



White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Grow Your Soul & Serve the World

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Theme for December

Silence – the practice of listening

Each month, our church gathers around a monthly theme and practice to guide our congregational life: worship, small groups, religious education, justice, and classes. Use these readings for reflection around the dinner table, in your own prayer practice, alone or with others.

*If you are interested in a monthly theme Sharing Circle, contact:
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer revluke@wbuuc.org or 651.426.2369x103*

QUESTIONS

How do you find and keep practices of silence in an ever loudening world?

How does the experience of silence make you feel?

How has it felt to deeply listen to someone else?

How has it felt to be deeply listened to by another?

QUOTES

Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing there is a field. I'll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass the world is too full to talk about.

- Rumi

How much better is silence; the coffee cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here forever with bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself.

- Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

Silence is absolutely vital to the flourishing of human sensibility, to the flourishing of ourselves as people.

- Canon Lucy Winkett

When you become aware of silence, immediately there is that state of inner still alertness. You are present. You have stepped out of thousands of years of collective human conditioning.

- ECKHART TOLLE, Stillness Speaks

God is the friend of silence. See how nature--trees, flowers, grass--grows in silence; see the stars, the moon, and the sun, how they move in silence.

- MOTHER TERESA, A Gift for God

The things you do not have to say make you rich.
Saying the things you do not have to say weakens your talk.
Hearing the things you do not need to hear dulls your hearing.
And the things you know before you hear them, these are you, and this is why you are in the world.

- William Stafford, Crossing Unmarked Snow.

POETRY & LYRICS

There is the sudden silence of the crowd
above a player not moving on the field,
and the silence of the orchid.

The silence of the falling vase
before it strikes the floor,
the silence of the belt when it is not striking the child.

The stillness of the cup and the water in it,
the silence of the moon
and the quiet of the day far from the roar of the sun.

The silence when I hold you to my chest,
the silence of the window above us,
and the silence when you rise and turn away.

And there is the silence of this morning
which I have broken with my pen,
a silence that had piled up all night

like snow falling in the darkness of the house—
the silence before I wrote a word
and the poorer silence now.

- Billy Collins

Hello darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again,
Because a vision softly creeping, Left its seeds while I was sleeping,
And the vision that was planted in my brain Still remains within the sound of silence.

In restless dreams I walked alone narrow streets of cobblestone,
'Neath the halo of a street lamp, I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light that split the night
and touched the sound of silence.

And in the naked light I saw ten thousand people, maybe more.
People talking without speaking, People hearing without listening,
People writing songs that voices never share and no one dared disturb the sound of silence.

"Fools," said I, "You do not know -Silence like a cancer grows.
Hear my words that I might teach you. Take my arms that I might reach you."
But my words like silent raindrops fell and echoed in the wells of silence

And the people bowed and prayed to the neon god they made.
And the sign flashed out its warning, in the words that it was forming.
And the sign said, The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls
And tenement halls and whispered in the sound of silence.

- *The Sound of Silence*, Simon & Garfunkel

READINGS & EXCERPTS

I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. And especially if it's given from the heart. When people are talking, there's no need to do anything but receive them. Just take them in. Listen to what they're saying. Care about it. Most times caring about it is even more important than understanding it. Most of us don't value ourselves or our love enough to know this. It has taken me a long time to believe in the power of simply saying, "I'm sorry," when someone is in pain. And meaning it.

One of my patients told me that when she tried to tell her story people often interrupted to tell her that they once had something just like that happen to them. Subtly her pain became a story about themselves. Eventually she stopped talking to most people. It was just too lonely. We connect through listening. When we interrupt what someone is saying to let them know that we understand, we move the focus of attention to ourselves. When we listen, they know we care. Many people with cancer talk about the relief of having someone just listen.

(...)

I have even learned to respond to someone crying by just listening. In the old days I used to reach for the tissues, until I realized that passing a person a tissue may be just another way to shut them down, to take them out of their experience of sadness and grief. Now I just listen. When they have cried all they need to cry, they find me there with them.

This simple thing has not been easy to learn. It certainly went against everything I had been taught since I was very young. I thought people listened only because they were too timid to speak or did not know the answer. A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well intentioned words.

- Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

When we think about what real silence is, we have to look at it from two angles; the first is to see silence through human eyes and the second is to see silence through Buddha's eyes or the universal eye. The opportunity to experience real silence occurs when we have been driven into a corner and simply cannot move an inch. This seems like a situation of complete despair, but this silence is quite different from despair, because in the area of despair the conscious flame of human desire is still burning. But real silence is the state of human existence that passes through this despair. How can we experience this silence?

Without everyday life, it is impossible to experience silence. In terms of the human perspective, silence has at least three flavors: pessimistic, optimistic and mystical. They work together and cannot be separated. In terms of the universe or Buddha's eye, silence is exactly as-it-is-ness, or what-is-just-is-of-itself. It is very quiet. Buddha's teaching always mentions this. If we want to know who we are and touch the real, silent, deep nature of our life, we must be as we really are. How? Sit zazen, that is all.

When we sit, two flavors are there. One is very sharp, cutting through delusions, suffering, pain and any emotion like a sharp sword. This is called wisdom. But within wisdom there must be compassion. That compassion is to see human life for the long run. Compassion is not something we try to create; we cannot do it. Compassion comes from the measure of our practice, which we have accumulated for a long, long time. It naturally happens.

The second flavor of silence seen by the Buddha's eye is to accept all sentient beings just as they are; what is just is of itself. To see everything just as it is, is not so easy for us. We need to polish ourselves again and again. We have to refine our spiritual life with all sentient beings. Otherwise we cannot see a thing as it is.

Silence means you have to be you as you really are - what is just is of itself. If we want to know real spiritual life, we have to taste ourselves as we really are. It is not necessary to stick to the forms and rituals. All we have to do is taste ourselves as we are.

- Returning to Silence (Excerpt from Returning to Silence by Dainin Katagiri, Shambhala Publications, 1988)