



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Listening to Silence”

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Centering Thoughts:

To speak is to sow; to listen is to reap. Turkish Proverb

*Silence is the universal refuge, the sequel to all dull discourses and all foolish acts,
a balm to our every chagrin, as welcome after satiety as after disappointment.*

Henry David Thoreau

Silence is more musical than any song. Christina Rossetti

The quieter you become, the more you can hear. Ram Dass

Sermon:

As the children in our story show, being silent isn't easy. By being silent the young Buddhists hoped to reduce distractions external and internal so that when it came time to meditate they would be more successful in their practice. Through the quiet focus of meditation they hoped to connect to their own Buddha nature. Though the children desired silence, they found it difficult to maintain. You and I are likely no different.

It is easy for most of us to get caught up in the noise of the world and our own minds and never find a calming, quiet moment to just be. To just listen to the thoughts and feelings we might otherwise suppress through our busy-ness. For some of us, we maintain the noise to avoid what we might discover or hear in the silence. For some, silence fills us with anxiety, rather than calm. For some who stop and listen, they discover they're unhappy, lonely, or stuck in a purposeless rut—and they'd rather not know. For some, silence is akin to death.

But noise is not healthy. Research shows noise produces higher blood pressures and stress hormones that tax our bodies. Noise makes it difficult to concentrate. Some people must listen to 'white noise' just to cancel out other noise or keep silence away. Conversely, quiet reduces blood pressures and increases good hormones. Silence gives us time and space to consider who we are becoming. Noise keeps us from ourselves. Silence heals. Noise hurts our ears and our souls. Silence soothes. Noise serves as a method of torture. Why torture ourselves?

Silence may be a form of punishment, too. Consider the child put in a corner facing the walls unable to speak or interact with peers. Although I didn't have that particular experience, in

elementary school I was considered borderline hyperactive. My first grade teacher despaired that I wouldn't learn to read because I couldn't sit still. I also spoke my thoughts out loud at what were considered inappropriate times. For punishment, my sixth grade teacher thought he'd silence me if I had to write one hundred times over and over, "I will not talk in class." It didn't silence me. In fact, since I had to do this so often, I even wrote out pages in advance.

We have many reasons for avoiding silence. But avoiding what might emerge in the silence will not eliminate the underlying cause or fear, it will only fester. Only facing it will allow it to be healed.

RING bell

Many religions engage our five senses in worship and ritual such as the aroma of burning incense, the feel of a pebble or a hug, the visual beauty of lit candles or gold iconic art, the taste of wine or bread, and the sound of a choir singing or bells ringing.

We begin our worship, our time of shaping or ascribing things of worth, with the sound of a bell. Bells call us to attention. Fire bells, school bells, doorbells, dinner bells, and ritual bells all alert us to something and call us to act, whether to flee to safety, answer the door, or simply stop chatting, be silent, and listen. Recall how a fire alarm bell makes your heart race, and how the silence that follows its ending calms you down.

In contrast to a world filled with noise, we offer you a small amount of silence each week. We ask you to silence your noisemakers when you enter the sanctuary for worship. But even during our brief silent meditation or prayer, we cough, shift in our seats, rattle papers, babies cry, and, regrettably, phones may ring. Sometimes our inexperience or inability to be silent makes us cough and shift, or even protest sitting in silence.

But if we allow ourselves to settle into the relative quiet, we might hear a bird sing an entrancing morning song. We might hear the gentle pitter patter of rain falling, nurturing the trees and filling ponds and reservoirs. We might notice the glorious colors of the budding trees and blossoming flowers. We might smile in joy and wonder as we sit in silence, listen and be still.

A Buddhist saying offers wisdom: "Only when the ocean is calm and quiet can we see the moon reflected in it." Let us be that calm ocean.

Pause, then RING

For several generations my mother's family has owned a camp or cottage on a lake in Maine. I love sitting on the deck, smelling the pine scent and listening to the sounds—water lapping against the docks, even mosquitoes buzzing in my ear. With luck, I'll hear a loon calling. Loons make a long ghostly wail that targets my heart. I listen intensely to hear every a note. I know the loon isn't calling me, but in a way I feel it is because I respond by wanting to protect the lake for the loon and other creatures who depend upon it. By listening to the loon, I feel at one with the loon and know I share this planet. Hearing the cry of the loon reminds me of our UU Seventh Principle and what I ascribe as having worth—life and my concern about threats to it.

No matter what side of the political aisle you're on, and whether you believe human activity is accelerating climate change or not, I hope you accept that climate change is real and that its impact is causing harmful change to our planet and habitats. I believe this is not something we should be silent about. There are times when being silent is immoral and dangerous. For me, now is not a time to be silent.

I did take a break from the news noise immediately after the election because I couldn't function while listening to the divisiveness and dysfunction coming from Washington. That brief break, though admittedly a head-in-the-sand time, was what I needed to heal my disappointment wounds. But I'm now past that self-imposed silence.

This past week the Senate silenced a Senator for breaking Rule 19 – that no one speaking on the Senate floor should impugn the character of another sitting Senator. Rule 19 aligns with our First Principle – that we should treat everyone with all due respect. We can disagree about whether Mitch McConnell was right to use that gag rule to silence Elizabeth Warren for speaking out against a cabinet nominee, but I hope we agree that we should be respectful of those whose opinions differ from our own. Just as we demand our right to believe as we must, so we must grant that right to others, even as we seek to change their beliefs or facts.

This election season proved to me that we aren't listening to each other. As I've said before, we live in our own bubble worlds. But if we pop these and truly listen to others, we may find common ground. We may find ways to compromise. If we don't stop and listen, we only invite more of what we have.

Christian mystic Thomas Merton suggests, "It is in deep solitude and silence that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother and sister." / Silence allows us to connect with others, not just ourselves.

Let us listen in the silence.

Let us listen to the sound of the bell that brings us back home to our true and best selves.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion:

1. How does it feel to be silent or sit in silence when you are in a group setting? What contributes to these feelings? Do you feel differently when you are alone?
2. How much silence do you experience in your day to day life? Does it feel like an appropriate balance of sound and silence? Do you tend to fill your day with sound or noise?
3. Set aside at least 10 minutes for a silent walk outdoors to listen and look. Upon return, what did you hear and see? Did your mood or feelings change as a result of the walk? If so, how?