

*Teresa Olearczyk\**

ORCID: 0000-0001-6660-2379

Kraków, Poland

## Silence and Human Development

### Cisza drogą rozwoju osoby ludzkiej

**Abstract:** This article seeks to answer a fundamental question: What has made silence a scarce commodity, even though it is among the more important human needs? The impact of silence on human development over the course of a lifetime, and in relationships with others, is shown. The affirmative aspects of silence from an anthropological perspective, as a natural human need that contributes to the development of full humanity, is underlined. With this aim, the article clarifies the differences between silence in the sense of quiet hush, and in the sense of keeping quiet; and between solitude and loneliness. The paper concentrates on the positive influence of silence on personality development and purposely omits the negative aspects of silence, since they do not serve the integral development of the person – this issue needs a separate discussion.

**Keywords:** silence; education.

**Streszczenie:** W artykule podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na fundamentalne pytanie: co sprawiło, że cisza stała się towarem deficytowym, choć jest jedną z ważnych potrzeb człowieka? Ukazano znaczenie, jakie ma cisza w rozwoju człowieka na różnych etapach jego życia oraz w relacjach z innymi. Zwrócono uwagę na afirmatyw-

---

\* Dr. hab. Teresa Olearczyk, Associate Professor, Faculty of Psychology and Humanities, Krakow Academy of Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, email: [teresaolearczyk1@gmail.com](mailto:teresaolearczyk1@gmail.com).

ne aspekty ciszy w ujęciu antropologicznym, jako naturalnej potrzeby człowieka, służącej jego rozwojowi ku pełni człowieczeństwa. W tym celu starano się wyjaśnić różnice między ciszą i milczeniem, samotnością i osamotnieniem. W tekście skoncentrowano się na pozytywnych cechach ciszy i świadomie pominięto jej negatywne aspekty, które nie służą rozwojowi osobowości – to zagadnienie wymaga oddzielnego omówienia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** cisza; milczenie; wychowanie.

Silence is associated with the situation before creation;  
our universe emerged from silence,  
is embedded in it and will dissolve in it.  
(Borkowski, 2007, pp. 40–42)

## 1. Introduction

‘Silence’ as a category has not lost its importance, even though it has been studied since ancient times. The concept of silence is present and functions both in common and intellectual discourse. Due to its interdisciplinary character, silence is subject to analysis from philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, moral and legal perspectives.

For the ancients, to abide in silence was not a problem. They were privy to vast spaces, areas of fauna, green space, psychological and physical space, the absence of noisy tools. For millennia, education took place close to nature, in low-density areas, close to the family, surrounded by silence and the sounds of nature. Monasteries were places of organised zones of silence, but the need for silence as a tool of human development was also recognised by pedagogues. Korczak (1978, 2019) organised ‘a quiet room’; Montessori (Kramer, 1988; Miksza, 2018) conducted lessons in silence; contemporary Benedictines in Tyniec Monastery carry out Christian meditation in silence; and many schools, including some in Poland, are implementing (silent) meditation for their students. In an increasing number of aspects of our lives, we see the need for silence – for example, ‘silent zones’ are being implemented in trains and planes.

‘Pure’ silence is impossible to experience, so I propose to consider silence as a complex cultural phenomenon, which includes artistic and intellectual elements. Silence is central to the process of socialisation – it is a cultural inheritance.

In this paper, I would like to answer a fundamental question: what has made silence a scarce commodity, even though it is among the more important human needs? What meaning does it have in communication? How does it impact human development over the course of a lifetime? What, if any, is the link between silence and solitude (or with solitude that is chosen, creative, and reflective)? I will underline affirmative aspects of silence from an anthropological perspective; I will also demonstrate that it is a natural human need that contributes to the development of full humanity. With this aim, I shall clarify the meanings of silence, and the difference between silence in the sense of quiet hush (which fascinates and divides research) and in the sense of keeping quiet. In this paper, I shall omit the negative aspects of silence, since they do not serve the integral development of the person, and concentrate on the positive influence of silence on personality development. I will focus on the culture of chaos and noise, the concept of silence and keeping quiet, the phenomenon of silence, types of silence, the need for silence, and silence as a means of personality development.

## 2. Silence and noise

Silence is an unfathomable phenomenon, as the quality of silence is that it is not heard. Silence may be identified with the state of peace and internal equilibrium. It is for this reason that concentration and meditation were encouraged by St John of the Cross and St Theresa of Avila. One may ascribe silence to the human person from the beginning of his existence and, therefore, it should not be limited or destroyed by anyone. The concept of a social contract, a common social life, while considering the freedom of every human being, requires respect for silence, understood as calming-down, detachment, a state of harmony and peace of mind. Silence can also, and perhaps above all, be identified with the Absolute, with God. The limits of silence are defined by autonomy, that is, being subject only to those laws that we set for ourselves.

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, the psychologist Frankl (2011) (regarded as the father of logotherapy, i.e. healing through 'meaning'), wrote that happiness is always a by-product of a good deed. But in order to undertake any activity, that is, to engage in human action, first one must reflect. This requires silence, which is connected to thinking, understanding and concentrating.

In human formation and education, establishing boundaries is crucial. First one must establish limits and then teach children freedom, leaving them ever-greater space for action. One must teach a child that there are consequences of excessive noise, excessive liberty, excessive tolerance; that everything in life has its place, its time, and its context, which must be considered.

Yet living in a specific historical time allows us to look at silence from a contemporary perspective. Formerly omnipresent, today destroyed, unwelcome, and misunderstood – but also urgently wanted. The unprecedented dynamic development of science, technology and media is related to noise, and contributes to many changes both in nature and in man's upbringing. The faster pace of life and the desire to possess, the uncertainty of tomorrow, intensify the anxiety of modern people. Under the influence of noise, anxiety arises in the human mind – this was a fact known by the great philosophers, who taught calmness and a balanced wisdom. They spoke not exclusively with words, but also with silence.

External factors, such as the quantity and movement of vehicles and people, are conducive to the feelings of confusion, excessive nervousness, aggression, as well as a sense of loneliness. A person locked in a space filled with haste, a clutter of mechanical sounds, bombarded with an excess of information – which often clash – forgets that human life is limited by time, and this fact obliges us to reflect on the meaning of life (Woolf, 1994) and the quality of its survival. We are surrounded more than ever by devices and goods of all kinds, and awareness of human dignity and silence is waning. One can notice the fatigue of modern people with noise and hatred. The clash between silence (keeping quiet) and noise is played out today not only in the sphere of basic concepts, but also in everyday life.

### **3. Silence and keeping quiet in literature**

The lack of an unambiguous definition of the concept of silence and keeping quiet causes difficulties in discourse. Exact translations of terms give rise to some difficulties, misunderstandings, and incorrect use of the terms. I therefore propose to adopt a rather general definition of silence and keeping quiet. As we become acquainted with aspects of the problem, it is possible to refine the concepts.

First, we must recognise the fact that we can keep quiet even when there is noise, but in the noise, the silence dies. Noise kills silence and damages the human person. A wider meaning can be attributed to keeping quiet. Refrain-

ing from speaking words may resonate meaning in the shared space; it may intensify the words already spoken and provide a space for a concentration of meanings. In keeping quiet, we consider what has already been said, and our thoughts mature. It is also the moment of completing what has already been said or is about to be said. Keeping quiet is not a retreat from the word, but rather a chance for the maturing of the words that are to be spoken, a crystallisation of the word before its reverberation. In some cases, remaining quiet is more eloquent than providing an audible word. Indeed, it can be a form of communication. Not everything can be expressed in words; sometimes the words used do not correspond with reality – they may be expressing an untruth, a lie.

Remaining silent can be a special way of conversing, through body language, when communication moves from verbal to silent. In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky (2015), the silence of the main character speaks much more than any verbal statement. In the story of the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoyevsky puts Christ in the position of a silent listener. Jesus does not speak at all, and his silence may be understood as a gesture of deep concentration on his opponent's words; an expression of empathic insight into his thoughts. But it may also indicate an awareness that the refutation of the Inquisitor's conviction cannot adequately be put into words.

Virginia Woolf, in writings such as *To the Lighthouse* (1994), devoted a great deal of space to silence (keeping quiet, interruptions, pauses), which is conveyed by the symbolic order of words that she inserted into the narrative. Thus, she did not treat silence as a synonym for 'absence' or 'desertion', but uses silence as a specific form of representation of 'the presence of Being'. Using silence, that is, 'keeping quiet', as a way of communication, she characterises her characters more clearly than by describing their external features. Thanks to the silence (suspending dialogue, gestures or looks replacing words – ingenious punctuation systems), characters communicate better than when they use words. Her protagonists often point out that 'it was impossible to say anything', and alternatively, 'many things have been left unsaid'.

Silence is often portrayed as an ultimate state – I am silent in the face of the mystery, pointing towards something that I cannot explain in a discursive language. There are many kinds of silence, as silence can take many forms. For instance, there exists a silence of those who have nothing to say, a silence of despair, a silence filled with love and wonder. There is also a silence of those who do not have the courage to do or to speak – they 'keep calm', while others suffer and die (Lash, 2004). There exists a silence caused by

an extreme experience, strong feelings and emotions, the silence caused by cowardice, or silence in the face of evil. And, perhaps obviously, there may be nothing behind the silence, it may be just the silence of emptiness.

We encounter the use of the phenomenon of silence (keeping quiet, refraining from speaking) and its various manifestations also in contemporary literature. Sartre (2007) did not locate silence in some supra-linguistic sphere or as something opposed to language, but rather as a phenomenon of language itself. Silence does not have to mean the negation of the voice, the negation of 'presence'; on the contrary, one can find in silence a place of great creative potential that is recollected and purified from the noisy racket (Etela, 2009).

#### **4. The need for silence of many kinds**

Modern people have a great need for a physical and mental space where they are able to enter into the world within themselves. Both the need for silence and its survival depends on the maturity of a human being. Hence, silence is different for a student, different for a teacher; it is something else for a politician, for a creator or for an elder. Yet people, like silence, are part of the same world. Silence as space allows us to hear the external sounds of nature, sound signals, and at the same time leaves a place for imagination and reflection, and gives us a chance to listen to the words of others. Silence is essential in communication between people because it allows one not only to hear the words of another and to understand the spoken content, but it also makes listening easier. In silence, we begin to sense the needs of another human being, and our brain is intensely seeking a solution to the situation in which we find ourselves.

Medieval monasteries are indeed model examples of the interplay of time, silence, and the place where rhythmically measured time played an important role in the functions of sacred space. Today, we seem to have mastered the avoidance of finding even a moment for silent listening. We are saturated with conversations, telephone calls, radios and televisions, not to mention the newest technological gadgets that provide noisy distractions: tablets and smartphones.

Filek (2014) points out that relative silence has many forms. Due to the nature of being 'before', 'after' and 'between' events, silence takes on different contours. Silence is different 'before the storm' and 'after the storm'. Silence can also occur as a pause.

## 5. Dimensions of silence

*External silence* is a condition that allows hearing the voice of a person other than ourselves, a call towards ourselves. It becomes a challenge directed at us. *Internal silence* is the subject of internal listening and is essential for the spiritual development of the human person; a condition of hearing the voice of one's conscience, perhaps the voice of God. It becomes part of us when we enter into internal silence. It is the opposite of the racket of thoughts, the clamour of desires, the battle of emotions. It helps to regenerate strength, both psychological and physical. *Dialogical silence* takes place between me and you, between us, as people. There may be the infamous 'silent days' when we are offended and do not speak to each other. The silence between us is a form of not speaking, of keeping quiet. In this way, it is a form of speech. Keeping quiet speaks, and its speaking may have many meanings. Indeed, the silence of keeping quiet is very meaningful (Filek, 2014). *Silence as a space* in search of internal freedom. Finally, *absolute silence* is the silence of death, in which we have no part.

In the past, little attention was paid to the phenomenon of silence: silence was simply around us. Now, an omnipresent noise destroys silence not only in public space but also in our private spaces: we are losing the capacity to protect places where silence once had a privileged position. We have an intuitive awareness of the value of silence in human development, but we only get to know it when we begin to miss the quiet. The value of silence is most appreciated by artists, for whom it is a prerequisite for their work. This is the group most aware of the fact that entering into silence and isolation is associated with concentration, and silence is accompanied by creative solitude.

## 6. Affirmative aspects of silence – the presence of silence in educative formation

A varied approach to silence makes us aware of the actual state of affairs, and thus draws our attention to the various challenges it faces; at the same time, it sensitises us to the educational value and effort required to introduce the elements of silence into the process of educating the younger generation. The insignificance of our life from the perspective of the cosmos, and yet, its uniqueness, unrepeatability and fragility, lead us to consider how

best to live it with as little pain as possible, and yet in the most useful and sensible manner. We need to reflect – to think – which are a human being's natural riches. To be able to do so, it is necessary to introduce silence into the educative and maturation processes of the human person. Learning how to be with myself and dialogue with my own self in silence, allows my inner 'I' to meet my external 'I'. These are the necessary conditions to analyse one's faults and gifts. But this fact provokes many challenges and changes. In this perspective, the topic of silence takes on an appropriate status and becomes very important.

Becoming aware of both the need for and the significance of silence allows a better understanding of what role it plays in our lives. Both silence and noise reach the brain through the ear, triggering specific changes (beneficial, calming, or devastating in the case of noise). The ear is not sleeping, so it listens and hears the sounds that the brain processes.

Silence is essential for the educative process; it is essential for cultural formation. One might refer to the 'parable of the broken window' (Hazlitt, 1993), which exposes one of the more significant mistakes of popular reasoning – that an activity always benefits society (as mending a broken window benefits the glazing industry), without taking account of the hidden losses. The conviction that a so-called 'partnership' proposed by educational liberalism would always bring positive educational effects turned out to be mistaken. Waves of aggression (even in schools) are flooding Poland (as tribal activism). We need to introduce silence as a method of self-discipline, of control over one's emotions, by including silence within dialogue; this will constitute a particular horizon of reflection on action.

In its most basic understanding, educational formation appears as an organised method of interaction with others in order to ensure personal development. It seems that such a broad approach makes it possible to find a common denominator for various concepts and, at the same time, reveals significant dimensions sufficiently strongly. These dimensions should be reduced to two: the purposefulness of interaction, which presupposes not only an earlier reflection but also the possession of the necessary knowledge about humanity; and the externality of interaction, which in turn demands the existence of objective patterns and various types of stimuli. In both cases, it is about the development of a person not only physically but also psycho-spiritually. Education has a crucial role in shaping a person's development. Every theory of education must necessarily, at the very least, answer the basic question about the goal of education, in terms of exerting external influence to ignite the actual development of a child or a young person. The question is, 'what is



the relationship between silence and education?’ More specifically, how can silence be introduced into the process of education? How does silence affect human development?

First, we must remember that silence is something other than ‘keeping quiet’ (not speaking), although these concepts are often used interchangeably and sometimes overlap. But silence is not the same as emptiness; it is a call to a personal reflection. It defines our beings when we confront our own inner ‘I’.

## **7. Silence as the link between physical and spiritual life**

Montessori (Kramer, 1988; Miksza, 2018), as well as Steiner (2005, 2007), pointed to the coexistence of movement and silence as necessary elements in education. Silence facilitates well-adjusted behaviour, balancing the processes of stimulation and inhibition. So, what is silence? Where does it come from? What is it for? Where does it lead?

I believe I can identify three ‘places’ from which silence flows. The first source is nature, the experience of peace, which opens one to a different dimension of existence and a new perspective on reality. The second source of silence is the experience of creativity. Finally, the third source from which silence comes is the spiritual encounter, for example with God, which, to some extent, from the beginning, defined what it meant to be human. Here, something completely different and important is present, which stimulates new ways of perceiving and expressing oneself.

When does the need for silence and keeping quiet arise? To take up another’s time by chatter is immoral, as is not keeping silence in certain circumstances. The lack of necessary silence is caused by redundant words that we speak in a situation that calls for silence and quiet. It is redundant to express one’s opinion on a given topic if nothing good comes of it, instead provoking an argument or trouble for the other. It is better to keep quiet than to hurt another by one’s remarks. Therefore, we need to master our susceptibility to chatter. We need to force ourselves to be quiet, to give the other a chance to speak. Let us think before speaking, and be careful in choosing our words. Silence, like the air we breathe and the water we drink, is an essential element in the life of every human person; our organism needs it just as much as it needs oxygen and water. Silence is a moment when we begin to listen to our thoughts, to our bodies. People look for silence, feeling the need to cut themselves off from excessive information. Hence, many are beginning

to practise meditation, participating in Ignatian retreats, during which the participant speaks only with his or her spiritual director. They are seeking *something* that might help them maintain internal equilibrium.

People who have a problem with self-control – over their emotions, desires, sense of meaning and truth in life – are often afraid of silence. They are afraid of the moment when the thoughts they had long pushed to the edges of their awareness will re-emerge. Then, they will be forced to answer the questions they had hitherto been evading. They are afraid of learning the truth about themselves. They are scared of remembering situations in which they chose the wrong path. They avoid the moment when they will have to answer to themselves why they are doing what they are doing.

Life among other people requires humanity. To preserve one's humanity, we need silence, the ability to reflect. Young people are in great need of someone to listen to them, and yet they talk, sometimes all at the same time. They often lack the kind ear of someone who will listen. An overabundance of pent-up emotions, without the possibility of unloading them, leads to aggressive behaviour.

Memories of the silence of the family home, safe silence, warmth and peace, evoke joy, which motivates people to recreate an atmosphere known since childhood, in which we grew up. Returning to places where we went with our parents calms us down, reminding us of safe times and carefree games.

Silence is a good that we rarely value. It matures along with the person, supported by pedagogy, ethics and religion. Yet the experience of noise is significantly more common than the experience of silence. We are accustomed to living with noise from childhood; it has become our natural and only known milieu. Noise threatens our health and even our lives, while silence is becoming rarer and rarer.

## **8. Conclusion: Educating for reflection through silence**

Silence is, in fact, fundamental in education, teaching us to listen. Keeping quiet is a task that orients one towards reflection, which leads to growth – and this is also the task of education. That which is most important happens within the human person. Experiencing and exercising silence as a method for personal growth and human development is a very beneficial state.

The principles that must be followed in teaching silence were presented by Montessori (Kramer, 1988; Miksza, 2018). Silence has its own melody and does not exclude sound, but rather is present in the music. Silence is

a way and ability in life. The life of a pupil in school is regulated by clearly outlined norms: that is, rules regarding time and behaviour connected with the programme and structure of given subjects, and private rules of a given teacher (their particular style of teaching, and expectations). All of this requires a certain discipline and internal tranquillity so that both teacher and pupil are able to carry out a dialogue in silence. Many schools have established zones of silence, and in some there is a quiet room. (Silent zones are organized in all schools in Niepołomice district – in Wawrzenice there is even a quiet room – and many schools introduce ‘silent lessons’ and focus on the dilemma of silence.) It has to do with shaping oneself through silence, and working in silence.

There is a difference between imagining silence and finding silence within oneself. Emotional calming-down can occur, among other ways, through the habit of daily writing, listening to the waves of the ocean (even from a recording), walking in silence in the halls during a break, jogging in silence, fishing, chess – all of this leads to the development of personality and concentration.

The centrality of silence in human development is exemplified in the refurbishing of the Brandenburg Gate, from 1994. Here, there is now a silent room for meditation, built on the pattern of the ‘Silent Room’ that Dag Hammarskjöld ordered for himself and his co-workers in his quarters at the United Nations in New York. The goal was to create a space for quiet reflection amidst the hustle and bustle of the big city. It is a place of tolerance between nations and religions, and a place of peace. The thought of creating a place for silence in the centre of Berlin emerged at the end of the 1980s, in West Berlin’s intellectual circles. In 1993, a ‘Society for Supporting a Quiet Place in Berlin’ was organised under the patronage of Dr Hanny Renta Laurien. The work of the Society (in cooperation with the Berlin Senate) led to the opening of the Place of Silence on 27 October 1994. This silent room is simply furnished: one decoration is a tapestry created by Ritta Hager from Budapest. There is a pictogram hanging on the wall in the form of a bas-relief designed by Franz Prentke of Berlin. Here, silence is now at the centre of social and political development, as it should be.

## References

- Borkowski, K. (2007). Nieobecna wszechobecna cisza wszechświata [Absent omnipresent silence of the universe]. *Tematy z Szewskiej*, 1, 40–42.

- Dostoyevsky, F. (2015 [1880]). *Bracia Karamazow* [*The Brothers Karamazov*]. Lublin: Centrum Kultury w Lublinie.
- Etela, F. (2009). Fenomen ciszy w kontekście (nie tylko) literackim [Phenomenon of silence in the context of (not only) literature]. *Tekstualia Palimpsesty Literackie Artystyczne Naukowe*, 4(19), 121–136.
- Filek, J. (2014). Filozofa wstęp do ciszy [Introduction into the silence by philosopher]. *Znak*, 707.
- Frankl, V. (2011 [1946]). *Człowiek w poszukiwaniu sensu* [*Man's search for meaning*]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca.
- Hazlitt, H. (1993). *Ekonomia w jednej lekcji* [*Economy in one lesson*]. Kraków: Znak – Signum Publishing House.
- Korczak, J. (1978). *Pisma wybrane* [*Selected works*]. Vols. 1–4. Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia.
- Korczak, J. (2019). *Pamiętnik* [*Diary*]. Wrocław: Siedmioróg.
- Kramer, R. (1988). *Maria Montessori*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press Inc.
- Lash, N. (2004). *Holiness, speech and silence. Reflections on the question of God*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Miksza, M. (2018). *Zrozumieć Montessori* [*Understanding Montessori*]. Kraków: Impuls.
- Sartre, J. P. (2007 [1947]). *Existentialism and Humanism*. York: Methuen Publishing Ltd.
- Steiner, R. (2005 [1922]). *Duchowe podstawy sztuki wychowania. Wykłady oksfordzkie* [*Spiritual ground of education*]. Gdynia: Genesis.
- Steiner, R. (2007 [1911]). *Duchowi przewodnicy człowieka* [*The spiritual guidance of the individual and humanity*]. Gdynia: Genesis.
- Woolf, V. (1994 [1927]). *To the Lighthouse*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions.