

A Collage of Thoughts and Images on Silence

by Jutta von Buchholtz, Ph.D

Over the last twelve months there have been more than the usual instances of sad silences both in my own and my clients' lives. I no longer hear my dog's paws and toenails on the hardwood floors of my house. Many of my clients have and continue to suffer silently and/or expressively through unwanted separations. Silence can speak of many things. There is the clamorous hush of unspoken words wanting to burst out of silence. On the other hand, stillness is often in silent contrast to our noisy, chatty lives—then silence is a blessing.

Initially my focus for this paper was on the painful and punitive aspects of silence in relationships, but as I explored these topics other thoughts and images emerged forming a collage of often disparate parts.

Silence enters our hearts through the secret tunnels of our ears but while we may deeply long for blessed silence on the one hand, it can also make us feel rather uncomfortable and we have the strong urge to fill it with sound.

Silenced, we feel rejected, separate, abandoned and lonely as in the infamous "silent treatment," a passive-aggressive strategy of unfortunate popularity.

Silence and emotional damage.

At times we have to ask ourselves, when do we do damage to ourselves and to others by speaking out, or when do we do damage by remaining silent? These moral issues arise daily in our lives, especially for those of us who belong to the tribe of professionals around the "talking cure." When does the therapist need to remain silently respectful of the client's deepest secrets?

I want to explore why and when silence can grow like a cancer of the soul, what do women and silence have to do with one another and what forces do we appeal to when we have "minutes" of collective, commemorative silence.

My musings are just that and are not intended to be a finished "product"—silence is a vast and mysterious subject. Its bipolarity does not lend itself to be enclosed. There are no ready conclusions because silence by definition is open and I hope to open your ears and hearts to the many connective tendrils of the hush within and without.

Silence like a cancer grows ...

There was a barely audible "click" on the phone line and

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the line went dead. The other had hung up, thereby slicing the connection and sending each partner into solitariness. Two voices had now been muted into dismissive silence.

I hear about many versions of the “silent treatment” in my practice, from my friends and, of course, I have experienced it in my own life as well. This vicious silent treatment makes us cry or become angry. We fear the heartache of separation. Silent treatment is intended to hurt. It is cruelly aggressive and can be sustained for days, weeks, months and even years. With it grows the alienating suffering it inflicts. Sometimes, to help ourselves, we listen to sad songs, wail with the blues, and feel angry with the other for hurting us so deeply. Being left in the emotional vacuum, at times we start to worry what our unconscious contribution to this truly destructive state of affairs might have been. We find ourselves cast out of a union, a connectedness and a mutual support system. We feel we have nowhere to turn to. To be rejected by the all-important other we find ourselves vulnerably and miserably alone, very much like a motherless child. This kind of stillness feels like a killer. In his book *The Shadow of the Tsunami and the Growth of the Relational Mind*, Phillip M. Bromberg speaks about the murderous attempt to blot out the experience of the other. He understands this kind of silence as a relational trauma, an emotional withdrawal. “Oh, please, don’t go so far away from me” (p. 63). The trauma results from the threat that love would be removed, that the other’s or one’s own very existence is denied, silenced. There is no more holding in mind or being held in mind. Not only do I no longer belong—I AM not! In such an emotional trauma, the mirror, which I relied on in order to reflect myself to myself, is taken away. The precious and perishable opportunity for individuation within and through a relationship is gone! The negative impact of relational trauma can result in chaotic and terrifying flooding of affect—resulting in “hysteria,” “unreasonableness” and the disturbing behavior that is often part of a sudden or long foreshadowed silence in any relationship—the disappearance of the significant other. Most of us have sat by the phone, desperately wanting it to ring ... like a metaphor for the umbilical cord that would re-connect us to mother. In my practice women as well as men have reported that the break-up of a relationship felt as if the world were falling apart and they with it. There is that terrible emptiness, that hole that is no longer filled by the existence of the other.

And yet ... emotional trauma can and often does initiate change, which may lead from dependence to autonomy in the deepest sense, a freedom I surely did not want, as some of our wise country songs lament.

The bi-polarity of silence.

When does inner as well as outer law require that we remain silent and when is it mandatory that we break the silence? In the sixties and early seventies, Simon and Garfunkel stirred us with “The Sound of Silence.” They were not only referring to the awful price of silence in relationships—where words could form a bridge over troubled waters. They were also talking about protesting the Vietnam war, breaking the silences that surrounded how and why that war was conducted and the horrendous toll it took on our youth.

Silence can be companionable, a wordless resting deeply in one another, or it can cover an unbridgeable gap of hostility between two people. Silence is a mandate of inner integrity as well as outer laws, when we learn of something dreadful, like child abuse, about which we must not remain silent no matter what the

personal cost. On the other hand, silence must be maintained by rules of inner integrity and against outer laws when it is a matter of life-saving, secretive silences during an oppressive regime as during the Third Reich. When is silence an endorsement for the continuity of an abominable situation or act?

Subjectively we need wonder what we silence within ourselves. In the series of interviews that make up *The Way of the Dream*, Marie Louise von Franz addresses this problem. She gives the example of parents, and how these days they often repress their natural inclination, to express their annoyance with a child who continuously misbehaves, like repeatedly dumping her food on the tray of the high chair she sits in. The timid parents are afraid that a perfectly justified verbal outburst might damage the child’s psyche. Von Franz suggests that a loving but firm setting of limits might be better for both the child and the parent than deceptive silence. This scenario makes me wonder what other natural impulses do we silence routinely? For example, are we muzzling our righteous anger because the collective admonishes us that women in general are not allowed that emotion? It seems to me that a large part of our psychic life, our natural instincts, is often relegated to the shadowy life of the uninvited guest or to the fate of the thirteenth fairy, which only turns malevolent, a deadly cancer in our souls, precisely because she is not invited.

Women, secrets and silence.

Unlike the Gnostics who considered silence one of the loftiest deities and thought of her as female, Pope Honorius III (13th century) decreed, “... women should not speak. Their lips carry the stigma of Eve, who led men into perdition.” (Eduardo Galeano, “Inquisition” in *The Nation*, June 22, 2009) In her thoroughly researched and well written article “The Public Voice of Women” (*London Review of Books*, March 20, 2014), Mary Beard explores what and where women have been allowed to speak on and out over centuries. Silencing a woman, especially in public, has a long history. It started centuries ago, with Homer’s *Odyssey*. Telemachus told his mother Penelope to shut up and return to her quarters which silencing treatment this otherwise savvy woman obeys mutely. To effectively silence women, rapists would cut out their victims’ tongues. In book VI (519 – 562) of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* Tereus raped his sister-in-law, the princess Philomela. He cut out her tongue when she threatened to tell the world. He raped her repeatedly even after that atrocity. This two thousand year old story is one of the most gruesome and bloody descriptions of silencing a woman I have ever read—it turned my stomach. Later the gods turned Philomela into a nightingale. Significantly, only the male nightingale has a voice—the female cannot sing!

A friend of mine, sharing childhood memories, told that her mother said of her: “... she was a good child. She quietly sat in a corner of her playpen and did not speak until she was three years old.” For women silence is often a prison but it can also be used as protective camouflage. We can “disappear” into silence. I wonder what that little child mused about.

In our culture women have a difficult time as public orators. Margaret Thatcher for example, took voice lessons to lower the pitch of her voice in order to sound more “authoritative”—masculine.

In private lives, women continue to resort to secrets and silence. “Just keep mum!” sorority sisters recently advised a client of mine after she had been date raped.

A large corporation employed another client, a talented

graphic designer. At office meetings her creative suggestions would inevitably be hijacked by her boss and passed off as his own.

One of my clients recently murmured: "I'm afraid I don't have anything to say. Maybe I won't be interesting." She is a very attractive PhD professor at a University. Here she is, over two thousand years later, a woman in the grips of the archetypal inner rapist energies, represented in the figure of Tereus, which continue to cut out a woman's tongue to brutally silence her.

We women can be secretive and silent, whose strategy was forced on us by circumstances cross culturally and historically. Consequently girls drink this deep knowing with their mothers' milk and the familiarity with secrets and silence continues as second nature for surprisingly many women.

The disappearance of the woman's voice behind the veil of silence plays a deep and unfortunate part in men's psyches. Many men's loss of connection to their inner feminine expresses itself in their sad unrelatedness to outer women from which men as well as women suffer grievously.

In the Grimm brother's fairy tale "The Six Swans," a witchy stepmother turned six brothers into swans. The sister escaped the curse because she secretly and silently watched from a window. In order to redeem her brothers she had to be silent for six years, sewing those six shirts made of starflowers. She lived in the woods until a king found her, fell in love and married her. His evil and jealous mother hid away three successive babies the young queen birthed, smeared blood around the young mother's mouth (!) accusing her, successfully, of being a man-eater! The loyal sister continued sewing in silence to free her brothers. She was taken to be burned at the stake. Just then the six years were up, the swans swooshed down and were released from the curse. The bad mother was burned at the stake and the three babies were returned to their – no longer silent - mother. The good woman's silence (image for the positive feminine) is a requirement for dissolving the evil mother's (image for the negative feminine) spell over the brothers (images for the masculine). There are many examples of the archetypal theme of good, sacrificial and often silent women releasing men from wicked spells, among them Hartmann von Aue's Der Arme Heinrich and Richard Wagner's The Flying Dutchman.

And yet I wonder ... what is it in us women that make us collaborative with this collective silencing?

Minutes of silence.

After devastating events, mourning survivors often gather for minutes of commemorative silence, devoted to the persons who died in the disastrous event. It struck me that something deeper and more profound also goes on in these rituals. In the silence dedicated to the memory of the lost souls, we are trying to reconnect with the departed, attempting to travel with them into the regions of the underworld, a spiritual realm to which they have returned.

"And he said, go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice." (Old Testament, I Kings, chapter 19, 11-12)

In the "moment of silence" we try to make space for the still small voice, the voice of God within.

Silent night, holy night. In Germany Christmas is celebrated on December 24 in the evening, on Holy Night. There is a mysterious and secretive hush around the house just before the door is opened to the splendor of the lighted tree, to the miracle of light that comes, silently, in the darkest hour ... of the year. In this annual traditional ritual, secrecy and silence on a small, familiar scale nevertheless effectively communicate a sense of the sacred.

Another amplification to the spiritual aspect of silence is the very fine film Into Great Silence. In 1984 German film maker Philip Gröning wrote to the silent Carthusian order at the Grande Chartreuse, asking permission to make a documentary about their monastic life. The order said they would get back to him. Sixteen years later, they were ready. Gröning, sans crew or artificial lighting lived in the monks' quarters for six months. The resulting film is a total immersion into the hush of monastic life. This virtually silent film was a surprise hit in Germany in 2006 and it continues to speak eloquently to the silent depths of our hearts where God might speak to us when we are still.

Knowing about my interest in the topic of silence my colleague Dr. William Willeford drew my attention to the work of Diarmaid MacCulloch, who recently published Silence: A Christian History. Since the book was not yet available to me for purchase, I found a review of it by Stuart Kelly in The Guardian, March 29, 2013. The author points to the deeply ambivalent relationship Christianity has with silence. Among many examples, he quotes from Psalm 62 which begins "...truly my soul silently waits for God," while Psalm 109 advises "Do not keep silent, oh God my praise." Meister Eckhart thought "... nothing is so like God as silence." Among many topics related to edifying silence, MacCulloch discusses speaking in tongues, reverential silence, the rise of monasticism and silent orders. Then he moves on and into the double-ness of sound and silence in Christianity surrounding the shocking cover-ups of the church during the holocaust, the times of slavery and present day's clerical abuse. God was silent. When the God of the Old Testament fell silent, His withdrawal was more terrifying and desolating than anger.

To conclude my musings and meanderings on silence: I recently bought If Not, Winter. Fragments of Sappho translated by Anne Carson. It is a bi-lingual edition—the original Greek fragments on the left page and Anne Carson's English translation on the right one. There are blank spaces on the pages where text is missing in the translation as well as in the original Greek. I find this moving and mourn the loss of what the poetess has said. And yet ...the words left on the page take on their own mysterious lives, which invite our involvement. The blank spaces cannot be overlooked and form a profound visual reminder of what has gone silent forever. At times there will be just one word to a page—all that is left of the original poem. On one page I found the following:

Someone will remember us
I say
even in another time

Today I learned that the writer and Zen teacher Peter Matthiessen's voice has gone silent.