

Talking less, seeing more: An interview with Sara Maitland

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PHOTO BY ADAM LEE

Read the [main article](#), in which Maitland describes her annual sojourn to the Sinai Desert.

Sara Maitland is a novelist and short story writer whose books include On Becoming a Fairy Godmother and Far North & Other Dark Tales. In 2008 she published A Book of Silence, about her exploration of a solitary, prayerful life. She lives in an isolated part of Scotland and takes retreatants to the Sinai Desert for periods of silence. She writes that she has "lived a very noisy life" and that the turn to silence is a surprise for her, but a welcome one.

In your pursuit of silence, you've moved farther and farther away from civilization. Where do you live now?

In 2006 I bought a ruined little house in western Galloway and rebuilt it. That's where I live now. As one friend said, "Nobody is going to just drop in, are they?" It is extremely isolated, and it is in an area which has the lowest population density in

the United Kingdom. I love it. But lots of people don't. One friend said, "Oh God, Sara, only you would have 20-mile views of absolutely nothing!" But I saw it as a place where, at least potentially, I could be silent.

It is a lovely, strange place to live. It is deeply old-fashioned, full of sheep farmers. And indeed the son of my neighbor is the British champion hand-shearer. Ninth in the world. That kind of sums things up. He is a sturdy young man, but sheep farming is not doing well. There are no children living within ten miles of me. Most of the people are old. Some are young men running derelict farms and hoping for somewhere better to move on to.

What need does silence meet for you?

I am not sure that need is the word I would use. I managed very happily without it. I prefer to ask: what does the silence give me?

The first thing silence gives me is a lot of time. You get a real freedom in both real time and psychic time. We spend a lot of time negotiating with people who are not our beloveds, people we don't give a serious toss about. If we were really holy, of course, we would. But these are the people who bump into you in the queue, or the people you meet at a dinner party that you didn't really want to go to. Suddenly all that time you spend reacting to them is free.

When I talk less, I see more. I had no idea how many kinds of grass there are in the world. I received an ecological gift that I had not anticipated. And silence gives me time to pray. For me, that is a very strong element.

How has silence changed your prayers?

Prayer is much less businesslike. I have less business, and so I have less to boss God about. I have more time to listen. I listen to myself, to my heart, if you like, and my brain. There is something stripped down about silence. There is a different self that you can meet when you are silent. We are trained to fill in all gaps with more yak. If you are doing what I am doing, a stillness comes in which new things can happen.

Basil was the bishop of Alexandria when everyone was rushing off to the desert to become a hermit. He got rather fed up with all these bright, Christian young people running off to the desert, and he said, "Whose feet are you going to wash in the desert?" One young monk said to him, "I hope that Jesus will wash mine." In my previous prayer life I was making myself fit for Christ to live in me. Now I see that I can be the guest, not the host. I don't want to say this in a way that is

condescending to others; it is not better to be a guest than to be the host. But it is different. Rather than constantly asking the Holy Spirit to come and be with me, I find myself asking if I can go and be with the Holy Spirit.

Does silence have its dangers?

One danger is that you could start to think you are an angel. A lot of solitaries choose to live somewhere difficult, because it keeps you grounded. You have to act real. I now have a dog. She has to be walked and fed and kept away from the neighbors' sheep. While she has reduced my silence, she is very real. She has to be let in and let out. You can't say, "Well, I'll do it tomorrow."

In the tradition of the Desert Fathers, one must be working. They spent an awful lot of time making reed baskets. There is a funny story about some villagers seeing a monk coming and saying, "Oh, no, we've got to buy some more of those reed baskets from the poor old fathers."

What do you do about distractions?

Well, some distractions are good and necessary. I pray formally three times a day—an hour in the morning, an hour at lunchtime and an hour in the evening. In the middle of the day, I do intercessory prayer, so you have to be a little bit distracted just to remember people's names and why you wrote them in your book.

I am a member of the Peace and Justice Rosary Prayer Circle for people who live in rural places. This means you have to remember which Mystery of the Rosary you are meant to be doing, and e-mail a little blurb to other people about it. So if you don't do it, you really are letting other people down even though with a bit of luck they will never find out. That requires a bit of "monkey thinking," just to stay on top of it.

But with listening prayer, I am better in the morning than in the evening, and I can usually find a place of silence within five minutes. Usually. But God is a menace like that. You constantly have to reevaluate. Is this holy silence or is this just you switching off? In which case, you might as well get up and get some more coffee and get a grip. Prayer requires knowing yourself.

My experience is that perhaps what God desires most is our freedom. God is very, very unlikely to bully you. On the whole, God is so free and wants you to be so free that it really is very easy to think you are praying when you are really doing nothing but having a bit of a doze or having clever thoughts—that's my main distraction. I get these fabulously clever images, and I need to stop praying immediately and put

them into a book.

You have written about the tension between creative silence and contemplative silence, and you say that you remain committed to both kinds but are not sure how to resolve the tension. How has that commitment evolved for you?

The conflict between wanting to be an artist and wanting to be a hermit—to put it in crude language—remains, and I do not know how it can be resolved. Solitude for writers in particular exists so that they can hear their own authentic voices. The aim of religious silence is to get your own authentic voice to shut up so that you might hear something of the voice of God. The aim is to eliminate that clamorous voice of the ego so that you can hear a voice which is other, which is not unique to you, which you cannot own and which you cannot replicate. So there is a fundamental conflict.

So you are no longer writing fiction?

No. I honestly cannot imagine now the sustained invention required. Meanwhile, I have found some sidesteps. I've been rewriting some old stories, fairy stories and hagiographies. My next book is a collection of modern retellings. Rewriting stories is a way of dodging the conflict, not resolving it.

What do you miss from your old life?

There are three things I miss. One is physical intimacy when I am not feeling very up—I want a hug. For me at least, or not yet, positive prayer experiences do not equal hugs. This is something that the dog is good for. I occasionally pull her onto my lap and cuddle her.

I also miss the constant narrative—the making up of stories all the time. I really miss it.

The third thing I miss is creative conversations. I no longer have shambolic, quite argumentative, open conversations with very smart people. It is that aspect of the social that I miss.