditions, offering spiritual direction and guiding contemplative practices. All in the hope of alleviating suffering in our world and nourishing peace and beauty. It is my practice of sitting in silence that makes my work possible. Silence has become the place I come from rather than a place I go to. Although Finland still sounds great!

A day of Silence  
Can be a pilgrimage in itself.

A day of Silence  
Can help you listen  
To the Soul play  
Its marvelous lute and drum.

Is not most talking  
A crazed defense of a crumbling fort?

I thought we came here  
To surrender in Silence,

To yield to Light and Happiness,

To Dance within  
In celebration of Love's Victory

I Heard God Laughing  
Renderings of Hafiz by Daniel Ladinsky

All my stirring becomes quiet  
around me like circles on water.

*My tasks lie in their places  
where I left them, asleep like cattle.*

Then what is afraid of me comes  
and lives a while in my sight.

*What it fears in me leaves me,  
and the fear of me leaves it.*

It sings, and I hear its song.

*Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.*

What I fear in it leaves it,  
and the fear of it leaves me.

*It sings, and I hear its song.*

After days of labor,  
mute in my consternations,

*I hear my song at last,  
And I sing it. As we sing,*

The day turns, the trees move.

Wendell Berry  
A Timbered Choir

I go among the trees and sit still.