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A Piercing Silence

What I learned when I finally got quiet enough to let God speak
By Renny Gehman

When we were newly married, my husband, Bob, joined the Air Force and was accepted into the accelerated master's program in management at MIT—and the Air Force was paying for it. The opportunity awed and excited us.

Then classes started. All of a sudden study habits loomed large. Our days became filled with the same conversation: "Bob, don't you need to study?"

"I'll get to it."

"Bob, isn't that finance paper due Friday?"

"Stop bugging me about it!"

I was afraid for the future—what if Bob failed a course? Would the Air Force court-martial him? I didn't think so, but I didn't want to find out!

My fears crystallized around Statistics and Probability, a self-paced, pass/fail course in which you studied a chapter, took the test, and moved on if you passed. Bob hated the course; to his engineer's mind it was "voodoo math" and not worth his effort. So he avoided it. Although he went to class, he barely cracked a book.

So here we were, days before the term's end, and Bob had 15 chapters to finish. I was frantic.

"Bob, aren't you going to work on Stats?"

"Nope."

"What if you don't finish?"

"I'll finish."

"What if you get an F?"

"Then I'll get an F."

"But what will the Air Force do?"

"Probably nothing," he said, becoming frustrated.

"Don't you care about our future?"

"Would you leave me alone!"

I stormed to bed in tears. Bob stayed at the table, working (not on statistics, I'm sure).

"I'm so afraid and angry, God!" I prayed. "Bob is so insensitive. He's being unreasonable and careless with this great opportunity." On and on I complained about Bob's shortcomings.

I'd worked up quite a stew when, softly but forcefully, I heard, "Will you be quiet!"

It wasn't Bob; it was a small voice inside my head.

I stopped my list of grievances and heard the Holy Spirit whisper, "You're making so much noise that Bob can't hear me!"

The image was clear: Bob studying in his chair, me chattering into one ear, God standing patiently by the other trying to get a word in. He couldn't, of course, because I kept interrupting!

I was stunned as I realized I was part of the problem. For the first time in a long time, I sat quietly and listened to what God had to say—mainly, that I wasn't my husband's conscience or his Holy Spirit.

"You're right, God," I whispered. "It's your job to make sure Bob graduates. Our future is in your hands, not mine."

Then I picked up my Bible to see what else God had to say about silence. I discovered the writer of Ecclesiastes had something to say about my predicament: There's "a time to be silent and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:7). I'd overdone the speaking, leaving no time for silence. With no balance in our communication, I'd put us out of step with each other. I'd destroyed the rhythm of our communication.

So for the rest of the semester, I studied being quiet. Some days I wasn't sure if I'd pass or fail. But I was determined to commit to the lesson.

The day after my meltdown, the professor removed five chapters from the required course work. Bob finished the remaining chapters with a day to spare, aced the course, and graduated nine months later with high honors. God taught me my first lesson in communication—be silent and let him work.

Catching the rhythm

Bob and I love to sing. We know that in music the rests are just as important as the notes—miss a rest and your rhythm is off. I've performed accidental solos that way!

Just as it takes both silence and sound to create great music, it takes talking, listening, and just being quiet to develop great communication. God uses that same rhythm with us.

Before the great communication of the Incarnation, there were 400 years of silence. Those years emphasized the importance of what was to come. Sometimes he just wants our silence: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Those times of stillness become the moments when God emphasizes who he is and what he can accomplish through us and through our marriage.

I also discovered marital silence comes in many forms.

Cherishing silence. The silence I learned at MIT was a *cherishing silence*. This is the silence of patience; the kind that gives God time to work on our weaknesses. When I'm stressed, I like to talk; worried, I want to share; afraid and I want immediate reassurance! Fear is poor motivation for communication. Because Bob wasn't living up to my expectations, I was afraid he'd fail—and take me with him. So I resorted to nagging. Nagging kills communication. Praying instead of nagging allowed us to communicate at a deeper level.

When I prayed for Bob, I stopped seeing him as the problem. God worked on me, cleansing my heart of the fear and selfishness that kept me from communicating my love.

In *The Power of A Praying Wife*, Stormie Omartian writes, "When you pray for your husband, the love of God will grow in your heart for him. Not only that, you'll find love growing in his heart for you, without him even knowing you're praying. That's because prayer is the ultimate love language. It communicates in ways we can't."

When I nagged, Bob's ears had an auto-off switch that activated instantly. I knew I wasn't getting through! When I stopped trying to make Bob work on my timetable, he was free to respond to the Lord's leading and discipline. Giving my expectations to God let me rest. I had to trust that God would get through to Bob. If he didn't, then there was certainly no way I'd be able to.

Love sometimes is best displayed by cherishing silence. And that's a better motivator than fear!

Confident silence. Sometimes, though, we need *confident silence*—the kind that appreciates unchangeable differences. It says to your spouse, "I recognize your strengths and trust your judgment." It's easy to do this when you both agree. It's more difficult when your personalities, backgrounds, or experiences clash. Then we need a quiet spirit. The prophet Isaiah said, "In quietness and trust is your strength" (30:15). A quiet spirit is a teachable spirit. Because I watched Bob study, I'd assumed I knew as much about his courses as he did. Wrong! I had my perspective, but only Bob had inside knowledge.

My criticism demonstrated a lack of respect for his judgment. He's slow, deliberate, and intense. I'm quick and push limits. Together we cover all the bases—as long as we remember to support each other. Because Bob didn't work the way I felt he should, I caused added tension in our marriage. I was unable to be confident.

Comforting silence. Later that year at MIT the pressures of his dissertation consumed Bob's time, energy, and attention. I couldn't remove that pressure, but I

could love him through it. I practiced a different kind of silence and offered the comfort of food, typing support, and hugs.

There will be times in marriage when there's nothing you can do or say. There are some situations that cannot be fixed, avoided, or changed. Illness, death of a loved one, job loss—all these situations call for a *comforting silence*.

This silence puts arms around your spouse and offers love without selfish demands. It performs acts of service unnoticed. It's empathy; a quiet that waits until the time is right to offer words. When my mother died Bob offered this same loving silence to me, knowing that comforting silence is the silence of hope, which believes, *We'll talk again in a while*.

Companionable silence. Like all couples, life (even at MIT) wasn't all work. Sometimes we just enjoyed each other. Our daughter was born during that same year of dissertations and Statistics classes. There were many times during those months when Bob and I shared a companionable silence.

We didn't need words to communicate our contentment. I'd be feeding Rachel and Bob might be working, but our communication was there in the loving looks we shared, the smiles we exchanged, even in the warmth of our bodies side by side.

Sitting quietly together, working separate projects side by side, communicating with eyes and heart in the presence of others—a *companionable silence* is the glue of the secure couple. Words, although welcome, are unnecessary.

We could share this silence because we'd already shared our thoughts and feelings. It's the rest between resolved conflicts, conquered problems, hectic seasons. Companionable silence needs to be built into marriage—it doesn't just happen. It's the reward—the rest—granted after the hard work of love is done. It's God's blessing that says, "This is good."

Cherishing, confident, comforting, companionable—notice there's no critical silence. Silence is misused when wielded as a weapon or in manipulation. There are no Scriptures that support sulking. In *Seeking God Together*, Dr. David Stoop writes that silence "helps you focus more on what God wants you to hear and understand about him and about yourself, your relationship with him, and your relationship with your spouse." Use silence to enhance your relationship—not destroy it.

I'm so glad God told me to be quiet that day. With my silence came understanding, compassion, and a deeper love for my husband than I had ever known.

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