

UCC Contemplatives In Action Curriculum: Practicing Silence

(60-90 minutes suggested; italicized portions are guides for the facilitator; **bold indicates materials needed**)

Gathering

- Sit in a circle with a focal center, perhaps a **table with a colorful cloth, candle, and flower or plant**.
- Ask everyone to introduce themselves and share a word or brief phrase that comes to mind when they hear the word “silence.”

Statio – begin with 2 minutes of silence

Explain that Statio is Latin for “station,” “position,” or “watch.” A simple definition of statio is **pausing to be prayerful**. In contemporary language, statio is mindfulness prayer. It’s an **unhurried** moment to appreciate God’s presence through silent prayer or meditation on Scripture. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, explains, “Statio is a monastic custom...of **stopping one thing before we begin another. It is the time between the times**” (Wisdom Distilled From the Daily, 1990, p. 176).

- If you have a **meditation bell**, you may sound it to begin and end statio.

Considering the Need for Silence

Say: The poet W.H. Auden observed that we’re afraid of pain but more afraid of silence – for this void is the wrath of God. But an article in *Harper’s* (1999) argues that silence is neither comfort nor curse.

Invite participants to name silences that are caring/open and awkward/excruciating. Using **newsprint**, list their responses. Some examples are given here:

Comfortable Silences	Uncomfortable Silences
Silence of connection to another person	Silence of anger
Silence of creativity and imagination	Silence of grief
Silence of listening	Silence of being ignored
...	...

Read: Ruth Haley Barton writes: “I believe silence is the most challenging, the most needed and the least experienced spiritual discipline among...Christians today. It is much easier to talk about it and read about it than to actually become quiet. We are a very busy, wordy and heady faith tradition. Yet we are desperate to find ways to open ourselves to our God who is, in the end, beyond all of our human constructs and human agendas. With all of our emphasis on theology and Word – as important as these are – we are starved for mystery, to know this God as one who is totally other and to experience reverence in [God’s] presence. We are starved for intimacy, to see and feel and know God in the very cells of our being. We are starved for rest, to know God beyond what we can do for [God]. We are starved for quiet, to hear the sound of sheer silence that is the presence of [God’s Self].”

When God spoke to Jesus at his baptism, he was driven into the silence of the desert (*cf. Mark 1:9-13*), where he could seek clarity that comes through a discernment process that depends upon silence. Such clearness is nearly impossible in a world that depends upon machines and devices that make noise. While we can’t totally eliminate this background noise, we can reduce it *if* we have the will to do it.

The primary task for spiritual formation may not be to promote for silence but to seek it and actively to engage it whenever and wherever it is found. God’s first language *is* silence, and God is to be met primarily in that space.

Quotes to Ponder - provide each person with a **copy of Quotes To Ponder (page 3)**; invite participants to read the quotes in silence. After 10 minutes, invite discussion using the questions on pg 3.

Developing a Practice

Ask: How does silence figure into your spiritual practice? (*Encourage brief responses for now*)

Read the following quote by William Britton (www.richerbyfar.com):

“It’s not enough to believe in silence. These things must be experienced and practiced, and practiced often enough to be routine. And so I come to a full stop. I sit quietly. I don’t petition God, give thanks, or meditate on some divine attribute. I don’t look out the window in wonder. Good things to do, but not first—not yet. Because unless I can first remember that it doesn’t depend on me, that I can’t do what needs to be done, then all is lost. And until I do this numerous times a day, every day, there’s a slim chance I’ll ever remember that. Everything argues against stopping: the to-do list, the desire to be productive, the expectations of others, ego, habit. And therefore, ruthlessness is required in establishing this essential practice...unless I first submit to utter inactivity—unless my activity flows from my practiced inactivity before God, I cannot trust that my activity will be anything but smoke and noise. No one needs my hurried self—the one that to me seems so indispensable—the one in such a rush to help. Something must be done, but first—only stopping will do.”

Say: As mentioned earlier, the primary task for spiritual formation may not be to advocate for silence but to seek it and actively to engage it whenever and wherever it is found.

Ask and discuss the following:

~If you were going to work on experiencing silence in the weeks to come, what would that look like?

~How can we incorporate the practice of “statio” into our congregation’s life?

- Invite the group to consider spending 5 minutes daily in silence until your next meeting. If you do not meet weekly, encourage increasing the silence by 5 additional minutes each week (to a maximum of 15 minutes) until you meet again. Either plan a follow-up session of 1-hour to share challenges and insights with the practice, beginning with statio for 10 minutes and close with more silence or the Lord’s Prayer; or, at the very least, allow some time to do a check-in at the beginning of your next gathering.

Closing Prayer (use the following or another appropriate closing prayer)

Open me to silence, Sound Creator;

Clear my ears from the background of my life.

Quiet the highway of my emotions

As they growl with gridlocked traffic.

When I calm my soul I can hear You.

Open me to silence, Sweet Singer;

Switch off the electronic noise makers,

The automatic switches I flip unawares,

That flap their clamor into my hours.

When I turn from the din I can hear You.

Open me to silence, Word Revealer;

Turn off the inner dialogues,

Still the divisive monologues,

End the gibberish of my misgivings.

When I stop my words I can hear You.

Open me to silence, Source of Sound;

Open me to hear Your words in my heart;

Open me to hear Your teachings in my soul.

~Debbie Perlman

in *Flames to Heaven: New Psalms for Healing & Praise*

Additional Resources

- For more on Statio: [Statio: Pausing to Be Prayerful - Soul Shepherding](#)
- *Inviting Silence: How to Find Inner Stillness and Calm* by Gunilla Norris
- *Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Friends of Silence* (a monthly newsletter) www.friendsofsilence.net
- *Into Great Silence* (film) – A film on the Grande Chartreuse (famed Carthusian Monastery)

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QUOTES TO PONDER

Unless I am silent I shall not hear God, and until I hear [God] I shall not come to know [God]. Silence asks me to watch and wait and listen, to be like Mary in readiness to receive the Word. If I have any respect for God I shall try to find a time, however short, for silence. Without it I have not much hope of establishing that relationship with God of hearing and responding which is going to help me root the whole of my life in prayer. ~Esther de Waal

Silence is God's first language. ~St. John of the Cross

In the stillness of the quiet, if we listen, we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, hope to despair. ~Howard Thurman

Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence in us, not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal. The sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something beyond the moment, a strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power and healing . ~ Rachel Naomi Remen

Prayer is sitting in the silence until it silences us.

and

The Desert Fathers and Mothers focused on these primary practices in their search for God: 1) leaving, to some extent, the systems of the world; 2) a degree of solitude to break from the maddening crowd; 3) times of silence to break from the maddening mind; and 4) 'technologies' for controlling the compulsivity of mind and the emotions. All of this was for the sake of growing a person *capable of love and community*. ~Richard Rohr

If you love truth, be a lover of silence. Silence, like the sunlight will illuminate you in God. ~St. Isaac (7th Century hermit monk)

First, silence makes us pilgrims. Secondly, silence guards the fire within. Thirdly, silence teaches us to speak. ~Henri Nouwen

When I am liberated by silence, when I am no longer involved in the measurement of life, but in the living of it, I can discover a form of prayer in which there is effectively no distraction. My whole life becomes a prayer. The world of silence in which I am immersed contributes to my prayer. ~Thomas Merton

Let us be silent, that we may hear the whispers of God. ~Ralph Waldo Emerson

For Reflection and Discussion

- ▶ Did some phrase or idea from these quotes your attention? Why?
- ▶ What emotions arise as you linger over these words?
- ▶ What seems particularly related to your experience?
- ▶ Considering the second quote by Richard Rohr, can you come up with ideas for a "technology" for controlling the "maddening mind"?