

Foreword

"The ancient tradition of silent contemplation is as important to the modern mind as it was to those of our forebears - and the Quiet Garden Movement has been facilitating the practice of mindful contemplation for the past 25 years, in gardens across the world.

I am delighted to see the launch of Quiet25 - it provides a thoughtful, accessible, and refreshing exploration of the journey into silence, of equal help to groups and individuals navigating the elements of contemplative prayer and practice, whether familiar with the silent land or having never ventured there before.

I hope you'll find time to explore the ancient practice of silence through this rich new resource as we celebrate 25 years of Quiet Gardens."

Dr ROWAN WILLIAMS

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📍 **Session format**

(90 mins)

Welcome - tea/coffee available

Opening section – includes:

- **Listen-in** (sentence/word reflection exercise) and **Stilling exercise**

Theme and discussion – includes:

- 🗨️ **Leader outlines the session and introduces the themes**
- 🗨️ **Discussion** on themes with **questions to consider**

Exercises section - usually need access to outside space

- 🔒 **Experiments in silence** (indicated in each session, and fully explained in Appendix 1 - page 37)
- 🌿 **Senses exercises** (indicated in each session, and fully explained in Appendix 2 - page 43)
 - 📍 indicates exercise needs **outside space**
 - 👥 indicates **group** exercise
 - 👤 indicates **individual** exercise
 - 👏👏 indicates **feedback and reflections** on exercises

Closing section - includes introducing the weeks:

- 🙏 **Silent prayer practice** ⌚ **Daily silent time**
- 📅 **Weekly task** ● **Closing stilling exercise**



Session 1

Why silence?...

An introduction to silence and its use

Opening section

 (10 mins)

- **Listen-in and Stilling exercise** (see page 3)


Suggested Poem/Readings:

- *“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” - Mark 6:31*
- *“I have shown you the power of silence, how thoroughly it heals and how fully pleasing it is to God.... Know that it is by silence that the saints grew, that it was because of silence that the power of God dwelt in them, because of*

*silence that the mysteries of God were known to them.” -
Desert Father Amononas¹*

- Opening two paragraphs of ‘The Song Of The Traveller’ by Thomas Merton from *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*

Theme and discussion (20 mins)

 At the core of the Quiet Garden Movement is the understanding that silence is profoundly important for our health and wellbeing, as well as for our spiritual development. Time in quiet outdoors in particular seems to nourish the soul.

What do we mean by silence?

The impact of human-made sound has increased drastically in recent history, as has the balance of noise and silence in our lives.

- 48 per cent of people in the UK feel their home life is spoilt to some extent by noise,
- and between 2000 and 2012 noise moved up from ninth to fourth place in a list of 12 environmental problems when respondents were asked which affected them most.²
- Eight million people across Europe suffer sleep deprivation because of traffic noise.³


Silence can be interpreted in many different ways. For example, a lack of audible sound or presence of sounds of very low intensity. The word *silence* also refers to any absence of communication or hearing – and is used in reference to nonverbal communication and spiritual connection.

In day to day life we will rarely ever encounter a complete lack of audible sound. Noise pervades everywhere. No matter how remote you are, it is very likely that sounds from cars or aeroplanes will be heard at some point. A total absence of noise is not realistic. Even if not a manmade sound, nature will be heard: birds singing, leaves rustling, dogs barking. Quiet stillness can in some respects be interpreted as a form of sound – a symphony of silence.

Questions to consider:

- How noisy is your area / home / life?
- Is this noise noticeable to you in your daily life?
- How do you react to this noise?

What are the benefits of silence? (10 mins)

 Noise, especially noise over 30 decibels, is associated with high blood pressure, anxiety, and stress. Research has found that silence has the opposite effect, releasing tension in the brain and body.

- **Reduces stress** - Silence may not cure illness, but it can help reduce stress which in turn can improve the body's overall capacity to maintain health.
- **Lowers blood pressure** - Silence seems to contribute towards lowered blood pressure – one study found two minutes of silence to be more relaxing than listening to “relaxing” music, based on changes in blood pressure and blood circulation in the brain.⁴

- **Regenerates the brain** - Silence can regenerate brain cells – another study compared the effects of ambient noise, white noise and silence, on the brains of mice. Although the researchers intended to use silence as a control in the study, they found that two hours of silence daily led to the development of new cells in the part of the brain associated with memory, emotion, and learning (the hippocampus). This suggests that silence could be therapeutic for conditions like depression and Alzheimer's, which are associated with decreased rates of neuron regeneration in the hippocampus.⁵
- **Restores mental function** - Silence can replenish our mental resources and energize us. In our everyday lives, sensory input bombards us from every direction. When we finally get away from these disruptions and distractions, our brain's attention centres are given opportunity for restoration.
- **Improves decision-making and problem-solving** - The ceaseless attentional demands of modern life put significant burden on the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which is involved in high-order thinking, decision-making and problem-solving. As a result, our attentional resources become drained – we become distracted, mentally tired and struggle to focus. Silence can help us recharge our energy, sitting silently for a few minutes letting our mind and body fully rest.

According to *attention restoration theory*, **the brain can restore its finite cognitive resources when we're in environments with lower levels of sensory input** than usual – for instance, the quiet stillness you find when walking alone in nature.⁶

- **Increases our perception** – When facing a new challenge, by making silence a first response, we give ourselves the

chance to reflect before speaking, helping increase the quality of our response and engagement.

- **Stimulates creativity** – Silence is a great facilitator of creativity. When we stop, allowing the mind to drift a while and tune-in to the beauty and aesthetic around us, we give space for creative sparks.
- **Increases our understanding of one another** – Paradoxically, silence does not cut us off from people, but has the effect of moving us closer to those who share in the silence around us.


Silence is a great **communication tool** in itself. It is **crucial to listening**. Many of us engage in listening only as a way of waiting until it is our turn to speak – but silence gives us the ability to listen effectively, helping us to listen to understand, rather than listening to reply. The word listen even has the same letters as the word silent!

Experiments in silence exercise (10 mins)

#1 Communicating in silence (see page 37)

Exercise that explores how much we communicate silently.

The practice of silence (10 mins)

 When we refer to silence we are not talking in the literal sense of a complete absence of sound, but rather the condition or quality of being quiet or still - an intentional period of time or space without noise, whilst accepting that there will be varying degrees of internal and ambient sound.

The practice of silence is an invitation to, *“Listen to the inner thoughts and feelings within... and... begin to notice an instinctive channel of wisdom perpetually guiding your footsteps.”*⁷

Silence is often used as a metaphor for inner stillness. *Being in silence* can help us take a step away from constant thoughts. There are many phrases to describe this: inner silence, internal silence, stillness, contemplation – all of which suggest more than the mere absence of physical sound. The state of ‘being in silence’ calms the ‘chattering mind’ – and is less about absence and more about presence. Indeed, religious traditions advocate the importance of being quiet and still of mind and spirit for our spiritual development.

The Australian aboriginal word for silence is *dadirri*, which has been defined as:

*“the open-eyedness of someone who explores where he or she has always belonged.”*¹¹

Martin Laird, in his book *Into The Silent Land*, suggests that:

“The practice of silence... cannot be reduced to a spiritual technique... A spiritual practice simply disposes us to allow something to take place. For example, a gardener does not actually grow plants. A gardener practices certain gardening skills that facilitates growth that is beyond the gardener’s

*“Silence is multifaceted, a densely woven fabric of many different strands and threads.”*⁸

Sara Maitland
Book of Silence

*“Silence is where we speak something deeper than our words...”*⁹

From the film, *In Pursuit of Silence* (2016)

*“Silence is not the absence of sound, but the absence of self.”*¹⁰


Anthony de Mello

direct control... And so it is with contemplative practice, not a technique, but a skill. The skill required is interior silence.”¹²

There are two contemplative practices of fundamental importance in the Christian tradition: the **practice of stillness** (also called meditation, still prayer or contemplative prayer) and the **practice of awareness (or watchfulness)**.


Using our senses can be helpful for nurturing the practice of contemplation – helping us **deepen our concentration** and **expand our awareness**.

Senses exercises

  (20 mins)

#1 Sight - Using your senses in silence


Go outside and try a couple of the *#1 Sight Senses Exercises* (see page 43)

 **Feedback** - Give people an opportunity to share how they found this exercise, and what they observed.

Closing section

(10 mins)

Introduce Daily practice & Weekly task

 As part of the Quiet25 course, you are invited to spend a regular daily time in silent contemplative prayer or meditation. We suggest selecting the same time each day. First thing in the morning, midday, or last thing at night are naturally good times. Whenever is the best time for you, start with a daily 10-minutes time of silence and gradually build from there. Starting this week, with 10-minutes each day, over the next 5 weeks we'll gradually increase the time to 25-minutes.

We recommend having a comfortable place to do this – somewhere you can sit upright, not slouched (a prayer stool can be useful but is not essential). A timer is also really useful, to free yourself from watching the clock. You might also find it useful to write your experience of these practices in a journal afterwards.

Each week we will also introduce a *Silent prayer practice*, which you can use as an ‘anchor’ during your daily practice. When you find that your attention wanders during these times, gently return to the practice by concentrating on your breathing.

Silent prayer practice #1 - Breath

Sit with your back upright but not stiff, your feet touching the ground. Let your weight distribute evenly on your chair/stool. Hands softly at rest in your lap or by your sides. Notice your breath, as you inhale and exhale. Each time your mind wanders, gently bring it back to noticing your breath.

Daily silent time #1 – 10-minutes

Spend 10-minutes in silence each day this week.

Weekly task #1

This week note down what distracts you. During your silent practice what type of distractions get in your way? Is there a pattern?

● **Closing stilling exercise**



Close with a short time of stillness together – see page 3.

Experiments in silence

Exercises to explore silence

 indicates the exercise *needs* to be done in an outside space – although they *all can* be done outside.

 indicates **group** exercise

 indicates **individual** exercise

#1 Communicating in silence (10 mins)

We often think we communicate by voice, but research suggests much of communication is actually non-verbal (only 20% is verbal) – this experiment explores how much we communicate silently.

Read aloud the person roles below – and get people into pairs and decide who will do which role.

- **Person 1:** choose a situation or person that prompts a certain feeling (it doesn't matter what the feeling is, and you won't have to share what the situation is or who the person is). Think about the situation / person, and allow your body / face to do whatever it's going to do. Don't act, just feel the feeling - letting your body naturally be.
- **Person 2:** watch person 1 and copy everything they do – body movements, facial expressions – feel what they are feeling. Don't analyse what you think they are thinking

Senses exercises

Using your senses in silence


 All these exercises really need to be done in an outside space.

 indicates **group** exercise

 indicates **individual** exercise

#1 Sight:

- **Colour swatches** – Get hold of a variety of colour swatches or colour charts for paints (these are freely available from most DIY stores or paint manufacturers), and cut them up into individual colours. Give everyone 4 or 5 colours and invite them to spend time matching their colours to those they can see in nature. 

- **Owl / Hawk eyes** – Explore your vision. Firstly,  explore how wide you can make your vision, like an Owl. Soften your gaze and hold your arms in front of you with your fingers wiggling. Gradually open your arms out, wiggling your fingers, until you can no longer see your moving fingers. Experiment and see how wide your vision can be.

Secondly, sharpen your vision, like a Hawk. Focus on the detail of something nearby, examining as much detail as you can. Then focus on the detail of something further away, again focussing in on as much detail as you can.

Invite people to spend time experimenting with these types of vision.

Celebrating 25 Years of Quiet Gardens

The Quiet Garden Movement nurtures access to outdoor space for prayer and reflection in a variety of settings, such as private homes, churches, retreat centres, schools and hospitals.

There are over 300 Quiet Gardens worldwide.

We also create opportunities for people to experience silence, restfulness and contemplative practices, with regular quiet days and retreats offered in many Quiet Gardens.

To celebrate and raise awareness of the benefits of quiet time outdoors, we have created Quiet25.

Find out more about our work and how you can support it, as well as find Quiet Gardens and events near you, at:

WWW.QUIETGARDEN.ORG

The Quiet25 Leader's Guide is designed to help you run a 5-week course, to use as the basis for a one-day course, or as individual workshops.

The 5 sessions take you on a journey through a range of contemplative exercises and practices in the exploration of silence: introducing groups to the experience of silence together in natural surroundings and exploring the physical, mental health and spiritual benefits of taking a regular time of quiet in nature.



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Dr Rowan Williams, from the Foreword



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Find out more about our work, as well as Quiet Gardens and events near you, at www.quietgarden.org