

Quiet Spirituality by Mirka Knaster

Maybe because I can talk up a storm, I love, even crave, silence. I feel safe in it. I know I won't blurt out something foolish or harmful, something I'll be sorry for. That's probably why if you ask spiritual teachers for advice on how to practice wise speech, they're likely to answer with one word: silence. Like the rain necessary for flowers to bloom, silence is essential for speaking with clarity.

A Hindu adage, echoed in other cultures, reflects this relationship: If what you have to say is truthful, kind, and useful, then say it; if not, silence is best.

My earliest lesson in the value of silence and the painful consequences of unkind words occurred when I was in elementary school. I don't recall what my mother did or didn't do one morning, but whatever it was upset me enough that I hurled enormous anger at her: "I hate you. I wish you were dead." As an adult, I learned it was not uncommon for children to express such heinous thoughts, but at the time I suffered dearly for not holding them back. My father gave me such a whopping and I cried so hard that I couldn't go to class that day.

Sages highlight the value of silence for more constructive reasons. They say it helps us use our personal resources judiciously. Talking expends energy and takes up time. I make a point of staying in close touch with friends, but I also know that hours can fly by in long talks on the phone. And although I love to go hiking with a friend and catch up on our lives, I notice a difference when I walk quietly with my dog. I feel refreshed from the exercise, and my energy is focused for the work I need to do.

Silence also helps me express what is important rather than any old thought that flits through my mind. Sometimes, in the middle of a disagreement with my husband or to avoid one, I'll call time out. If I don't pause long enough for a walk or a sitting meditation to reflect on what's really going on, I'm likely to keep blundering with hurtful speech. In silence I have a chance to cool down, assess the situation, examine my own motivations, and consider what words will help heal the rift between us.

People who want to hear the language of the soul and the words of God know that they can't have their ears filled with the loud noises of the world, including our own internal chatter. They must listen for that still, small voice. The Quakers, or Society of Friends, conduct their worship meetings in silence. In one account of their sessions, Robert Barclay, an early defender of Quakerism, reports on how much more powerful this is than any argument to dissuade a person from the error of his ways. He noticed that when someone enters a meeting with the intention to do mischief, his "darkness" is overcome by "the secret strength and virtue" of silence. As a result, Friends have come to consider silence as the key mark of spiritual life and the singular method for communing

with God.

The Hebrew Bible tells us that silence can also be a means for distinguishing authentic seers from charlatans. The prophets divide the "straw" among themselves from the "wheat" through the criterion of silence. False prophets are loquacious while true ones consider prophecy a divine gift not to be used indiscriminately. When the people sought Jeremiah's advice following the murder of Gedaliah, the prophet didn't respond immediately. Instead, he remained silent for 10 days before conveying God's message.

I find silence healing, not only on a spiritual level, but also physically and mentally. Some people love to go to spas to relax and get pampered with all kinds of water and massage treatments. I love to go on retreats and pamper myself with silence. No voice mail, no e-mail, no conversation, no radio, no video. The silence refreshes me like a cool shower on a sultry summer day. In the restfulness of it, I collect and unify the scattered pieces of myself. As a tonic, silence clears away the exhaustion accumulated from the nonstop noise of modern urban living and restores my energy.

But what's a tonic for me is not necessarily good medicine for someone else. Teachers acknowledge that silence may not be the best spiritual practice for individuals who are inclined toward melancholy or depression. They may need to open up and express themselves. Also, it is important not to maintain silence in the face of injustice. In "Ethics for the New Millennium," the Dalai Lama says that if we keep silent out of a sense of self-centeredness, then it's a problem. We have a universal responsibility to break out of such silence and be of service to others. But, first, a cautionary note: It is in the womb of silence that we can grow ideas for the best course of action to take and to ensure that such action is rooted in compassion and wisdom. If we are going to speak out, our task is first to align ourselves with what the world needs, not what our ego desires, or we risk creating more harm through unconscious speech.

One way to begin enjoying the delicious fruit of silence is to practice it briefly. Before we pick up our utensils to eat a meal or lift a mug to drink coffee or tea, we can pause in stillness for a minute. We can remain quiet just before we make a phone call. And, instead of immediately going on and on about what's happening in our life, we can give space to the other person, listening patiently to what they have to say. In time, as we learn to still our mouth, we notice that we are also learning to still our unruly thoughts and passions. We learn, as a Jewish sage once put it, that "the fence of wisdom is silence."