

Preparation for Stillness and Silence (December theme)

Winter can be a time of slowing down and retreating into silence. Silence is a meaningful part of life. We meditate in silence, we worry in silence, we grieve in silence, and we pray in silence. Sometimes, we just sit in silence and be still.

But we must come to silence willingly. The personal search for silence and stillness acts as a pathway to deeper understanding. Silence imposed from without, however, can feel like a heavy weight to bear and a block to our creativity. And sometimes to be silent can feel like an abnegation of responsibility.

As E.B. White wrote, "If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day." We long for the repose of a spirit in silence, but are drawn to speak our truth, and hope that someone is there to hear.

To be silent is to invite experience of the larger world into the mind, to enjoy bird song with coffee in the morning, to briefly lose the constant internal voice that niggles and nags, to be present in the now.

To be silenced is to lose oneself in an entirely different way. As Seamus Heaney states in *Passage to the Center*, "What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak. It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us."

One of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves is the gift of listening; listening to all the songs, the voices and the cries, in silence and in respect.

As Rumi said, "The quieter you become the more you are able to hear."

To prepare for the Gathering, think about the experience of silence in your own life. Quietly contemplate the impact of silence, how we use it, and how it defines our experience.

Read the following words on silence. Consider how they relate to your own experience of silence.

There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. *Ecclesiastes 3:7*

Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world ... would do this, it would change the earth.
William Faulkner

The water in a vessel is sparkling; the water in the sea is dark. The small truth has words which are clear; the great truth has great silence. *Rabindranath Tagore*

How much better is silence; the coffee cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here forever with bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself. *Virginia Woolf*

There's really no such thing as the "voiceless." There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard. *Arundhati Roy*

When you are in doubt, be still, and wait; when doubt no longer exists for you, then go forward with courage. So long as mists envelop you, be still; be still until the sunlight pours through and dispels the mists – as it surely will. Then act with courage. *Chief White Eagle, Ponca*

If we had a keen vision of all that is ordinary in human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow or the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which is the other side of silence. *Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot)*

Silence, of course, is crucially different from quietude, the latter being the absence of noise and the former the absence of voice. Silence is to quietude what isolation, that weapon of oppression, is to solitude, that wellspring of creative fertility. *Rebecca Solnit*

Silence may be as variously shaded as speech. *Edith Wharton*

Questions to Ponder

1. Think of a time when you sought silence and stillness in order to collect your thoughts or process difficult or painful experiences. What was that like?
2. Are you comfortable with silence? Do you feel a need to fill the void?
3. Have you used silence as a meditative practice? How would you develop a practice of silence?
4. If silence offers you a gateway to connection with the natural world, reflect on a time when that happened.
5. Silence can be peaceful or it can be a way to avoid conflict in relationships. How do you balance a need for harmony with the desire to speak up for yourself?
6. Think of a time when silence was imposed upon you from without. How did this make you feel? How did you handle it?
7. When we see injustice in the world, sometimes it's hard to speak out. How do you balance your sense of responsibility with your desire for personal serenity?
8. If you have a personal truth that has been silenced, reflect upon it.

Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, think of a situation where you experienced silence or stillness. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence:
"When I am silent, I feel ... "