

Entering silence

by Harry Froklage

Two days of silence. Well, not two whole days. Only forty-four hours, actually, sixteen spent sleeping—surely I can talk in my sleep?—and then meetings with my spiritual director during which we can hardly be expected to communicate telepathically. And surely we won't be required to mime our responses during Mass...

A whirl of such anxieties anticipated my first weekend-long directed prayer retreat. It would take place in late September at the Guelph Centre of Spirituality, a renowned Jesuit retreat house with a growing connection to St. Jerome's. I had made arrangements for eight of the University's graduates and friends to participate, with the secret hope that one place would remain for me.

One did. The anxieties began.

My two teenage sons were unequivocal: "You'll never do it." They know me to be compulsively verbal. But Michael Higgins, our president, had been on retreat and recommended the experience wholeheartedly. No one who knows him would describe Michael as "taciturn." If he could master silence, so can I.

The restfulness of the place draws me in even as I arrive. The greetings are muted but warm. I learn my room number, the times of gathering, the name of my spiritual director, Sister Perpetua.

The rooms are plain, but hardly Spartan. In the lounge, rows of armchairs face, not each other, but a window and the garden and fields beyond. The furnishings possess a haphazard charm: random sheets and pillowcases; varied patterns of dinnerware. My favourite piece of serendipitous crockery is emblazoned "The Sands Casino, Las Vegas."

The forty participants and their spiritual directors, drawn from many denominational backgrounds, gather in the white-walled chapel with its beautifully abstract rendering of the Last Supper, all mauves and teal, gold and black. Fr. Phil Shano, the Centre's director, welcomes us warmly. He clarifies that silence is not a rule to be observed, but a gift given to each other and to ourselves.

And so it is. After meeting with our spiritual directors, we lapse immediately into quiet thought. We are liberated from social expectation. We can be deeply private and alone even with others sitting next to us in the darkened lounge or preparing hot chocolate beside us in the dining hall. We are neither solitary nor sociable. We are a suddenly easeful community of independent seekers, respecting but not curious about each other, sharing but not intruding upon the act of prayerful contemplation.

It is wonderful.

In silence we take our meals together, gaze at the landscape together, and encounter each other on long country walks. We meet each other's eyes, smile widely, and move on.

Through this silence, I begin to hear other voices. One is that of the world itself. On a sunlit autumn afternoon, I meander down paths canopied by turning leaves and bounded by grey rail fences, every other post surmounted by a birdhouse. I settle beside a rush-edged pond, sharing the world with a turtle sunning on a log. The background drone of cicadas is broken only by the occasional splash of a leaping fish or the half-hearted caw of a crow.

Half-a-mile away, tires rush by on Highway 6.

The world re-forms me by its very presence.

Another voice becomes clear as well: that of my own thoughts. The fragmented riffs of everyday thinking resolve themselves into long, complex sentences, each word laid, like a course of bricks, in its place. I catch myself laughing out loud—a guilty moment, that—at things occurring only in my head. I reacquaint myself with my breathing, my pleasure in solitude, my delight in who I am.

Not all of what I discover is admirable. But it is human. I begin to understand and accept that fact.

I begin also to apprehend something I have heard about, something to which Sister Perpetua has alerted me. It resides in the spaces between the voices of the world and myself. I can only describe it as a kind of deeper silence, a communicative silence, one that waits in patient expectation to begin a dialogue with me.

For me, prayer has always been a monologue. It's been all me, asking, thanking, protesting, pleading. But this deeper silence asks me to be still, to be shaped, not by my own urgencies, but by God's formative purpose. I begin to understand what it means to be truly prayerful.


People warned me that the weekend would pass in a flash. I doubted them. I was wrong.

I thank Sister Perpetua and join the others in the chapel, incredulous that Sunday afternoon has arrived and that this deeply restorative experience is over. My tongue feels thick within my mouth. After this profound silence, can I ever be glib again?

The clamour of anxiety resumes, as needlessly as ever.

Glibness did return within moments, and I was fully re-engaged with the world by the third traffic light on the way home.

But the effects of that weekend have not entirely dissipated. Those two days were like visiting another, more restful country under the direction of a knowing guide. I apply the lessons learned in silence where I can. And, in the midst of the hurly-burly, I am consoled by the knowledge that a restorative experience is available to me.

And it is only half-an-hour away. 



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Photo: Ron Hewson

The grounds of the Guelph Centre of Spirituality are the perfect setting for long walks and silent contemplation.