

## **Do You Hear?**

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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My motivation for sermon writing was really low this week. Pulling wet laundry from the machine, I mused on the number of ways I had spent the morning avoiding writing what should be the easiest of the six sermons on the senses to write. Hearing is such a large part of how we do spirituality, this should be a walk in the park. But two cups of coffee, four phone calls and a pile of email in, I was now doing laundry instead of writing.

Then it dawned on me that the last two sermons I wrote, I never got to deliver. Two weeks ago, Beasley very capably stepped in and led the service when I got sick. Last week, we cancelled due to the dire weather predictions. Two sermons, that for two different reasons, I never spoke. Sermons are meant to be spoken. Sermons don't live on the page. They only live in the sound of their recitation.

I wondered as I tossed shirts into the dryer if this was how composers whose works aren't performed feel? Or playwrights who don't get produced? Some things need sound to exist in the ways they were meant to exist. Drums and pianos and tubas are beautiful to look at, but until they are animated by hands or breath they have not fulfilled their ends. Screenplays and sermons don't find life until they are spoken; songs until they are sung.

If the drum or tuba or sermon is not the end in itself, then neither is the sound. Until someone hears, the process remains incomplete. Because sound calls us together. It creates relationship. Whether it's the dinner gong summoning us from afar or the whisper drawing us into intimacy, sound can draw us in, closer, connected. The composer Igor Stravinsky said that the "profound meaning of music and its essential aim, is to promote a communion, a union of man with his fellow man and with the Supreme Being." Charles Darwin would probably have agreed since he hypothesized that music predated language and that its purpose was to bring people together. Birds do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it. Darwin wrote, "The suspicion does not appear improbable that the progenitor of man, either males or females, or both sexes, before they had acquired the power of expressing their mutual love in articulate language, endeavored to charm each other with musical notes and rhythm."

We not only have this basic instinct to communicate through sound, but sound is one of those things that is culturally contextual. We understand certain sounds in certain ways based on mutual agreement within our culture. Language is the most obvious example. Until a critical number of people agree that "collywobbles" is a word and means a certain thing it is just useless noise. But if you have ever sat through dinner in an ethnic restaurant playing only the music of an unfamiliar culture you might have a glimpse of how acculturated we are to sounds of many kinds. Even music across generational cultures has caused plenty of indigestion. These kids today with their rock and roll! Through sound, culture and community are understood. Sounds create space and they can create sacred space. Drums, voices, bells, silence, gongs, shofar.

People of many religions called into worship by many different sounds. Sacred space created by many different sounds.

Sounds can also break space when used inappropriately. I was in a workshop once—I no longer remember the topic—but I remember that the leader used a Buddhist singing bowl to signal when class sessions began and ended. Finally, one of the Buddhist students in the class approached the instructor and offered that the bell's sound was used in sacred ritual for particular purpose and that to hear it used as a simple timekeeping device outside of its intended context was jarring. Sounds can draw us in. So, too, they can push us out. The uses of sound in religion are as many and varied as the religions of the world themselves.

In our own tradition, the sermon remains the central part of most services because our tradition developed through and out of Protestant Christianity in which hearing the Word of God as set forth in the Bible defines worship. We have reached new agreements about what the Word of God means and what constitutes scripture, but the form of organizing around the spoken word remains. Though music may not form the center of our worship it plays an equally important role. As one colleague quipped, "When Unitarians took God out of the center they put in music instead."

We are certainly not alone in the use or centrality of music. From drums to pipe organs, music has a long religious history. Here are just a few of the vignettes reported by Brent Plate in his book *The History of Religion in 5½ Objects*:

The Dogon people of current day Mali tell the story of a great drought. To beseech the great god Amma for help, a leatherworker created a drum and played it while the blacksmith beat on his anvil. Pleased by the percussion, Amma sent the saving rain.

Another story from Argentina's Matco people tells of a great fire that destroyed the world. Two great bird-like creatures, Ianchu and Chuña, arose from the ashes to recreate the world. This, Ianchu did by drumming on the hollow stump of a burned tree, chanting until shoots began to grow.

A third story comes from China. When the god of rain abandoned his post a great drought spread through the land. Toad, fox, bear and tiger were sent to heaven as a delegation to the Jade Emperor to seek his intercession, but toad's drumming so annoyed the Emperor that he sent his army to stop the noise. Somehow, toad overpowered the soldiers and gained entrance to the palace where the Jade Emperor granted his request for rain. From that time on, the booming of toad's drum announced the coming rains.

These are just three stories of many from around the world but in each of them drums are an important way of communicating with the divine, of reconstituting the world and continuing life. In contemporary religion drums continue to play important roles in helping to communicate with deities, in brining practitioners to ecstatic states, or in simply marking time. The drum itself is a material object, one we can see and touch, but the sound is ephemeral, and so in some forms of Buddhism it draws the listener's attention to the impermanence of all things.

Just as drums have their many sacred uses there have been times and places where drums were considered evil. The Bible contains a number of mentions of praising god with music – with trumpets and lyres, timbrels and harps. But it never mentions drums. So people being people, someone got the idea that drums were evil and they became banned in Christianity. Mix in a good dose of colonial hubris and the native drums of Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and the Middle East become tools of the devil. A popular nineteenth century book by Rev. Hugh Reginald Haweis warned that the “the drum is a terrible instrument of vengeance, and is often a terror to the drummer himself, as well as his less emphatic companions.”

And so it remains with all the variety and wide ranging theologies of the world’s religious traditions. Music prized in this time and place is anathema in another. Instrumental music, a mainstay in many traditions, is largely forbidden in Muslim worship, though vocal music is welcomed. Secular music is often not allowed in even mainstream Protestant churches. With all the different ways we believe, so we worship.

In this series on the senses, I have, so far, posed the question what would it be like if we incorporated this physical sense into our idea of how we encounter the sacred. But today we are looking at the single most used sense in our tradition. So the question isn’t really what if we engaged hearing more, but what if we set it aside? What if we did not, or could not hear? How could that enhance our spiritual lives?

Like all of our senses, hearing is a tool. And it is only one tool that we have for listening. The hands of the signer, moving in gestures of meaning, allow us to listen if we have the knowledge to understand them. Silence allows us to listen to things other than words. It is in the process of listening, of attending to what our senses bring us, that it finds completion. Silence can speak as profoundly as spoken word or gesture.

Seeking silence has played a significant role in religious history, perhaps not as large a part as seeking the sounds of drums and bells and voices, but certainly an important part. The Christian tradition has a long history of solitary contemplation and keeping silence even in religious orders. The Quaker meeting allows space for the spirit to enter by sitting in silence. Buddhism and Hinduism enter deeply into silent meditation practices.

I have to say I’ve never had a comfortable relationship with silence. I grew up doing my homework in front of the TV or at the very least with radio on. There is a clear soundtrack to my life composed of popular music, commercial jingles and TV show theme songs. If sound wasn’t being delivered electronically then someone was talking or singing or playing an instrument.

It used to be that when ministers talked about the joy of silent meditation I switched my brain to the top 40 station. When we visited a Buddhist monastery in seminary and sat meditation with the monks I thought I would burst out screaming before the three minutes was up. But through practice, I’ve worked my way around to find the beauty in silence, to recognize that there have, in fact, always been times of silence in my life hunkered down with a good book or (far more rarely) off in the woods alone. I welcome times of silent contemplation now. In fact I can’t write a sermon or do pretty much any part of my job without them. Now, I can even go to Quaker meeting without feeling like I need make something happen.

Thomas Merton, much of whose work I admire, wrote this in his book *The Silent Life* in 1957:

The world of men has forgotten the joys of silence, the peace of solitude which is necessary, to some extent, for the fullness of human living. Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally. When that inner voice is not heard, when man cannot attain to the spiritual peace that comes from being perfectly at one with his own true self, his life is always miserable and exhausting... He is no longer moved from within, but only from outside himself.

Aside from the gendered language, I think the thought holds up pretty well for today. So maybe we should try a bit of what Merton preaches. Instead of the discussion on silence, let's instead move into the silence itself and see how it feels. I invite to settle into a comfortable position. To come into this time of silence.

[TIME OF SILENCE]

Silence is not an empty thing. In it there are the sounds of being together, of being alive and being together. Silence allows us to listen more deeply to what really needs our attention. Sound calls us in, silence draws us deeper.

May the beauty of sound be yours. May the beauty of silence accompany it. May we remember to not simply hear, but to listen deeply that we might truly hear.

Namaste.  
Por lo tanto puede ser.

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