

# "Quiet"

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a sermon by Dan Lillie  
delivered on December 3, 2017  
at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

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## **A Moment of Silence**

[Go to pulpit, pull out pocket watch, open it, look at it for 20-30 seconds, close it, and put it back in my pocket]

Some of you may know where I got the idea for that little time of silence: it was inspired by composer John Cage's piece called 4'33", so named because it is four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. It serves to remind us that the rests, the moments of quiet between the sounds, are just as important as the notes.

## **Two Sides of Quiet**

So how was that time of quiet?

I imagine some of you enjoyed it, and maybe found it peaceful. That is certainly the feeling we are going for in our time of quiet meditation during Sunday services: a comfortable, peaceful quiet.

Others may have found it uncomfortable, like the silence in a car. Have you ever turned the radio off so you can have a conversation, found yourself reflexively turning it back on the second the conversation hits a lull? Any noise, it seems, is preferable to the discomfort that quiet can bring.

Some of you may have just been annoyed by the quiet time: "Yeah, we get it, the sermon's called Quiet and you're being quiet. Get on with it already!"

What I am trying to point out through this admittedly contrived example, is that when we encounter "quiet," it can be comforting, but it can also be unsettling.

These two sides of quiet became evident to me when I realized that two songs, both called *Quiet*, conveyed very different attitudes towards the idea of quiet.

## **The Unsettling Side of Quiet - John Mayer**

You heard both of them earlier in the service. The first was by John Mayer. He sings:

"Midnight, lock all the doors and turn out the lights;

feels like the end of the world this Sunday night.

There's not a sound; outside the snow's coming down.

Somehow, I can't seem to find the quiet inside my mind."

It seems that John's encounter with quiet leaves him feeling unsettled. When the room is quiet, he finds himself faced with his own anxious thoughts.

"3:02- the space in this room has turned on me,  
and all my fears have cornered me here (me and my TV screen).

The volume's down; blue lights are dancing around.

And still, I can't seem to find the quiet inside my mind."

He talks about the TV – the instrument with the ability to fend off the quiet – as though it's his ally, and the quiet has them both cornered. Except, he doesn't say that the *quiet* has him cornered, he says "all my fears have cornered me here." There is something about the quiet that has him, not just unable to control his busy thoughts, but bringing him face-to-face with his fears; an unsettling quiet, indeed.

"Daylight is climbing the walls; cars start and feet walk the halls;  
the world awakes and now I am safe- at least by the light of day."

Interesting that he makes the connection between quiet and darkness. With the rising of the sun, both the darkness and the quiet of night are held at bay. What is it about the quiet and the darkness that stirs up discomfort and fear in us?

For starters, how about the mystery and uncertainty we're forced to encounter in both the quiet and the dark. When we can't see or hear anything, our mind fills the gaps with all of the possible things that might be lurking just beyond the reach of our senses. Even if we know we are physically safe, the quiet and the darkness can play tricks on us. We tend to fear the unknown, or at the very least, mistrust it.

Quiet can even lead us to mistrust ourselves. The quietest place on Earth is a room in Redmond, Washington. Owned by Microsoft, the anechoic chamber is constructed of multiple layers of concrete, supported by vibration-reducing springs in its foundation, and lined with sound-absorbing wedges of foam. Inside the room, the noise level measures at negative 20 decibels. Just for context, the human ear cannot hear anything below 0 decibels. A jet plane taking off just outside the chamber would sound like nothing more than a whisper when the room is sealed.

Many people who visit can spend no more than a few minutes in the room. They report being able to hear the pulsing of their blood, the grinding of bones as their joints move, and even the squishy sound of their eyes blinking. For many, this level of quiet leads to dizziness and feelings of being disoriented. One person

said, "My own voice sounded like it was having trouble coming out of my head. For a moment, I felt genuine disorientation, like the light-headedness you can get with low blood sugar."<sup>1</sup>

That description sounds incredibly uncomfortable. It is easy to understand why we might be tempted to avoid the quiet. Often, I think we do this subconsciously, like when our hand instinctively reaches for the radio. This may also explain our tendency to prize busy-ness. We use noise and movement to fend off the discomfort and uncertainty. In the name of productivity, we pack our days with tasks and to-do lists. We don't often prioritize pausing, silence and stillness... but maybe we should.

### **The Comfortable Side of Quiet - Jason Mraz**

The other song that I want to look at, also called *Quiet*, is by Jason Mraz, who has a very different attitude towards quiet. Describing a world that often seems to be moving at a speed beyond his control, Jason seeks comfort in the quiet company of a trusted companion.

"I will hold your hand and watch the world spin madly 'round this life we're in; Everything goes quiet when it's you I am with. There are no words, no words when I am with you""

Unlike John Mayer, Jason Mraz not only accepts quiet, he seeks it out. Jason has come to embrace quiet as a welcomed respite from the frantic and hectic pace of the world. This is a very different kind of quiet than the fear-inducing sort that had John cornered by his TV in the middle of the night.

So how can two people have such different reactions when faced with Quiet?

It seems to me that a person's reaction to the quiet says more about the person than it says about some universal truth regarding the nature of silence and stillness.

Quiet is like a mirror, helping us see ourselves more clearly. Our response to moments of quiet is a reflection of our inner selves. If we are unsettled, the quiet forces us to see this. If we are content, the quiet will reveal that inner peace.

And from this honest reflection, we can begin to ask the right questions. One thing I've learned about quiet is that it helps me see the questions, not the answers.

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<sup>1</sup> "Step Inside the Quietest Room in the World" by Jillian D'Onfro. *Business Insider*, October 6, 2015. <http://www.businessinsider.com/microsoft-quietest-room-in-the-world-2015-10/#microsoft-built-its-anechoic-chambers-in-its-hardware-lab-building-87-on-its-campus-in-redmond-washington-1>

While quiet can give us a look at our inner selves, what is not immediately evident is Why we are feeling that way. When faced with an unsettling quiet, if our reaction is to drive it away, we may never discover the source of our anxiety, and so it will remain with us. If, however, we respond to an unsettling quiet with curiosity, we may have an opportunity to discover something about ourselves.

We can glean insight from a comfortable quiet too. Regardless of whether our reaction to quiet is peaceful or afflicted, we can ask ourselves "Why do I feel this way?" --- and our pursuit of the answer can be the beginning of meaning-making in our lives.

### **A Possibility...**

Given the mysterious and uncertain nature of quiet, we may never be able to fully understand it. It's true nature is silence. Like the Tao, it is unable to be spoken of. And so any words about quiet can only point us in the direction of what it might be. But I have a thought...

What if quiet is not the absence of noise, but the presence of a space in which something can grow? What if it is the space in which we cultivate meaning and purpose in our lives? As Unitarian Universalists, our fourth principle calls us to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Might there be truth and meaning in the silence as well as the sound? In the dark as well as the light? And aren't we called to explore the truths within ourselves; those parts of ourselves we only have access to in moments of quiet and stillness?

Maybe. I can't say with any certainty. But then, it's difficult to say anything certain about quiet.

It seems to me that truly embracing quiet is not about completely eliminating noise and busy-ness, but welcoming the quiet moments when they present themselves; it means noticing what we can about our world and ourselves in those moments; and it means listening for the quiet wisdom in silence, for what can only be known beyond the boundaries of words.

And now, I think I've said enough about quiet. It's better, I think, to experience it.

[pull out pocket watch, open it, look at it for 20-30 seconds, close it, and put it back in my pocket]

May it be so.