

## Seven Words of Silence

*Rudy Wiebe*

In our 21st-century world that is often so screamingly loud, writers work in silence. They work with words, silently, in order that their work may eventually be seen and, in the act of seeing, be heard. For a few moments, let us consider seven words concerning silence.

***The first word of silence is SOUND.***

In the Canadian parkland where I was born, the silence of living things surrounded me. On our pioneer farm we had no electricity or gasoline to make motors roar; horses and cows snuffled in barns, pigs in pens, chickens. I was the youngest child by four years and grew up largely alone. The winter snow falling, spruce branches in wind, mosquitoes after a rain or birds just before sunrise, coyotes at night; on a hot summer afternoon cowbells, or thunder; somewhere a dog barking. In autumn, if I was very attentive, a poplar leaf falling to the ground. These were the sounds of my growing up. These slight sounds were not dominating in any sense; rather, they defined the earth's fundamental silence in the same way that lines on a page, or the road-allowance grid of the land survey, sketch the unfathomable nature of paper or land. These tiny, living sounds, any one of which I can recall in an instant no matter in what cacophonous surroundings I may find myself anywhere on earth, these indelible sounds were and are for me the affirmation of the fundamental silence of the universe. As Wordsworth wrote:

Fair seed time had my soul, and I grew up  
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear.<sup>1</sup>

Beauty and fear: these will be recurring themes this morning. They are the

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude. Book First: Introduction—Childhood and School-time*, lines 301-302.

composites of silence.

*The second word of silence is DEATH.*

Canadian poet E.J. Pratt explicates this word with an ocean image:

SILENCES

There is no silence upon the earth or under the earth like the silence  
under the sea;  
No cries announcing birth,  
No sounds declaring death.  
There is silence when the milt is laid on the spawn in the weeds and  
fungus of the rock-clefts;  
And silence in the growth and struggle for life.  
The bonitoes pounce upon the mackerel,  
And are themselves caught by the barracudas,  
The sharks kill the barracudas  
And the great molluscs rend the sharks,  
And all noiselessly—  
Though swift be the action and final the conflict,  
The drama is silent.

There is no fury upon the earth like the fury under the sea.  
For growl and cough and snarl are the tokens of spendthrifts who  
know not the ultimate economy of rage.  
Moreover, the pace of the blood is too fast.  
But under the waves the blood is sluggard and has the same  
temperature as that of the sea.

There is something pre-reptilian about a silent kill, . . . <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> E. J. Pratt, "Silences," in E. J. Pratt, *Complete Poems*, Part 2 © Univ. of Toronto Press (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1989). Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

The poem continues at length, but its explication of “death” is, I believe, more than understandable to us all.

***The third word of silence is CREATION.***

In the tradition of the Jewish-Christian faith, it seems creation begins in silence. Consider Genesis 1:

In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void, and darkness lay upon the face of the deep; and the wind of God was moving over the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light.<sup>3</sup>

God speaks into the silence, and his Word creates.

And God said, Let us make man in our image . . . so God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them.<sup>4</sup>

God’s *word* shapes the unspeakable beauty of all creation, and, in particular, it shapes us: us human beings. By God’s *word* creation comes out of fathomless silence—even modern science cannot theorize about what was before “The Big Bang”—into an existence that our human senses can grasp. In this biblical image of human understanding, all creation is God’s speech; including ourselves. When I look at you, you look at me, we see God’s speaking word. But strangely, in the continuing biblical text, we see again and again that when God speaks to humans directly, we are suddenly afraid.

The story of Adam:

And the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Adam, where are you?” And Adam answered: “I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid. . . .”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:1-3. Various Bible translations are used throughout this article.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:26-27

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3:10

The story of Israel at Mount Sinai:

When all the people . . . saw the mountain smoking, they were afraid; they stood at a distance and said to Moses: “You speak to us . . . if God speaks to us, we shall die.”<sup>6</sup>

*The fourth word of silence is JOY.*

We must also notice, in the biblical tradition, that when God breaks his silence with speech, the result is not always human fear. There is the story of the boy Samuel:

And the child Samuel ministered unto the Lord before Eli (the priest in the temple). And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision. And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to grow dim, that he could not see; and before the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep; that the Lord called to the child Samuel: and he answered, “Here I am.” And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” And Eli said, “I called not; lie down again.” And he went and lay down. And the Lord called again, “Samuel.”<sup>7</sup>

This happens three times; and each time Samuel runs to Eli and says, with childish acceptance, “But you did call—here I am,” until Eli—more than his eyes are “growing dim”—begins to understand and instructs the little boy properly. The story continues:

And the Lord came, and stood, and called as at the other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak, for your servant hears.<sup>8</sup>

A child, Samuel, is not afraid when God speaks out of the silence. Nor in the biblical story given by Luke is the teenage girl Mary. You will

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 20:18-19

<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 3:1-6

<sup>8</sup> 1 Samuel 3:10

remember that when the birth of the forerunner to the Messiah is divinely announced to aged Zachariah (like Eli, a priest), Zachariah is so incredulous, so unbelieving, that he is struck dumb (an appropriate punishment) until the child is born.<sup>9</sup> The girl Mary, when she is told that she is to bear and give birth to the Messiah, the Redeemer of the world, simply asks an obvious question, and when it is answered, responds:

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be with me  
according to your Word.<sup>10</sup>

And a little later, she expresses her profound feelings in one of the great poems of all time. It begins:

My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior,  
For he has considered me ...<sup>11</sup>

When the eternal silence becomes absolutely personal, some people are terrified; but others are surprised by joy, overwhelming joy.

Like that other Mary we just read about, Mary Magdalene was devastated by sorrow outside the empty tomb; she can see it with her own weeping eyes: the body of the dead Jesus is gone. But the living Jesus she cannot recognize; she can only beg him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” And then Jesus says to her: “Mary.”<sup>12</sup>

In this time of Lent, on Palm Sunday, at Easter, it is good to be distraught, to weep, to question God. For then we are ready to confront the risen Son of God, and if we confront him, he can name us. And then we will recognize who he is—even as we recognize ourselves.

### ***The fifth word of silence is SONG.***

The first written use of the word “silence” in an English text occurs in the 13th century. The word itself comes from the Latin verb *silere*, meaning “to

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:21-23

<sup>10</sup> Luke 1:38

<sup>11</sup> Luke 1:46-48

<sup>12</sup> John 20:15-16

abstain, to forbear from speech,” and it is used twice in one 1225 document called *The Ancrene Riwe*. This “Rule/Guide for Anchoresses” was written at the request of three noblewomen who had abandoned the world to live in religious seclusion. That is, the manual was to provide a tolerant and enlightened guide for a humane religious community. The first text states: “In silence and in hope shall be our strength.” The second use of the word in the *Riwe* is even more powerful: “She may also hope that she shall sing through her silence sweetly in heaven.”<sup>13</sup> When devotedly practiced, silence can become a heavenly song.

***The sixth word of silence is STONE.***

Luke tells the story that when Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a young donkey—the event we celebrate today as Palm Sunday—his followers began tearing branches from the trees to wave over him, spreading their clothes on the road for him to enter the holy city as on a royal carpet, and screaming with happiness and triumph. They really seem ready to storm the Roman garrison and set Jesus on the Throne of David in this triumphal entry into the Jewish royal city. In fact, the crowd is so loud that the religious leaders get worried; the Pharisees (decent people, with a sense of proper decorum) tell Jesus to order his followers to behave themselves and shut up. Jesus looks at them for a moment, and then answers: “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”<sup>14</sup>

Do stones ever, have stones ever, broken their silence? Do they ever speak? Writer Annie Dillard tells us in an essay that she knows a man who is trying to teach a stone to speak.<sup>15</sup> It is very slow work, so slow he may not accomplish it in his lifetime, but he is already training his infant son to carry on the task after him. Dillard wrote the essay 30 years ago, and I still haven’t heard whether the man was successful.

But of course we all know that stones really do speak. When I walk

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<sup>13</sup> Definition of “Ancrene Riwe” in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. II, 2823/41.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 19:40

<sup>15</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 85-94.

through the enormous excavations in the central plaza of Mexico City, the great layered, carved stones now exposed tell me endless stories of the human beings who lived and worked there 3000 years ago. When I walk along the gravel banks of Strawberry Creek in northern Alberta, the stones I find imprinted by leaves, by sticks, by shells, these chunks of fossilized trees, these porous shards of fossil bone tell me stories of life—here where my feet stand, here in the palm of my hand—life millions of years ago. Stones do speak.

To return to Luke's story of Jesus: suddenly, after his stony rebuke to the specious Pharisees, Jesus is weeping! This eternal rock of confidence in his "Heavenly Father" weeps at the sight of the great city of Jerusalem spread out below him. He laments: "Your enemies . . . will surround you and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you. . . ." <sup>16</sup>

Very soon, Jesus weeps, the mighty stones of this mighty city will cry out in devastating Roman destruction. And then we remember the words of the Apostle Peter, the disciple whom Jesus called The Rock, writing a letter years later while in prison in Rome:

Come to him, our living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house. . . . The stone which the builders rejected has now become the corner-stone. . . . <sup>17</sup>

With that image of immoveable conviction, Peter the Apostle, from his prison cell in Rome, brings us to the seventh word of silence.

***The seventh word of silence is WRITING.***

The mystery of writing is that writing is words gathered together in silence. Writers know this perfectly well, it needs no discussion: we all want to write so well that, when the reader sees what we have written, our mutual silences will open into listening, and by *seeing* we will begin to *hear* what we have never been able to imagine before. May God give us grace.

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<sup>16</sup> Luke 19:43-44

<sup>17</sup> 1 Peter 2:4-7

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The seven words of silence: Sound. Death. Creation. Joy. Song. Stone. Writing. To understand these words, we may need more silence than we can ever find on earth. Perhaps that is what eternity is for. There, in eternity, like the three devout women of the 13th century, we may in hope “sing through our silence sweetly in heaven.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> An earlier, very different, version of this essay, titled “The Words of Silence: Past and Present,” was published in *Silence, the Word and the Sacred*, ed. E.D. Blodgett and H.G. Coward (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1989).