

The Negative Persona of Silence

By Heather de Geest

To reflect on the existence of silence requires an understanding of its non-existence. As John Cage proclaimed after his experience in the “silent” anechoic chamber, “there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound” (Schafer, 1994, p.256). Although scientific observations confirm that true silence does not exist, the physical and emotional reactions of many individuals to “silence” indicates otherwise. The exposure of many individuals, particularly of the Western culture to a relatively quiet soundscape can lead to a variety of negative emotions, including anxiety, terror, boredom, and loneliness. These negative perceptions of silence can perhaps only be adjusted through a greater personal understanding of the value of quiet, for the benefit of our own individual soundscapes and the good of our society.

The individual who fears silence probably misunderstands it. As Susan Frykberg illustrates in the Study Guide, silence does not exist, for “wherever there is life, there is sound” (Frykberg, 1998, p.120). Our society has attempted to capture these elusive and complex qualities of unearthly quiet by labeling them silence. Yet as Frykberg elaborates, “silence” is only a literary metaphor, constructed to explain “‘auditory space’ between sound events”. What appears to be silence in our soundscape is a huge expanse of this auditory space “between many small non-dominant sounds” (Frykberg, 1998, p. 121). Perhaps it is because our individual soundscapes are so often crammed with a variety of sounds that compete and overlap each other that we become bewildered by these periodic moments of auditory space. The words of Emily Carr, a frequenter of quiet forests describes the wonder and awe of encountering “silence”:

The silence of our Western forests was so profound that our ears could scarcely comprehend it. If you spoke your voice came back to you as your face is thrown back to you in a mirror. It seemed as if the forest were so full of silence that there was no room for sounds (Schafer, 1994, p. 23).

In contrast to the reverent appreciation by which Carr experiences silence, George Green perceives silence as a threatening force:

In wintertime, the stillness, the absence of life or sound, is weird and oppressive. . Sit down upon a fallen tree, and the silence becomes oppressive, almost painful. It is a relief even to hear at last the sough of the fall of the snow from the boughs of the cypress (Frykberg, Course Reader 10.4, 1998, p.2).

The characterization of silence by Green echoes the general view of the Western culture. Our culture largely views silence as a negative presence that should be avoided whenever possible. In many circumstances, individuals dislike silence simply because they had grown used to a previous sound, and are unfamiliar with the quiet. Barry Truax describes his perplexion when he unexpectedly encounters silence:

The noisy city has become deathly quiet. Now the silence seems as oppressive as the bells did a few moments before. That heavy bombardment seems to have cleansed the air of the city's usual profanity, leaving a strange and nervous calm (Schafer, 1994, p.254).

In the social setting, the negative view of silence becomes further evident. Although some cultures appreciate silence within the social setting, Western culture perceives the state of silence to be awkward. In our culture, successful communication involves a great deal of conversation. Frykberg writes in the Study Guide that “most North Americans tend to be eager to fill any space with words, perceiving any silence as awkward” (Frykberg, 1998, p. 122). As R.M. Schafer succinctly writes in The Soundscape, “silence for Western man equals a communication hang-up” (Schafer, 1977, p.256). My own perception of silence in the social setting appears to have been greatly influenced by my Western roots. Unless I am with a close friend, I talk a great deal, and will quickly fill a space in the conversation with words. I notice that my friends do not greet each other with just a wave, but a steady stream of sentences as well. Silence in my social settings does not usually take place.

The fact that silence can be used in communication to indicate hostility and contempt also contributes to the negative view of silence. Although silence can be utilized to express the unspoken understanding between two kindred spirits, it can also represent the livid silence between a couple of quarrelling lovers. The silence that frequently arises between my mother and I illustrates the extent to which silence depends on its context. When we disagree, my mom and I maintain silence for hours, indicating to each other our anger and frustration. As a result of experiencing silence during moments of anger, my perception of silence has become that much more negative.

Not only can a forced silence be viewed negatively in the social setting, but in many circumstances, it is the cause of the fear. In The Soundscape, R.M. Schafer writes that “to contemplate an absolute silence, that is an absolute and terrible thing” (Schafer, 1977, p.256). Schafer emphasizes how desperately humans cling to sound, as though they believe a lack of sound to be representative of death itself: “man fears the absence of sound as he fears the absence of life” (Schafer, 1977, p. 256). In her Study Guide, Frykberg attempts to explain the cause for this negative association with silence, when she writes that “maybe one is reminded of the self and its shortcomings because one hears the sounds of oneself dominate over the sounds of not-self” (Frykberg, 1998, p.123). My experiences of solitary studying in my apartment illustrate my own association of

lifelessness with silence, and my inability to tolerate it. Whenever I study alone in my quiet apartment all day, I become extremely restless. The absence of sound irritates me, and leaves me feeling lonely and unmotivated. It is not until I am exposed to the conversation of others or some form of loud and varied sounds that I become relaxed. In such a situation as this, it becomes evident that I have heard the sounds of my self for too long, and require sounds of “not-self” to temporarily dominate my soundscape.

A negative view of silence can also perpetuate itself in those who have been exposed to heavy volumes of sound on a regular basis. The state of silence would appear that much more devoid of sound events to those whose soundscapes are frequently filled with noise. My own experiences in an empty gymnasium illustrate how loneliness and isolation can easily be attributed to a long exposure to silence. Whenever I entered the high school gymnasium and found it isolated, I would experience feelings of complete loneliness. The fact that I associated this space with loud sounds and activity increased my loneliness. The quiet would feel loud in my ears, and I would become startled by the echoes that sounded as my heels clicked against the floor. In such moments as these, I would not take notice of the unique sounds that I could still hear within the gym; my thoughts focused instead on the sounds that I could not hear. In its context, the silence was so unfamiliar to me that I felt burdened by it, and wished to remove myself as quickly as possible from the gymnasium. As a teenager, these experiences in the isolated gymnasium further reinforced in me a negative perception of silence.

In many circumstances, our thought processes during solitary moments further contribute to our negative perception of silence. In the Study Guide, Frykberg suggests that “in silence, maybe one is reminded of the self and its shortcomings because one hears the sounds of oneself dominate over the sounds of not-self” (Frykberg, 1998, p.123). Personally, I am most eager to be removed from silence in those situations where I am unwilling to reflect on my Self. For example, when I have arrived home to find the house empty of both people and sound, I usually feel myself to be immediately thrown into a state of self-reflection. In such circumstances, the absence of noise scares me a little, as it foreshadows what might happen should I lose my loved ones. What I miss the most in these moments are the everyday sounds of doors banging and people shouting. Such moments exemplify to me my own desire to avoid a solitary state, and my negative view of silence as reminding me of such a possibility. It is with great excitement and relief when a family member comes home and I am once again exposed to sounds that are “not-self”.

Perhaps the most destructive use of silence in our society would be its utilization as a means of oppression. As Frykberg notes in the Study Guide, “if sound implies power than silence implies powerlessness” (1998, p.124). The childhood of our grandparents perhaps best exemplifies this, in which children were expected to “be seen and not heard”. “A long time ago” (according to my grandmother!), children as the lowest level of the social hierarchy were expected to keep their silence while in the presence of adults, unless

commanded to do otherwise. In my own childhood, whenever I practiced “silence”, it was my parents’ wishes and not my own. The fact that silence was always forced upon me during childhood and rarely chosen resulted in my perception of silence as an oppressive and negative presence. Whenever my parents held dinner parties, for example, I was expected to remain quiet as a form of politeness. As a result, I dreaded the prospect of silence. In these circumstances, I was in awe of silence, and regarded it as a boundary that could not be crossed. To be permitted to break through the silence and talk loudly once again was freeing and blissful. In such situations as these, whether I heard sounds or not was irrelevant. I perceived that I was surrounded by relative silence because I was not contributing to the sounds. The fact that I was forced into silence, therefore, led to a negative view of it.

In more extreme circumstances, individuals in positions of power frequently torture their inferiors under the rules of silence, in order to further oppress them. The images of concentration camps during the Holocaust for example, illustrate how an oppressed individual will maintain silence in order to stay alive. In such circumstances as these, the inmates would not dare speak to the Germans who oppress them, for fear that they might be shot. The movie “Schindler’s List” highlights a harsh Commander barking orders at the masses of silent Jewish prisoners, the cruel words cutting through the deathly silence. In fear of angering their oppressor, the prisoners preserve their silence at all costs, and break it only with the sounds of their grueling labour. The joy of being freed from this silence during the rare moments when they can sing and pray becomes evident on the faces of the prisoners. As “Schindler’s List” illustrates, the negative effects of silence can reach gruesome heights.

Silence serves not only as a tool under which the powerful oppress their inferiors, but also as a weapon utilized by the less powerful in their attempt to rebel against the oppressor. In the Study Guide, Frykberg writes that “silence is also used by marginalized groups as a resistance strategy. For example children are often silent when confronted by a reprimanding teacher or parent, perhaps in an attempt to maintain some sense of autonomy and self” (Frykberg, 1998, p.124). As a child, I would preserve a strict silence after having been punished, in order to resist the power that my parents held over me through the punishment. Similar to what Frykberg details in the Study Guide, I would attempt to regain a sense of power over my own Self, and “punish” my parents with my silence. I found this silence very difficult to maintain and did not enjoy it at all; my own purpose for keeping it was to attempt to punish my parents as they had punished me. Ironically, in my attempt to control my parents, I was further adding to my own oppression.

The relationship between silence and powerlessness indicates the importance of speech in our society. It is interesting to note that kidnapped victims are often portrayed with taped mouths, perhaps not only as a means of keeping them quiet, but also to remind them of their own inferiority. I observe examples of this relationship between silence and

powerlessness in my own life as a university student. In most lectures, for example, a person of authority speaks, while the students remain silent. Professors who fail to maintain a level of relative silence as they conduct their lesson appear to be struggling with their ability to assert this power. The classes in which the professors are most respected appear to be those in which students maintain a level of relative silence as the lesson is taught.

The association between silence and powerlessness is relevant not only for such marginalized groups as children, but also in regards to the historical role of women. Frykberg refers in the Study Guide to this “parallel between the historical role of women in institutions of power and the relationship of silence” (Frykberg, 1998, p.124). Traditional Christian views, as presented in the Bible by the apostle Paul, illustrate how women were expected during this period to keep their silence while in church: “Let your women keep silent in the churches for they are not permitted to speak. . . And if they want to learn something, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35). The extent to which the male population dominates high positions of power in the political and religious spheres has led to negative effects for the women who have been silenced. The association that women make between their silence and a sense of powerlessness is taken note of by Frykberg: “silent women . . . feel passive, reactive and dependent, they see authorities as being all-powerful, if not overpowering” (Frykberg, 1998, p.125). Furthermore, Frykberg indicates that when women remain silent in the public sphere, they are inhibited from maintaining power over their own Self. As she writes, “silent women also have a great deal of difficulty in conceiving a sense of Self, and they believe that the source of self-knowledge is through others” (Frykberg, 1998, p.125). My own experience in situations where female authority might be challenged has led me to question how I utilize silence. In a classroom setting, for example, particularly if there is a male professor, I am hesitant to talk in the classroom. I believe that other classmates will consider me to be aggressive if I talk too much, and so I remain behind that curtain of silence as a way of maintaining what I believe to be a more feminine persona. In this instance, therefore, my perception of silence as more feminine indicates also my own desire to refrain from exhibiting power. Similarly, during personal conversations with female friends, I have observed that the person who talks the most expresses a desire to exhibit authority and a wish to dominate in the conversation. When I am with a shyer individual, my voice is heard the most. I find it particularly interesting that I rarely have this power struggle during a conversation with a man; it is almost always with a woman. Through my social upbringing and self-reflection, I have been taught to perceive well-utilized silence as indicative of polite gentility and femininity. On the negative side, a consistent preservation of silence leads to the loss of a voice and of a Self for many individuals.

The negative effects and characteristics of silence in our society have reached grotesque proportions. Its presence instills loneliness in the hearts of the solitary and terror in the souls of the oppressed. How can our society, particularly the people of Western culture

redevelop a more friendly relationship with silence? In the Study Guide, Frykberg proposes that we redesign our soundscape “to include more silence” (Frykberg, 1998, p.127). Not only do our minds require re-training and our ears, re-adjusting, but we must take responsibility for our own soundscapes whenever possible.

One crucial element in such a transformation is the development of our perception of silence. How can we expect ourselves to appreciate silence when we avoid it so intensely? We must thrust ourselves in the very recesses of silence and see what unfolds. I find that after a night of being exposed to loud broadband music, walking through the forest can be a somewhat terrifying experience for my ears. Yet such an experience is precisely what I need to clean my ears and reacquaint them with the brilliantly clear notes of birds warbling and leaves crackling underfoot. Such an experience calms the frenzy of my mental processes and enables me to remain connected to the quietness within.

In order for each of us to develop a positive relationship with silence, walks through the forest cannot be sporadic moments, but an integral part of our life. My own daily routine is so completely filled with traffic noise, broadband lighting and air conditioners that I come home to a quiet apartment, uncomfortable with the silence that I find there. For this reason, I keep my home soundscape environment as free of noise as possible. I rarely use noisy electrical appliances, and keep the bathroom fan and radio turned off unless they are being used for a purpose. By the end of the evening, I am much more comfortable with the silence that surrounds me.

The idea that an appreciation for silence begins with a quiet mind further illustrates our own responsibility for our soundscapes. In The Soundscape, R.M. Schafer proposes a solution for learning to appreciate silence: “still the noise in the mind: that is the first task-then everything else will follow in time” (Schafer, 1994, p.259). Personally, when I enter a church with a readiness to enjoy the silence around me, I am fully involved in the listening process and aware of how clear each sound is, in an environment devoid of masking sounds. Such a listening experience leaves me with a more peaceful feeling and a greater appreciation for silence. Silence in these instances becomes a presence to be savoured, not feared. It is not a threatening, oppressive force or a tool used to gain control of the situation. When my mind is truly at peace, silence becomes a friend.

In our world of noise and turbulence, the state of “silence” can easily be perceived as threatening. The fact that individuals frequently use silence as a tool of resistance or oppression further reinforces its negative persona. Perhaps it is only by experiencing silence more frequently in solitary situations that we can experience the majesty of silence. As the planes and trains and automobiles roar past us, we need to remember the silence within our own hearts.

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