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THE FEAR OF SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Summary

From a philosophical standpoint, silence is characterised as both a positive and a negative phenomenon of complex nature. The history of interest in silence, as an essential spiritual discipline is long and often involves the spiritual discipline of solitude and they are sometimes viewed as one. The focus of this paper is the place of silence and solitude in practiced spirituality and the importance of dedicating time for silence in order to open our inner being to God's grace and an authentic life. However, deliberate silence can be dangerous because it opens a real possibility of facing who we are before God, so consequentially leading to realisations of whom and what are our gods, idols and totems. The fear of loneliness and emptiness, awareness of limitations and death, and other unappealing realities are a part of what we may encounter in silence.

Key words: *silence, solitude, fear, spiritual discipline*

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that in today's world, in which the life of a woman or a man seems to have become a set of tasks, speaking of silence is almost countercultural. It is generally considered that the most important aspiration in contemporary life is to be effective in our daily routines and activities so that silence is usually perceived as a lack of something, a kind of emptiness. Almost chronic business or distractedness became a way of life for many modern people. Hence, for the most part we don't see the place for silence among the realities of life and we find little time for it. Actually we recognize no use for it. Furthermore, the silence that we will talk about here is connected to solitude, and an observer would easily conclude that in contemporary world we lost the touch with solitude and silence, as an essential condition for the encounter with our inner reality and the Reality. Solitude is a phenomenon quite strange to modern people. The very word is often scary because it is associated, sometimes even mistaken for aloneness in a sense of loneliness.

Given the unremitting exposure of contemporary life to various voices, information, people, events – not to mention the extraordinary amount of noise and

nonsense, one would expect that silence and solitude would be goods most desired by modern people. But, truth to be told, most modern life is a studied attempt to avoid ever being alone. Alone in silence we are forced to face with the reality of the inner world (Kelsey, 1976: 70). Silence and solitude are considered enemies that remind us of our loneliness and must be fought against. Perhaps we could say that it seems that silence appears to be so “loud” that it must be “silenced” by sounds. We have many devices available for our battle against silence. There are computers, laptops, smart phones with the internet and countless applications, television and numerous other machines and gadgets that serve to help us entertain ourselves always and everywhere. We could say that even newspapers, magazines and even sleeping pills are there to “protect” us from this “dangerous” silence that waits and threatens us.

Living in the first half of twentieth century Max Picard noticed this phenomenon of “noising” on the example of the radio, and he wrote a chapter *The Radio* in his *World of Silence*. Here, in the context of his praise for silence, he writes that a whole world of radio is based upon the noise. “Radio is a machine producing absolute verbal noise. The content hardly matters any longer, the production of noise is the main concern. It is as though words were being ground down by radio, transformed into an amorphous mass. There is no silence in radio or true words either, for a situation has been created in which silence is no longer missed and words are no longer missed either, in which words are ground down to a mere radio-noise, in which everything is present and at the same time nothing is present. Radio has occupied the whole space of silence. There is no silence any longer... And the type of man formed by the constant influence of this noise is the same: formless, undecided inwardly and externally, with no definite limits and standards... It is as if men were afraid that silence might break out somewhere and destroy the noise of radio. And so all space is filled with noise, it dares not be silent, it is constantly on guard against silence... Everything on the radio is constantly on the move, in a state of perpetual flux, nothing is concretely fixed and stable. Past, present and future are all mixed up together in one long drawn-out noise. Therefore the noise of radio destroys man. Man who should confront objects concretely is deprived of the power of present concrete experience” (Picard, 1988: 18-19).

One can argue with Picard about these words that taken out of context, can seem pointed against technological achievements. However, this would be a good place to notice that radio, television set as well as our contemporary smart devices are not enemies of the silence by themselves, but it is the misuse and abuse of

them that makes them harmful distractions from authentic human life. It is putting them in the place of a daily companion in one's life, the place that doesn't belong to them, that makes these easy and popular means of distractions and entertaining. Anything that we use to keep us away from spiritual reality does spiritual harm.

Obviously to allow silence to enter into our life we need to disconnect, to hang up, to turn off, to unhook. That means that we have to sacrifice some "obviously necessary things of the modern living." In a very real sense the way of silence and solitude, the way of contemplation, is a way of detachment. Precisely because of all this our world needs more words about silence. Taking time to be still and silent is something that people of today are thirsty for in our age of speed, the internet and smart phones. Our time and place need us not to be silent about silence.

Silence seems like a useless phenomenon. It doesn't fit into the world of profit and utility; it simply *is*. All the other great phenomena have been appropriated by the world of profit and utility. Even the space between heaven and earth has become a mere cavity for airplanes to travel through. Water and fire have been absorbed by the world of profit, losing their independence, but noticed only insofar as they are parts of this world. However, silence stands outside the world of profit and utility; it cannot be exploited for profit; you cannot get anything out of it. It is 'unproductive'. Therefore it is regarded as valueless. Yet, Picard calls silence "the holy uselessness" (Picard, 1988: 18-19).

Silence has its independent existence. We are aware of it not as only as of part of our visible world. Silence should be recognized as a part of eternity. Picard would say that one cannot imagine a world where there is nothing but language and speech, but one can imagine a world where there is nothing but silence. In no other phenomenon distance and nearness, range and immediacy, the all-embracing and the particular are as united as they are in silence (Picard, 1988: 17-18).

"When silence is present, it is as though nothing but silence had ever existed. Where silence is, man is observed by silence. Silence looks at man more than man looks at silence. Man does not put silence to the test; silence puts man to the test" (Picard, 1988: 17).

Silence tests both religious and irreligious people. Nothing presses us with the hardest questions as loud as silence does. Encountering silence asks for courage. More precisely, the encounter with silence brings us closer to encounter with our inner selves before God. Maybe this makes understandable why our fallen nature instinctively avoids silence. Men and women, especially in contemporary

times, live their lives in cycles of busyness and entertainment and keep themselves constantly occupied and therefore distracted.

Silence frightens us because it leaves room for all kinds of unknowns to come upon us. In the silence and solitude, we are often challenged to give up the illusion of control, to “let go”, to rethink our choices and values. Feelings of loneliness and emptiness, awareness of limitations and death, these and other unappealing realities may try to get our attention when there is nothing but silence.

In search for spiritual, the cycle of busyness and entertaining must be broken. Silence should be allowed to enter our lives. Unless we take time to be silent, time to return inward we distance ourselves from God. “We seldom find God in a hurry, or in bits and pieces of reflection on a day of busy activity” (Kelsey, 1976: 83). If we keep ourselves busy all the time with outer things, we simply keep ourselves outside the relationship with the Reality. Dr. Carl Gustav Jung once remarked, “Hurry is not of the Devil; it *is* the Devil” (Ibid, 83).

It is not news that for fruitful spiritual life one has to devote her or his time for search for “daily bread” from God. This is not only essential for the person’s relationship with God but with others as well. If we don’t take time from our busy schedules for being still and silent, so we can hear the most important voice, we cannot grow the seed of eternity in our heart. Morton Kelsey explains essentiality of taking time to be silent, arguing that an efficiently busy life that keeps us occupied without being harried and keeps our attention entirely on interesting outer things, is probably more potentially destructive of spiritual growth than debauchery or alcohol or hard drugs. People who experienced these indulgences know that comfort that comes from them doesn’t last long and is most likely to leave a person in worse condition than he, or she was. Usually they at least lead to emptiness, sometimes to despair. In this state of spirit one is painfully aware of the void that cannot be fulfilled by any of our earthly pleasures. Sometimes this state leads to letting go of ones trying to control and direct his or her life by himself or herself and then they became available to be found by God (Kelsey, 1976: 83).

On the other hand, an efficient and busy life that is spent continuously in good works can “shield an individual most effectively from any plunge into the depth where God dwells” (Kelsey, 1976: 83). This is why it is essential for a person to find time to “sit still” and to “do nothing”. There is a saying among Quakers who recognize well the power of silence: Don’t just do something. Sit there.

Christian philosopher Pascal insightfully remarks that he had discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact: that they are unable to stay quietly in their own room.

It is interesting to notice that the fear of silence and solitude often makes people develop skills of keeping themselves busy. It does not matter how much or how little they have to do. Time is actually more elastic than we usually think. Of course there are limits to its elasticity. However, one must be careful in a full life that important parts of it are not shortchanged, time does expand and contract according to what we do with it (Kelsey, 1976: 83).

People fill their time with various jobs and tasks. Businessmen, in their quest for success in their careers, work long hours on the projects that normally two or three people should work on. But, this should not be mistaken: it is not the profession that leads one to not having time for spiritual. People have a way of keeping their time filled with the job at hand, no matter what it contains. One can stretch ones time for regular house tasks. We can meet people cleaning and rearranging things in their houses continuously. It is obvious that this everyday all day long housework is not for the sake of the clean and neat house, but to keep one occupied. As we mentioned in a similar way, it is not the task that makes one loose the silent atmosphere. One can clean the house in silence, caring about the space for oneself and others, and not compulsively work on creating a sterile environment.

To avoid the encounter with silence one can “stretch the time” to shop the whole day or to just watch the television. Most of times people combine these tasks or distractions, that keep our mind in false security and away from facing silence as we understand it to be a path to insecurity and loneliness.

We sometimes think that we really do not have time to stop. It looks as if time has an inexorable power over us that keep us from stopping and stepping out of it. We get caught up in clock time and its rushing moments that we forget the real importance and value of time. We forget that time has another dimension. That, other dimension of time is the eternal meaning of each moment (Kelsey, 1976: 83). We could actually say that rushing through it, we are actually losing the real appreciation of the time that is given to us. It is not too much to say that this stands most for today’s world. The cycles of continual business that alters with indulgence is actually a widely spread way of escapism today.

The fear of silence leads us to keep busy with not only various ways to change our moods and even feelings by technological devices, but also using the intellectual, and even spiritual tools that help us escape the unpleasant “silent place within”. The list of such escapes is virtually endless. It became an axiom that the goal of life of an individual is to feel good. Everything in modern society is subjected to this goal. In a way, it could be even said that people started to feel a kind of obligation to feel happy. Wisdom of the world teaches us that happiness

is to be found in pleasure. However the principle of pleasure can never give what it promises – it can never satiate the thirst of a human soul.

The feelings of “happiness” that pleasure can bring, no matter how strong or elevated they could be, can never satiate, but can only conceal the real thirst of man’s soul, the thirst for God. These feelings can only repress the awareness about our inner discontent, but they cannot eliminate it. Not to be misunderstood, pleasure is not bad in itself and the ability for it is a gift from God, but the problem is that in common philosophy of today’s life it took the place that doesn’t belong to it by its nature. Pleasure, then, becomes a strange tyrant, forcing people to turn to various compulsions and techniques so they could feel better about themselves and their own “noisy” reality.

Unsatisfiable desires for happiness without obedience to God are the roots of all vices, and their power over people is based on self-deception. Deception of everlasting attempts to satisfy our goals, which would make us feel good in fact, keeps us busy and concentrated on the things of this world. This is why different kinds of “noise” we read as something desirable, even necessary, important for the meaning of our existence and our self-confirmation. Silence, where we face God, reveals that our achievements, goals and even happiness are not as important as they seem in the noise of everyday life. In solitude, facing silence we meet the opportunity to realize our condition, and the need for the repentance and salvation.

Dedicating time and seeking silence is an active step to break inertia of our nature and that is why it is not easy. Silence discovers and reveals our self-deceptions, makes us vulnerable and leaves us with nothing but our helplessness. Our unholy nature refuses silence and demands from us to keep ourselves busy.

There are also their “inner monsters” within most of people that they can encounter in the time of silence and solitude. It is a difficult experience to deal with them and people are trying to avoid that. The fear of silence is very relatable and understandable because of this. However, it is an illusion that by not dealing with them, maybe somehow they will disappear. And we keep ourselves busy, so we don’t have to deal with them. We try to avoid silence that could bring those monsters and leave us alone and without control. We are usually not aware that if they are there and we don’t deal with them, they “usually seize upon and raise hob with our families and children and friends, the very ones who least deserve their ‘dirty tricks’. In fact, if we stay busy enough, we do not even notice the mischief our inner demons are doing to others” (Kelsey, 1976: 83). It is important to realize that by not taking time to be silent, in solitude where we open ourselves to God, we harm not only our spirit, but also others, people we have relationship with.

There is a true story that is a good illustration of this in one episode from the practice of Carl Gustav Jung: A clergyman came to visit Dr. Jung asking him for help. He was on the edge of breaking down. He had a fourteen-hour working schedule, and his nerves played out. His hands even trembled. Jung began with asking if he wanted to get well, and minister indignantly responded that it is obvious that he did. So Jung gave him simple, but surprising prescription. Minister was supposed to reduce his work to eight hours a day. He was also supposed to sleep eight hours. He was to spend the remaining hours all alone, in quiet of his study. The minister agreed to try this and he hoped that his tension would be relieved.

He started immediately and on that day he worked only eight hours. He explained to his wife what he was going to do, and he went into his study and closed the door. He stayed there for several hours. He played a few Chopin Etudes and finished a novel by Hermann Hesse. The next day he spent his day similarly. He slept for eight hours, he worked for eight hours, and remaining hours he spent in his study, except that in the evening he read Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and played a piece by Mozart. So, the following morning he went to see Dr. Jung. He was complaining that he was just as bad off; and obviously he was.

Jung asked questions and carefully inquired about how he had followed instructions and heard what he had done. "But you didn't understand!" Dr. Jung told him. "I didn't want you to spend time with Hermann Hesse or Thomas Mann, or even Mozart or Chopin. I wanted you to be all alone with yourself." At this the minister looked terrified and gasped, "Oh, but I can't think of any worse company!" To this Dr. Jung replied: "And yet this is the self you inflict on other people fourteen hours a day" (This story is retold in Kelsey, *Other side of silence*, p. 84).

We should be aware of inflicting on others the company we ourselves do not enjoy. This story is in fact story of so many of us. It is true that most people don't know how to enjoy being alone. We are either afraid that we will find a big emptiness within us, or maybe something disturbing, maybe even demonic. So we try not to look there.

There is a popular opinion that silence and solitude are something that only monks do and that they decided to encounter these spiritual battles with inner selves, but that it is not the calling of every one of us. Does the aspect of silence in solitude that frightens us warn against some real dangers? Is the path of silence and solitude absolutely necessary for each and every human to experience a true spiritual life? Is that the only way for a person to encounter God?

In his book *Solitude, A Neglected Path to God*, Christopher Moore notices that if we fear of being alone, unless we can name this fear and decide for our-

selves whether it is justified, we will be unlikely to claim the solitude we need and to receive the gifts it can give us... (Moore, 2001: 19).

Our fear of solitude and silence comes from many sources.

Ester Schaler Buchholz suggests that our fear of solitude may be rooted in childhood fears of abandonment and neglect: as infants we cannot provide for ourselves the basic needs for food, warmth or relief from distress. Some parents punish their children by isolating them, sending them to their room, etc. In this way solitude becomes undesired and undesirable for a developing person. Society adds its negative attitude to solitude and to those who seek it out. Buchholz writes: "Invariably, alone time meets with social questioning if not censure... People associate going to be alone with unnecessary risk taking and antisocial pursuits (Buchholz, 1997: 29).

For some there is a fear of boredom associated with fear of solitude. We should realize that problem is not the solitude, but the lack of inner resources to deal creatively with silence and solitude and to receive their benefits (Moore, 2001: 22). Boredom can be devastating because this loss-of-soul feeling reveals that there is no support at all for meaning or value or love (Kelsey, 1976: 106).

It is important to mention that fear of death may contribute to our fear of solitude. Moore writes that unconsciously we fear that time when we will be ultimately alone and ultimately solitary (Moore, p. 22-23, In this context Moore notices that although faith tells us that we will be a part of community, the "communion of saints", that this does not entirely assuage our fear of death and therefore, by extension, our fear of solitude).

We seem to be ambivalent towards silence and solitude. They attract us, and yet we fear them. Even the Bible, as well as the rich tradition of the Church, reflects this ambivalence. This was already discussed in more detail in previous sections, but we will here just mention that both recognize their danger, but at the same time affirm their potential. The wilderness is certainly a place of danger, but it is also a place for transformation.

Solitude is not loneliness. Contrary to loneliness, we enter solitude willingly. We choose it. Loneliness is not chosen. It is however, a complex emotion. It doesn't have to be inflicted by physical absence of others. A person can be very lonely in a crowd. On the other hand, a person in solitude may not feel lonely at all. As the silence and word, so the solitude and community are not mutually exclusive. In a healthy, spiritual, authentic life they should alter and be interconnected.

It is important to remind ourselves of wisdom to keep ourselves close to Jesus. We can discover when we are alone with ourselves that in fact we are with

Him. Being alone with Jesus is the marvel. It is the adventure that we are called to. That is the basis for the social life we authentically desire. The greatest need of the soul is to be in contact with the true self which is in contact with Jesus. At this point the true self remains a separate self, yet becomes one with its Lover, Jesus Christ the Lord. In this way we can view silence and solitude as disciplines interconnected and interdependent with the need for building an authentic community of love, a collective of people who are vulnerable but brave to grow in love and spirit, persons who support each other to be courageous and face the fears of silence and solitude that give birth to compassion and integrity.

Having time for silence and solitude in one's life does not imply individualistic and self-centered existence, but on the contrary if we approach it with humbleness it teaches us compassion and connects us with other human beings. It makes us more true to ourselves and others. By contrast, while many feel solitude deprived, people in our society are increasingly lonely. Many people today are tending to be alone in their work and other various areas of their lives. There is a phenomenon of modern Western society that people are almost constantly alone, being sufficient to themselves, of course with the help of devices and methods that help them escape feelings of loneliness. This is far away from silence and solitude we are talking about. Society that forgot the values of silence and solitude ironically, produces loners, and supports extreme individualism, could we even say social autism? Probably this is the very reason why solitude is arguably of greater danger to us today than it was in previous generations. Our secular world has no tradition of the creative use of silence and solitude as spiritual disciplines. Hence, it is important to get educated about the value of solitude and silence as a spiritual discipline that protects from the individualistic philosophy of our time.

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STRAH OD TIŠINE I SAMOVANJA**Rezime**

U filozofskom smislu tišina je i pozitivan i negativan fenomen kompleksne prirode. Istorija interesovanja za tišinu kao esencijalno važnu duhovnu disciplinu je duga i često povezana sa duhovnom disciplinom samovanja, tako da su ove dve discipline ponekad posmatrane kao jedna. U fokusu ovog rada je mesto tišine i samovanja u praktikovanoj duhovnosti i važnost odvajanja vremena za tišinu da bi naše unutrašnje biće otvorili za Božju blagodat i autentičan život. Međutim, usredsređena tišina može biti opasna jer otvara mogućnost upitnog suočavanja s time ko smo mi pred Bogom te posledično može otkriti ko i šta su naši bogovi, idoli i totemi. Strah od osećanja usamljenosti i ispraznosti, svest o ograničenosti i smrti, kao i druge neprivlačne realnosti su deo onoga sa čime se možemo suočiti u tišini.

Ključne reči: *tišina, samoća, strah, duhovna disciplina*