

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
November 22, 2009

“Drowned in Deeps of Quiet”
by Donne Hayden

On Sundays, we come to Meeting for Worship knowing at least half an hour that morning will be devoted to communal silence. While some of us can barely tolerate any time spent without purposeful noise of some kind, but some of us would relish a longer period of silence. All of us come seeking connection to something larger than ourselves. While other traditions invoke the Divine with music and words and joyful noise, those drawn to a Quaker Meetingroom invoke it most powerfully with silence. Friends take seriously the admonition in Psalm 46, Verse 10 to: “Be still, and know that I am God,” with stillness necessitating silence. And most of us resonate with these lines, well-beloved among Friends, from John Greenleaf Whittier’s long poem titled “The Meeting”:

*And so I find it well to come
For deeper rest to this still room
For here the habit of the soul
Feels less the outer world's control
The strength of mutual purpose pleads
More earnestly our common needs;
And from the stillness multiplied
By these still forms on either side,
The world that time and sense have known
Falls off and leaves us God alone.*

This Meetingroom on Sundays is an island of quiet, a refuge from noise, but even this Quaker silence is filtered through human doings—i.e., electric lights, heating and air conditioning sounds, etc. The silence of nature, through which we have the most direct access to the Holy, is a precious and, I’m afraid, vanishing resource, more and more difficult to find.

This was brought home to me recently one Saturday morning a couple of weeks ago, when I went to attend a meeting of the Southwest Ohio Fellowship of Friends at the Hadley farmhouse in Clinton County. I decided to take advantage of being in the countryside on a lovely fall day. My border collie, Dodger, had spent most of the week cooped up in the apartment, so I brought her with me, purposely arriving a little early at the Hadley farm so that she could run, unleashed, and I could walk in the quiet countryside.

I parked my car out by the barn, let Dodger out, and together we followed a track of flattened grass and weeds away from the farmhouse toward a line of brush and trees. The sky was clear, the air cool, the tall grass yellow with fall, and on the trees in the distance, the leaves russet or brown. We were several miles from any town, and probably six or seven miles from the nearest freeway. As Dodger dashed and sniffed, I walked the path, expecting to hear only bird calls and the crunch of dry grass. Instead, I heard the hum. The hum of traffic on I-71, the hum of machinery and power, a hum always around us these days. Sometimes it sounds more like a whoosh; we can almost convince ourselves it is the sea or the wind. But it's not; it's the hum. Once I became aware of the hum, I couldn't stop hearing it.

Living in an apartment with my dog, Dodger, I am forced to go outside at odd hours of the day and night. I sometimes find myself at 5:30 in the morning in the wooded area behind the apartment carport, enjoying brief communion with the Creative Force of the Universe. Early in the morning I hear birdsong, late at night the rustle of small critters, and then—no matter what time it is, I become aware of the hum. The hum of traffic on Columbia Parkway, the hum of planes and machinery at Lunken Airport, the hum of humanity. The hum is inside our buildings, even monasteries and Quaker Meetingrooms, though we're rarely aware of it

until the electricity goes off, and then, surprised, we hear for the first time in months or even years, a few seconds of true silence.

This Thanksgiving week, I am thankful for the benefits of human civilization—I am thankful for warm, dry places when it’s cold outside and cool rooms when it’s hot outside; I am thankful for food kept unspoiled for long periods of time; I am thankful for music and entertainment; I am thankful for light in the darkness—for all these I am grateful. But I miss the power of profound natural silence.

I miss it because I was lucky enough to have been born in a time and place when such silence was abundant. When I was a child in Clovis, New Mexico, one of my family’s chief forms of recreation was to go for a drive in the country. For my parents, the goal was to get far enough away from civilization that we could see no sign of other human beings—not even houses—nor hear any human sounds except our own. It was still possible in those days to find places like that within a day’s drive of Clovis. *I heard* profound silence; I heard it in the sandy arroyos of the jutting Caprock near Tucumcari, among the *piñon* trees in the foothills outside Santa Fe. I heard it on rare days when the wind didn’t blow across the *Llano Estacado* (the “Staked Plains,” so-called because the plains were so flat and featureless that early Spanish conquistadores, learned to drive stakes in the ground so they would know if they were traveling in circles). As a child, I heard profound silence, but I did not know its value, nor suspect that it could become a disappearing thing.

In the 1990s, a young woman named Helen Fairley worked for the National Park Service at the Grand Canyon in Arizona. She overheard conversations among “aviation, acoustic, and Geographical Interface Systems (gis) experts” brought there to find ways to “restore natural

quiet” in and around the Grand Canyon. She thought it odd, and suspected that no one had particularly noticed the “natural quiet” until it was gone. Curious, she did a little research, and to her surprise, found that some of the earliest visitors to the great canyon had remarked on the silence. In “a series of recollections written in the late 1960s,” Ann and Myron Sutton” recalled their first hike in the canyon in 1948. Here is what they said:

We had been granted the most glorious of days.... Urban images and sounds lay far above and behind. Here everything was sharp and clear. Here everything came into focus. And here we came to reaffirm the one great fact of the Canyon land. It was a quiet land. The trees, the cliffs, the very gorge itself made no noise save for some imagined hollow breath of hugeness, perhaps an industrial illusion derived from the thought that anything so big must make some kind of noise.... We had entered a world in which we were masters of our thoughts, but happily mastered and conquered by the immensity around us. We wanted nothing to change it—no sound of horn or engine or whistle, no shrill siren, no ring of telephone.... Quiet, a rare commodity, overwhelmed us.¹

And that was in 1948.

Fairly continued her research and found others, even earlier, who were moved by the power of silence in that place. A British travel writer who visited in 1937 wrote: “There was in this immensity...a silence so profound that soon all the noises from the life around us on the Rim were lost in it, as if our ears had been captured forever, drowned in these deeps of quiet.”

¹ Helen Fairley, “The Sound of Silence: Historical Perspectives on Natural Quiet at Grand Canyon.” <http://www.gcr.org/bqr/14-4/sound.html>

In 1920, a naturalist named Van Dyke noted: “at the Canyon one is conscious of . . . no sound. The stillness seems like that of stellar space.” And in 1909, a newspaper publisher from Kansas City wrote: “From the rim one gets two impressions—so strong that they seem almost too big for the soul to hold—like the soul-smiting terror that comes to one who gazes long at the stars. The two impressions are of numberless infinitely-reaching horizontal lines and of eternal silence...”

Perhaps natural silence is more awe-inspiring in wide and open places like the plains of New Mexico or the Grand Canyon.

I personally miss the “soul-smiting terror” in places of profound natural silence where we encounter the Divine full-force, we know its power, and it is a bit terrifying. Listen to these words from the famous explorer, Admiral Richard E. Byrd, who spent the winter of 1934 alone in a hut at the South Pole. In this excerpt from his book, *Alone*, we find a description of what such profound natural silence can do to a human being:

I paused to listen to the silence. My breath, crystallized as it passed my cheeks, drifted on a breeze gentler than a whisper. The wind vane pointed toward the South Pole. Presently the wind cups ceased their gentle turning as the cold killed the breeze. My frozen breath hung like a cloud overhead. The day was dying, the night being born — but with great peace. Here were the imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it! That was what came out of the silence — a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres, perhaps.

It was enough to catch that rhythm, momentarily to be myself a part of it. In that instant I could feel no doubt of man's oneness with the universe. The conviction came that the rhythm

*was too orderly, too harmonious, too perfect to be a product of blind chance — that, therefore, there must be purpose in the whole and that man was part of that whole and not an accidental offshoot. It was a feeling that transcended reason; that went to the heart of man's despair and found it groundless. The universe was a cosmos, not a chaos; man was rightfully a part of that cosmos as were the day and night.*²

As we go into the silence we have available to us today, remember times of deep and holy silence, wherever it occurred for you; remember the “soul-smiting terror” of being “drowned in deeps of quiet.” Follow Psalm 46 into the silence:

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

²Richard E. Byrd, *Alone* (1938), Chapter 2.