SILENCE

Steve Matthews

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for February 16–22, 2015.

MAKING THE CONNECTION
“October is beautiful in New England. I live in coastal Massachusetts; and while the trees are not as showy this year due to a summer drought, the water is still temperate and many of the summer residents have gone home. The neighborhood is much quieter. So yesterday I decided to spend the day kayaking in the salt-water cove that is my backyard, hoping for some exercise and, yes, some silence.

“Before long, I’d passed the noise of cars. After about ten minutes, I put down my paddle and listened. What could I hear? I heard leaf blowers from the houses along the shore. I paddled farther toward the bay. In another ten minutes I stopped again. This time I heard leaf-blowers and nail guns (the way sound travels on the water is amazing). Once on the bay, I stopped again. I heard the sounds of planes, leaf blowers, an occasional motorboat; but I heard soothing sounds too. I heard sea gulls. I heard the geese’s wings, flapping on the water as they took flight. I heard the gentle lapping of waves on my kayak. As I rested, I could also hear the deep sigh that spontaneously rose from my lungs. All of a sudden, I couldn’t hear the leaf blowers any more. They were audible; but when I listened for something else, they drifted from my attention. My body and soul were resting as I drifted in my tiny boat. Even in the midst of sounds, I found silence.”—Steve

MEET THE WRITER
Steve Matthews was a youth minister for more than 15 years. He lives in the South Coast of Massachusetts and is the Director of the South Coast Mission Hub, a collaborative of churches sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Steve is also a spiritual director and a consultant working to systematically redevelop parish ministries that are struggling with decline. He was a writer for The Way of Pilgrimage: An Adventure in Spiritual Formation for the Next Generation.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED
• (optional) a candle and matches
• Bibles
• newsprint
• markers
• pens
• a bell or pleasing simple sound on your smart phone to use for the “Silent Prayer”
• (optional) index cards
• (optional) centering prayer pamphlets (see “Taking It Further”)

PLUGGED IN

+ These music videos relate well to this theme:
  > “Sacred Silence,” by Tom Booth
    (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Sacred+Silence+by+Tom+Booth)
  > “Be Still and Know that I Am God” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMM1hLwDhz0)

+ Contemplative Outreach offers an introduction to “Centering Prayer,” one method of silent prayer and a flyer describing the process, which can be downloaded for distribution.
  (http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/category/category/centering-prayer)

CHECKING IN

Begin this time with an opening ritual: a moment of silence, a short prayer that the group says together, or a candle-lighting to symbolize Christ’s presence. Take a moment to claim the space and time as holy.

Then invite group members to answer the following question, and encourage them to listen prayerfully to the responses without comment.

  **When did you experience silence in a positive way?** You may have been spending time in the natural world, in church, alone in your room, or immersed in something you enjoy doing. Use as much detail as possible to tell us about the experience.

EXPLORING THE WORD

**Scripture: Psalm 46:10**

Technically speaking, few places are silent. Even so, cultivating silence is a valued practice across religious traditions. Christianity (http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/category/category/centering-prayer), Islam (http://www.islamicinsights.com/religion/religion/silence-the-mark-of-a-believer.html), Judaism (http://ejm1007.blogspot.com/2008/01/sound-of-sheer-silence-silent-practice.html), Hinduism (http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=4881), and Buddhism (http://www.lionsroar.com/going-nowhere/) all include an emphasis on retreating to quiet places and practicing and seeking silence. Time and again, Jesus retreated to quiet places to pray. The Bible is full of other stories and teachings (http://www.soulshepherding.org/2011/07/bible-verses-on-solitude-and-silence/) encouraging us to withdraw and to be still. Read aloud some of these passages, or write them on newsprint and display them around the room.
Ask group members to reflect on their own experience of silence. Then invite them to answer the following questions:

- **Was silence complete, or were other sounds in the background?**
- **What were you thinking about as you sat quietly in that moment?**
- **Is it possible to silence our minds?**
- **As Christians seeking to be more faithful, why does being silent matter?**

Invite group members to read Psalm 46:10 silently, then slowly and aloud.

- **How does being still and quiet relate to the knowledge of God?**
- **What other reflections do you have about Psalm 46:10?**

Invite the group into five minutes of silent prayer. You may want to guide their prayer, using these instructions:

> “The purpose of this time is to be still and quiet for about five minutes. Before we start, please silence your phones. Find a comfortable position so that you are not likely to dose off or need to move. In a minute, I am going to ring a bell. At that time, take a deep breath and pay attention to the sounds and activity around you; your body sensations; what you hear, smell, and touch. Pay attention, but try not to get too caught up in them. The goal is not to stop your thoughts, but to pay attention to what is happening in the room at this moment and to do so restfully and without judgment.

> “I am going to gently ring the bell two more times during this five-minute time of silence. When you hear the bell, pay attention to where your mind is. Notice if you are still and quiet in your spirit. If not, gently release whatever you are thinking, and ask God to help you pay attention to what is happening in the room at the moment. I will say, ‘Amen,’ at the end of our prayer time.”

After the prayer, bring group members back together and invite their feedback:

- **What did you notice?**
- **In what ways do you feel different after five minutes of silent prayer?**

**SHARING IN PRAYER**

Ask someone to write on newsprint the words of Psalm 46:10. The prayer is meant to invite the group into stillness and into sacred silence. Read aloud Psalm 46:10 as a prayer. Allow one minute of silence. Then read again as follows, pausing for a moment of silence after each line:

> Be still and know that I am God  (silence)
> Be still and know that I am  (silence)
> Be still and know  (silence)
> Be still  (silence)
> Be  (silence)

_Amen._
TAKING IT FURTHER

• Ask group members to think about what God is calling them to listen for when they practice silence. Invite them to write on the index cards ways they might commit to engage in a practice of silence over the next week.


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