

On the Path

The Healing Powers of Silence and Wilderness

By Keith Hammer

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A year ago, Pastor Peter Shober wrote a nice article about the healing power of wilderness for his hometown Missoulian newspaper. "A wonderful intersection occurs between spirituality and wilderness," he wrote. "Spirituality is the connecting force of the unseen and mysterious. Wilderness is the natural, seen in all its original beauty. When the two paths cross, something sacred occurs."

"The church, ever since Jesus took off for the Holy 40 days in the wilderness," he continues, "has understood that a time of stark emptying is powerful medicine . . . When away from all the noise and fury of the 'real' world, we . . . discover anew that our spiritual lives are better guided by subtraction than addition."

"Wilderness and spiritual practice," Pastor Shober concludes, "have powerful ways of returning us to our normal lives with renewed intention and resolve to not only take better care of our bodies and our good earth but to deepen our lives with compassion and justice."

Writing for Ode magazine of his experiences halfway around the world in Bali, Tijn Touber reports on awakening on March 7, 2008 to a deafening silence. "It's 'Nyepi,'" he writes, "the first day of the Hindu new year, when no one talks, travels or works. It's a day of silence, prayer and reflection that enables the Balinese to start the New Year with spirits renewed."

"In Western countries, the modern, run-away 24-hour economy has clearly won the battle against people [seeking times and places for silence]," Touber notes. "Forget about days of silence, occasionally leaving the car in the garage or shopping-free Sundays. Many countries are literally never silent."

Touber then tells the story of a Belgian radio journalist assigned to record five minutes of silence in the Flanders region. After many months, the man concluded it was impossible to find five minutes of silence anywhere in Flanders, his many attempted recordings always interrupted by trains, cars, airplanes, radios, voices, and sirens.

The other day I was suddenly struck by a moment of silence between passing cars as I walked back from our mailbox a few hundred yards down Foothill Road north of Bigfork. It was an increasingly rare moment when all that could be heard was the breeze in the trees and the call of a nearby raven. It was indeed one of those moments when my attention became equally riveted by the absence of noise, however brief, as by the sounds of nature surrounding me.

As much as I enjoy working around the house, yard and woodlot, spending time with even the best of friends, writing or playing music, I've learned that my peace of mind is also dependent on the long periods of silence experienced only by walking or skiing in the quiet backcountry. For me there simply is no substitute, even though my life is blessed with the many benefits and relative quiet of rural living.

Pastor Shober's article suggests I am not alone in this: "Living in Montana can be very hard, but it is also a joy. Surrounded as we are by wild places, we take for granted

what most can only imagine. I have lived and served my church in Missoula for 18 years and I don't think there has been a day when I haven't looked up to the mountains or seen some critter or smelled a pine-filled breeze and been given solace. It is special, and I've never lived anywhere where people loved where they lived so much."

But I am at a loss to try and explain through words or music how or why silence is so essential to our wellbeing. I can only suggest that a lot of the tension and injustice in our world would find its own resolution if we only gave higher value and priority to silence and its remarkable ability to set us right again. I can only testify to the importance of knowing quiet wilderness exists, of conserving it both for its own sake and for when we and our grandchildren need it most, and of spending quiet time in wilderness to heal ourselves and the world.

Perhaps the Cistercian monk and priest Thomas Keating summed it up best in saying: "Silence is God's first language. Everything else is a translation."

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Silence and solace in the Swan Range. Keith Hammer photo.