

## Silence

It may seem strange to consider silence an integral part of learning and teaching, but I am convinced it is essential to good education. I am not talking here about the silence the students should be exercising while listening attentively to the teacher and to each other. Nor am I talking about the silence involved in quiet reading as the student studies books and material in preparation for class. Nor do I mean the anxious silence after a teacher's question—during which time the students is meant to guess some answer the teacher already has in mind. No, I am talking about silent silence, where only thought and feelings may prevail. I am talking about purposeful silence or creative silence. Such silence belongs to the mystery of learning, indeed to the mystery of transformation.

But this seems odd in a classroom, doesn't it? After all, are not talking by the teacher and questions/repetition by the student what teaching and learning are all about? I have sometimes lurked in the hallway outside classrooms just to overhear what goes on. If you listen to the conversation inside a classroom, you will no doubt hear speaking of some kind going on virtually 100% of the time (unless the students are taking an exam!). And most of that time, it will be the teacher speaking. It would be unusual to "hear" much silence. I think this is unfortunate.

I believe that one of the primary pedagogical qualifications of an effective teacher ought to be the capacity to be comfortable with silence. Typically, when teachers ask a question worth pondering, they may need to wait a long time for the students to formulate answers or gather the courage to speak. Typically, if teachers are not comfortable with silence, then they will quickly fill any void of silence themselves. If they ask a question and there is no forthcoming response in fairly short order, the teacher may think the students have nothing to say, and so they become impatient. The result is that teachers will answer many of their own questions. Furthermore, in so doing, they will be giving to the students the message that if they just keep quiet long enough they will not have to speak at all—because the teacher will always rescue them. If it is true that people learn by speaking, then we must be patient with silence while students prepare their hearts and minds to speak.

I have developed a practice in which I try to address this problem. When I have asked a genuinely reflective question about the students' views on something (not a fact-finding question), I may encounter a long awkward silence. The first time it occurs, I will chuckle and say, "I want you to know that I am very comfortable with silence, and I am in no hurry. So speak when you are ready to speak, because I really want to know what you are thinking about this question." Then I return to silence, and I wait. I must also be prepared for silence after the first and second and third speaker, and so on. Otherwise, I find myself picking up the beat again after one or two students speak, and the value of the initial silence becomes obviated. Sometimes, I may say between speakers, "Others?" And then lapse into silence again. I try to be careful not to correct or add to answers as they come up. Sometimes, praise God, students will even begin speaking among themselves!

In fact, silence is crucial to learner-centered education and a sign that the teacher takes student views very seriously. Don Michie, a friend and colleague at Carthage College, was more comfortable with silence in the classroom than anyone I know. He was a most extraordinary teacher who empowered students to be fully engaged in the interpretation of literature and in lively discussion about it. I was privileged several times to team-teach with Don, and I learned an enormous amount from him. In the end, we wrote a book together.

Don's comfort level with silence was legendary. In a course on Business English, he began the first class with the words, "Well, what do you think?" And they were the last words he spoke the entire first fifty-minute period! What a message those students got about what was going to be expected of them through the class! It was crystal clear that they were going to be the ones to take responsibility for their learning.

At Carthage, there was an honors program among freshmen students that was almost entirely learner-centered. There were three of us instructors in any given year (Don Michie was among them) who were totally in sync. We would give an initial assignment to read, say, something from Plato or Virgil. When the students arrived for class the next day, they all sat in a circle and they were invited to discuss what they had read. After they had discussed it for a while, one of us teachers would say, "You don't get it." When the students would ask what they did not get, the faculty would revert to silence. So the students would return to discussion. Again a faculty person would say, "You don't understand." And then revert to silence. After several class periods of this, the students were completely baffled and frustrated—accusing us teachers to our faces of not doing our jobs. So one student finally said, "Okay, if you're not going to teach, we'll just go to the library and figure it out for ourselves!" Bingo! They got it! And the silence, the refusal to fill the void, the refusal to give "the answers," the refusal even to engage in leading conversation—all led to the desired outcome. Without the silence, I doubt this would have happened. We could not always guarantee it would engender the desired result, but when the process worked, it served to foster independent, self-motivated, and creative learners

Ultimately, however, the meaning of silence does not lie in its usefulness as a pedagogical technique. Rather, silence is an end in itself. It is the act of being present in the present. In this regard, silence is a sign of intimacy. To be comfortable with silence is to be comfortable with people. I know that I have reached a level of friendship with someone when we can just sit together in a car-ride or over a meal and simply enjoy the silence together while we think. Then when someone is ready, they will speak. I have learned this in conversation with a colleague and friend from another seminary. We have a tradition of meeting for dinner each year at our national conference of biblical scholars. In conversation over our meal, I would speak—but then it would seem like it was an eon before he would speak. At first I filled the void. But then it became a discipline for me to just wait it out. I loved this man and it was always worth waiting for him to share, because he had such insightful things to say. I learned to relish these (to me) slow-moving conversations. I discovered that just as people have a zone of *personal space* in which they are comfortable (and may not want others to get too physically close to them), so people have a *personal time* comfort zone in conversation (and may not want people to rush them in conversation). And what I would have missed if I had just filled the time!

Consider the Quakers. If you are not comfortable with silence, do not become a Quaker. In worship, most of their service is done in silence. They do not fill their time together with structured liturgies of hymns and litanies and sermons and prayers. Rather they wait for the Spirit to lead them. So they may sit for a long time in silence, until the Spirit leads someone to speak. And what is spoken is usually thoughtful and inspired, worth pondering with even more silence! What about honoring silence in a classroom periodically just to think. We have to make space for the Spirit to get a word in edgewise!

How about a Quaker pedagogy? What if we gave an assignment for people to ponder and reflect about ahead of time—and then had a Quaker meeting! What would the conversation be like in class if we invited people to wait and listen for guidance for thirty seconds or a minute before the each next person should speak? Of course, the subject matter would have to be

conducive to such a process. You would not do this in a Greek class or a math class. But you could do it in a constructive theology class or when discussing a literary interpretation of a short story or a gospel. You would not want to do it every class period. But when you did it in one class period, it might change the dynamics of every class period, because the whole group would be more comfortable with silence—and probably more thoughtful about what they said. And they would be trained to think a while and to think deeply before they spoke. Perhaps also their writing would improve, because it would be preceded by reflection in addition to the gathering of information.

I imagine that the void that preceded creation in the Genesis myth was characterized by an eerie silence that lasted billions of eons. And then God spoke. And what a word! Let there be light, and there was light! What if we considered that many acts of creation might well share this dynamic: first a silence, then a word, and possibly then a transformation of some kind. Silence is the matrix out of which thoughts, ideas, feelings, and so on are born/created in a person or in a group. Consider the efforts of some meditation programs to think of “nothing” as the basis for renewal of the person. That would be “creation-out-of-nothing” for certain. I have sometimes begun a class with a brief silent meditation, and it has generally served to make the whole class discussion more focused and thoughtful.

I recall Tommy Tyson, a Methodist evangelist, telling this story. He went to lead a revival, an evangelistic retreat, for several nights at a church in some inner city. Next door worked a prostitute walking prominently around the neighborhood and in front of the church in the evenings. As Tommy and the leaders prepared for the revival in prayer, the elders began to say terrible things about this woman and to ask God to judge her. Tommy stopped them and said, “If we offer these prayers to God for this woman, they might tear her to shreds. These might be our human words, but do you think God has a thought about this woman?” Then they returned to prayer. There was a long, long silence. Here was the matrix out of which something new might emerge. And finally one of the elders spoke the word: “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone!” As a result of this experience, the entire tenor of the group and of the revival changed. And in the end, as Tommy recounted it, the woman came to the revival! And she came forward to be saved! Maybe silence in our classrooms might evoke from us some profound words, perhaps even a word that comes from God.

But there is more. There are often so many words in a teaching/learning experience that we do not take the time to feel. Perhaps we do feel, but we do not take the time to feel what we feel. I am convinced that feeling is essential to learning and transformation. We now talk about emotional intelligence, which I believe is very much interwoven with other kinds of intelligence—rational, mathematical, artistic intelligence. Emotions are connected with how people learn, from whom they learn it, what they remember, and how it affects them. The ancient rhetoricians knew this well. They engaged in the art of persuasion by engaging the emotions as well as the mind, feelings as well as logic. Now I am not talking about an appeal to emotion that is manipulative. I am talking about the natural inclusion of feeling in the learning process.

What if we took silence as an opportunity to enable students to get in touch with what they are feeling as well as with what they are thinking? I do performances of biblical texts. Such oral performances restore the emotive dimensions of the text and evoke much emotion in the hearer. How can you describe the healing of a blind man or the proclamation of blessing to the poor or a harsh conflict between Jesus and the authorities over some vital issue without the performer expressing emotion or without the audience experiencing emotion? Sometimes, I will do an exercise immediately after a performance in which I will ask each person to sit in silence

and get in touch with what they were feeling during the performance. Then I invite them to share what they were feeling and to articulate what it was about the story and the way it was told that led them to feel that way. I have had some of the most insightful conversations out of this exercise of silence.

Personally, as a very outgoing person, I have struggled all my life with the challenge to be silent. I am far to the right on the extrovert (versus the introvert) side of the scale on the Meyers-Briggs test. The role assigned to me by my profile in that test is that of a “field marshal”! I began my adult years acting as if I should say aloud everything I was thinking internally. I not only said what I was thinking; I also used to finish other people’s sentences (including my wife’s!). But early on, due mostly, thank God, to the women’s movement and to personal therapy, I was able to change (somewhat!). As a result of those experiences, I learned to hear myself speaking, and I did not like it. So I sought to become more of an active listener than an active speaker.

Even God got to me. In the early seventies, I was involved in the Christian charismatic movement. One day I was praying for the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gift of speaking in tongues. God said (you know how God speaks to us in our minds), “You? The gift of tongues? No way! You already talk too much in English. Why would I add other tongues? No, I am giving *you* the gift of silence. Then maybe *other* people will have a chance to speak!” Oh well! That’s pretty clear. I had to begin to see silence as a gift, and soon it became obvious what a precious gift it was.

Another time, I learned the same lesson in a different way. As part of an ecumenical team, I was helping to give charismatic retreats among Roman Catholic priests and sisters in various cities in South America. We took turns preaching. When it was my turn, the other leaders encouraged me to pray, open the Bible randomly (supposedly under divine guidance), and then preach on what passage my eyes fell on first. So I closed my eyes, prayed, and then opened the Bible. I may be the only person ever to try this who opened the Bible to the two blank pages between the Testaments! Either that was a message not to preach at all or it was a message to preach on the subject of my choice. But surely, in either case, it reinforced the fact that silence was a gift of the Spirit and should be practiced as a spiritual discipline.

However, for others, for introverts, the problem is the opposite. They have the challenge to speak up, especially in a group the size of most classes. Many students will tell me that they have set as a goal to speak up at least once in each of their class periods. Their silence does not mean they are not engaged, but they realize how important it is for their learning and involvement that they express themselves verbally in class. And for silent students to speak affects the whole class in such positive ways. It is like a child’s first speech. There is anticipation. And when the child speaks, it changes the child, and it changes and enlivens those around the child. When quiet adults speak, the whole dynamics of the situation often changes—for the benefit of everyone.

Often, the students who tend to be quiet have the most interesting comments to make. Sometimes, after a discussion has been underway for awhile, I will say, “Now I want only those who have not yet spoken to share their thoughts.” Sometimes there is considerable silence before they begin to speak up. However, it is then that we all learn the true wisdom of the group as a whole. Some of the most profound insights have come when I have been patient and when I have insisted, even after much silence, that everyone be given an opportunity to speak.

In the end, there are no methods or strategies or techniques for incorporating silence into the learning process. We cannot repeat an exercise of silence and expect the same results

from the same group or from another group. We need to be creative about this. And we need to be prepared to improvise on the spot when it seems judicious to give students the chance to reflect and feel in meditative quietness. It almost needs to be part of a flow in the process of learning and as a response to what is happening. How to work silence in the classroom may not be plan-able, but that it should be an integral dimension of the educational experience seems quite clear.