The Value of Silence

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One day Subhuti, in a mood of sublime emptiness was sitting under a tree. Flowers began to fall about him. “We are praising you for your discourse on emptiness,” the gods whispered to him. “But I have not spoken of emptiness”, said Subhuti. “You have not spoken of emptiness, we have not heard emptiness”, responded the gods. “This is the true emptiness.” And blossoms showered upon Subhuti as rain. Paul Reps (1971), Zen Flesh, Zen Bones

Abstract

Can we dialogue without words, or encounter the other in solitude? Silence in Gestalt therapy has often been associated with obstructive moderations to contact, but this contrasts with the approach of many religious and secular traditions, where silence, stillness and emptiness, often solitary, are highly valued. This paper examines the varied phenomenology of silence in groups, one to one and in solitary silence. Our hypothesis is that the practice of attending to silence is a figure-ground reversal from our normal state. Silence or nothingness, normally ground, itself becomes figure, and is the infinite “other” towards which we turn, allowing our chattering thoughts, normally so important to our identity, to become ground. Thus we venture beyond the normal boundary markers between self and other, opening ourselves to the reality of our profound interconnectedness with all that is – an experience which can be frightening or ecstatic. Finally, we put this into context as one example of “liminal space”, a potential source of trauma as well as a means of reconnection and healing.

Silence and Dialogue

Verbal dialogues are central to most forms of psychotherapy. We describe our experience in words, often seeking a shared sense of meaning to satisfy our need to be “understood”. Within Gestalt therapy however, there has always been recognition that verbal contact is only one of our range of modes of contact. “ Withdrawal” from contact with others is also stationed as a necessary and valuable polar opposite. There is therefore, within our theory and praxis, a place for the non-verbal, inactive, quiet self to emerge.
 Nonetheless, traditional Gestalt therapy theory and practice has tended to focus on the active, noisier, agentic self. Indeed, the classic Gestalt Cycle/Wave of Experience, (e.g. Clarkson, 1989, Zinker, 1977), would suggest that silence and stillness (the fertile void) are only an incidental resting point between different Gestalt cycles.

Yet, we live in a world where deep respect is universally indicated by silence; we commemorate the dead by a moment of silence. In the face of another’s tragedy, silence is often the only appropriate response. Writing this paper, we observed our deepest thinking and reflecting occurred in quietness. We found we shared a sense of being most authentically in contact with ourselves, and sometimes with others, when we didn’t need to talk. In this way, silence and stillness can be formulated as a universal language.

Nowhere is this more apparent than within the Spiritual realm. Here ‘silence’ leading to ‘stillness’ and ‘emptiness’ are highly valued by almost every major tradition. For example the advanced Yogic practice of Nibija or “meditation without seed” is a technique of stillness, while in Buddhism, Sunyata or emptiness is a core realisation. In Christianity too, the ‘via negativa’ is viewed as the means to transcend the conceptual prison of our constructed world of words. Dionysius the Areopagite (681 CE) in his Mystical Theology goes further, advising distancing from all modes of sensual experience:

...in the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and nonbeing, that you may arise by unknowing towards the union, as far as is attainable, with it that transcends all being and all knowledge.

Silence and stillness then stand on the threshold between the Secular and Spiritual worlds, practiced and valued highly within both. Yet within psychology and psychotherapy, there has, until recent integration of practices of mindfulness and meditation, (e.g. Kabat-Zinn, 2007), been very little to illuminate the phenomena or guide their integration into clinical practice.

We were fascinated by these complex, and sometimes polar, views of silence and stillness, and by our various experiences of these phenomena. Within this paper we have chosen to examine these in depth and also to attempt to articulate the implications for the theory and praxis of Gestalt therapy. We outline uses of silence in groups, in individual therapy and in solitary meditation and attempt to understand why silence is so often still seen as negative. Finally, we propose a Gestalt explanation of the process of stilling the mind in terms of the “lived body”, the compatibility of silence as a spiritual practice in Gestalt, and the turn
towards the ‘unknown other’ of the void at the ground of our being. 
The irony of all our words on silence is not lost!

**Attitudes to Silence within Gestalt Therapy.**

**Obstructive Silence**

Within our literature, it has frequently been noted that silence is not always beneficial, and can be used to obfuscate as well as to reveal. If verbal dialogue is our primary means of contact, silence can be a means of avoidance or reducing connection with another. Shame, guilt and fear can all lead to stonewalling – removing oneself from a conversation using silence (Lee & Wheeler, 1996, p12). Equally, a response of silence from another can be the trigger for shame, engendering a rapid withdrawal from contact. Thus silence is (often rightly) interpreted in these situations as an active refusal to speak, a rupture in the relational field, and an obstacle to interpersonal contact. Yalom warns us that the silent patient is the problem patient, who rarely benefits from the group (Yalom 1975, p.386). Interestingly however, Yalom does not write about silence as a group, (or wider field), issue, but focuses on it as a problem with or for an individual client and thus for the facilitator.

A more subtle form of obstructive silence is the social taboo; subjects never spoken of, or avoided. Some excellent examples are related in *The Collective Silence* (Heimannsberg & Schmidt, 1993) of the refusal to speak about the Nazi years in modern German psychotherapy and the damaging psychological consequences of this avoidance.

**Connected Silence**

Less written about however, is the silence that is *not* motivated by shame, guilt or fear, but is the result of, or the means to, genuine I-thou contact. Indeed, such silence is the sharing of presence, uninterrupted by words.

Similarly, the literature is sparse concerning the experience of silence in the therapeutic relationship; what is occurring, in process terms, when client and therapist choose to be silent. We will describe cases where this has happened.

Least written about of all in the Gestalt literature is the silence of being present to oneself, by oneself, and of the deepening awareness and exploration of the ground of our own being through solitary silence. Such practices bear a dangerous resemblance to Yontef’s description of the schizoid process and are therefore often subject to misunderstanding at best, or pathologising at
worst (Yontef, 2001). Yet, it may be only in such conditions that the deepest silence can be found.

**Phenomenology of Silence**

The experience of silence is clearly therefore not uniform, and is phenomenological in nature, often being negatively interpreted. We would suggest that the current emphasis in most psychotherapy literature regarding the negative qualities of silence may be the result of widespread cultural bias. Sara Maitland suggests in her book *A Book of Silence* that ‘the fear of silence is very deeply embedded in the Western psyche’ (p 128). It is perhaps surprising to find this also the case within Gestalt therapy, where compatibility with traditions that use meditative techniques for stilling the mind are more widely acknowledged (e.g. Kolodny, 2004, p92).

So, we wish to advocate for a much more positive re-evaluation of these latter forms of silent awareness. Here Gestalt theory and praxis have much to say about the value of ‘Being’ in the face of our cultural bias towards ‘Doing’. In the next section therefore we propose to look at silence in groups, in individual therapy and alone, as well as what silence represents in theoretical terms. We will also examine what happens to us when we allow ourselves to become still.

**Silence in Context.**

As we have seen, the silence of avoidance is often about not acknowledging what is present, while connected silence is the silence of presence; of being fully in the here and now. To further illustrate this, we will consider silence in three different contexts - in groups, in individual therapy and in solitude.

**Silence in Groups**

In his paper *The Power of Silence in Groups*, John Bernard Harris (1996, p24-30) expertly outlines the definitions, phenomenology and ways of dealing with silences in group situations. He proposes a re-evaluation of silence, and the cultivation in mature groups of silences, both at pre-contact/final contact stages of the Gestalt cycle and in reflective moments of group contact. In this way, he introduces silence as an expression of Id functions. Most interestingly, he analyses the relationship between silence and gender, using Judi Marshall’s (1984) twin stances to life of agency (male) and communion (female). He proposes that silence is devalued as time-wasting inactivity or avoidance, rather
than a means to greater communion, contact and awareness, is a consequence of our male-dominated agentic culture.

Another cultural context in addition to gender is age of the group. I (Virginia) am facilitating two groups at present and notice a different experience of silence, which I think relates to the age of the groups. One group has been together as a training group for three and a half years and the other is a new group, six months old (a therapy group with a small amount of teaching of Gestalt theory). In the mature group silence ebbs and flows and feels part of the texture of the group; I find it difficult to think of it as figural or separate from the whole group experience. However in the new group silence itself is very much a figure at times. This group talks, laughs and engages vivaciously with each other in the breaks (where known social rules apply) then returns to the formal group and is silent. The discrepancy is more noticeable to me than it has been with other groups I have facilitated (I am also more interested and aware of silence myself). The silence seems often to be uncertain, wondering what can be spoken and what can’t and group members have sometimes said ‘can I say...’ Silence is uncomfortable but risking getting something wrong and feeling shame is worse. Members are present and engaged with themselves, it is not the silence of absence, but of hesitancy to engage, and I suggest this is characteristic of new groups.

We, sadly, still find ourselves agreeing with Harris (1996, p25), that silence is often seen as problematic in Gestalt groups. When I, (Virginia), participated in a large analytic group, it was seen a little differently. The facilitator did not suggest there was a problem with silences, but instead speculated on the meaning. Silence was seen as group behaviour rather than a group problem. Thus, this unspoken group behaviour is the figure of interest and topic for interpretation and enquiry, rather than the silence itself. In this particular group I had a profound experience of silence that felt alive and full; as if I was surrounded by warm thick air which held me and my fellow group members in something very hard to put words to. It seems useful to consider this possibility, that silence can be a containing and bonding process, in Gestalt groups, as well as the possibility of seeing silence as part of the phenomenological experience of the group rather than as a problem or failure; approaching silence in groups without judgement.

Silence in Individual Therapy

I (Virginia) have had two experiences with silence in individual therapy where the considered use of silence has enhanced the relationship and provided the client with something important (permission was given by both clients for this
to be written about). The first of these was with Leone, a woman in her 30’s, whom I had been seeing for two years. It had become increasingly clear to me over the previous months that I regularly talked too much in our sessions and that Leone would answer my questions and observations and go along with me but that she often felt dissatisfied and missed. I would often realise after the sessions were over that this had happened again. Over time we talked about this and I got better at not getting caught in busyness and mistaking her compliance for more real contact. In this process Leone also became more able to be aware of what she wanted separate from the signals she was expert at picking up from the other. This was the background to a session where she had again talked about how therapy was not always meeting her needs and I had acknowledged my part in that. In the closer connection that followed this I asked her to notice her body process and she became sad and tearful. From here we stayed in silence for about 20 minutes. During this time we had a lot of eye contact and the silence felt active and alive. I felt very present and conscious of the importance of remaining so. The connection between us was of the kind that we didn’t seem able to reach through words; silence freed her from her historical solution to not getting something right which was to try harder. It enabled a sitting in her own experience with me sitting in mine and no need to attend to anything more than our connection.

The second experience is different. Ruth is 50 and I have been seeing her for 5 years. During that time there have been frequent silences as she ‘freezes’ as we call it. When this happens she becomes physically immobile, withdrawn and often unable to speak. She doesn’t look at me. For a long time I would drift myself at these times - think about other things; be somewhat present but not fully attentive. After my experience with Leone I began to think about this and to wonder how my inattentiveness may be affecting what happened. I began to stay present when these silences occurred. I cannot say for sure what part this has played in the mutually acknowledged deepening of our relationship and what is attributable to other relational experiences, but I believe it to be a factor. Recently we had an explicit experience where Ruth asked me to be silent during a session and we sat in silence for about 15 minutes. She did not look at me and later described the silence with me present as a way of being (as opposed to doing) and feeling in touch with her whole self, that was not usually possible. We were not connected with each other in the way Leone and I were and I didn’t feel the intensity of the connection; I also took longer than Ruth to relax into doing nothing but staying present. Once I did I felt calmly present and bathed in a kind of peace that I have sometimes noticed in very rich group silences.

Clearly this silence served a different need from the previous one above;
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Silence could be described as the ground and Ruth’s sense of being the figure. With Leone silence itself, and connection through silence, is the figure.

Julianne Appel-Opper (2009, p61-64) describes her experiments with not speaking when working with clients, in order to let herself be physically impacted by the non-verbal communication between the living bodies of herself and client. Citing Merleau-Ponty, she observes a deep level of contact being reached where a client’s ‘lived body’ could more clearly communicate past traumas through physical movements alone.

A Theoretical Formulation of Silence and Stillness: Why Less is More.

In *The Healing Relationship*, Richard Hycner and Lynne Jacobs (1995), stress the importance to genuine connectedness of a ‘turning towards’ the other, with one’s whole being, and a turning away from personal concerns that are separate from this occasion and this person. This they call ‘presence’, which is difficult to define, but its absence is readily apparent. Presence is more than a ‘quality,’ it is an existential stance: bringing all of myself to bear in this moment with this person (*ibid.* p.15).

An essential pre-requisite to the process of establishing authentic presence, is therefore also ‘bracketing’, the placing of interfering experiences and understandings in abeyance, in ground. Only by being open to what is emerging between us; to uniqueness, to being surprised, bracketing prior expectations, can genuine contact unfold. Thus absolute authenticity and a willingness to be open would seem to be essential to genuine connectedness.

Silence is by no means precluded from constituting an emerging dialogue, provided it is a genuine responding and not based on the wish to protect oneself from self-expression (*ibid.* p65). Being present in silence however, requires an awareness of being embodied, and a connection to the solid actuality of our physical selves as well as a genuine responding to the other. It thereby seems as if genuine responding to the other is dependent on our connection to ourselves, our self-support.

In clinical praxis therefore, Silence and Stillness can be essential procedural competencies within the process of becoming present, both to myself and for the other. Indeed they are foundational to an emergent dialogue, creating field conditions supportive of a bracketing of interfering thoughts and experiences, and an authentic turning towards the other.

Solitary Silence

In a group or in individual therapy, the physical presence of the ‘other’ person
is obvious, but what happens to us when we are alone? Is there an ‘other’ who is being turned towards in solitary silence? If so, who or what are we talking about?

Sartre’s (1956) notion of ‘negation’ might be helpful here, for in Being and Nothingness he states that the foundation of all phenomena is their negation, their absence. Phenomena are founded not upon being, but on non-being. The power of negation is an intrinsic feature of the intentionality of consciousness. Nothingness lies at the heart of being - according to Sartre. In layman’s terms, I define what is present by what is absent; the notes form a tune due to spaces in between, the figure emerges and stands against a ground: nothing is ever in isolation.

It is in turning towards the spaces between our thoughts; the ‘nothingness’ at the heart of being, that we reverse the normal figure-ground relationship. Silence becomes the focus that allows us to become attuned instead to that which lies beyond the ‘notes’ of our own chattering thoughts. They are not suppressed, but acknowledged and then let go (back into ground). Thus through a reversal of the usual focus on an emerging figure we re-direct attention instead to a structure of ground, which then becomes figure, to be in turn released, continually refocusing our sharpening awareness toward the ground of each more nebulous figure as it emerges.

As our perceptions become more subtle, the boundary which defines self and other becomes more diffuse – expanding out into the wider phenomenal field. We lose our sense of a separate boundaried self to experience ourselves as indivisible from the greater field. This is the sublime emptiness of Subhuti. Des Kennedy, citing Merleau-Ponty, concisely sums up this idea in a review of a book by Spinelli (Kennedy, 2008, p88).

The power and secret of Gestalt therapy lies in its being a dialogue between people at the pre–reflective level, that is to say at the level of the lived body. This pre-reflective level is that sacred ground of primordial silence in each of us, beneath the chatter of our words. My lived body is that pre-reflective level and carries the key to what I have become as a human being. And unless we embark (remonterons) upon that exploration, says Merleau-Ponty, our view of our human being will remain forever superficial.

The Relationship with the ‘Other’

The experience of solitary silence might therefore be viewed as a turning towards the ‘nothingness at the heart of being’ as Sartre describes. In Gestalt terms, this ‘Other’, this ‘fertile void’, however is not zero, but is the ground
of complex sedimented connections and experiences from which our present self arises. So the ‘nothing’ is anything but an absence. It includes all that lies in pre-awareness (or the pre-reflective level referred to above): the boundless field of which our lived-bodies are seamlessly a part.

We are relational beings, primed from our beginnings for connection, and in a group or in individual therapy, relationship with others is inevitable whether in silence or not. This begs the question however of what happens to our relational expectations when we are solitary? In writing about the silence that comes with solitude there is frequent reference to an ‘Other’ who is related to, and perhaps fulfils the relational needs, at the time. Morton Kelsey in *The Other Side of Silence* writes:

> [In the silence] I encountered an ‘Other’ with whom I could share every experience of confusion and anxiety, hope and thanksgiving, of sorrow, joy, discouragement and renewal. The ‘Other’ of whom I speak has sometimes been a vague presence and sometimes a burning reality that brought relief from tension and misery, or again at times a wisdom offering specific directions and guidance that rescued me from intolerable situations. And at rarer moments this ‘Other’ gave a joy and fulfilment that made the whole business of life worthwhile. (Kelsey, 1976, p10)

There is something reminiscent of Arnold Beisser’s (1970) *Paradoxical Theory of Change*, in this sharing of every experience, which thus transforms it. In Kelsey’s description, the ‘Other’ has the flavour of a loving parent or mentor, an image of a nurturing God - an ideal, infinite ‘Other’ who, like silence itself, listens with perfect acceptance and with the calm wisdom of detachment, and in so doing provides what actual others may not. It is this ‘Other’, who is also all that lies in pre-awareness that I place in the empty chair opposite me. By contrast, for Emmanuel Levinas, (1968), it was the alterity of the altogether “Other” – that which is ever-present, but unknown, alien, strange, terrifying and sublime: utterly different from us – seen in the unpredictability of other people, or indeed of ourselves that forever eluded comprehension.

> God is in one sense the Other par excellence, ” the Other in as much as Other; the absolutely Other. To the contrary, my neighbour, my brother, man, is infinitely less other than the absolutely Other, and in a certain sense, more Other than God. (Levinas, 1968, p. 36)

This ‘Other’ of silence can therefore be nurturing or terrifying, and in its Dionysian “Otherness” may by some be seen as delusional. Sara Maitland
(2009) articulates the dilemma of modern society in its attitude towards the ‘Other’ as God.

So, a modern narrative will say that anyone who lets the (divine or delusional) Other too far in, who weakens their own boundaries, or has them weakened, is ‘mad’, as we see extensively in modern psychiatric discourse. While a religious or spiritual narrative will tend to sense that those who will not consent to be used by the forces of the Other are the mad ones. (p. 253)

The turn towards the ‘Other’ in the practice of silence is also to become empty, open to new perceptions. It is to turn away from our fixed understandings and reified self image and enter a transition state full of dynamic possibility. Such is known as a liminal state - a state devoid of preconceptions; of surrender, with total presence, on the threshold of something new.

**Liminality and Silence**

So far we have examined the encounter with the unknown ‘Other’, and the softening of the self-other boundary through the use of silence. Such a letting go of rigid self concepts leads to liminal space - a state of uncertainty and openness which leads us to the threshold of new possibilities, events, lifestyles or states of mind (Denham-Vaughan, S., 2010). As Frank Staemmler, (1997), notes, cultivated uncertainty should be a Gestaltist’s fundamental attitude. It is only by holding one’s own opinions and judgments lightly, that we can remain in contact with ‘what is’ and allow new interpretations to emerge.

As Staemmler points out however, uncertainty is uncomfortable and indeed undesirable when the confidence of the patient is required. As Peter Philippson (2009) stresses in his book *The Emergent Self* healthy self functioning emerges within the dialectic between rigid predictability (certainty) and unpredictability (uncertainty). Liminal space can therefore be traumatic, and relationally disturbing, precisely because it lacks structure. This is always a consideration when working clinically; more fragile self-process is likely to require increased structure, agentic activity and direction.

**Liminality, Uncertainty and Trauma**

An extreme example of liminality is experienced in trauma. Doris Brothers (2008, p36-37) describes trauma as the destruction of the “systematically emergent certainties” (SECs), which organize and underpin our relational
world. Trauma plunges us into chaos, disorientation, terror and shame as our previously clung to certainties are revealed as unreliable (ibid. p. 49-51). Such a description is remarkably like the experience of the ‘Otherness’ of prolonged solitary silence. Brothers likens trauma to barren exile in the desert, also the place of solitary silence sought by the Desert Fathers. In attempting to re-establish a sense of order and certainty, victims of trauma may sacrifice complexity and contact in favour of simplistic rules and/or dissociation.

*Healing implies a developmental progression towards an increasingly full, rich, complex, differentiated experience of self that occurs in relation to another person (or persons) whose self-experience is also undergoing developmental advance.* (Brothers & Lewinberg, 1999, p.261)

**Complexity, Communication and Silence**

Such may be the depth of trauma that words cannot communicate. In progressing towards that full, rich complexity, there may be “that which is in some sense known, but not yet available to reflective thought or verbalization.” (Preston 2006, quoted in Brothers, 2009, p.5). At these points, silence may be the only fitting phrase to articulate. Indeed, Brothers movingly describes how her initially difficult relationship with a dying client ‘Len’ resolved, as they learned to sit together in silent stillness.

*What happened to Len and me during these moments seems to defy explanation. It is as if we both simultaneously found the courage to drop all artifice with one another - and ourselves. As we sat in the stillness I seemed to see Len clearly, vividly, distinctly, and I felt seen by him in just that way. At the very same time, I felt that we were mysteriously and invisibly joined, not only one with another, but with all the world.* (Brothers 2009, p157)

It is the extreme uncertainty of liminal space that characterizes trauma, and yet, it appears, the gentle encounter with silence can reintroduce us to the “increasingly full, rich, complex, differentiated experience of self that occurs in relation to another person” (Brothers & Lewinberg, 1999, p.261).

**Conclusion**

Words allow us a certain level of dialogue and contact. However, there are all too many times when verbal contact is insufficient to effectively communicate our lived experience. At the physical level of the lived body, non-verbal
communication may be more profound, and the deepest level of connection, may only be possible in total stillness and silence.

Such silence takes courage, and involves a willingness to let go of our pre-configured interactions (“all artifice”), and to enter a liminal state where a new state of connectedness can emerge. Stillness is where we become conscious of the interconnected ground of our being, of the subtle pre-awareness of our lived body and of the undiscovered potential of our alterity.

Connected silence is to be present to the unknown ‘Other’ – the ‘nothingness’ or ‘void’ forming the ground of all perception, which contains all that is in pre-awareness and the as yet unrealized potential of the field. Remaining present in this void is not always easy, the experience of ‘nothingness’ has been likened to entering a “Cloud of Unknowing” (Anon, 1961) or a “Divine Darkness” (Dionysius 681CE).

Silence can, of course, also be awkward or fearful or embarrassing or boring - a void to be filled. At the same time, silence as a response is refreshingly disarming in accepting whatever we bring. There are no arguments to be won, or opinions to be defended. As we have shown, silence is also reliably always present, as the ground of our awareness. Herein lies both benefit and danger – silence is restorative, but without our authentic presence and the willingness to remain open, it can easily become a dissociative and defensive retreat from conflict or shame.

However, if we learn to remain present in silence, we can become aware of increasingly subtle aspects of our phenomenal field expanding and diffusing our sense of the self-other boundary which defines us. Eventually, more by grace than through willpower (Denham-Vaughan, 2005), the illusion of our separateness as a self becomes dispelled, and we realise the interconnected unity of our existence. In this way, through silence we can experience relatedness in its purest form with that which we might normally consider as ‘other’.

_Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God._ (Emerson, R.W., 1849)

The jury is still out as to whether Gestalt constitutes a spiritual practice, though attempts have been made (with varying success) to bring out Gestalt’s spiritual side. A number of Gestaltists look to Buddhism as the most complimentary spiritual practice (Kolodny, 2004), yet there appear to be a number of conceptual incompatibilities between the two traditions (Bennett,
It would appear therefore, that Gestalt therapy provides all the necessary concepts, but has not yet the explicit meditative practices of other, formally recognised, spiritual traditions. Our hope is that by an increasing focus and development in both the theory and practice of silence and stillness we may more explicitly develop compassionate relational capacity, a sense of interconnectedness and transcendence of the self-other boundary. In this way, Gestalt may find within itself a spirituality that is both secular and religious, humanistic, universal and yet uniquely our own; we might find, just like Subhuti, that blossoms will start to rain.

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