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The Joys of Silence in the Noisy Season: Mum for a Day

One writer discovers that moments of silence can bring something other than discomfort, rather a sense of security and understanding

by Annabelle Gurwitch, *comedian and coauthor of You Say Tomato, I Say Shut Up.*

“Can't be done.” Snorting laughter. Disbelief. These were the reactions from my friends and family to the news that I was taking a vow of silence. Truth be told, taciturn is an adjective that's never once been used to describe me. I've always felt that while listening is great, it takes precious time away from what I really want to be doing, which is talking. Even so, between my personal duties as the wrangler of a teenager and my professional opinionating on television, I can find myself inured to the sound of my own voice. The challenge I had set myself—to be completely silent for 48 hours—was going to be exacerbated by a daily schedule packed with activities in which verbal interaction is not only expected but practically required.

I hung a sign on a lanyard around my neck announcing “I've taken a vow of silence. It's for my sanity, not for a religion” and headed out to my weekly cardio-tennis class. In recent years, my game has been diminished by a rotator cuff injury, so in place of skill I routinely lob colorful expletives. But without my auditory armor, I was forced to experience just how much I sucked. I left the court smarting. It felt as though I'd had a facial peel so penetrating that my rawest emotions were brought to the surface.

At home, my husband seemed elated to be spared my housekeeping dictums. Fifteen years of marriage will do that to you. He was practically skipping as he left his shoes, pants, crumpled-up receipts, the odd wine cork and assorted detritus in his wake. But it was my teenage son who threw down the gauntlet. He was determined to break me—which is ironic, because ever since the hormones started kicking in this year, he spends on average at least every other minute of every waking hour plotting ingenious ways to avoid discourse with me.

First, he called me on his cell phone to say he'd been kidnapped. I simply couldn't resist texting back, “Great news. Ask them to call me when you turn 18.” This positively infuriated him. I am planning on archiving the explosive tirade of invectives he left on my voice mail so I can replay them when I start to miss him after he leaves for college in a few years. But it was only after the declaration of an impending hunger-and-homework strike failed to achieve the desired response that he threatened to set his hair on fire. We squared off. The knowledge that I was barred from uttering a word gave me the grace to do something I have never managed in 13 years of parenting: I ignored his provocation. My son fixed me with a steely expression, pointed a pair of scissors at his flaxen tresses, snipped, dangled and then deposited his precious cargo directly into the flame of a lit candle. One single hair. Thank you, vow of silence, for teaching me that though my offspring has a flair for the dramatic, his lunacy has limits. Sure, my son went to bed at 12:30 am and failed to finish his required reading, and it appeared as though a fraternity had taken up residence in our home, but the world didn't stop spinning on its axis. I felt rested, even energetic, in the morning.

The next day, a comedians' coffee klatch was entirely frustrating for me as I was unable to weigh in with a single stinging retort. The comedians sparred, and my brain filled as usual with machinations of one-upmanship whose aim can be summed up as “How can I impress them with my pithy wit?” which is comedian-speak for wanting them to “like me, to really, really like me,” which is actor-speak for “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,” which is Wizard of Oz-speak for “I am uncomfortable with exposing my small and insignificant authentic self, so please let my public persona entertain you.” Ugh. As the conversation swirled around me, I realized that, mostly, I speak because I'm trying to make people like me, or to issue orders to my family, or to avoid my feelings. Sometimes all three at the same time. A terrible trifecta. Kudos to you, vow of silence: In less than two days, you've revealed more than years of therapy, and you're cheaper, too. Just when I started entertaining the notion that I might keep this up for a few more days, someone took out some cheese fudge. I couldn't stop myself from blurting out, “What does it taste like? Can I try it?” Damn you, chudge, you made me break my vow; but having a mouth full of cheese fudge turns out to be just as effective a way to stop speaking as keeping mum. I highly recommend both. Silence is golden, but chudge is more delicious.

