

Being Attentive to Silence

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Abstract: *This paper posits silence as a transcendental reality, present wherever beauty, truth and goodness are found. We can fear the presence of silence while at the same time suffering from its absence. Yet learning to be attentive to the bodily felt-sense of silence means that we are better able to bridge authentically the gap between our interior world and the demands of the exterior world. This paper draws on the work of psychologist and phenomenologist, Robert Sardello, to support its argument, as well as that of Ignatian-formed theologians, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Bernard Lonergan and Brian O’Leary.*

Key Words: Silence, felt-sense, mindfulness, anxiety, contemplation, resonance, interiority.

Silence. Stillness. These are not commonly found in the often reckless rush of daily life. Even for those who are necessarily still in body—confined by reasons of ill health, disability or age—the pressure of thought surges on, carrying with it a tumult of emotions. Silence and stillness are even less present for those whose tasks in the world engage them in seemingly never-ending demands. Here, too often, “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”¹ The consequence is a suffering which can be ignored for a time, often an extended time, but which ultimately reveals its presence in the searing loneliness of the night, over coffee with a neighbour, in a visit to the pastor or priest, or in the doctor’s clinic and psychologist’s suite.

I have been privileged to work with people who came to me in my capacity as a clinical psychologist. For them things had fallen apart, the centre no longer held. On their journey to healing and transformation they learnt a number of skills which are pertinent to the issue I address here. My clients learnt to attend to their interiority. In other words, they learnt to pay attention to the felt-sense of themselves in at least some of the various operations in which they engaged in daily life.² They then learnt to present that sense to God in prayer. They also learnt to value silence. Here psychological practices of mindfulness became seamlessly interwoven with what the Christian tradition terms contemplative prayer.³ In the next section I consider awareness in the context of the many

¹ W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming” in *The Mentor Book of Major British Poets*, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: The New American Library, 1963) 426.

² For a presentation of the basic pattern of operations occurring in human experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding and acting see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972) 6.

³ The term “mindfulness” is a translation of the Pali word “sati” and is synonymous with awareness. The practice derives from Buddhist teaching of the path towards enlightenment. For an extended but very accessible study see Analayo, *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization* (Birmingham: Windhorse

varieties of silence available for differentiation. I also consider the impact of both the presence and absence of silence in our lives. All these considerations have the ultimate goal of articulating the value of being attentive to silence *en route* to an authentic interiority which values the felt-sense of the body.

BEING AWARE OF SILENCE

“Everything, it seems, has its own quality of silence.”⁴ There are silences which exist between people, each with its own recognisable meaning:

There is the awkward silence of the road trip with someone we do not know well enough to be silent next to, the refrigerating silence of hardened anger ... the focused silence of absorption in our sewing or a good book, the stunned silence of seeing the status of our pension fund.⁵

There is the silence of lovers and the silence of those whose love has deepened and matured over many years. There are the silences of nature: the vast and utterly still silence of the mountains, the silence of the dark forest, the joyful silence of the flowing stream and the silence of the falling leaf.⁶

The absence of sound waves characterises each instance, whether in social or natural contexts. Nevertheless each silence carries its distinctive meaning, for the external presentation of silence communicates unique meaning.⁷ So too in the spiritual life silence is the outer form of more profound dynamics that can be both healing and freeing. Even one who is not a practitioner of meditation or contemplation can appreciate silence as a significant value: “I can’t think of anything lonelier than spending the rest of my life with someone I can’t talk to, or worse, someone I can’t be silent with.”⁸

The psalmist calls us to “be still” and thereby to know God (Ps 46:10). The saints cherish silence and monasteries maintain a “Great Silence.” Such silence develops an interiority that is foundational to the spirituality manifested by the withdrawn contemplative and the person in active ministry alike.⁹ The Carthusian’s physical cell is carried metaphorically in the hearts of many who respond to the call of God.¹⁰ Such was the lesson that the mystic and activist, Catherine of Siena, conveyed to her biographer,

Publications, 2003). For the incorporation of Buddhist practices of mindfulness into western psychology see, for example, Bruno Cayoun, *Mindfulness-integrated Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: Principles and Practice* (London: Wiley-Blackwell Publications, 2011); Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World through Mindfulness* (London: Piatkus, 2005); Daniel J. Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010).

4 Robert Sardello, *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness* (Berkeley, CA: Goldenstone Press, 2008) 15.

5 Martin Laird, *A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 46.

6 Sardello, *Silence* 15.

7 See Laird, *A Sunlit Absence* 46. For the identification of the various functions of meaning, see Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 76-79.

8 Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009) 7.

9 For the comparison of the interiority of the Carthusian and the person who adopts Ignatian spirituality see Brian O’Leary, “Ignatian Mysticism and Contemporary Culture” *The Way* 52/4 (2013): 53.

10 *Ibid.* 53.

Raymond of Capua. She encouraged Raymond as follows: "Make yourself a cell in your own mind from which you need never come out."¹¹

Down through the ages stillness and silence have been presented as the context for an encounter with God. For Blessed John Ruysbroeck the experience of the stillness of God is that of a "dark silence in which all lovers lose themselves."¹² Using the paradoxical imagery of the mystic St John of the Cross refers to his Beloved as "silent music, sounding solitude."¹³ Thomas Merton's experience in the quiet solitude of his hermitage powerfully depicts the way in which silence calls the lover of God:

I live in the woods out of necessity. I get out of bed in the middle of the night because it is imperative that I hear the silence of the night, alone, and, with my face on the floor, say psalms, alone, in the silence of the night.¹⁴

St Teresa of Avila encourages us to imitate the saints in their "striving after solitude and silence."¹⁵ Those who pursue such goals eventually find that the spiritual journey brings such intimacy with God that they can "rejoice together in the deepest silence."¹⁶ Importantly, Teresa instructs her sisters to "enter in" to the marvellous interior castle, acknowledging the seeming absurdity of such an instruction when "clearly one doesn't have to enter [this castle of the soul] since it is within oneself."¹⁷ Teresa explains, however, that such an instruction is necessary because "there are souls ... so accustomed to being involved in external matters that there is no remedy, nor does it seem they can enter within themselves."¹⁸ The revelation of the world within is denied such people, preoccupied as they are with the world without. In such situations the phenomenon of interiority is opaque, totally removed from their worldview.

Many of us could identify with Teresa's observation. Life outside monastic constraints does indeed create such distracting hurdles that it is very difficult for us to "enter in." Self-awareness is very important at these times as St Catherine of Siena observed in her frequent references to the value of the "cell of self-knowledge."¹⁹ Often the first hurdle to overcome is that of anxiety, an anxiety that is paradoxically present both in the presence and the absence of silence.

¹¹ Blessed Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* (London: Harvill Press, 1960) 43.

¹² Jan van Ruysbroeck, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage; The Sparkling Stone; The Book of Supreme Truth* ed. Evelyn Underhill (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing LLC, 1992) 178.

¹³ St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* ed. Kieran Kavanagh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1979) 412.

¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life* (Journals of Thomas Merton) (New York: HarperOne, 1998) 240.

¹⁵ St. Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976) 91.

¹⁶ St. Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle" in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1980) 442.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 285.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 286.

¹⁹ For a discussion of self-knowledge as foundational for Catherine's exercise of authority, see Meredith Secomb, "The Role of the 'Cell of Self-Knowledge' in the Authority of Catherine of Siena" *Magistra: A Journal of Women's Spirituality in History* 9/2 (2003): 41-54.

Silence and Anxiety

Silence is “real enough to be afraid of.”²⁰ This was my clients’ experience until they learnt how to accept the noise and chatter of their interiority and to allow the silence to transform their inner space, for silence both forms and transforms us.²¹ Silence exposes us to the noise within: “the incessant inner talking that goes on; the continual churning of our emotions; angers that have gone unresolved for years; envies, hatreds and desires, bad memories, pains and hurts, deceits we have justified to ourselves.”²² Such exposure upsets our seeming equilibrium; it generates anxiety.

Foundational to my clients’ acceptance and subsequent exploration of their experience was learning how to accept the bodily sensations that accompanied their exposure to interiority. In so doing they discovered depths of which they were not previously aware. Such depths provided a paradoxically firm foundation for all subsequent psychological development. Acceptance of the anxiety that accompanied the stillness and silence of darkness, emptiness, and unknowing provided the first step towards the expression of a life lived with a new level of authenticity and assurance. What is it in consciousness that enables the acceptance of anxiety to constitute a new level of human functioning? Bernard Lonergan addresses this question when he considers the impact of religious experience, demonstrating thereby that he was ahead of his time in appreciating what is now referred to as the neuroplasticity of the brain.

Lonergan notes that engagement with God in the realm of ultimate self-transcendence may generate anxiety and dread because it upsets the current “concrete synthesis” previously established by the subject.²³ Reflecting on the impact of changed horizons on a presently “successful integration of the problem of conscious living,” Lonergan observes, “any change in that concrete successful synthesis of human living gives rise to anxiety.”²⁴ It can generate dread. As Lonergan points out, however, such anxiety can motivate one to further action to ensure a more satisfactory synthesis. Lonergan argues that we achieve that synthesis when consciousness integrates the “underlying neural manifolds.”²⁵ Lonergan points to the way in which anxiety and dread engage both the intellectual/spiritual and sensitive dimensions of the human being at the neuropsychological level. In so doing anxiety changes the sensitive, or neuronal and somatic, dimensions of human beings. Transformation is achieved when we both notice *and accept* the felt-sense of anxiety rather than reacting in a non-constructive way.²⁶ Such acceptance generates new neuronal pathways that prepare for a new level of neuropsychological integration.

Not only anxiety and dread but all expressions of human functioning, including those in the transcendent realm, have an impact upon the neuronal and somatic

²⁰ Laird, *A Sunlit Absence* 47.

²¹ *Ibid.* 47.

²² Sardello, *Silence* 37.

²³ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism*, ed. Philip J. McShane (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001) 288.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 288.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 289.

²⁶ Note that approaches to anxiety based on principles of mindfulness complement Lonergan’s approach for which see, for example, Cayoun, *Mindfulness-integrated Cognitive Behaviour Therapy*.

dimensions of the human being. The presence of silence is just one of those expressions. Another expression is the absence of silence. Given all that has been said about the *presence* of silence and anxiety, it is a paradoxical reality that the *absence* of silence can also create anxiety. Being attentive to the depths of interior silence supports our sense of our unique individuality. When we are unable to achieve that degree of attentiveness we experience anxiety:

Our anxiety comes from our bodily experience of being reduced to the likeness of everyone else, of being completely forgetful of the touch that gives us a unique sensing of our bodily presence in the world. All the adornments, make-up, clothing, and accoutrements can never individualize the way we sense the fullness of our embodied being.²⁷

In the overly extroverted drive to attend to matters exterior to our core sense of self we can lose touch with that which makes us distinctive. Such a loss generates anxiety. There is a further reason for such anxiety. It derives not only from succumbing to social pressures; it derives also from the failure to recognise the foundational reality that our being is grounded in God.

The Contemplative Awareness of Silence

In the ground of our being is an unassailable union with God, a union worked by the gifts of creation and redemption. For so many of us, however—even those professing a Christian faith—the transforming, experiential reality of this truth is rarely available for reflection. Martin Laird is in a centuries-long line of teachers who point to the reason for this sad state of affairs. Our interior “noise and chatter” delude us into thinking we are separated from God.²⁸ Only awareness will cleanse our “doors of perception,” enabling us thereby to see infinity in all that is.²⁹

The practice of contemplation is a time-honoured means of developing the awareness which accesses the still and silent depths within. The silence to which contemplative prayer exposes us is not merely the absence of sound. Silence is a portal through which we touch the depths of reality. Isaiah tells us: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Is 30:15). Then, like modern day contemplative practitioners, he laments the Israelites’ preference for the noise and din of activism, for taking things into their own hands (Is 30:16). Such ego-centred, self-determined activism ensures the loss of all capacity to be attentive to interiority. Only the ego-surrendered self has the capacity for such attentiveness.

Contemplative practice enables us to develop this capacity. While many teachers present techniques for focussing on a prayer word, phrase or sound, for Martin Laird it is the expansion that occurs within awareness that is really the liberating dynamic:

It is the blossoming within awareness ... of the flowing luminous vastness that is interior silence. This silent, flowing awareness is untouched by noise and turmoil and yet at the same time is generous and open enough to ground both calm and calamity.³⁰

²⁷ Sardello, *Silence* 37.

²⁸ Laird, *A Sunlit Absence* 3.

²⁹ See William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2010) 25.

³⁰ Laird, *A Sunlit Absence* 6.

Such awareness is not of objects, whether internally or externally perceived, “but the simple opening up from within of the ground of awareness.”³¹ Such awareness has depth, described most adequately by the strongly apophatic terminology of Meister Eckhart.³² It is a “breadth without breadth, an expanseless expanse.”³³ It enables us to see beyond our thoughts into their ground.³⁴ There, in the purity of the awareness thus experienced, is a spaciousness that yields both solitude and love.³⁵

The theme of stillness and silence is central to the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Stillness (*hesychia*) comprises silence accompanied by an attentive listening and openness to God.³⁶ Silence is one of a number of virtues identified as a prerequisite for prayer.³⁷ It is also the outcome of the exercise of detachment wherein “in indescribable silence” the practitioner may dwell in the blessed glory of God.³⁸ It provides the context within which God is revealed, for “perfect silence alone proclaims Him.”³⁹ Hence in the Eastern Orthodox tradition as in the West silence is not of value in itself. Rather it serves intentionality in its efforts to focus on its beloved objective.⁴⁰ There is, however, another approach to silence. It is the approach that values the experience of silence as a *Ding an sich*, a thing in itself. In the next section I consider the reality and value of silence before reflecting on the way in which we can enter into and resonate with silence in itself.

³¹ Ibid. 14. For a comprehensive account of this “ground” see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: a Study of Human Understanding* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983).

³² Apophatic terminology refers to God by way of negation, and kataphatic by way of affirmation. However while apophatic experiences are typically, and simplistically, described as having no imagery and kataphatic as having very specific imagery, even the former do use imagery. So, for example, the “dark cloud” of the classic in the field or St John of the Cross’ “silent music” use imagery although of a paradoxical nature, for which see Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978); St. John of the Cross, “The Spiritual Canticle,” in *Collected Works of St John of the Cross* 412.

³³ Eckhart, Sermon 29, cited in Laird, *A Sunlit Absence* 18.

³⁴ Bernard Lonergan similarly recognises a luminous, opaque and prior presence to self that is the ground for all other intentional activities, for which see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Existenz and Aggiornamento,” in *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988) 229.

³⁵ Laird, *A Sunlit Absence* 19.

³⁶ G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, eds., *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) 365.

³⁷ For the identification also of “self-control, vigilance, humility and patience,” see Gregory of Sinai, “On Commandments and Doctrines, Warnings and Promises; on Thoughts, Passions and Virtues, and also on Stillness and Prayer: One Hundred and Thirty-Seven Texts,” in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 233.

³⁸ Nikitas Stithatos, “On the Practice of the Virtues: One Hundred Texts,” in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 103. Stithatos was a disciple and biographer of the better known St Symeon the New Theologian.

³⁹ Maximos the Confessor, “Various Texts on Theology, the Divine Economy, and Virtue and Vice,” in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) 271.

⁴⁰ By “intentionality” I mean the awareness of desire towards God. For Bernard Lonergan’s explanation of the psychological sense of intentionality see Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 7.

THE REALITY OF SILENCE

Silence is real. Like beauty, truth and goodness, it is intelligible. It is an experience upon which we can reflect and about which we can come to a correct understanding.⁴¹ Just as the pause is as pregnant with meaning as the music that preceded it, so silence is as real as the sound that surrounds and permeates it.

Beauty is present wherever truth and goodness are found.⁴² Unity is present too, for the vision of the mystic recognises the graced coherence in all that is made.⁴³ We are speaking here of transcendental realities that permeate everything, transcending as they do particular categories of objects.⁴⁴ I suggest that silence could be considered yet another transcendental attribute of Being since, for the one with the sensitivity and capacity for stillness, the form of silence can be perceived analogously to the form of beauty.⁴⁵

Hans Urs von Balthasar reflects on our perception of beauty: "The beautiful is above all a *form*, and the light does not fall on this form from above and from outside, rather it breaks forth from the form's interior."⁴⁶ A form is beautiful because it is both a "sign and appearing of a depth and a fullness ... that remain both beyond our reach and our vision."⁴⁷ There is an "inwardness" in matter that gives it energy and spontaneity and where we paradoxically perceive a non-manifested depth.⁴⁸ In the poet's words beauty reveals a mysterious, ineffable depth within which there lives "the dearest freshness deep down things."⁴⁹ Beauty is not, however, alone in its capacity to reveal depth. Silence too reveals depth. The phenomenologist and psychologist, Robert Sardello, observes, "In Silence everything displays its depth, and we find that we are part of the depth of everything around us."⁵⁰ Those with sufficient sensitivity and awareness find there is a sensory response to the perception of such depth.

⁴¹ For the notion of reality as an experience that is intelligently understood and reasonably affirmed see Lonergan, *Method in Theology*; Lonergan, *Insight*. For a succinct statement of distinctions between naïve realism, idealism and critical realism see Lonergan, "Existenz and Aggiornamento" 225.

⁴² For the observation that "beauty ... dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good" see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Vol. I. *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982) 18.

⁴³ Note that Aristotle identified only unity as a transcendental because it alone was intrinsic to Being, whereas Truth and Goodness are relational, for which see Benedict M. Ashley, *The Way toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2009) 175.

⁴⁴ For the explanation that "the One, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful" are "transcendental attributes of Being, because they surpass all the limits of essences and are coextensive with Being" see Hans Urs von Balthasar, "A Résumé of My Thought" in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. D.L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991) 3. For the description of the transcendentals as constituting a *circumincessio* in the totality of being, see Balthasar, *Glory I* 21.

⁴⁵ Such sensitivity is analogous to Balthasar's insistence on the requisite training to see the form of Christ, for which see *Ibid.* 26, 464, 481.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 151. The emphasis is Balthasar's.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 118.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 442.

⁴⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *Poems and Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) 27.

⁵⁰ Sardello, *Silence* 11.

The Touch of Silence

Silence reaches us through many senses. For the poet and mystic silence reaches us through hearing:

Elected Silence, sing to me
And beat upon my whorled ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be
The music that I care to hear.⁵¹

The “silent music” of St John of the Cross is yet another instance of the spiritual capacity to “hear” silence. However while hearing is often associated with the mystical perception of silence, it is the sense of touch which is primarily privileged with such acuity. Both Robert Sardello and Hans Urs von Balthasar emphasise the sense of touch. For Sardello silence is felt “as a kind of touch.”⁵² For Balthasar, following Aquinas, touch is the “‘root of the senses’ ... because, through it, what is living feels itself even as it feels other things.”⁵³

We are speaking here of the perception through the “spiritual senses.”⁵⁴ Origen was the first to develop the concept of the spiritual senses, arguing that there exists a “general sense for the divine” with features that parallel those of our five natural senses. This general sense is subdivided into five senses: “a sense of sight to contemplate supernatural things ... a sense of hearing which perceives voices that do not resound in the exterior air; a sense of taste ... of smell ... of touch.”⁵⁵ Augustine spoke of these senses as he wrestled to articulate what he loved when he loved his God:

Not material beauty or beauty of a temporal order; not the brilliance of earthly light, so welcome to our eyes; not the sweet melody of harmony and song ... It is not these that I love when I love my God. And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace; *but they are of the kind that I love in my inner self*, when my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away; when it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind; when it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating; when it clings to an embrace from which it is not severed by fulfilment of desire. This is what I love when I love my God.⁵⁶

In the experience of the spiritual senses highly refined interoceptive dimensions that are best referred to in terms of touch accompany our loving intention towards God

⁵¹ Hopkins, “The Habit of Perfection” 5.

⁵² Sardello, *Silence* 35.

⁵³ Balthasar, *Glory* I 394. Balthasar acknowledges that for Aquinas taste and smell are close to touch in comprising the “root of the senses.”

⁵⁴ For a consideration of the spiritual senses see Balthasar, *Glory* I 365-425; Stephen Fields, “Balthasar and Rahner on the Spiritual Senses,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 224-241; Karl Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’ in the Middle Ages” in *Theological investigations: Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology* vol. 16 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979) 104-134; Karl Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ According to Origen,” in *Theological Investigations: Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology* vol. 16 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979) 81-103.

⁵⁵ Origen, cited in Balthasar, *Glory* I 368. See also Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’ in the Middle Ages” 104-134; Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ According to Origen” 81-103.

⁵⁶ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961) X.6. Emphasis added.

and attentive receptivity of God's love towards us.⁵⁷ The spiritual sense of taste is of this ilk as is that of hearing. While we "taste" and see that the Lord is good, that taste is accompanied by a spiritual awareness of touch permeating our being. The "elected Silence" of Gerard Manley Hopkins "beat" upon his ear. Here too there is a reference to the sense of touch in Hopkins' mystical hearing. All such phenomena, which could be called "pneumo-somatic," require an awareness of a highly refined, deeply interiorised sense of touch.⁵⁸

When Robert Sardello describes silence as having "the most subtle qualities of objective touch imaginable," he is referring to the interior sense of touch deriving from neural activity and experienced as a subjective feeling state.⁵⁹ Touch gives us an experience not only of the outside world but also of our interiority. We feel the warmth of the sun on our back and the gentle breeze on our face but, if we are attentive, we also feel an increased sense of wellbeing, a sense that can spread throughout the body. Our sense of wellbeing has neurophysiological correlates, for the body is a "sensory organ."⁶⁰ When John Wesley spoke of his heart being "strangely warmed," he was not just speaking metaphorically. When the mystics are caught up in ecstatic union, the activities of body and soul are intimately entwined. So, too, attentiveness to the experience of silence reveals data for conscious awareness at a somatic as well as emotional level.

Yet we must learn the skill of such attentiveness. It demands that we free ourselves from our usual domination by thoughts and images. Sardello observes:

Sensing our body (*sic*) presence ... means we can actually feel our bodily presence in its wholeness as if touched from the outside. To feel so requires us to shift our attention out of our thoughts and perceptions of what is around us to the familiarity and closeness of our own bodily form. For a few moments, as we shift, we do not shut out the world but rather feel it as a spiritual presence touching us. *In those few moments we feel subtly touched all over.*⁶¹

This refinement requires practice. It may take several years to effect the necessary neurophysiological changes that result in such an intensified level of bodily awareness.⁶² The development of this sense enables silence to become a healing bridge between our contemplative selves and the world for it enables us to resonate with silence.

⁵⁷ The psychological term "interoceptive" typically refers to stimuli that occur within the body such as muscle tension or visceral sensations. Training in the awareness, and subsequent acceptance, of such interoceptive sensations is a component in the treatment of anxiety disorders such as panic attacks. I suggest here that God's grace effects subtle bodily sensations to which we can similarly learn to be attentive.

⁵⁸ For the proposal that such data of sense be referred to as "pneumo-somatic," see Meredith Secomb, "Hearing the Call of God: Toward a Theological Phenomenology of Vocation" (PhD dissertation, Australian Catholic University, 2010). <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/digitaltheses/public/adt-acuvp266.24022011/> (accessed 10 November, 2013) 216.

⁵⁹ Sardello, *Silence* 41. For a study of the neural systems that support such interoceptive awareness see H. D. Critchley and others, "Neural Systems Supporting Interoceptive Awareness" *Nature Neuroscience* 7/2 (2004): 189-195.

⁶⁰ Sardello, *Silence* 35.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 36. Emphasis added.

⁶² *Ibid.* 40. Practice of one form or another (e.g. contemplative prayer or mindfulness or Buddhist meditation) is essential to effect the necessary neurophysiological changes. For a study of such changes see Belinda Ivanovski and Gin S. Malhi, "The Psychological and Neurophysiological Concomitants of Mindfulness Forms of Meditation" *Acta Neuropsychiatrica* 19/2 (2007): 76-91. A comprehensive presentation of these strategies is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

Resonating with Silence

For Hans Urs von Balthasar "The beautiful requires the reaction of the whole man."⁶³ Just as the whole being of the connoisseur is involved in responding to beautiful music or a beautiful work of art, so too the embodied soul responds fully to the beauty of its Creator in so far as it has been trained to do so. For Balthasar the person who has been trained in faith can, through faith, become "a sounding box of the event of beauty," attuned to the sound of the divine.⁶⁴ I suggest that a similar capacity exists for the one who has learnt to be attentive to silence.

Sardello argues that we can learn to resonate with silence. Just as a sounding bell can cause other objects, such as glassware, to resonate sympathetically, so too the human soul can learn to resonate with silence: "The human soul functions similarly as an activity of resonance, and our soul connection with Silence is a form of sympathetic resonance."⁶⁵ Sardello encourages us to nurture the felt-sense of resonance in order to alert us to the subtleties of silence.

By nurturing the felt-sense of resonance we are brought to an awareness of a "Holy Silence" where we will find a "hidden altar" deep within our bodies and our hearts.⁶⁶ This altar is within us all. It is the hidden and luminous core of our being.⁶⁷ The discovery of this silence will spontaneously reveal a chapel of the heart wherein we kneel before the Mystery that is unveiled. As far as this goes, Sardello's reflections on silence are akin to those of the scholars whose work I have discussed so far, both the Eastern Orthodox writers and those in the contemplative tradition of the West.

Sardello, however, explicitly identifies the uniqueness of his contribution. Going on a retreat, visiting a monastery or reading the riches of the contemplative tradition are activities that certainly generate experiences of silence. They are not, however, enduring experiences, for Sardello argues that "it is no longer possible for us to get to Silence in those ways, not in ways that bridge the gap between Silence and the noisy world."⁶⁸ After such experiences we can suffer feelings of alienation, resentment and anger, disoriented for a time by the contrast between the demands of being present to the world and the apparent riches of retreat from the world. Such experiences do not engender a foundational and authentic interiority available for discernment and responsible action. How then do we authentically "bridge the gap" between our inward turn and the demands encountered upon our outward return? I suggest that only the development of an authentic interiority, helped by being aware of the felt-sense of silence in the formation of that interiority, will enable us to engage authentically with the demands of a needy world.

⁶³ Balthasar, *Glory I* 220.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 220.

⁶⁵ Sardello, *Silence* 13.

⁶⁶ Therese Schroeder-Sheker, "Introduction," in *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness* (Berkeley, CA: Goldenstone Press, 2008) xx. For a complementary discussion, from the viewpoint of faith, of "attunement" to the Holy Spirit, see Balthasar, *Glory I* 241-257. Balthasar refers to the soul's attunement to, or concordance with, God throughout this volume.

⁶⁷ For Bernard Lonergan's reference to the "hidden" and "luminous" core of our being see Lonergan, "Existenz and Aggiornamento," 222, 229.

⁶⁸ Sardello, *Silence* 2.

ATTENTIVE TO SILENCE: BRIDGING THE GAP

There are certainly personal benefits to the habitual practice of Silence:

We feel a new attunement to spirit as a directly felt reality. We gain the capacity of reflection, of letting the world and things and others mirror within us, rather than ceaselessly going from one activity to the next. We realize that our activity had become an addiction. We gain a newfound creativity. Insights, new ideas, and new ways of seeing come again.⁶⁹

While we may hold the value of the newly felt interior freedom consequent upon the experience of silence in high regard, this is not Sardello's emphasis. Sardello wants to bridge the gap between our pursuit of personal solitude and our effective engagement in the world. Hence he wants to integrate both spirit and psyche with the body, for it is an "embodied spiritual-soul" that comprises the whole person who lives and acts within the world.⁷⁰

For Sardello both psychological and spiritual practices tend to ignore the body.⁷¹ He accepts that both forms of practice acknowledge, and may even value, silence. The silence is, however, merely a medium for engagement with another object of intentionality. In contrast a focus on silence itself generates the awareness of a bodily experience of silence. As this sensory awareness is heightened, "the practice of entering Silence itself forms the instrument that gives us access to Silence."⁷² By so doing we are no longer thrown into a painful dualism of noise *versus* silence, of activity *versus* stillness. Rather our sensory awareness of bodily presence to silence enables us to transcend the uncomfortable dualisms of engagement with, or withdrawal from, the world:

Entering Silence through sensing is the key to living both our soul life and our spiritual life in the world ... Letting Silence pervade all we do does work because it never separates itself from the world. Thus we do not make the practice of Silence exclusively into a soul work and go inward, nor exclusively a spiritual work to attain some goal on a spiritual path. The work is to be with Silence itself, and in so doing we are one with soul spirit, body, and world.⁷³

Nature provides the primary access into the development of an awareness of the impact of silence upon us.⁷⁴ Sardello encourages us not simply to enjoy the silence, as on a balmy day we might marvel at the soft and silent beauty that surrounds us. Rather we are to be attentive to the experience resonating within ourselves:

We feel the presence of Silence throughout the physical world as a kind of touch. ... Our whole body, as a sensory organ in itself, senses this realm. We cannot say we experience Silence just in front of us, or to one side, or above, or in back of us. It is all around and also within.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Ibid. 9.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 33.

⁷¹ Ibid. 33. Sardello cites psychological practices such as active imagination or dream work and spiritual practices such as meditation or contemplation. Sardello does not consider the mindfulness practices of cognitive behaviour therapies that do focus on the body.

⁷² Ibid. 33.

⁷³ Ibid. 33-34.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 9, 35, 38.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 35.

Such awareness ensures an embodiment, an integration of body, soul and spirit that provides a somatic experience of an “aleness that partakes of the whole of the world.”⁷⁶

Once we have discovered this new bodily awareness, then, and only then, for Sardello can we proceed to enter into silence through meditation.⁷⁷ Too early an entry into meditation, or contemplation, carries the danger of being merely a work of a disembodied spirit. Contemplative practices generated from such disembodiment dissociate us from the world and generate a division between our “spiritual” practices and our work in the world. Such practices are not authentic expressions of interiority and hence deny us the capacity to engage authentically with others. Eventually we can carry our increased body sensibility into our relationships, giving them a new depth and power.⁷⁸

While I have been emphasising the importance of being attentive to silence, it is but part of a fuller programme necessary for the development of an authentic interiority, or, as Bernard Lonergan would say, “authentic subjectivity.”⁷⁹ Lonergan presents a comprehensive account of the conditions necessary for such personal enlargement.

The “Work of Art” of our Life

Bernard Lonergan has masterfully demonstrated the conditions for a life lived authentically. It is a life where we base our decisions and actions on correctly understood experience, where awareness of interiority coexists with awareness of exteriority. It is a life where we are attentive to our experience, reflect intelligently on that experience, determine the truth of that reflection, and only act when we have judged the value and worth of a considered action.⁸⁰ I am concerned in this paper with the first level of intentional consciousness, that of being attentive to our experience. In particular I am concerned that we learn to be attentive to one facet of the data of sense available for conscious awareness, that of the felt-sense of silence in the context of acting in the world.

There are many patterns of such action.⁸¹ While we all experience phenomena deriving from our senses, these sensations are differently patterned according to the needs of the moment. Although the issue I address here is pertinent to all patterns of experience, my focus in this paper is on the aesthetic and dramatic patterns of experience.⁸² It is on the patterns that organise sensation both in recognition of the

⁷⁶ Ibid. 36.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 38.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 47.

⁷⁹ Note that I am using the more traditional and familiar term “interiority” as roughly synonymous with Lonergan’s preferred term of “subjectivity.” For a succinct presentation of Lonergan’s notion of “the subject,” see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Subject,” in *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. W. Ryan and B. Tyrrell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 69-86.

⁸⁰ For an extended presentation of Lonergan’s identification of four levels of intentional consciousness see Lonergan, *Method in Theology*; Lonergan, *Insight*.

⁸¹ See Lonergan, *Insight* 181-189. Lonergan there also identifies the biological, aesthetic and intellectual patterns of experience.

⁸² Being attentive to the felt-sense of silence in the context of the intellectual pattern of experience is important, but is beyond the confines of this paper. Suffice it to say that such attentiveness can only develop after we have exercised awareness in the ordinary stresses of daily life.

spontaneity and joy of conscious living and also according to the demands of daily life. Both patterns contribute, I propose, to the task of making our lives a “work of art.”⁸³

For Lonergan experience within the aesthetic pattern can occur merely “for the sake of experiencing.”⁸⁴ The experience of silence belongs in this category when we rejoice in the silence of a still and sunny morning. However, we can also be attentive to the felt-sense of silence in the context of the pressures of daily life. Then we are in the dramatic pattern of experience, and being attentive to silence in this context contributes new features. Then it infuses speech and action with an authority that derives from accessing realms beyond the surface ego, an authority that derives from accessing the depths of the ego-surrendered self, a self that touches the reality of God. For, in submitting the ego to faith-filled silence accessed in the depths of ourselves, we touch the Word of God which, St John of the Cross informs us, is spoken “always in eternal silence, and in silence must be heard by the soul.”⁸⁵ I suggest that an awareness of silence, a careful attentiveness to the dimensions of silence that touch our bodies, as well as our hearts and souls, will contribute to the work of making our lives a work of art. Here we begin to touch the wellsprings of authentic interiority.⁸⁶ Here we enter into the possibility of a faith-filled life of everyday mysticism engaged contemplatively with the world.

An Everyday Mysticism in the World

In a more descriptive vein than Lonergan’s comprehensive explanatory account, Brian O’Leary cites the late Cardinal Martini’s notion of interiority as “everything that has to do with the sphere of the heart, of deep intentionality, of decisions made from within.”⁸⁷ O’Leary extends this notion to the “everyday mysticism” that the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola, proposed. Ignatius’ spiritual life was not just a series of profoundly intimate moments with God such as he experienced at Manresa, for eventually he learnt to find God whenever he wished. Indeed, Ignatius’ ease in finding God continued to increase as his life progressed.⁸⁸ Hence the mysticism Ignatius proposed is, to quote Bernard Lonergan, “not just a series of exceptional events. It is a whole way of life.”⁸⁹ It is, in other words, an “everyday mysticism.”⁹⁰ This mystical intimacy with God in the ordinariness of daily life made Ignatius’ ministry so effective.

O’Leary addresses the need for an authentic interiority as a counter-cultural value in the present-day world and in so doing reflects on the seemingly paradoxical resonance between Ignatius and the Carthusians. The active ministry of Ignatian spirituality is in the

⁸³ See Lonergan, *Insight* 187. See also Eph 2:10.

⁸⁴ Lonergan, *Insight* 184.

⁸⁵ John of the Cross, “Maxims on Love” 675.

⁸⁶ A continuation of such authentic interiority requires the adoption of the remaining transcendental precepts proposed by Lonergan, namely being intelligent about our understanding, reasonable about our judging and responsible about our decision-making and acting. However, an elaboration of these dimensions is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸⁷ O’Leary, “Ignatian Mysticism and Contemporary Culture” 54.

⁸⁸ Ignatius of Loyola, *A Pilgrim’s Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola* trans. Joseph N. Tylenda S.J. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991) §99.

⁸⁹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Bernard Lonergan to Thomas O’Malley November 8, 1978” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 20 (2002) 82.

⁹⁰ O’Leary, “Ignatian Mysticism and Contemporary Culture” 45, 55.

world for all to see. In contrast the contemplative work of the Carthusian is hidden in the silent solitude of a cell. Yet they have in common an emphasis on interiority:

The monk lives in his cell in order to cultivate interiority and so find God. Ignatian people carry their "cell in their hearts, entering it in recollection and prayer. They too cultivate interiority, but in the very different context of being inserted into the world.⁹¹

The stresses of the world's demands place a great strain on the one who would unite the contemplative and active lives. The monk's singleness of purpose is more readily sustained in the focused life and rule under which he lives. In contrast the one seeking to live a life of intimacy with God while at the same time actively serving his or her neighbour is faced with a multitude of challenges. In such circumstances being attentive to the felt-sense of silence is a significant aid to maintaining the cell of the heart in ministry in the world.

CONCLUSION

While we may enjoy the silence of nature or of contemplative prayer, we seldom pay attention to the experience of silence as it impacts on our bodies. Silence is real. It touches us. It generates experiences to which we can attend. By paying attention to the felt experience of silence we can learn to resonate with silence and thereby develop a sensitivity to the subtleties of silence. Being attentive to the bodily sense of silence helps to ground us, providing a firm bridge between the interior and exterior worlds. When we learn to value the felt-sense of silence in all the different patterns of experience which we encounter, we discover that it reveals a new platform for assured engagement with God and the world, a platform which supports both our interior solitude and our loving relationship with others.

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⁹¹ O'Leary, "Ignatian Mysticism and Contemporary Culture," 53.