
Silence as an Incubator for Creativity

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Seen as an incubator, silence can serve as a rich and fertile breeding ground as well as a safe and nurturing place for the expression of creativity. Through philosophical and personal musings, this author reflects on a positive side of silence as opposed to the more negative imposed silence that she experienced as a young child. Chosen silence can nourish and nurture and offer an environment with the perfect and necessary conditions that lead to the birth of creativity. As its own entity, silence can offer the pause that is necessary before creativity finds expression. Small “c” creativity, the kind that lives deep inside each of us, that is God given, offers an opportunity to emulate the ultimate Creator, creating something from nothing.

Silence. I always feel when I say the word, I need to do it, to be silent. For just a few beats, or breaths. To take a moment to experience it, to take it in, to be in silence, to be silent.

Silence has special relevance to me. At the age of nine I had a bicycle accident and suffered many injuries, the worst being a broken jaw. The doctors explained that for my jaw to heal it would have to be “wired shut”. That was all they said. Then they silenced me, for six weeks. Being made mute was haunting and traumatic beyond words. (couldn’t resist.)

Imposed silence, or being silenced as I was, to anyone is a trauma but all the more so for a young child. Over the years I have tried to make sense of that trauma, reaching and searching and hoping to find ways to integrate and process it and learn how being silenced affected me. As an educator, I turned to Jung, Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and Gilligan and a few others to try to help me understand the probable psychological, cognitive, social, moral and relational effects that the accident had on me at that stage of my development. As a yogini, I turned to the system of yogic breath work called pranayama, to help me deal with and undo the physical effect of not being able to open my mouth for six weeks. And finally, and most intriguing to me as a spiritual seeker, I looked at silence through the lens of much self-reflection and soul searching.

After all my searching, I have learned that the imposed silence that I suffered is the shadow side of a very beautiful and rich silence, a positive place that has the potential to create something from nothingness. *Choosing silence versus being silenced or stumbling upon it, can be healing, expansive, and instructive. Being silenced, on the other hand, is crippling, belittling, constricting, and disempowering.* (LeClaire, 2009, 84, 88.)

As an adult in mid-life and no longer a scared, traumatized nine-year-old, silence is a very much welcomed part of my life. As an educator and mother of four, I have embraced silence as a wonderful place, a beautiful space offering a meaningful and nurturing opportunity. Silence has become my friend and I look at it with awe and admiration. I see it as a vehicle of richness, a place of depth and value. An incubator where creativity can be nourished and birthed. It is a perfect and optimal environment for nurturing and fostering creative expression. It is in the emptiness of silence that I have come to see vastness and silence has incubated much of my own creative expression.

In *Listening Below the Noise* Anne LeClaire talks about the connection between silence and creativity “*Early on I discovered that there is a direct correlation between quiet and creativity. In the space of silence, ideas can surface and connections can be made. All distractions distort and ultimately destroy creativity, noise most of all. And, of course, on the most basic level, silence is enormously restful to both body and mind and that frees up energy to create.*” (LeClaire, 2009, 84)

The German philosopher, Max Picard, who has written extensively on silence, says that “silence is nothing merely negative; it is not the mere absence of speech. It is a positive, a complete world in itself.” (Picard, 1945, 132)

This positive “complete world” is a quiet space for reflection and depth and richness. As Picard says, it is not just the absence of sound or words. It is a mindful intentional silence, one that offers a quiet place for reflection. It is the place deep inside us that offers stillness and calm, that allows for a journeying inward away from the outside world.

Daniel Siegel, psychiatrist and scientist, writes in his book *The Mindful Brain* that when a mind is mindful and receptive to all that arises in silence, an active engagement can occur; an active engagement with the environment through the senses which allows for a connection to the self. Siegel talks about the silence that allows for stillness of the brain. “*Why silence?*” he asks. “*Silence creates a rare opportunity to pause and drop into stillness, to become intimate with your own mind. When we start the journey to attune to our own minds by pausing into stillness we enter a new realm of*

experience that can produce surprise in each moment....As the stillness permits the mind to 'settle', it becomes possible to be aware of the subtleties in the fine structure of the mind's functions. Stillness is not the same as a void in activity, it's more like a stabilizing strength." (Siegel, 2007, 61-73)

The yoga instructor, Matthew Sanford in his book *Waking* writes about his life-threatening car accident that killed his father and sister and left him paralyzed. I am fortunate that my accident wasn't as devastating as his, but it still was a trauma that I have tried to make sense of my entire life. As I read his words about how silence can be negative, it took me right back to my own place of forced silence which was very negative. Sanford's words resonate with me. "*Although silence lies at the center of wonder and appreciation, even strength," he says, "it also can breed powerlessness, indifference and apathy."* That's exactly how, as a nine year old, I felt. I felt powerless. He continues, "*I believe that silence can deepen our perception and holds a key to our consciousness."* He observes, "*My traumatic experience of a spinal cord injury and its resulting paralysis has made more tangible a silence that can be experienced in the gap between mind and body. How we relate to this silence, how we process it, is a fundamental issue presented by our consciousness. Rather than working to integrate any residual silence that I might experience into who I am, I am urged to overcome it, to step over my paralysis with a courageous exertion of will. The medical model deems the air of this silence as too cold for me to breathe."* (Sanford, 2006, 66, 98)

Sanford was encouraged by his doctors to "overcome" his paralysis and his silence rather than to integrate them. I can relate to that, since no one even gave voice (once again, couldn't resist) to the fact that I was being silenced. He goes on to explain how his life became about choosing a more positive outlook of embracing the silence and integrating and finding value in it. That is exactly what I have tried to do as well.

In *One Square Inch of Silence*, the acoustic ecologists Gordon Hempton and John Grossman write,

Today silence has become an endangered species. Silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything. It is the presence of time, undisturbed. It can be felt within the chest. Silence nurtures our nature, our human nature, and lets us know who we are. Left with a more receptive mind and a more attuned ear, we become better listeners not only to nature but to each other. Silence can be carried like embers from a fire. Silence can be found and silence can find you. Silence can be lost and also recovered. But silence cannot be imagined, although most people think so.

To experience the soul-swelling wonder of silence, you must hear it. Silence is a sound, many, many sounds. Silence is the moonlit song of the coyote singing in the air, and the answer of its mate. It is the falling whisper of snow that will later melt with an astonishing reggae

rhythm so crisp that you will want to dance to it. It is the sound of pollinating winged insects vibrating soft tunes as they defensively dart in and out of the pine boughs to temporarily escape the breeze, a mix of insect hum and pine sigh that will stick with you all day. Silence is the passing flock of chestnut-backed chickadees and red-breasted nuthatches, chirping and fluttering, reminding you of your own curiosity.

I find their poetic words to be so comforting. They make me crave, yearn for and seek silence.

They go on to quote Mother Teresa: *See how nature-trees, flowers, grass-grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun-how they move in silence. We need silence to be able to touch souls.* (Hempton, 1-12)

It is in that spiritual silence of touching souls that I paradoxically see and experience both emptiness and everything all at the same time. It is in that paradox and from that place of seeming contradiction and transcendence that the creative process can be incubated. It is from that expansive place of nothingness that the birth of something new can take place.

Silence as an incubator for creativity is a rich, fertile, meaningful place where much gets done. It is paradoxically a blank space that gives shape and organization. *“Like the solitary spider who busily weaves her web in perfect silence, we need to be alone and quiet for our subconscious to spin its creations. Picasso said solitude is necessary for creative work, ‘In silence’s calm surrounds, we discover the power of imagination and throw open the gates to creativity.’ In the opulent luxury of solitude, time becomes elastic and creative impulses surface and are allowed room to breathe.”* (LeClaire, 136-137)

Marcel Marceau, the master of silence, said, *“Do not the most amazing moments in our life find us without words?”* Herman Melville said, *“Silence is the one and only voice of God.”* And Matisse said that *“creativity requires silence to flourish”*. *All art forms require silence, “a garden needs room between rows, between plantings, paintings require negative space, music needs the grand pause, and poetry needs line breaks...without silence, art becomes chaotic a confusing jumble without order or meaning.”* The artist Cleveland Morris said, *“I don’t think art is possible without silence. The ultimate spiritual discovery is in silence, not in noise.”* (LeClaire, 113-133)

In *Stillness* Richard Mahler says, *“in silence you will reach a point where the heart tells itself what to do.”* (Mahler, 2003, 118) It is when the creative thought or idea is ready to be born that it leaves its incubator and finds expression. In *Writing from the Heart*, Nancy Slonim Aronie says, *“It’s our authenticity, our originality, that is pure. Creativity is maintaining the balance between the heart and*

the mind; the dedication to the moment and the ability to stand by and surrender and let the stuff flow through.” (Slonim Aronie, 1998, 159)

In his extensive research on creativity, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, (1996) makes a distinction between creativity with a small “c” and large “C”. He defines creativity with a small “c” as *“the neat things children often say, or the creativity that all of us share just because we have a mind and we can think”*, which he says is an important part of everyday life. But on the other hand, Creativity with a “C”, and what he preferred to write about, means *“the process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed.”* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 7)

I like the “neat things children often say” and I cherish the creativity “that all of us share because we have a mind and we can think.” This type of small “c” creativity as I see it, is what is in each of us. It is just waiting to be discovered, allowing our uniqueness to find expression, being a vehicle to transport the soul on its rightful path. It’s the place that brings darkness to light. Small “c” creativity means that there is a creative spark that exists in each of us and is just waiting to be discovered.

We are born with the ability to be creative. When we pause in silence we can tap into that ability and embrace and honor it. *“Jung wrote that creativity is an instinct, not an optional gift granted to a lucky few. If you don’t find a way to be creative in life, that instinct goes repressed and frustrated. You feel its loss as a deflation, the spirit leaking out of your sense of self. You feel empty, disengaged, and unfulfilled.”* (Thomas Moore, 2008, 2)

Creativity is the way we emulate the ultimate Creator, bringing into being something that doesn’t already exist. For this to happen creativity needs silence. It is in this place where creative thought and expression--whether a new idea, song, poem, or dance-- get nurtured and eventually born, without words or sound.

“Creativity is God’s gift to us. Using our creativity is our gift back to God. That every person has the gift to imagine and join with the divine in the ongoing creation of the universe.” (Cameron, 1992, 3.)

Creativity exists in all of us, waiting deep inside to be first discovered and then shared. It’s a surrendering to the brilliance. Speaking the voice that we each have, being the vehicle to transport the soul on its rightful path.

May Sarton writes “*It is only when we can believe that we are creating the soul that life has any meaning, but when we can believe that-and I do and always have-then there is nothing we do that is without meaning and nothing that we suffer that does not hold the seed of creation in it.*” (Sarton, 1994, 128), Sarton stresses, in many of her books, how her environment affects her creativity and she talks about from where her creativity flows, “*I had found one of the places on earth where any sensitive being feels exposed to powerful invisible forces and himself suddenly naked and attacked on every side by air, light space-all that brings the soul close to the surface. There the poems flowed out.*” She then talks about the impact of silence in this place, stating, “*Each time I come back here the same miracle happens. I bring the world with me, but at a certain moment the world falls away and I am inside the life-restoring silence.*” (Sarton, 1968, 21) How beautiful to view silence as life-restoring!

At a commencement speech that Anne Morrow Lindbergh gave at Middlebury College in May 1976, she spoke about communication and writing, her form of personal creative expression: *Wordless communication is one of the highest forms because at this point, communication becomes communion.* She said when an idea or an expression of creative thought is ready to be born it comes from the need to break out. She asks, *Why is communication important? Thinking about it I decided it was important to me because of a very simple paradox: we are social animals and at the same time we are solitary, irrevocably solitary. We communicate in order to break out of our solitude, our loneliness, in order to be part of our world, in order to share our experiences, and perhaps to try to discover their meaning. In other words, we communicate in order to illuminate our lives, or the lives of others. We try to illuminate the darkness both within ourselves and outside of us. At least this is why I write-to illuminate for myself and occasionally I hope, for others.*

She says communicating your vision is what creativity is really about. You have to “*surrender the vision in order to give it form, shape and body. The flower of insight has to be sacrificed for the fruit of a finished work...so now, if you have to have courage enough to leave your vision, you start your descent on the practical path of action.*”

Lindbergh says that the creative “gift” needs to be communicated and that is when the real work begins. She offers a beautiful metaphor of the creative process. First what happens, she says, is experiencing the creative inspiration, which is like “*standing at a lookout point and seeing across the valley the peak one wants to climb. One must look at it well because one never quite sees this view again. It is a beautiful clear day and the peak over there is not only dazzling but it looks astonishingly near. A few hours’ brisk walk would reach it or, at most, an afternoon’s expedition. But one doesn’t move because it’s so beautiful, so perfect and so clear. Nothing, one thinks, will ever be the same again.*”

Nothing will ever be as difficult, because one has had this glimpse of reality. One is struck dumb; one wants to stay there forever, looking at the view.” But, she says, “*vision is a miracle, a gift, a point of departure but it isn’t communication.*” She ended her speech with this quote from T.S. Eliot’s *Little Gidding*: “*We shall not cease from our exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started from and know the place for the first time.*” (Lindbergh, 1976)

There are many gifts of silence and they touch us in the cognitive, psychological, physiological and spiritual dimensions of our lives. There is a strong connection between quiet and creativity. How do we find that connection? How do we arrive in a place of silence? Opening up to silence in order to reap these gifts sometimes feels daunting. Making the conscious choice to enter the silence and embrace the stillness is the first step. The mere act of seeking and choosing silence opens us up to its expansiveness. We can attend to this expansive place by carving out moments to slow down. To pause. To sit in silence. Allowing silence to be an incubator. Taking the time to wait for the process of creativity to happen, for it to evolve. When the process is done creativity finds expression and is born. Sometimes this creative expression feels as if it isn’t even coming from us but rather it was there all along just waiting for us to find it and allow it to be expressed.

There are pauses around the silence. Once we have identified these pauses we can experience the positive effects of solitude and silence on a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual level. Sometimes, we just need to stop before we can continue in order to create something coming from nothing. It is about getting quiet long enough to explore the stillness. “Let us be silent that we may hear the voice of God.” (Emerson) Just stop. Listen. To the silence.

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