

Silence

The silence we value is a deep stillness of heart and mind. Friends dwell in silence on many occasions. We provide for silence at weddings and memorials and at meetings for the transaction of business. Committee meetings open with silence, and silent grace quiets the heart before meals. These shared silences foster unity and charity among us.

Daily retirement for a period of quiet can give an individual a sense of peace and self-control. Another form of silence, described by Friends as an “opportunity,” bears a resemblance to a brief meeting for worship. It arises either by prearrangement or spontaneously, and may occur during visits to the homes of Friends or in unusual circumstances, such as on a park bench or in a hospital waiting room.

Similarly, a pause may occur during general conversation, when we are drawn into stillness until words emerge again from a place of deep refreshment. Active silence gathers us to walk in nature, or to perform quiet tasks together such as needlework, devotional reading, leaf-raking, or washing dishes. We are enriched by those among us whose lives embody and dwell in silence.

Silent retreats are times set aside for the refreshment of the spirit. Some Friends set aside an occasional weekend for an individual retreat in silence and solitude, for example when carrying weighty responsibilities. They may spend the time in prayer and reflection, visiting a garden or nature preserve, or yielding to the call to rest in quiet. Regular times for silence and retreat seem essential for spiritual growth.

Organized silent retreats call Friends together for a period of time. The retreat provides an occasion for silence, worship, and prayer away from the atmosphere in which committees and business are usually conducted. The Friends come with the expectation that in waiting together we may be gathered in worship in a way different from private meditation or a quiet weekend in the country. This more sustained period of retirement shared with other Friends can deepen our individual spiritual lives and the life we share together.

Quotations

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

1 Kings 19:11b-12

Be still, and know that I am God!

Psalm 46:10

Be still in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God, whereby thou wilt receive his strength and power from whence life comes, to allay all tempests, against blusterings and storms. That is it which molds into patience, into innocency, into soberness, into stillness, into stayedness, into quietness, up to God, with his power.

George Fox, 1658

Remember [that] it is a still voice that speaks to us in this day, and that it is not to be heard in the noises and hurries of the mind.

William Penn, 1691

We were taught by renewed experience to labor for an inward stillness, at no time to seek for words, but to live in the spirit of Truth, and utter that to the people which Truth opened in us.

John Woolman, 1747

Silence is the inaudible echo of the voices of God which is heard with the ears of the heart. It is not simply the absence of speech but a state of being. It is a universal language that speaks and comprehends all, contains all languages and all accents, tolerates and absorbs all. The paradox of the silence is that one can never say enough about it since it is inexhaustible by its very nature. ... Silence enables us to escape the prison of words. ... You may step into the pool of silence denuded and in pain but you will emerge from it restored in truth and peace.

Peter and Carole Fingesten, 1987

Might part of the vocation of the Society of Friends be to keep silence alive as a service for the world?

Kathryn Damiano, 2000

We need a vocabulary to describe the different textures of our corporate silence so we can better appreciate the experience. When we focus on the vocal ministry to evaluate the quality of our corporate worship we have looked to the fruits and missed the source. Attending to the quality of the corporate silence can disentangle the personal issues that arise in reacting to the vocal ministry of another. Sometimes our experience in the silence might be fragmented, distracted, or scattered, with our thoughts and focus jumping from one thing to another. Other times it might be a deep stillness where many of those present feel held to attention, perhaps like what happens in a yoga asana where the breath moves through us while the mind is quiet. Practice can help us come to that place of deep, focused attentiveness more readily.

Debbie Humphries, 2009

The discipline of silence and openness must be practiced over and over, day after day, week after week, alone and with others. The Light nurtures a Seed in us but to grow, that Seed must be repeatedly exposed to the Light.

Robert Griswold, 2010

Advices & Queries – Silence

All of us need to find a way into silence which allows us to deepen our awareness of the Divine and to find the inward source of our strength.

Amid the busyness of daily living, we seek to return to the stillness which grounds us.

We value silence, not as an end but as a means toward the end, which is communication with the Divine and fellowship with one another.

We must not remain silent when something is wrong, or when we are led to speak out.

Seek to be formed by a practice of silence, as a foundation for a mindful life.

- Do we set aside times of quiet for openness to the Spirit?
- How do we bring stillness into our daily lives?
- Do we seek to be formed by a living silence? How are our lives shaped by the practice of stillness?