

The Gift of Silence

It is only in solitude and silence that our life is really present, that we are truly responsive to the heartbeat of the universe and free to contemplate the miracle of existence. (Lane, p. 19)

By Cathleen Haskins

I live in a small fishing village in Wisconsin, a state often alluded to as the land of cheese and beer, grazing dairy cows, waving wheat fields, and towering sunflowers. It is a place of amazingly beautiful lakes, bountiful parks, and persistent, enduring cold and snowy winters. My neck of the woods is the northern part of Door County, a string of quaint little villages bustling with tourists during summer months, then vacated by all but the locals and occasional winter visitors the rest of the year. People from all over the world make Door County their vacation destination, referring to it as the Cape Cod of the Midwest. They come to enjoy the natural beauty, Lake Michigan, inspiring sunsets, and all of the renewing, restorative powers offered by the simplicity, charm, and natural wonders of the area.

Last November, my niece Amy and her two young children visited us for Thanksgiving. They arrived late on

Wednesday evening. "Ohhh," Amy whispered as she breathed in the still, crisp night air, "It's soooooo quiet." We paused, wrapped in the beauty of the moment, looking up, listening, when 4-year-old Nora added her unsolicited approval. "I like it," she said in her soft voice. "I like the quiet."

We moved here, in part, for the cycles of activity and solitude that the seasons offer. The vibrant summers (the shops and restaurants reopening, the tourists arriving, the music and art communities expanding), and then the change and calm that descends each autumn: the putting away and closing up, the emptying out and shutting down. And with winter comes the great gift of quiet, spreading like a blanket over the peninsula, humbly offering silence, the serenity of solitude. I need this slowing down time. We *all* need some slow, silent time because it brings a peace that anchors us to our essential selves, to that inner place of stillness, self-reflection, creativity, and calm. Paradoxically, we

human beings tend to feel uncomfortable, if not fearful, in silence. This is understandable when one considers how our lives have been stripped of silence and solitude with and replaced by noise, restlessness, entertainment, and action.

Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote about solitude and silence, spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh teaches about it, Mother Teresa spoke of it, spiritual guide and author Eckhart Tolle addresses it, Jesus spent 40 days in it. From Christianity to Buddhism, Hinduism to Judaism to Quakerism, the practice of silence has held particular significance. At the same time, engaging in times of silence or practicing periods of solitude are not born of, nor do they belong to, any particular religion, but are rather of a spiritual nature.

Slowing down, quieting the mind and body, and experiencing silence nourishes the spirit. Montessori educators are mandated to cultivate not just the intellect but the whole child.

We recognize that nurturing the spirit of the child is part of what makes this form of education work so well. Thus, it seems important to ask:

- What are the benefits of stillness and silence for children?
- What do exercises in stillness and silence for children look like?
- What about a place in the classroom designated for practicing silence? What would that look like?

How Silence and Stillness Benefits Children

When I was teaching I created a poster that read, "Don't just do something, sit there!" Those words were not my own, but I liked the concept because that message suggested a shift in my active, productivity-based life toward the notion that non-action has merit. It is a radical movement away from the widely held belief that has taken deep root over the last half century, in which activity and productivity are the true measures of success (Don't just sit there, do something!), and promote busyness over rest and efficiency over craftsmanship (Carl Honoré, 2004, p. 122). This is the same paradigm that values output more than inward-focused attention and values intellectual progress over inner growth. Yes, we do want to see children engaged in purposeful work, but introducing them to the benefits of non-doing will serve them as well.

Today's children have inherited an unbalanced childhood agenda and lifestyle, too often consisting of perpetual daily activity and fraught with adult oversight and omnipresent technology (and lacking quiet moments). Lured by such cultural icons as large-screen TVs and vehicles with DVD players, children become dependent upon external devices to fill what might otherwise be quiet moments of observation or contemplation. Rushed from one event to another, shuttled off to summer classes and camps, or immersed in adult-structured tasks,



Photograph by Cathleen Haskins

there is little time to do nothing or just to be. But children, just as adults, benefit immensely from non-doing. When children engage in non-doing, it isn't so much about *emptying out* (as it may be for some adults practicing specific forms of meditation) as it is about *making room* and *slowing down* for inner experiences. Children need to have time to meander, to observe, to wonder, to stroll along a trickling stream, to lay beneath a shade tree on a warm day, or to ponder the night sky.

Exercises in Stillness and Silence

Teachers can help children experience the benefits of balancing *doing* (activity) and *being* (stillness and silence) by preparing a space and offering opportunities to engage in stillness and silence activities during the school day. Maria Montessori developed the Silence Game when she recognized (and sought to understand) the love and desire children feel for silence. She described how she discovered accidentally children's extraordinary love of silence while holding a tiny baby wrapped up in blankets, surrounded by children. The baby lay peacefully in her arms, and when Montessori asked if they could be as still as the baby she held, she was amazed at their response. "I should never have believed that children could love this mysterious, simple thing called silence so much" (Montessori, 1989, p. 54).

Montessori was captivated:

All the children lent themselves to the task, not it must be said with enthusiasm, since enthusiasm implies something that is impulsive and openly manifest. But here was something that rose up from a deep desire. The children all sat perfectly still breathing as quietly as possible, having on their faces a serene and intent expression like those who are meditating. Little by little in the midst of this impressive silence we could all hear the lightest sounds like that of a drop of water falling in the distance and the far off chirping of a bird. (Montessori, 1982, p. 126)

Montessori understood that stillness is the precursor to silence, and she explored this further by providing opportunities for children to become still and create silence, helping them to pay attention to each part of their bodies as they worked together in this endeavor. She emphasized collective effort and cooperation, necessary for group silence, and she found that the children expressed great interest and delight in achieving silence.

It is important that the teacher integrates into his or her own understanding the value of non-doing. If she does not fully accept the benefits of taking time for silence, most likely she will urge the child onward to get busy with "real work." By doing so, the message is sent to children that moments of stillness and silence are not a valuable use of time. I once worked at a public elementary school where some of the faculty did not want benches or picnic tables on the playground because they feared the children would sit and do nothing. And yet, "just sitting" is beneficial! The task of the adult is to understand silence and stillness in a different way, not as a demand from adult authority but as a doorway to the sanctuary of the inner self.

Two increasingly popular practices, mindfulness and meditation, are based in stillness and silence, and there is a small but growing body of research on their benefits, some of which is being conducted on children in schools. Canadian researchers working with fourth through seventh graders found that a mindfulness pilot program had a positive effect on optimism, attention, and introspection (Suttie, 2007). Visitors to the Mayo Clinic website (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2010) will read that meditation exercises such as yoga, qigong, and mindfulness promote calm and inner peace by "building skills to manage stress, increase self-awareness, [focus] on the present, and [reduce] negative thoughts." Furthermore, painter, author, and educator John Lane, in *The Spirit of Silence, Making Space for Creativity* (2006), argues that silence is the source of infinite creativity. Referring to Emily Dickinson, Henry David Thoreau, Paul Cezanne, and Thomas Merton, he says, "All spoke of the importance of silence and solitude as the conducive ground for creativity and a focused awareness of the miracle of existence" (p. 50). In this vein, stillness and silence activities can be introduced to children with the expectation that possible benefits include awareness of the inner self, improved attention, mindful awareness and presence, increased calm, and increased creativity.

Inner Awareness

As technology has advanced and the world has gotten progressively noisier, it is more difficult to find places where silence can be found. Montessorian Aline D. Wolf captured this topic in her little book for children, *I Want to Hear the Quiet* (2001), in which she brings the child's attention to all of the noises in an ordinary house on an ordinary day—the television, washer and dryer, radio, video games, vacuum cleaner, and more—making it hard

to think. It's important, she suggests, sometimes to turn everything off in order "listen to the silence" and to hear one's own thoughts. With simple language, Wolf reminds the child to turn inward.

It is true that, from the time they wake up in the morning until they go to bed at night, children's environments are awash in noise: dishwashers, garbage disposals, coffee grinders, blenders, music, computers, and cell phones. Going outdoors, we can add lawnmowers, leaf blowers, snow blowers, and rototillers, as well as car alarms and the noise from traffic, aircraft, and trains. This storm of noise poses an obstacle to looking inward. "Silence," says Montessori, "often brings us the knowledge which we had not fully realized, that we possess within ourselves an interior life" (Standing, 1984, p. 226).



Photograph by Cathleen Haskins

... silence is the source of infinite creativity.

Attention

From personal experience we are aware of the elusive nature of concentrated attention, the ability to focus exclusively on one subject. Our attention is easily split by distractions. External noise is not the only barrier to attaining focused states of mind. Our own internal chatter also acts as a

roadblock to concentration. For example, consider a time you were reading in a quiet environment, yet your mind was distracted by other thoughts. You realized that because your active mind interfered with your ability to concentrate, you didn't really know what you just read. Although inner silence is the more difficult silence to cultivate, it is the more important kind of silence, because even when our environment is quiet, if the mind is turbulent, it is nearly impossible to achieve deep or lasting concentration. Montessorians want to help children achieve normalization, which is dependent upon concentration obtained through work. Experiences in stillness and silence can be launching pads in the elementary classroom for further discussion on the role of internal silence on focused attention and concentration.

Mindful Awareness and Presence

Concentration is a single-point focus, to the exclusion of all other thoughts or surrounding activity, whereas mindfulness, as described by author Jon Kabat Zinn, is "... paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality" (1994, p. 14). By paying attention to our own breath, we can become more mindfully aware. In *The Mindful Child*, Susan Kaiser Greenland (2010, p. 63) shares an activity she devised called the Clear Mind Game in which she adds baking soda to a clear glass container of water and stirs it up until the water is no longer clear. "This is like your mind when you're all jazzed up and feeling excited," she tells children. "But by focusing on your breathing, you can settle your emotions down and see things as they really are, just as when the baking soda settles to the bottom of the container and you can see through the water again."

In silent mindfulness exercises, children focus on their own breathing,

learn to pay attention to the sensations in their bodies, and become more aware

of themselves and their surroundings. Mindfulness is an experience in slow-

ing down, increasing clarity, and heightening sensory awareness. Simply put,

Creating a Silence Place

Making space for a Silence Place in the classroom can be as simple as a small table in a corner, a comfortable chair near a low window, or a cushion on a rug in an out-of-the-way area. Choose a quiet place away from foot traffic. A low divider or shelf partitions can define the area. If space allows, include a shelf for peace objects or activities. A simple art print, a plant, or fresh flowers add to the aura of peacefulness. Students should have free access to this place with a reasonable time frame agreed upon for a visit. An exact amount of time need not be stipulated but sometimes it is helpful to give students a general idea of how much time they may spend in the space. Consider a small clock for older children, or a sand timer for younger children.

Activities to Enhance Stillness and Silence

Below, I have described a few of the items I have made available for children in my classroom's Silence Place.

Zen Rock Garden

For centuries, the Japanese have created gardens of harmoniously arranged rocks and white raked gravel, creating silent retreats for peaceful contemplation. This ancient process of arranging stones and raking sand is a calming activity and even very young children enjoy using the miniature rakes to create paths in the sand around the pebbles. This activity can be purchased or handmade.

Japanese Brush Painting

Although more expensive (available through Montessori Services or local toy stores), the brush painting activity is a welcome addition to the

Silence Place. Using a tapered brush and a small amount of water, images can be created on a special board that sits on a large sturdy easel. The design that appears as black ink slowly disappears as it dries.

Pendulum

A pendulum set on a small table provides a quiet, restful activity. Put a small amount of sand in the base and watch the designs created as the pendulum swings back and forth. (Also available through Montessori Services.)

Mandala Peace Ring

I first found a peace ring for 50 cents at a Goodwill Store years ago.

Beautiful multicolored beads representing the diverse colors of life and earth are arranged on seven silver rings that represent the continents and the oceans. The peace ring is used by gently manipulating the rings to create different shapes. Originally created as an aid in Buddhist meditation, it is a natural fit for the Silence Place.

Individual Silence Game

The Individual Silence Game is a simple, easy-to-put-together activity that is a must-have in Montessori classrooms. In a basket place a small rug (different from work rugs), a 3- or 5-minute sand timer, a doily for the timer to sit on, and a sign that reads *SILENCE*. Present this to the children by removing the items carefully and slowly from the basket, placing the doily on the rug, the timer on top of the doily, and the *SILENCE* sign facing outward as a reminder to other students not to interrupt. Sit in a cross-legged position, still the body, and begin watching the sand run through the timer. Encourage children to observe the sifting sand until it has all fallen to the bottom. Remain sitting for a minute or so more, then place the timer, doily, and sign aside. Roll the rug and return all items to the basket.



Zen Rock Garden



Japanese Brush Painting



Mandala Peace Ring

mindfulness is about being in the present moment. For children, exercises in mindfulness have the potential to increase calm, reduce stress, improve attention, act as a natural conflict-resolution tool, and cultivate compassion (<http://mindfulschools.org/about/mindfulness>).

Creativity and Problem Solving

Artists, authors, painters, poets, and scientists have long extolled the virtues of silence in the process of creating. Author Anne LeClaire was already an established writer with a lifestyle that was fast-paced and frenzied when she became interested in the study of solitude and decided to engage in 2 days of silence every month. "Stillness centered me and allowed me to focus . . . this kind of attention to our work—complete and without interruption, an undisturbed concentration—enables us to tap into a groundwater of creativity not readily available when our attention is fractured" (2009, p. 132). Children, like adults, need quiet time to mull over ideas, to contemplate and reflect. If creativity rises up when the mind is still enough for ideas and visions to surface, then children need time to be quiet or "bored" enough to let in their own creative thoughts. When the surroundings are quiet and the mind slows down, there is space available to organize thoughts and for new ideas to germinate. "Solitude," wrote Ester Buchholz, "is required for the unconscious to process and unravel problems. Others inspire us, information feeds us, practice improves our performance, but we need quiet time to figure things out, to emerge with new discoveries, to unearth original answers" (Buchholz, 2010).

Cultivating Calm

One August, just prior to the beginning of my second year as an elementary Montessori teacher, as I was setting up my classroom the principal

informed me of a new student enrolled in my third-grade class. This young boy (I'll call him James) had tried to hurt himself just 3 months earlier. Although I was a new Montessori teacher, I had years of experience working with children of all ages in many different environments. Nevertheless, I was concerned about meeting the needs of this little boy.

I had just read Aline D. Wolf's book *Nurturing the Spirit of the Child* (1996) and had decided to create a place in my classroom to include one or more of the simple silence activities she suggested. Since we were a small country school and my classroom was at the end of a short hallway, I found a suitable space directly outside the classroom door. Here, where a large window provided a view of the pastoral country setting, I hung a poster of a young child on the grass holding a small bunny, and on a small wooden table I placed a homemade Japanese rock garden. On a wicker chest I placed a large, thriving philodendron plant.

It was simple, but James, a tense, hesitant, though very sweet child, was clearly drawn to it; he used it often (as did other children). At first, when he seemed anxious or uncertain of what to do next, I would encourage James to spend some time in our Silence Place. Having come at age 8 from a traditional educational classroom into a Montessori learning environment, this was quite a change from his prior elementary experience, and it took him a while to grasp that this special space was available to him at almost any time. It wasn't long before he was comfortable enough to make that choice for himself. I observed that this simple quiet activity of placing the small stones in the sand and then raking little paths around the pebbles in the rock garden really seemed to calm him. Sometimes he just sat and looked out the window. At the end of the year he gave me a hand-drawn picture of himself in the classroom; across the top he had writ-

ten, *I love this class and wish I could be in it next year*. After that, I was never without a Silence Place in my classroom.

Time For Silence

Consider incorporating a daily inner peace time into the classroom. Prepare for such a time by discussing with students what this time is for and how it should be used. Some guidelines for keeping this time simple and workable are:

- Focus inward; it is a time for quiet.
- Choose a place to sit or lie where you are least apt to be interrupted or distracted.
- Activities allowed include day-dreaming, resting, reading, journal-writing, drawing, or coloring.
- Doing nothing is absolutely acceptable.
- Holding a 20-minute inner peace time following the noon recess works especially well because it is a perfect transition from high-energy recess activities to calmer in-class activities.

Conclusion

Montessorians are aware of and open to implementing activities and providing experiences that cultivate the spirit of the child, because we know that our work is about more than just an alternative education experience for children; it is a holistic approach to child development. We realize that we have the opportunity and responsibility to nurture the spirit of the child. Yet Montessori reminded us that when the spirit is well-tended, so is the intellect, and that little reminder may be enough to encourage us to contemplate our own classrooms and reflect on how we prepare our environments to protect and nourish the spirit of the child. We have already been introduced to the sacred splendor of silence in the classroom through the Silence Game. Are we able to look more deeply and with a broader vision at other inward exercises and experi-

ences in stillness and silence? If yes, then we give children what no textbook will: the knowledge that they have an inner life, which is a source of concentration, mindful awareness, calm, and creativity.

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