

## ***The Music of Stillness***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

December 3, 2023

### **Reflection on the Theme by Ronnie Mars**

Do you hear that? Silence. Naturally, you'd think it is noisier in the light of day and calmer in the stillness of the night. That's not the case when I have to write a reflection; I haven't written the first word, and I'm trying to get to sleep. Thoughts run through my head while I'm tossing and turning, making it difficult to greet the Sandman. I reached for my phone from the nightstand to jot down some thoughts in a Word document. This is my routine when I'm a Worship Associate for a service.

I learned that when thoughts exist inside our brain, it consists of electric waves that are the channel of communication for neurons or mental chatter. It's the loudest when I'm looking for inspiration.

Eckhart Tolle impressed me with these words, "When a gong or "singing bowl" is struck in the silent stillness, a reverberating sound is suddenly born...it lingers briefly...decays and dies. The sound can represent the span of our life-experience, but never our Life. Our true self is not the perishable sound, but the imperishable, still silence from which the sound arose and resonated temporarily. Indeed, this truth has even greater depths for it may be understood, that in our essence, we are none other than That which strikes the gong, so to speak, and silently witnesses the resulting "sound."

Our singing bowl brings us together as we prepare for worship. The stillness is followed by the musical notes played by our gifted musicians and the voices of our choir. My words don't come as easily as their gifted talents. They've spent years honing their musical skills.

I'm afraid of repeating myself. What time is it? The ticking clock-seconds into minutes-also disturb my somber. Rev Bert's guiding words echo in my head; find ways of saying the same things differently. Simple yet brilliant!

When I think I have emptied the depths of my thoughts and ready to drift off, more chatter surfaces, and I reach for the phone again. My inner voice has been my guide for as long as I can remember. It speaks the loudest when I shut out surface chatter, no matter the time of day. Some of you may feel you cannot stand here and do this. The experience has silenced a lot of my mental chatter.

A dozen former worship associates have stood here since I've been coming here. I don't know how the experience affected them, but I took something from each of them. When you can stand here and speak as if you're talking to a dear friend with no filter, the feeling is liberating.

The key is opening ourselves up and looking inward and being honest with ourselves. Self-awareness shouldn't be alien. As my words blacken the blank page, it seems like something greater than me takes over and I'm free. Then even the external chatter doesn't matter.

The subheading of today's service mentions Sages and Prophets using silence to achieve internal peace. I'd like to mention the Griot; a West African historian, storyteller, praise singer, poet, and/or musician. That's something I can aim for. My internal peace comes when my mental chatter is silenced and my voice still.

**The Music of Stillness© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

*There will be rest  
And sure stars shining  
There will be rest  
And sure stars shining  
Over the rooftops  
Crowned with snow  
A reign of rest serene for getting  
And the music of stillness  
Holy and low*

It was a little more than 20 years ago that we got our first dog, a puppy. A black standard poodle puppy that our son named, Scotty. We got a poodle because I've got allergies. Because of those allergies, I had never had a puppy or kitten before in my home. And it was a surprising amount of work. Not as much as bringing a human baby into a family, but still a lot of work. What I remember both about raising a baby and raising a puppy is the interruption of sleep – the caretaking that happens in the middle of the night, responding to cries and feeding and changing diapers and taking the dog outside to do his business. I remember one winter night in Michigan when it was my turn to take the dog outside in the middle of the night. I wasn't happy about it. I don't like my sleep to be disturbed: One reason we only had one child. But it was my turn, so I bundled up (and Michigan can be cold in the middle of the night in winter) and took him out. And of course, being a puppy, he mostly just wanted to play. It took a seriously long time for him to take care of business. But because I wasn't messing around, I stayed still, holding onto the leash, waiting... and waiting. While I waited for Scotty to realize that I was serious and wasn't going to begin playing with him, I looked up – *and sure stars shining over the rooftops crowned with snow and the music of stillness*. It was just a moment. Maybe 5 minutes of my life, but a moment I remember these 20 years later, for the music of stillness, the sense of calm and beauty and wonder that surrounded us. It was worth disturbing my sleep to get outside in the cold, look up and recognize my rightful place in the universe, a speck among specks of stars.

Sometimes these moments of awareness come suddenly and unbidden, like when you're taking the dog out, they can surprise us with joy and awe.

University of California Berkely psychologist Dacher Keltner has spent years studying the science of awe and in a conversation with Shankar Vedantam on the Hidden Brain podcast he defines awe as the encountering of vast mysteries that we don't understand. These experiences of awe can come to us suddenly and unexpectedly, but we can also summon them by paying attention to small moments of awe. Keltner talks on this podcast about a study they did where participants took an awe walk once a week for eight weeks. An awe walk is just an ordinary walk, but besides walking vigorously for your heart, you go with a childlike sense of wonder. You purposefully stop to reflect on what you encounter that is interesting and notice the small things around you, the smell of flowers and patterns of shadows. You go to places that you're curious about and you look up past the horizon and to the vastness around you, or listen to the distant and near sounds about you.

When Shankar Vedantam asks Dacher Keltner if there is any evidence that awe has physiological effects on us, Keltner replies:

“Yeah, there's this thing called the vagus nerve--largest bundle of nerves in your body. It slows heart rate, deepens breathing, regulates digestion, helps with your gut and the microbiome. In general, people who have a nice functioning vagus nerve that is responsive and has elevated levels do better in life. And we found, thanks to Amy Gordon and Jenny Stellar, that little brief experiences of awe, seeing an inspiring image, hearing about moral beauty, elevates your vagus nerve activation. And then just as impressively, when your immune system, the cytokine system more specifically, cranks out these proteins that attack pathogens, and that's the inflammation response that makes you feel feverish and sluggish and overheated. It's good when you're fighting a virus. It's not good if you're chronically inflamed. And it's one of the central threats to health in the United States.

“And Jenny Stellar and Neha John-Henderson went out and found in our lab that feeling a lot of awe, of all the positive emotions, quiets down the inflammation response. Emerson, when he had this big epiphany of awe out on a cold day in Massachusetts, he said, "There is nothing that nature cannot repair." And I think he was feeling these changes in the body of vagal tone and inflammation, reduced inflammation that awe gives us.” End quote

*I shall find the crystal of peace  
Above me stars I shall find  
There will be rest  
And sure stars shining  
There will be rest  
And sure stars shining*

Our chalice circles, small groups that meet regularly around here, are studying our theme this month as well and included in their December session a quote from author, psychotherapist, and spiritual guide, Gunilla Norris. [Silence](#)

Silence reveals. Silence heals. "There is nothing that nature cannot repair" said Emerson. The first time I tried meditating it was with a group of friends from the UU Fellowship when we were living in Wenatchee, some thirty years ago. I didn't last long at it. When I sat in silence and tried to acknowledge and dismiss my thoughts as I was taught, the feeling that came up for me was grief. Pure grief. A lot of grief. Sadness. The silence revealed feelings I had tried to ignore, feelings I had suppressed because they were uncomfortable and unwelcome. It was a long time before I returned to even trying to sit in silence. I had to work through the grief and sadness, process it, 'metabolize' it as Resmaa Menakem would say. I agree that silence heals, but sometimes before we heal, we have to open the wound to clean it out. It hurts while it heals.

It is in this silence that we can learn to listen to our autonomic nervous systems – that mysterious surveillance system that operates generally out of our awareness but can come into consciousness once we understand how it works. In the reading, Dana said “when we do connect with that information pathway and discover there is always something to hear, we can feel overwhelmed” which is kind of what happened to me with that first attempt at silent meditation. “Listening practices” she goes on to say “help us turn toward the inner world of our nervous system from an anchor in safety. When we create a habit of tuning into the quiet conversations and hear what our nervous system wants us to know, we can use that autonomic information in making choices as we move through our day.”

Both Resmaa Menakem and Deb Dana have written down very practical exercises that you can try if you're interested in learning the language of your vagus nerve, which Menakem also calls your "soul nerve." I hope I'm adequately expressing the connection between our physiology and these mystical or "awe" experiences which the ancients have documented for us as travel guides for becoming better humans.

Another poem from the chalice circle session this month, this one by a member of this congregation, Gay Garland Reed. She calls it *Hunkering Down*.

The trees have overheard the whispering  
that winter is on the way.  
Plants are pulling back  
Retreating  
like turtles into their shells.  
They heed the murmurs in the air  
that shake the leaves  
And send them trembling  
toward the ground.  
The time has come  
to hunker down.  
We take our cue from the trees  
and retreat inside.  
Now is the time to turn inward.  
Now there is time to let the  
cool waves of solitude  
engulf us.  
Now there is time to unravel  
the skeins of yarn  
tucked in the corners.  
So when the trees are bare  
We turn our gaze inward.  
We hunker down  
and wait  
for the great awakening.

I love that poem, Gay. Aren't we all waiting for that great awakening? That moment of insight when the mystery opens up to us and all is revealed? Or enough is revealed that we understand a little bit more than we did before? We are on a great journey, I believe, we humans. I see it as a journey of becoming more fully human, of becoming better than we are and thus creating a society better than it is.

We need silence and solitude, and we need society. We need others, for we are interdependent, as we explore this journey of becoming more fully human.

What's interesting about this autonomic nervous system is that its biology is in our bodies, but its purpose is to keep us safe in our environment. So if we go back to my remarks just before Thanksgiving – the Sunday we held a fire drill – we are still talking about this tension between authenticity and

belonging. And if you didn't hear that sermon, then think of the biology of our bodies as the authentic part of who we are – for what is more basically *you* than your physical body? And our bodies are hardwired to scan the environment for feelings of safety or danger – that's the belonging part. We take our cues from others and cue others.

The eight people who joined us in membership this morning understand the need for society (belonging) as we undergo the highly personal journey of great awakening (authenticity). They have brought their diverse gifts to us and in return ask for our participation in their spiritual development. I wish you all could have been with us in our last class together as these new members shared their spiritual journeys and life paths which led them to us – for they are, each one of them, interesting, thoughtful, compassionate people. Please read their fuller biographies in the bulletin this week or available on the table in the foyer. Or better yet, meet them over cake in coffee hour and get to know them. They are authentically who they are and want to belong to a community of other interesting, thoughtful and compassionate people. That's what we offer each other here and why I am so passionate about the promise and practice of church as an institution.

I mean, I love my Orange Theory class, where I go to exercise three times a week and I'm very fond of many of the people I've come to know in that class, but it is a business. They are a money making institution – and I don't mind paying them, for I get something out of it – but when they offer community building activities – like on the new app you can tell your friends which class your taking so they can join you – I'm aware that it is a strategy to get new clients in the door to make more money. This church, on the other hand, is not in the business of making profit. Frankly, it's barely paying its bills, because its primary purpose is to help us become more fully human, to develop spiritually and emotionally, so that we might bring healing into the world, rather than perpetuating harm. That's a mission I can believe in.

Whether you prefer the language of the children's affirmation: *Love your neighbor as yourself. Search for truth with an open mind. Make the world a better place.* Or that of our mission statement from 2005: *We come together to deepen our spiritual experience and philosophical understanding, grow a vital, nurturing community, and act on our values in the wider world.* That's the point. We come together to deepen our spiritual experience, grow the beloved community, and act on our values in the wider world.

By coming together with the expressed purpose of learning and becoming and growing, we discover who it is we are in dialogue, in community – we discover our authenticity as we create community and a sense of belonging. In an ideal world. And of course, a church is a bunch of people and we sometimes muck it up because we are all far from perfect, but we keep trying, we start over again and we persevere. We rejoice when new people join us for we are better for their being among us.

We are best with others, however, when also we understand our inner selves. *The time has come to hunker down. The trees have overheard the whispering that winter is on the way. When the trees are bare, we turn our gaze inward.* Welcome to December and our theological theme of silence.

Besides declaring that "there is nothing that nature cannot repair" Ralph Waldo Emerson was to have also said that "Silence is the solvent that destroys personality and gives us leave to be great and universal."

“Our true self is not the perishable sound [of the singing bowl] but the imperishable, still silence from which the sound arose and resonated temporarily” says Eckhart Tolle Ronnie quoted this morning. There is a reason the great sages and prophets taught and still teach practices to still the chatter and help us tune into the body and its natural wisdom – “there is nothing that nature cannot repair.”

*Through all the tumult and the strife I hear the music ringing. The Music of Stillness. It sounds an echo in my soul.* My favorite line in the hymn we’re about to sing is that last one: *when friends by shame are undefiled...* May we all turn our gaze inward and become undefiled by shame, may we become more fully human, become better and more joyful, both awestruck and grounded.