

Watching and listening: Stop talking and find some silence

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 19, 2006](#) issue

Summer vacation for me and my family means the beach. Every year, with one or two exceptions, we find a way to travel to the ocean. The place we have settled on is a quiet barrier island in North Carolina. It has no boardwalk, nightclubs or amusement parks, just a grocery store and a fish market. We walk the beach, build sand castles with grandchildren, ride bicycles from one end of the island to the other, and discuss at some length what dinner should be.

We do things there that are not possible in the center of a big city. What we mainly do is look and listen. We look at the ocean all day and we listen to the waves crashing on the beach. We watch the beach birds scurrying in front of the surf, searching for hidden delicacies. We watch the pelicans flying in single file, soaring high over the ocean and then, when they spot a school of fish, tucking their wings in a dive position and hurtling into the ocean. We watch the dolphins gliding at the surface and occasionally jumping. There's a lot to see. At night, we walk outside and look up at stars that you can't see in the city. Occasionally we see a shooting star.

What we notice most when we return to the city is the noise. Even leading worship in the congregation I serve means knowing how to preach through sirens. So I especially appreciated [Diana Butler Bass's article](#) on silence in worship. She recalls, as I do, that mainline churches once contained very little silence. When I was a child, a new minister introduced the revolutionary concept of a silent, bidding prayer. My mother loved it, but my father hated it. He timed the silences on his railroader pocket watch ("He let 'em go for 40 seconds this morning").

Bass observes that "noise disconnects us from others" and cites Carl Jung, "If you can't stand to be alone with yourself, why do you inflict yourself on us?" I'm grateful for her reminder that part of the church's task is to teach people to pray, that part of praying is listening, and that in order to do that you have to stop talking and find some silence.

I learned this lesson also from Rachel, my beautiful granddaughter with Down Syndrome. She finds sitting through a 60-minute worship service (with a long monologue by her grandfather) a bit of a burden. But she loves the Taizé service, loves lighting and watching the candles, loves singing the melodic music and loves sitting in the silence. Learning to do that is something we all need to do.