

Learn to Confront Silence

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

A persistent fight that many couples have is that one may like to get out and do all sorts of things (meet people, dine out, and so forth) and the other may enjoy just sitting at home doing nothing. I read an interesting article some time ago about the breakup of Andre Agassi and Brooke Shields that discussed this. As I have heard of various breakups of other couples throughout the years, this same rationale for separating has emerged more times than I can count: One always wanted to be on the go and the other did not.

What this conflict is truly about, on a more fundamental level, is that one person feels the need to stay active and the other wants to be inactive. One person craves distraction and movement, and the other person craves silence and stillness. I believe that most of us struggle with silence and stillness, and how we deal with this defines our lives. Very few people (myself included) have come to terms with silence. The problem with silence is that it forces us to confront ourselves and who we really are. The less active we are, the more we need to confront what is going on in our minds, and confronting the inner workings of our minds is difficult for many people.

It is interesting to study religion, yoga, and other cultural movements that have emerged in various parts of the world throughout the millennia. Most of these movements have various forms of meditation built into them. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and many other religions include meditation and silence in their rituals. In fact, one could argue that a major component of each of these religions is an attempt to quieten our minds and put us in touch with this silence. Whether it is through chanting, repetitive prayers, or some other means, each of these religions seek to get us in touch with silence. Think about the monks who sit and chant hours per day, for example. This action puts them in touch with the silence of their own minds.

In most forms of traditional yoga (not necessarily that which is practiced in the United States), people spend about an hour or so stretching and doing various poses before meditating. Very few people realize that the stretching and yoga poses done prior to meditation are only done in order to make the meditation itself more effective: The theory is that in order to calm the mind and access silence within, you need to calm the body. It was believed that only by calming the body could you access the silence of the mind. Practitioners of traditional yoga do not want the body to distract them from sitting in silence for a long period. Instead, they want to access the silence within their minds, and they view the body as something that potentially can get in the way of that silence.

Paradoxically, in the United States and in other areas of the world, yoga has become more about stretching and exercise and less about quieting the mind and accessing this silence. If you think about this, it is somewhat fascinating because yoga, as it was developed throughout the centuries, was only conceived to be about the mind and not the body. Most of the yoga classes I have been to in the United States, however, have involved very little chanting or meditation. I believe this is more a symbol of our world than anything else: People have become more interested in movement than in silence.

Like modern yoga in the United States, the vast majority of us are more concerned with distracting ourselves than silence. In my household, for example, the television is on most of the time. I would much rather sit in front of a television than sit in silence. A television is comforting, and it keeps my mind occupied. On the weekends, I would much rather be running around going out to lunch, the grocery store, or playing with my children at a park than sitting around in silence. In a similar manner, it is rare that my family does something as simple as sit on a porch and look outside during a summer day. We are more likely to be moving around and doing something than nothing at all.

People are continually distracting themselves in many, many ways, and it can cause serious problems in their lives. Most of the problems that we experience, I believe, are due to the dangers of distraction. We distract ourselves with:

- Food
- Business
- Television
- Movement
- Gambling
- Fast cars
- Shopping
- Moving to new places
- Sex and promiscuity
- Money
- Having new experiences
- Exercise
- Fighting with other people
- Socializing with other people
- Drugs and alcohol
- Cigarettes
- Crime

In fact, the list of distractions we have is massive, and the more you look around at people you know, the more distractions you are likely to see. I certainly engage in many distractions and so do you. For example, if I am sitting around doing nothing

on a weekend, I will have a snack—not because I am hungry but because I am bored. I may have several snacks just to keep my mind occupied. This certainly is not good for my health; this sort of snacking does me no good whatsoever. I am no different than virtually anyone I know, though. Most people, particularly in this country, find themselves distracting themselves in one way or another when confronted by silence.

When we stop working, stop moving, and stop distracting ourselves, we are confronting this silence. Silence can cause much discomfort for people, and it is in this silence that many people experience problems in their day-to-day lives.

- Silence can come when you are at home at night.
- Silence can come when you are on vacation and trying to relax.
- Silence can come on the weekend when you are not at work.

In fact, silence can be found almost anywhere, and it is something that you need to learn to live with and learn from. There is strength in being able to confront silence, and it is a challenge we should consider undertaking.

Most of the very successful people have difficulty confronting this silence. People who work seven days a week may find themselves unable to handle the silence. When you look at most “super achievers” out there, they are working as hard as they are because without the work, they would need to confront this sort of silence.

Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to interview and speak with hundreds of extremely successful people. As a student of achievement, I have always been interested in the history of these people. Generally, there are things in their past that they are simply not comfortable dealing with. There are aspects of their past that, when there is silence, they find themselves needing to confront. It could be a poor relationship with a parent, a major failure from their past, or something else that is hurtful. In just about every case I have seen, though, the super achiever has issues he or she needs to solve.

This came out for me a few days ago, when I was learning in more detail about a person I know. This person has been an internationally famous producer, has virtually perfect health, has a great marriage, and is wealthy beyond anyone's wildest dreams. In fact, if you were to look at this person's life from the outside, you would think that it was the best life imaginable.

Despite all of these achievements and outward happiness, this person is incredibly upset with their life because one of their siblings receives all the praise and love from their parents—despite being a failure. The parents always have sided with the less successful sibling and never praised the more successful one. The more successful one drinks too much, cycles through various antidepressants (which do not work), seeks out affairs, spends tons of money on things they should not, and more. The person is distracting themselves from the world because the pain they feel related to their parents is just too severe.

It is in silence and without distraction that we confront our true selves and the consciousness that lies behind who we are. There are tons of studies that link profound psychological benefits to meditation, yoga, prayer, silence, and other disciplines that put us in touch with this silence. Confronting silence is often called “confronting our own demons.” If you look at your life, you are likely to discover that you spend a great deal of your time running, moving, and engaging in all sorts of activities that are not necessarily contributing to your happiness. You are lost in distraction. Yet it is through facing the silence -- and with it, reality -- that your world will begin to change for the better.

THE LESSON

In silence, you confront your true self; when you are less active, you need more to confront your mind's inner workings. This is difficult for most people to do, as they frequently are more interested in distracting themselves than confronting silence. There is strength in being able to confront silence, and it is something that you must learn to live with and learn from. Don't get lost in distractions, or spend your time in activities aren't contributing to your happiness.