In pursuit of silence: My annual sojourn into the Sinai Desert

by Sara Maitland in the April 18, 2012 issue

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Read the sidebar interview with Maitland (subscription required).

Every fall I go to the Sinai Desert—that small triangle of rock and sand that pushes down between Africa and Saudi Arabia. Once upon a geological time it lay under a warm shallow sea, and the water carved the sandstone into extraordinary dreamlike cliffs standing vertically above the fine white sand of the seabed. The same deep movements of the earth that tipped the land up, draining the water off into the Mediterranean, threw up volcanoes and harsh mountains of broken rock. One of those peaks is the Holy Mountain—variously called Sinai, Horeb or St. Catherine's Mountain.

Here Moses saw the burning bush; here the Hebrew people received the law; here Elijah, fleeing for his life, heard the "sound of sheer silence" (now accepted as a more accurate translation than the traditional "still, small voice") and knew that it was the presence of God. And here, too, in the Orthodox Monastery of St. Catherine, continuous Christian worship has been offered daily since the sixth century, possibly

longer than anywhere else in the world. Mount Sinai is also of course an Islamic holy place, and St. Catherine's must be one of the very few monasteries with a mosque inside its enclosure. Further East in Sinai, toward the Red Sea, was one of the principal locations where, in the fourth century, the Desert Fathers (some of whom were Mothers) began to experiment with silent prayer. They created the hermit tradition, which has continued ever since and moreover has been deeply influential in the formation of the monastic life and of Christian spirituality more widely.

All deserts are silent, harsh and—so far as I know—beautiful. But Sinai adds to this its own specific history of God's dealings with humanity, which makes it sacred to all three of the great monotheistic faiths. It is a holy place where the veil is lifted—or at least rendered semitransparent.

I feel a strong spiritual affinity for deserts. For the last six years I have lived as a semihermit on a moor in southern Scotland, which is isolated, wild and, to me, extraordinarily lovely. However, it is not a desert, so every fall I go to Sinai for a week. In order to be able to afford this—silence not being very profitable in the 21st century—I am employed by a travel company to introduce other people to desert silence. The company, which hires members of the Bedouin tribe as hosts, has a serious ecological commitment and a deep, predominantly Christian spiritual agenda. The expedition I work on, however, is not a standard retreat but a nondenominational exploration of silence itself. One consequent privilege is to have travelers from a wide range of traditions—including Muslims, Buddhists, Jews and people without any explicit religious affiliation, as well as Christians from across the spectrum.

Silent prayer, although much lauded in the Western church, has also been made highly esoteric and has become "advanced." I do not believe it is necessarily advanced, but I do know that most of us lack any deep experience of ordinary, nonspiritual silence on which to build such prayer. So the trip tries to offer a taste of silence and some clarity about what this silence is and what it can do. My groups have included both truly experienced silence practitioners, who want to better understand what they are doing, and "beginners" who want to have this experience. If you do not feel at home in monastic places and are not equipped for solo wilderness treks, this encounter can be surprisingly hard to access.

What we actually do is extremely simple. We arrive in Sharm el-Sheikh, a popular seaside resort, get on a bus and later transfer to four-wheel-drive vehicles and go

deep into the desert and camp—no beds, no bathrooms, no stoves (but wonderful food cooked on wood fires). We stay put; each adventurer finds a "cave in the rock" and sits there and listens to the desert silence and—I hope—to his or her own heart and mind. We also go for silent walks—in the bright dawn, in the hot afternoon, in the star-dancing night (my favorite), and we try to learn about silence.

I know for myself that to listen to anything, even silence, I have to know what I am listening to. It is not only for purely spiritual reasons that deserts are the natural home of hermits: there are also some simple scientific ones. First, of course, there are not many people, and people make a lot of noise. But beyond that there are things about sound itself that are helpful to understand. For example, there is a physical process called attenuation: the drier and hotter the air, the less sound carries and the less it reverberates—so that the same sound in the desert disrupts silence less and for a shorter time than in a damper or cooler climate. Sand and sandstone absorb sound waves more than harder surfaces do, swallowing up noise. The silent processes of geology and astronomy are more nakedly exposed in the desert—the rocks are not covered by vegetation and the stars are not obscured by light pollution or even clouds. There is no sound of running water.

Deserts are naturally silent places: it is not by chance that of all the spiritualities that were tried out in the third and fourth centuries, that of the hermits endures (the word *hermit* comes from the Greek word for desert), whereas that of the dendrites (who lived in trees) and stylites (who lived on pillars) and others became obsolete rather quickly.

As for us: How do ears receive and brains interpret sound waves? Why does silence slow the heartbeat, and what effect does that have physiologically? Safe silence is very good for your health!

Beyond the physical there are particular experiences in the desert that act like a pressure cooker for the soul. Among these are: Vulnerability—the desert is perilous, life is stretched thin, you learn you are vulnerable and dependent both on other people and on grace. Scale—the brightness of light and the huge open spaces make you, as an individual, very tiny. Simplicity—stripped of so many things (cell phones, hot showers, refrigerators, mirrors), you realize these should be delights, not necessities. The Bedouin themselves—those who are still living in the desert have a culture of survival and joy very different from the demands of Western lifestyles. And above all, silence itself—changing the way we see and judge others, stripping

off the social protection of chatter, leaving us naked and surprisingly tender.

If we read the tales and sayings of the desert hermits (they seldom wrote anything themselves), we can see what happens to people in the desert. They were fiercely, frighteningly ascetic, disciplined to a degree that seems almost masochistic now, but it did not turn them into angry, judgmental, harsh human beings. On the contrary, humility, charity, hospitality and a deep, sweet sense of humor and kindliness are hallmarks of desert spirituality.

There are two separate traditions of silence—both have been absorbed into Christian spirituality and are often confused. There is the silence of self-knowing: "The world is too much with us" expresses the belief that society corrupts our true inner life and deafens us to our authentic voice. We need sometimes to withdraw from it into the "bliss of solitude" in order to shore up the boundaries of our personalities, to make ourselves less permeable and more genuinely creative and fulfilled. This silence is widely accepted and generally, in moderate doses, approved of.

But desert spirituality seems to be about something very different: a radical loss of self, of identity and ego. This is *kenosis,* the self-emptying (the literal antithesis of self-fulfillment) that Paul ascribes to Christ in Philippians 2:7: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." And at its core is silence.

This *kenosis* is a very terrible thing. I want it and try to seek it—and then I waver. I slip back into prayers for a quiet heart and a more romantic vision of an inner solitude that will allow me to hear my own self and become a better writer (and possibly a better person). But each year I need to go back to the Sinai, to the huge silence as well as the vulnerability and dependence and the extraordinary beauty and challenges it offers, to reinspire me to revive my sometimes greedy enthusiasm for the extreme—for the presence of the vast silent God of the desert, beyond language, beyond individuality, absorbed into joy.

I try to find this constant tension, this alternating rhythm of desire, healthy and positive. I am convinced at the very least that in our culture of noise and "self-full-fill-ment," a taste of desert emptiness is good for the spirit.