

# Discovering Silence

“Who then is this, whom even the winds and waters obey?”

(Luke 22:39). (Mark 4:41)

A man creates artistic mosaics to fill in potholes on the roads he travels and elicits unexpected joy at seeing them.<sup>1</sup> The crystalline sounds of a younger sister’s piano playing refracts into shimmering colors—notes and rhythms alternating between waves and fireworks. Beauty, spontaneous or highly refined, can be evidence of humanity’s unlimited imagination and good will. However, media has become predatory even with beauty—almost to the point where little is valued in and of itself, not even individual identity—unless it is superstar status, which status is itself a construct of the media. We see this across the bottom of screens when crawlers interrupt even artistic performers and individual speakers. Why? To advertise yet something more—a next show to watch. The ubiquitous interruptions of still more advertisements epitomize disrespect for the individuals who are speaking or performing, as well as the omnipresence of greed—of never watching enough media, ads, screens, etc. Is it any wonder that today some do not listen with care to what others have to say? To prompt discussion, I sometimes asked students if they thought it possible to think outside the media today, and at other times asked, “When do you hear your own voices?” Students sometimes seemed puzzled, as though the idea of listening to their own voices had not occurred to them, but their most interesting thinking came from having to wrestle with that question along with what they learned from critically interacting with the thinking of others. After some time, a student would respond, “When I’m running.” Then another would say, “Not until I’m alone in my room.” Then another, “I meditate.” “It might sound strange, but when I work out alone at the gym.” “After I turn off my phone and am lying in bed at night.” “When I pray.” “When I take a long walk.” “Only when I’m with a best friend I know has my back.” Almost invariably, students responded that they heard their own voices when they had distanced themselves from distractions that surround us <sup>24/7</sup>, and/or when they discovered the infinite dimension of listening to silence.

They felt free to imagine, to be bold, or just meander along with unspecified thoughts. Students grew more confident as they learned they could build on the writers they had read and use evidence from research to *support their own ideas* and then to explain to readers the *reasons why* they had reached certain conclusions. Nature, too, its beauty, wilderness, rhythms, and power is a place for hearing one’s own voice. Often it acts as a foil to the inundation of non-stop distractions, a place to think apart from the media and data overload that commodify our voices—a refuge poets know well. A recent *60 Minutes* episode featuring an attempt to revive the extinct Tasmanian tiger stated succinctly: “Earth is the face of science and logic. Passions survive just fine in the wild.” The magnitude of disasters during the last few years makes us more aware, perhaps, of a stark contrast in ways we relate to nature. We cannot really get our minds around the sheer expanse of the cosmos. Each new scientific discovery is exhilarating in the ways it challenges previous attempts to conceive of boundlessness, such as— Carbon dating of scattered seeds from the Ice Age helps reveal ancient humans and extinct giant beasts first left footprints in North America about ten thousand years earlier than previously thought.<sup>4</sup> The glowing green tail of comet C/2022 E3 (ZTF), hundreds of millions of light years away, appears in the night sky “for the first time since the Stone Age,” making its closest approach to earth in “50,000 years.”<sup>5</sup> (A light-year is 5.8 trillion miles.) “Astronomers have discovered 12 new moons around Jupiter, putting the total count at a record-breaking 92....Saturn, the one-time leader, comes in a close second with 83 confirmed moons.”<sup>6</sup> “Using advanced analysis of crystals from a moon rock collected during the Apollo 17 mission in 1972...a new study published in *Geochemical Perspectives Letters*...has confirmed that the moon [is] roughly 40 million years older than once believed.”<sup>7</sup> “Astronomers have discovered a rare in-sync solar system with six planets moving like a grand cosmic orchestra, untouched by outside forces since their birth billions of years ago...100 light years away” (that’s a mere 100 x 5.8 trillion miles away),<sup>8</sup> John Mather, a NASA senior scientist working with the James Webb Telescope at Goddard Space Flight Center, is understandably excited by “spectacles of the cosmos” transmitted in the year since scientists have had access to the powerful new \$10 billion telescope.

Scientists are now said to capture light from billions of years ago, and we learn that one galaxy has a staggering hundreds of billions of galaxies within it.<sup>9</sup> As much as we think we understand an ecosystem, when we learn something new or more research is done on something we were unaware of before, we realize there is still always *that much more* to understand. Recall that the original estimates regarding water flow at Lake Mead were flawed. Or Randy Horton’s concern that scientific models of global warming may have seriously underestimated the outcome of “aggregate warming.”<sup>10</sup> Now, when referring to “Stephan’s Quintet”—“a multi-wavelength exploration”—and spectacular, “deep field image showing thousands of galaxies stretching into the distant universe,” Mather simply remarks, “We’re still at work on what all those mean ... *all the predictions were wrong*.”<sup>11</sup> So the universe continues to both fascinate and baffle. A microscopic bit within a drop of pond water reveals minute universes of imperceptible complexities.<sup>12</sup> That microscopic bit is a mere fractal of a larger arrangement nested within a wider fractal of space, and this expanded “space” is itself nested or embedded within larger measures and wider expanses of space that recede into a *mis en abyme* of galaxies billions of light years away. We can’t exhaust the universe because, whether grand and/or imperceptible, each facet of a sub-atomic bit opens into infinite more dimensions...of infinity. So, given that we are studying infinity, regardless of how much we study, infinite more remains to be explored. The 13.8 to 14.5 billion years or so ago that scientists theorize preceded a Big Bang is comparable to other human narratives that often begin, “Once upon a time, long, long ago...” Billions of years ago is surely a vast expanse of time ago— in fact, so inconceivably long ago that there is room for error and/or constant revision. In the aftermath of disasters, nature invites us into silence... calm...even peace, where—once a surge of its power is spent and we are alone with what is greater than ourselves, we are humbled—even relieved, to cede control.

Nature, then, can humble with its majesty, making us keenly aware of what is greater than our own infinitesimal places within it. The infinity present in nature is also present *within* the human being—that dimension of existence that, throughout all of time, is in a process of realizing its own identity. When we awaken to the intangible, we attempt to communicate with inexhaustible and ineffable infinity. The soul is the dimension of awareness in human beings that perceives and responds to this unfathomable wonder, that many call God.

“A color stands abroad on solitary hills that science cannot overtake, but human nature feels.” Emily Dickinson

“A Light Exists in Spring” 1896.<sup>13</sup>

Devastating as it was, the pandemic’s spread of death, toxicity, and decay—and Nature’s concurrent “renovation” of much of the landscape—left us with something like a clean slate with which to ponder and then perhaps re-imagine a future in some ways different and in some ways better for those to whom we pay it forward. So many individuals bring hope to communities devastated by climate change and bring tables of plenty for those who are hungry or without. Once we start sharing with others, we participate in giving and receiving love that reinforces elemental human bonds. Sharing food, volunteering child care and/or providing elder care; bringing relief to the overly burdened; taking time to talk with someone lonely, wanting every child in America to be equally, well-educated, and new, bipartisan political groups who seek to actually solve the nation’s problems are all small acts of service that can give meaning and purpose to our lives. Service is love in action, something Gandhi was aware of when he advocated being the change we want to see in the world. Trailblazer Sandra Day O’Connor, the first woman on the U.S. Supreme Court, seems to agree, “Our purpose in life is to help others along the way.”<sup>14</sup> We are called to do the same now—to respond to each other’s needs in the face of natural or physical disasters, although definitions of both “neighbor” and “needs” have expanded. No longer is “neighbor” just the person next door, but rather, each human being we meet, and sometimes needs are more intimate than physical deprivation. We may need to “hear” loneliness—a very different form of silence—to show patience and understanding with ingrained trauma, to share grief and insecurities in ways that at first seem awkward or even upset our own defenses.

It may be more difficult for people to reach out to connect with others, given the tremendous mental health needs that now confront us, the drug addictions and the ongoing crises of shootings and hatred that seem intent on tearing us apart rather than allowing wounds to heal. But the pain around us calls for caring more deeply, more compassionately, perhaps with something like Hawaii’s *aloha* spirit, expanding our “village” to those who do not even have a village around them. Recall that “big bet” (see 5a) of the advertising industry’s plan to intentionally increase economic consumption: “Our enormously productive economy demands that (among other strategies)...we seek our spiritual satisfaction...in consumption.”<sup>15</sup> At an international conference on the economy, Pope Francis reordered those priorities: “Human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are seekers of meaning before being seekers of material goods. That is why the first capital of any society is spiritual capital.”<sup>16</sup> Reinforced by high-tech and AI, the advertising industry replaces self-worth and spiritual needs with endless entertainment. Economic consumption often replaces human bonds with digital links. But these “rewards” do not satisfy the deeper needs and longings of the human heart. Secularization of desire coopts human purpose and self-worth, replacing those innate senses with keeping us in comfort zones and then feeding us non-stop, Faustian desires of wanting always more, i.e., greed. We might give careful thought to what technology continues to replace—those digital connections that substitute for human bonds because our more elemental human needs do not go away. Spiritual needs are felt in human restlessness, in fears hidden or buried deep inside, and in a gnawing longing—hunger for purpose and meaning. Pope Francis tried to show us how to care for others, society’s lepers, the sick and sorrowful, the outcasts, the forgotten and vulnerable—in all of whom we likely recognize something of ourselves. Silence allows us to imagine beyond the known light spectrum to what we are not able to see. Pulling back the glittering curtain of materialism that advertising keeps in front of our eyes allows us to feel more deeply than what its spectacles hypnotize us with and what incessant violence numbs us to.

World traveler Pico Iyer once concluded what the Dalai Lama and others have also discovered: “Sitting quietly and giving ourselves permission to be still can be a journey on its own.”<sup>17</sup> Iyer continues, “Being in the now, “we can’t dodge or slip below the intensities of the moment...It’s not just about sights, but insights; it’s not just about taking pictures with your smartphone, but about learning how to see.”<sup>18</sup> Silence can offer deeper access to intuitive awareness, to a stillness of time far more unsettling than those of human activities: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Native Americans and other indigenous peoples also find a spiritual dimension permeates the natural world. Others are affected by touching nature—for example, when we plant gardens, listen to rain, harness the winds to sail, watch the sky unfold in myriad patterns, or witness an eclipse...together...as did many on April 7, 2024, and then felt a sense of shared wonder. The Christian God, too, communicates via natural phenomena: “You heard His words out of the fire. (Deuteronomy 4:36) “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.” (Exodus 19:18-19) “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. (Isaiah 9:1-2, 5-6) “His face shone like the sun. ... A bright cloud enveloped them and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love.’” (Matthew 17:25) “I am the light of the world.” (John 8:12) “A sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.” (Acts 2:2) The ancient Israelites had a fear of the sea, for them a sign of chaos and death.<sup>19</sup> They “stood in awe of the Creator’s power to govern the ocean waters: Storms beyond natural disasters can plague human beings from within. Death can be the “otherness” of each person who must reckon with the end of his/her being. It is that hesitation that keeps some from using nuclear weapons. Try as we might today to forcefully insist on our wills, on our own power and technological expertise, even now nature can cause fear with its insurmountable powers followed by wonder and awe, as those before us have exclaimed: “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him?” (Matthew 8:27) Christians believe the infinite vibrancy of creation is divine, that the divine entered into material form and endured suffering in order to heal all of humanity. This is love infinitely more powerful than anything we might have thought to fear.