

THE ART AND TECHNIQUE OF SILENCE

It might seem a contradiction in terms, or at least a paradox, to talk about silence, but actually it isn't. As with many other pairs of opposites, the two poles of speech and silence aren't antagonistic; they don't exclude each other, and both are necessary. The problem lies not in suppressing one of them, but rather in the wise regulation of both of them; this is one aspect, one important application, of the Law of Right Relations.

4 Let's begin, then, by examining this topic from the point of view of the relationship between silence, on the one hand, and speech and sound on the other. What I'm about to say is not meant to disturb the silence, but merely to serve as a guide to the "Temple of Silence."

Silence follows sound, and each sound or creative word should come from silence. Thus the first type of right relationship between silence and speech is that of using them in right proportion. I don't need to talk at length here about the enormous disparity that exists nowadays between silence and sound ... or noise. Our civilization has been called the culture of noise; all kinds of noises bombard us in what has been called "the jungles of the West." Continuous noise is actually harmful for physical health, and the worst thing is that present-day humanity, especially young people, not only become used to noise, they actually desire it, so much so that they produce it when there is none, for example by turning up the radio when they become unable to bear the silence.

This last point refers to noise and sounds from outside, but the situation isn't any better regarding sounds that come from within us, especially idle talk or nonsense. If there were instruments to measure the amount of energy wasted in vain and harmful words, we would be really shocked, but of course we don't need much imagination or a special word counter to understand this. The habit of speaking too much and too negatively has been encouraged by what may be

called the modern cult of expression, the right to self-expression. This has been a reaction to the excessive repression of the nineteenth century, but, like all reactions, it went to the opposite extreme, and now there is an urgent need to reduce the current excessive, unregulated "expressionism."

Here too the solution lies in proper regulation, which simply means to think before we speak, to consider whether what we are about to say has any value or serves any good. It has been said that "Humanity as a whole needs silence now as never before; it needs to reflect on and perceive the Universal Rhythm."

This need is particularly great and urgent for those who are spiritually oriented, and this leads us to consider another type of silence, more subtle but no less vital and necessary, that is, inner silence.

"Silence" is not just refraining from talking. There is no real silence when emotional storms are raging within us, when we find our mind constantly chattering to itself. Silence is not just refraining from speaking, but also abstaining from certain lines of thought and eliminating reveries and the unhealthy use of the imagination.

There are different types of inner silence, and it could be said that every sphere of life has its own silence. We all know the wonderful silence of nature on a summer afternoon, or especially during the night: the silence of a starry sky. Then there is the silence of the emotions – of desire, fear and imagination – which is a positive step toward peace and serenity. Silence at the mental level consists of slowing down the mind and curbing its activity.

There is also a "silence of the will," i.e. the personal will, which means the dedication of one's will and its unification with Spiritual Will. The highest form of silence is that achieved and maintained through contemplation. On the religious and mystic path this is called "the prayer of quietude," and in all respects contemplation is the highest form of silence because it encourages and includes all other forms.

Joy is an aspect of silence that is generally not taken into full consideration. Joy has been given an interesting definition;

it is the “silence that sounds,” and it has been said that it is a characteristic of someone who knows and appreciates the values of the Spirit.

Another fact even less recognized is that silence is an Entity; there is a Spirit of Silence in the same way that there is a Spirit of Love, a Spirit of Light, a Spirit of Beauty. To our materialistic mind this seems strange and difficult to conceive. Yet all the attributes and qualities of God are Beings; they are His Angels, His Messengers; they are living and conscious Forces. Everything in the Universe is alive, and in all religions the faithful turn to the Angels, Spirits, or Higher Beings. Our Souls, which have been called “Solar Angels,” are Living Beings that work on the higher planes where the qualities, or keynotes, of the Spirit exist as Living Beings. Recognizing this gives us a wonderful sense of the Universal Life that is the One and the Many manifested in myriads of entities hierarchically ordered.

Thinking of Silence as an Entity can be particularly beneficial. It helps us understand His positive and active nature, and it transforms our consideration of Silence as the mere absence of sound or speech, which is what most people usually think. Silence is a positive and spiritual energy, and if we want to practice silence this can be facilitated by invoking the Spirit of Silence, by entering into communion with Him, and hence by becoming receptive to the impressions that come to us when we are, metaphorically speaking, “enfolded in His wings.” There is a close relationship between silence and higher telepathic reception; it has been said that the Science of Receptivity is based on various kinds of silence.

Now I will say something about the practice, or technique, of this art of silence. As with the development of any spiritual quality, an easy and useful preparation is to first “set the mood” by reading something on the subject. Among the writings suitable for this purpose I would point to the fine essay on silence by M. Maeterlinck in the book *Le Trésor des Humbles* and the celebration of silence in T. Carlyle’s book *On Heroes*. Also, the Quakers have written extensively on silence because they base their religious practice on silent meetings for worshiping.

We can also find encouragement in the exemplary lives of those who have practiced silence. A modern example would be Aurobindo, who used to remain silent for 360 days a year for many years. During that time period he would write a lot while keeping absolutely quiet. Another less extreme example is that of Gandhi. Once a week, on Monday, he used to observe 24 hours of silence.

After this preparation, we then have to “maintain quietness” internally, and this can be achieved through the various stages of meditation. First of all, direct the attention from “the periphery to the center,” then raise the center of consciousness by moving from feeling to aspiration, and

direct the attention of the mind toward the Soul or, generally, toward the world of Spirit and Reality. It’s important to move through the emotional-imaginative level quickly so as not to get distracted by any psychic impressions that might come through if we linger too long on this plane.

Consciousness must be kept at a high point of inner tension. This tension – which is a vigilant form of awareness, a spiritual attitude of “being present” to ourselves – is the essential prerequisite for any spiritual conquest. It can be seen as a combination of Intention and Attention. Intention urges us to penetrate into higher levels of consciousness; Attention is the concentration or “centeredness” of consciousness and the act of keeping it fixed at the level reached.

Notice that spiritual tension is different from personal tension. They are, in fact, two opposite conditions. The second is an obstacle to the first, as spiritual tension can best be achieved in a state of physical relaxation and mental and emotional calm. This tension is followed by silence, a living silence that creates the necessary conditions for any revelation.

Everything that has been said so far refers to individual silence, but it can and actually should be applied as well to silence in groups and to the silence of the group. Group gatherings should utilize the practice of silence, not just because it provides an opportunity and satisfies a need to be in silence, but also because it creates an imperceptible but indeed real communion among a group of people, as well as between two people who sit together in silence. In *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* there is an anecdote that shows how well the Franciscans knew the value of silence.

“Soon after the death of Saint Francis, Saint Louis King of France set off to Perugia to see Brother Giles in person. He arrived at the convent gate as if he were a poor unknown pilgrim, but having been revealed to Brother Giles that the pilgrim was the King of France, he left his cell in haste and ran to the gate without asking any questions. They both knelt down and embraced each other with great reverence and many outward signs of love and charity, as if a long friendship had existed between them, though they had never met before in their lives. Neither of them spoke a word, and after remaining clasped in each other’s arms for some time, they separated in silence. Then, when the other brothers found out who the pilgrim was, they bitterly complained to Brother Giles. He answered: ‘Beloved brothers, be not surprised at this, that neither could I say a word to him nor he to me; for no sooner had we embraced each other than we saw into each other’s hearts, and knew far better what we had to say than if we had explained in words that which we felt in our hearts. For so imperfectly the tongue of man reveals the secret mysteries of God, that words would have been to us rather a hindrance than a consolation’. (Chapter 1, XXXIV) The effects of silence on the personality include the replenishment of energy, a sense of reinvigoration, and a true process of regeneration of all personal aspects. Another effect

of group silence is that of harmonization. When there are conflicts or disagreements within a group, or simply differences of opinion about some decision to make, or about which activities to undertake, the best thing is to maintain silence, to spend some quiet time together (this of course implies that all group participants know and appreciate the art of silence). After a period of silence spent together, it's easier to understand each other because we will have considered the problem from a higher impersonal perspective. The separative personalities will have been silenced, and the participants will have symbolically gathered in the Temple of Silence. There, after having aligned more closely with the Soul and uniting with the Souls of everyone else, they will see the points of agreement, of contact, and of understanding with each other.

6

But the beneficial effects of silence are not limited to this. Along with the practice of silence, what gradually develops has been called "the double life of the disciple," meaning the ability to maintain a "zone of silence" during daily life amid noise and turmoil: "The silence of the center preserved within the worldly noise." Here too there is an encouraging example, that of Brother Laurence of the Resurrection, who was able to keep a sense of the presence of God while he was busy in a noisy kitchen.

Another positive effect of the practice of silence is learning to act quietly, without fuss and noise.

In Maria Montessori's educational approach there is an exercise that is used to train children to move carefully in attentive silence. They do this willingly, and in so doing they learn self-control.

A similar exercise, but with a very different purpose, is performed by hotel thieves, who are able to steal silently into a hotel room without waking up the guests! In doing so, they are actually practicing a form of yoga. In fact, up to a certain point, certain skills developed in yoga can be used both selfishly or unselfishly and beneficially.

The difference lies in the motive, not in the technical skill. Hence, we can learn much from those who behave wrongly. Too often they do very bad things very well, while we often do good things not well enough! Remember, in the Gospel it is said that Christ will come "like a thief in the night."

Another benefit of maintaining a zone of silence – a state of dis-identification or meditation that can be maintained as we perform daily activities, investing in them the needed energy and attention level (but not more) – is to be able to listen carefully and recognize those insights, messages and inner forces that can often be more easily accessible when we are externally active and thinking of other things, rather than in moments of deep reflection.

I think these quick notes might be enough to encourage us to put into practice or intensify the practice of silence. Let us consider ourselves, individually and in our groups, as "Friends of Silence," serviceable followers of the Spirit of Silence.

Roberto Assagioli

SPIRITUAL LESSONS OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Dear Readers, we present you an article that we think could have been written today and not eighty years ago. It is about a different economic crisis to the current one but the principles that govern it are similar and shadows and lights are the same.

Up to you the necessary considerations...

A school of political economy that was in vogue in the last century had created the myth of the "homo aeconomicus", an imaginary being who would act motivated solely by his or her own financial gain, and on this basis it had built more or less ingenious theories and formulated supposed laws.

The great historical events that took place in the twentieth century have demonstrated the futility of those abstract constructions, and little to no validity of those "laws".

It could not be otherwise. The "Homo aeconomicus" does not exist but man, the complex and multifaceted man in which the various aspects and elements, the various needs, tendencies, desires, passions and aspirations constantly act and react upon each other, and all contribute, in different, hardly calculable and predictable ways, to determine his or her conduct in all fields, including economic one. And in turn the individual and collective economic conditions have not only tangible and practical effects, but affect the whole human being, influence his or her ideas and feelings, pose problems, require choices, and cause emotional, moral and spiritual crises.

This fact was fully recognized by the (Italian) Prime Minister, that worded it in one of those incisive phrases