

The Healing Silence: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Approach to Communication

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Thomas Merton wrote often and with rich, critical insight about the problems of mass media and our growing culture of noise, but his death in 1968 unfortunately left us without his direct counsel regarding how to cope with the proliferation of computers and personal communication technology. Yet, this does not mean that Merton's pre-digital era writings are rendered irrelevant today. Quite the contrary, Merton left us with much contemplative wisdom regarding how to steer a course through the electronic cultural wilderness. Merton's recognition of the extent to which 'genuine communication is becoming more and more difficult' led him to declare with mission-like zeal: 'When speech is in danger of perishing or being perverted in the amplified noise of beasts, perhaps it becomes obligatory for a monk to try to speak'.¹

Throughout his critique of mass communication, in particular, Merton emphasizes spiritual experience (silence, solitude and contemplation) as a legitimate position from which to evaluate and transcend the effects of mass media. His chief concern regarding mediated communication concerns its effect on the individual's ability to discover one's true self, and consequently one's relationship to God or the Ground of Being. Merton criticized the mass media for fostering propaganda, fragmentation and alienation — destructive forces that terrorize the individual's natural inclination to unity with oneself, with one's neighbors and with one's God.

Today, however, there are new mediated barriers to contend with: if we are not busy being distracted by mass entertainment, we are prob-

1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), p. 243.

ably on one of a number of personal communication devices. The mass information society we live in now has both public and private dimensions; no area of our personal lives is free from the clamor of constant messages. A ringing telephone used to interrupt our day, now it is silence that seemingly disturbs us in the midst of our noisy lifestyles. For Merton, when silence is obliterated we lose our ability to communicate. 'For language to have meaning', he explains, 'there must be intervals of silence somewhere, to divide word from word and utterance from utterance. He who retires into silence does not necessarily hate language. Perhaps it is love and respect for language which impose silence upon him. For the mercy of God is not heard in words unless it is heard, both before and after the words are spoken, in silence'.²

In this article, I wish to illuminate Merton's contemplative approach to communication, one that I will argue is much needed as we move to confront the communication problems of the twenty-first century. Merton has much to say about our fundamental problems of communicative relatedness — of how to repair our relations with others, with nature, with God and with our innermost selves — because he has much to say about *silence*. I will proceed by first briefly examining Merton's perspective of the relationships between silence, symbols and communion. I will then elaborate on that understanding by discussing how Merton's perspective of communication functions as a social critique of our culture of noise, and how this critique suggests creative requisites for restoring authentic communication in a broken world.

Merton understood the significance of the transformative values of genuine communication, and it was this understanding that led him to embrace *communion* as the essence and goal of communication. Ultimately, Merton leads us to an awareness of the *communicative power of listening to silence*, which can help us rescue our everyday social relations from further suffering in a fractured culture perpetuated by the illusions of noise as speech, email as connectiveness, and recorded phone messages as presence. Our noisy, fragmented existence, however, is not merely an external phenomenon, encompassing our broken relations with others, but involves an internal fracturing as well, as the perpetual erosion of silence threatens to sever our abilities to reflect, to rest and to understand our true self. The recovery of silence, though, is not for its own sake, but is necessary for the restoration of authentic communication. Merton understood the problem clearly, for he realized that the loss

2. Thomas Merton, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude', in *idem, Disputed Questions* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 177-207 (195).

of silence – its disconnection from communication – can only result in noise and consequently prohibit genuine contact and communion:

The constant din of empty words and machine noises, the endless booming of loudspeakers end by making true communication and true communion almost impossible. Each individual in the mass is insulated by thick layers of insensibility. He doesn't care, he doesn't hear, he doesn't think. He does not act, he is pushed. He does not talk, he produces conventional sounds when stimulated by the appropriate noises. He does not think, he secretes clichés.³

Thus Merton's contemplative approach to communication rests in this acknowledgment and deep understanding of the healing virtues of silence. He provides aid and guidance for the contemplative person who must 'withdraw into the healing silence of the wilderness, or of poverty, or of obscurity, not in order to preach to others but to heal in themselves the wounds of the entire world'.⁴ Merton's claim, though, is that we will find in this healing silence that our ability to communicate with others, and our capacity for communion, is healed as well.

Silence, Symbols and Communion

Silence pervades, envelopes, extends and transcends communication. It is the environment in which speech is enabled to be seen and heard. Silence is inherent in our beingness and helps foster our soul-connection to others. Merton understood these vital connections – these paradoxical, symbiotic relationships – between silence, symbols and communion. His life was a celebration of deep connectiveness, standing as a spiritual guide at the intersection of speech and silence, the crossroads of solitude and community. Merton's contemplative approach to communication is based upon two assumptions: (1) communication is the active human link between silence and communion, and (2) communication becomes *inactive* when uprooted from silence and severed from its true aim, communion.

Silence to Communication

There are at least six commonplace themes in his writings through which Merton links silence and communication: (1) silence and monasticism; (2) silence as the language of God; (3) listening in/to silence; (4) silence and recollection; (5) silence and compassion; (6) silence and the inner

3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 55.

4. Merton, 'Notes', p. 194.

self. As a phenomenon, silence is clearly multidimensional for Merton, possessing numerous values and characteristics, many of which are described in his article 'Creative Silence'.⁵

Merton is closely aligned with the views of Swiss philosopher, Max Picard (1888–1965), in understanding silence to be autonomous, positive, creative, distinct from speech and integral to the structure of human beings. In fact, the two writers are in such close harmony on the subject of silence that one could mistake many statements by Picard as the words of Merton. Consider, for example, Picard's description of love being filled more with silence than speech, and how 'through the silence that is in love, language is taken out of the world of verbal noise and bustle and led back to its origin in silence. Lovers are close to the beginning of all things, when language was still uncreated, when language could emerge at any moment from the creative fullness of silence'.⁶

Both Picard and Merton view silence as preceding human speech and language, while human communication, ideally, is meant to proceed out of silence and then return to rest in silence. In a culture of noise, however, communication never rests, and rarely do we. Yet, in addition to relaxation and the need to get away from the noise and busyness of modern life, Merton explains that there are deeper motives for the Christian seeking silence, for silence is a place where one can listen to God:

We are perhaps too talkative, too activist, in our conception of the Christian life. Our Service of God and of the Church does not consist only in talking and doing. It can also consist in periods of silence, listening, waiting. Perhaps it is very important, in our era of violence and unrest, to rediscover meditation, silent inner unitive prayer, and creative Christian silence.⁷

Hidden beneath our fear of silence is the fear of our selves, which is further submerged in our fear of God. Merton alludes to Picard's notion of the 'flight from God' that orchestrates so much of our noise into an escape from the realities we fear within us, the ones we may only face in silence.⁸ We make retreat, we rest in silence, therefore by withdrawing from the fury of the flight, but not from ourselves or other people. It is here where Merton tells us silence can be so healing and creative: 'Not only does silence give us a chance to understand ourselves better, to get a truer and more balanced perspective on our own lives in relation to the

5. In *idem, Love and Living* (ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hurt; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 38-45.

6. Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Washington: Gateway, 1948), p. 96.

7. Merton, 'Creative Silence', p. 39.

8. Max Picard, *Flight From God* (Washington: Gateway, 1951).

lives of others: silence makes us whole if we let it. Silence helps draw together the scattered and dissipated energies of a fragmented existence'.⁹

Merton argues that silence and communication are not mutually exclusive phenomena; to the contrary, silence so pervades and envelopes communication that it is vitally essential to every act of expression. In essence, we need silence in order to communicate properly. There are at least four ways in which we can readily understand this intimate relationship between silence and speech. First, silence exists *before* an utterance is made. Human beings did not invent silence; we invented speech. As Picard puts it, 'the absence of language simply makes the presence of Silence more apparent'.¹⁰ Second, silence exists *after* an utterance is made. We know someone has spoken to us not simply because they have spoken, but because they have stopped speaking. Third, silence exists *within* utterances as pauses between words, or as spaces between letters and words on the printed page. Finally, silence *is* communicative, serving as a message or form of expression itself.

The loss of silence, therefore, harms or limits our ability to communicate. As we shall see, silence is important to Merton because *symbols* are important; when communication is severed from silence, symbols become useless for sharing meaning, hence communication becomes useless as a means for communion.

Symbols to Communion

Merton's essay, 'Symbolism: Communication or Communion?' is his clearest explication of the nature of symbols and their role in leading to the experience of communion. Merton takes a spiritual perspective, of course, in treating the sacramental function of language and symbols in general: 'The true symbol does not merely point to some hidden object. It contains in itself a structure which in some way makes us aware of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself'.¹¹ Merton draws a parallel between the degradation of symbolizing (expressing/communicating) and the spiritual decay of culture. For Merton, then, an ordinary act of communication between two people potentially involves more than a transaction of exchanged messages, for the very use of symbols implies a deeper, spiritual dimension of relation.

Symbols become degraded when they are utilized as, or believed to be, 'totalist'. A totalist symbol—as opposed to a creative, living or

9. Merton, 'Creative Silence', p. 43.

10. Picard, *The World of Silence*, p. 15.

11. In *idem*, *Love and Living*, pp. 54-79 (54).

spiritual symbol—is one that is used only to call attention to itself as an exclusive, self-contained universe of meaning. Thus when cut off from a reality outside itself, from what sustains it, a symbol may function in divisive and destructive ways that counter the aims of authentic communication. Merton contrasts, for example, the living symbols used in peace negotiations with the totalist symbolic statement of an intercontinental ballistic missile. ‘Man cannot help making symbols of one sort or another’, he writes, for we are symbol-using beings, but contemporary symbolic communication is more symptomatic ‘of a violent illness, a technological cancer’ than the product of spiritual experience.¹² Merton explains the vital, spiritual role of authentic symbols in this way: ‘To express and to encourage man’s acceptance of his own center, his own ontological roots in a mystery of being that transcends his individual ego’.¹³ But as Kilcourse rightly observes, language is a communication medium that is of utmost humane concern to us because it ‘can unite or divide human persons. It can be used well or badly’.¹⁴ Consequently, Merton issues a call for wisdom and discernment in communication: we must distinguish between living symbols that direct action to wholeness and unity, and ‘pathogenic and depraved symbols [that] divert man’s energies to evil and destruction’.¹⁵ To discern the differences, however, one must be capable of interior response, which is why our appreciation and experiences of silence are so essential.

Merton is not attacking language when talking about the degradation of the symbol as much as he is lamenting the human inability to transcend language. In other words, the phrase ‘degradation of the symbol’ refers chiefly to our misuse of language in ways that separate the symbol from the sacred. In his essay on ‘Free Speech’ (*parrhesia*) in *The New Man*, Merton explains, ‘words lose their capacity to convey the reality of holiness in proportion as men focus on the symbol rather than on what it symbolizes’.¹⁶ He claims that the primary function of the symbol, or the word, ‘is a contemplative rather than a communicative statement of what exists’, adding that ‘the word is a kind of seal upon our intellectual communion with Him, before it becomes a means of communication with men’.¹⁷ Merton traces the basis of human communication to our original relationship with the Divine when ‘the primary function of

12. Merton, ‘Symbolism’, pp. 78-79.

13. Merton, ‘Symbolism’, p. 65.

14. George Kilcourse, Jr, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 172.

15. Merton, ‘Symbolism’, pp. 62-63.

16. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Noonday, 1961), p. 87.

17. Merton, *The New Man*, p. 88.

language was to bear witness to the hidden meaning of things rather than “talk about” them’.¹⁸ Hence Merton provides us with an eloquent defense of *communion* as the primary aim of human communication.

Essential to Merton’s perspective, overall, is the understanding that true communication *uncovers* rather than constructs communion. ‘The function of the symbol’, he says, ‘is to manifest a union that already exists but is not fully realized’.¹⁹ Thus the symbol is ‘new’ whenever it discovers a new depth or dimension to what is already present. ‘The symbol awakens awareness, or restores it. Therefore, it aims not at communication but at communion. Communion is the awareness of participation in an ontological or religious reality: in the mystery of being, of human love, of redemptive mystery, of contemplative truth.’²⁰ Merton summarizes his view in this way: ‘The symbol is an object which leads beyond the realm of division where subject and object stand over against one another. That is why the symbol goes beyond communication to communion. Communication takes place between subject and object, but communion is beyond the division: it is a sharing in basic unity.’²¹ Thus communion occurs between true persons communicating authentically:

The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.²²

Merton is critical, therefore, of the obliteration of silence and the degradation of symbols, a situation that forces communication to become self-destructive and thereby prohibit communion. This situation, when raised to cultural levels, becomes a social environment that conditions us to the normalcy of noise. In *Cables to the Ace*, Merton describes our situation in this way: ‘The saying says itself all around us. No one need attend. Listening is obsolete. So is silence’.²³ As we have seen thus far, Merton is concerned with silence because he is concerned with communication, and he is concerned with communication because he is concerned with communion. The basis for such concerns is made even more paramount through his critique of our culture of noise.

18. Merton, *The New Man*, p. 89.

19. Merton, ‘Symbolism’, p. 68.

20. Merton, ‘Symbolism’, p. 68.

21. Merton, ‘Symbolism’, p. 73.

22. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 308.

23. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 3.

Merton's Critique of a Culture of Noise

Merton appeared to foresee our predicament today, but not without a sense of humor. Consider the following prophetic insight when, after commenting on communication as being 'the worst problem today' in *Vow of Conversation*, Merton turns to offer this visionary satire of twenty-first century telephone activities: 'Wives of astronauts talk by radio with their husbands in outer space. A priest of St. Meinrad's in Peru can call Jim Wygal and talk to him on the phone he has in his car while he is driving around Louisville. And what do they have to say? Nothing more than "Hi, it's a nice day, hope you are feeling good, I am feeling good, the kids are feeling good, the dog is feeling good," etc' .²⁴

In just the last few years, a number of scholars from diverse intellectual disciplines have slowly begun to also see through the illusory glories of an information society, finding many reasons, like Merton, to criticize our growing addiction to speed and noise. For example, media scholar David Shenk's guide to surviving the information glut reminds us that too much of anything is still not a good thing.²⁵ British communication scholar John Locke offers reasons why we are becoming a society of strangers despite the plethora of technological communication devices.²⁶ Media consultant Ed Shane attempts to disillusion us further about ceaseless connectivity.²⁷ Social critic Morris Berman goes so far as to claim in *The Twilight of American Culture* that our only way out of this cultural and spiritual morass is to become like 'monks', withdrawing from society in order to preserve what is good and honorable.²⁸

American cultural critic Neil Postman further revealed and clarified our addiction to distractions in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, explaining in his follow-up solution to our predicament, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, that we took a wrong turn as a society in the nineteenth century and why we need to return to the balanced models of social life of the Enlightenment period.²⁹ It is disappointing to note that after mentioning

24. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-65* (ed. Naomi Burton Stone; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 187.

25. David Shenk, *Data Smog* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

26. John Locke, *Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Anymore* (New York: Touchstone, 1998).

27. Ed Shane, *Disconnected America: The Consequences of Mass Media in a Narcissistic World* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).

28. Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

29. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985); and *idem*, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

the possibility of our turning back further to the wisdom of the ages for guidance (namely to 'Confucius, Isaiah, Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha, Shakespeare, Spinoza and many more'), Postman dismisses them as irrelevant to our immediate era:

The words of the sages can calm and comfort us. They offer perspective and a release from the frenzy of speed and ambition. Very useful, I would say. But, of course, they are very far away from us in time and cultural conditions, and their advice is so abstract that it is difficult to see how we can turn much of it into practical and coherent instruction.³⁰

Perhaps Postman would find what he is looking for, and much more, if he read Thomas Merton's views on the still-relevant wisdom of the ages.

As valuable as these scholars' insights are, however, I find Merton to be more instructive, not only because his criticism goes deeper into our problems (probing the spiritual depths of human nature as well as social structures), but because he is able to offer practical counsel and true spiritual guidance. Merton's critique of mass communication is centered on his understanding of silence as not only a mode of communication, but also a mode of knowing.³¹ For Merton, it is our loss of silence that has led to the breakdown of communication, and consequently to the *loss of communion*, which is the grave danger we face, and the reason why we must work to restore authentic communication with one another: 'To live in communion, in genuine dialogue with others is absolutely necessary if man is to remain human'.³² Merton teaches us that true communication on the deepest level 'is more than a simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary on this deep level must also be 'communion' beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a 'preverbal' but also on a 'postverbal' level'.³³ Merton was critical of superficial communication because he was convinced that 'it is necessary that there be genuine and deep communication between the hearts and minds of men, communication and not the noise of slogans or the repetition of clichés' in order to experience the spiritual nature of our being.³⁴

Our true self struggles against the noise in order to make its presence felt, but too many people are persuaded to disconfirm its presence and

30. Postman, *Building a Bridge*, p. 11.

31. For a good, systematic treatment and defense of silence as an authentic mode of knowing, see George Kalamaras, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension* (New York: State University of New York, 1994).

32. Merton, *New Seeds*, p. 55.

33. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 315.

34. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 243.

prefer the noise of distractions: 'Let us frankly face the fact that our culture is one which is geared in many ways to help us evade any need to face this inner, silent self', sending us reeling instead into the noisy 'commotion and jamming which drown out the deep, secret, and insistent demands of the inner self'.³⁵ According to Merton, these problems explain our failed attempts at communion, and indicate our desperate need for silence:

In silence we face and admit the gap between the depths of our being, which we consistently ignore, and the surface which is untrue to our own reality. We recognize the need to be at home with ourselves in order that we may go out to meet others, not just with a mask of affability, but with real commitment and authentic love. If we are afraid of being alone, afraid of silence, it is perhaps because of our secret despair of inner reconciliation.³⁶

It is interesting to note William Shannon's observation that 'there is nothing in the monastic rule, Merton points out, to prepare the monastery for the arrival of the television addict'.³⁷

Essentially, Merton reveals to us the illusions of connectivity and community fostered by the mistaken identification of surface noise as communication depth. Silence, then, becomes first of all a form of protest against the noise, and secondly as a path to communion:

We live in a state of constant semi-attention to the sound of voices, music, traffic, or the generalized noise of what goes on around us all the time. This keeps us immersed in a flood of racket and words, a diffuse medium in which our consciousness is half diluted: we are not quite 'thinking', not entirely responding, but we are more or less there.³⁸

Merton concludes, therefore, that: 'The greatest need of our time is to clean out the enormous mass of mental and emotional rubbish that clutters our minds and makes of all political and social life a mass illness. Without this housecleaning we cannot begin to *see*. Unless we *see* we cannot think. The purification must begin with the mass media'.³⁹ He ends that statement, however, with the potentially life-altering challenge and question of 'How?'

We must not forget that Merton's critical stance toward the media is adopted from the position of silence, which is exactly what Inchausti

35. Merton, 'Creative Silence', pp. 40, 41.

36. Merton, 'Creative Silence', p. 41.

37. See William Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987), p. 105.

38. Merton, 'Creative Silence', p. 40.

39. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 77.

concludes in his excellent overview of Merton's intellectual contribution to modern thought. According to Inchausti, Merton perceives our social problems as stemming from a 'general, psychological migration, since the late Renaissance, away from any identification with our silent selves'; Merton's 'antidote' to this state of cultural confusion is 'a return to contemplative living'.⁴⁰ Instead of merely attacking the content of media messages, or striking at the technological vehicles themselves as propagandistic, Merton encourages us to turn our critical gaze away from the media, not merely to ignore them, but in order to disconfirm their legitimacy and to embrace silence as more valuable for authentic communication. As we have seen, Merton's critique begins with a return to silence: 'Let those who can stand a little silence find other people who like silence, and create silence and peace for one another'.⁴¹ It is not the negative dismissal of media, but the positive embrace of silence that provides Merton with such rich contemplative insights.

Hypercommunication and Messaging

Ultimately, the problem with the mass media, for Merton (and myself), is that it perpetuates a culture of seemingly limitless communication that actually makes true communication difficult, and consequently prohibits true communication and community. Communication scholars are well aware of the fact of how communication (i.e. other messages) can function as noise within a particular context. Hence the paradox of communication as noise. Noise can be defined as any distraction or disturbance in the flow of direct communication. In following Merton, therefore, we are led to realize that because our culture has become so inundated with the technical reduction of communication — radio, faxes, cellular/mobile phones, television, billboards, books, compact discs, magazines, newspapers, computers, worldwide web, etc. — we have created a cultural lifestyle that makes it increasingly *difficult to find the silence needed in which to communicate* with another person. We mindlessly perpetuate this difficulty because, as Julia Ann Upton observes, 'we are so culturally adapted to having someone else fill in all our silent spaces'.⁴² We manufacture so much noise that we cannot hear each other, nor hear ourselves, let alone God. To make up for the loss of authentic communication we

40. Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), p. 148.

41. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1953), p. 311.

42. Julia Ann Upton, 'Humanizing the university: Adding the Contemplative Dimension', *The Merton Annual* 8 (1996), pp. 75-87 (80).

experience consciously or unconsciously on a daily basis, we simply increase the amount of messaging, thus conforming to the cultural norm of pumping up the volume. In essence, we resort to *hyper*-communication.

I employ the term hypercommunication as a label for a variety of communication forms that serve to accelerate interactions and exacerbate our communication anxieties, multiplying the effects of a noisy culture—mobile phones for endless gossip and chatter, constant staging of pseudo-events, increased advertising in all venues, more talking doors, more talking car alarms, more talking subways and elevators, musical greeting cards, talking stuffed animals, Muzak everywhere, televisions turned on in retail stores for customers' pleasure—any form of communication we use to overload the air/void with the seeming necessity of more messages. Like a person hyperventilating, desperately breathing rapidly in pursuit of deep, saving breath, we live in a state of hypercommunication: desperately transmitting and receiving messages as much and as rapidly as possible in pursuit of communion. What we fail to realize is that we need silence to breathe as well as to communicate, for according to the teachings of the Kaushitaki Upanishad: 'When a man is speaking, he cannot be breathing; this is the sacrifice of breath to speech. And when a man is breathing he cannot be speaking; this is the sacrifice of speech to breath'.⁴³

Our hypercommunication has led to the emerging phenomenon of *messaging*, by which I mean the almost obsessive process of sending and leaving messages without concern for how (or whether) they are received or understood. We *message* each other rather than take the time to fully communicate. Messaging is not communication. Living in a state of hypercommunication, we do not have the luxury of time, we tell ourselves, and so we sacrifice the virtue of patience to merely leaving messages for each other. We then make the fatal error of assuming we have communicated with the other person because we sent them a message. Messaging will not lead us to communion.

Hypercommunicators see silence only as an empty hole that must be filled with messages and more messages. Hypercommunicators know only that it is better to send than to receive, to be heard than to hear. To hypercommunicators, silence is, indeed, *weird*.

Yet, the culture of noise perpetuated by hypercommunication is still *not the primary problem*; it is only a symptom of a much deeper problem: spiritual disconnectiveness, which is only exemplified by the loss of con-

43. Juan Mascaro (trans.), *The Upanishads* (New York: Penguin, 1965), p. 105.

nection between silence and utterance, and the reduction of communicating to messaging.

Kierkegaard, of course, recognized all this in 1846. In *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard explains that 'a revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere'.⁴⁴ In this present age, writes Kierkegaard, there are no relationships between people, only tensions, and because there is no direct, genuine communication between people, only abstract chatter, there is no true action. The end result is a talkative culture created by 'doing away with the vital distinction between talking and keeping silent. Only some one who knows how to remain essentially silent can really talk – and act essentially'.⁴⁵ Peter Fenves presents an intriguing critique of Kierkegaard's notion of talkativeness, accusing Kierkegaard of engaging in the same kind of discursive activities that he is criticizing, and concluding that Kierkegaard and his argument (picked up by other writers) is hypocritical.⁴⁶ The point would be well taken except that I think Fenves misses Kierkegaard's essential concern. For Fenves, the issue is differentiating chatter from true communication (what does it look like?); but for Kierkegaard, the issue is not which type of discourse is better, but whether silence is valued for the cultivation of inwardness. Busyness is the illusion of action, he reasons, and talkativeness is the illusion of communicative action. Merton would definitely agree.

Communication Wisdom

The transformative vision and critique of contemporary society by Merton strongly suggests the first step toward healing ourselves and our culture: the renewal of our appreciation for, and experience with, silence. Merton suggested many creative, though not fully developed, ideas during the last few years of his life about how to communicate silence (in)to the world. Parallel to this concern is Merton's focus on the spiritual restoration of symbols. In surveying the violence, noise and technological dominance of cultural life today, Merton reasons, 'the only remedy for this is in a return to the level of spiritual wisdom on which the higher symbols operate.

Monasteries and retreat houses have existed for centuries as places where one can withdraw from the world of noise to a sanctuary of

44. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 35.

45. Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, p. 69.

46. See Peter Fenves, 'Chatter': *Language and History in Kierkegaard* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

silence for recollection and restoration. But is that enough to reduce the noise? As Merton reminds us, even monasteries can be quite noisy, which is why he shares with us a journal entry describing a day when he 'was glad to get back to the healing silence of the hermitage' after a busy day with his monastic community.⁴⁷ Merton appeared to feel, toward the end of his life, that there were greater possibilities open to transforming relations between the monastery and the world, between cloistered silence and the cultural noise. The compassion surging throughout Merton's social critique aims toward a more proactive strategy in assisting non-monastics in their encounters with the healing silence. Instead of merely maintaining a standing invitation for visitors to the monastery, Merton sensed an obligation to take the message of silence and communication wisdom back into the world. Gradually, Merton came to believe that contemplation was for everyone, and was never more prophetic than when he said, 'the world was full of people who are looking for meditation and silence'.⁴⁸ Those who are sensitive to this situation are exhorted to stay close to communication wisdom for the sake of all: 'If the contemplative, the monk, the priest, the poet merely forsake their vestiges of wisdom and join in the triumphant, empty-headed crowing of advertising men and engineers of opinion, then there is nothing left in store for us but total madness'.⁴⁹

As a whole, Merton's writings can be understood to function as one lengthy advisory concerning communication wisdom. First and foremost, Merton provides a model for reconnecting our own selves to silence. Clearly we should establish and safeguard a period of silence every day, as well as follow a spiritual discipline in maintaining that silence. Furthermore, communication wisdom entails encouraging others to experience silence in two ways: by admonishing them to take advantage of quiet moments whenever they arise, and by withdrawing our own presence (and noise) on occasion to enable them. How can others experience silence when we are always interacting with them?

Communication wisdom involves, also, the reduction of our consumptiveness of constant messages by simplifying our cultural lifestyles. By reducing the clutter of unnecessary noise—subscriptions, messages, video rentals, more television channels, etc.—we are likely to regain our senses to communicate more fully when most necessary. Such cultural asceticism, therefore, should enable us to understand further the spiritual

47. Merton, *A Vow of Conversation*, p. 196.

48. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1992), p. 19.

49. Merton, 'Symbolism', p. 79.

nature of human communication in general, which may lead us to realize more deeply, and to experience more often, the epiphanies of being in contact with the hidden wholeness of a world of living relations.

Discernment is key to Merton's conception of communication wisdom, and one of the most primary distinctions we need to make is between *being* and *doing* in terms of our fundamental orientation to communication. A *doing* perspective throws us headlong into the stream of noise as we busy ourselves with sending and receiving messages, whereas a *being* perspective reminds us to be still, silent and to seek communion over and beyond the transmission of messages. The fundamental idea of communicating beings should lead us to prioritize communion in our daily interactions and strive to cultivate a listening heart. In the words of David Steindl-Rast, 'listening with my heart I will find meaning. For just as the eye perceives light and the ear sound, the heart is the organ of meaning'.⁵⁰ Such communication wisdom is a vital step to restoring meaning and meaningfulness to our everyday communication.

Conclusion

In the end, Merton stands as a spiritual guide to help us navigate our way through the labyrinth of a noisy culture. From Merton we can see that communication is essentially and ultimately spiritual in nature. Human communication is a spiritual nexus; it is our point of contact and connection with the world within and all around us. To be sure, we can create reality through the social constructiveness of speech, but Merton shows us that what we create is only a partial reality. He reminds us that there is more to reality than we can possibly say, that we are also being (re)created by a reality not of our own making, a reality that seeks to communicate with us, ever present, ever speaking through silence. Merton tries to help us see that 'if our life is poured out in useless words we will never hear anything in the depths of our hearts, where Christ lives and speaks in silence'.⁵¹ Thus, when we reduce all communication to human fabrications and mediated realities, we reduce communication to noise, and severely reduce all prospects for communion.

Yet, if we attend to the silence that anchors and enlivens communication, we regain a sense of the whole and increase the prospects for genuine contact, connection and communion. Merton presents an alternative

50. David Steindl-Rast, *A Listening Heart: The Art of Contemplative Living* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 10.

51. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), p. 260.

orientation to communication, one that views communication as an act of being, and not merely a process of doing. This alternative orientation emphasizes silent listening as the proper starting point for all communication, which stands in stark contrast to the hyper-talkative perspective that hustles to indoctrinate millions of people every day. True communication runs deeper than the mere transmission of messages, for it extends to the level where we share an understanding of each other as persons, not just messengers.

In the final analysis, we are communicating beings, not mere transmitters of data. Merton's alternative perspective restores an absolutely vital element to communication: *presence*. Noise prohibits presence. Remembering presence underscores the central spiritual, hence fully human, dimension of our communication with others, that crucial aspect so often disregarded as inconsequential in an era of authorless texts, answering machines and funerals on websites (why be there when you can pay your respects in virtual reality?).

Merton reminds us that if we could just learn to listen first—listen in and to the silence—we would realize that we are not alone in our solitude, and we would be able to develop our latent capacity to understand and live life more deeply, more contemplatively, and communicate more wholly and authentically at the level of communion.

The voluminous works of Thomas Merton represent a resounding silence spoken into a fragmented culture of noise. Merton speaks *in* silence, *of* silence, *from* silence and *with* silence; yet it is his intimacy with the mystery of how silence serves as the ground for speech, that empowers him to *speak to our silence*. At times, listening to silence can be deafening, but there is a grand paradox here: silence enables us to both truly hear and truly communicate. Thus we find in Merton's words a transformative perspective of communication for the twenty-first century: a contemplative approach from which to draw vital insights for healing our relations with others through the restoration of genuine communication.