

Facilitators' Corner: Inviting the Silence Winter 2005, By Mellen Kennedy

*"Our task is to listen to the news
that is always arriving out of silence."
Rainer Maria Rilke*

As I pause from my writing at the round, oak dining room table, I find myself in unexpected stillness. The dog sleeps restfully on the sofa after our morning excursion in the woods. The typically boisterous cat perches motionless in the window surveying the winterscape. The subzero world outside amplifies the stillness. **We are suspended for a moment in tranquil, healing silence.** A minute later the cat is stalking the unsuspecting dog from the top of the sofa and the stillness is broken. While it lasted, that moment seemed infinite.

Perhaps you can recall spontaneous moments of silence like these in your experience? **Perhaps you've experienced these moments in your small group?** To me they seem to be rare gifts.

We live in a time and a culture where silence is often viewed as a void to be filled, particularly in groups. **"Silence is something like an endangered species"** remarks therapist, Gunilla Norris. In our quest for efficiency, silence seems like a waste of the precious resource of time. We quickly become uncomfortable and jump to "fix the problem" with words.

Other times and other cultures have viewed silence differently. The mystical traditions of the world teach us that silence is a to be cultivated. They teach us that our **spiritual flowering is nurtured by spontaneous and intentional moments of silence, even in groups.** Rather than an absence, silence is seen as full and rich. Silence can invite us to slow down, relax and go deeper. Perhaps that's actually why it can make us so uncomfortable.

I'm a member of a covenant group of fellow seminarians and seminary graduates who "meet" together once a month by conference call. I especially appreciate one member who will **invite us into silence** at what feels to me to be just the right moment. The quality of the conversation from that moment on, seems to be enhanced by that pause.

I think that as facilitators, the more we become comfortable with silence in our own lives, the more we can allow silence to unfold in our groups. I'd like to invite you to think about the place of silence in your life and in your group. **If you're uncomfortable with silence, why?** How have you experienced silence in your group, considering both negative and positive instances? You might even consider doing a session on silence with your group.

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton wrote **"It is in deep solitude and silence that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother and sister."** Although most of us are not called to the profound silence of monastic life, as Thomas Merton was, I think we, as facilitators, can still learn from his words. Wishing you the best in cultivating silence and gentleness in your important work as a group facilitator.

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