

**“BALANCING STIRRING ACTIVISM
WITH STILLING SILENCE,
EVEN BOLD BENEVOLENCE
WITH BENEFICIAL BOREDOME”**

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

On October 25, 2009

My impression has been, life here at First Parish has been as lively this fall as ever before, maybe even more so, and that has been true of our services of worship as well, the variety of church activities obvious every week in the announcements, the competition for the focused mid-service last announcement, last week's amazing worship led by the Welcoming Congregation Committee, and this morning's parade of social action groups.

It's been great. And then at some point I start to think how our religious life together, as much as our personal lives, including our own religious lives, need to find a balance between vitality and calm, outwardness and inwardness, vibrancy and peace.

Vibrancy – it has got to be a welcome aspect to any congregation's life together, the sense of blood through the veins, spirits lifted up and above the mundane, feeling enlivened by ideas and community and vision and hope. I am all for it.

But I recently heard a colleague who has been doing interim ministries for a while now as one of a well-trained army of my colleagues who come in between ministries to help congregations decide who they are and want to be and how to go about getting there. He says that when a congregation is asked to name the quality they most want to achieve, an adjective every single one selects, and regularly leads with, is “vibrant.”

He is a reasonably lively guy himself, but he shakes his head at the idea that people think it would be a good thing for their church to vibrate a lot. I'm afraid he is being a bit literal, since I assume all people mean is, they'd like their church to feel alive and invigorated. But I sympathize with his reservation: like him, I would hope as high on the list of desired characteristics would be healthy, spiritual, safe, restoring, sustaining, consoling, and quieter words like that.

I have been trying to do that in every service with the meditation and silence, and people have thanked me for it. Today, the whole second half of the service seeks to provide the balance we all need, individually and together, between our activity and activism on the one hand, and some sense of peace and stillness on the other, maybe even boredom. The rabbi and author Erica Brown notes that "boredom can actually help faith if we allow ourselves to wallow in it just long enough for it to spark creativity." We get bored of our boredom, she suggests, and find some creative way out.

I will ever try to spare you that. But a stillness of spirit, a quietude of the soul, these are good things to be had in church and in our lives in general, and we do well to find place for them.

So relax – you don't have to listen to another word I say this morning, although I do have a theme to develop, one about silence, one part of the constellation of solitude, stillness, and silence I want to put in a plug for, even though there are places in life more still, more silent, and with more solitude than the worship services I hope you will keep attending. But in the hectic, noisy world most of us live in, even here is a refuge of sorts, and I want to encourage you to find others as well, even as you remain an active participant in this community and all its lively programs, including those that will be highlighted downstairs after the service at our annual Social Action Fair.

There is a good new book by the Cape Cod writer Anne D. LeClaire called, *Listening Below the Noise: A Meditation on the Practice of Silence*. In many ways her observations about the

experience of silence, and the rewards and possible drawbacks of practicing it, echo the observations of the British writer Sarah Maitland, whose 2008 book, called *The Book of Silence*, has just been issued in the United States. It promptly sold out, and a second printing is underway.

You may have heard Ms. Maitland interviewed on radio, as I did, and I have read numerous on-line reviews and excerpts by now, although copies as of today are impossible to come by. Trust me, I have tried. It tells me that the appeal of silence is enormous today.

Ms. Maitland began her experiences with silence earlier this decade, and she followed up with trips to the quietest places available on earth. She is a reclusive sort, and a Roman Catholic who prays for three hours a day, I am told.

But her observations are much the same as those offered by Ms. LeClaire, who began her practice even earlier, about 1992, if I count back seventeen years from 2009, when her book was published. It was back then that she began the practice of not speaking at all on the first and third Monday of every month.

Let me let that sink in. She was silent two days every month. And married, although her two sons had left for college when the practice began. Still, she knows it takes a toll on relationships when someone – someone who is not mute, someone who could talk – doesn't and won't.

She is another author whom you may have heard interviewed on public radio – she and Ms. Maitland appeared so closely together one could easily conflate their accounts, especially since their revelations are similar. They both experienced a heightened sense of awareness, perception, creativity, and wellbeing, balanced thereafter by a darker side of silence, even a dangerous one, but with an ultimate affirmation.

From the descriptions of Ms. Maitland's work, one gathers that she has researched more thoroughly the historic examples of practitioners of silence in various religious traditions, as well as the dangers not just of distress but of psychosis. Ms. LeClaire knows she can connect her practice of silence with that of Quakers and

some Hindus, but she is more concerned with what her own experience taught her.

Her connecting motif is the garden, in particular the secret garden in the book of the same name by Frances Hodgson Burnett that she read and loved as a child, having received a copy as a gift at ten. "...Each night that winter I curled up on the sofa to lose myself in the story of young Mary Lennox. Although she was described as an unwanted, lonely, and slightly unpleasant child, she captured my heart and imagination from the opening pages. I wept when her parents died in a cholera epidemic in India and worried for her when she was shipped off to an uncle's estate in England. Her discovery of a hidden door that opened to a secluded garden completely enchanted me, and I thrilled as, within its walls, she was transformed from a yellow-faced, sickly child to a hearty and adventuresome girl." No doubt some of you read the book, too, or saw the movie.

LeClaire went on to an adult life where her "days were occupied with obligations and mundane responsibilities....

"And then in midlife," she writes, "and quite unexpectedly, I discovered my own hidden garden," a personal silence she entered into at a time of distress, which she tried out and has regularly reentered ever since.

Not that she could have seen that coming. Previously, "the concept [of silence] was alien to my soul.... In high school I was once given three detentions in a single study hall because I found it impossible to sit through forty minutes without talking to the girl next to me. To say I was chatty would be an understatement."

[9-10] "In school the Conduct box on my report card [was] usually marked U for 'Unsatisfactory,' and the constant theme of my parent-teacher conferences [was] that I disrupt[ed] the class with my chatter." [87]

But she was on the beach, troubled by the impending death of a close friend's mother, with recent deaths in her own family still on her mind, and she heard a voice that said, "Sit in silence." More than once it said it. So she gave it a try.

What she found in the first silent Mondays was that she became more attentive, mindful, and engaged with life, with all her senses heightened, and not just on the silent days but throughout the weeks in between. Over time she slowed down, and was better able to keep things in perspective and to sort priorities.

As you may imagine, her husband and others had some work getting used to it. As she notes, “although I had chosen silence, our own family experienced the consequences.” [75] ...A “proclaimed day of silence enclosed me in a private place... And so, of course, that meant that occasionally the people in my life felt shut out, rejected, or simply irritated by the boundary that I insisted on maintaining.” [54] But even that taught her lessons about boundaries and learning to surrender control over others’ emotions.

But before long she came to realize that while “Silence may empty a hollow space for something to enter, what appears is not always welcome. I found myself thinking about sad and hurtful things.” [43] She wonders if that isn’t why people “avoid becoming silent, why we fill the air with meaningless chatter and music and radio talk... On some level, perhaps – being quiet – we are afraid of what we will hear” [45] – worst of all, in her opinion, an inner voice proclaiming, “You are not enough.” [48]

Continuing in this self-help book vein, she thinks it a good thing to have these negative aspects of our minds surface so they can be dealt with and their negative power overcome. You may want to remember that in thinking of the outcomes of silence Sarah Maitland factors psychosis in, too; but I don’t doubt that spending time in silence with matters that weigh on our minds or otherwise trouble us is one way people make progress, just as some people find talk therapy more productive.

But LeClaire has some other lessons she has garnered by being quiet. One that would not have occurred to me is, being silent you may start to notice what words come to mind to say, if you were speaking. But you’re not speaking, but left with some self-knowledge, like, I hadn’t realized it before but I am the kind of person who finishes other people’s sentences, or is quick to pass

judgment, or tries to prevent serious discussion with humor. She became more aware of how others use language, too, and became more careful in choosing her own.

She takes time to note the night and day difference between choosing silence, which she is enthusiastic about, and being silenced, as by criticism, judgment, sarcasm, political repression, or cultural restriction like those on women or others in some countries or in some situations. “To be silenced is crippling, belittling, constricting, disempowering,” she notes, while “Chosen stillness can be healing, expansive, instructive.” [88]

One particular place silence can be healing is in the presence of someone who is upset or in grief, when the temptation for most people is want to find the right words that will help, that will solve the problem, that will make the person feel better; when often what will be most helpful and healing will be just your silent presence.

In the end, she says that if she were asked why she maintains the practice of regular days of silence, “I find it restful [and] restorative, I’d respond. It has taught me to listen. To pay attention. To reflect instead of to act. I’d tell them it has brought me back to myself.” [198]

And, I might add for her, this was in a world where silence is under constant assault. Even if we are not ready to stay silent all day – and by the way, by the end of the book she goes to their cottage on the water and says nothing for a week – we may concede that we should take some action in response to that assault, becoming more comfortable with silence here in the service, when driving in the car, wherever, and seek it out and welcome it.

She quotes Kiekegaard: “The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and asked for my advice, I should reply, ‘Create silence.’” [144] She quotes the Swiss philosopher Max Picard who wrote in 1948 that “Nothing has changed [human] nature so much as the loss of silence. The invention of printing, technics, compulsory education – nothing has so altered [humanity] as this lack of relationship to silence, this

fact that silence is no longer taken for granted, as something as natural as the sky above or the air we breathe. [Having] lost silence, [we have] not merely lost one human quality but [our] whole structure has been changed thereby.” [33]

I could toss in a couple lines from Sarah Maitland: “As a society we will do anything we can do to avoid silence at every level. “We are terrified of silence and try to banish it from our lives.”

Yet Anne LeClaire believes “our spirit has an instinct for silence. Every soul innately yearns for stillness, for a space, a garden where we can till, sow, reap, and rest, and by doing so come to a deeper sense of self and our place in the universe. Silence is not an absence but a presence. Not emptiness but repletion. A filling up.” [34]

I hope we can all find that place in our own lives, and in our life together, even as we vibrate together as well -- and maybe see if we can't pitch in on one of the wonderful social action programs we have, and at least go around and learn more about what they are up to.

But for a moment before our final hymn, let us listen to “the one and only voice of God,” which is what Herman Melville called silence.... [35]