

Creating quiet

Noise and nausea share etymological roots.

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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These days, finding silence is both difficult and necessary.

It's hard enough to find external silence. Even in the early morning hours, I hear the low hum of appliances, the whirring of fans, the on-again-off-again cycle of the HVAC unit, and the faint sounds of traffic and of trains in the distance. On workdays, this near-silence eventually gives way to the noisy news of *Morning Joe* and my loud inner commentator, to the clamor of email and text messages, and to the jangling of social media. Once everything is on, it's almost impossible, at least for me, to switch it off, though off and quiet are what I crave.

Inner silence is even scarcer. When I read the daily lessons suggested by the Book of Common Prayer, as I regularly do, I hear the voices of the ancient witnesses but also the voices of my internal committee of selves. Simultaneously I hear

“Be still and know that I am God” and “Be sure and proof the case-study you’re using in Social and Organizational Ethics today.”

“Take no thought for tomorrow” and “You’ve got to get the oil changed in your car this week; you’re 1,000 miles past due.”

“Love your enemies” and “Did you hear what that idiot said?”

“Trust in the steadfast love of the Lord” and “Your pain is getting worse. Is cancer kicking into higher gear?”

My emotional and spiritual landscape sometimes sounds like Times Square on New Year’s Eve, or like a kindergarten classroom on the morning after Halloween with kids hyped on sugar unable to sit down and listen during story-time; or like the

Atlanta airport when thunderstorms have stranded thousands of people who are hungry, angry, tired, and anxious to get home.

Sometimes it takes me a long time to find center and settle into stillness. More and more, my contemplative practices include daily detox by which I have to come down from the high of addiction to others' opinions, incessant input, stress-produced adrenaline, and ever-present anxiety about you-name-it.

Noise and *nausea* share etymological roots, and the sickness needs regular treatment. Soren Kierkegaard wrote: "The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and my advice asked, I should reply, 'Create silence. Bring people to silence. The word of God cannot be heard in the noisy world of today. Therefore, create silence.'"

Often, the way I create silence is by walking: *solvitur ambulando*, "it is solved by walking." Yesterday, it took me a couple of hours on the move before my mind cleared and my heart rested. It doesn't always take so long, but my soul was a town hall meeting, jammed with frustrated, fearful, and needy constituents who felt I hadn't heard their concerns.

My ego would prefer that I avoid solitude and silence. It's easier for my impression-managing, image-projecting, self-justifying, and self-centered persona to stay in charge if I never leave the stage, never take off the mask, and never look in the mirror made of quiet. One of the desert monastics, Seraphim, said that silence is the cross on which we must crucify our egos. It's a cross I need to take up daily.

So, I'm praying and practicing the wisdom of this lovely collect: "O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

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