


March 2019

The Phenomenal Space of Soulful Silence

Ellen Wimmer

Regis University, Department of Counseling, Division of Counseling and Family Therapy, Rueckert-Hartman College of Health Professions, ewimmer@regis.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/cftr>

 Part of the [Counselor Education Commons](#), [Marriage and Family Therapy and Counseling Commons](#), and the [Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wimmer, Ellen (2019) "The Phenomenal Space of Soulful Silence," *Counseling and Family Therapy Scholarship Review*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/cftr/vol2/iss1/6>

This Contemplative is brought to you for free and open access by ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Counseling and Family Therapy Scholarship Review by an authorized editor of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

The Phenomenal Space of Soulful Silence

ELLEN WIMMER

Department of Counseling, Division of Counseling and Family Therapy, Rueckert-Hartman College of Health Professions, Regis University, Thornton, CO

Where has silence gone? What does this mean for the spiritual soul? This analysis utilizes a phenomenological and qualitative lens to assess the way silence and the soul interact. The author posits that the relationship between silence and the soul, or *soulful silence*, creates a space to learn about the powerful phenomena that shape us. Through imagery, metaphor, and personal reflection the author embarks on a descriptive journey to explore what we learn by sitting in soulful silence, the phenomenological and spiritual implications of soulful silence, and how one must first become intimately familiar with their own soulful silence to experience growth, beauty, and wisdom.

KEYWORDS soulful silence, silence, phenomenology, phenomena, soul, spiritual science

This withdrawal from the day's turmoil into creative silence is not a luxury, a fad, or a futility. It is a necessity, because it tries to provide the conditions wherein we are able to yield ourselves to intuitive leadings, promptings, warnings, teachings, and counsels and also to the inspiring peace of the soul.

– Paul Brunton

Silence is a necessary medium with which one develops a relationship with their soul, this relationship is henceforth denoted as, *soulful silence*. As counselors and human-service professionals, we must closely familiarize ourselves with the intimate and complex relationship humans have with soulful silence. Indian yogi and guru, Paramahansa Yogananda once said, "Through the portals of silence, the healing sun of wisdom and peace will shine upon you" (1946). However, the western inclination towards individualism and away from collectivism (Zhao, 2017) has left the soul with fewer communal quiet spaces to practice soulful silence. With a reduction of these spaces, where masses could collectively await the experience of a phenomena, epiphany, or god, (Johnson, 2018) the individual seeking soulful silence now retreats to do so alone. But there is hope; the qualities of viewership to phenomena that occur in this soulful silence allow the spiritual individual to experience a collective connection with larger, phenomenological forces (Walsh, 2018). Phenomena like pain, anxiety, joy, guilt, love, and others require a soulful silence to make themselves known, so that we may bear witness to them. Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenological philosopher, describes this soulful silence as, "a primordial silence beneath the noise of words," gesturing towards a responsibility to listen deeply to what the soul makes known to us in soulful silence. Through imagery, metaphor, and personal experience one explores what it means to sit in soulful silence, this analysis examines the notion that soulful silence can never truly be a singular experience, as silence itself bears intrinsic qualities of viewership to phenomena, and serves as a facilitative space for wisdom.

Silence in the "Age of Noise"

Modern society expects a minimum level of noise to be present at all times, within oneself and one's thoughts, as well as in the world around them (Smith, 2018). Between two people, we suffer a chronic expectation of conversation, and silence marks a failure to that demand (2018).

Silence is treated as a frivolous nuisance to be quickly skimmed over for fear of intimacy, with others and with oneself. Writer and arctic explorer, Erling Kagge writes that in this "age of noise, silence is almost extinct" (Johnson, 2018). Our world is louder now, there is a static buzz present at all times. Cars rev, sirens cry, wind howls through buildings and drills batter concrete, television chats, sings, and entertains while phones ring and appliances purr in the background. We live in noise, we talk over it, and consequently we contribute to it. If a moment comes where the baseline noise of life lifts, and silence asks us to sit with her, we automatically fill our minds with thoughts to match the expected level of noise that has become habitual to us. Jungian psychotherapist and spiritual writer, Robert Sardello notes, "Our choosing to live in the noise of our thoughts and emotions within the incessant clamor around us happens almost without our recognition. But we are uncomfortable with the Silence" (2008). This reactive discomfort highlights our inability to acknowledge the innate wisdom that silence holds.

Soulful silence is an integral catalyst to wisdom, and in modern society, wisdom feels like a lone individual's pursuit (Le, 2005). No one achieves wisdom in isolation, and our appreciation for collective silence has dwindled (Shermer, 2018). Spaces like churches, mosques, temples, mausoleums, meditation rooms, gardens, nature reserves, etc. all recognize the value of cultivating a soulful, typically prayerful, silence with oneself and with those around you. With these spaces frequented less and less (2018), tortured souls retreat to find or create a silent space of their own. This is not to say that shared or collective religious spaces always guarantee the experience of soulful silence. Rather, that as a society we do not revere or seek out silent structures as regularly, and when we do, we do it alone. Perhaps the phenomenon of silence is viewed as isolative because the modern quest to find it is now a lonely one.

Meditation Quiets, Silence Listens

Meditation can be a powerful tool to cultivate inner silence, and zen-meditations specifically strive to block out all sounds, thoughts, and feelings to achieve a silent calm (Gehl, 1987). Meditation is generally concerned with lessening mental activity and distractions, placing a positive phenomenon like gratitude or calm in the silence, and attending to that phenomenon (van Elferen & Raeymaekers, 2015). However, if one's experience of silence is exclusively through this type of meditation, the creative potential and calm power of soulful silence does not have the opportunity to be enjoyed. Sardello states, "All religious traditions, all forms of mediation, all rituals, attract the Silence. Yet strangely, users of these traditions acknowledge Silence mostly as a starting point to launch into whatever they promote. Hurling towards their goals in their multitude of ways, they do not realize that they have reached it with their very first step. They are unaware that it is necessary to disclose what is present, rather that setting out on a path looking for somewhere else" (2008). Meditation is about quieting phenomena, where silence is about listening into it.

Humans are shaped by phenomena like suffering, love, guilt, fear, intimacy, vulnerability, suffering, passion, and anxiety. These phenomena have an age-old wisdom about them that begs to be known and held by humans. There are memories, images, colors, textures, and sounds connected to an individual's relationship with any of these phenomena. It is in this space of soulful silence, with no meditative intention or agenda, where these phenomena can come to life and we may bear witness to them. It is imperative to note that soulful silence and meditation are not in competition, they overlap and often occur side by side. They are simply different experiences, and soulful silence, merely listening, offers an authentic and organic way of being moved by

phenomena. This offering of soulful silence respects the power, history, and life of phenomena. Soulful silence is a ritualistic offering, an invitational gift to phenomena with the message: With arms outstretched, kneeled, and head bowed, this space is for you. Fill me up and move within me, dance slowly or punch these walls. Overwhelm me. Show me your texture and your body, the sculpture of your curves and your edges. Show me your images and hues, move and dwell in this silent space, so that I may know you more deeply than I have known you before.

Soulful Silence, a Hall for Phenomena

Dwelling with phenomena has an intrinsic quality of audienceship, where the silent soul offers to house the experience of a phenomenon. If soulful silence is a hall, the phenomenon is the symphony. Before the symphony, the audience has an expectation of what is to come, they have heard this symphony before. But this time, it will be new. The audience settles into a hushed silence, waiting for the symphony to begin. Behind the heavy stage curtain, the seated musicians hear the audience's silence. They listen into it. The musicians feel their expectant, silent audience grow eager, ready to be moved by symphonic experience. There is a magnetic pull between the audience and the musicians, an attraction. The musicians feel an anticipation and longing to fill the silent air of the hall with sound, and an aching desire to move the audience in a way they have never been moved by this symphony in the past, like a familiar phenomenon preparing to shape a soul it has moved through before.

The curtain lifts, the conductor enters and lifts their arms in preparation for the downbeat, the musicians inhale, and the symphony begins. The violins weep, the trumpet calls out, the remaining brass punctuate the swirling chorus in symphonic bursts and the woodwinds flutter above with their soprano song. The symphony dances and sways within the silent hall, filling the space with an ethereal sculpture of sound. The silence kisses the sound, its curves and hard edges, its expressions and its heartache. The musicians need the silence to be heard, the silent audience needs the symphony so that they may be moved. Like a phenomenon taking shape within one's soul, the audienceship of silence begs the symphony to make itself known. To allow this experience, to let oneself be moved, one learns more about a phenomenon. The phenomenon is new in this moment, this experience is unlike any before because it has never existed in this time with this context, or with this particular orchestra in this particular venue with this particular conductor. If one listens to a symphony throughout their lifetime, one is shaped and moved by the symphony in different ways. As one learns more about it, becomes more intimate with it, they grow wiser about the symphony. If I have a relationship with the phenomenon of depression, each time I feel depressed, I learn more about what depression *is*, I grow wiser about it. My relationship becomes more intimate, more textured, and I feel less blindly pained by its presence when it needs to visit again. By knowing phenomena more intimately in silence, we have the opportunity to ultimately relate to it with empowerment, understanding, and experience.

To say that silence is an isolative experience discounts the notion that phenomena have a life and wisdom of their own, that they shape all beings and by extension, connect all beings. One can posit that if I am wrestling with *my* anxiety, *my* joy, *my* grief, that they are still a part of me. That those things are mine and belong to me. For some that may be true. However, by recognizing the self as a vessel or facilitator and the phenomenon as "the other," one is able to experience the phenomenon from a place of radical acceptance and humility.

Phenomena as Other

To recognize a phenomenon as “the other” allows it to have qualities that are beyond our temporal control. Only then can we begin to wrestle with the notion that these phenomena have existed long before we were born, and will live on through others long after we die. There is an additional level of collectivism and connection with the world when we recognize phenomena in soulful silence. This collective connection does not mandate that individuals access silence in a group with others, rather, that once soulful silence is attained, the individual looks upon their dwelling with a phenomenon as something that all humans have the capacity for. When we allow silence to personify the space of our soul, we become vessels for things much bigger than ourselves. This is not lonely or isolative, rather, it is collectively uniting to recognize that all humans are moved and shaped by the same phenomenological forces.

Soulful silence feels different for every person. I imagine a clear glass cube, with six solid and impenetrable sides. I am the cube, my body, heart, and soul conceptualized into a structure. These walls, this membrane, has housed phenomena before, it has held *Pain* before. Each time, the glass walls of my soul bears witness to what happens within. This silence has learned about Pain before, loved Pain before, and is ready to see a new face of this phenomenon. Once in this space of soulful silence, I wait. I anticipate. I listen. I feel the air within the cube, quietly vibrating with an anticipation. This time the silence feels cool, but not cold. Like the air before a storm, damp and chilled. I listen, and I thank the space for being. I feel the phenomenon of Pain yearning to make itself known in this space. I let it in.

A small black storm cloud takes form in the center of the cube. It is moving, slowly churning, its shape changing but just subtly so. Its color a dark navy. The silent, cool air of the cube begins to vibrate with energy. The space that was once soundless and airy, now feels anxious and electrified. The air grows denser. Quietness is replaced by the frantic buzz of violins, whirring up and down in dissonant minor arpeggios. The storm cloud swells, formidable hues of navy, black, and gray churning and blending as the cloud grows larger. Threatening. The violins grow louder. The now colossal black cloud begins to swirl into a funnel, faster and faster, not yet touching the sides of the cube, but threatening to, aching to. Suddenly, a white crack of lightning bursts out of the clouds and strikes the wall of the cube. *Pain*. The walls of my soul scream and cry out, in shock, hurt and devastated, unable to withstand another blow. Memories and images of painful experiences fuel the churning cloud. Then, whipped around by the tornado of black clouds, another bolt of lightning is hurled at the walls of the cube, striking it once more. The walls arch their back in pain, crying out, blind with agony. Rolling and churning still, the black clouds now ease, they begin to slow, the violins lessen in volume and tempo. The air of the cube, less frenzied than moments before, watches the storm cloud recoil as it retreats into the distance. The air still damp, but lighter now as it exhales. The storm dissolves, noting that it has done all it needs to do, thanking the space for its existence. The space now silent, the walls exhausted, bids the storm of pain a farewell.

Now, a soulful silence once again. However, this silence feels different than the silence before the storm. It has seen more, experienced more. The walls of the cube are beaten and battered, worn by the storm, imprinted upon by Pain. A tired, exhausted sensation permeates through the soulful silence. The space of soulful silence, having allowed and experienced the phenomenon of Pain, now knows Pain in a way it never did before. It knows Pain’s dark swelling clouds, its churning mannerism, the way it lashed out without warning. Its hues, its sounds, the way it moves, the way it hurts, the way it aches to be known by the soulful silence. The silent cube

now knows this experience of Pain in its entirety, because it was the medium with which Pain passed through. By allowing the phenomenon to exist in soulful silence as the other, by not reactively attempting to alleviate or soothe it, the soul learned about the phenomena and will know more next time it needs to visit.

The Pairing of Phenomena and Soulful Silence

The experience of phenomena is comprised of two interacting constructs: a space of soulful silence, and a phenomenological subject like Pain. In, "Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness," Sardello notes that when we sit in silence, "We do not dissolve into the world, nor does the world dissolve into Silence, we each mirror the other within the depths of the soul, we discover that each thing of the world lives deeply within us" (2008). Soulful silence and phenomena, or "the world," pair together in a mutual contract, to love and hold one another, and to cherish the other's particularities, their touch, their beauty. The pairing is intimate and organic. Let us continue considering the phenomenological subject, Pain. Silence attracts a given phenomenon Pain, and Pain is pulled in towards her. Pain is allowed to take shape in the silent space on his own time, ache and move, and knows when it is time to kiss her forehead and bid farewell. Silence was prepared and welcomed Pain, feeling his movement, his breath on her neck, his violence, and acknowledges his love when the time comes for the two to bid farewell. Like lovers parting ways, the pair separate with gratitude and sweetness for the other, thankful for the time they have spent together and the wisdom they've attained, acknowledging that this is not the last time they will meet.

Phenomena have moved through humans and shaped them since the beginning of time, an unbroken thread through all beings. By cultivating the space of silence in oneself, and letting phenomena move through you, there is a deep sense of knowledge and wisdom that lingers long after the experience with the phenomenon has ended. One now knows Pain in an experiential and qualitative way, and is ideally less fearful of Pain in the future. Therapists and counselors must continually deepen our own soulful silence, to better know phenomena as they come.

The Gifts of Soulful Silence

There must be a balance of letting phenomena move through you in soulful silence, acknowledging their own intrinsic wisdom, and alternatively using meditation to set a positive intent, or to select a less tortuous phenomenon one wishes to learn more about. We have explored the subtle differences between meditation and soulful silence, one has an intent and one simply listens. Both modalities offer wisdom and knowledge that can serve as useful tools for the therapeutic relationship. In the position of the therapist, when one is able to cultivate a soulful silence within oneself, she/he/they are then more prepared to attempt to cultivate a silent space for their client. It is the responsibility of the therapist to first help the client set up a conceptual structure to embody their soul, then secondly, to give clients the creative tools to better describe and understand whatever feelings and images appear in that space.

On an introductory level, it is also the responsibility of therapists to relay that this space of soulful silence is challenging to cultivate for the first time. Sardello comments on this experience, "Moments of quiet remind us that we have neglected the core of our being, and we cannot face the implications of this neglect. Anxiety enters. It's better to keep running away from it" (2008). Like an untrained muscle, the therapist must take on the role of trainer, and the client a trainee. The

trainee's muscles are undefined; the potential strength of the muscle is undetermined. However, with gradual and incremental exercise, the muscle gains strength. Its shape becomes more defined. The trainee learns what the muscle is capable of, and the limits it can be pushed to. The trainer points out which exercises and tasks lend themselves to the muscle and eventually, outside of the training environment, the trainee establishes an intuition for which tasks the muscle is best suited to for. To help clients cultivate a space of soulful silence, and know how to use it, is very similar. The ultimate therapeutic goal is to give clients a keen understanding of how to experience their own soulful space, what it is best used for, and how to make meaning of the interaction between soulful silence and phenomena.

Fear of this space of soulful silence is understandable, as it implies an intimacy with a phenomenon one may have never experienced before. The space of silence can have an attractive volatility. Soulful silence is like a magnet hovering above a bed of nails, unsure which nail will suddenly lurch up and pang the magnet's end. It may prod and dent the magnet, or smoothly float up and join the magnet in union. For particularly repressed and impatient phenomena, the space of soulful silence can experience a push and pull while contemplating letting phenomena in. If a phenomenon has been welcomed into silence before, they may be warmly invited in by soulful silence. For frenzied and ignored phenomena that pound at the door, the electricity between silence and the unexplored phenomena grows. Begging to be known, the pair call out and tempt one another, drawing nearer, it is only a matter of time before the soul breaks open and phenomena flood in. Perhaps this is why revisiting past trauma or finally listening to ignored feelings can be so turbulent during the initial sessions of therapy. If the client feels exhausted or untethered by allowing phenomena into their soulful silence, it is the duty of the therapist to help reconstruct the client's weathered soul, guiding them to make meaning out of what occurred, and continually express the gifts that can result from sitting in soulful silence. Sardello notes, that, "We come to these revelations concerning the heart and Silence not by theorizing but from the immediacy of experiencing. [...] In doing so, we are able to enter into a remarkable intensity of Silence and become aware in a far more concentrated manner of the creativity, the healing, the devotion, and all of the qualities of Silence [...] Through practices of the heart we become not just partakers of the gifts of silence but also spiritual creators within this realm" (2006).

Therapists must make it known that the phenomena that enter soulful silence are experienced by all, they shape all of us, and they hold an ultimate wisdom about humans that must be listened to. Phenomena long for human silence and attention. They long to be touched by silence, caressed and embraced. They long to be heard by silence, like a symphony filling a hall with liquid gold. They long to be feared by silence, like a formidable storm cloud. They long to be loved, and silence aches to love it back. We must sit in soulful silence, so phenomena and the soul may love one another the way they have always loved one another. We must routinely attend to their beautiful partnership, so that we may live closer and more intimately with the powerful phenomena that shape us.

References

- Dauenhauer, B. P. (1980). *Silence: The phenomenon and its ontological significance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gehl, P. (1987). *Competens silentium: Varieties of monastic silence in the medieval west*. *Viator*, 18, 125–160.

- Heidegger, M. (2000). *Introduction to metaphysics*. (G. Fried and R. Polt, Trans.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (2005). *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ihde, D. (2007). *Listening and voice: Phenomenologies of sound*. Albany: State University of New York Press. Kramer, J. D. (1988)
- Johnson, J. (2018). Silence in the Age of Noise. *The Christian Century*, 135(16), 42–43.
- Le, T. N., & Levenson, M. R. (2005). Wisdom as self-transcendence: What's love (& individualism) got to do with it? *Journal of Research in Personality*, 39(4), 443–457.
- Lumma, A.-L., Kok, B. E., & Singer, T. (2015). Is meditation always relaxing? Investigating heart rate, heart rate variability, experienced effort and likeability during training of three types of meditation. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, 97(1), 38–45.
- McBlane, A. (2016). Expressing Corporeal Silence: Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, and Posthumanism. *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics*, 6(1), 149–161.
- Sardello, R. (2008). *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Sardello, R. (2006). Silence. Benson, North Carolina: Goldenstone Press, 2006, *Jung Journal: culture & psyche*, 1:4, 72-76.
- Shermer, M. (2018). Imagining No Heaven: The Rise of the Nones and the Decline of Religion. *Skeptic*, 23(2), 32–37.
- Slattery, D. P. (2007). The subtle power of silence. *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche*, 1(4), 72–76.
- Smith, C. A., Parks, R., Parrish, J., & Swirski, R. (2018). Disruptive Silence: Deepening Experiential Learning in the Absence of Technology. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 18(1), 1–14.
- van Elferen, I., & Raeymaekers, S. (2015). Silent dark: the orders of silence. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 19(3), 262–273.
- Walsh, P. J. (2017). The Sound of Silence: Merleau-Ponty on Conscious Thought. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 25(2), 312–335.
- Williams, R. A. of C. (2018). Silence in the face of mystery: God is the encounter we can't control. *The Christian Century*, 135(18), 28–31.
- Yogananda, P. (1946). *Autobiography of a Yogi*. New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers, 2003.
- Yousef, N. (2010). Romanticism, Psychoanalysis and the Interpretation of Silence. *European Romantic Review*, 21(5), 653–672.
- Zhao, S., & Untea, I. (2017). Transcendentalism and Chinese Perceptions of Western Individualism and Spirituality. *Religions*, 8.