

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

December 13, 2020

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Stillness

Come, Silence, fill this moment¹

Introduction

They say that silence between and around the words lets the words speak their meaning. They say that silence between and around the notes of the music allows the music to ring in its beauty. In the same way, in our busy lives full of accomplishments and full of doing, we need stillness to pause, to reflect, to give meaning, and to recharge. Stillness allows us to see the precious things in our life lit up – the precious things illuminated.

All month the theme for our worship services is stillness. I have decided that every Sunday in the month of December we will hear the same hymn, a song from our hymnal about stillness. It's the one that we heard the choir sing earlier this morning, and the message of that hymn echoes the message that I want to share with you this morning:

*Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let the stillness carry me
Find the silence, hold the silence, let the silence carry me
In the spirit, by the spirit, with the spirit giving power
I will find true harmony.²*

I think we can find harmony in the stillness; I think there is also challenge in the stillness. We saw both of the those things in the story that Kendra shared with us: the child who went seeking for silence found challenge there and found harmony.³

Stillness Is More Sacred Than Secular

Let me start with this: if you were to divide the world into what is sacred or spiritual on one hand; and what is secular or mundane on the other hand, I say that stillness would fall in the category of the sacred. There are many examples of this. Prayer and meditation are usually marked by stillness and silence. Hanukah candles represent stillness: when I have lit a candle for Hanukah every night this week since Wednesday, the burning of that candle feels like it holds me in stillness. The morning today: stepping outside...there's nothing like an early morning with a fresh snowfall, especially on a Sunday when there is less traffic and noise. That stillness feels like a sacred stillness. The most sacred place for me is often in the forest where I find stillness. And when I walk into a cathedral, or any sanctuary, like this one, there is a stillness there.

Stillness is mostly in the realm of the sacred.

I have one little anecdote about that. I have a friend from college, we were roommates together. Years after college, we were on the phone one time and he mentioned that he had started going to church regularly. I was surprised because he – nor I -- had never defined ourselves as religious people back in college when we know each other well. him to be a religious person at all. And he said, "I think it's good to set aside some time

¹ Rev. Mark Belletini, "Ode to Silence." Sonata for Voice and Silence, Skinner House Books, Boston. 2008.

² Carl G. Seaburg, "Find a Stillness." #352 in Singing the Living Tradition, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston. 1993.

³ Andrew Newman, The Boy Who Searched for Silence. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-dY90Ykzm0>

every week to think about what's important." In other words, he wasn't going to church for the theology, he wasn't even going for the community. He was going for the chance of quiet reflection. Maybe that's why some of you are part of this religious congregation: to have time set aside every week to think about what's important.

Of course there are examples of spiritual practices that are not defined by stillness. There is the pilgrimage practice of Muslims and others. There is the "Whirling Dervish" practice of certain Sufis: they hold one hand up toward God, they hold one hand down toward the earth, and they spin...and that is their spiritual practice. But I say that mostly, stillness and sacredness go hand in hand.

Here's what Mother Teresa says—Saint Theresa:

*We need to find God, and He cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence.*⁴

And here are the words of another spiritual leader, a man who is known as the Father of Yoga, as I learned this week: Paramahansa Yogananda. He says,

*In the devotee's silence God's silence ceases.*⁵

In other words, when I come in silence to my practice of meditation or prayer, that's when I God can begin to speak to me.

Stillness as a Spiritual Practice

I say that a spiritual practice of stillness is a good thing for us, a healthy thing. And I say that this time of year, with the coming darkness and the snowfall lends itself to this sort of practice. Next week of course, we will celebrate the winter solstice, the darkest day of the year. Stillness practice might be appreciating the snowfall, finding a quiet place in the woods, lighting a candle, or perhaps prayer or meditation.

I'm not the only one who says that stillness is a good practice. This is from Michael Hyatt. He names these two reasons for practicing the discipline of stillness. First, he says,

*I want to maintain perspective. If I don't make time to be still, then I find myself in reactive mode—
influenced by hundreds of little voices with big demands.*

And I really like his second reason. Michael Hyatt says we practice stillness because

*I want to stay connected to my true self. I don't want to get confused, thinking that I am the image I
present to the world. They are related, of course, but I want to live from the inside out.*⁶

I love that, because—it doesn't mean that we're being false—but we're always presenting an image to the world, a persona...putting on a mask, if you will. But in stillness, we remember that there's an inner self, and if we don't take time for stillness we run the risk of forgetting that—as Michael Hyatt says.

⁴ Mother Theresa, quoted by Teresa Tomeo in *Listening for God*, Sophia Institute Press.

<https://catholicexchange.com/seek-god-through-the-sounds-of-silence>

⁵ Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Second Coming of Christ*. ([ISBN 978-0-87612-555-7](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0876125557))

⁶ Michael Hyatt, "How to Master the Essential Discipline of Stillness." <https://michaelhyatt.com/the-practice-of-stillness/>

And, there's a risk.

The Challenge of Stillness

There's a real risk that when we practice stillness, we're going to find stuff we don't like. When we go inward and we take the time, without the distractions and the business of our everyday world, we might find stuff we don't like.

Usually when we do a stillness practice we might close our eyes to shut out what we see; we might find a quiet place to shut out what we're hearing—like the child in the story. The extreme example of that would be a sensory deprivation chamber. Have you heard of these? I've seen one—I've never tried one. It's a small room or chamber with no light and no sound, and it has a very shallow pool of water, so that you are floating. All of your senses, sight, hearing, and even feeling are suspended. I was talking with some of my ministerial colleagues about this, who have done this, and one of them said—especially at first, when you go into a sensory deprivation chamber, "It's loud in there."

It's loud in there from all the stuff that's coming up from the inside! When we take the time to shut out what's outside, there's a lot of stuff that can come up. Sometimes it's our demons, our shadows, our doubts, our fear and shame.

When I think about that, again and again I return to the wisdom of Pema Chodron, Buddhist nun, about dealing with the negative feelings that come up. And her advice is: let it come up, and look at it with patience. She says,

Sit with your anguish and the discomfort of it. It's like sitting on a wild horse. When we stick with this process we learn something very interesting: there is no resolution for these uncomfortable feelings. When we feel powerful energy, we tend to be extremely uncomfortable until things are fixed in some kind of secure and comforting way, either on the side of "yes" or "no," "right" or "wrong." Patience, on the other hand, gives us nothing to hold on to. Joy, happiness, inner peace, harmony come from sitting still with the moodiness of the energy until it rises, dwells and passes away. Patience is a way to develop fearlessness, to contact the seeds of war and the seeds of peace and decide which ones we want to nurture.⁷

"To contact the seeds of war and the seeds of peace and decide which ones we want to nurture." I think the child in Kendra's story found both: the anger, which the child was able to let go, and then the child found inner peace. Both are within us, and in the practice of stillness, we find both. I think this is also what Rev. Mark Belletini was saying in his poem:

*You, silence,
are quicksand where curses and cockiness and
arrogance find their end.*

Certainly in the silence that kind of thing comes up: curses, cockiness, arrogance—let it come up, let it pass. And he says,

*You, silence,
are the hand in which the pearl of the universe,
grown around the painful grain of human suffering,*

⁷ Pema Chodron, *Practicing Peace in Times of War*. Shambhala Publications, 2007.

*rests in heartbreaking beauty.*⁸

Just as Pema Chodron says, there are the seeds of war and the seeds of peace within us; Mark Belletini is saying the same thing. There is cockiness and curses within us; and there is the pearl of beauty within us. In the silence.

*Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let the stillness carry me
Find the silence, hold the silence, let the silence carry me
In the spirit, by the spirit, with the spirit giving power
I will find true harmony.*

May all of us find a place of stillness. May we dare to enter the stillness and the silence, even when what we find within us is negativity. May we dare to sit through that. And may we find within us the harmony in the stillness. May it be so.

⁸ Rev. Mark Belletini, "Ode to Silence." Sonata for Voice and Silence, Skinner House Books, Boston. 2008.