Divine silence

A Quaker colleague taught me how stillness exercises agency, how it acts upon worshipers.

by Isaac S. Villegas in the December 2024 issue
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I once had to plan a joint Mennonite-Quaker funeral for a couple at church who lost a son. They were faithful members both of our church, which met in the evening, and of the Friends meeting, which gathered for worship in the morning. For over a decade our Mennonite congregation rented meeting space from the Society of Friends, a sharing of material resources that provided opportunities for our two bodies of faith to grow toward one another. As a result, sometimes people became quite at home in both groups, attending both services, and this couple was among them.

To prepare the funeral service, I met with the clerk of the Friends meeting. Friends delegate to their clerk administrative duties, organizational responsibilities, facilitation of meetings, and discernment processes—all of which are understood as spiritual. Together we discussed how to incorporate meaningful parts of our worship traditions into a cohesive service. Central to Quakerism is collective attention to the quietude, the stillness that resounds with the mysterious silence of God's presence.

As we outlined the funeral service, the clerk asked if I felt comfortable taking the lead on moving the gathered community from the Friends' time of silence to the Mennonite congregational prayer. I nodded, nonchalantly agreeing to the task. I jotted a note to myself and moved on to another item on our agenda about the order of the service. But the clerk returned to the question of the conclusion of our time of silence: "Are you familiar with our attention to silence, about how we do it?" I responded enthusiastically that I had joined their meetings for worship several times and that I always found the time of stillness refreshing. Before moving on, I asked if she had a sense as to how long I should set the timer on my phone in order to know when to transition from the silence to the prayer.

"On second thought, I think I should take on that responsibility," she offered, gently. "It sounds like you don't quite know how to discern the end of silence, to know when the silence is finished with us, for now."

She was certainly right. I did not and do not understand the qualities of divine silence. For her, the stillness exercises agency; the silence acts upon the worshipers. To know when the quietude has accomplished what God wants to do in the lives of the gathered takes practice, the experiential knowledge that comes with a weekly gathering. For the Society of Friends, worship is a habit that attunes people's lives to the nature of God—the one whose being is beyond categories, whose eternal life defies words. In their stillness, they learn the holy communication of God's silent presence.

In his poem "First-Day Thoughts," the 19th-century abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier described Quaker worship as a kind of speechless language. "In calm and cool and silence, once again / I find my old accustomed place among / My brethren. . . . / There, syllabled by silence, let me hear / The still small voice which reached the prophet's ear." The custom of worship, of gathering with his community of Friends, opens him to God. Syllabled by silence, let me hear.

To give ourselves to silence in worship is to wait for the Spirit of God who gives us rest.

My participation in worship with the Friends has been infrequent and irregular. Over the years one thing I've noticed, while sitting there quietly with them, is that I become hyper-attentive to my own noises—the creak of the pew when I shift my weight, the scratch in my throat that triggers a cough, the growling of my stomach, the jangle of my keys that I bump with my shoe (I forget that I placed them on the floor to keep them from bothering me in my pocket). To attend to silence is also to notice a world of sound.

In *Quaker Faith and Practice*, Tayeko Yamanouchi, a member of the Society of Friends in the United Kingdom, describes her experience of worshipful silence as training in listening to God's polyphonous world. "As I silence myself I become more sensitive to the sounds around me," she writes, "and I do not block them out. The songs of the birds, the rustle of the wind, the children in the playground, the roar of an airplane overhead are all taken into my worship." In the stillness, in the quiet that pronounces sound, she hears Christ's promises. "I hear the words of Jesus, 'Come unto me, all that labour and are weary, and I will give you rest.'"

To give ourselves to silence in worship is to wait for the Spirit of God who gives us rest. "Be still, and know that I am God," says the psalmist (Ps. 46:10). While my church is not dedicated to the intentional silence of Friends, my experiences as a visitor to their meetings have instilled in me an awareness of the Spirit who meets us in between the movements and words of our services—in the moments of stillness and quiet before the call to worship, after the scripture reading, in the pauses between the preacher's sentences, in the breathing that makes possible our singing. "An objective, dynamic Presence which enfolds us all," explains Thomas Kelly, an early 20th-century Friend, "nourishes our souls, speaks glad, unutterable comfort within us, and quickens in us depths that had before been slumbering." That presence holds our lives in existence—the one to whom we return with the routines of worship, our habituation into being with God together, in our listening for the breath of life, the Holy Spirit, as we sing and pray, as we confess our sins and our faith with words and silences.