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'A discipline of silence is demanding work, and often requires sacrifice on some level'

Alison Woolley
director, Seeds of Silence

I'm certainly no expert on silence. But I bring to it my own daily practice of silence over a decade: my twice-yearly silent retreats to the Llanerchwen hermitages.

Seeds of Silence (SoS) is a response to the comments made by those women during my research which investigated the value and impact of chosen silence in the lives of contemporary Christian women. They repeatedly talked about how little support there was for women in developing and sustaining a practice of silence. They felt that many clergy lacked experience or knowledge about practising silence as a spiritual discipline, and that churches generally have very little space for silence.

Women are often unable to go on retreats because they still bear much of the responsibility for caring for children, or for elderly relatives, and for running a home — on top of their working lives. Going on retreats can also be difficult financially, especially for women with children, or who are disabled, unemployed, or retired.

SoS encourages and supports Christians in developing a spiritual discipline of silence. It's an ecumenical project, offering "Exploring Silence" workshops for Christians anywhere. A Christian charity funds this work in the Bradford area for one day a week, and I offer these, and additional workshops and courses nationally as freelance work.

SoS also facilitates local groups who meet for regular, silent prayer, and offers support and resources to those who want to set up similar groups in their locality.

More than 500 people a month visit our website, which carries signposts to the many organisations, blogs, books, websites, and retreat centres that can help them to explore a discipline of silence.

Two days a week, I work as a music therapist with children with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties. I've just completed a chapter about the role of silence in research interviews for a book coming out in the autumn, and I'm turning my thesis into a book. I also work as a spiritual accompanist.

Practices, or spiritual disciplines of silence, don't really relate to external silence — the absence of words or sound — but to a deeper, internal silence where one becomes aware of the ongoing eternal presence of divine love in which all things are held, and to a deeper awareness of our own being, and that of others. External silence is initially necessary and helpful in moving towards internal silence.

There's a lot of external silence in my work as a music therapist, partly because the youngsters can take a

long time to respond and make their own sounds, due to the level of their disabilities. But also I work best when I am grounded in a place of internal silence, where I am able to be fully present to the child and fully present to myself in response to them, and aware of the presence of God in and around and between us.

It's probably in this work that I have learned most about what it is to offer this internal silence to another person, how valuable it is for them, and how, without this internal silence, I am far less able to be available to others or to God, and less open to God's activity within the world.

Having done a music degree, my mind's primed to analyse rather than enjoy music, which makes the relationship between God, silence, and music ambiguous for me. Sometimes this feels like a great loss. But amid the intense silences in between moments of sound in music therapy, I'm sometimes shocked by the sense that, as a child and I create music together, then God's presence with us and in each of us can feel almost tangible. I think it's from the depth of attention offered to one another from internal silence that this emerges, rather than from the music or sounds we create.

Today we're hyper-stimulated, and it increases our propensity to react instantaneously rather than take the time we need to form an appropriate response. People are beginning to recognise the poor outcomes that result, and look for something to help them live more meaningful lives.

It also seems that today's world feels more precarious: politically, environmentally, financially. It is not surprising that people are seeking ways of living that help them to feel more grounded, more connected with one another, more in touch with their own being in the face of the individualisation, disintegration, and fragmentation within society.

Nearly 200 years ago, Kierkegaard wrote: "The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and asked for my advice, I should reply: Create silence." A century on, Max Picard wrote that nothing had changed the nature of humanity to our detriment so much as our loss of silence. Perhaps each new generation has to discover this for themselves.

Churches that follow a formal liturgy could keep the silence indicated in the liturgies for longer than five seconds. And just by leaving more auditory space in between phrases of the liturgy, a whole service can give people more sense of encountering God.

The practices of silence within the Christian tradition are, ultimately, about being in God's presence in an intimate way, not about hearing God speak, asking for, or expecting to receive, anything. The mystics and respected practitioners today all caution against seeking or hoping for any "experience" of God, or to hear from God.

It may be that what seems to be a proliferation of voices speaking about meditative practices has always quietly been going on, but, because of the evolution of technology and social media, we're more aware of them.

Some are able to find a path by just getting on with it; but most need some guidance if silence is to be a long-term practice in which they stay mentally safe. Engagement with silence can have significant impact on our psyche, and we're wise to



pursue this alongside formal spiritual accompaniment.

Of course, there is a danger of talking too much — or talking nonsense — about silence. A discipline of silence is about a shift from egoic consciousness towards the apophatic, but it's far harder to talk meaningfully about this than about external silence. There's also a danger of people getting so caught up in retreats, or books, or exploring different practices that they never actually develop any disciplined silence. It's demanding work, and often requires sacrifice on some level.

My main practice is centring prayer as taught by Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeault. I usually have two periods of 20-25 minutes following this practice of silence a day, but I know that, when I regularly make the time for a third, this has a significant impact.

The first experience of God that I remember was when I was about 11, singing the chorus "Jesus take me as I am" by Dave Bryant, and finding tears rolling down my face. The little girl standing next to me asked

me why I was crying. I couldn't explain, but I knew it was to do with grasping for the first time that God accepted me just as I was, without my needing to try to be anyone else. Three decades on, I'm still working on understanding what it really means to be unconditionally loved by God.

It's difficult to know whether what I experience is God or just my own construct, but what I encounter in silence is God's being and love, mediated to me through a sense of sinking to a place of vast openness, like a great plain, an endless vista, where my awareness is something other than my normal consciousness. Sometimes this vastness is very still, visually and physically; sometimes it is like swooping through layers of shifting, iridescent colours. I can lose all sense of time: 20-25 minutes somehow stretches to an hour, or longer. But this doesn't happen often, and I don't seek such encounters. That's not the point.

More usually, any sense of God's presence is illusive, or seems absent, though I trust and believe that God is always there.

John Cage has been influential. Hearing about his noteless composition "4'33" when I was doing GCSE music first sparked my interest in silence. This, and many of his other works, had a big impact on my own composition style.

The musicians who've had most impact on me have been those I've sung and played with throughout my life — from Mrs Habberley, who began teaching me the recorder at school when I was five, through to those I've performed with, or been conducted by, over the years. Youngsters in therapy are my greatest teachers and collaborators.

I like pre-Baroque vocal music. I'd have loved to have played the cello: Jacqueline du Pré's recordings are my favourites. Michelle Shocked and Sinéad O'Connor always delight me, along with my cat Maiya's purr. I listen to much less music than I used to, although I encounter a wide spectrum of styles when I dance at 5 Rhythms each fortnight. If this was *Desert Island Discs*, the record I'd save from the waves would be *Officium*, by Jan Garbarek, and the Hilliard Ensemble.

These days, there are two books that I turn to more than any others for inspiration and comfort: Carla Grosch-Miller's *Psalms Redux: Poems and prayers*, and Nicola Slee's *Praying Like A Woman*.

What usually makes me angry are tales of national or local government agencies' making judgements that common sense shows up as utterly ridiculous.

If you ask me where I'd most like to go, it's always "To the sea."

Love and compassion give me hope, and, in troubled areas of the world, the education of girls.

I'd love to see what St Hilda of Whitby would make of our wonderful cathedrals; so I'd like to be locked in Salisbury, Durham, or York Minster with her. Alison Woolley was talking to Terence Handley MacMath. www.seedsofsilence.org.uk

SNOW-BOUND. The last time it happened, an American friend asked if I knew John Greenleaf Whittier's poem "Snow-bound". This was a few years back. It is one of the great snow poems, and, re-reading it after discovering the track up to the lane blocked by drifts, I was struck by Whittier's "hereditary" memory of English winters.

He is a boy cooped up with his family and a handful of neighbours in a clapboarded farmhouse in Haverhill, Massachusetts in c.1820, but subconsciously his experience is still that of Haverhill, Suffolk. The same — marvellously described — north wind; an identical interior. And the same just Quaker God, of course. The rattle and roar, and the vast white silences are made to contain, as it were, the noble domestic life.

Blizzards are among literature's chief devices for casting together strange bedfellows, and this one is no exception; for among the neighbours is Lady Hester Stanhope's equally eccentric friend Miss Livermore. The pair of them had fallen out on the question which one of them took precedence at the Second Coming to ride into Jerusalem with the Lord.

"Snow-bound" offers a lad's view of religious fantasy and rationality having to exist in the closest proximity until the thaw. Anyway, sans the media, what has humanity ever done in captivity but tell its own tales? These, though enchanting, come second best to the tale of the



word from Wormingford

Ronald Blythe starts Lent in snow-imposed solitude in this archive piece from March 1996

snow itself. It is the same tale it always tells, first in a wild rage, then so quietly that you can hear the flakes crystallising the trees.

On Ash Wednesday, I made a reconnaissance to see if I could get to church to read Joel's fierce demands — "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people. . . let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar" — but found I had to climb Duncan's steep field if I was not to

vanish in drifts. These were combed by the wind into rising segments like the roof of the Sydney Opera House, and impassable. There was a pale new moon as sharp as a sliver of ice, and air which spoke daggers. So home to a little Lenten music, and an apology to Joel for being so effete.

The worst thing is that many of the village people live on gritted roads, and my snow-bound descriptions are put down to writer's hyperbole. It took an ox-team to "break the drifted highways out" in Whittier's poem, and should the worst come to the worst (which it never does), I dare say Duncan will send a tractor down. But not yet. Also, by the time that these luxuriating thoughts on inaccessibility are read, the drifts will be streams hurrying to the river, and the way will be clear.

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