

QUIET

Quiet is a noun, an adjective, an adverb and a verb. It is a simple, yet rich, word.

As a noun, it refers to a quality or state of tranquility, calm, peace. We passed the afternoon in quiet.

As an adjective, it describes things that are free from uproar and noise, still, at rest. The quiet cat stretched out in a sunbeam.

As an adverb, it describes things that are functioning optimally with no disruption. On a windy day, the quiet-running windmill turns.

As a verb, it means to release from distress or disturbance. The mother quiets her baby.

Quiet, in my childhood, was a highly desirable pursuit. I spent long quiet hours under a huge spreading tree in my best friend's back yard, watching bugs crawl, listening to the lives of birds, studying the dapple of sunlight and the sprinkle of rain, searching out four-leaf clovers in the grass, watching fragments of blown dandelion puffs ride the breeze, digging small stones from beneath the grass and wondering at their colors and patterns.

My daughter wrote me a letter from camp when she was 9 years old saying her favorite counselor was the one who taught "shade gazing". The activity involved sitting under a big shade tree and just gazing around. I realized, when I got that letter, how far I had strayed from the cherished quiet of my own childhood and I regretted that I had not taught her that myself.

Since then, I've often wondered when and why I chose to fill up all the quiet places in my life. I cannot recall any one time when I know I abandoned quiet. And yet it happened, that I do know. Was it when I was in junior high school, and started to become afraid of the new thoughts that crossed my mind when I was in solitude? Do people run away from contemplation when they first realize that their minds are capable creating images of shocking fantasies, of unfathomable emotions, of frightening behaviors – as well as of the random flights of butterflies and the innocent passage of sheep-like clouds across the sky? Do we become afraid of our own thinking -- the depths to which it can take us, and the heights to which we can soar within it? Do we rush away from quiet because we don't understand our own minds, and then spend our years keeping our own imaginations at bay with activity and excitement? And when we seek to replace the quiet we have lost, do we choose to "focus" our thoughts with the serene mantras of meditation or the ordered text of prayers so that we do not unleash our own unpredictable creative chaos?

It took a long time for me to notice that the level of activity, intensity and drama in my life was not only unnecessary, but counterproductive. It took even longer to acknowledge all that commotion would not change with circumstances – that it wouldn't change because I moved to a different house, or got a different schedule, went into a different business or entered a new phase of life. It was hard to admit that I could create activity, intensity and drama out of *anything* because they were products of my mind, not of my life. And it took even longer to form the intent to change my mind. The habit of rushing around, being so busy and so much in demand that I never had time to reflect, was hard to break. Once I looked to break it, I realized that the impetus for the habit was the fear of what I might have to think about if I left my mind alone, not the concern that I would not accomplish my tasks or succeed in my work.

What set me free to change my mind was the dawning of awareness that my thinking is the source from which I continually create my life experience. Until I knew that, I believed life experience continually created my thinking. Therefore, if my mind turned to unpalatable or unacceptable or frightening thoughts, I assumed that I had “gone bad” and was being damaged or punished by my life. I would work to fight off those thoughts and change my life so they wouldn't keep coming to me. If the difficult thoughts were byproducts of my life, then where was the quality control? I would have to try harder to “do” more. The only “control” I had was to careen out of control, with so much going on in my life that there wasn't any down-time.

At one point, someone used the word “daymare” to me to describe scary thinking that comes to mind when we're awake. I had never been troubled by “nightmares” because I recognized they were just scary stories that occurred to me during sleep, as my father had told me since toddlerhood. He had explained from the beginning that the imagination never sleeps, and that everyone dreams with the same fictional ability that characterizes the greatest of storytellers.

So the concept of “daymare” took me aback. Why would the mind be any different awake than asleep? If we have this huge capacity for fiction, wouldn't it work as well during the day? Wasn't that, indeed, what fiction writers were doing – using that capacity while awake, when they could remember it, re-think it, shape it, write it down?

If any thoughts could arise at any time because of my ability to make things up, then the quality control was not in life and life activities. The quality control was in my own mind, in my ability to relate to my own thinking and use that gift wisely. The quality control was in my own willingness to reflect, to seek quietude, to allow the thoughts that didn't help me to pass through my mind like storm clouds, knowing that the innocent, sheep-like clouds would return and pass as well.

Quiet opens the floodgates to ideas. My observation of it is that the least constructive ideas I have are clearly not useful to me when I am reflective, and they pass quickly. The

wisest and most useful ideas tend to float into perspective and linger in the quiet, allowing the mind to explore them and discover how to act on them. And the most beautiful ideas touch the heart, illuminate the imagination, and create the poetry of love.

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