

Creating Space for Silence

by Shemaiah Gonzalez

Silence can be scary—at least for adults. Isn't this why we scroll through our phones while in line at the grocery store?

My grandmother used to keep the television on 24/7. "If I don't, it's too quiet!" she told me.

And me? I'm Pavlov's dog when it comes to the notifications on my smartphone. But the worst is seeing the conditioning in my own children.

"Mommy, your phone just beeped. I think you just got a text." My young son hollers to me from the other room.

"No, it's an e-mail," his year-older brother corrects him. "A text makes a ding sound."

The noise in our lives leaves little room for silence.

The Old Testament tells the story of young Samuel hearing God's call at night. Confusing the Lord's voice with the priest Eli's, Samuel runs to Eli's room saying, "Here I am; you called me?" Groggy Eli assures Samuel that he did not call him and tells him to return to bed.

This happens several times until Eli, realizing it is the Lord's voice Samuel hears, advises him to reply, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:1–18)

Hearing this story as a child, I couldn't wait to go to bed. The activity of our house would slow down for the night, leaving my room quiet and peaceful. In the dark I'd whisper, "Here I am!"

Now, a mother, I walk up the stairs to tuck my children into bed, pausing a moment before my son's door to hear him chatting away. It takes me a few moments to realize he is praying. Not with the lofty, pious tone I sometimes take now as an adult, but he prays as if God is sitting at the end of his bed, listening.

Knowing my children also desire this space for silence, I look for ways of creating it. The time right before bed is perfect for cultivating silence. The house activity slows down for the day, and we need a moment to regroup and to listen before bed.

I light a candle as we gather in the front room. For these little ones, a candle is special and calming. We sit "criss-cross applesauce" on the floor and watch the light dance on the walls.

The boys love hearing stories about when I was little, so I tell them one. I tell them how sometimes when I was scared, angry, or even when I was so happy I wanted to save the feeling, I would sit in my hall closet and be very quiet. Sometimes I could feel God's comfort, and I wouldn't be scared anymore. And sometimes I'd feel like God was happy that I was so happy.

I whisper that we are going to be quiet for three minutes and listen. I set the timer on my phone and let my younger son push the start button.

My sons might wiggle. They might giggle. And with my eyes closed, I feel my younger son gently touching my fingernail. But if I ignore the movement and model stillness, they follow. I open my eyes to see my older son, his eyes closed, with a huge smile spread across his face. It looks like love.

When the timer chimes, I ask them what it felt like to be quiet. "Peaceful," says my younger.

"When I sit still," my older shares, "the only part of me moving is my chest, up and down, up and down."

"Sounds like you were paying attention," I say. "That's another way of saying you were listening."

Spiritual writer Kathleen Norris says, "Listening is a prerequisite for silence." Isn't this why we adults fill the space with noise? We don't want to listen. We are afraid of what we might hear.

Children aren't afraid of the quiet. It's magic to them. We adults have forgotten how magical, how healing silence can be. Norris says, "Silence becomes a presence." It is in silence we hear God's love and guidance, just as Samuel did.

I let my older son blow out the candle as we head up to bed. "Tomorrow night, can we be quiet for five minutes instead of three?" he asks as he takes my hand. I realize my son has been modeling for me. He's been showing me how to create space for silence, reminding me not to be frightened of it. Silence isn't scary after all.

"Of course," I answer as we walk up the stairs. I look forward to it.



SHEMAIAH GONZALEZ is a freelance writer who holds a B.A. in English Literature and a M.A. in Intercultural Ministry. She thrives on moments where storytelling, art, and faith collide. Published on *Busted Halo* and *America Magazine* among others, she is obsessed with being well-rounded as she jumps from Victorian lit to Kendrick Lamar, from the homeless shelter to the cocktail party. A Los Angeles native, she now lives in Seattle with her husband and their two sons.