

Silence: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: "silence."

Readers Write in the [August 29, 2018](#) issue



*In response to our request for essays on silence, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. Our next topic for reader submissions is **promise** — [read more](#).*

I'm a fixer, a problem-solver. For years I guided my fellow lawyers, showing them the path out of their dilemmas. If someone from my church family needed help and advice, they called me. My wife and kids believed I had all the answers. Unfortunately, so did I. I would always respond with an answer. Silence was just another word for failure to help.

Then my nine-year-old daughter began a 15-year journey through psychiatric institutions and group homes. At first I saw this as yet another problem to be solved. When she would call me to complain about this and that, or about everything, I confidently bestowed my pearls of wisdom. The only problem: this wasn't working. I

kept trying, but nothing seemed to do any good. Had I met my match? Perhaps. But this was my precious, unique, fearfully and wonderfully made daughter. I would never dream of giving up.

One day she called from a facility in Texas and griped about how they were mistreating her and how everything was so unfair. I was poised to intervene with magic words of astuteness and discernment. And then—out of the blue—my tongue was seized and frozen by an unseen force (the Holy Spirit?). No words escaped my mouth. Silence? From me? When answers and fixes were called for? I just kept listening. When she was done talking, she said, with a burst of hope and uplift, “Thanks for listening to me, Dad. That really helped. I feel much better now.”

That was 20 years ago. Whereas once I would have found long silent spells in conversations with my daughter awkward and intolerable, I now find them welcoming and hopeful. I know that my silence is profound and life-giving. I can now see the image of God in my own child and be reminded of who really is in charge—and who is the one who ultimately fixes everything.

Roland Wrinkle
Newhall, California

Every Tuesday evening, the rented yellow school bus picked up the students from Sherman Institute, a federal boarding school for Native American youth, and dropped them off at Calvary Presbyterian Church. Calvary was one of several churches in Riverside, California, that provided an off-campus program for Pima, Navajo, Hopi, Apache, and Ute teens.

It was a challenge to work with the students from Sherman. Some refused to participate in our planned activities; they just wanted any excuse to get off campus. Most, however, were grateful for our ministry, and we tried to be as culturally and emotionally sensitive as we could be.

Charlene was Pima. She was terribly overweight and wore a scowl. Not only did she never smile, she never spoke a word to anyone. Once off the bus, she sought out a corner where she could isolate herself from any human contact. Everything about Charlene communicated: “Stay away or else.”

After two months of observing Charlene's behavior, I decided to sit down next to her. Each week for the remainder of the school year, I sat down next to Charlene and never said a word. I sat with her for about ten minutes each week, and then got up and joined the rest of the group.

As the end of the school year drew near, the young people were looking forward to returning home to their families in Arizona and Utah for the summer. I arrived one evening and heard an unfamiliar voice coming from Charlene's direction. Once she started talking, Charlene did not stop until it was time to return to the institute. I learned from her how the Pima had been a thriving people, how they grew their own crops and were proudly self-sufficient—until the river that ran through the middle of their reservation stopped flowing. I learned how their beautiful lush gardens were replaced by the weekly visit of the truck that dumped government surplus food.

When I wished Charlene a happy summer, she returned a smile, the first one I had ever seen from her. Charlene taught me the power of silence and presence. If my tongue had intruded upon the silence, I would never have heard her story.

Calvin Chinn

San Francisco, California

I'm the father of an inquisitive five-year-old. He often goes silent when others are asking him questions—until he gets to know them a little better. They have to be willing to stay in the conversation long enough for that to happen. I hope his silence around others won't manifest itself in the same way it did for me.

I was too afraid to speak up in certain situations. It didn't matter much that I was silent in high school, because I could still get by and make decent grades. But that didn't prepare me well for college or life. There were a lot of moments when I wanted to say something and didn't. There were moments when others needed me to speak up and say something, but I was silent.

It wasn't until seminary that I had a professor who saw my struggle to find my voice inside me and named it. He helped me see multiple angles of silence. He taught me how to engage the contemplative part of silence, a silence that in the end helps me pay attention to myself and to what is happening around me. He also showed me how silence can be used as a weapon that serves as one more tool of oppression for

those who need someone like me (in a place of great privilege) to lift my voice alongside them or even sometimes for them.

It's somewhat ironic that as part of my role as a college chaplain today I teach classes and find myself encouraging some students to speak up more. I also encourage some students to take a step back and be more silent.

One feature of my classes that didn't exist for me in my undergraduate experience is engaging in contemplation as part of the learning experience. I incorporate a variety of contemplative practices as a way of helping students slow down, pay attention, and be still or silent. I use them as a way to help them search for their own authentic self and voice. Of course, I also expect them to contribute to the conversation in class.

I still don't always get my relationship with silence right, but I'm much better at it than I once was. To a large degree that's because of my professor who saw the internal struggle in me and wasn't silent about it.

Lyn Pace

Oxford, Georgia

I was gripped by a real sorrow: my young brother had just died of a brain aneurysm. He was only 36. Of course, no one ever anticipates that sort of crisis. What does one do? What can one? As for me, I unaccountably set out into a wildness called Breaux's Gore, a place I'd never been, and one where—in the proverbial middle of nowhere—I came on a headstone, knife-thin, canted.

The morning was quiet. Never such quiet. Was there anyone who knew that marker beside me? Even now who knows about it? The odd hunter, I suppose. The slab has been there since 1841, in open country at the start, country that had reverted to dog-hair-dense woods. I read the name on the marker: *John Goodridge*, a man perhaps wife- and childless. Weather had worn the headstone's shoulders round.

I hiked back out to my truck and drove home. As evening approached, I moved back and forth from woodpile to shed. The process felt less like work than dream. Odors rose on November's twilight, then settled. Duff, rain, the logs I'd split the week before. I settled, too, sitting in our wheelbarrow's bed, my seeming self like a chunk

of maple or dirt or stone that might ride along in muteness.

It's been more than four decades since I found that marker, the same since my brother trod God's green earth; but how specifically I recall the way all the world went silent near that grave. That was a silence more entire than any I've ever known before or since.

I will never forget it. I will never be able not to hear that utter absence again. Darkness was coming now, the days having shortened so. From the wheelbarrow, I looked around me. Our young family was all set for the real coming cold; I could almost hear the subtle hum of our old Round Oak woodstove.

I had more wood than we'd need, and as I turned from that glut and took a step toward the house, I felt something gentle—from above the trees that lined the footpath—fall all around me. In the instant, I relived the morning, so pregnant with silence, and somehow, by so doing, I half believed I could move beyond delight or sorrow into stone quiet, a quiet that might mean consolation.

Sydney Lea
Newbury, Vt.

I was about two weeks into my first unit of clinical pastoral education. I was visiting a patient when we were interrupted by a phlebotomist who needed to draw some blood. She said it would not take long, but she had a hard time finding a vein. I sat down in the chair by the wall and watched. She called a nurse for help. After a few whispers about the problem, the phlebotomist left the room and the nurse took over. The nurse did some more probing, first on the back of the other hand and then up the arm, then she tried again. I was wondering what I should say, or if I should excuse myself. I decided to stay.

The nurse eventually called a supervisor and there were more whispers as the supervisor took over. Eventually the supervisor called a doctor, and the doctor finally called a surgeon. Each one nodded to me as they entered and left the room. The atmosphere was tense, the patient was hurting, while I sat and watched. The surgeon finally found a vein and left the room muttering.

Now the room was empty except for the patient and the would-be pastor. He said to me, “Thanks for sharing my pain.”

Joe Miller

Warren, Rhode Island

On April 2, 2013, my world went silent. I got the call at 6:30 that morning from an official at the American Institute in Taiwan, telling me that my oldest daughter, Anna, age 19, had been killed in a freak scooter accident. The silence enveloped me. While life as I had known it continued on around me, I felt cut off from it, as if I was receiving information from a long way off. My prayers, which I had uttered for the 20-plus years since I had been a Christian, in thanksgiving, praise, and supplication—most recently asking for protection for my daughter—stopped. I could not pray into the void that had taken my daughter.

When I told friends I could not pray, one of them volunteered to come each week and pray with me—for me—and that she would do so for as long as I needed her to. She came faithfully every week for a year and a half. She was my voice in the silence. She and other friends who continued to stand with us were, I knew, God’s presence with us.

After that first year, I wish I could say that life got easier, but instead things were difficult in a different way. The veil between Anna and our life was no longer as thin, and it seemed to me that God went silent. The signs of Anna’s presence became fewer. I explained to my surviving daughters that we needed to stay here but that Anna needed to move on. I turned to the story of Jacob wrestling all night, silently, with God. I wrestled with anger, with despair, and at times with hope—because at least I felt I was in touch with this silent God, hanging on until God might bless me.

I began to pray again in fits and starts; I started reading passages that resonated. “O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me” (Ps. 43). Four years after Anna’s death, I sensed that I could stop wrestling with God, hearing for a moment out of the silence, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4).

I find now that I am not wrestling with God. I often feel as though I am wandering in a wilderness. The silence still surrounds me as I try to make my way. I find that I

need a conscious reminder of God's presence. Unfortunately, we have not been able to go back to church, and this has been another loss. I cannot find the stillness that I crave in the Sunday morning service instead. I often seek out silent places where I can pray and listen: "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Ps. 46).

Ellen Nugent Harris
Bellingham, Washington

From Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*:

"What deadens us most to God's presence within us, I think, is the inner dialogue that we are continuously engaged in with ourselves, the endless chatter of human thought. I suspect that there is nothing more crucial to true spiritual comfort, as the huge monk in cloth of gold put it, than being able from time to time to stop that chatter, including the chatter of spoken prayer. If we choose to seek the silence of the holy place, or to open ourselves to its seeking, I think there is no surer way than by keeping silent. God knows I am no good at it, but I keep trying, and once or twice I have been lucky, graced."

He'd been a minister for a quarter of a century, and he'd taken to heart the vow that all the ministers took upon ordination—"to be a friend to your colleagues in ministry." So he'd served on committees and attended ordinations and installations. He thought he had friends in other churches, even if their theologies didn't always match his.

Then his congregation's governing body took some actions that resulted in public charges, countercharges, meetings of church courts, and articles in the local newspaper and the denominational publication. Seeing him at meetings, we, his colleagues in ministry, were friendly but distant. We had our own churches, our own problems, our own skins to worry about. When our paths crossed, I avoided looking him in the eye.

The wheels of justice and public opinion turned slowly, but in the end there was a resolution of his congregation's case. Things were resolved in his church's favor. We were glad for him. At a denominational meeting we shook his hand, clapped him on the back. I offered a little prayer of thanksgiving that all had ended well. I couldn't know, then, that there were some human costs that would unfold with the passing years.

Later at that meeting he stood up and asked for permission to speak. He didn't talk about the controversial issue or the legal process or the people involved. He told us about the silence at the center of the noise—about the phone that never rang in a gesture of friendship, his feeling of being deserted by friends in faith, colleagues in ministry, and people who had taken a vow.

"Where were you?" he asked his colleagues. I remember him saying: "I didn't expect you to take a stand alongside me. It wasn't your battle. I did expect your friendship, your offers of prayer, a shared cup of coffee. We could have talked about something else. Or we could just sit together for a bit, not saying anything. Where were you?"

There was silence and downcast faces. In our silence, we were ashamed. And, I hope, recalled to our better selves, as ministers and as people.

Ann Beams

Hanover, New Hampshire

I had signed up to attend a silent weekend retreat because I'd been exploring contemplative spirituality. Back in the 1970s, in my little corner of the church, no one talked about such experiences. Yet in the authors I was reading—Elizabeth O'Connor, Morton Kelsey, Henri Nouwen, Julian of Norwich, and others—I kept coming across an invitation to silence, listening to God in the depths, and meeting One who called me into intimate communion.

It fell to me to meet our retreat leader at the airport, provide lunch for her, and then drive her to the retreat. I confessed my fears. "I've never done this before," I said. "I'm not at all sure I can do it."

"You'll be OK," she replied, and didn't try to convince me of anything. For some reason, I trusted her.

On the first evening we listened to our leader reflect on the importance of making space for listening to God. Our lives were cluttered with many important things but often lacking the one necessary thing: time to be with God. Not to study the Bible. Not to read books about God. Not to pray through our lists. Simply to listen to God.

The next morning we ate breakfast in silence, except for the few moments when a psalm was read aloud. At first I felt awkward, keenly conscious of the sound of toast crunching. Should I make eye contact with anyone? Smile? By the time breakfast was over, I began to settle into a peaceful place—aware of others but able to withdraw to an inner solitude. Though I wasn't hearing any communication from God that I recognized, I was beginning to feel at home.

Our group gathered briefly after each meal. In each session we were led into a scripture passage: praying and rewriting a psalm in our own voice, engaging with a gospel story, or praying a prayer from the epistles. Then we were sent away into hours of silence. When I look back on that experience, I am convinced that scripture was the well-traveled road that made it possible to trust the silence. Because we already affirmed the importance of scripture, we were willing to let it speak God's word to us—and then discovered that the Spirit of God had more to say than was written on the page.

During the silent hours, an amazing thing happened. In the midst of imagining myself present in the story of Jesus' visit at Mary and Martha's house, I experienced the living, loving presence of Jesus in a most visceral way. I felt addressed by Jesus, not judged, but lovingly heard and affirmed and invited into intimate communion, a relationship that would require an ongoing commitment to silence and solitude.

At the end, I was eager to continue the journey, as were others. Our leader told us, "Go home and practice silence and these ways of praying scripture for at least six months before you tell others about your experience."

And so I did. And ever afterward, I've remembered that weekend as a sharp turn in my life with God. Though I would sometimes stray from the practices, whenever I returned to silence and scripture, God would be waiting to meet me in that immediate, personal way I first experienced at a silent retreat. Silence has become a friend, a sanctuary, and a path of ongoing transformation.

Marlene Kropf

Port Townsend, Washington

Larry was a gregarious seminary classmate whose three-year-old son was killed by a drunk driver while riding his tricycle in front of their apartment house. The news spread quickly around the seminary.

Instead of holding a visitation at a funeral home, Larry and his wife invited people to come to their apartment. I arranged for Lowell, my mentor and field education supervisor, to drive us to their residence so that we could offer our words of comfort. All the way there I tried to imagine what I should say. “I am sorry about what happened” sounded so uninspired. “My prayers are with you” sounded like a cop-out. “May God’s blessings be with you” sounded hollow. I was going to be a pastor someday—what should I say?

When we arrived we walked up to the second-floor apartment. The door was open, and as I looked into the living room I saw about 30 classmates and faculty members standing quietly. A few were talking with Larry and his wife, others were eating cookies and drinking coffee.

Larry looked up and saw Lowell and me standing in the doorway. He quickly walked over to greet us, and then he engulfed me in a hug. I hugged him back, as best as I could, and we stood in that embrace while I frantically thought, “Say something! Now is the time to come up with the right words!”

I could not utter a sound. Nothing sounded sufficient, authentic. I hugged Larry tighter, and then finally we let go of each other. I nodded good-bye, and Lowell and I left. On the way back to the campus I thought about how I had failed as a pastor at a time when my friend and classmate needed me to be one.

Two weeks later Larry was back on campus. After class ended, Larry walked over to me, grabbed my hand, and shook it earnestly, and said, “Phil, I want to thank you for what you said to me that night at our apartment. I will never forget it.” What had I said? Then it became clear to me: there had been eloquence in the act of being present.

Phil Blackwell

Whitewater, Wisconsin

A week before beginning treatment for breast cancer, I went on a solitary prayer retreat. On the first day I wandered the stone paths near the cabins and the miles of trails in the woods. I prayed as I walked, but my mind was full of grief and noise. About an hour before dinner, I visited the empty sanctuary in the main building. A crucifix hung above the altar with a practically naked, almost life-sized, three-dimensional Jesus. Blood ran down from his hands and head and pierced side. My empty-cross Protestant self was rather unnerved. His eyes were open, and his gaze followed me as I moved to different seats, trying to escape it. He was almost smiling and radiated patience, love, and amusement. I glared back at him, slightly offended by his lightheartedness. We looked at each other for a long time. The dinner bell rang. As I got up to leave, he said, *Suffering is part of it. But there is a way.*

I said to him, *I do not know the way out of this time in my life that feels like death. I won't get to walk the earth again after resurrection. It is easy for YOU to give advice.* He shrugged. *Suit yourself.* I was pretty sure my lack of sleep was making me hallucinate.

The next five months of surgery and chemotherapy were the worst of my life. The future held no guarantees and the past seemed filled with mistakes and missed opportunities. The love and gratitude I felt for family and friends was tempered with the guilt of being frequently helpless. I prayed, but my mind was not quiet. I craved what the almost-smiling crucified Jesus had: lightness in the midst of sorrow.

About a week after the last chemo, I felt well enough to go on a retreat at the same prayer center I had been to earlier. My friend and I got there after dark. That night my mind was surprisingly quiet, and I felt compelled to go outside. The brilliant stars and the sliver of moon shed no light on the stone path outside the cabin. Despite this, I thought I could find my way to a little chapel in the woods. When I got there it was deathly still inside. What about a little warmth or a hint of Benevolent Presence? Was this the tomb in those three days between heaven and earth? Why had I braved the darkness for this cold emptiness? The cold and the silence enveloped me. *He is no longer here.*

I was up before dawn the next morning. I headed out into the woods. I climbed a small hill, gasping for breath. Five months ago, I could have easily run up this hill. As I stood catching my breath at the top, the morning light poured into the autumn woods, igniting them in a blaze of color. The sun warmed my face, and I was unexpectedly overcome with a penetrating joy.

Later, as it was growing dark, I went back to the sanctuary where Jesus was still hanging, unapologetically bloody and naked. We looked at each other in the deepening darkness. He gazed at me with my scars and my months of anguish with utter love and a little amusement. I felt his gaze grow upon me as the silence deepened and the darkness became complete. The dinner bell rang, and I stood to leave. *Suffering is a part of it, he said to me. But there is a way.*

*Kim Dulaney
Rocky Mount, Virginia*

Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise.” So says Proverbs 17:28. I read that verse hundreds of times as a shy, awkward teenager, hoping others were reading it too and interpreting my habitual silence as wisdom rather than the layers of terror that it really was. Having a card-carrying psychopath for a mother gives a kid plenty of reasons to keep quiet. For example, telling her the sky was medium blue when she felt it was light blue was considered “talking back.” That kind of thing provoked her rage and ushered in the silent treatment. She might not talk to us for days. Especially for a child, this is the worst kind of silence there is, something I’ve heard described as akin to being buried alive.

Once when I was four, she was sick in bed and directed me to make her a bologna and lettuce sandwich. I mixed up the two greenish balls in the refrigerator drawer and brought her a bologna and cabbage sandwich. That is my first memory of her rage hurling me into outer space, where I would spin and spin, and then disappear.

As kids, my brother, sister, and I would go down to the basement and try to laugh about how she wanted us all dead. Like most dysfunctional families, we maintained a conspiracy of silence concerning the truth of the matter. We moved around a lot and would joke that we had to get out of Dodge (actually, a succession of Levittowns) when someone was about to figure out who our mother really was.

Crying was forbidden, so I learned to cry silently. I got rather good at it. I can still cry silently for long periods, tears running down my face, without sobbing or even sniffing.

These days, my siblings’ silence hurts the most. They each found a way of slow suicide, and they’re gone now. Shame and self-loathing—the one-two punch of

abuse—can make just being in one’s own skin unbearable. My sibling’s deaths weren’t pretty, and occasionally someone in my church would discover the truth. Their response was—you guessed it—silence.

But I’ve been able to find my own voice with singing, social justice work, and writing. I’ve been a psychotherapist for many years, and adult children of toxic parents find their way to my office because I believe them.

And I’m learning there is another kind of silence, a healing kind. After turmoil and suffering, it was in stillness that Elijah heard God’s still small voice. It is in the stillness where I too can hear that abiding voice. With listening, I’ve discovered that even the most toxic silence is no match for love.

Susan Donnelly
Wyckoff, New Jersey

“Tell them to keep silent.” These words from my 96-year-old mother came as a surprise to me. Since she was now confined to a memory care facility, I thought she would enjoy hearing about the memorial service I had just attended for a cousin. “Not to my liking,” she muttered. Since she was in a period of lucidness, I decided to probe further. “What would you like at your service, Mom?” Then came her terse response: “Tell them to keep silent.”

After suffering a fall several months earlier, she had rapidly declined and was very ready to die. Just one month after this conversation she slipped into the silence she so desired, and in the weeks following I continued to ponder her words. Psalm 62 has always been one of my favorites: “for you alone my soul waits in silence.” Had my mother had enough words? Did the words of hymns, verses, and liturgy no longer carry meaning for her?

As I journeyed my way through her dying and death, I often wished I could ask people to simply keep silence with me. Words and assumptions about how I must feel about losing my mother fell flat. I wanted to tell them to keep silent. Sometimes people’s well-intended words simply added to my deep sorrow.

I come from a tradition rich with words. But death and grief defy words and often render them meaningless. In the emptiness that follows the death of a loved one,

especially when the relationship is complicated or disappointing, my soul can only sit with the silence. Sometimes it is an empty silence. Sometimes it is a yearning silence filled with regret and longing and meaning. Sometimes it is the silence of the holy mystery that fills me with the sure knowledge that even when human relationships fail us, God is there simply to be with us in the silence.

Madelyn Herman Busse
Friday Harbor, Washington

My 12-year-old son, like many children with autism, is nonverbal. Through typing, writing, and signing, he is able to communicate many of his needs, though this patchwork of strategies still often leads to misinterpretation.

But one thing he knows how to tell me is when he is ready to walk. Most afternoons after school, or often early on Saturday mornings, we take walks together. Sometimes he listens to music to dull the sensory-interfering noises of the world, sometimes not. When time allows, we walk for miles and miles, often taking familiar routes in and around town, sometimes charting a new course. Side by side, and in silence, we walk. I discern this to be a part of my calling as a father.

The exercise is good for both of us, to be sure, but it also fills my soul. I am privileged to be there sometimes to guide and protect but also just to be alongside. Together, we experience both routine and surprise, stillness and movement, quiet and its varied interruptions. And there is mystery to be found in it all.

In other parts of my life as a pastor, I am not always so comfortable with silence. Sitting down to pray and meditate can be a challenge. I am prone to be thinking of the next meeting to attend, parishioner to visit, or sermon to write. In the quiet I fret about performance, worry about the future, dwell on all those many things that are so tempting to try to control. So often, it is so hard to just listen.

And so I walk. And my son, by walking with me, helps me embrace the quietness that we are allowed to share with one another. And in our shared silence I am reminded of the God who also walks alongside at all times and in all circumstances, the One who will speak if we are willing to listen.

John Wahl
Chagrin Falls, Ohio