Silent Awakening, Part II: Embracing Silence in Our Everyday Lives

It is one thing to find silence in the middle of a forest far away from the “maddening crowd.” It is quite another to find it in our daily lives, and do so in a way that is supported by what we do and the people and places that surround us. Yet as noted in Part I, silence remains a critical commodity for our health and well-being, and does not make concessions for the clamor of our times or the demands of our day. Yet even when noise is occurring around us, it does not mean that we cannot still find “intracranial silence”, or freedom from the noise inside us. It is what I describe as “peace of mind.” On most days, I ride a bike to work and am obviously surrounded by noisy vehicles and many other entities that are not quiet. Yet it is one of the places I find silence in my day. This might seem strange to some, as I have to be acutely aware of drivers and other traffic patterns in order to remain safe. But in finding silence in this manner, I am left to reflect on the day that may be and the day that was in a metaphysical space that is not confounded by the words of others, or even many stressors that seem to pause with my movement on the bike.

But I realize that for some, this is not an option. So, I propose considerations for all that I believe would help families make silence part of their ordinary day. These are as follows:

**Make sure the home has a number of silent sanctuaries.** One of the biggest threats to silence is the fact that so many homes have so few rooms where screens or devices are not available. There truly is something to be said for having a television in one room in the home, and making sure that this room is not the bedroom. When the setup of a home encourages silence, people will naturally seek out opportunities that embrace it, such as reading or drawing or playing a board game. But when homes have devices and televisions scattered all over the place, many remain on for no reason—other than to perpetually disturb the peace (or cover the conflict).

**Leave behind the mobile devices whenever possible:** Most of us are drawn to the idea that the few minutes before, between, or after an event is when we can get one more thing done. The problem is that it may very well be the time that we should most be silent and reflective, and be acutely aware of what we are thinking and feeling. So often I see people feverishly on their mobile devices in the car or in a boardroom just before a meeting. What are lost are opportunities for reflection and initiation that might occur in real space, not cyber space. We wonder why we always seem so busy. One reason may be because we never give ourselves even a brief break between the events that occur in our lives.

**Institute regular periods of silence in the home:** A late movie or news program is not a problem. I believe that 3 hours of television every night is. I know that many people regard this as the only way they decompress from their day. But, unfortunately, studies show that screens generally work to activate our brains, not calm them. What may seem like a life saver at the end of a hard day may actually be perpetuating the tension that we already feel. But silence done right, whether in active or passive form, truly allows for a decompression that we all need before the ultimate shutdown of all: sleep.

**Put the kids to bed on time, and make sure we do the same:** As I have said before, we don’t sleep for an average of 25 years in a lifetime if it wasn’t really important. Sleep is the least respected and most
important commodity that we rarely paid attention to until we finally entered the great sleep recession, and are seeing the consequences play out. But second only to the sleep needs we have is the need for all of us parents to have quiet time before we go to bed. While I know that this is especially challenging for working parents and active kids, I continue to be concerned about how late our kids are staying up, both for them and us. In the process, parents thwart their best opportunity for silence, which is most conducive for meaningful conversation and resolute reflection.

Seek out regular opportunities to do mundane activities in silence: A few years ago my brother said that he spent a couple of hours cracking pecans alone in the kitchen with nothing to distract him. It sounded boring until I remembered that for millennium, people used to chop wood, plow the farm, and feed animals in silence for hours on end. Lost in our modern world of multi-tasking is the simple art of engaging in a basic activity that requires little thought, and then settling into a comfort with saying nothing at all. A couple of months ago, I watched the documentary “Into the Great Silence” about the Carthusian monks who live almost their entire lives under a vow of silence. For the first twenty minutes, I wondered how I could even get through the almost completely silent film without falling asleep or getting really bored. But as I settled into the movie, something strange happened. I completely lost track of all time as the film pulled me in; then suddenly, the credits started to play. As these monks know best, freedom from the constraint of time is one of the gifts of silence.

Find the trails nearest you, and become intimately familiar with them: There is no better place to find silence than in the trees. Even for those of us who live in the city, we are not far away from little trails or even grassy patches that summon us to a more peaceful place. Many free sanctuaries exist close by. Oftentimes only when we leave them do we realize just how sacred of places they are.

Go out in rain, snow, and inclement weather: Finally, there is an interesting thing about bad weather. While I am not advocating for anyone to go out in a tornado, some of the most comforting silence I have ever experienced in my daily life is during or after a good snow. Precipitation has a way of muting sounds around us, and so for years when it snows, I will seek out a trail or golf course nearby, climbing over the hills and valleys framed by the crunch of the snow. Rain does similar things, and so often in a good shower, it is wonderful to go out back or find a trail, and slop around in an otherwise quiet place. Ultimately, these are just a few simple ideas to bring silence back into our lives. But like anything we seek, we must understand that the benefits often occur in mysterious, delayed ways. If we expect otherwise, we set ourselves up to be disappointed. But if we commit to the process, benefits will come. So, if you find yourself cracking pecans tonight in silence and you feel like you are wasting time, just channel your inner ancestor and consider for a second (or more) that for them, it was just a way of life. And a peaceful one at that.

Part III: Why We Fear (and Are Bored by) Silence