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Daring to Be Silent

By Wendy Kagan

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For Kelley Amadei, every year begins with silence. Just after New Year's, when a deep chill has settled in, she checks into The Garrison Institute for a nine-day silent meditation retreat with the American Buddhist teacher Lama Surya Das, and wraps herself in a warm duvet of quietude and stillness. Asked to honor a code of Noble Silence when the retreat begins, Amadei joins a hushed group of 20 to 50 people who have sworn off cell phones, devices, media, books, and everyday chitchat for the gathering's duration. Together yet alone in a veil of reticence, they walk the corridors of the sprawling former monastery, smell its dark wood and incense, eat in the dining hall, stroll the grounds on the Hudson riverfront, listen to the lama's teachings, and sit for meditation. It's an experience that stands in stark contrast to her digitally connected life—as an executive coach to high-powered business people, Amadei is always online—and that's exactly what she likes about it. "I think it started out as a search for better self-awareness," says Amadei, who lives with her wife and son in Garrison, not far from the Institute (it was Lama Surya Das who led her to the area). Over 15 years she has built up her practice from a half day of silence on her own to a yearly nine-day retreat. "I get to connect with myself in a way that feels more authentic."

Introducing the Digital Detox

Silence as a spiritual practice comes cloaked in a rich history; nearly all religions weave some aspect of quiet contemplation into their tapestry of rituals. Carthusian and Benedictine monks pass in and out of great islands of silence. In the Quaker meeting tradition, silence is the mystic heart: People may speak out of it, yet no vocalization is frivolous. Secular life has rarely prized silence, but in today's Age of Distraction—where social interactions preclude physical presence via an array of devices from mobiles to tablets—silence is more exotic than ever, and perhaps more necessary.

"We are pretty constantly always in touch with someone else these days," says Sharon Salzberg, an internationally known meditation teacher who leads three or four silent retreats a year at places like The Garrison Institute and the Insight Meditation Society, which she cofounded, in Barre, Massachusetts. Salzberg references the modern malady of "continuous partial attention," a phrase coined by the writer Linda Stone to describe the cognitive condition that arises from connecting through the digital realm. We don't want to miss anything, yet we're not fully present either. It's a constant state of high alert that feeds into feelings of stress and overwhelm, compromising our ability to think clearly and be creative and effective. "You're on e-mail and you think, what about Facebook? You're texting and you think, what about Twitter? It's too much," says Salzberg, who notes that a silent retreat can act as a digital detox and a counterbalance to all that virtual movement. "It's such a bold and wonderful experiment not to engage in our normal social chatter. It's a tremendous gift to give to oneself."

Finding Wisdom in Stillness

Amadei doesn't have to travel far to reach The Garrison Institute, but as she approaches, a shift in consciousness begins. "It's really beautiful to see the enormous shadow of the monastery as you're driving up the private road. When you step inside, there's this feeling of Noble Silence even before it begins, a seriousness or deliberateness." After checking in and leaving her cell phone with a staff member, she finds her room before the group meets in the meditation hall. "The senior teachers and retreat managers come in to welcome us, lay out the ground rules, and tell us what to expect," says Amadei. Even though retreatants are instructed to be silent with one another, they listen to teachings at prescribed times, and they can talk to a staff member whenever they have questions or concerns. "The staff tries to set us at ease that this is an intense and beautiful experience, that it's going to be uncomfortable at times and that's okay." Amadei likes this sort of honesty—because the silence is not always easy for her. Sometimes inner demons claw through. "There's always this anticipation of what's going to come up for me in the silence. Where's my mind going to go? What deep, dark, uncomfortable thing am I going to uncover this time? Am I going to be willing to face it?"

It's natural that when quiet descends outside, the noise level increases within. "The silence acts as an intensifier: We can see more clearly the lack of silence that's going on in our mind," says Salzberg, who considers this a good thing. "A lot gets revealed. The things in our mind become more workable because we actually see them." Used in this way, silence can be a tool to help train our attention, just like meditation. "We look at what we're thinking and feeling, and we understand more about the things that motivate us. We realize that we have a choice; we don't have to buy into every thought that comes up in our mind." Salzberg gives an example of negative self-talk such as "I can't do it, I can't do anything." Within the silence, this kind of terribly limiting habitual thought reveals itself as just a thought. If we see it that way, we can more easily let it go.

Amadei finds that the silence also forces her to be more honest with herself.

"You start to realize the motivation behind the words you would say and how self-centered your speech can be. It makes me realize how much I complain about trivial things." On her last retreat Amadei had a cold, but since she couldn't talk about it, it went away faster. Refraining from speech, even for just a few days, can help to break the social habit of constantly externalizing. "When you don't get to say things out loud, you're more aware."

The Slow Life Movement

As life speeds up via our omnipresent technology, we're seeing a countermovement these days toward practices that wind us down. Mindfulness, a form of meditation that focuses on awareness of the present moment, is going mainstream: The CBS show "60 Minutes" recently ran a segment in which reporter Anderson Cooper surrendered his cell phone—and stepped bravely out of character—for a weekend silent retreat with mindfulness teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn. Some people choose to float in sensory deprivation tanks to find quietude (New Paltz now has the Hudson Valley's first hydrotherapy spa, Mountain Float Spa). At Camp Grounded, a summer camp for adults tucked into the redwoods of Northern California, staff members in hazmat suits collect campers' devices when they arrive. *Forbes* calls it the camp "where people pay \$570 to have their smartphones taken away from them." They don't see their electronics again until camp is over four days later—meanwhile enjoying an unplugged life with a choice of activities that range in flavor from nostalgia feeding (kickball and capture the flag) to wellness warrior (qi-gong and Thai massage). All-camp silence and a silent dinner are among the signature Camp Grounded experiences. (Yes, they have sing-a-longs and make s'mores too.)

"We're overstimulated most of the time," says Liz Schulman, a yoga teacher and the co-owner of Living Yoga studio in Cold Spring. Cultivating silence is similar to the yogic practice of Pratyahara, or sensory withdrawal—a Sanskrit term from the Yoga Sutras, the ancient text by the Indian sage Patanjali dating back about 2,000 years. Practitioners consider the Yoga Sutras to be an instruction manual for how to achieve Samadhi, or bliss; Patanjali lays it out in eight steps, or limbs. "Pratyahara is the fifth limb of Patanjali's eight-limbed path," says Schulman. "It's a shifting or refocusing of all of your senses to what's happening in your inner landscape. They say in yoga that the senses dominate the mind, the senses are the king of the mind. If the senses are drawn out, then the mind is drawn out. When we learn to turn our senses in, we can turn our mind in, and it readies us for the last three limbs of the eight-limbed path, which are concentration, meditation, and bliss."

The Courage to Go Inside

For those who are not used to self-exploration practices like these, there can be a lot of resistance. Schulman recently taught a three-week meditation course and found that even a 10-minute sit was highly uncomfortable for many people. Similarly, the idea of dropping into silence for even two or three days is terrifying for most of us. "People come to a retreat and they're nervous, asking, 'How am I going to be silent?'" says Salzberg. "They say, 'My partner doesn't think I can be silent.' Somebody said once, 'They're doing a betting pool at my office because they don't think I can be silent.'" But the anticipation is nearly always worse than the silence itself, which usually wins people over in the end. They appreciate the peace, the restfulness, and the way that the present moment becomes more available and more vivid. Eating food in silence becomes really about eating food and tasting it, because you're not distracted by a conversation with the person sitting next to you. "Almost always people look back on it at the end, and the silence is one of the most beautiful aspects of having been on retreat. For once in our lives we can let go of trying to impress people or make a certain impression. We can just be ourselves, and it's great."

For Amadei, starting off the year in silence feeds her in countless ways. "I'm a better mom for it; I'm more thoughtful about how I interact with my son and how I communicate with my wife. I'm more aware of my own habits, my own patterns of reaction. I'm more compassionate and more present. In my work, it helps me to practice what I preach, which is self-awareness. The more we understand ourselves, the more we can understand our impact on other people." Amadei also gets to steep herself in the Tibetan Buddhist wisdom of her guru, Lama Surya Das, who teaches about Dzogchen, or the Great Perfection. "The silence compounds his teachings," she adds. Once she returns home and starts talking again, her speech feels more pointed and effective.

In the end, it's the grand prize of the present moment that Amadei carries away with her. "On the first full day of silence, I always hike," she says. "I notice so many more details around me—the sensations on my face, the different angles of branches and trees." Last year, meditating on a rock by the water's edge, she witnessed for the first time the Hudson River flowing both ways. It startled and amazed her. "I happened to be sitting at the exact moment when the current started to shift and move back upstream. It's moments like that. They couldn't happen without the silence."

RESOURCES Kelley Amadei Spark-shift.com

The Garrison Institute Garrisoninstitute.org

Sharon Salzberg Sharonsalzberg.com

Liz Schulman Livingyogastudios.com

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