

The perils of silence: Real and imagined dangers

by [Sara Maitland](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue



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I love silence. Silence and I have a nearly 20-year committed relationship that looks set to continue, although silence is perhaps more faithful to me than I to it. Like most long-term relationships we have somewhat domesticated each other—I am no longer ecstatically “in love” with silence, which can be a harsh and demanding partner. I believe too that it is for me, as marriage can be for many, a necessary part

of my own path toward holiness.

I love silence and am continuously thrilled and excited and challenged by it. But almost all thrilling, exciting and challenging endeavors come with risks, even danger. You fall off the cliffs you climb; you drown in the oceans you sail; you become addicted to your “highs”; you break your loving heart. Silence is no exception—it comes with its own specific perils built in. The best protection against risk (and in the end even this may not work) is knowledge—embodied knowledge, the kind where you do not merely “know,” but you also act on that information (you wear a safety harness; you check the meteorological forecasts). You set out the risks clearly alongside the delights and see what you can do to reduce the former without destroying the latter.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that is both risk-averse and frightened of silence. This has tended to mean that the perils of silence are either highly exaggerated or consistently downplayed or even ignored. You say you live with silence and immediately your audience assumes either that you are a psychotic loner or an enviable mystic. I am fairly certain that I am neither. But I know too that in the desert one is vulnerable. So I want to look at the perils of silence and at the available safety harnesses.

Probably the biggest perceived danger in silence, especially when that silence is accompanied by solitude, is that the practitioner will go “mad,” most probably in a highly florid if not schizoid style. This is an ancient anxiety. Athanasius in his *Life of Anthony* reports that when, in about 305 AD, Anthony emerged from his 20-year-long silent and solitary sojourn in the ruined fort at Der el Memum (Pispir), everyone was very surprised to see him neither emaciated nor deranged, suggesting clearly that this was the expectation. Curiously enough, the fact that he was patently sane did not change the terror of silence as something likely to drive people mad.

A fair number of individuals embracing a life of radical silence have gone very mad indeed, but I have found no evidence whatsoever that there is a higher incidence of unanticipated schizophrenia in the silent than in the population at large, though I admit that this would be extremely difficult to measure. The risk is more that those pursuing the life of silent prayer absorb this belief and become terrified or obsessed by the expectation of mental illness.

The risk is made more complicated by the fact that there are some physical experiences, associated with extended periods of silence, that look at first sight very similar to the classic symptoms of psychosis. The oddest of these are auditory hallucinations: hearing voices in silence is a widely reported experience and has very little to do with the reasons why someone is being silent. This “delusion” is extremely common among solo yachtsmen, and Charles Lindbergh reported hearing voices when flying: these are not people who seem psychotic in any other respects, and the vivid experience seems to have no extended consequences. I have sat in silence in a windstorm and listened (not without pleasure) to a male voice choir singing in Latin.

I have come to suspect that this is a “brain” rather than a “mind” abnormality—a good deal of space in our brain is taken up with the odd linguistic knack of breaking streams of spoken sound into separate words (this is how oral language works and why it is so difficult to follow conversations in a foreign language even if you can read it fluently). I think that rather than being sudden and isolated instances of insanity, these voices are instances of the normal human brain exercising itself in the absence of its ordinary task—breaking up human speech. The fact that the voices are most likely to occur in places like yachts where there is a great variety of irregular sounds because of the sea, the wind and the many wires and ropes strung at high tension rather confirms this. Modern research has suggested that hearing voices is not necessarily associated with mental health issues in any case. Still, the silence adventurer should be prepared for and critical of any external “messages” he or she receives.

Another common effect of long silence is an intensification of sensation and emotion—everything feels extreme, even overwhelming. (Food always tastes bizarrely wonderful on retreats!) But when the sensations are less agreeable they can be decidedly alarming. St. Anthony felt so harried by lust that he threw himself into thorn bushes to alleviate it. (I do not know why male Christian hermits seem so inflicted by lust, while Buddhist hermits are shaken with rage and Christian women solitaries suffer fantasies of self-harm.) At times intense silence can feel like surfing a huge wave, vertiginous, giddy, even slightly insane. Ride it out; perhaps, sadly, it does calm down, but initially this can be disturbing, especially if the neophyte has been terrorized by threats of madness.

A final quite scary effect of silence, which ought to be less alarming to the spiritually inspired silence seeker than to the person who is driven by some different motive, is

the almost inevitable weakening of one's personal boundaries. The self becomes permeable, open to the whole universe—and, we hope, to God. Not every hermit on record has experienced ecstatic or visionary flights of the soul—but very many, to a greater or lesser extent, have.

There are two perils here. One is that we live in a culture that regards such interventions from outside the autonomous ego as symptoms of psychosis. However silly this may be, this fear is present in almost all modern individuals and can be terrifying. The other risk is that the permeable self may become open to forces other than God and a beneficent version of the natural world—some of these forces are pretty dark. The safety net in both cases is to look to the work of earlier and, in this context, wiser and more liberal writers. I find Teresa of Ávila extraordinarily helpful in her careful diagnostic distinctions between true mystical experience, demonic dissimulations and madness, while acknowledging the reality of all three.

So, although there are intense and sometimes frightening things to work through, I do not believe that silence itself, or even silence accompanied by solitude, drives people mad, *provided they have freely chosen it*. A good deal of the scientific evidence for the dangers of silence for mental health comes from studies of individuals in solitary confinement. There is no question that compulsory punitive isolation is extremely dangerous to the human psyche—and can lead to a unique and hideous form of psychosis. But to compare the free-hearted, gentle hermits from a wide variety of societies across a long sweep of history to the occupants of prison cells is a bit like comparing the feelings of a woman pregnant with a wanted baby, basking in support and encouragement from those closest to her, to a woman pregnant as a consequence of rape and facing shame and poverty. No one expects them to feel the same way.

So the biggest danger of silence is fear—and often fear mixed with both derision and judgment. Those exploring silence can reasonably anticipate accusations of madness, selfishness and stupidity, and since there are going to be elements of all three in all of us, these can sink their barbs in deep, depriving us of joy, confidence and faith, and into the space thus created madness, egotism and idiocy can sneakily enter. Here we can only hold tight to the clear gospel message that Jesus loved and sought silence, often more silence than he was able to have. If we believe that silence makes people mad, selfish and stupid, then we think that of him.

The real perils that come with silence are those not of madness but of plain old-fashioned badness. There are specific and cunning temptations in silence that, if allowed to flourish, can fester and rot the whole enterprise. It will come as no surprise to anyone practicing within the Christian tradition that the most common sin of silence, as of everything else, is pride. It takes many forms, and I—I suspect like most people—am capable of a surprisingly large number of them. For me the most central ones include:

Delusions of self-sufficiency. Here I do not mean forgetting that the whole thing is pure gift (although that too), but that a particular form of pride tricks me into thinking I am free of the necessity of needing others. Now the modern hermit ought to be better vaccinated against this sin than her predecessors. I am not out in a trackless desert: every time I go out I drive a car that other people made along a road that others maintain. I am not ploughing and planting, hoeing and harvesting alone—I go to a shop where someone sells me the food I eat. I get up every morning and switch on the electric light. Of course electricity is part of the goodness and providence of God, but it is mediated to me via a whole complex network of fellow human beings on whom I am as dependent as a baby on its caregivers and whose daily work is probably less agreeable and less freely chosen than mine. And that is before I mention the people who write and print and distribute the books I read and buy the ones I write; the nursery gardeners who make my life lovely by fostering plants; and above all the neighbors who take time out of their own harsh hardworking lives to keep an eye out for me and rescue me from my more egregious idiocies (managing to put my car in the ditch yet again, for example) and the friends, family and parishioners who love me and tenderly tolerate my often-inconvenient-to-them lifestyle choices.

False accounting. This takes the form of believing, without consciously noticing, that I am mysteriously “in credit” with God’s merit bank because I live such a “special” way and that somehow therefore God owes me spiritual and other treats just because I have chosen to do what I most want to do. This is totally bizarre, but over and over again I catch myself thinking or feeling it. It is a form of pride particularly (though not exclusively) related to silence, because not socializing cuts me off from even gentle, implied criticism and the kindly teasing of friends. It has dangerous consequences, too, of which the most important here is a sort of subterranean sense of entitlement that can easily lead to self-indulgence and particularly to idleness. John Cassian was clear that idleness is one of the things that

leads to *accidie*—an odd state not unlike depression (the word means “without feeling”)—that really does seem particular to the eremitic life. *Accidie* is a vile thing to experience, and the best-known cure is steady hard work and rigorous maintenance of a rule of life. It is probably better to be on the watch for this sneaky form of pride and so avoid its consequences.

A sense of invulnerability. In long periods of silence many people experience not just a blurred sense of boundaries between the self and the world but also a blurred sense of time itself. It is a wonderful emotional sensation and extremely gratifying, but it easily leads to very basic failures to take proper care. I see this form of pride often on expeditions into the desert. People who are slightly tipsy on beauty and silence ignore basic instructions: don't go too far alone; drink your water; take your rehydration salts; wear dark glasses, a hat, long trousers—yes, even in the shade. Be a little fearful. In the desert retribution comes swiftly—you will soon be ill, lost, burned and, if you are alone, dead. I have noticed that this is a particular temptation for the young; older silence adventurers are so weighted and freighted by the world that they can seldom recover the exuberant if foolhardy false optimism of youth, which can too often become prideful negligence. When I lecture on silence I find myself warning the young as much as encouraging the old.

There are more. There are lots more. Pride is as subtle and sneaky as the serpent and a master of disguise and deception. Luckily there is also a great deal of advice available on how to deal with it. Personally I would prescribe three specific medicines especially suited to those who are trying to live in as much silence as they can find or manage.

The first is a regular disciplined practice of both praise and gratitude. By *praise* here I mean thanking God for all those things that have nothing immediately to do with me: the Trinity, the created order, the incarnation. By *gratitude* I mean the reverse: giving thanks for every single breath I took today, for any lovely thing I saw or read, for the food I ate, for the friends who love me.

The second is to find a spiritual director who, together with the more traditional skills of the job, knows how to laugh at you lovingly.

The third is a daily dose of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (I use the old and slightly old-fashioned 1936 Helen Waddell translation, but there are lots of others available now). There was not a danger, physical or spiritual, that the Desert Fathers

did not face with an almost hideous ascetic harshness, as stripped down as the desert itself. And from the broken ruins of their cells and their egos they emerged with a sweet courtesy, a detached generosity and a gloriously funny, ironic self-understanding. Their gentle holiness will keep you humble.

Of course none of this will make you safe—guaranteed safety is not on offer. But it may make you a little safer.