

From quiet/1
CFM
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I cross a number of rivers and streams as I drive to work each day, and again on my way home. At one of the bridges I cross, I drive above not only a river, but a kind of lagoon beside the river, a large pool of mostly-standing water that fills during a rain and then gradually seeps away. Some time in January I began to notice, in that pool, a single swan resting there, swimming slowly, sometimes feeding. The first few times I saw him I couldn't quite believe he was really there, or would be there much longer. And now, even though he's been there nearly every day for a couple months, I still find him quite curious. So I look for him every time I pass, and I know what part of the lagoon he favors. The complication is that the lagoon is located more or less beneath a bridge, and to find the swan I have to look over or under the guard rail and quite away from the road. Needless to say, I don't look very hard for the swan when I think there's a car behind me, nor one coming towards me, and I don't look at all if there's more than one car coming from either of those directions. There's only one way to actually find that swan, and that's driving slowly, nearly at a crawl sometimes, and looking closely. It can't be done if I feel hurried or rushed.

Last week, I went over to Newport to hear a band I like play at the Southgate House. This particular group, in all honesty, I don't understand the meaning of their lyrics 90% of the time. But I like them anyway, because to my ear the way they sound is so amazing. I listen to them for their melodies and harmonies, for the way her voice goes with the piano and guitars, the lap steel and the violins. I listen to them for the complexity of what they do, as though they were an orchestra with themes and counter-themes and harmony and all of that going on, somehow, with just one singer and three musicians.

That's why I was there. But a good part of the audience was waiting to get through these guys in order to hear the next guy, the headliner, the singer they'd really paid for. I can understand that, but I was still surprised to see, from where I

was in the balcony, the glowing white and blue screens of cellphones scattered all throughout the crowd below me. In all these little light-islands down there, thumbs were flying as folks sent and received text messages, or posed at a table for their camera phone, or even dialed absent friends and talked a while. In the meantime, the group I'm there for is on stage weaving some of the most opulent and evocative musical stuff I've heard, sounding more like 12 people than four, and I'm looking at all these glowing islands beneath me, and I can't help but wonder, not, "is anything getting through?" but, "how would it be possible for anything to get through?"

Now I know, first off, that this is the response of a fan whose band has been dissed. And I also know that there's a generational gap in my response to those cell phones, I know that people younger than I am are able to focus on more streams of information at one time than I can. There's a good chance that this may just be my crotchety middle age setting in. But I keep thinking about the swan in that pool of slow water near the river, and the absolute impossibility of seeing that swan if I'm driving too quickly, and the impossibility of driving slowly enough to see the swan if I'm in heavy traffic. And then I wonder whether being still and waiting is actually more than a preference—I wonder whether it's a necessity, I wonder whether it's the way we're built. There are some things we're just not going to get unless we watch and wait.

In the middle of our bible there is a very curious book called, depending on the bible you have, either the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon. It's curious, first, because it makes no mention of God, and, secondly, because it is a song cycle of erotic poetry. Not erotic like hard core pornography, but if you wanted to steam up the bedroom some night, you could do a lot worse than borrow some lines from the Song of Songs. A mild example:

Song 2:8 The voice of my beloved!

 Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
 bounding over the hills.

9 My beloved is like a gazelle
 or a young stag.

 Look, there he stands
 behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
 looking through the lattice.

10 My beloved speaks and says to me:
 “Arise, my love, my fair one,
 and come away;

11 for now the winter is past,
 the rain is over and gone.

12 The flowers appear on the earth;
 the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
 is heard in our land.

13 The fig tree puts forth its figs,
 and the vines are in blossom;
 they give forth fragrance.

 Arise, my love, my fair one,
 and come away.

14 O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
 in the covert of the cliff,

let me see your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

I have heard these lines read well, and I am not reading them well, but neither do I think we would want me to. Although what I've chosen here is the mild stuff, not the stuff about how behind the veil your temples are like ripe pomegranates.

Anyway, having this erotic love poetry in the center of your holy scriptures is not something the church has stayed easy with, and one of the first ways that Christians tried to deal with it was to say that it should be understood as allegory, that the man and the woman here stand in for God and humanity, Christ and the church. More recently, scholars have pointed out that the Hebrews did not understand the soul and the body to be separated in the way that's come down to us from Greek and Roman thought, and it may be that to the Hebrew mind there is nothing scandalous at all about including a description of mutual love, romantic sexual love, in the account of the world—the account of God's creation—that the Hebrew scriptures are trying to give us.

What I'm trying to get at here is that I don't want to say that the Song of Songs is not exactly what it appears to be—a love poem between two impassioned lovers. It is that. But it also, in fact, does work for me as an allegory, largely because it reminds me that even though I spend so much time waiting for God to find me, waiting for God to put on some show, to send me a sign, to give me a message, the witness of the saints tells me that there are times when God hides and waits to be found, when God wants to be pursued, that God does not always take the role of the pursuer.

I do trust, especially when I'm lost, that God will ultimately find me, that God wants to find me—and when God finds me, that's grace. But the record of the saints

and heroes who've lived amazing and faithful lives is that an actual relationship with God will depend on my willingness to seek God, not only to be found by God. All we have to do is look at our friendships to see that the most satisfying ones are the mutual ones, the ones with give and take about who gets in touch with whom, who makes the plans, who does the inviting.

A relationship with God is that way also. It has some degree of flirtation in it, some degree of seduction; occasionally, even, the giddiness and heat of new love. That's what I am reminded of by the Song of Songs:

14 . . . my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

These are poems about watching and waiting, about observation and sensation, and I realize that there is a great deal of love in watching and waiting.

My day yesterday would seem to be very far away from swans, quiet musicians, the Song of Songs, watching and waiting. Yesterday I spent the afternoon listening to Rick Polhamus talk about his service with Christian Peacemaker Teams. It's not like I'm an absolute novice when it comes to CPT. I'm familiar with the work they do and the rationale behind it. What Rick added to my picture were some stories about what it actually means in an individual life to be engaged in the work of building peace. And one thing I had never understood quite so clearly was that seeing options is essential to working for peace.

Seeing options is essential to working for peace. You have to be able to see more than one ending for a situation, you have to be able to see all the possibilities in order to be a peacemaker. You are standing between and in the way of people who can see only black and white, and you are the one who has to be able to see the gray. That revelation came to me with such startling clarity that now I think the only way to be a peacemaker is to be able to see more than one option, to be able to see as many possibilities as you can conjure up. In fact, Rick said, some of the training for Christian Peacemakers involves learning to come up with as many options as possible in 30 seconds.

But that goes against the flow, I think. It seems to me that finding options isn't really the way we are trained intellectually, except maybe in science. We are trained to direct our thoughts along a logical and rhetorical line, a direct line, from point A to point B to point C. Not necessarily from point A to points B through J all at the same time. It takes a reverse kind of discipline for us to give up the line of logic and simply watch the thoughts as they appear in front of us, to let them swim into our awareness as a swan might; to let them play their stories in front of us without trying to direct them; or even to follow blindly after one thought as though we were pursuing a lover through the woods, letting ourselves be led instead of choosing our own path. We are trained to sort thoughts in or out, to build boxes to put our thoughts in, and we ourselves often end up in the boxes we make. We don't have as much learning in letting our thoughts blossom and riot in springtime fertility.

This week, I think the silence of worship is our training for that. Our silence is the place where, as in the Song of Songs, we can learn to pursue God as we would pursue the woman or man we're in love with, walking by the shops and markets, into the woods and gardens of our lives, hoping to catch an unexpected glimpse of Her face, letting our heart pound with excitement when we do.

The silence is where we can learn to follow our thoughts where they lead us, instead of trying so mightily to lead and direct our thoughts. And the silence is the

place where we can practice, if we discipline ourselves for it, the art of finding all the possibilities, not just the obvious one. We can bring into the silence something in our life that seems tight, trapped, boxed-in, and we can ask God to look at it with us. It takes quiet, and stillness, and a willingness to look hard, but it's part of my faith that in silence God will show us what we can't see otherwise.

In the end, maybe, the silence can become the garden from the Song—the place where we come to meet Love.