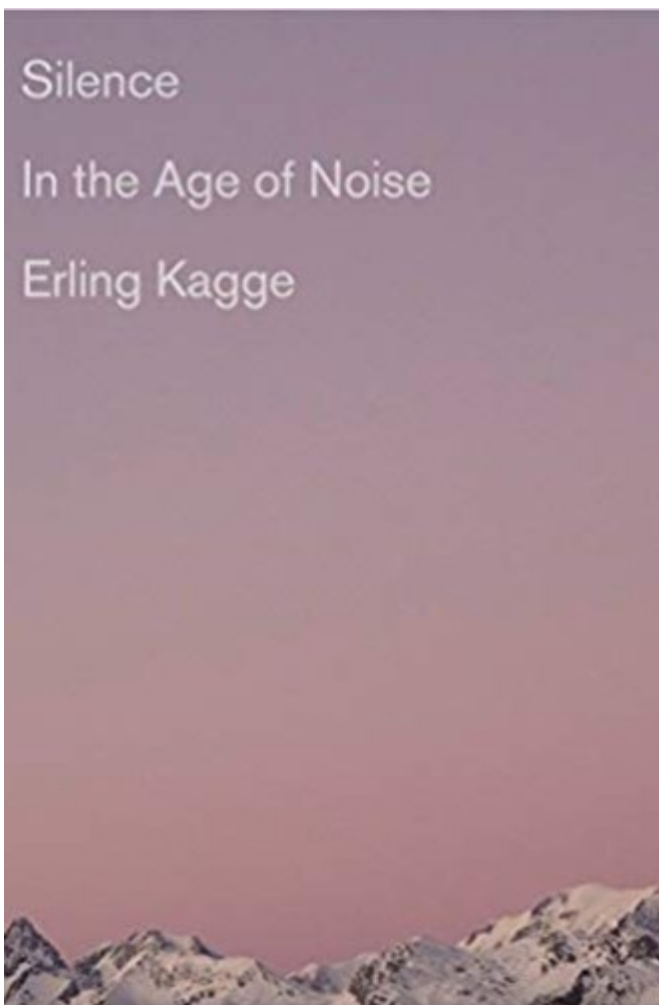


The silence of focused attention

Erling Kagge fears that the practice of stillness is endangered.

by [Jeffrey L. Johnson](#) in the [August 1, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Silence in the Age of Noise

By Erling Kagge

By Erling Kagge Pantheon Book

The silence that Norwegian explorer Erling Kagge experienced in his extreme adventures—especially during his 50-day solo trek across Antarctica—becomes a model for the silence the rest of us might discover.

A man of quiet but strenuous pursuits, Kagge is a lawyer, publisher, art collector, and, most famously, cold-weather explorer. Before he skied alone to the South Pole without even a radio for contact with other people, he reached the North Pole without a support team. After that, he climbed to the summit of Mount Everest. Given those achievements, one might expect this volume to be a book of brags or a travelogue of solitary exploits. There are illustrated adventure moments, but the body of the essay directs readers to look to their own personal pilgrimages of rejuvenating silence.

Loosely organized and suggestive rather than descriptive or prescriptive, Kagge's book explores broad questions: What is silence? Where is silence to be found? Why is silence valuable in our time?

Kagge opens with a reference to his teenage daughters, who are dismissive of silence and suspicious of discussions of it. He then moves to college students, who seem thirsty for silence. His daughters and the students are of a generation that fill their lives with chatter and messages. Images pour in on them from their screens. In their "age of noise," he writes, "silence is almost extinct."

He suggests that if his daughters were to value silence, it could be just what they are looking for. Silence, Kagge writes, could be a friend more loyal and present than Facebook friends and a luxury more valuable than "the Louis Vuitton bags they so covet." The older students, whom the author met as a guest lecturer, welcomed exercises that explored silence. They seemed eager to identify environments of silence in their lives and happy to enter spaces of silence.

Kagge connects silence to the activity of being immersed in some aspect of life. One can imagine the author recalling what it felt like to walk in the bright, icy silence of Antarctica, as if no other world existed. The distractions that dissipate energy in our everyday lives, the messages that pepper our senses, and the alerts that jangle our plugged-in brains: these were absent while Kagge was fully occupied with reaching his destination in an inhospitable environment. "The world disappears when you get into it," he writes.

The silence that Kagge lauds is the stillness of the craftsman or artist, the focused attention of the biologist when lost in a study of plants. One might add to Kagge's examples the scripture reader pondering a passage or one who prays in contemplative devotion.

A practical man, Kagge sees the pursuit and acceptance of silence as an amendment to life and a corrective to the wearying flashes and alarms of technology around us. His tone is one of personal discovery: silence appears in wonder under an overwhelming canopy of a star-splayed night sky or in motionless observation before a great work of art.

Kagge views silence as a secular therapy for the diseases of modern life, not as a spiritual matter. Yet he admits that the Buddha had a river to teach him about the wisdom of silence and that Jesus prepared for his vocation in the silence of the wilderness and later bowed his head in the silence of a garden before he was arrested. In passing, Kagge acknowledges that communities of religious men and women have ordered their lives by daily rounds of silence and that some still offer their lives entirely to the silence of eternity, cloistered from the world of noise around them. God is present in silence, the author admits. God is silence.

The author's purpose is to encourage readers to find moments of restorative silence in their own lives. Kagge may, however, also inspire Christians to graciously receive silence as a gift of God and to express it bravely in worship and devotion.