

Disciplines of listening

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

When God Is Silent.

By Barbara Brown Taylor. Cowley, 96 pp.

The Presence of Absence: On Prayers and Epiphany.

By Doris Grumbach. Beacon, 126 pp.

Barbara Brown Taylor's concise, pithy and challenging prose is evidence that she is practicing what she preaches: that Christian pastors take more care with the words they use and treat language with economy, courtesy and reverence. Her book *When God Is Silent* makes amply clear what she means by these terms. If we believe that God spoke the world into being and made the human in the image of the divine, then the words we say matter. Taylor's thesis is that language is in crisis—that "the whole enterprise of trusting words to mean what they say" is endangered.

All too often, Taylor insists, Christians are part of the problem rather than people who offer an alternative. It isn't simply that the jargon of psychobabble is working its way into worship, but something deeper: a lack of trust in the essential mystery of God's word. When, as Taylor puts it, preachers "wield words such as *God* or *faith* as if they were made of steel instead of air," they make faith remote and abstract. Her concern resonates with the dismay I felt as a writer returning to church after a 20-year hiatus. I experienced worship as such a bombardment by words that my mind went numb. I had spent years learning to be careful with words, and I couldn't understand how so many people, including pastors, who professed the religion of the Word could be so careless with the language they used in worship.

Back in the mid-'60s Thomas Merton spoke as a prophet of language, commenting that for us saying "God is love" is like saying "Eat Wheaties." Taking up the prophet's mantle, Brown asserts that advertising, media and professional jargon and sheer verbal overload have so corrupted our way of speaking and hearing that God has chosen to be silent. She suggests that we are suffering the kind of famine that the prophet Amos foresaw, a grim famine that deprives us of "hearing the words of the Lord. They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it."

Taylor sets forth a grim challenge: "First we nailed the flesh. Now we have nailed the Word by speaking of it too glibly." To the extent that we continue to value information over reflection, communication over contemplation, we'll continue to try to keep the Word under our thumb. But God's Word won't be confined, not in any tomb of our devising.

Taylor suggests that we return to the Hebrew scriptures, the "Hear, O Israel," as the ground of our faith. The focus of the language, she points out, "is on the ears, not the lips—on listening, not speaking." She suggests that when we pray, "Hear us, O Lord," we are tempted to imagine that the burden of listening is on God, rather than on us. She asks that we try instead, "Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening."

If Taylor is eloquent in describing our misuse of language, she is even more eloquent when meditating on the value of silence, on "the game of divine hide and seek [which is] part of God's pedagogy . . . [making] silence a vital component of God's speech." She offers concrete and practical suggestions for ways to improve our relationship with both silence and the words God has given us. It is only idolaters, she suggests, who insist on talk and the illusion of control it gives. "Only an idol always answers. The God who keeps silence, even when

God's own flesh and blood is begging for a word, is the God beyond anyone's control. An answer will come, but not until the silence is complete. And even then, the answer will be given in silence. With the cross and the empty tomb, God has provided us with two events that defy all our efforts to domesticate them. Before them, and before the God who is present in them, our most eloquent words turn to dust."

Doris Grumbach's *The Presence of Absence* is as brief and forceful as Taylor's book and is a good companion to it. It is an important book for pastors in that Grumbach, a novelist, conveys something that many older people experience but do not articulate—a profound disappointment with the churches to which they have devoted their lives. I suspect that most pastors are familiar with the syndrome: many church members of a certain age resist joining another committee or organizing another church supper. As their lives near their end, they shun the easy platitude, the lure of more activity. They want the church to help them go deeper. But all too often, it cannot slow down enough to hear and respond to their silent plea.

Grumbach, who began publishing memoirs at age 70, begins this book by describing an experience of the *mysterium tremendum* that came to her as a young woman, an unbidden sense of the holy, of "ineffable joy, a huge *delight*." Having no "history of belief . . . no formal religion or any faith at all," she is astonished by the powerful sense of God's presence, and responds by seeking God in church. "I hoped that, in a hallowed place, and with the help of Holy Rite, I might again experience a moment of 'noble freedom,'" she writes. But in more than 50 years of church membership, of praying in community, Grumbach never again had that "same astonishing sense of epiphany."

Grumbach's book is laced with letters to friends and writers of spiritual books (including myself) that relate honestly and painfully her sense of communal worship as "arid" and "sterile." I know some pastors who might simply tell her to get with the program, that epiphany is not the business of the church. But Grumbach challenges one to ask, If that is so, how do churches relate to God? How do they teach us to honor that Christ that is in ourselves and in other people?

This is not a neatly packaged book. It reads like a journal of one woman's journey through faith, painful disease, prayer, and happy discovery of others who have described similar journeys. Simone Weil became important to Grumbach, as did the psalms. A thoroughly literary person, she found spiritual sustenance in John Keats as well as the Quaker Thomas Kelly, Rilke as well as Thomas Merton.

Grumbach settles into a daily discipline of contemplative prayer, practiced in solitude. This leads her to a lovely bit of biblical interpretation: "Like the very rich, God has many residences, many mansions, all of which contain the possibility that an avid visitor may, if he is very fortunate, find Him at home." She cites St. Augustine's observation that "He was within and we mistakenly sought Him without."

Christianity, like Judaism, is inescapably communal. Holy scriptures call us the people of Israel, the body of Christ. Grumbach does not naïvely assume that she stands alone in her faith. But she does argue convincingly that the hermetic path brings her closest to God. I was reminded that even St. Benedict, a great promoter of communal prayer and life, found a place for hermits. He valued those who, after years within the monastic community, felt the need to live and pray apart from it. He also cemented into the monastic tradition the recognition that pride in one's spiritual practices—what Grumbach calls "the uncritical approval of the self"—is the enemy of Christian life.

Nearing 80, Grumbach remains crustily critical, especially of herself. Regarding the tension between communal worship and the extreme choice she has made to live and pray alone, she writes: "Was this a contrariness at the heart of things to be resolved by compromise? Should I move into the center on the theory that one did not cancel out the other, that both made the whole, supporting and throwing light on each other: two journeys, not one, to the same destination?" She adds a question that clearly enlivens her faith, but does not trouble a

Christianity grown stale and self-satisfied: "Are there no contraries at the heart of things?"

God found a way to mediate between the flesh and the Word. Asked to meditate on absence and presence, silence and speech, solitude and community, the readers of these books might content themselves with the recognition that contradiction is the most powerful of relationships. We long for resolution, for easy answers. Yet as Grumbach concludes, citing the Talmud, our job is to "look ahead. You are not expected to complete the task. Neither are you permitted to lay it down."