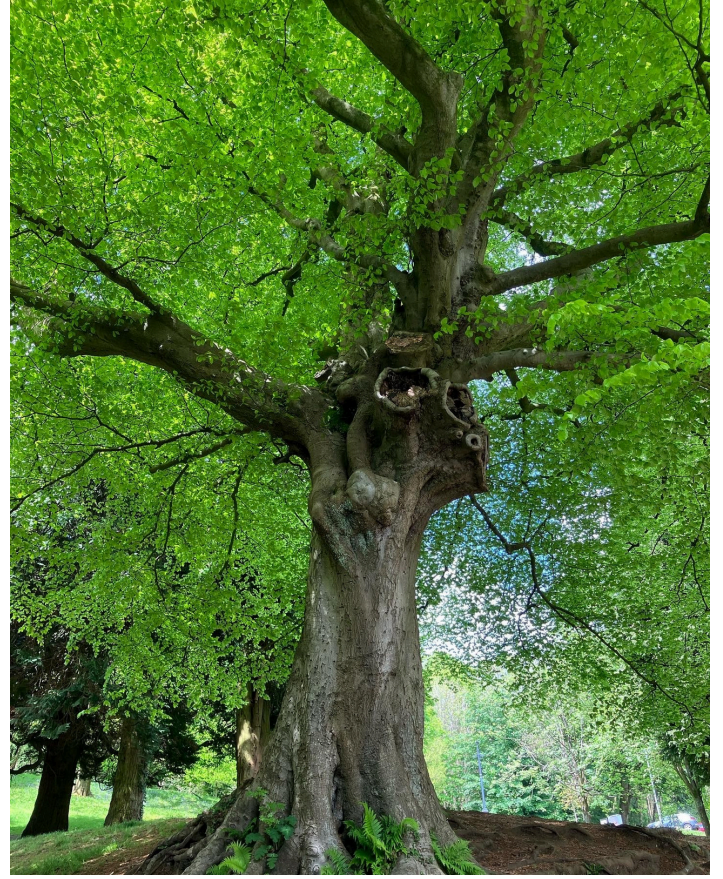


# Quiet & Silence

Elijah Yohannan



There is an odd little song by the American folk-rock duo, Simon & Garfunkel, called “The Sound of Silence.” This haunting piece was penned by Simon in 1964, three months after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Perhaps you’ll recall its opening lyrics: “Hello darkness, my old friend / I’ve come to talk with you again.” Of greater interest to me here is the third verse, in which the narrator describes a scene from a vision he saw while asleep:

And in the naked light, I saw  
Ten thousand people, maybe more.  
People talking without speaking.  
People hearing without listening.  
People writing songs that voices never shared.  
And no one dared  
Disturb the sound of silence.

The narrator tries to reach these people, warning that the silence grows like a cancer, but he fails: “My words, like silent raindrops fell / And echoed in the wells of silence.” Garfunkel later explained at a live performance that the song was about “the inability of people to communicate with each other, not particularly intentionally but especially emotionally, so what you see around you are people unable to love each other.”

## Y o h a n n a n

These lyrics recently crossed my mind as I made a trip from Alabama to my hometown in Texas. It's a drive I've made several times before, generally taking between nine and ten hours. Over time, I've come to spend an increasing number of those hours per trip sitting in silence—no music, no radio, and no podcasts. This last time, I decided to spend the whole ten hours like this. For the first six hours, I did it willingly—it was a calm, peaceful contrast to the feverish haste which characterized the preceding school months. For the last four, I did it to see if I could. For just a day, I opted out of our modern attention economy, and subconsciously declared, in the words of a certain fictional scrivener, “I prefer not to.” I sat and watched the world pass around me—groves of trees vigilantly guarding the edge of the road, open fields nursing livestock and greenery, a painted sky pouring forth a vast array of subdued and resplendent hues. All the while, the road hummed beneath me, steady and reliable, bearing me up and leading me home. At times I hummed and sang, meditated and contemplated, soliloquized and prayed. At times I did none of those things at all. And during those hours, what I found was that the boredom and solitude were not nearly so bad as I may have imagined—that the quiet was quite comforting. I now imagine heaven as having some form of this quiet.

This was a curious revelation. I recently wrote another essay on my time working at a grocery store (I know, what *riveting* topics I've chosen to expound upon). In this work, I described a deep desire which grew in me with each passing shift: a desire for connection, even if brief. I yearned to help someone, to have a real conversation, or to make someone's day better in some meaningful way. Every once in a while, such an opportunity came; some of my favorite moments in that job were when I got to help non-native speakers by explaining things in what little Spanish I knew, for example. My favorite memory came when a mother and son found themselves short on a purchase at the self-checkout station. I volunteered a dollar from my wallet, and, after a brief back-and-forth, she accepted before quickly paying me back with four quarters from her car and several words of gratitude. As a self-checkout attendant, I stood for hours, watching hundreds of people go by per shift, each with their own style, mannerisms, and presence. I smiled at each one, watched for opportunities to serve, and wished them well as they left the store. Since I was constantly surrounded by people and frequently interacting with them, I might have expected that I would feel better in these shifts than in that long drive—that I would feel less isolated, less bored, less antsy. But I didn't feel this way at all. Often, I felt objectified and alone—a part of the fading scenery in someone else's day.

Why is it that we can feel our most lonely in a crowd of people—even, sometimes, amidst a group of friends? If we *are* so lonely, why is a walk alone in nature, by contrast, so rejuvenating, despite us having no one to talk to? Why, for me, did the long drive alone outshine a shift at the store? This, I believe, is the difference between what I will call quiet and silence. The quiet is calm, peaceful, comforting. The silence is deafening.

## Y o h a n n a n

There was, in the late 1900s, an Austrian-Israeli philosopher by the name of Martin Buber. Among his works was a book titled *Ich und Du*, or *I and Thou*. In this work, Buber explained two ways of addressing the world: the *I-It* relation and the *I-Thou* relation. Though there is certainly risk in attempting to summarize his often-cryptic prose, I will here venture to do so. An *I-It* relation to something involves merely using or experiencing it; it is a form of objectification, and a way of living-in-the-past that often characterizes our day-to-day living. An *I-Thou* relation is a form of present encounter. In either case, Buber postulates, the *I* is inseparable from that which it relates to—a relation is singular in nature. Though one could enter into either relationship with a nonliving entity—such as a tree—the distinction becomes particularly significant when addressing our relation to other humans. To relate to a person from the lens of *I-It* is to view them in terms of their function, utility, or component characteristics—to turn them into an object in your world. To relate to a person through the lens of *I-Thou* involves recognition of another as a whole being, as opposed to a means to some end. Buber advocates an openness to opportunities for *I-Thou* encounters that show up in our lives, especially with other people. He wrote (with ‘Thou’ translated here as ‘You’), “Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines—one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity—so it is with the human being to whom I say You. I can abstract from him the color of his hair or the color of his speech or the color of his graciousness; I have to do this again and again; but immediately he is no longer You.” Being a theist, Buber proposed that our *I-Thou* relations are how (and often where) we encounter God, the *Eternal Thou*.

I’ve had a number of what I would call *I-Thou* experiences in my life. My encounter with the woman in the grocery store was one of them. In that moment, she ceased to be ‘just another customer’ to me. Here was a woman with life-experiences, beliefs, longings; I wondered what had led her to this point, and what motivated her initial hesitancy to accept an act of goodwill. I too ceased to be *I-It*, as I so frequently found myself to be during that job. I felt, for a moment, unobjectified and seen. I was recognized as another whole being who lived, and felt, and deliberated, just as she did—rather than as a mere marker in the context of the environment and the day. Most other key *I-Thou* moments I remember came from listening to people. In high school alone, from varying degrees of initiative on my part, I found peers and adults opening up to me about things that they rarely, if ever, dared to share. Some were more surface level. An acquaintance had taken to drinking with his coworkers to fit in, but worried about the example he was setting for his younger brother by coming home drunk. An instructor shared their fears for and of the world at large, and of its various political forces. Other things shared were much deeper. A friend approached me and shared through tears how feelings of inadequacy had led him to a desire to take his own life. A classmate described how issues with body-image made them often reluctant to leave their house. A man I had known for a week recounted how childhood trauma had previously led to struggles with mental health and sexual deviance. From fractured relationships with parents, to conspiracy theories, to concealed addictions, many hidden things were shared with me—some through my own pursuit and others completely by their volition, but all precious and sacred. I wondered why this was. *Why share with me?* I did not know until recently.

## Y o h a n n a n

At the end of last school year, I had a meeting with a couple of other student leaders and the director of the campus ministry I have been a part of during my time in college. We had met in the same way the whole semester, discussing the ministry, sharing with each other, and praying over one another. At this particular meeting, we each wrote three affirmations about the others—positive characteristics or things that we believed they had been doing well. The last person to share their affirmations for me was a girl I knew the least well out of the group, but whom I had gotten to know better during these times together. Before she shared, I would say that I had responded to the others' affirmations well. But her final affirmation caught me completely off-guard: "You make me feel heard." An unexpected wave of emotion swept over me—I could feel it in my chest and my eyes. My words became jumbled and garbled—I hardly knew what to say. I later thought about this moment, and it struck me as rather odd. *Why, of all that was said, did that affect me in such a strong way?* I thought hard about it and came to realize that this was what I had wanted for a long time as well. Almost my whole life, I too wanted to be heard—for someone to truly listen. I realized that so often at home, at school, and at my various activities, I was treated not as a whole being, but as *It*—a thing in the form of whatever the viewer believed or wanted me to be. It was only after coming to college and forming several key, deep relationships that I felt like I received in full what I had subconsciously longed for.

I think everyone wants to be seen and heard, one way or another. Looking back, my experiences of deep connection with others demonstrate this. If, as the Bible purports, we are indeed relational beings and human brokenness is indeed universal, this should come as no surprise. Yes, we all want to be seen and heard.

And yet, at the same time, we don't. Herein lies a great irony. As much as I've witnessed a desire for connection and openness in others, I've seen an accompanying hesitancy, a recoiling. In a recent Bible study I led for the aforementioned campus ministry, I asked the group how often they feel pressure to present a better image of themselves to the world—one less correlated with their true feelings and selves. The answer was virtually uniform: *all the time*.

There is, in the Genesis account of mankind's fall into sin, a detail that has always struck me as interesting. It comes after Adam and Eve take and eat the fruit that they were commanded not to eat.

*7. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*

*8. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*

Genesis 3:7–8

## Y o h a n n a n

What is interesting here is the two-fold severance of relationship we witness. In the Garden of Eden, the author writes, Adam and Eve were naked before each other, unashamed and in open communion. They saw each other, were exposed before each other, and hid nothing. They were likewise spiritually “naked” before God, walking with Him in the Garden without doubt or fear. Yet upon eating the fruit, their first instinct was to *hide* from each other’s gaze—covering their nakedness with sown coverings—and to *hide* from God amongst the trees. Indeed, the two are no longer able to stay in the Garden, and a curse is pronounced on their relation to each other; both relationships are broken beyond human repair. And yet hope is not lost.

It is likewise interesting to note that the Christian God is fundamentally, among other things, a God of *relationship*. It is believed that before time began, the three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were in complete eternal relationship *with each other*. This is why God pronounces in the Garden, “It is not good for the man to be alone”; man is said to be made in God’s image, and thus is created for *relationship* with Him and others. Though man’s relationship with God is fractured, the Old Testament repeatedly prophesies and foreshadows a coming Messiah—a mediator and sacrificial lamb who would *restore* this relationship. The Christian believes that Jesus is this foretold Messiah, and that through *relationship* with him we may have a restored *relationship* with the Father and receive the Holy Spirit. God, then, calls the Christian to deeper, more meaningful *relationships* with the people around them. Ultimately, they look forward to the coming eternity, in which their vertical relationship with God and horizontal relationships with others are *fully* restored, as it was originally in the Garden. This is what I long for.

Until then, however, we live in a world filled with silence. I know you’ve heard it as well. We hear it in the political debates on TV, and around our family dinner tables. We feel it in the repeated conversations that never break the surface tension of our lives. It oppresses us in those moments when we feel most alone. And we too whisper it—talking without speaking, hearing without listening, writing spiritual songs that voices will never share; we rarely dare disturb the sound of silence. We dwell in it, even cultivating it as we live in a perpetual state of *I-It*. We dare not address the *Thou*, for to do so would require a relinquishment of control, a flattening of the ego, an openness to new and frightening possibilities. Buber writes, “Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.” To speak *I-Thou* is to encounter the manifold and whole, and so manifest our manifold and whole selves. We recoil before God and man—these most pressing of *Thou’s*—sowing spiritual garments over ourselves so that the whole may, by our own volition, become the censored. We submerge our brokenness beneath the deafening silence.

Yet we crave true connection all the same. Deep down, I suspect that we all long to see and be seen—to hear and be heard. We yearn to break the silence or to have it broken for us. And I believe we should.

How then, do we do this? How do we open ourselves to *I-Thou*, remove our spiritual coverings, and pierce the silence in even a small way? On the basis of my lived experience, I will venture to provide three ideas. Each finds a basis in scripture, but I believe their wisdom can be found useful for people of all walks.

First, share deeply with those close to you. New Testament writers such as Paul found this fundamentally important to their work in ministering to others. He wrote in one letter:

*Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.*

1 Thessalonians 2:8

Indeed, such Christians are even commanded to confess their sin—which we are so inclined to hide—to the other Christians whom they walk alongside. With their whole selves forgiven through Christ, there is nothing left to hide. Even outside of the church, however, I've witnessed firsthand how one person's choice to be vulnerable can unbolt the doors to greater openness, honesty, and connection—doors that otherwise would have been shut tight. Many times, this person was me, and I can certainly say that it takes much courage and humility to do this. But rarely was it not worth it. I can also share from experience that I personally have benefitted greatly from sharing with others; sharing deeply and fully with a few members of my campus ministry was an irreplaceable step toward healing from past trauma and progressing in my journey with mental health.

On that note, however, I will add a caveat, which is my second piece of advice, a staggering warning from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount:

*Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.*

Matthew 7:6

There is more than one interpretation of this verse, but mine here is this: choose wisely *what* you share with *whom*. I was recently reminded of this verse when speaking to a friend about her last experience at her family's Thanksgiving dinner. Her family is largely conservative, whereas she is much less so. As those around her echoed similar opinions and expressions of confusion with the 'other side,' my friend ventured to share a counterpoint—a potential explanation for the very questions they were asking. Upon this, they swiftly turned on her in a manner akin to a pack of wolves—or, I suppose, pigs in this case—and verbally tore her to pieces. Yes, we should talk to truly speak, but this does not mean that we should continually (and unwisely) open ourselves to abuse. While it is an act of courage to choose vulnerability, it can be a form of naivety to do so in a context unbecoming of it and to expect a response dissimilar to what we have previously witnessed.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I would urge all to truly listen. Attend to those around you, knowing that they are likely hurting as well. Perhaps you've heard this famous verse from James:

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.*

James 1:19

I believe that if more people did this, it would certainly alleviate much pain in the world. I suspect my own practice of this is one of the reasons why people have been inclined to share their lives with me. But I would like to take this even a step further with another simple yet profound verse from Paul:

*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.*

Romans 12:15

I mentioned earlier a friend who came to me from the depths of suicidal ideation. We spoke quietly, alone in a small music closet. My heart was deeply moved for him; it hurt me to see him hurt. We cried together in that closet, he for all he was feeling, and me for the suffering I saw in him. Now, years later, he is one of the most successful peers I have, and he often texts me about his victories, large and small. I believe he does this because he knows that I will rejoice with him, just as I mourned with him that day. Though we have generally moved apart with time, and our conversations are not as they used to be, I am glad that I can still be there for him in this way—that I've made him feel heard and broken the silence when he needed it most. Such relationships are abundantly meaningful, and through such things, I, myself, have found a unique and significant gratification—a type of quiet in its own right.

I appeal to you to join me.

Share deeply. Listen intently. Stand in relation.

Savor and share the quiet.

Speak *I-Thou*,

and break the silence.

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Howard Books, 2008.

Eliot, Marc (2010). *Paul Simon: A Life*. John Wiley and Sons. ISBN 978-0-470-43363-8.

Holy Bible: New International Version. Zondervan, 2011.

Melville, Herman. "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street." 1853. Project Gutenberg, 2010.

Simon, Paul. "The Sound of Silence." Performed by Simon and Garfunkel, Columbia Records, 1964.

*Header photo anonymous*