

Space for God to Speak: *Using Silence to Address Media Glut from the Inside Out*

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Silence is rarely seen as a gift, particularly as it requires so much time to become an able and skilled speaker. Its golden properties are metaphoric and mostly appear lacking in luster, especially for the 4.7 billion of us who are a part of the global population using digital media.¹⁸⁶ Our media-centric culture of chatter and megaphone persuasion makes measured, reasoned discourse an ebbing phenomenon. But personal mobile media (PMM) have so dramatically altered the semantic environment that a new appreciation for silence—with a resurgence in contemplative practices—is beginning to emerge. Podcasts, webinars, memes, and television series using ancient religious practices such as yoga, meditation, and the enneagram as their focus have silence taking on a new sheen. Conferences, organizations, and workshops that focus on listening, mindfulness, and other qualities associated with quiet reflection have advanced a discussion of silence as an important part of the communication process and have now become a regular feature in the popular press.¹⁸⁷ It is time for communication education to deal seriously with silence as a worthy and important part of speech.

Until recently, scholarly study of silence had largely been consigned to the area of communication studies known as nonverbal communication, a subcategory of the field that owes much to the early research of Raymond Birdwhistell and later advanced by Paul Ekman and Tannen and Saville-Troike.¹⁸⁸ Although the primary focus of this project does not involve nonverbal communication per se, silence is one of the categories attributed to the sub-field. This, along with the “rhetor’s tool,” that is, silence as *aposiopesis* or the “pregnant pause,” has a long-standing tradition in speech-making. From Quintilian and Cicero to Burke,¹⁸⁹ Glenn,¹⁹⁰ Kennedy,¹⁹¹ and Bizzell & Herzberg,¹⁹² to name a few, we have seen silence used as a rhetorical tool to gain audience attention,

¹⁸⁶ These figures are accurate as of July 2020 and reported by Statista: Statista, “Global Digital Population as of October 2020,” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>.

¹⁸⁷ Some examples include the following: Contemplative Outreach Events with Steve Standiford and Lindsay Boyer at the Garrison Institute in Garrison, NY; 2020 Contemplative Practices for Higher Education Conference, hosted by the Contemplative Higher Education Alliance for Research, Teaching, and Service, in Roanoke, VA; “The Living School” at the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, NM; *Turning to the Mystics* podcast with James Findley; *Mindfulness* journal; and *Mindful* magazine.

¹⁸⁸ For overviews of nonverbal communication see Raymond Birdwhistell, 1952; Paul Ekman, 1972, and Tannen and Saville-Troike, 1995.

¹⁸⁹ See Burke, Kenneth. “Language as Symbolic Action.” 2001. In *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd ed., edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, 1340–5.

¹⁹⁰ See Glenn, Cheryl. *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. 2004.

¹⁹¹ See Kennedy, George A. *Aristotle: On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*.

¹⁹² See Bizzell and Herzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd edition; 2001.

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maintain engagement, and create context and emphasis. Another niche of communication studies recognizes silence in conversational turn-taking and the necessary rests and pauses that occur in patterns of interpersonal exchange. In this subcategory of study, silence is that which helps to punctuate speech, creating responsive patterns and the rapid pace of exchange commonly known as conversational flow.¹⁹³

Silence is also studied as a part of what is needed to make meaning. Making meaning, sometimes referred to as “sensemaking,” is part of communication coherence.¹⁹⁴ Silence helps provide the necessary dialectical space for reflection, offering a means by which one may reduce uncertainty of interpretation. Certain precepts of uncertainty reduction theory overlap with the process of making meaning, though they are not synonymous. Whereas uncertainty theory focuses on managing impression in order to predict future relationship, sensemaking involves analysis after an interpersonal interaction. One is proactive, the other retrospective.¹⁹⁵ Both require reflective silence. The steady flow of information from newsfeed, print media, streaming services, and multiple social media networks encroaches upon this necessary aspect of communication effectiveness at every turn. Without silence, the intrapersonal reflection and self-awareness needed to properly interpret meaning is missing.

Aside from its communicational, relational, and linguistic properties, silence has been shown to be effective in every part of human development and behavior. Along with alleviating stress, improving memory, and stimulating brain growth, silence as a regular and intentional discipline has long been a practice that creates the necessary mental space for reflection, analysis, critical thinking, focus, and intimacy.¹⁹⁶ Kirkwood points out that it “is widely held that the attainment of direct, non-intellectualized knowledge of the real can be achieved only when one can briefly set aside talking, intellectualizing, and emoting”¹⁹⁷ A number of fields address silence in both worth and necessity. From medicine and psychology to philosophy, education, sociology, and communication, silence is essential for human well-being and can be addressed from multiple vantage points. The close interdisciplinary connection silence has with other fields makes a nuanced study important, particularly in these times of paradigmatic cultural shift through media development and usage. Exploring the importance of silence as a function of intrapersonal communication, especially in regard to the deep resonance of silence with religious studies, forms the central goal of this paper.

Religious groups that function outside the formal structures of the monasteries also use silence in their rites and rituals. Early Quakers found the self-abnegating properties of silence useful in helping them discern the voice of God. Although there are a number of conservative Quakers in the United States who continue to worship in silence in what they term “unstructured meetings,” more liberal Quakers conduct

¹⁹³ See Jaworski. “*The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*.” 1992. Also, the work of Holler, Kendrick, & Castillas, *Turn-Taking in Human Communication Action*, 2016.

¹⁹⁴ See Kramer, Michael W. “Communication and Uncertainty Reduction During Job Transfers: Leaving and Joining Processes,” 1993.

¹⁹⁵ Foundational work in the field may be found in Berger & Calabrese, 1975. For more granular research in the context of workplace relationships, see Michael Kramer, 1993.

¹⁹⁶ See Borrelli, “Five Health Benefits of Being Silent for Your Mind and Body.”

¹⁹⁷ See Kirkwood, William. “Studying Communication about Spirituality and the Spiritual Consequences of Communication,” p 23.

meetings that appear more akin to services in mainline churches.¹⁹⁸ Other Christian groups make use of silence to replenish, restore, and energize those working among the poor and dying. One example is in the work of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who explained, “God is the friend of silence. In prayer and silence God will speak to you. In silence, we find new energy and unity. Silence gives us a new look on everything.”¹⁹⁹ Reverential silence is a common practice in Christian traditions such as Roman Catholicism, but not the same as monastic silence. Monastic silence is dialectically attached to verbal prayer, and in some monasteries, it is practiced specifically as a *via negativa*, that is, as a way of emptying one’s self of the need to vocalize, thus creating space for God to move upon the soul in a transformative way. This manner of keeping silent is a type of renunciation of the self. Some monks, such as the Trappists, generally remain silent throughout meals and use silence to maintain a general atmosphere of prayer, while the Benedictines use silence as a means of maintaining simplicity and order. Some orders, such as the cloistered Carthusians, can remain silent for days at a time.²⁰⁰

Finally, silence has long been a part of a narrative of the mystic. From the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the fourth century to the Christian mystics of the Middle Ages and moderns such as Thomas Merton, silence has played a significant role in mediating the space between what can be said and what remains unspoken. Merton, along with other contemporary teachers such as Richard Rohr, James Findley, Anthony de Mello, and Henri Nouwen, joins with numerous voices from the past such as French noblewoman Jeanne Marie Guyon, Spanish mystic Michael Molinas, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Brother Lawrence, and Julian of Norwich, to name just a few who extol the benefits of the “prayer of silence.”²⁰¹

This article explores several of the ways the need for silence is being addressed and reframed in the public sphere, along with its relation to the long history of contemplative silence in the church. After a brief review of some of the scholarship and historic precedents involved in past paradigmatic media shifts, this article will explore several contemporary instantiations of silence, review its connection with human communication and well-being, observe implications, and move toward a solution, suggesting ways that silence might best be used as a regular practice both within the church and in the wider world.

Communication, Media, and Silence

In a limited but famous set of studies undertaken by Albert Mehrabian it was estimated that between 65% and 93% of meaning is communicated nonverbally. While his methodology focused narrowly on the communication of feelings and attitudes among female undergraduate students, Mehrabian and colleagues unveiled the dominance of nonverbal messages in human communication.²⁰² Despite the limitations of their

¹⁹⁸ Early Quakers have long appreciated and used silence as a means of worship, waiting to be moved by the Spirit of God to speak rather than from one’s own font of human wisdom. Today, silence remains a part of Quaker meetings as well as silent prayer times where several gather in a “meeting for clearance,” that is, to gain clarity concerning God’s direction.

¹⁹⁹ See Harrington, *A Time for Silence*.

²⁰⁰ The Carthusians maintain a lifestyle of silence, speaking approximately one time per week and then returning to their silent existence.

²⁰¹ Jeanne Guyon’s “small and practical means of prayer” is something she called “the Prayer of the Heart.”

²⁰² See Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication*. 1972.

research, this work revealed the importance of understanding what expressed without words. This high percentage of meaning-making attributed to nonverbal communication moves far beyond facial gestures and body language. Much of it is the result of how silence functions in conversational turn-taking and rhetorical pause. Categorizing communicative silence into four separate levels, Tannen and Saville-Troike²⁰³ framed these as (a) unnoticed cessation of sound in the production of consonants; (b) pausing or turn-taking in conversation; (c) lulls in conversation (Goffman, 1959); and (d) providing structure and background against which speech is made meaningful.²⁰⁴ In their *Perspectives on Silence*, Tannen and Saville-Troike reposition silence as the communicational ground of speech rather than considering speech—as it long has been—the ground. In their discussion of the topic, the two invoke Searle (1969) when they argued that “just as one can utter words without saying anything, one can say something without uttering words.”²⁰⁵

More recently, Ajit Pyati, a Canadian communication scholar, argues that the study of silence belongs in a more comprehensive education, one that is more holistic in its approach. Approaching silence from this standpoint, Pyati argues for the integration of contemplative practice as a necessary part of the study of communication.²⁰⁶ He cites the twentieth-century Cistercian monk Thomas Merton, who argued that “the function of a university is, then, first of all to help the student to discover himself: to recognize himself, and to identify who it is that chooses”²⁰⁷ This, a more humanities-driven approach to the study of communication underscores the central purpose of this essay: to explore the connection between silence and effective communication in religious practices, and to ask aloud whether or not it is time to break down the walls that conscript contemplative silence to the basement level of contemporary Western Christianity.

The Media Ecology Connection

Today’s media landscape, emphasizing multiple channels of information and a plethora of emotionally charged stimuli, has drastically altered the environment in which much human interaction takes place, normalizing interruption and diminishing the necessary place of silence as grounded structure of speech, reflection, critical thinking, and interior balance. Expanded use of “smart technologies” in everyday life has altered the acoustic landscape as well, leading to numerous social challenges, some of which affect physical comfort and auditory health, others altering emotional and psychological equanimity. In 1985, Neil Postman addressed this issue as an imbalance between access to information and a person’s ability to act upon it. The imbalance, he explained, was a result of the emergence of a new age of media in the mid-nineteenth century: the development of telegraphy. The telegraph connected the world, allowing access to people and problems far outside the scope of one’s immediate locale. Postman explains, “Prior to the age of telegraphy, the information-action ratio was sufficiently close so that most people had a sense of being able to control some of the contingencies in their lives. What people knew

²⁰³ See Tannen, Deborah, and Muriel Saville-Troike. *Perspectives on Silence*, 1995.

²⁰⁴ Tannen, Deborah, and Muriel Saville-Troike. *Perspectives on Silence*, p. xvii.

²⁰⁵ Tannen, Deborah, and Muriel Saville-Troike. *Perspectives on Silence*, p. 6.

²⁰⁶ Pyati, Ajit. “Contemplation as Educational Activism in Communication Studies.” 2017.

²⁰⁷ See Pyati, Ajit. “Contemplation as Educational Activism in Communication Studies.” 2017 pp 67-80

about had action-value.”²⁰⁸ The concentrated strength of family and community relationships found in locality began to ebb in the wake of the woes of the world. Because “everything became everyone’s business,” as Postman phrased it, the average person was inundated with the weight and worry over problems that were not theirs to solve: “For the first time, we were sent information which answered no question we had asked, and which, in any case, did not permit the right of reply.”²⁰⁹ Postman’s observation about the telegraph may well represent the beginning of the fissure between communication and meaning-making. As the rise of non-contextualized information expanded, open, unfettered head space diminished, leaving individuals with what Kenneth Gergen has termed “social saturation.”²¹⁰ If not the beginning, Postman’s example is a worthy one, framing the movement of information as a commodity rather than a move toward sense-making.²¹¹ Clearly visible through the television age and now in the age of PMM, this trend continues today.

Too much information or stimuli has been a consistent theme in the work of many other scholars and thinkers, perhaps most notably Marshall McLuhan, whose view of media as a totalizing force enlivening or deadening the whole sensory apparatus of the human brain was the subject of his greater body of work. In his classic *Understanding Media*, McLuhan explained that the human brain cannot stand detached and unmoved in its interaction with media, a dynamic that has increased exponentially as we have soared into ubiquitous and pervasive use of digital devices. McLuhan writes, “In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action. It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner.”²¹² Like Postman, who posited that an inability to act upon this information increased the sense of personal helplessness and added to the psychological state of stress, McLuhan’s premise that media are immersed in the human sensorium is an idea that has continued for over fifty years. Communication scholar Paul Soukup links this idea with Walter Ong’s work in secondary orality. He explains, “Products of secondary orality demand more, not less interpretation since they involve a deception—the hiding of the text on which they depend. Digital materials, as being yet more abstract, require more interpretation.”²¹³ Certainly, this applies to the faster, more efficient means of communication, such as email, social media, texting, and AirDrop, which allow more tasks to be accomplished each day and are accompanied by the ensuing amped-up expectations to fit more into the newly freed-up space. As the digital age continues, a sensory imbalance has become

²⁰⁸ Postman, *Amusing*, p 6.

²⁰⁹ Postman, *Amusing*, p 69

²¹⁰ According to Kenneth Gergen in *The Saturated Self* (1991), one of the most prominent elements of what he terms “social saturation” occurs when the community comes to consensus in the adoption and use of a new technology, and, in more particular terms, said technology begins to expand the individual circle of influence so that each life becomes more densely populated with people, noise, schedules, and demands. This, he contended, is part of the dilemma of identity in contemporary life. Instead of simplifying life, new technologies make them more complex and demanding.

²¹¹ See Kramer, Michael W. “Communication and Uncertainty Reduction During Job Transfers: Leaving and Joining Processes,” 1993.

²¹² McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

²¹³ Soukup, “Looking Is Not Enough: Reflections on Walter J. Ong and Media Ecology.”

even more pronounced than in the twentieth century when Postman, McLuhan, and Ong were theorizing.

The ideas these fathers of media ecology promote hold increasing weight as the age of digital technologies expands and signs of communication breakdown continue. Much research and countless anecdotal examples may be found in every area of society. The world of business is no exception. Leadership strategist Carol Kinsey Goman calls upon a recent Harvard study that found face-to-face interaction to be thirty-four times more effective than an email. “In face-to-face meetings our brains process the continual cascade of nonverbal cues that we use as the basis for building trust and professional intimacy,” she explains. In a *Forbes* interview with Ulrich Kellerer, author and former CEO of the German corporation Faro Fashion, Goman provides a forum for the businessman to discuss his research findings, saying, “While sending emails is efficient and fast, face-to-face communication drives productivity. In a recent survey, 67% of senior executives and managers said their organization’s productivity would increase if superiors communicated face-to-face more often.”²¹⁴ Facial primacy is part of the reason for this, but there is more to the matter. Essentially, people need people, not a screen image or facsimile of another. This factor has come to the fore in 2020 as “screen fatigue,” sometimes called “Zoom fatigue,” provides a timely example of how much energy it takes to communicate for extended hours. While the innovative features of advanced technology have been a gift to the most isolated, the global pandemic has opened our eyes to a bit of what is lost in our relationships when human beings cannot touch anyone, breathe near anyone, or actually be in each other’s presence.²¹⁵

The nonverbal communication cues to help maintain predictable outcomes in communication as well as navigate the realm of emotion in personal interactions are attended to primarily through one’s face.²¹⁶ These cues are a part of the social environment in which humans flourish. Without them, something is missing. And, as the media environment continues to shift, human communication suffers when one medium is substituted for another without acknowledgment of the lacking nonverbal cues.

Part of what suffers goes beyond communication breakdown and is attributable to the overstimulation of the human sensorium.²¹⁷ Whether spoken or written, the current massive exteriorization of the word can easily lead to chaos without proper attention to the interior. As Walter J. Ong writes, “The word itself is both interior and exterior: it is, as we have seen, a partial exteriorization of an interior seeking another interior. The primary physical medium of the word—sound—is itself an exteriorization of a physical interior, setting up reverberations in other physical interiors.”²¹⁸ As the primacy of the spoken word once again takes on greater capacity in the world, one of the greatest challenges is to find ways to protect the endangered spaces that typically

²¹⁴ Carol Kinsey Goman, “Has Technology Killed Face-to-Face Communication?”, *Forbes*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolkinseygoman/2018/11/14/has-technology-killed-face-to-face-communication/#1ab9d968a8cc>.

²¹⁵ Sklar, “‘Zoom Fatigue’ Is Taxing the Brain. Here’s Why That Happens.”

²¹⁶ For more detailed discussion of this see Mark Knapp and Judith Hall, 2007.

²¹⁷ Related to the word “sensation,” the concept of sensorium refers to the whole of the brain/body nervous system or the entire sensory apparatus. Both Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan used this word to explain the way media affect the senses and perception.

²¹⁸ Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1967).

allow for leisure, both in mind and body. With the flow of information continuing to increase, it is no matter whether the information is relevant or irrelevant; all contribute to the intaking of more information than the body can easily and regularly process through the nervous system. The extra load placed on the sensorium thereby contributes to the loss of stable and balanced interiority. A lack of silence exacerbates this situation, creating a “perfect storm” for chaos.²¹⁹ Many of the most recent studies researching in this area are found in the realm of mental health, neuroscience, and wellness. A specific area is in the field of psychology and the growing interest in the study of anxiety disorders.

Contemporary Problems Associated with Media Glut

Exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, heightened stress associated with excessive screen time has only added to the growing epidemic of anxiety. This, seen in the demeanor and behavior of many suffering from stress-related disorders, illustrates what recent research in the field is revealing. Aspects of it, such as excess fatigue, social anxiety, and even the growing epidemic of loneliness, are referred to generally as “tech overload” or “media glut.”²²⁰ These phenomena have also been alternatively framed as “information overload” and appear to have foisted human beings into a runaway pace of life screeching with high-pitched anxiety.²²¹ The periodic discomfort that anxiety brings is an experience not uncommon to most people. Although formally researched and treated in the fields of medicine and psychology, anxiety-centric disorders are increasing as information overload becomes more intense; the most common and widespread of these is known as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). GAD is described as feeling uneasy without a reasonable cause and affects nearly 6.8 million Americans each year.²²² The information on teenagers is even more alarming. In 2017, teenage anxiety and depression rose 70%.²²³ GAD is not just prevalent in the U.S.; according to the World Health Organization, the disorder affects as many as 300 million people worldwide. Other data point to upward of forty million people of all ages who are affected by this disorder, making it the most common mental health issue of the day. Because of the rapid increase of GAD, many other changes are occurring both within individual mental health and in the social landscape.²²⁴ One aspect is something regularly recognized by occupational therapists and cited as a growing problem in the *Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood* manual. The manual mentions “sensory overload” as a condition that is affecting more and more children and adults as the rapid pace of everyday life increases.²²⁵ Though not officially recognized as a mental disorder, “[s]ensory overload happens when you’re getting more input from your five senses than your brain can sort through and process.

²¹⁹ Venus Bivar, “Senses,” Chicago School of Media Theory, <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/senses/>.

²²⁰ Koppel, “Overload: How Technology Is Bringing Us Too Much Information.”

²²¹ Chumakova, “Surviving Information Overload: A Plea for Balance.”

²²² Newman, “Anxiety in the West: Is It on the Rise?”

²²³ Damour, “New Study Links Phone Use and Mental Health in Teens.”

²²⁴ Hafner, “Researchers Confront an Epidemic of Loneliness.”

²²⁵ Arky, “The Debate over Sensory Processing.” Although it was submitted for inclusion, sensory processing disorder is not recognized in the latest *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders* as a mental health disorder.

It is generally described as a reaction to loud noises, crowded spaces, or just too much stimuli coming from too many directions, [and, *sic*] is expanding far beyond the autism spectrum.”²²⁶ While not directly a communicational malady, these factors contribute to the imbalance of the human sensoria, undoubtedly adding to the amount of cognitive processing necessary to communication in an environment requiring multitasking.”²²⁷ Other underpublicized problems associated with the media glut involve disorders such as multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, and ADHD.

Heightened pace also contributes to this overload. As it increases, it creates exterior pressure to keep up, and interior equanimity is upset. But do people truly experience *more* anxiety in these days of data deluge, or is this more a matter of perception? If there is an actual rise in anxiety, is it due purely to the glut of media and data we must, of necessity, absorb today? Surely, direct causation is too simplistic a notion. The changing media landscape is not the only factor; however, more and more interdisciplinary studies, reports, books, and articles are emerging that note a connection between well-being and media saturation. One, from the American Psychological Association was conducted for two consecutive years. It explored the level of anxiety in a population of 1,000 millennials in 2017 and again in 2018. The first study revealed that two-thirds of those polled experienced regular symptoms of anxiety. In 2018, that figure was up by 5%.²²⁸ During the same period, a review of twenty-two research studies that took place over the past eight years was published by the National Center for Biotechnology Information. Although many of the findings were inconclusive based on what has been called unhealthy or addictive Internet usage, there is compelling evidence to suggest that the use of social media networks has some correlation with mental health: “Whether this effect is beneficial or detrimental depends at least partly on the quality of social factors in the SNS (social network) environment.”²²⁹ These qualities include non-Internet related social experience, family, and age.

In addition to the expanding array of anxiety disorders, loneliness is rising in what appears to be epidemic proportions.²³⁰ One study found “that students who limited their use of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to 30 minutes a day for three weeks had significant reductions in loneliness and depression as compared to a control group that made no changes to their social media diet.”²³¹ It appears, however, that even those who are not socially isolated and do not report high activity related to texting and the use of online platforms also experience a deep sense of loneliness. The spike in loneliness

²²⁶ Healthline, “MS Voices: How to Deal with Sensory Overload.”

²²⁷ Kathryn Watson, “What Is Sensory Overload?” Healthline, September 27, 2018, <https://www.healthline.com/health/sensory-overload>.

²²⁸ Newman, “Anxiety in the West: Is It on the Rise?”

²²⁹ Elizabeth M. Seabrook, Margaret L. Kern, and Nikki S. Rickard, “Social Networking Sites, Depression, and Anxiety: A Systematic Review,” *JMIR Mental Health* 3, no. 4 (2016): e50.

²³⁰ A recent study found that loneliness affected the well-being and overall physical health of 46% of people surveyed throughout the United States. The reasons, however, appear to be mixed. Loneliness was described as a daily sense of being overwhelmed by isolation and growing social anxiety, and the dynamics factoring into these numbers on loneliness are diverse, but often include the heavy use of social media. One study, for example, was conducted in 2018 by University of Pennsylvania researchers and reported a correlation between excessive Internet and social media use. These numbers were calculated prior to the global pandemic of 2020.

²³¹ Jeremy Nobel, “Does Social Media Make You Lonely?”, *Harvard Health Blog*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/is-a-steady-diet-of-social-media-unhealthy-2018122115600>.

shows up in a 2018 loneliness index; in a study conducted by Cigna, one of the foremost health insurers in the United States, almost half of the 20,000 people surveyed reported feeling lonely sometimes or often. The index separated “very heavy users” of social media from those reporting never using social media: “Respondents defined as ‘very heavy users’ of social media had an average loneliness score of 43.5—not remarkably different from those who reported never using social media, 41.7.”²³² It may be that loneliness is simply being reported more accurately in this age of information, but the one steady contributing factor to loneliness appears to be the lessening of face-to-face interaction.²³³

Interiority, Distraction, and Information Overload

The term “interiority” refers to the inner landscape of one’s being. Sometimes referred to as the soul, interiority is envisioned in numerous ways and mostly perceived through art, lyrical poetry, and psychological study. It is an idea that is fundamental to Greek thinking and emphasized in Augustine.²³⁴ From a contemporary perspective interiority refers to the psychological existence of a person, the non-public, private self. From a communication standpoint, the term involves one’s inner dialogue or intrapersonal communication. Some refer to this interior dialogue as “inner speech,” the self-talk and thoughts one has that are not verbalized. According to James Moffett, inner speech refers to a level of consciousness that is, in fact, “verbalizable” but may not ever be spoken, yet is available to one’s conscious mind. Inner speech can and often does come forth to the exterior “if some available stimulus directs attention there and [so it is, *sic*] potentially capable of being put into words”.²³⁵ Interiority is related to inner speech; the degree to which inner speech becomes a part of one’s consciousness is the degree to which interiority exists. The Collins English Dictionary describes interiority as “the quality of being focused on one’s inner life and identity.”²³⁶ This definition better describes my own approach to the subject. When exterior noise, which may contain a wide variety of stimuli from visual images and GPS to the pings, pangs, and wide variety of notifications from our smartphones, eclipses the inner landscape of quiet, distraction becomes the norm and communication is immediately degraded.

This is not only so for conversational coherence, but for the sense-making and reflective features of intrapersonal communication. The depth of thought necessary to cultivate and nurture close relationships, enter civil discussion, and enjoy stable mental health is grounded on an ability to be in touch with reality, and that requires the willingness to reflect on one’s inner self. While the convenience and immediacy allowed by these digital devices are undeniable, their pervasiveness and growing ubiquity have shaped (and are shaping) a radically new way of life, not just for those who use them but also for those who have opted out of the digital economy. These technologies have rippling effects both in lived experience with others and in one’s own interior, or private, self. Examples of such are numerous. Take, for instance, the ever-growing “skill set” of

²³² Alexa Lardieri, “Study: Many Americans Report Feeling Lonely, Younger Generations More So,” *U.S. News and World Report*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-care-news/articles/2018-05-01/study-many-americans-report-feeling-lonely-younger-generations-more-so>.

²³³ Lardieri, “Study: Many Americans Report Feeling Lonely, Younger Generations More So.”

²³⁴ See *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 10, 1,1.

²³⁵ See Moffett, “Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation.” pp 231-232.

²³⁶ “Interiority,” Collins, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/interiority>.

Amazon's Alexa.²³⁷ As of April 2019, one hundred million people own a device that uses the Alexa program; many "rely" on "her" for numerous bits of information, even companionship.²³⁸ Many reviews note using Amazon's voice assistant, Alexa, for "non-utilitarian" reasons, such as comfort in falling asleep, a way to stem loneliness, or in conversation as a substitute for a friend. This begs the following question: Is Alexa taking the place of intrapersonal communication and the dialogue with self that is necessary for sense-making? Some claim this digital assistant is just a tool helping to organize one's thoughts, like a written "to-do" list or calendar, while others find that the more they utilize this device as a substitute for human interaction, the more habituated they become to depending upon the technology to "stand in" for a human being. This trend has prompted the Amazon development team to increase the human features of this machine and give "Alexa a personality, by making its voice sound more natural, and writing clever or funny answers to common questions."²³⁹

Recently, some tech insiders have been speaking publicly about the intentional distractions they have built into the software. One is Jason Rosenstein, co-inventor of Facebook's "like" button, who left the company and is concerned about the distraction and loss of focus individuals are experiencing due to the social platform's interpersonal limitations. In an interview with Ted Koppel of *CBS News*, Rosenstein expressed concerns about the social media network and used the word "dangerous" to describe its effect on the public. He explains, "I think it's *very* dangerous right now to have a business model in which the way that these companies make money is by selling people's attention to advertisers."²⁴⁰ He further explained the financial incentives that are built into Facebook's business, including incentives to develop tools and software that make it nearly impossible for people to stop looking at their phones. This distraction factor, coupled with the pace and sheer magnitude of information necessary to process in everyday life, creates a "perfect storm" that is raging against the human psyche, working against positive mental health for many.

Some perceive these problems as no more than a "bug" in the system, one that can be adjusted and addressed with a technical solution. Others note the inevitable change in the human sensorium as being intimately related. No matter the perspective, physical, emotional, and numerous sensory challenges are increasing as use of our digital devices expands. Once these devices became ubiquitous and pervasive, the new pace became a necessity, diminishing human freedom rather than advancing it.²⁴¹ Consider, for example, the new social protocols surrounding visiting a friend or family member. Where once friends, family, and others in close community would not think twice to knock at someone's door if in the neighborhood or to call them on the telephone, those same relationships are now typically mediated via an anticipatory text: "Are you home?"

²³⁷ Alexa now features over 40,000 software functions called "skills," developed mostly by third parties.

²³⁸ Christopher Mims, "Your Next Friend Could Be a Robot," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/your-next-friend-could-be-a-robot-1476034599>.

²³⁹ From an interview in Aaron Paul Calvin's, "Echo and the Lonely Men: Can Amazon's Alexa Be Your Friend?" 2017.

²⁴⁰ Koppel, "Overload: How Technology Is Bringing Us Too Much Information."

²⁴¹ Jacques Ellul frames this necessity as the work of *la technique*, a French term that is not synonymous with "technology" nor the English word "technique." Rather, *la technique* refers to the tendency for technological methods to eclipse the original purpose. These methods (or means) are exchanged for the ends and empowered by a rhythm of efficiency, engendering a force tangled in its own network. that erodes human freedom of choice.

“What are you doing?” “I’m in your driveway—can you talk?” Data culled from my own ongoing research among the 18- to 24-year-old demographic point to the deepening entrenchment of these changing social protocols.²⁴² A text message is quickly becoming the socially acceptable way of contacting someone, rather than a voice call or face-to-face visit.

Despite the many personal connections made possible by the revolution in social media, an upset to interior equanimity continues to soar. Yet, increasingly mechanized machine-to-human communication and social media are just part of the changes brought about by the new semantic environment. Perhaps the most significant issue is not the media platforms, per se, but the pace the media ecology engenders. Instead of a steady rain of information drizzling over daily life, what has occurred may be described more accurately as an unrelenting tsunami. The revolution in computer technologies has created a dynamic that keeps individuals in a near-constant state of chaos, running away from the impending wave of information that threatens to engulf them. Whereas the television heightened the imbalance between information input and one’s ability to act upon it, the smartphone and its mobility factor raise “the interplay of image and instance to an exquisite and dangerous perfection”²⁴³. The overload is nothing new (we humans have an uncanny ability to adapt and conform), but the ongoing development and rollout of apps and the increasing ease of daily functions have exacerbated the situation. French philosopher and social theorist Jacques Ellul developed this idea in his framing of technique as a systemic, unrelenting force that erodes human freedom; in one of his final works, he refers to information overload as the “phenomenon of congestion.” He suggests that “even though each event might be useful, the totality is inhuman.”²⁴⁴ Lamenting about the pervasiveness and complexity of information systems and the imbalance it brings to every aspect of human life, Ellul touches specifically on problems associated with congestion in education, bemoaning the way excess information taxes knowledge: “It is the surcharge on academic programs, the ransom that must be paid for the growth of knowledge.”²⁴⁵ This surplus of information denigrates education in general by filling the cognitive and communicational spaces needed to process what is being taught. The classroom, particularly when vested with educators who welcome questions and use the Socratic—or discussion—method of teaching, is a place where congestion should be avoided most.

The massive wave of networked digital technology has brought much of this “overload” to the surface, with its mobility factor creating an entirely new dynamic in

²⁴² My own research includes an exercise I have conducted every semester for the past fifteen years. Students begin with a 24-hour fast from electronic and digital media, keep a log, then write an essay describing their experience. The survey, focus group, and debriefing data all point to the changing social protocols of engagement. My findings include a change sparked by the need to reduce uncertainty and maintain positive face with friends and family. In the past 5 years of the ongoing study, the fear of missing out [FOMO] has become a regular feature in the data.

²⁴³ See Postman, 1985, p. 78.

²⁴⁴ See Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* 57.

²⁴⁵ See Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, p. 57. Ellul’s critique of education is part of his wider project, which critiques systems and problems embedded in institutional organizations. His solution is not to reform curricula but to reduce the seemingly unending layers of technical knowledge in favor of more human interaction in the classroom. His program is like that of Neil Postman’s, whose ideas surrounding the encroachment of technology in the classroom at the expense of deep learning are treated deeply in his *The End of Education* (1995) and *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1971).

social interaction. These external dynamics seep through every part of human cognitive processing and over time change what Walter J. Ong has termed the psychodynamics of the secondary orality.²⁴⁶ The small handheld device we call the smartphone has allowed the public to take their media wherever they go, making the ease of combining work, play, home, and social groups into not just a convenience but also, in some ways, a necessity. In the wake of these changes, the rhythm of life has seen great disturbance. One aspect of the quickened pace that is not addressed as much as others is the unmooring of the human interior. The ability to multitask creates the necessity for it, clogging the channels of interpretation and focus with too much information to process.

These factors and others have played a part in reducing the awareness of our interior and numbing it with internal and external noise. Increasingly, the information is quashing the inner self below the surface of performance-driven behavior. The upset in interior equilibrium spills out regularly in relationships, at work, at school, and in the community. To combat these social ills, many school administrators, corporate leaders, faith communities, and neighborhood groups are working to address the distracted, overwhelmed lives. The following section explores several silence-centric strategies that are being used to address these social ills. The first measure to be discussed is a practice employed with increasing regularity: mindfulness.

Contemporary Silence Practices—Mindfulness, Yoga, and the Enneagram

Mindfulness

The concept of using silence and focused meditation in schools is becoming mainstream in the form of a meditative practice called mindfulness. A Portland, OR, high school was the first in the nation to offer a course for credit in this practice, which today is being touted as a means by which to create a calm and engaged classroom. Essentially, mindfulness is about the cultivation of present-moment awareness. Its practitioners use centering exercises such as deep breathing and journaling to bring the mind into focus.²⁴⁷ The breathing techniques are said to help students become self-aware, calm, and focused. Efforts to make mindfulness available to every child have been underway in online and on-site training courses for educators.

A curriculum called “Peace in Schools” is bringing what has been called “stealth Buddhism” to the public school system throughout the United States. This, along with other programs such as actress Goldie Hawn’s MindUp foundation, reframes Buddhist meditation in secular, neuroscientific terms rather than religious ones.²⁴⁸ Candy Brown Gunther, professor of religious studies at Indiana University, explains the secularization of meditation as mindfulness and suggests that it is a feature of the cultural appropriation of religion. She quotes Hawn’s description of her MindUp program to Buddhist insiders: “I’m a producer, I’m gonna put this show on the road . . . and *I got the script written*, and I call it a script because it is; it’s one step of *how the story gets told* of how you’re able to facilitate the best part of you.”²⁴⁹

Mindfulness practices run the gamut from meditative courses that train and teach technique to apps that help users become focused for thirty seconds or five

²⁴⁶ See Ong, 1982.

²⁴⁷ For full NYT article, see Gelles, David, 2021. “Mindfulness for Children.” *The Well*. *The New York Times*.

²⁴⁸ See Keck. “‘MindUP’ Teaches Brain Chemistry, Not Religion, Say Supporters.”

²⁴⁹ See Brown, “Mindfulness Meditation in Public Schools: Side-Stepping Supreme Court Religion Rulings.”

minutes at a time. Daily reminders and alerts proliferate throughout the Internet and are used to show people how to meditate or use a mantra.²⁵⁰ One site draws from the 1970s Harvard studies of transcendental meditation and encourages visitors to find a mantra, whether that “holy word” is a religious one or not.²⁵¹ These apps and websites encourage people of all belief systems to meditate. Protestants may use a familiar scripture as the holy word such as Psalm 23, quietly repeating “The Lord is my Shepherd.” A Jewish believer may use part of the *shema*, a core foundation of the faith.²⁵² The mantra might draw from Hindu or Buddhist literature, use a generic word that expresses peace, or be a simple prayer from your childhood or your family.”²⁵³ Another site, offering tips for micro-meditation and listing the top fifteen apps for mindfulness, promises to help those who engage to relieve their anxiety and stress and learn to relax their mind.²⁵⁴ Some examples of these platforms are Buddhify, Breethe, and Aura, which all promise to help users stay on track to relieve stress. Other secularized religious practices that make use of silence to calm or relax the psyche include tai chi, a graceful form of exercise that attempts to bring harmonious energy to the soul; guided imagery, to reduce trauma and lessen physical pain; and yoga, which is the most popular of these practices in the United States.

Yoga

A dimly lit room, deep breathing, reverential quiet, balanced posture—these elements are part of the regular experience for over twenty million Americans who practice yoga. The word “yoga” is Sanskrit for divine union, and the practice “has one single aim: stilling the thoughts of the mind in order to experience one’s true self.”²⁵⁵ This involves steady focus on one’s breathing and the ability to hold one’s position in stillness. The explosive popularity of this ancient Indian philosophy has in many ways been culturally appropriated and commoditized in the United States, largely due to the displacement of formal religious symbols and disenfranchisement of formal institutional religious systems.²⁵⁶ The rise of yoga has also been concurrent with the growth of social media and the overarching digital economy.

Swami Vivekananda first brought yoga to the United States in 1893 at the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago; then, in the midst of the 1960s exercise boom, his book became popular with American housewives and health advocates.²⁵⁷ As yoga became known as a means of physical exercise, yoga classes increased at gyms and community programs throughout the 1980s. Now, “yoga has come to be seen as something of a panacea for the ailments of modern society—tech overload,

²⁵⁰ See InnerPeaceFellowship.org, “Inner Peace Meditation: How to Mediate,” https://www.innerpeacefellowship.org/how-to-meditate/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwov3nBRDFARIsANGsdoEmi8lAPBpXld20_gFhJ9rq7BbKiRwECEsAxQISYN-C4A-0loDq8sQaAiNbEALw_wcB.

²⁵¹ See Groothuis, “Dangerous Meditations.”

²⁵² The core scripture of the *shema* comes from Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, oh Israel, the Lord your God is one.”

²⁵³ See Groothuis, “Dangerous Meditations.”

²⁵⁴ See “15 Best Meditation and Mindfulness Apps for 2021,” Develop Good Habits.com, <https://www.developgoodhabits.com/best-mindfulness-apps/>.

²⁵⁵ See Gregoire, “How Yoga Became a 27 Billion Dollar Industry—And Reinvented American Spirituality.”

²⁵⁶ See Antony 2014, p. 63.

²⁵⁷ Henry David Thoreau is widely known as the first practicing American yogi. See Gregoire, “How Yoga Became a 27 Billion Dollar Industry—And Reinvented American Spirituality.”

disconnection and alienation, insomnia, aches and pains, stress and anxiety.”²⁵⁸ Many see the practice as a way to modulate the harried speed of life in the twenty-first century, a way combat a culture saturated with stress and burnout. Yoga has been shown to help fight everything from addiction and lower back pain to diabetes and aging, in addition to boosting overall well-being and stress relief. According to Dr. Ishwar V. Basayaraddi, it is a means to self-realization and the achieving of harmony between body and soul, which today has become normalized and increasingly used in high school coursework and training.²⁵⁹ A cursory look for online resources to supplement high school curricula reveals numerous options: “The internet is saturated with yoga-based lesson plans, teacher-training courses, and ‘mindful’ music playlists designed for schools, while programs for certified yoga instructors who want to bring their practice onto campus have also gained popularity.”²⁶⁰ While some public schools are banning the meditative practice due to Supreme Court rulings on religion in schools, others are embracing it as a part of overall physical and mental health.²⁶¹ Emerging research points to the greatest public school adoption of this contemplative practice on the coasts. According to a 2015 Harvard University study of school-based yoga programs in the United States conducted by Bethany Butzer, educational yoga programs are based primarily in big cities on the coasts, the “areas known for their New Age-y enclaves—such as Colorado and the Northwest U.S. . . . Where they’re all but unheard of, Butzer’s data suggests, is in America’s heartland.”²⁶² In a national survey conducted in 2012, 1.7 million children were actively involved in the practice.²⁶³ The growing body of evidence that the breathing and stretching patterns help to calm children and create a more civil and teachable environment is a major part of the effort toward curricular inclusion.²⁶⁴

Just as resistance toward formal religion and a preference for the more general “spiritual” have grown over the past twenty-five years, so too has the practice of yoga. This may account for its explosive popularity in the West, despite the prevailing sense “of uneasiness and suspicion toward non-Western religions.”²⁶⁵ Part of the reason for this may be linked to the additional mental energy needed to navigate the digital economy and its rippling effects, along with the church’s entrenched and historic lack of willingness to address the whole person. There is some evidence, however, that steps are being taken to help congregants experience positive mental health. Enter the enneagram.

Enneagram

Although the enneagram has deep roots in ancient oral culture, historians and other scholars are not in agreement about the inception of the nine-point personality assessment system. Some point to Pythagorean geometry and Greek philosophers such as Plotinus, whose *Enneads* reveal nine divine qualities that are manifest in human nature

²⁵⁸ See Gregoire, “How Yoga Became a 27 Billion Dollar Industry—And Reinvented American Spirituality.”

²⁵⁹ At least since 3000 BC, stone-hewn statues of yoga positions appear in ancient ruins in the Indus Valley. Basavaraddi, “Yoga, Its Origin, History and Development.”

²⁶⁰ Wong, “Why Schools Are Banning Yoga.”

²⁶¹ Wong, “Why Schools Are Banning Yoga.”

²⁶² Wong, “Why Schools Are Banning Yoga.”

²⁶³ Wei, “More Than Just a Game: Yoga for School-Aged Children.” *Harvard Health Blog*, January 29, 2016.

²⁶⁴ Marilyn Wei, “More Than Just a Game: Yoga for School-Aged Children.”

²⁶⁵ See Antony, Mary. G. “It’s Not Religious, But It’s Spiritual.” *Appropriation and the Universal Spirituality of Yoga*, 2014, p 63.

through a higher and a lower part of the human soul.²⁶⁶ Echoing Plato's ideal forms as well, enneagram teaching in the twenty-first century mirrors the idea that the higher part of one's soul—or essence—is unchangeable, while the lower part is the seat of personality, rife with its fixations and passions. Other experts cite the Sufis and early Desert Christians as the earliest practitioners of this wisdom tool.²⁶⁷ Currently there are at least fifteen popular podcasts that focus on enneagram work, helping listeners to understand their inmost self (or soul) with greater clarity and wisdom. Silence, although not a major feature in this system, is implicit. For one to become aware of one's own fixations and personality patterns, reflection is necessary.

Essentially, the enneagram is made up of nine (*ennea* in Greek) points of fixation, each with a built-in path toward growth. From anger and anxiety to peace and serenity, the personality system helps practitioners increase awareness of the “blind spots” of the inner self. One of the current experts and advocates of this personality typing system is Christopher Heuertz, who explains the enneagram as a “sacred map of the soul” but is careful to add that “the map isn't the journey.” The map, although not a religious tool, is informed by both the Christian tradition and the Buddhist tradition, and is experiencing a boom in interest. Heuertz, author of *The Sacred Enneagram*, describes the enneagram as a wisdom tool and explains in an interview for *Relevant* magazine that this nine-pronged tool might be described as “a compassionate sketch of possibilities of who we can become,” which is quite different from other personality assessments such as the StrengthsFinder, DISC, or Myers-Briggs.²⁶⁸ Why has the enneagram been enjoying such favor in the marketplace?²⁶⁹ The answer may point back to the information and sensory overload taxing so many people in the wake of an ever-expanding digital media environment.²⁷⁰

Despite resistance from some fundamentalist Christians and Roman Catholics, the enneagram has found its way into mainstream culture, using language of transformation of the soul or the art of growth. In the enneagram's system, becoming aware of one's “fixations” appears to take the place of awareness of one's sins. According to Morgan Ian Cron, an Episcopalian priest and co-author of the international bestseller *The Road Back to You*, there are many believers who have given up on the church, but not left the faith, and many who are expressing a need for self-care and peace of mind rather than ritual, sermons, and judgment that they are not doing enough. He explains: “In our world now, a lot of the institutions that helped people to understand who they were are gone, or they don't have as much influence.”²⁷¹ The enneagram and these other quasi-religious practices are finding their way into secular venues such as public schools, corporate training programs, and community organizations because of the often-unspoken cry of people who are pressed for time, needing focus or what is colloquially termed “head-space.” As these secular uses of silence gain traction, it is now time to

²⁶⁶ Plotinus. *The Enneads*, [translated by Stephen MacKenna]. London, UK: Penguin, 1991.

²⁶⁷ Integrative9 Enneagram Solutions, “Enneagram History and Origins.”

²⁶⁸ DISC is an acronym for dominance, influence, steadiness, conscientiousness.

²⁶⁹ “What is DISC?”, PeopleKeys, Inc., <https://discinsights.com/disc-theory>.

²⁷⁰ See Reiss, “Why Has the Enneagram Become So Popular among Christians?”

²⁷¹ See Carr, 2010.

²⁷² Cron explains this in an interview with Jana Reiss in her piece from the Religion News Service, “Why Has the Enneagram Become So Popular among Christians?”

consider the ancient Christian practice of meditation and its outflow, contemplative prayer.

Christian Contemplation and the Prayer of Silence

Whether practiced in secular or religious terms, deep breathing, stretching, and mindfulness are practices deeply rooted in the ancient art of contemplation, where focused silence has long been a part of Christian mysticism. Proponents throughout the centuries (also known as Christian mystics) include Benedict of Nursia (480–547), John of the Cross (1542–1591), Brother Lawrence (1614–1691), and Julian of Norwich (1342–1416). Some traditions speak of contemplation as the “prayer of silence,” as taught by seventeenth-century French noblewoman Jeanne Guyon, who learned to pray silently during an oppressive marriage to a man who forbade her to pray openly.²⁷² Long before Guyon, there were others such as Benedict of Nursia, who embraced the simpler, quiet life of solitude in a cloistered group, and Francis of Assisi, whose formerly raucous life as a youth transformed into one dedicated to simplicity and much silence after a mystical encounter with God.²⁷³ Much earlier, in the fourth century AD, a group of Christians endeavored to live their lives outside the city, in close community, where silence and silent prayer was front and center. Known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers, these early believers sought a place of solitude where they could more keenly focus on keeping Jesus Christ as the central focus of their faith.

During the reign of the Emperor Constantine (280–337), Christianity became accepted and normalized.²⁷⁴ Paganism became politically incorrect, and Christianity began to be co-opted by politics. This—something they perceived as an unfitting substitute for simple, unfettered devotion to God’s leading in their lives—was the primary reason some Christians left the city. The Egyptian desert was a respite for these radical desert dwellers. Its sparseness and simplicity provided an oasis from the bustling chaos and noisy din of Constantinople. Followers of Christ such as Amma Matrona, Poemen, and Antony the Great were among those who looked to the desert as a refuge. Their self-imposed exile provided a way to preserve their faith and the dynamism of the message of Jesus Christ through an ascetic communal lifestyle. Although their desert experience did not produce a plethora of written texts, some writings have remained. Their *Verba Seniorum* is a classical collection of “plain, unpretentious reports that went from mouth in the Coptic tradition before committing to Syriac, Greek, and Latin.”²⁷⁵ Through these writings, their rich heritage has been preserved and studied, allowing an interesting perspective on silence and solitude as an alternative lifestyle to contemporary followers of Christ. Their habit of solitude and silence became known as Desert spirituality, a way of being that kept silence and simplicity a part of everyday life.

²⁷²See Jeanne Marie Guyon, *Experiencing God through Prayer*, 1984.

²⁷³The phrase “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary, use words” is often attributed to Francis, though uncorroborated and often contested.

²⁷⁴Constantine became Emperor in AD 323 and soon after began to Christianize the pagan temples by outlawing their existence and turning them all into houses of Christian worship. The credulity of Constantine’s faith is contestable to this day, but there is much evidence that he was, indeed, a believer in Christ. Now, instead of being fed to the lions, burned, and undergoing so many other persecutions for their faith, Christians could worship God freely, without fear of condemnation. On the other hand, because it was politically advantageous to be a Christian, many came to the religion (Christianity) without coming to a living faith.

²⁷⁵See Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p 12.

Today, in some Christian circles, there is a resurgence in these practices, with numerous books, podcasts, and other resources to help center believers within a practice that leads to interior peace and well-being. In the West, one of the more recent proponents was Thomas Merton, the previously mentioned Cistercian monk perhaps best known for his now classic work, *Seeds of Contemplation*. A Roman Catholic and public intellectual of the mid-twentieth century, Merton is largely responsible for revitalizing the Christian mystical tradition in the United States, authoring numerous books that advanced the practice of silence and contemplation. His many essays critiquing the industrial age and its heavy mechanization argued that, both intrapersonally and interpersonally, solitude and silence are necessary components to the development of the true self.

Merton's practice was one that incorporated both silence and action into the stream of his life, for both are necessary and must be kept in tension. This dialectical approach to speech and silence is perhaps what made him so unique. He contended that ignoring the tensions and trials of progress and all the noise and other social challenges it fosters could work against proper development of true personal identity, suggesting further that such development is not fully realized without collaboration with others in mature, honest, reflection. Contemplation is major part of this maturity, but "is not and cannot be a function of this external self. There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular".²⁷⁶ Merton lived and loved his quiet hermitage but did not stay there constantly. Instead, he wrote and spoke all over the world, living a very outward, active life informed by inward contemplative practice. The communal link was always present in his life, yet his teaching and engagement with others was informed by the practice of silence, a practice he upheld as a means of finding true rest. Merton is credited by many with bringing contemplative prayer back into the language and awareness of non-monastic Christians. Despite this, teaching and preaching on the subject of contemplative silence has realized no noticeable increase, and in the wake of its absence, other religious as well as secular efforts have filled the vacuum.

Christians from other traditions such as Thomas Kelly, a Quaker also writing in the twentieth century, advocated a type of contemplative practice called "centering prayer," one that "supplies the present-day tools of reflection whereby the experience of Eternity is knit into the fabric of time and thought".²⁷⁷ Kelly did not outline a particular way or devise a formula to practice silence, but encouraged readers to "lay hold" of the Divine life and power by returning in quiet persistence to the "practice in turning all of our being, day and night, in prayer and inward worship and surrender, toward Him who calls in the deeps of our souls."²⁷⁸

Author and teacher Richard Foster is yet another proponent of the use of silence in discipleship. Foster has done extensive work in understanding the various streams of Christian orthodoxy. In one of his best-known books *Celebration of Discipline*, he addresses the overstimulation of the age and advocates a practice that incorporates a measure of silence into everyday life, something he calls *otium sanctum*, or "holy leisure." This type of

²⁷⁶ See Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*. p.7.

²⁷⁷ See Kelly, 1997, p. 11.

²⁷⁸ See Kelly, 1997, p. 11.

leisure refers to the “ability to be at peace through the activities of the day, an ability to rest and take time to enjoy beauty, an ability to pace ourselves”.²⁷⁹ Foster offers rationalization for such, saying, “If we are constantly being swept off our feet with frantic activity, we will be unable to be attentive at the moment of inward silence. A mind that is harassed and fragmented by external affairs is hardly prepared for meditation and if we expect to succeed in the contemplative way, we must pursue ‘holy leisure’ with a determination that is ruthless to our datebooks”.²⁸⁰

Many other religious traditions draw from contemplative silence. Existential philosopher and Jewish Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel lauded silence, debunking claims suggesting that it leads to a mystical union. Rather, he emphasized that “it is neither a way composed of magic nor an ascent by means of letters but is rather the dialogue of he who stands before God and reaches momentary communion and exaltation.”²⁸¹

The Roman Catholic tradition has long held space for contemplation, typically as the work of prayer in its monasteries—something for mystics and saints. Today, it appears change is afoot. In the Jesuit publication *America*, contemplative retreat leader Lindsay Boyer explains how the practice of silence grounds her works to renew the mind: “I have found that God’s presence can often best be invoked with a minimum of God language, or sometimes no language at all. By teaching centering prayer, I offer the gift of God’s silence, which speaks to the heart, and seems to convert the mind and will as well.”²⁸² In this tradition, silence is a means by which the practitioner is able to transcend the world of words and information, connecting with the deepest sense of self and divine Other.

The Latin *contemplatio* most literally means “to mark out a space for observation.” What does one observe when embracing the silent prayer of contemplation? This is part of the inexplicability of the Christian faith. There is an Other—a Supreme Being who is invisible, but present; the contemplative wants to embrace that Presence deeply. In contemplative prayer, the believer turns his or her gaze attentively toward that One whose face may be seen in the life and death of Jesus Christ. What words are to be said in the midst of this loving, longing gaze? Human words fail, but contemplation is a practice that moves beyond words. Essentially, it makes the space available for God to speak.²⁸³

Implications

Using Neil Postman’s information—action ratio as a background, this article has examined the resurgence of contemplative practices as countervailing efforts to regain and restore balance to the human sensoria. Balance involves holding two opposing necessities in tension, and, as poet John O’Donohue reminds us, requires the “loyal

²⁷⁹ See Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. p. 27.

²⁸⁰ See Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. p. 27.

²⁸¹ See Horowitz, “Abraham Joshua Heschel on Prayer and His Hasidic Sources.”

²⁸² Sidney Callahan, “Centering Prayer: Contemplative Practice for the 21st Century,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, December 3, 2014, <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/centering-prayer-contemplative-practice-21st-century>.

²⁸³ The Psalms offer the most evidence for the Voice of God in the numerous passages as well as the Scriptures surrounding the prophetic speech of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Moses.

weight of the opposite and opposing force”.²⁸⁴ Silence is just such a weight. In this project, I have explored such tensions in the link between information overload or “media glut” and silence, focusing on several practices that actively use silence as an antidote to the current cacophony. The secularization and expansion of spiritual practices such as yoga, mindfulness, the enneagram, and non-monastic meditation are each becoming a mitigating dynamic intended to restore and replenish equanimity in the human sensoria. Implications of these findings point to the need for silence in the Christian community and a move toward apprehending it. Though the implications are many, I will focus on two, starting with implications for the church in the United States.

The church in America has by and large left a vacuum in the area of interiority. The practice of silent prayer, both individually (for the sake of spiritual formation) and for the greater well-being of the community, is available if the church would but lay hold of it. Promoting the use of silence as a contemplative practice to focus, listen, and reflect is something local churches can effectuate immediately. Next, the practice of attentive silence is a necessary liniment to help restore the art of listening both relationally and as a means of restoring dialogue in the public square. Measured silence vis-à-vis waiting to respond to another instead of having a guttural reaction has the power to do much toward healing the broken communication that is evident in our polarized public conversation and relationships with one another online. The need for new communicational patterns—a new normal—is dire, and not limited to institutional valence.

This is especially apparent within the walls of the church. Religious education must step up. The practice of contemplative prayer is not only spiritually energizing—the silence also fosters equanimity, making space for emotional stability. By teaching contemplative practice as a regular feature in the spiritual formation of all believers, educating on the proper place of silence, and providing opportunities therein, the church can do its part to help establish positive relational and mental health among its congregants. This, undoubtedly, will work toward the furtherance of speech that advances dialogue. Additionally, the intentional and regular break from speech that contemplation offers creates a built-in humility enhancer. Spending time in solitude and silence is a worthy reminder that that speech is a gift from God—one to be used, not abused. Speech is a powerful gift, indeed, but one that must be regulated by self-discipline. Discernment is necessary, as well, in determining when to choose silence instead of using the gift of speech as a default measure to make a point. This may be especially so in religious institutions where the loudest voices typically hold the most sway. Contemplative silence helps discern the still small Voice of God, but reminds us as well that we, too, have a still small voice within us—the inner teacher.²⁸⁵ Obeying this inner voice requires coming away from the din of distractions in order to hear it.

A second implication also involves the specific role of education, but the kind which must expand beyond the walls of the local church. The place for solitude in an active life may appear to be out of touch with the real needs of a workaday world, but the lack of it does not negate the human need for quiet, solitude, and contemplation.

²⁸⁴ O'Donohue, *Longing and Belonging*, 2012.

²⁸⁵ Emerging from the long tradition of interiority, the notion of “inner teacher” is largely a Quaker idea, noted often in the work of Parker J. Palmer, specifically in his volume, *A Hidden Wholeness: Journey toward an Undivided Life*, first published in 2004.

Noise, rather than silence, is rapidly becoming our new “natural” environment. Immersed in such an information-rich, media-saturated habitat, the acceleration of noise—both external and internal—is rising exponentially. Instead of the rich robes of silence set as the backdrop for dialogue, conversational space is becoming something of an anomaly, and as the pace of life increases, time for quiet reflection is scarce. An antidote is needed—a corrective—to the runaway train of speech acts piled into our overstuffed days of information-rich media. Providing opportunities for the local community to learn and grow in understanding and apprehension of silence is imperative. One of the ways to accomplish this is by becoming a resource to the wider community and, to view it more widely, as a part of the reconciling work of Christ. Perceiving community outreach this way is imperative.²⁸⁶ Now is the time to revive and cultivate contemplative practices as part of the work of reconciliation in the earth.

Conclusion

With roots in ancient Christian practice, contemplative silence is a measure in which the church could take the lead. This matter is critical and is centrally intertwined with the God of the Bible’s emphasis on love. One author, John Swinton, a pastor and former nurse practitioner from the University of Aberdeen, has emphasized this in his book *Becoming Friends with Time*. In it, Swinton points out how time is the unseen factor in well-being and wholeness. The Scotsman correlates bodily health with spiritual vitality and points the way to more rapid healing by something that would seem to be standard practice: being present with patients. Running around the hospital at top, turbo speed may appear to be accomplishing much, but, as he explains, when medical professionals slow down and bring their full selves to their patients, it helps them heal more quickly. In many ways, this practice is much akin to bringing one’s whole self to any other relationship, such as a friendship or a marriage; it is also the place where contemplative practices can help most. Focus, eye contact, *truly listening*—all of these can occur only when one steps out of the hurry and is fully present. Swinton explains, “To meet someone requires more than simple presence. It involves *looking* at someone, *seeing* them as they actually are and *learning* to love and to receive love.”²⁸⁷ In differentiating between simply being in someone’s presence and Swinton’s notion, the phrase “true presence” comes to mind.

Swinton retells the story of the 1960s Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama whose book *Three Mile an Hour God* helps articulate the immense importance of a well-paced life. Koyama noticed that the average speed that human beings walk is three miles per hour. Swinton locked onto the idea, using Jesus Christ as Exhibit A, maintaining that Jesus walked at the same pace as everyone else on the planet and never wrote a book or employed a publicist. He walked at three miles per hour and turned the world upside down by his true presence. Ultimately, Swinton’s conclusions about human relationships and practical medicine culminate in a short sentence: *Love has a speed*. We miss too much when we rush through life. Indeed, love has a speed, and it is in sync with our natural bodily rhythms. That speed is gentle. That speed is tender. It may appear excessively protracted in our hurried, fast-paced world, but a slowing may be exactly what is needed

²⁸⁶ In 2 Corinthians 5:18–20 Paul reminds us that we are all ministers of reconciliation.

²⁸⁷ John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*, Syndicate, <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/becoming-friends-time/>.

to help us from tearing ourselves apart and returning friendship, love, and public discourse to something that at least resembles civility.

What might this look like? Those involved in scholarship might pursue interdisciplinary research exploring the neurological, communicational, spiritual, and psychological benefits of silence. Moving forward this way will allow us to better assess and lay hold of the benefits of silence, which will do much to address the imbalance in the information-action ratio. Without such education and recalibration, the human sensoria may continue to adjust, but also continue to spin in a cycle of disorder, disrupting interior equilibrium.

Those involved in areas other than academe might commit some ministerial time and personal energy to advancing a contemplative agenda by offering free, easily accessible meetings for contemplative practice. In the early centuries of Christianity, the church led the way in feeding and housing the poor, creating the “poor houses,” then the first hospitals. So, too, there is a need in this century to care for the impoverished of soul, teaching congregants the way to walk in peace and equanimity. Clearly, the world is hungry for an alternative way to live in this fast-paced world without choosing to live off-the-grid or becoming fearful of technology. Guidance, direction, discernment: These wisdom tools are within the reach of Christians everywhere. Using them to help mark a path for others within (and outside of) the community of faith is a way to foster shalom, thereby walking in greater alignment with Jesus’s call to “love thy neighbor.” There are myriad ways these gifts might be used to create shalom that are limited only to the ways human beings can think creatively. Perhaps through coordinating events and workshops, teaching series, and group gatherings specifically for prayerful meditation, local churches will make initial steps in helping those outside the community of faith adjust to the quickened pace and noisy throng of this technological society. Instead of trying to shout the loudest or convert the most, helping others cultivate a focused, balanced interiority may certainly help move the church further away from the narrow, discursive, sometimes militant means by which the Gospel has historically been communicated.

Beyond Awareness

In this age of life hacks and quick fixes, silence peers from the corners of the room waiting for her chance to shine. Contemplative practices once relegated to the monasteries are being secularized and gradually becoming mainstreamed. These practices are increasingly offered by public institutions in an effort to help people cope with the psychological tension to know more, be more, and do more in the same number of hours each day. Moving forward in a continually advancing and complex media environment will require not just an awareness of how media glut disturbs human equilibrium but necessitates a way forward. The need to actively pursue solutions that provide an antidote to the breakneck speed of daily life is apparent.²⁸⁸ Alternatives to the hyper-pace and information overload must be discussed and employed. A return to spiritual practices such as solitude, silence, and stillness is in order. Merton made this clear throughout his writings, suggesting that rest for the soul is available when meditation and silence come together in a contemplative life. Laying hold of the practice of silence, whether for reasons of spiritual or mental health, is an opportunity to take back the agency that, in many ways, has been given over to the powerful current of media

²⁸⁸ Rauch, *Slow Media: Why Slow Is Satisfying, Sustainable, and Smart*.

streaming through our lives. Cultivating the practice of contemplative silence is an opportunity to envision a different kind of life, one that does not capitulate to the multiple forces of corporate persuasion and efficiency but stands up and reclaims the time and space to reflect, focus, and think more deeply. Silence can help lead the way. More than a pause, silence is a gift, one that the church has largely left wrapped and undiscovered. Silence does not feel like our natural habitat. It may even seem counterproductive, yet to protect and preserve all that is precious and delightful about life, humans must lean into silence, take charge, and address the imbalances we have brought upon ourselves through our own creative, technological impulse.²⁸⁹

Silence “stands at the door and knocks”; she has been waiting long enough for her younger, more glamorous sister—Speech—to facilitate justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly toward a more harmonious, peaceful society. Having stood in the background for too many generations, Silence has been belittled as ignorant, mute, and unworthy. But she has a place. There is a ground Silence brings to Communication’s table, a foundation of calmness, poise, openness, and equanimity. She knows her place and will bring it if we let her.

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²⁸⁹ See Rauch, *Slow Media*.

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