

Words from Silence *-S. Thomas Berg*

There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. —Psalm 19:3-4

*Elected Silence, sing to me
And beat upon my whorled ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be
The music that I care to bear. —Gerard Manley Hopkins from The Habit of Perfection*

I have occasion to go to Ephphatha House. It's a small Catholic community in the country. There is a chapel there I like to sit in. Here I find silence. Thick silence. Silence that leaves my ears ringing. It's the kind of silence that detoxifies rather than brings relief. Perhaps one day it will bring relief but for now this silence feels too much like loss and death. But these times in the *desert* are what I need and so I come back, again and again.

In our age with its backdrop of white noise most of us know that we need time for silence. And yet half-consciously we continue to arrange things to keep us insulated from silence. We live uncomfortably with the dissonance and yet we are uneasy with any lull.

The silence that we fear is not just the absence of the audible. We fear true silence because it begins with chilling emptiness and progresses to loud inner moiling. So why would we put ourselves through this? Because by grace as we battle through the barriers and suffer the small deaths, and then as we finally lay listening with every fiber of our being, we hear the soft footfalls of God approaching.

It was this way for me. During the late spring of 2000, in my one-man tent perched a couple hundred feet above the Atlantic, somewhere on the Cornwall coast I lay listening to what I knew from reading the Psalms, was the speech of God. It came to me beyond the West in a holy mix of surf and wind. And then it came in the calm. And with it I felt the rhythm of wild longings. No escape, I could only press myself down further in my sleeping bag and wait and listen. I heard no words but with speech as clear and cogent as ice water I heard the invitation to enter into silence. This silence, so vast, brought eternity near. This silence made endless space for God to speak, and I could not help but listen.

Writers are first of all listeners. Silence is about listening. Reflective silence sharpens and focuses our attention and helps us see and penetrate the darkness and the incoherence of our own souls. As Christian writers we need to cultivate a habit of silence to foster our interior integrity. Without this we end up writing from our egos. It is said of Simone Weil

that her writing and her life are one document. In our clearer moments we know that our words can only be as good as our lives. And it is our lives, through our words, that we offer a numb and needy world.

In order for this reflective silence to become our companion we need first of all to find quiet places. The Monastics knew well that external parameters clear space for internal change. These still places once found will become our places of axis and access. And here we will return again and again until gradually the inner noise subsides. We probably won't go to the extent of Gerard Manly Hopkins who entered the Jesuit order and began a seven-year silence. And yet that silence was broken by his greatest poem, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, a deeply meditated and trenchant portrayal of Christian faith. In any case this affirms for us Henri Nouwen's insight that, "Silence gives strength and fruitfulness to the word." Silence works and prepares the soil that gives life to words. Words born of silence speak with grace and authority. The common word sings when borne (again) by silence.

In the end true silence is not *for* better writing, in fact it is not *for* anything. In the end silence is our gift, and yes, our sacrifice to God because in silence we give ourselves in humility to God. And it is for this reason that we return to the silence of an Ephphatha House chapel. We wait, and we open ourselves to the operations of God. Better writing is simply a happy by-product of the real work of silence.

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Ephphatha House Chapel