

OPINION

# How Silence Became a Luxury Product

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Recently, I wanted to find a moment to journal, pray, and simply be still, so I went to a riverbank near my home. I sat listening to birds, eyeing the languid joy of sunbathing turtles, charting fallen leaves eddying in the green current. A roar broke the silence. A leaf blower. I tried to find a quieter spot, but leaf blowers seemed to follow me. Everywhere. It was like some secret society of leaf blowers conspired against me. I kept looking, but quiet was elusive. Wherever I went I found the whooshes of road noise, the clack-clack-clacking of construction, or the blare of televisions.

Our cities and our lives are noisy. We are bombarded with muffled public transit announcements, helicopters circling, cellphones buzzing, beeping, ringing. The countryside is quieter, but leaf blowers still roar there too, as do planes overhead, and tractor-trailers. And everywhere there are voiceless but wordy ways of grabbing our attention like billboards or advertisements that dot each mile of the road and every spare surface. These too impede silence with their input and visual noise.

This isn't all bad. People sometimes need to blow their leaves. I get that. As I write this, I sit in a coffee shop with music pumping through the overhead speakers. I like it. I have three loud, beloved children. I understand that my daily life cannot hold the exquisite silence I've found inside of monastery walls.

Still, silence is a human need. There was a time, not long ago, when it was less difficult to find silent spaces. Embracing silence always had to be somewhat intentional, of course. Humans have perpetually been able to fill the air with talk, song, laughter, screaming or humming. But for most of human history — without TV, cars, radio, airplanes and industrial machines — hush was more of a default mode.

But now, silence has become a luxury item. Think of the wealth required to purchase a getaway from the noise.

In his book "The World Outside Your Head," Matthew Crawford advocates for what he calls an "attentional commons." We as a society hold certain resources in common, like air and water. These vital resources are available to everyone as part of the common good. Crawford says that the "absence of noise" — auditory silence but also freedom from things like advertisements that intrude on our attention — should be seen as just such a resource. He writes, "As clean air makes respiration possible, silence, in this broader sense, is what makes it possible to think." He argues that we all need access to quiet, undistracting spaces.

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Crawford brings up the pricey quietude of the business class lounge at Charles De Gaulle Airport. I have only been in an exclusive airport lounge once (a friend got me in), but the sheer decadence of silence there — with its soundproof doors and walls — compared to the beeping, dinging, blaring in the rest of

the airport was both delicious and disturbing. The silence was worth every penny, but why did only those who could pay those many pennies (or have friends who could) deserve it?

On weekdays in cities, churches sometimes keep their doors unlocked to provide a literal sanctuary from noise. This is an unsung kindness to the public, and every church who can do this, should. Still, not many can and this practice is more difficult now due to Covid precautions. As churches in urban areas close and are remade into trendy condos or restaurant space, we don't just lose a worshiping congregation. We lose one more silent space.

It all leaves us asking, where can we go to find silence? There is an increasing need to preserve and protect publicly accessible silent spaces.

I've become more and more drawn to silence in the past five years, craving it, studying it and practicing it whenever I can. I've come to see the necessity of silence for emotional wellness, for spiritual growth, but also — and here's the point where it becomes more than just a personal practice — for a healthy society.

Studies indicate that constant noise boosts stress hormones, blood pressure and susceptibility to other chronic illnesses. It also creates a kind of relentless distractibility that keeps us from noticing our very lives and our internal needs and longings. A never-ending din makes it more difficult to process grief and intense emotions in healthy ways.

Our society, as a whole, tends to avoid silence. The music in my coffee shop stops for just a few minutes — longer than we are used to — and I notice everyone tense up and glance around nervously until it begins again. Many people sleep with television or music on. Even religious services often trade quiet contemplation for amped up music and flashing screens.

In "A Book of Silence," Sara Maitland writes about her quest for silence, a quest so intense that she moved to a remote cottage on the Isle of Skye in Scotland for a season. Her book explores sociological, religious and mythic aspects of silence. But she also addresses how silence is often viewed negatively in our culture. People fear it. Too much silence can drive one insane. When she began to intentionally seek out silence, friends warned her against it and worried about her newfound passion. I understand this. Though I crave silence, I run from it as well. It can make one feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. Like most of us, I have been habituated to noise every moment.

Reflecting on her long experiment in silence, Maitland writes, "I am convinced that as a whole society we are losing something precious in our increasingly silence-avoiding culture and that somehow, whatever this silence might be, it needs holding, nourishing, and unpacking."

Last New Year's Eve, at midnight, as the year turned into another, I began by reading a familiar verse from Psalm 62: "For God alone, my soul waits in silence." Sitting in silence is hard for me, but I know I need it. I think we all do. We need a still and quiet place to become fully human, fully alive to the goodness and grief so palpable in this world if we have a second to listen for it. I want to learn to better wait in silence. That is, if I can find some.