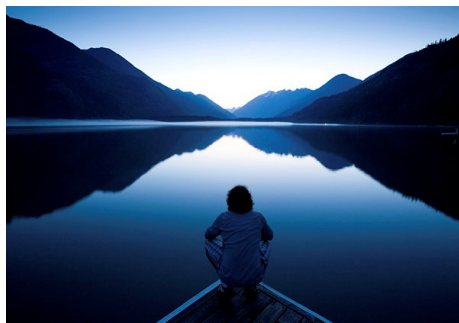


*(The following article is an excerpt from an essay entitled “Inside the Horn of Silence”, soon to be published as a book of essays on the human condition, Feathers in the Dust.)*



### *Finding the Sound of Silence*

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“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter.”

—Keats

“Spirit is still, but it sings sweetly and universes are born.”

—Swarmi Ramda

According to Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam, “Silence is the garden of meditation.” When we turn to God in prayer and meditation, it is like a summer gathering in the garden or a summons to the revelations of early morning dreams. We are prepared to kneel quietly, eyes inward and thoughts upward, in some holy aspiration that asks for words or song; but will settle for something less, or perhaps more. Words lock us in with desire, petitions and requests, while the absence of words makes its own unexpected offering. Silence opens the field to the wind, silence offers mountain peaks to the clouds, silence brings the blue of the sky down into the lake. We speak of “filling the silence” when in truth silence is already full; it needs not the words, rhythms, and echoes of resonance and sound that otherwise punctuate our lives with their statements of character and identity. Silence can be stately and grand far beyond the window of our imagination. “Well-timed silence hath more eloquence than speech,” wrote the poet Martin Tupper.

Silence can be challenging, a gaping hole that needs to be filled with sound, any sound, any noise, but this inexplicable void that says so little, but that fills us with terror and awe. We explore its parameters and hope to come to a better understanding of its awesome power. We walk through the woods and gather the silence around us, the silence is only heightened by the periodic sounds of nature, such as the chirping of birds and the swish of the wind against the pines. We wish to develop a taste of solitude and silence in remembrance of what Plotinus called “the flight of the alone to the Alone.” We put on silence like an enveloping winter cloak as the heat of silence spreads through us; everything dissolves within its embrace and everything disappears under unknown stars. I have walked into the silence of the night until my thoughts echo silence and my name becomes silence. It is my refuge and comfort; my final hope and the broth of my soup bowl. When I leave the woods, I leave its silence behind me; but I am now ablaze with internal sights and abuzz with internal sounds, spreading in waves before me. The power of silence has done that.

What of those grand artifacts of nature that we think should speak, but have no actual voice and in truth say nothing through words. Who has quieted the stars? Who has silenced the billions of galaxies that we easily see now in massive telescopes in outer space. The stars and galaxies move among each other untouched, heedless and hushed as always, and yet their silence speaks volumes to the casual onlooker who gazes up to the night sky in perpetual wonder. Up close, the sea pronounces something in a gruff voice; but from the distance it utters an incomparable silence. Lightning shines its flash of light in absolute silence, but peals of thunder are not far behind to take up the echo.

We endeavor to listen to the voices of nature, yet as much as we try to decipher their secret messages, we are pressed into silence in response to a natural detachment toward us. We cannot quite make out what is being conveyed; we can only hope to decipher what has never been sounded. When confronted with the sight of the woods, the sea, the mountains, the night sky, we like to think that we are about to hear a revelation; words that have never been uttered before; insights that have never seen the light of day. We stand there and think: I am ready. I have shut everything down and feel empty and completely awake to what may come. I wait and listen as the waves roll in and the clouds roll by, when, lo and behold, as I listen, I hear something, too remote to be endured and too silent to be heard. Dusk becomes night and the moon sets behind the horizon. Still I listen and wait, wait and listen. There is nothing more than the premonitions of silence and not a single note is sounded. The silence continues to be there, not emptiness but fullness, not

absence but presence, a silence enduring enough to withstand the rigors of time and the promise of eternity.

We forget what the forces of nature such as the deserts, mountains and oceans try to remind us of, namely that there is an order of magnitude and levels of existence that extend far beyond anything our imagination can summon on its own. By speaking of forces far greater than we can possibly invoke and being confronted with spans of time than we cannot possibly envisage, our experience of the world helps us to shape our understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe. The subtleties of sound, as a unique form of communication and as a way of connecting to higher levels of reality, take us out of ourselves. Every time we hear the desert wind or the roar of the ocean, we are led beyond our own limited world of forms, opening upon a world that lies in the mythical land of “beyond”, off the edge of the known horizon. Through the resonating power of silence, we are taken to that distant land that shimmers in desert mirages and lies beyond the peaks of mountains, where rivers flow and blossoms bloom to a rhythm that transcends sound, awakening us to the reality of the eternal rhythms that float through us like brave clouds across mountain peaks, raising our consciousness to the point that we can hear the silent resonance of God in the sacred thunder of the Eternal.

Nature itself withdraws its promises and gives up its prey, leaving us alone with a final question that may never be answered in this world. I spend hours watching the white sky, the green trees, the gray lake, the blue sea, the black night, and the silvery stars; but they give nothing to us with any certainty and mock our curiosity with their detached and sober face. I think if I could begin to understand the world of physical forms, then I might begin to understand the mystery that lies behind them. What are the eternal truths by which we measure the temporal realities of “this world”? We have some inkling here, an intimation there; signs appear everywhere in nature as symbols of a higher order; but they are only felt; they refuse to be transfixed, either by words or the facts that bind them into the rigid world of forms. Modern science would have its way and insist upon the facts of the physical reality; but nature will also have its way, lending to humanity premonitions of another reality that lies tucked away within physical forms and float in and out of our consciousness like reoccurring dreams or imaginary ghosts, keeping alive the hope that there is an alternative reality that does not reveal itself directly, but that exists nonetheless as a promise, a challenge, a truth worth believing in.

This is the end; about silence there is nothing more to speculate upon and disclose. Some secrets are not meant to be revealed to human minds without destroying the very conditions that make us human in the first place.

The abiding mystery that underlies the entire created universe will not give up its inscrutability, any more than the Sphinx could give up the mystery of its origins and continue to be the symbolic enigma that it is. Words capture nothing but a fleeting image or a fading sound. Only silence will prevail, containing more meaning in its enduring presence than all the great works of philosophy and literature. Therefore, let us welcome silence once again into our hearts, and freely return to that silent abode where “Spirit is still, but it sings sweetly and universes are born.”