

On silence

Ruth Bridges explores how silence can enhance the capacity to develop a more sensitive understanding of both oneself and others

*'Stillness is the only thing in this world that has no form. But then, it is not really a thing, And it is not of this world...'*¹

*'To hear the sounds of time passing, and to do so before it is too late, we need to listen for and to hear the voices of silence. To do that we need to dwell in moments of solitude'*²

My reflection here is in response to Chris Jenkins' article, 'The Big Silence, in *Thresholds* Summer 2011 and, particularly, to his words 'the simple power of silence'. It is also written during a period within which I have been drawn into such 'simple power' with a vengeance.

Within hours of necessarily deep solitude I have encountered a profoundly shaking questioning of my being, my offering of compassion, and my accompaniment of my clients. Time within such silence has prompted me to voice questions heretofore unvoiced, at a new and somewhat disquieting level – questions I would not have heard were it not for silence.

I have long sensed the importance of spending time alone in silence, both as a disciplined practice and as a quiet undercurrent to my life. At times, such practice has offered a gentle reconciliation of the disparate and sometimes desperate aspects of my humanity, aspects that may seem paradoxical, confused or chaotic. Mercifully, silence existed at the core of my depression as a non-judgemental place of refuge and release. More recently, reflective and mindful practices have offered new ways of seeing; challenging, and sometimes transforming, my experience of life. Essentially, I move to silence to reconnect with the depth of my soul (core, essence, heart) and to enable the falling away of thoughts, concerns

and stresses, that can all too easily distance me from the profundity and the preciousness of life. And yet, whilst silence can offer moments of comfort, rest, protection, recuperation and healing, it may also powerfully challenge, demand, disturb, and frighten.

In silence we may recognise that, fundamentally, we have nowhere to hide, and the sense of exposure and aloneness can be profound. At times I am left feeling raw, naked, and fragile... and yet when I have the capacity to openly embrace such vulnerability, my sense of 'being' is considerably heightened. Perhaps paradoxically, this level of emotional or spiritual exposure enables me to feel more solid, connected and present; more alive perhaps. And yet, however compelling this may be, I am uncomfortably aware that I can all too easily disappear into silence, using it as a means of detachment. However subtle or unconscious, this can prompt frustration and confusion in others and has, on occasion, been experienced as dismissive, coercive – even manipulative. A careful balance would therefore seem necessary between an appropriate recognition and respect for my own needs, and a sensitive acknowledgment of the needs of those around me. And it is sobering to realise that, often, I do not get this balance quite right.

One of my most powerful recent experiences of silence was earlier this year during time alone in a retreat centre. Through a number of unplanned and unexpected hours I moved within the deep stillness of the ancient and beautiful chapel. I sat and I knelt, I walked barefoot on the smooth, cold stones of the floor and felt a powerful melding of my spirituality and my physicality. I wrapped myself in layers of clothing as the air grew cooler. I made tea and sat on the altar steps, holding the

warmth to me. Tears came and went. I drifted in and out of different levels of awareness, allowing my spirit to follow its own path – I had no agenda, other than to be present. These were deeply powerful hours for me, and I absolutely did not want them to end. As I write, I imagine myself back – and recognise that there is something I find within such deeply still and silent spaces that I struggle to find elsewhere, something to which I frequently yearn to return... a sense of 'coming home' perhaps.

Whatever our religious affiliation – or none – I wonder if entering what we might perceive as a 'sacred space' (retreat centre, ashram, synagogue, mosque, cathedral...) truly offers the potential for a more profound, and perhaps inevitably more disturbing, experience of silence and of one's self, than within other spaces. According to Burgoyne³, to more fully understand the emotional atmosphere and/or physical sensations apparent within such spaces, we must use a spiritual perspective. A 'thin place', she offers, is a place where the veil between this world and the Other world is *thin*, where the Other world is more near. For me, the retreat centre chapel was a very thin place, where this Other world – however one might envisage such – was indeed 'more near'. Perhaps predictably, therefore, this was a realm within which I found a connection to my spiritual self without seemingly having to try very hard. I moved swiftly between worlds and, weary as I was, the chapel seemed to offer a holding I could simply fall into – and fall I did.

Rohr⁴ reflects compellingly on the human need to fall into such 'sacred space' – into liminality, encountering the threshold (*limen* – Latin). This liminal space is described as one within which 'nothing looks like what we're used to...' For those of us seeking to offer therapeutic/spiritual accompaniment to others, I firmly

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believe that a courageous acquaintance with such liminality is utterly essential. Increasingly, I sense, that to be sufficiently aware of the threshold, where the Other world feels 'more near', enables us to hear our clients both more accurately and more compassionately. We may also become more attuned to the meaning of the silences that emerge between us – moments where words do not or cannot capture the heart of where our clients 'are' because their pain is too raw, their fear too great, or their lack of trust too pervasive.

There are times, surely, when a gently and reflectively held silence is the purest response, when to speak would be to distort the profundity of the encounter or disturb the air surrounding us. It is perhaps how we empathically witness such silences that may offer our clients true space to 'be' – the space for which, at some level, we maybe all yearn, and the space I feel I glimpsed in the solitude of the chapel. However, I believe there exists here a powerful challenge for us, for our empathic response and our silent witness demand a delicacy that holds lightly, but a solidity that does not dissipate when faced with the intensity of pain, struggle, fear, anger...

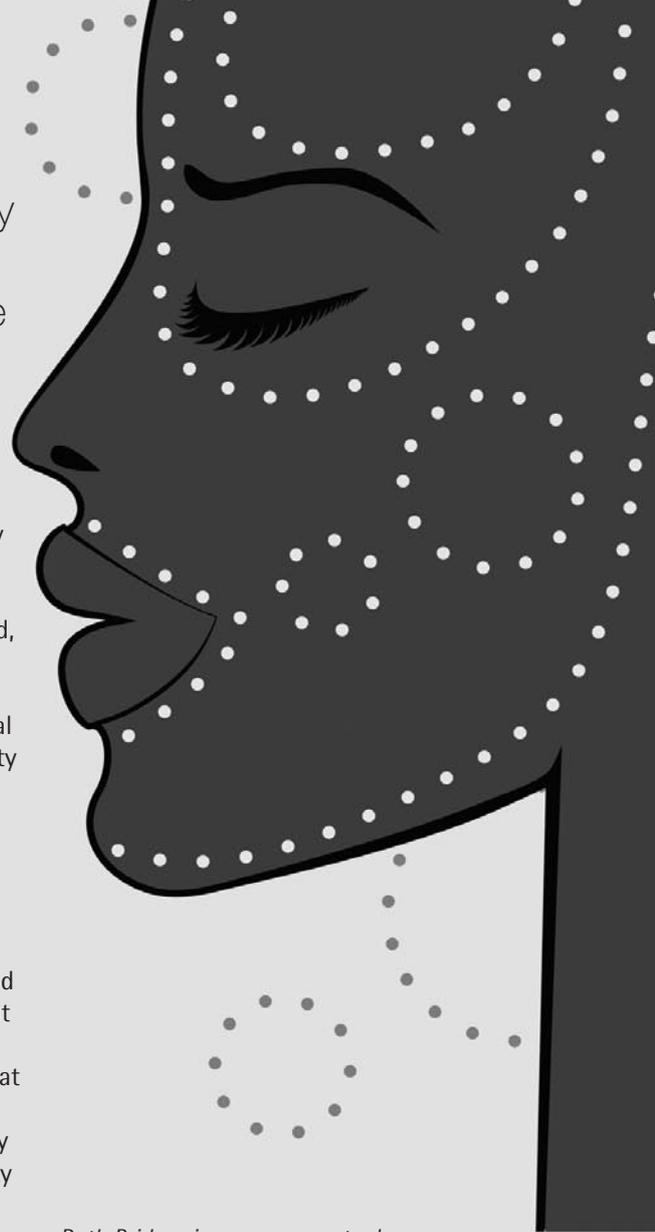
My therapeutic accompaniment of those undergoing treatment for cancer offers a profound challenge to me. I am greatly touched by my clients' pain, and deeply moved by their courage and dignity, frequently in the face of significant illness. Between sessions, my clients are often with me, gently held in my silence, and whilst I would hesitate to call this 'prayer', I wonder of the spiritual significance of such 'holding'. I wonder too of the ethical implications of the same⁵. For although I believe that such practice may open the way toward more authentic and compassionate meeting, it would also seem vital to remain aware that, however subtly or indirectly, this may

also draw our clients into a potent and perhaps persuasive world, one for which they might be profoundly unprepared. However, despite any potential 'risk', I would maintain that, respectfully and mindfully held, our moments of silence/reflection, beyond the immediacy of the therapeutic space, hold the potential to considerably enhance our capacity to develop a more loving⁶ and sensitive understanding – both of ourselves and of others.

Ultimately, I fall to silence to listen to myself more openly and to find a space for my tears. I certainly do not seek to obliterate the voices, pain, and experiences of those around me – but to allow my own voice, pain, and experiences to join them. I believe that I hear, feel, and see more honestly when my silence is held firm. We may discover a powerful sense of solidarity here; that we share an intensely vulnerable existence. Far from remaining on the outside, looking in, we perhaps discover that, along with our clients, we are 'merely joining the great parade of humanity that has walked ahead of [us] and that will follow after [us]'.⁴ More than anything else in this world, silence may awaken us to a heightened appreciation of such 'walking', and offer the potential to become more completely present in this 'one wild and precious life'⁷.

In *A Book of Silence*, Sara Maitland provides a magnificently raw insight into a profound venture into silence⁸, and I would offer, with her, that 'silence is both the instrument and content of [my] life. I don't feel worried about falling over the edge of a bottomless chasm, but rather I have a sense of moving up a level, into some finer cleaner air.' ■

*'There where life resounds
A clear white note
In the silence'*
(Dag Hammarskjöld)



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