

Finding Silence in a Noisy World

by Patricia Ullman

The world is noisier than it used to be. Sounds of people, vehicles, muzak, television, and gadgets bombard our ears at all hours of the day and often into the night. If we listen more closely, we may be able to hear the nearly constant hum of electricity, heaters and air conditioners, and all of the subtle ambient sounds that are new to the last century or so. Sitting in the cafe where I'm writing this, there is an orchestra of human conversation, some unidentifiable background music playing, beeps of a cellphone, thumps and dings from the cashier stations, occasional loud car or truck noises outside—the familiar medley of urban activity. Even when we take a walk in the woods we may be listening to music or podcasts. A recent statistic about Americans says that we watch an average of a little over five hours of t.v. per day. A 2015 study by Common Sense Media found that teens spend more than one-third of their awake time using media such as on-line video or music, nearly nine hours a day on average.

We all get the idea—lots of noise, lots of distraction.

Florence Nightingale, who is regarded as the founder of modern nursing, is quoted as saying that unnecessary noise “is the most cruel abuse of care which can be inflicted on either the sick or the well.” I was reminded of this recently when my mother was in the hospital, constantly disturbed by beeping machines, loud voices, and televisions. She was so exhausted by the noise that it was difficult for her to heal enough to be able to come home, and she was relieved to finally escape to her own quiet refuge and get some rest.

I was talking about the importance of silence the other day with one of my meditation clients. She thought it made a lot of sense but wondered what constitutes actual “silence.” She said that her most peaceful and rejuvenating times are her early morning walks, when she tries not to listen to music but just walk, hear the birds, smell the smells, and so on. I loved her question, which made me think and in some way inspired me to write this article. One reply to her question is a quote from a 2011 World Health Organization (WHO) study, which describes the positive side of the perception of sounds to be “...of major importance for human well-being. Communication through speech, sounds from playing children, music, natural sounds in parklands, parks and gardens are all examples of sounds essential for satisfaction in every day life.”

The WHO report goes on to describe the negative aspects of noise in great detail, defining the adverse effect of noise as “any temporary or long-term lowering of the physical, psychological or social functioning of humans or human organs.” In addition to the more

obvious adverse effects of noise-induced hearing impairment and interference with speech communication, environmental noise is shown to contribute to disturbance of rest and sleep; psychophysiological, mental-health and performance effects; effects on residential behaviour and annoyance; and interference with intended activities.

Think about it: noise pollution is used as a form of torture that has been documented as far back as the ancient Aztecs. In recent times, incessant music has been used to break down prisoners psychologically in situations that include the Iraq war and the Waco, Texas siege, as well as countless other situations where the intention is to erode the subjects' resistance. One of the terms for this use of music and sound is "futility music." It basically drives people crazy.

So, in some small way you might say we are torturing ourselves by not making more of an effort to include silence in our daily lives. Our mental and physical health suffer in various ways, undermining our general sense of well-being. So what can we do about it?

Like the client's experience I mentioned above, taking walks without bringing along our electronic devices is shown to help our brains refocus and have better memory consolidation. One particularly interesting study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (<http://www.pnas.org/content/112/28/8567>) found that, "Participants who went on a 90-min walk through a natural environment reported lower levels of rumination and showed reduced neural activity in an area of the brain linked to risk for mental illness compared with those who walked through an urban environment. These results suggest that accessible natural areas may be vital for mental health in our rapidly urbanizing world." ("Rumination" is defined here as "repetitive thought focused on negative aspects of the self.")

There are many studies showing the benefits of immersing ourselves in nature, or even just taking time to gaze at nature from a window, if we're not able to go out. Various studies have shown the positive effect of windows in hospital rooms, for example. A 2018 study in the *International Journal of Gerontology* found that "... ICU rooms with windows are associated with shorter ICU stays than those without windows, suggesting that windows may be important in medical ICU rooms." Another related study found that patients in rooms with windows looking out on a natural scene had shorter postoperative stays, received fewer "negative evaluative comments in nurses' notes," and didn't need as much pain medication as patients whose windows faced the side of a brick building.

Similarly, there are many studies suggesting that school children benefit from having lessons in nature, or even from taking a walk outside before or between lessons. A 2018 article in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* described studies suggesting that "spending time in relatively natural outdoor settings has a number of positive, immediate aftereffects on individuals, each of which is likely to enhance classroom engagement."

So, consciously disengaging from technology, traffic, and talking (what I've dubbed the three "T's") and experiencing the natural world, in whatever way is possible for us, brings many benefits to our brains, our bodies, and our spirits.

We can add a fourth "T" to the list: Thinking. Obviously, thinking is fundamental to our humanness, necessary for understanding our world, making decisions, creating, analyzing, and so much more. But we can be so caught up in and driven by our thoughts that it's easy to forget the intimate depths of experience we've known in moments of silence—those moments when something suddenly catches our attention and there is nothing but 'ah,' openness, complete connection. It doesn't matter what that something is: a ray of sunlight striking our face, the voice of a loved one, the smell of manure, a sharp pain. At that moment, there is no thought, no judgment, no storyline, just the pure, silent experience of That, whatever it is. We tend to remember those vivid experiences, because in those moments we feel completely and perfectly present and alive. Then our thinking mind kicks back in with its commentary, and we're back on the surface again. Deliberately creating opportunities for more peace and quiet, like walking in nature, or eating a quiet meal, or gazing out of a window, puts us in touch with our non-ruminative, non-discursive mind, which helps to reduce anxiety and increase awareness of our present situation.

Mindfulness-awareness meditation works directly with our thinking mind. In this ordinary and important practice, we set up a situation in which we simply observe our thoughts coming and going, neither pushing them away nor engaging with them. Metaphorically, we take time to step out of traffic and sit in the nourishing forest, enjoying the sounds and smells in a vivid and simple way. When we intentionally take the time to stop, breathe, observe our mind and body, and let go of our thoughts, we experience an outer and inner stillness that helps us to remember where and who we are. This simple but powerful practice refocuses our attention back from our spinning-out thoughts and emotions to an experience of simple presence and engagement.

The benefits of this are countless, and are encapsulated by the meaning of some of the many Tibetan words for meditation: calm abiding, resting the mind, stabilizing the mind, strengthening the mind, getting used to what it feels like to be simply and fully present, clarity, awakened heart/mind, development of insight. From neuroscience and behavioral science perspectives, mindfulness meditation changes the size and shape of our brains in ways that increase our ability to pay attention, learn, and remember (among other things), while decreasing areas of the brain that cause stress and related health factors like high blood pressure, too much adrenalin and cortisol, insomnia, anxiety, and so on.

The last study that I'll mention is a 2013 study on mice (and an amazing parallel study on fungus) published in the journal *Brain Structure and Function* (March 2015, Volume 220, Issue 2, pp 1221–1228). The first experiment divided mice into four groups, three of which heard

different kinds of sounds while the fourth remained in silence as a control group. To the researchers' surprise, the control group developed more brain cells in the hippocampus, the part of the brain associated with learning, memory, and emotional regulation. These findings support what is called attention restoration theory, where environments with lower levels of sensory input allow the brain to recover some of its cognitive abilities. In other words, when exposed to silence, the brain can restore some of what has been lost through exposure to excess noise.

The study on fungus was conducted by a middle school student who I meet with each week for a meditation session. I was talking with him about silence, gadgets, the mouse study, etc., when he amazed me by describing a similar experiment he conducted this year on fungus, entitled "The Effect of Music on Blue Oyster Mycelium Growth." When he told me that he had a similar result with his silent control group, I asked him if I could include this in my article. With the caveat that his study didn't have strict lab conditions, he kindly gave me his permission.

In a nutshell, he was interested in discovering how to maximize fungi growth because of their crucial contribution to biotechnology and the ecosystem. He tested the effects of three genres of music on the mycelium growth, with a fourth group acting as a control. Based on previous studies on music and plant growth, he expected classical music to have the greatest effect on the growth of the fungi. To his surprise, the control group, which was exposed to no audio, experienced the greatest growth. This led him to the conclusion that, with today's multi-purpose demand for mushrooms, mushroom farmers could be well-advised to grow their mushrooms "in an area with as little sound pollution as possible."

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There is a scene I've always remembered from the Martin Scorsese film *Kundun*, which is about the life of the young Dalai Lama. This movie captures the feeling of the culture of profound silence and the intense monastic tradition that still pervaded Tibet as the Dalai Lama was growing up. In this particular scene, the teenage monk is in his formerly quiet study room in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, the capital city where he lives. Loudspeakers have been placed all over the city by the Chinese communist invaders, constantly spewing propaganda at all hours of the day and night. As the sound of a Chinese patriotic song invades the sacrosanct space where the Dalai Lama is reading, he says softly, "They have taken away our silence."

Find the silent spaces in your life. Walk in nature without technology, eat a quiet meal alone, take time to consciously pause and rest in silence (preferably while gazing from a window!). Turn your phone and other devices completely off at night.

More systemically, learn to practice mindfulness-awareness meditation. This will not only

put you in touch with outer and inner silence, but it will also help you to remember to notice sound and silence during your day. It will help make it more of a habit to pause, breathe, and let your mind rest for a few moments or more. Then, you will return to work and other activities feeling a little more fresh and clear. And you will be more in touch with the silence within which all of the sounds are happening. The benefits are enormous.

If you want to explore the practice of silence further, consider group meditation sessions or retreats. You will return with a different outlook on what's going on around you, and how you interact with it. You can also consider doing a workshop on mindful speech, which includes awareness of silence.

Herman Melville said, "All profound things, and emotions of things, are preceded and attended by silence." Life is precious and profound. Let it be attended and enriched by silence.

Patricia is the author of *Eight Steps to an Authentic Life: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Times*, available on amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com. Contact her for information on workshops, retreats, family meditation in your home, mindfulness sessions in your workplace, and individual or group mindfulness sessions.

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