

A listening prayer: For prayer you do not have to speak

by [Gordon Atkinson](#)

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I can't imagine absolute silence, neither can I hear it. Even when I'm in a quiet place, my mind produces its own ghostly, seashell sound. The noise in my head is a faint but high-pitched whine accompanied by a lower rumbling that sounds like an engine pulsing away in the distance. These seem to be the default sounds of my brain. It's what I hear when there is nothing else to hear.

About the closest you can come to silence is to become silent yourself and hope for the best. Close your eyes and forsake your vision. Let go of sight and your desperate need to see. Embrace hearing and you will begin to notice the many layers of the sounds around you.

I became silent on the evening of July 11, 2005, while sitting in a swing hanging from a tree at Laity Lodge, a retreat center in the hill country of Texas. I became silent and told God that I would listen to everything and hoped to hear from him.

This is the prayer that I thought that night. "I am listening, Lord. This is my only prayer tonight. I wonder, do you sometimes speak to doubtful and wayward boys like me?"

I do not know if God spoke to me that night. I only know what I heard.

The first thing I heard were the crickets, who provided a throbbing background to everything. Funny, I hadn't heard them before I got quiet, and then suddenly they were deafening. In a juniper tree nearby an insect clattered away in the darkness. He was calling for a mate, or perhaps just singing the song of himself.

My tennis shoe scraped on the hardened earth beneath the swing. With my eyes shut and my ears open, it was an offensive noise, altogether artificial and out of place. I didn't like the sound of it, so I stopped moving my feet.

The ear can focus on things near and far, like the eyes. I turned my head to the left, pointing my ear back over my shoulder and toward the river. I picked up the distant and desperate cries of coyotes on the scent of prey. It was like hearing something from another world.

Suddenly, a sound to the right, and I turned my head back, probing the darkness. I heard a murmuring, a conversation in the distance between two men. I couldn't make out the words, but the voices were masculine and the cadence seemed friendly.

This side of the conversation, I heard a mysterious insect that made a "tick, tick, tick" noise. Another made a sound like a man compulsively rolling ball bearings around in his cupped hand.

When I had heard as far away as I could, I returned to the sound of the crickets around me. Listening hard, I heard two distinct cricket noises. There was a shrill, cricket chirping, but also a deeper, bleating call. The crickets made me feel at home. There was a familiar and comforting sound. I was pressed on all sides by their presence. I was not alone.

I ended my prayer time by listening to the sound of my own breathing and the gentle creaking of the swing.

Everything I heard seemed like a cry of longing and need. The insects were breathing the cool air of the night and dragging their legs and wings together, little violins calling across the darkness for companionship or comfort. The coyotes in the distance cried out in their hunger and in praise of their primitive love of the chase and the kill. The indistinct voices of the men in the distance bore the sound of reason and the timbre of friendship.

And I too was calling in the night, hoping to find the God that I have worshiped and served since I was a boy. Did I hear him that night, or did I just hear the common sounds of creation?

This is prayer. You do not have to speak. Do not let anyone tell you that you must speak. You may speak if you wish, or you may simply listen in the darkness.

Listening is good. Listening pries open the secret places in our hearts where we guard our vulnerability from the dangers of the world. Listening brings layers of

sound; it allows you to journey far away and then return to yourself.

Desire is a goodness. Mystery is another. Longing is the sharp tang on the edge of joy that turns it from storybook sugar to an aged and robust wine of the soul. Thank God a part of these three always remain with us. God save us from complete consummation.

Keep your longing for answers in check. Stand trembling at the edge of discovery and hold onto that sweet moment as long as you can. This too is a kind of prayer.

When I left the swing that evening, I knew for certain that I was but one more creature of the night, longing and listening and hoping for what I need. I'll leave it to you to decide whether or not I heard from God.

I do not know, and at this season of my life, it doesn't seem to matter.