

March 2015

SILENCE—AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

Isn't it strange how sometimes you can forget the name of a movie you saw last weekend, or what you had for dinner before the movie, while certain events from the distant past remain embedded in your memory like the Rock of Gibraltar?

I have this indelible memory of a rare moment of overpowering silence, the likes of which I had never before experienced. The year was 1970 when, as part of the Third Infantry Division of the U.S. Army, I was stationed in South Korea. One of my weekend walks had taken me into a remote rural area, far from the base and far from any roads or highways. The noise of trucks, taxis, and other city sounds had long since faded away. Across a distant rice paddy, a farmer walked slowly beside an ox that was pulling a wooden cart. They made no sound and appeared not to be in any hurry. I remember thinking that this iconic scene could have easily taken place one thousand years ago, in a time long before the noisy industrialized era. It is hard to describe, but the silence had an overpowering quality to it and it touched me deeply.

Just as we need sunlight and water for physical health and survival, we also require periodic silence to maintain our spiritual health. In Psalm 46 we find the commandment, "Be still and know that I am God." In *Light on the Path* we read, "Listen only to the voice which is soundless." But in today's world, random sounds are ubiquitous and silence is a rarity. Everywhere you go—the gas station, the grocery store, the office, even at home—you are assaulted by indiscriminate waves of sound as they invade your personal space, impinge on your consciousness, and demand your attention.

Gordon Hempton, an acoustic ecologist, has written a book called *One Square Inch of Silence: One Man's Search for Silence in a Noisy World* (Free Press, 2010) in which he warns: "Today silence has become an endangered species. Our cities, our suburbs, our farm communities, even our most expensive and remote national parks are not free from human noise intrusions." All this underscores the necessity to establish room for silence in our busy lives. Today, where one is accosted at every turn by a cacophony of strident sounds and enervating dissonance, the need for silence is a matter of both mental and spiritual well-being. That South Korean rice paddy, in which I experienced that extraordinary moment of serenity some forty years ago, has probably given way to a paved highway and the mechanized sounds of modern civilization. The outer world is what it is. But through quiet reflection and regular meditative practices, we can create our own inner sanctuary of silence, regardless of what is going on in the world around us.

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