

WOMEN CHOOSING SILENCE:  
TRANSFORMATIONAL PRACTICES AND  
RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores chosen practices of silence in contemporary Christian women's lives, insubstantially addressed within the literature of feminist and practical theologians. A survey of their discourse, which predominantly addresses the imposed silencing of women and the attendant quest for authentic voice to name their experiences, is supplemented by interdisciplinary exploration of silence within wider theologies, Quaker Studies, linguistics, and the talking and arts therapies.

Employing feminist research methodologies, this qualitative study utilises descriptively rich material from semi-structured interviews to consider the function of silence within research interviews, to identify and map women's engagement within a spectrum of practices of silence, to explore their role in the women's spiritual journeys, and to highlight difficulties reported in sustaining this discipline.

Data analysis shows that although frequently associated with solitude, practices of silence are valued as transformational in the women's relationships with God, self, and others. A metaphor of a web is proposed to represent the process of relational change, and silence's potential in developing relationally responsible communities is advocated. Explanations for feminist theologians' neglect of chosen silence are derived from the analysis, and this discipline is invited to re-engage with silence as a resource for discovering authentic identity beyond egoic selfhood.



For all who have  
offered me their silence

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## INTRODUCTION

The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and asked for my advice, I should reply: Create silence!

Søren Kierkegaard<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Introduction

This study is an exploration of practices of silence in the faith lives of contemporary Christian women. Its opening—a nineteenth century appeal to reinstate silence so that all life can live more healthily—is increasingly being echoed in today’s world. For millennia, engagement in practices of silence has been thought central to spiritual growth within the world’s many religious traditions. Knowledge of Christian practices of silence extends back at least as far as writings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers from the third century AD. The earliest lived solitary, silent lives in the Egyptian desert around Alexandria. Their ascetic practices influenced the development of religious communities that flourished in subsequent centuries. Their writings, along with later works by the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart, have been significant in formulating Christian meditative and contemplative practices of silence.<sup>2</sup> Last century, increasing availability of their texts renewed interest in disciplines of

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<sup>1</sup> Referenced by Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, Stanley Godman, trans., (London: The Harvill Press, 1948), 231. Although Picard does not give the source, see Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination*, in Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, eds., & trans., *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, XXI, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 47, with additional material between the first and second sentences.

<sup>2</sup> The influence of early Christian writings and practices concerning a discipline of silence are particularly well documented in the opening chapters of Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

silence amongst Christians. In addition, writing by prominent twentieth century Christian contemplatives like Simone Weil and Thomas Merton, and the prominence given to silence within worship at the Taizé Community in France, introduced new generations to practices of silence. Increasing Christian awareness was accompanied by growing secular interest in meditative practices from Eastern spiritual traditions in the 1960's and 1970's. Retrieval of and return to meditation and contemplation within the Christian tradition was intentionally fostered amongst people outside religious communities by the monks John Main, Bede Griffiths, Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington.

Several decades on, there has been little research into current practices of silence amongst Christians, despite an exponential rise in investigations of other practices following the emergence of practical theology. Similarly, although feminist theology explicitly explores the particularity of women's faith lives, highlighting silenced aspects of their experience, feminist theologians have not addressed chosen practices of silence in women's spiritual journeys today.

This study evolved as a response to the absence of enquiry into silence as a spiritual discipline within theology. It investigates the role and significance of practices of silence amongst twenty contemporary Christian women who have chosen to incorporate silence within life. Rooted within practical and feminist theologies, this qualitative research uses social science methodologies to offer an initial exploration into these women's understanding and perceptions of silence as a spiritual discipline. In this chapter I describe the personal, professional and faith-based contexts from within which this research

emerged. Following this, I identify the primary aims of the study and further questions that emerged in early stages of the research process. I then offer a rationale for the significance of this inquiry within practical and feminist theologies, before concluding the chapter with an overview of the rest of the thesis.

## **1.2 Beginnings: Personal, professional and research contexts**

Colloquially, silence is 'golden'.<sup>3</sup> Its inherently value-laden threads weave through my personal and professional life. As performer and audience member I wait whilst the conductor's baton hovers, prior to silently transmitting the temporal information required for musicians to burst into united rendition. I hold my breath in exhilarating moments of silence at the music's conclusion, awaiting the audience's verdict—or before offering my own. The poetry of silence, particularly T. S. Eliot and Gerard Manley Hopkins, has inspired my sparsely textured musical compositions. For approaching twenty years silence's complexity has pervaded my professional life as a Music Therapist with young people who cannot speak and whose communication is profoundly limited. Through them, I better understand the narrowness of conventional perceptions that interactional momentum is lost after only three seconds without sound:<sup>4</sup> receiving their responses may require my silent, attentive presence for a minute or more. But I was initially seduced by silence when studying music in my mid-teens: exposed to John Cage's noteless composition, *4' 33"*, for

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<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 127, credits the oft quoted phrase, 'Speech is silver, Silence is golden', to Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881).

<sup>4</sup> Reference to the work of developmental psychologist, Daniel Sterne, by Julie Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands: Silence, Music and Communication,' in Nicky Losseff and Jenny Doctor, eds., *Silence, Music, Silent Music*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 177.

the first time silence became something more than absence, and worthy of further consideration.<sup>5</sup>

Any notion of silence as appropriate within faith was all but absent from the Christianity of my childhood, becoming even more so attending a large, charismatic church at university. Here, extended musical worship, even longer preaching of the Word, and intercessory prayer which evoked panic if its ceaseless flow faltered, were the norm. However, exploring beyond its robust teaching on some spiritual disciplines, snatches of writing nudged me towards silence in my relationship with God. It was a decade before I attended a weekend retreat with periods of intentional silence, but only a few more months until I sought out a poustinia for days of individual silence.<sup>6</sup> Appreciating silence's value within faith was further enhanced by receiving, then training in spiritual accompaniment.

Incorporating silence within my spiritual practice coincided with discovering feminist theology through a new part-time role sourcing second-hand Christian texts for under-resourced theological libraries in the global South.<sup>7</sup> Female clergy donated texts with arresting titles by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Phyllis Trible, which identified for me women's absence in scripture, our forgotten places within church 'his-story'<sup>8</sup> and the silencing of our experiences. Yet I was surprised these same women,

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<sup>5</sup> Cage's 1952 composition, first performed on piano, comprises three movements, each of which is denoted on the score as a musical 'rest'. The beginning and end of each movement were indicated by opening and closing of the piano lid, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> 'Poustinia' comes from the Russian word for desert. Poustinias are typically small, simple dwellings, traditionally located in woodland and used by individuals seeking time with God in silence.

<sup>7</sup> Working as the part-time manager of the Overseas Book Service for Feed the Minds.

<sup>8</sup> A term used by feminists to indicate that history has predominantly been written from a male perspective. An alternative, 'herstory', originated from Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings*

whose work was otherwise so enlightening, had little positive to say about silence and its practices. My experiences, and conversations with other women, suggested a marked dichotomy between the wounding impact of silencing discussed by feminist theologians and the affirmation we found through intentional engagement in silence.

Around this time, popular BBC series *The Monastery*, (2005) *The Big Silence*, (2010), and others in between, extended awareness of Christian practices of silence to a wider audience. These were complemented by contemporaneous docu-film presentations of female and male contemplative religious communities, *No Greater Love*<sup>9</sup> and *Into Great Silence*,<sup>10</sup> as well as extensive media coverage of Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence*,<sup>11</sup> weaving autobiographical accounts of her solitude within other sources.

Planning doctoral research within practical theology, I was dismayed to find no sustained exploration of disciplines of silence within its discourse, despite repeated statements of the importance of investigating religious practices: as feminist practical theologian, Mary Clark Moschella states, 'we focus on religious practice because practice is a key element in the process of change. ... Research that attends to religious practices taps into this transformative capacity.'<sup>12</sup> The juxtaposition between increasing secular interest in silence

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*from the Feminist Movement*, (New York: Vintage, 1970), and is used by many feminists to describe past events from women's perspective, or to emphasise the role of women.

<sup>9</sup> Directed by Michael Whyte, 2010. This film follows the lives of nuns in the contemplative, enclosed Carmelite community, Most Holy Trinity, at Notting Hill in London.

<sup>10</sup> Produced and directed by Philip Gröning, 2006. With little speech or music other than the singing of Offices, it follows a year in the life of monks in the contemplative Carthusian order at La Grande Chartreuse in the French Alps.

<sup>11</sup> Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, (London: Granta Books, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 49.



and the lack of sustained discussion of its practices within feminist and practical theology was perplexing. I had found a substantial silence in their discourse, but not quite recognised it as the writer's dream described by Anne Phillips: 'coming across an area of study grossly under-researched, one which as yet commands little library shelf-space, into which to speak.'<sup>13</sup> Eventually, the embryonic overall aim for my research emerged in response to Nicola Slee's book, *Women's Faith Development*.<sup>14</sup> In concluding, Slee states the importance of being present to and with women in the pain of their silence and unknowing. Slee acknowledges there are *traditional* resources which can speak into these, citing authors already mentioned above.<sup>15</sup> Her following statement, highlighting the need for texts to accompany women 'as an essential means of legitimating their experiences of silence and invisibility, and of affirming their potential creativity'<sup>16</sup> acted in three ways. Firstly, it hinted at the need for *contemporary* texts to accompany women's silence. Then, my particular reading of this sentence reflected the silence and invisibility I encountered concerning practices of silence within feminist and practical theologies. Lastly, it suggested the possibility of my own potential for creativity in engaging in research which might—eventually—produce new writing to support and encourage exploration of a discipline of silence by this and subsequent generations of women.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Phillips, *The Faith of Girls: Children's Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), xi.

<sup>14</sup> Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 178-9.

<sup>15</sup> Slee names Simone Weil, Meister Eckhart, St John of the Cross, Thomas Merton and the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

<sup>16</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 179.

<sup>17</sup> Now published as Alison Woolley, 'Silent Gifts: An Exploration of Some Aspects of Relationality in Contemporary Christian Women's Chosen Practices of Silence', in Nicola Slee, Fran Porter and Anne Phillips, eds., *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 147-159.

Like Mexican poet, Octavio Paz, I had become 'Enamoured of silence'.<sup>18</sup> I listened for its rich strands within the tapestry of life, seeking different perspectives on its many forms and subtle echoes. In *Practical Theology 'On Earth as it is in Heaven'*, Terry Veling describes attentive listening as crucial for theological hermeneutics. To 'truly hear' requires openness and willingness to be addressed, without which any listening will be fruitless.<sup>19</sup> When truly listening, 'we realize that something is being asked of us'.<sup>20</sup> Provocative questions address our assumptions, forcing recognition that existing knowledge and understanding is small, insisting on acknowledgement of our limited horizons, and inviting active response. Although practical and feminist theologies created minimal space for exploring silence, I too had not heard many questions about its role in women's lives: beyond my own engagement there was 'yet more depth to be discovered, a deeper insight to be lived'.<sup>21</sup> I determined to respond by attempting to hear how the value women give to practices of silence might be interpreted within the contexts of practical and feminist theology.

### **1.3 The Aims of the Study**

The primary aim of this study is to investigate practices of silence amongst twenty contemporary Christian women. The research is undergirded by two parallel areas of inquiry. Firstly, to identify and describe practices of silence belonging to these women's

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<sup>18</sup> Octavio Paz, *Alternating Current*, (New York: Viking, 1973), 69, referenced by Karl Patten, 'Teaching "Discovering Silence"', in Adam Jaworski, ed., *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), 372.

<sup>19</sup> Terry Veling, *Practical Theology 'On Earth as It Is in Heaven'*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Veling, *Practical Theology*, 32.

<sup>21</sup> Veling, *Practical Theology*, 32.

spiritual discipline. Secondly, to explore the role such practices play in their ongoing faith journeys. As no similar research into women's practices of silence exists, an affiliated aim is for this investigation to be a catalyst for further research into their role by feminist and practical theologians.

As my research unfolded I identified a broader range of questions to sharpen and guide the inquiry's focus. These divided into four areas. Firstly, what do these women understand by the term silence? Next, what specific practices do they name as belonging to their discipline of silence? Third, what do they value about engagement with these practices? Finally, what role did silence have within interviews? More detailed, additional questions which emerged within these areas shaped my consideration of the women's comments during data analysis.

The absence of exploration into women's practices of silence precludes comparing key themes derived from my study with others, beyond individual women who have written autobiographically about their own spiritual disciplines.<sup>22</sup> However, I do not intend to suggest universality in conclusions reached within this small-scale study. The particular contexts and perspectives of participants and researchers in any future investigation will undoubtedly yield different findings, supporting and challenging those of this inquiry.

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<sup>22</sup> Some such texts will be discussed in Chapter 2. In addition, it will discuss Stanford J. Searl, *The Meanings of Silence in Quaker Worship*, (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005). Although Searl's research findings are referred to several times in discussing themes from my data analysis, it does not offer scope for comparison with my own study for the following reasons: it is confined to an exploration of silence amongst Quakers; many Quakers do not identify as Christians; there was no distinction made between female or male perceptions and little differentiation of findings as they applied to women or men; it offers little, if any exploration into the role of silence outside Quaker Meeting for Worship; the periods of silence under investigation therefore apply only to corporate times of silence and do not consider individual practices of silence in a distinct way.

Although the objectives of this research in its early stages focussed on exploration of the areas of inquiry described here, inevitably, in completing the study some received more attention, whilst others receded. In part, this resulted from the material generated by these particular women. However, my own biases and suppositions colour my particular listening, reading and thinking about their comments, and impact on the direction of the inquiry. These limitations and their implications will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

#### **1.4 Rationale for the research**

Theologians continue to advocate the ongoing significance of silence within Christian spirituality: it is indispensable in humanity's relationship with God.<sup>23</sup> They also present silence as profoundly important in our relating—to one another and with creation. Rowan Williams suggests silence should be treasured as, rather than cutting people off from relationships, it reaches to the root of our human problems. Where habits of speech reinforce imprisonment in the inevitable untruths of our utterances, silence offers a means of restoring our interactions by freeing language from the evasions and control that form the major content of our speech, before God and with each other. Silence necessitates allowing whatever already is simply to be what it is, without intrusion into its beauty, integrity or origin in God.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Lash, *Holiness, Speech and Silence*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 91.

<sup>24</sup> Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes*, (Oxford: Lion Books, 2003), 45, 69 and 111.

Nearly a century after the opening advice to ‘Create silence’, Max Picard’s phenomenological work, *The World of Silence*, extended Kierkegaard’s portrayal of the dis-ease caused to humanity by its loss:<sup>25</sup>

Nothing has changed the nature of man so much as the loss of silence ... this lack of relationship to silence, this fact that silence is no longer taken for granted, as something natural as the sky above or the air we breathe. Man who has lost his silence has not merely lost one human quality, but his whole structure has been changed thereby.<sup>26</sup>

More recently, Michael Strawser suggested Kierkegaard’s remedy is needed for humanity to recognise the responsibility each bears towards others. Reflecting on this responsibility as portrayed in Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy, Terry Veling writes of ‘being faced’ by the gaze of others as a confrontation with the continual requirement of responsibility for and towards them:

The face of the other breaks into my world and calls out to me. I am not an *I* unto myself, but an *I* standing before the other. The other calls forth my response, commands my attention, refuses to be ignored, makes a claim on my existence, tells me I am responsible.<sup>27</sup>

Strawser proposes silence as our beginning for treating twenty-first century problems of ‘faltering responsibility, lack of personal commitment and a sense of obligation’ when faced

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<sup>25</sup> Although often cited as a book about silence, Maggie Ross describes Picard’s text as one which ultimately ‘celebrates language’. See Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User’s Guide*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014), 10.

<sup>26</sup> Picard, *World of Silence*, 216.

<sup>27</sup> Terry Veling, *Practical Theology*, 124, emphasis in original. Veling contrasts ‘being faced’ with the more familiar experience of ‘facing being’—our facing of life’s difficulties, uncertainties and profound ambiguities. Veling portrays ‘being faced’ as shifting attention away from our own gaze out towards the world and towards the gaze of those who look upon us and ask of us from beyond our being. See Veling, *Practical Theology*, 126-129.

by others.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Oliver Davies states returning to an understanding of the role of silence will enable Christian communities to hear other voices more effectively, ‘allowing its own speech to be more deeply formed in responsibility before the other.’<sup>29</sup> Maggie Ross’s *Silence: A User’s Guide*, published in Autumn 2014, brings considerations about the impact of the loss of silence up to date. For Ross, humans carry responsibility to maintain the appropriate balance between silence and speech, reflection and action, attention and distraction. Having forgotten this responsibility, Ross depicts humanity as no longer able to thrive: the survival or extinction of all creation now hangs in the balance.<sup>30</sup> For each author, if we are to live responsibly, recognising the need for transformation in our relationships with nature, others, God and ourselves is intimately entwined in appropriate engagement with silence.

Despite recognition of the importance of silence in many expressions of Christian faith, references to *practices* of silence within theology are often insubstantial. Silence is frequently listed amongst other disciplines—worship, prayer, fasting, giving and service—each of which has multiple texts offering exploration and explanation for academic and non-academic readers. Yet there is a dearth of literature addressing practices of silence, other than from autobiographical experience.<sup>31</sup> Theologians have made little attempt to explore

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Strawser, ‘Gifts of Silence from Kierkegaard and Derrida’, *Soundings* (Spring/Summer, 2006), 89 (1-2): 57 and 64.

<sup>29</sup> Oliver Davies, ‘Soundings: Towards a Theological Poetics of Silence’, in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 222.

<sup>30</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> An ongoing body of writing has emerged from the Quaker tradition since the advent of this distinct worshipping community in the mid seventeenth century. Their writing largely addresses the unprogrammed, communal silence that forms the basis of Quaker Meeting for Worship, and has received little attention from non-Quaker theologians.

meanings attached to the phrase practices of silence, as used to describe aspects of people's contemporary, disciplined engagement with God.

Throughout Christian history it has been recognised that lives are enriched by silence, where its theory and practice are combined in disciplined individual and communal praxis.<sup>32</sup>

Consequently, the absence of investigation into spiritual disciplines of silence is surprising.

However, over thirty years ago Don Browning identified that Christians often fail to reflect theologically on prevalent practices because of their familiarity:

We are so embedded in our practices, take them so much for granted, and view them as so natural and self-evident that we never take time to abstract the theory from the practice and look at something in itself.<sup>33</sup>

Since Browning's observation practical theologians have increasingly conducted empirical research amongst Christians, seeking to complexify the meanings and values given to prominent practices within people's faith journeys. Marie McCarthy asserts the important role of practical theology in facilitating recovery of the transformational power of traditional spiritual disciplines by retrieving, critiquing and reconstructing practices from within Christianity's heritage.<sup>34</sup> Although McCarthy named silence within this group of practices in 2000, until recently, no research into contemporary Christian engagement in individual practices of silence within the UK was published.<sup>35</sup> Empirical investigation into

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<sup>32</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, (London: SCM Press, 2005), 26.

<sup>33</sup> Don Browning, *Practical Theology*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 6, referenced in Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Marie McCarthy, 'Spirituality in a Postmodern Era', in James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, eds., *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 202-204.

<sup>35</sup> Woolley, 'Silent Gifts', is the only known example within this discipline.

silence is perhaps more necessary than other practices as, carried out in silence, and most frequently engaged in alone, discussion, exploration or evaluation between individuals concerning their usage is comparatively uncommon.<sup>36</sup>

Woodward and Pattison describe practical theology's starting point as any practical concern relating to people's everyday lives that cries out for further attention.<sup>37</sup> Previous depictions of harm caused by humanity's increasing disconnection from silence indicate its exploration is an important, contemporary issue of practical and religious concern. Strawser, Ross and Davies' suggestions for the significance of silence in addressing challenges of human responsibility towards all created life resonate with Veling's proposal that exploring ways to live responsibly, attentively and thoughtfully—rather than with cold indifference—are of primary importance for practical theologians.<sup>38</sup> Such concerns are fundamental to practical theology's task: 'to mediate the relation between the Christian tradition and the specific problems and challenges of the contemporary social context.'<sup>39</sup> Practical theology can mediate theological appreciation of the significance of silence for contemporary society. By investigating practices of silence it can suggest how faithful praxis may facilitate the individual and social transformations proposed by McCarthy.<sup>40</sup> I suggest Christian engagement in silence is, therefore, an appropriate focus for consideration by practical theologians and that an initial exploration of its practices is urgently required.

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of this, see Pink Dandelion, 'Conclusion', in Pink Dandelion, ed., *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 226-238, particularly 229.

<sup>37</sup> Woodward and Pattison, *Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Veling, *Practical Theology*, 12-13 and 123.

<sup>39</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 26.

<sup>40</sup> McCarthy, 'Spirituality', 202.



Although silence has been central within feminist theological discourse, its presentation is principally negative. Its focus has been the *silencing* of women and other marginalised groups by patriarchal society and authorities. This is rightly denounced as inappropriate, offensive, and to be resisted. Yet as within practical theology, feminist theologians have said little about contemporary Christian women's chosen engagement with silence.<sup>41</sup> They have failed to give any substantial account of such practices perceived as impacting on faith lives in affirming and life-giving ways, for women or wider society. Rosemary Ruether states that developing an understanding of women's spirituality should draw on theology which takes seriously 'broken relations between self and body, ... others, ... nature, ... and God, as creating not just false images but also broken and distorted existence'.<sup>42</sup> Although Williams, Strawser, Davies and Ross all propose return to appropriate silence can foster healing of broken communal responsibilities,<sup>43</sup> discourse about such a place for practices of silence remains predominantly absent within feminist theology.

Feminist theology has privileged models of 'being' antonymous with silencing: phrases such as 'hearing to speech',<sup>44</sup> 'speaking truth to power',<sup>45</sup> or 'finding authentic voice' epitomise

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<sup>41</sup> Some Womanist theologians have identified the significance of choosing to remain silent as a form of protest. See, for example, Delores S. Williams, 'Black Theology and Womanist Theology', in Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 60; Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 120-123; Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 176-178, 180-192; Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do With It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 101.

<sup>42</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Feminist Theology and Spirituality,' in Judith Weidman, ed., *Christian Feminism*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 14.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes*, Strawser, 'Gifts of Silence', Davies, 'Soundings' and Ross, *Silence*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 210.

<sup>45</sup> Used extensively within feminist secular and theological texts, the phrase originates in a pamphlet, *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence*, published by a Quaker affiliated organisation, the American Friends Service Committee in 1955, to promote the effectiveness of love in human relating in response to the escalation of the Cold War.

such models and are common within its literature. The coalescence of these prominent dialogues—silencing, and its antonyms—has dominated feminist theological discourse. As Christie Cozad Neuger states, ‘Regaining language and voice for the power of naming one’s self, one’s environment, and one’s God has been a primary agenda for feminist theology’.<sup>46</sup>

This unbalanced emphasis on silence’s oppressive forms has, at best, marginalised any role for chosen silence within feminist theology. Its exclusion should concern feminist theologians for, as Maria Harris states in her discussion of pedagogy for women, ‘The thing which does not fit in or which is left out forcefully educates and miseducates everyone, since the thing which is left out or forgotten regularly turns out to be the clue leading to new knowledge.’<sup>47</sup> Feminist theology’s virtual omission of any discussion of chosen silence’s potential in women’s spiritual journeys could be interpreted to imply all silence is equally discredited. That this implication arises from theological discourse claiming to acknowledge and affirm women’s experience is unfortunate.

Elaine Graham’s recent overview of the intersection of feminist and practical theologies states that despite feminist practical theology’s dilemma—its ambivalent place within the academy which values the explication of high theory over the investigation of lived experience—it continues to place women’s experiences centrally. Feminist practical theology holds women’s faith experiences in creative tension with more systematic and

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<sup>46</sup> Christie Cozad Neuger, ‘Pastoral Counselling as an Art of Personal Political Activism’, in Christie Cozad Neuger, ed., *The Arts of Ministry*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 97.

<sup>47</sup> Maria Harris, *Women and Teaching: Themes for a Spirituality of Pedagogy*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 21.

analytical models of inquiry, whilst also embracing the standpoints, contexts and phenomenological accounts of the reality of women's lives.<sup>48</sup> Graham states this discipline has crafted ways to focus on how women 'actually inhabit lives of faith' and develop new patterns of practice, spirituality, community and religious language with a fresh methodological and epistemological seriousness. She suggests the development of such work illustrates that the 'living webs'<sup>49</sup> of women's practices hold potential as 'wellsprings of new ways of knowing and acting' within feminist theology.<sup>50</sup>

Although Graham affirms that investigation into women's experiences remains central within feminist practical theology, the dominant discourses of feminist theology have marginalised discussion of practices of silence in contemporary Christian women's experience. These practices remain an unexplored source of wisdom, whose rich wellsprings remain untapped as potential catalysts for women's transformation.

In *Silence and the Word*, David Ford suggests a generational period of time must elapse after first responses to significant occurrences within a community have been worked through, before memories and wisdom can be distilled into mature testimony.<sup>51</sup> In the latter

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<sup>48</sup> Elaine Graham, 'Feminist Theory', in Bonnie Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 198.

<sup>49</sup> Graham adapts this term from Bonnie Miller-McLemore's phrase 'living human web', offered by McLemore as a feminist expansion of Anton Boisen's individualistic phrase, familiar to practical theologians, the 'living human document'. See Miller-McLemore, 'The Living Human Web: Pastoral Theology at the Turn of the Century', in Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, ed., *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights from Pastoral Care*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 9-26 and Anton T. Boisen, *Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, [1936] 1971).

<sup>50</sup> Graham, 'Feminist Theory', 199.

<sup>51</sup> David Ford, 'Apophysis and the Shoah: Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?' in Davies and Turner, *Silence and the Word*, 186.

twentieth century, feminist theology's exposure of Christian women's silencing and choosing to 'address the theme of silence by refusing to be silent from now on' is such an occurrence.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the emergence of practical theology within theological academic discourse is a further such occurrence. Having identified an apparent lacuna in practical and feminist theology's understanding of contemporary Christian women's chosen practices of silence, I suggest sufficient time has elapsed since women's anger at their enforced silencing erupted for research into women choosing rather than refusing silence to commence. Investigation into such practices using the methods of enquiry of these disciplines and from the perspective of Christian feminist commitment is now both appropriate and overdue.

## **1.5 An outline of the Study**

This chapter traced the emergence of my research into contemporary Christian women's practices of silence from within my personal and professional perspectives and located this inquiry within the context of practical and feminist theologies and within social science and feminist methodologies. I stated the overarching aims with which the study began and identified four specific areas of enquiry that emerged in its early stages. The chapters which follow will address questions arising from these broader themes. Chapter 2 develops a more detailed, interdisciplinary understanding of silence, exploring perceptions within theology, philosophy, theory of art, linguistics, psychodynamic and client-centred schools of therapy and the Arts Therapies.<sup>53</sup> Chapter 4 outlines principles of feminist research methodology

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<sup>52</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 27.

<sup>53</sup> The Arts Therapies include art, music, drama and dance-movement therapies, but I will draw only on discussions from within art and music therapy.

that informed the design and conduct of my research and describe the qualitative research methods used in data collection, analysis and representation.<sup>54</sup> This chapter also begins exploration of silence within interviews.

In chapters 3 and 5 to 7 I present my main research findings. These chapters cover two distinct areas. Chapter 3 provides a foundation for the three further data chapters. Firstly, it maps the women's perceptions of silence, generally and in the context of their spiritual journey. Next, it explores their ongoing exposure to its practices, from childhood through to developing their own disciplines in maturing adult faith. It details practices of silence identified by the women, discussing these within the traditional pairings of external or internal silence and individual or corporate silence. Finally, it highlights the difficulties encountered by the women in sustaining their discipline of silence.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are linked by their exploration of relationality. This 'has become an organizing concept for talking about women's psychology, feminist ethics, and feminist theology' since Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* was published in 1982.<sup>55</sup> Relationality emerged as the central principle for why the women value engagement in practices of silence. Each of these three chapters explores silence in one of three different relational contexts: in relationship with God, then self, and lastly, in relationship with others. In these

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<sup>54</sup> The order of chapters 3 and 4 given here has been reversed from that originally presented in the thesis as a correction requested following the viva voce examination.

<sup>55</sup> Christie Cozad Neuger, 'Women and Relationality', in Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern, eds., *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 115. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Although some of Gilligan's work has been contested in the intervening decades, her demonstration that women's decision making is primarily rooted in an assessment of their relational implications has ensured that consideration of relationality has remained a focus within feminist theory.

chapters and throughout the thesis I use 'self' to apply to a woman's own being. 'Other' is predominantly used to refer to other people. At times 'other' is used more broadly to incorporate creation. Following usage in some therapeutic literature I use 'self' and 'other' in preference to the more familiar convention of 'the self' and 'the other' to indicate my perception that self and other are multiple and in a state of flux, rather than singular.<sup>56</sup>

My concluding chapter summarises the main findings of this study, before identifying some of its limitations and suggesting directions for future research. I propose a metaphorical organising model for the process of relational transformational which this investigation identifies resulting from these women's engagement in practices of silence. Following this, I explore possible reasons that feminist theologians may have omitted engaging with chosen practices of silence and consider the role that such engagement may have within developing responsible relationships and sustainable communities. This discussion culminates in posing a question for consideration by feminist theologians which arises from my analysis, before a reflective piece of creative writing draws my study, and the reader, towards a concluding silence.

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<sup>56</sup> Discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

## SILENT THREADS: EXPLORATIONS OF SILENCE FROM INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

We have allowed silence to become a gift forgotten, one we only consent to unwrap when all of our alternative bows and strings have been unraveled, and our diversions have been utterly played out.

Elizabeth Scalia<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Introduction

Early Christian engagement with silence is documented in sayings of the Desert Ammas and Abbas of Egypt and Syria in the three centuries following St Anthony's (251-356) flight to the desert.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the lives of eremitics, or those living within coenobitic communities, have continued to be shaped by practices of silence. Their resulting writings, from John Cassian (360-435) to Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and beyond, are well known.<sup>3</sup> In the discussion which follows I will not be considering their history or writings, firstly because this would duplicate work already covered extensively.<sup>4</sup> More significantly, as this inquiry

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Scalia, 'For 2011: Unwrap the Silence', *First Things*, Web Exclusives, (October, 2010). See <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/12/for-unwrap-the-silence>.

<sup>2</sup> See Helen Waddell, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (London: Fontana, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> See John Cassian, *Conferences*, Colm Luibheid, trans., (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1985), written as dialogues of the Desert Fathers, and John Cassian, *The Institutes*, Boniface Ramsey, trans., (New York, NY: Newman Press, 2000). Thomas Merton's *Journals* are published voluminously, including *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, Jonathan Montaldo, ed., (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), which chronicles his struggle to balance solitude with growing acclaim, and Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life*, (London: Sheldon Press, 1975). Texts by St Ignatius, St John of the Cross, Margery Kempe, Meister Eckhart, St. Bonaventure, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila are well-known examples.

<sup>4</sup> For example, MacCulloch, *Silence*, Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, (New York: Crossroad, 1991); Peter-Damian Belisle, *The Language of Silence: The Changing Face of*

explores practices of silence amongst Christian women today, my research is grounded in an investigation of discourses concerning silence within recent and current literature.

I begin with an outline of initial questions around definitions and perceptions of silence, which continues as an ongoing thread of inquiry throughout the chapter. I then discuss considerations of silence within feminist and practical theologies. Whilst their literature gestures towards the possible positive significance of chosen silence and its practices for women and the church, it offers little sustained discourse on which to draw for further development. Practical Theology acknowledges the need to engage in interdisciplinary inquiry because theological discourse cannot, of itself, furnish information about all aspects of contemporary life.<sup>5</sup> Seeking insights beyond theology to bring into dialogue with my research, I turn to discourses of theoretical understandings of silence within the disciplines of linguistics, Quaker studies and the various talking and arts therapies.

## **2.2 Silence: questions of definition and perception**

The English language is unhelpful in considering silence. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines silence as noun as either absence of speech, or absence of all noises—the former contradicting the latter.<sup>6</sup> Definitions as a verb are of reduction to silence or cessation from speaking. In English, the word ‘silence’ is used to denotes multiple situations, assisted

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*Monastic Solitude*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003); Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden and Roger Ellis, eds., *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Woodward and Pattison, eds., *Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.dictionary.oed.com](http://www.dictionary.oed.com)



somewhat by derivatives of ‘quiet’. In linguistics, silence is perceived as a communicative device in interaction, an obstructer or facilitator, a means of emotional management, and a marker of interruption, yet linguistics has no specific differential terminology:<sup>7</sup> there is no lexical encoding for semantic differences between acoustic, prosodic or pragmatic silences.<sup>8</sup> Many languages use different vocabulary to denote silence as noun or verb.<sup>9</sup> Oliver Davies describes the Russian words *molchanie*—silence as cessation or refusal of speech—and *tishina*—silence encountered on the Russian steppe or deep within a forest. Davies’ discussion highlights tension and ambiguities between different silences:

... a conversation in a Russian forest will banish silence as *tishina*, but create the possibility of silence as *molchanie* ... we may read that silence either as the cessation of conversation and the restoration of *tishina* or alternatively as *molchanie*, and the continuation of their conversation by means of silence. In the latter case there are further ambiguities, since *molchanie* may be aggressive ... , refusal of some kind ... it may be compliant ... or reflective ... awkward and embarrassed ... an easeful lull, a resting upon mutuality of relation with no need—for the moment—of speech ... [It] may be maintained by the one partner, who cannot find words that are adequate to the intensity of their feeling, entailing for the interlocutor an attentive waiting upon the other to speak.<sup>10</sup>

Davies describes *tishina* as objective, relating to creation and the cosmos, and *molchanie* as subjective and relational, invariably subtended by speech.<sup>11</sup> For Davies, silence is ultimately an empty sign, dependent on signification given by the context in which it is embedded for its

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<sup>7</sup> Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike, eds., *Perspectives on Silence*, (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1985), xviii.

<sup>8</sup> Włodzimierz Sobkowiak, ‘Silence and Markedness Theory’, in Jaworski, *Silence*, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver Davies offers a detailed discussion of Hebrew and Greek usage of words denoting silence, particularly *hares* and *damam* for divine refusal of speech within Hebrew scripture, and *sige* and *hesychia* in Neoplatonic thought. See Davies, ‘Soundings’, 202-213.

<sup>10</sup> Davies, ‘Soundings’, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Oliver Davies, ‘Cosmic speech and the liturgy of silence’, in Randi Rashkover and C. C. Pecknolds, eds., *Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), 219.

meaning.<sup>12</sup> This contrasts vividly with feminist poet, Adrienne Rich, for whom silence abounds in its own rituals and etiquette, with presence, history and form enough for the blueprint of a life, finally cautioning

Do not confuse it  
With any kind of absence<sup>13</sup>

Sara Maitland concurs with Rich: much contemporary thought about silence perceives it as a negative condition. Maitland writes, 'it is a real, separate, actual thing, an ontological category of its own: not a *lack* of language but other than, different from, language; not an *absence* of sound but the presence of something, which is not sound.'<sup>14</sup> In the mid twentieth century, composer, John Cage, explored silence as absolute or relative, particularly in his noteless 4'33". Cage believed 'material silence'<sup>15</sup> existed as an absolute absence of sound, until hearing his autonomic system functioning in an anechoic chamber. For Cage, silence became 'a *something*, something that is *there* but not sound.'<sup>16</sup> It is this 'something'—silence's presence as an affirmative entity—which is so intriguing.

Maitland highlights the ambiguity and paradoxical aspects of silence using the analogy of a radio to explore the 'transmitter/receptor problem'.<sup>17</sup> Seemingly identical auditory silences exist when a broadcast's transmission ceases or a radio is turned off. In addition, static can

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<sup>12</sup> Davies, 'Soundings', 222.

<sup>13</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Cartographies of Silence', in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 28, emphasis in original.

<sup>15</sup> This term is used to denote the concept of a complete absence of all auditory sound by Maggie Ross. Ross, like Cage, concludes that material silence does not exist. See Ross, *Silence*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> William Brooks, 'Pragmatics of Silence', in Losseff and Doctor, *Silence*, 101.

<sup>17</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 26.

silence the radio's effective communication of meaning, whilst uninterrupted transmission is experienced as silence by the deaf. Such silence, where communication is not experienced, was termed 'false silence' by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>18</sup>

Alina Kwiatkowska discusses silence and perception within auditory and artistic modalities. She identifies a 'cognitive silence', created when a sound or image the hearer or viewer expects, becomes absent.<sup>19</sup> Kwiatkowska uses the example of René Magritte's *L'homme au journal*:<sup>20</sup> his canvas bears four identical images of a room. The first Western eyes conventionally look at—top left—has a man reading a newspaper in the room. The 'background' image of the room is insignificant in the viewer's mind. Rather, his absence from the following three images becomes meaningful: the viewer wonders where he has gone. When what has been in the foreground of our attention becomes silent, we focus on its absence: it becomes a cognitive silence. Kwiatkowska suggests it may be that our attention should turn to what we perceived as background, what was silent to our attention. Whilst Kwiatkowska's example utilizes visual perception, cognitive silence applies equally to experiences of silence in other modalities.

Both Maitland and Bakhtin differentiate between silences caused by the cessation of human, mechanical, or natural sounds. Maitland reports that many people consider rhythmic,

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<sup>18</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Languages*, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986), 145.

<sup>19</sup> Alina Kwiatkowska, 'Silence Across Modalities', in Jaworski, *Silence*, 329-337.

<sup>20</sup> René Magritte, *L'homme au journal*, 1928, oil on canvas, Tate Modern, London. For the image, see <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/magritte-man-with-a-newspaper-t00680>.

mechanical sounds to break silence, but not natural sounds like wind or water.<sup>21</sup> For Maitland and Merton silence is primarily broken by human speech. For Bakhtin, natural silence is 'quietude': silence relates to absence of speech alone, and is thus only possible for humanity.<sup>22</sup>

Maitland compares isolated silence in a flotation tank<sup>23</sup> and a 6 week span living as a solitary on Skye with the medical diagnostic parameters for the syndrome associated with solitary confinement. She concludes the difference between sensory deprivation leading to mental breakdown and her self-reported *jouissance* lies in imposition or choice. Along with her transmitter/receptor problem and Davies' discussion of the potentialities of silence for his Russian peasants, Maitland's conclusion reveals that subjective experience of silence depends upon whether it is deliberate or unintentional, and chosen or imposed.

Texts discussing contemplative life differentiate between external and internal silence. Alice Borchard Greene's early study proposes the central difference is whether attention is directed towards the objective world, or self.<sup>24</sup> Merton understood external silence as chosen absence of sounds, essential for cultivating valuable internal silence, where thoughts, desires and judgments are stilled.<sup>25</sup> Generally, external silence is symbolic of the search for

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<sup>21</sup> Maitland *A Book of Silence*, 25-27.

<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 133-4. A Russian speaker, Bakhtin appears to deliberately seek to draw this distinction in the English language based on separate Russian terminology, *tishina* and *molchanie*, discussed above.

<sup>23</sup> Maitland, *Book of Silence*, 82-4. A flotation tank, or 'pod', is a large bath with a closing lid. It is filled with a highly concentrated salt water solution heated to the body's temperature, 37° centigrade, which enables effortless flotation. The tank is totally dark and sound free.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Borchard Greene, 'The Religious Uses of Silence', (PhD diss., University of Columbia, 1938), 39.

<sup>25</sup> John F. Teahan, 'The Place of Silence in Thomas Merton's Life and Thought', in Patrick Hart, ed., *The Message of Thomas Merton*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publishers, 1981), 98.

interior silence, but can mask inner turmoil, whilst internal silence may be retained in external turmoil. Interior silence may be described as shallow—where awareness of individual, egoic identity is maintained—or deep—where egoic awareness is temporarily transcended. Deep silence is integral to contemplation. Here, practitioners become ‘immersed in the depths of a silence greater than the self’,<sup>26</sup> frequently associated with subsequent difficulty in describing awareness of ‘an identity beyond essence, self beyond ego ... and a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation’ between God, self and others.<sup>27</sup>

Ross describes the work of silence as neutral, non-linear and opposite to speech, which is self-reflexive and linear.<sup>28</sup> Ross’ work primarily discusses contemplative silence. This lies beyond silence where an observant eye/I is present, giving access to ‘deep mind’<sup>29</sup> where, elided or suspended, self-consciousness temporarily falls away.<sup>30</sup> For Ross, engagement in a discipline of silence carries no necessity of belief: it requires observation of and reflection on the mind ‘at work with the silence’ and realisation of the ‘trans-figuring’ that attentiveness to the silence of deep mind can effect:

if we can get beyond our manipulative thinking to focus on not focusing, we open ourselves to insight and change; we access a vast, spacious, generous, silent, thinking mind that seems to have knowledge we have

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<sup>26</sup> Teahan, ‘The Place of Silence’, 93-94.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Merton, ‘Learning to Live’, in *Love and Living*, ed., Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 9. Referenced in Bernadette Flanagan, ‘*Quaestio Divina*: Research as Spiritual Practice’, *The Way* (October, 2014), 53 (4): 128.

<sup>28</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Deep mind’ reflects Ross’s seeking a neutral word other than those associated with different modern schools of psychology to refer to the large areas of the mind to which we have no direct access, but can influence by intention. Ross cautions that deep mind does not equate to the unconscious, but rather, the unconscious resides in deep mind. See Ross, *Silence*, 76.

<sup>30</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 1.

never self-consciously learned; that makes unexpected connections; that has its own ethics; and that not only gives us insights but can tell us when an insight is correct.<sup>31</sup>

Ross states it is when attempting to verbalise these processes that religious metaphors arise.<sup>32</sup> She describes silence as restorative, reinstating mutual interdependence and free exchange of different types of knowledge that emerge from self-conscious and deep mind, opening self to an 'unfolding and ever-changing perspective, a transfiguration.'<sup>33</sup> The fundamental message Ross identifies amongst those who engage with silence is that if self-consciousness makes us human, 'its elision opens the door to what was once called divinity.'<sup>34</sup> Although Ross' language differs markedly from Eckhart Tolle's in *The Power of Now*,<sup>35</sup> there is considerable correlation between their thoughts regarding this: it is by re-centring personhood within deep mind that 'human beings share the life of God.'<sup>36</sup>

## **2.3 Silence in feminist theological perspectives**

### *2.3.1 Acknowledging silence's importance for women*

My inklings of silence as a theological practice faithfully enacted beyond meditative or contemplative prayer were nurtured by Slee's observations of silence's negative and positive role in women's faith development.<sup>37</sup> Slee highlights the importance of acknowledging the

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<sup>31</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 1 and 7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001). Tolle does not align himself with any specific religion or faith tradition, frequently referring to biblical and Buddhist texts, with references also to Sufi, Taoist and Hindu writings.

<sup>36</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 164.

<sup>37</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*.

silences in women's naming of their experiences of faith and spirituality. She locates women's difficulties in expressing faith using personally acceptable, affirmative language within the Christian tradition of apophatic theology.<sup>38</sup> However, Slee uses the term 'apophatic faithing' to describe ways faith is silently articulated amongst women which, without being named, could be un-noticed. She describes apophatic faith as 'an agnostic, paradoxical and elusive kind of knowing which operates at the edges of rational and critical thinking, rooted in denunciation and negative naming, which often does not even know that it knows, because it is most aware of what it does *not* know.'<sup>39</sup> Slee concludes that language's inadequacy for naming women's experiences of faith requires those involved in their pastoral care and theological education to accompany and affirm women's not knowing by creating space for silence, waiting and 'apparent nothingness'.<sup>40</sup>

### 2.3.2 *Feminist theology: silencing and being silenced*

Slee's affirming presentation of silence within women's lives prompted my exploration of references to silence in texts by other feminist theologians. Here, discussion shifted to more negative forms, predominantly the silencing of women. The theme of women's invisibility through deliberate or unconscious silencing by and within the church has been central to feminist theology. Marjorie Procter-Smith remarks this is 'a very grave matter for women in

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<sup>38</sup> Apophatic, or 'negative' theology refers to encounter with God being beyond words, leading to an inability to convey or conceive the ultimate reality of God in the affirmative, which results in talk about God and faith being expressed in terms of who or what these are *not*.

<sup>39</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 165, emphasis in original. For her full explication of apophatic faithing, see 77.

<sup>40</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 178.

a religion with anamnesis at its heart'.<sup>41</sup> Riet Bons-Storm playfully suggests 'The proper role for a Christian woman is obviously to exist as silently and secretly as possible, because according to many texts in the Bible, she is a possible means of corruption for proper and pious men'.<sup>42</sup> As sociocultural narratives order society by implicitly defining the roles of men and women,<sup>43</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza sees the feminist theological task being 'to interrupt the patriarchal silencing of women and to make women visible as God's agents of grace and liberation.'<sup>44</sup>

Women have experienced significant silencing within liturgical events. Prior to 1994, women's voices were absented from presiding at Eucharist within the Church of England. This continues in some Anglican parishes, the Roman Catholic Church worldwide, and non-conformist churches adhering to Paul's injunction that women should keep silent in church.<sup>45</sup> Lamenting this absence, Procter-Smith writes 'these things we may not do, these things we may not touch, these places we may not enter, these roles we may not take, these words we may not speak.'<sup>46</sup> Christian worship exposes tension between many women's lives and traditional liturgy, which frequently portray male perspectives as normative. Procter-Smith describes androcentric and patriarchal liturgies as a form of disenfranchisement,<sup>47</sup> and Janet

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<sup>41</sup> Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*, (Akron: OSL Publications, [1990] 2000), 25.

<sup>42</sup> Riet Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in Pastoral Care and Counselling*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 122.

<sup>43</sup> Bons-Storm, *Incredible Woman*, 50, refers to Joan Laird, 'Women and Stories: Restorying Women's Self-Constructions', in Monica McGoldrick, Carol M. Anderson and Froma Walsh, eds., *Women in Families: A Framework for Family Therapy*, (New York: Norton, 1991), 430.

<sup>44</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Women Invisible in Society and Church*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), 14.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:34. All biblical references are taken from the anglicised edition of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), unless otherwise stated.

<sup>46</sup> Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite*, 23.



Wootton cautions liturgy can become the focus of divisive tension within Christian communities when failing to acknowledge women's experiences.<sup>48</sup> She also highlights women's voices as largely silenced in musical liturgy, particularly within Cathedrals.<sup>49</sup> June Boyce-Tillman concedes some Cathedrals now admit girl choristers, but maintain separate boys' and girls' choirs. Yet, 'It has to be the pre-pubescent girl's voice. As soon as it becomes a woman's voice, it is rejected'.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, whilst younger members of congregations are addressed in hymns, sermons and prayers as 'boys and girls', or using ungendered collectives such as 'children' or 'young people', women's gendered identity remains absent from many liturgies<sup>51</sup> or is subsumed within male collective nouns.<sup>52</sup>

Despite increasing usage of inclusive language, many women continue to struggle with androcentric referencing to the divine.<sup>53</sup> Last century, feminist theologians responded using a variety of strategies: Schüssler Fiorenza questioned implicit gendered perceptions using 'G\*d'.<sup>54</sup> Riet Bons-Storm often chooses 'God/dess',<sup>55</sup> whilst others use 'Goddess'.<sup>56</sup> More

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<sup>48</sup> Janet Wootton, *Introducing a Practical Feminist Theology of Worship*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 34.

<sup>49</sup> Wootton, *Theology of Worship*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> June Boyce-Tillman, 'Interview', *Feminist Theology* (June, 1998), 18: 114. This is no longer the case in all cathedrals: the Choral Foundations of Bradford, Lincoln, Peterborough and St Paul's are structured to enable mature women's voices to regularly sing services, but the separation of girls' and exclusion of women's voices from cathedral choirs remains the predominant practice.

<sup>51</sup> Wootton, *Theology of Worship*, 30.

<sup>52</sup> Many of the rules of English grammar have been taken from those applied to Latin, where a collection of people including both males and females can only be referred to using a masculine noun or adjective. For a full discussion, see Wootton, *Theology of Worship*, 29-30.

<sup>53</sup> Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite*, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Introduction: Feminist Liberation Theology as Critical Sophiology', in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1996), xiv.

<sup>55</sup> Riet Bons-Storm uses this repeatedly in *Incredible Woman*.

<sup>56</sup> For some feminist theologians, such as Carol Christ, Naomi Goldenberg or Melissa Raphael, patriarchal models of God are irreparably damaged, and recovery of prehistoric traditions of goddess has become necessary. For a discussion, see Nicola Slee, *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), 31-2.

recently, Ellen Clark-King's research identified feminist attempts to engender the feminine in naming God as disturbing to women for whom perceiving God as male remains central to faith: attempts to challenge the exclusion of the feminine divine has itself, unintentionally, been experienced as exclusionary by other women.<sup>57</sup>

Initially, white, educated women within secular and theological feminist movements compounded, by omission, the silencing of women outside their own life experiences. Feminist theologians and liturgists now resist attempts to stereotype or archetypally claim false unanimity between women. Instead, they seek to give voice to uncommon experiences, valuing particularity and contextuality within women's lives, even when authenticity sparks conflict or disagreement.<sup>58</sup>

### 2.3.3 *Feminist theology: choosing silence*

As feminist theologians primarily identified women's silences as imposed, I sought authors who portrayed women choosing silence. Elaine Graham states that in correcting 'the historical effacement of women's experiences' moving 'from silence to speech'<sup>59</sup> has been 'irresistible' within feminist theory.<sup>60</sup> It frequently presents silence and speech in a co-dependent paradigm where finding voice from a place of silencing is desirable. Highlighting the centrality of this theme, Neuger writes 'Most works of feminist counselling have focussed

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<sup>57</sup> Ellen Clark-King, *Theology by Heart: Women, the Church and God*, (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite*, iv.

<sup>59</sup> Elaine Graham, 'From "Terrible Silence" to "Transforming Hope": The Impact of Feminist Theory and Practical Theology', *International Journal of Practical Theology* (1999), 2: 189.

<sup>60</sup> Graham, 'Feminist Theory', in Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion*, 194.

on the importance of helping girls and women to gain access to their own voice.<sup>61</sup> The earliest comprehensive text addressing psychotherapy from a feminist perspective, by Miriam Greenspan,<sup>62</sup> describes women seeing the world through their own eyes for the first time as they respectfully hear one another's stories. Quoting from this, Neuger identifies the corollary between secular feminist descriptions of women's finding voice and the seminal writings of feminist theologian, Nelle Morton.

In *The Journey Is Home*, Morton depicts first identifying her familiar concept of 'hearing to speech' when leading a women's workshop in 1971.<sup>63</sup> She recalls a woman who, having remained silent and alone, on the last day began to talk awkwardly and hesitantly.

When she reached the point of the most excruciating pain, no one moved. No one interrupted her. No one rushed to comfort her. No one cut her experience short. We simply sat. We sat in a powerful silence.<sup>64</sup>

Morton recalls numerous occurrences of women finding authentic voice when painful narratives were given space to shape themselves and allowed to reach their depths without being smothered by others. She refers to this as 'depth hearing ... more acute than listening' which allows authentic speech to emerge. The philosopher, Don Ihde, proposes hearing 'the single "authentic voice" occurs in only certain privileged moments ... of fragile meeting in which there is an exchange of concentrated listening and speaking'.<sup>65</sup> He states philosophy's

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<sup>61</sup> Neuger, 'Pastoral Counseling', 95.

<sup>62</sup> Miriam Greenspan, *A New Approach to Women and Therapy*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

<sup>63</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*.

<sup>64</sup> This and following references, Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 205.

<sup>65</sup> Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound*, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976), 182-3.

desire for a single voice, identical both 'within' and 'without', has resisted the primacy of polyphony—that we speak with different voices at different times. Privileging neither silence nor speech, the philosopher, Dauenhauer, perceives silence as shaping, rather than ceasing, discourse. Without silence discourse is 'experienced as either insufficient or incomplete, as unable to cope definitively with God, or with immediate perceptual experience, or with what it is to be a self, or with love'.<sup>66</sup> Silence reveals the limits of speech, allowing change to occur within subsequent conversation.<sup>67</sup> He concludes, 'authentic speech is one with authentic silence and, in their oneness, they are the most efficacious of human experiences'.<sup>68</sup>

Whilst Morton recounts the 'powerful silence' the listening women sustained, her 'Journal Jottings' present finding voice as the primary consideration. She does not identify corporate silence as enabling the woman to be heard 'all the way'. Nor does Morton explore this powerful silence: reflection on its potential for enabling speech is overshadowed by its facilitating finding voice, separating them out from Dauenhauer's perception of their interdependence and authentic oneness.

In proposing a spirituality of pedagogy for women, Maria Harris names silence as the first of five generative themes.<sup>69</sup> Her presentation of silence as the ground of such a pedagogy affirms its potential value for women. Although acknowledging it has often been 'a demon to

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<sup>66</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), 82 and 75.

<sup>67</sup> Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 76.

<sup>68</sup> Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 138.

<sup>69</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*. In Harris' development of a spirituality of pedagogy the four subsequent themes, which build on her description of silence, are remembering; ritual mourning; artistry and birthing.

be exorcised' for women, Harris' presentation of silence is 'not as a negative force' but a positive, richly textured, multi-faceted and multi-layered healing power.<sup>70</sup> She states that if women are wise in attending to silencing which destroys, they must also equally engage with silence which can create and heal, suggesting silenced women can benefit from befriending contemplative silence: 'Silence before the Mystery which holds us and cherishes us can be the power healing the wounds that other silences inflict.' For Harris, women best recognise God's 'Presence' as one who comes 'ready to be our sister and our guide' in silence. She describes God's silence as one 'of listening and receptivity', where women can find gold in themselves by discovering divinity within. In the silence of compassionate listening women become 'receptive to others ... [to] our world [and] also practice receptivity to ourselves.' Hearing what has been silenced, they 'find a voice'<sup>71</sup> to proclaim what is remembered: they are birthed into bearing responsibility for self, towards others, the earth, and whoever may have need of their voice or their 'care-filled listening'.<sup>72</sup>

The listener who hears to speech is often discussed by feminist theologians. Kathleen Billman writes of a listener's silence communicating 'by eyes, face ... and posture that one has something infinitely precious to learn from someone else ... to offer back what often seems to be ebbing away—the capacity to touch or enrich another human being'.<sup>73</sup> Billman emphasises the need to attempt to learn the potentially quite 'other' language of the speaker. She affiliates openness to others' language with empathy, where interest and

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<sup>70</sup> This and following references, Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 29.

<sup>71</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 86 and 30.

<sup>73</sup> Kathleen Billman, 'Pastoral Care as an Art of Community', in Neuger, *Arts of Ministry*, 31.

attention is so captured by ‘otherness’ that we seek to understand what is not yet known.<sup>74</sup>

For Ross, encounter with otherness calls forth respect, humility and reverence. In awe before one another and creation, our gaze is turned from comparison and difference towards recognition of our shared common centre:

Our most profound commonality with our selves, with each other, with the creation, is not effected by what we can know, *but by what we cannot know*. Our communion is engagement with the mystery of otherness, our own, that of other people, the creation as a whole of which we are a part, and the mysterious Other beyond all knowing. In Christian terms, this otherness is the commonality between God, neighbor, and self, the self-outpouring perichoresis of the Trinity.<sup>75</sup>

The unknowability of others is a recurring theme in Rachel Muers’ *Keeping God’s Silence*.<sup>76</sup> A feminist Quaker theologian, Muers does not discuss women’s silence separately from men’s, but engages with feminist demands for justice and equality through exploring the need to re-examine silence’s significance in forming a Christian ethic of communication. Basing her concept—the ‘silence of unknowability’ of others—in an understanding of the hiddenness of God, all are recognized by a listener as potential speakers. For Muers, ‘silence of unknowability’ corresponds to the question ‘Who is heard?’ presupposed in Morton’s ‘hearing to speech’. Sharing Ross’ understanding of the commonality of our otherness, for Muers, all others remain ‘unknowable’ to the listener, never fully available to

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<sup>74</sup> Billman, ‘Pastoral Care’, 35.

<sup>75</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 83, emphasis in original.

<sup>76</sup> Rachel Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

comprehensive analysis.<sup>77</sup> Muers and Ross attest it is in the silence of unknowability we can be open to 'the most profound engagement' with our neighbours, our selves and God.<sup>78</sup>

Like Dauenhauer, Muers refuses to separate silence from its own ontology, presenting silence as different from and of at least equal significance to speech. Drawing on Rich's poetry,<sup>79</sup> she argues against silence within communication as 'any kind of absence'.<sup>80</sup> Muers states theologians who present God as 'sometimes silent, hidden, or withdrawn', suggesting our appropriate response is to 'wait patiently until "He" deigns to speak again', assume God's communicative relating to humanity is only through speech. For such theologians, God's silence can only be perceived as intentional withdrawal and breaking of communication. Analysing Morton's reflections on 'hearing to speech', Muers suggests her writings indicate rejection of this model:

God has often been interpreted as inept ... especially when ... [we] hopelessly face the meaninglessness and absurdity of existence. But suppose this logic is reversed and God's silence is perceived as hearing persons to response!<sup>81</sup>

Quoting Morton's words, 'women are experiencing God as a great hearing one, one who heard us to speech, rather than one who has spoken us to hearing',<sup>82</sup> she proposes Morton is concerned with the possibility that God's silence is hearing humanity, but particularly women, to speech.<sup>83</sup> Muers presents God's silence as inviting response and an exemplar of

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<sup>77</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 72 and 98.

<sup>78</sup> Maggie Ross, *Silence*, 81. Also see the developing argument throughout Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*.

<sup>79</sup> See earlier reference to Rich, *Cartographies of Silence*.

<sup>80</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 21-24.

<sup>81</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 60.

<sup>82</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 60.

<sup>83</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 51.

silence's potential as an alternative, ethical 'communicative practice' that is deeply 'relational and personal.'<sup>84</sup> Inviting the reader to a shared keeping of God's communicative silences, Muers concludes that any critique or interpretation of theological silence 'must "convey the ultimacy not of judgement but of love."' <sup>85</sup>

Morton's 'hearing to speech' continues to permeate feminist theological writing. Bons-Storm begins *The Incredible Woman* by quoting 'Speaking first to be heard is power over. Hearing to bring forth speech is empowering'.<sup>86</sup> Like Slee, Bons-Storm advocates listening to women's silences. She proposes the term 'unstory'<sup>87</sup> for experiences in women's lives Laird labels as 'the story that is not there.'<sup>88</sup> In unstory, a woman cannot give any meaning to her experiences that correspond with her developing self-narrative. Articulating her experience also entails acknowledging feelings of pain or shame a woman attaches to her story: to do so would cause unbearable incongruence. Consequently, shameful or painful events fall from consciousness, becoming an 'unstory'—an unspeakable or even unthinkable experience, consigned to silence. Bons-Storm states experiences become unstories when their occurrence in self-narrative would be considered inappropriate by any dominant belief system or discourse:<sup>89</sup> for Christian women, predominantly these are the beliefs and discourses of patriarchal authority espoused by Christian communities to which they belong. The silencing of unstories lies somewhere between imposed and chosen silence. However,

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<sup>84</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 12.

<sup>85</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 224.

<sup>86</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 210.

<sup>87</sup> Bons-Storm, *Incredible Woman*, 57.

<sup>88</sup> Laird, 'Women and Stories', 437.

<sup>89</sup> Bons-Storm, *Incredible Woman*, 58.



any interpretation within chosen silence is only understandable in as far as this is preferential to facing the incongruence that would become apparent if a woman were *not* to choose to be silent: this is likely to occur unconsciously.

The unspeakability of a coherent narrative amongst those who have suffered intense trauma is also addressed by Heather Walton. She expresses concern that ‘Theologians have perhaps been too ready to use theodicy to bridge the gaps and fissures in human experience in order to enable us to supply a happy ending to all our stories’.<sup>90</sup> Walton suggests many who engage with the dilemmas of suffering conclude that narratives will not always offer satisfactory forms of communication. New forms of expression which can bear traumatic experience are needed. Recognising the difficulty and imprecision in attempting to allow pain and suffering to speak, Walton uses Laurence Kilamyer’s phrase, ‘speaking in signs’, to highlight the need for acknowledging the validity of communication through the rituals and symbols of Christianity.<sup>91</sup> However, accepting that conventional symbolism within Christianity is insufficient, Walton proposes a greater understanding of the language of silence—where physical gestures and material objects may embody what is inexpressible in words—is necessary. Evoking Wittgenstein’s familiar statement, ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’,<sup>92</sup> she concludes that to preserve silence’s sanctity we must grant what is unspeakable “‘the power to address us in its silence’”.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Heather Walton, ‘Speaking in Signs: Narrative and Trauma in Pastoral Theology’, *Scottish Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy* (2002), 5 (2): 4.

<sup>91</sup> In Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Essays in Trauma and Memory*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 175, referenced in Walton, ‘Speaking in Signs’, 4.

<sup>92</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans., D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, (London: Routledge, 1961), 150, first published in German in 1921, and in English in 1922.

<sup>93</sup> Walton is referencing Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 163, in Walton, ‘Speaking in Signs’, 5.

Liturgical ritual also affirms the place of silence when 'speaking in signs'.<sup>94</sup> Although constructing feminist liturgy is usually presented as breaking the silence, feminist theologians also acknowledge liturgy is far more than words: aspects of liturgy are conducted, enacted, and received in silence.<sup>95</sup> Women's liturgies enable a more fully embodied experience by appropriating the richness of the sensual. Ward and Wild portray such liturgy as understanding words 'are incomplete and can be very misleading. Other things are important too: gesture, context, symbol and above all silence',<sup>96</sup> but offer no elaboration of its importance.

## **2.4 The silencing of silence**

Although feminist theology has offered limited acknowledgement of the place of chosen silences, these relate predominantly to groups, with scant writing about women's individual practices. Such references are generally brief, with little, if any, further investigation of their role. Silence has been confined to a subsidiary function within the widely discussed concept of hearing to speech, with negligible consideration of its potential to facilitate women finding authentic voice. Within writing concerning liturgy and ritual, silence is bestowed only nominal acknowledgement as an almost coincidental adjunct to non-verbal, symbolic actions. Whilst feminist theologians have advocated women's physically embodied experiences, meagre attention has been paid to their embodied practices of silence. In

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<sup>94</sup> Walton, 'Speaking in Signs'.

<sup>95</sup> For examples, see Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite* and Wootton, *Theology of Worship*.

<sup>96</sup> Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, comp., *Human Rites: Worship Resources for an Age of Change*, (London: Mowbray, 1995), 4.

reclaiming women's marginalised and silenced experiences, affirmative engagement with silence has been overlooked. Women's silencing has almost rendered thinking silence as 'creative ... formative of human beings ... belong[ing] to the basic structure of man [*sic*]'<sup>97</sup> anathema for feminist theologians. As a result, they have largely presented silence as pejorative. In effect, feminist theology's dominant discourses have—however unintentionally—silenced most discussion of any merits of chosen practices of silence within contemporary Christian women's experience. As I noted elsewhere, 'That this has occurred within a discourse aiming to speak directly from and to women's experience is regrettable.'<sup>98</sup>

A further silencing of discussion of practices of silence is identified by Quaker theologian, Pink Dandelion. In Quaker 'Meeting', silence is primarily understood as an intentional absence of spoken language and created sounds. Corporate silence marks the bounded space of unprogrammed, collective worship: it is 'the very medium through which the group approaches God'.<sup>99</sup> In Quaker orthodoxy, God is experienced through silence: it is the medium for hearing, voicing and discerning God's will, within which each individual's authority for belief in God is found.<sup>100</sup> Dandelion describes Quaker silence as an 'active entity' whose correct usage, in association with speech, is a skill to be learned.<sup>101</sup> He argues that Quakers' reverence for and theological understanding of the appropriate use of silence in worship devalues and militates against speech.<sup>102</sup> Placing silence centrally, 'learned' rules

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<sup>97</sup> Picard, *World of Silence*, 15.

<sup>98</sup> Woolley, 'Silent Gifts', 148.

<sup>99</sup> Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution*, (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 15 and 240.

<sup>100</sup> Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 15.

<sup>101</sup> Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 250.

<sup>102</sup> Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 242.

regulating silent worship and any vocal 'ministry' extend their influence to Friends' engagement outside Meeting: by constraining verbal interaction, a normative culture of silence outside worship is also fostered.<sup>103</sup>

Ross suggests appropriate engagement in 'deep silence', evidenced by the obviation of solipsism and narcissism, is 'the source of healthy community'. It should lead away from contemporary notions of self-authenticating experience into open and inclusive community engagement.<sup>104</sup> Yet Dandelion asserts 'thinking', not deep silence, 'is the most popular activity in Meeting' amongst contemporary Quakers, with self, not self-forgetfulness, 'placed at the centre of a privatized quest.'<sup>105</sup> Dandelion suggests Quaker's corporate silence can exist as a mask covering non-involvement or 'fear of getting it wrong', leading to self-censorship of any potential contribution to ministry.<sup>106</sup> Further, it may masquerade as piety in a culture which highly values corporate silence and where its outward form can cloak disunity.<sup>107</sup> In these ways, Quakerism's cultural norms impede Friends' theological discussion, concealing changes in individual and communal meanings of silence and belief. As a result, Dandelion states Quakerism is unreflexive about its rapidly expanding diversity of belief, increasingly accommodating post-Christian neo-orthodoxies through failure to facilitate safe environments where theological changes can be openly voiced. As with feminist theology, Quakerism's dominant culture—this time of silence, as opposed to finding

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<sup>103</sup> Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 237-257.

<sup>104</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 26.

<sup>105</sup> Pink Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 125.

<sup>106</sup> Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 258 and *Liturgies of Quakerism*, 105, respectively.

<sup>107</sup> Dandelion, *Liturgies of Quakerism*, 110.

voice—has inadvertently silenced discussion about silence and its meanings amongst Friends.<sup>108</sup>

## 2.5 Practical theology: lacking silence?

Although practical theology has engaged extensively with the silencing of marginalized groups,<sup>109</sup> searching its literature has revealed no exploration of religious or secular practices of silence. However, expressing need for a spirituality with depth and integrity equal to the task of practical theology, Ballard and Pritchard hint at silence's potential significance: 'We have to be taken beyond ourselves if we are to encounter God, and this will involve a rich mix of word and sacrament, symbol and art form, music and atmosphere, celebration and silence.'<sup>110</sup> Passing reference is made to silence, with no clarification of how we are to interpret this, or silence's relation to 'celebration' at the end of a string of referring pairs of words. Can we not celebrate silently? Is it antonymous to rejoicing? Despite acknowledging 'visual arts have a great potential for facilitating reflection by a different route from the normal cerebral approach',<sup>111</sup> they offer no recognition of silence's role in facilitating theological reflection through non-verbal, creative and artistic mediums. Although they caution such practices could 'become self-indulgent and lack any kind of critical distance' echoes Dandelion's critique of Quaker worship, it also betrays some discomfort in using

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<sup>108</sup> Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 238.

<sup>109</sup> A brief scan of titles in the UK journal *Practical Theology*, shows engagement with marginalized issues including physical and sexual abuse, unemployment, disability, sexuality, AIDS/HIV, prisoners, incest, poverty, and those affected by suicide or violence.

<sup>110</sup> Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, (London: SPCK, 1996), 157.

<sup>111</sup> Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 131.

silence or non-verbal processes within theological reflection: there is no explanation for offering this caution about non-verbal practices but not for word based theological reflection.

Marie McCarthy highlights silence as necessary amongst authentic and faithful spiritual practices: 'We must sit in the stillness, wait, and listen deeply. And we must be silent. The discipline of contemplative awareness is nurtured in the practice of silence. We consciously create pools of silence in which to hear.'<sup>112</sup> McCarthy states the particularity of meaningful practices and traditions found in any authentic spirituality should be identified. She suggests practical theology can contribute to their recognition through a hermeneutic of restoration that engages in a process of retrieving, critiquing, and reconstructing the treasures and wisdom within Christianity's past.<sup>113</sup> McCarthy proposes such exploration can build bridges between historical, authentic spiritual practices and the present. Listing candidates for retrieval, she continues 'Practices such as ... keeping silence can be quite potent.'<sup>114</sup> She cautions that 'contemporary seekers ... have little or no context for understanding' the roots or purpose of practices of silence.<sup>115</sup> Without being placed in their historical context she fears retrieved practices will become New Age gimmicks or pious disciplines, rather than

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<sup>112</sup> McCarthy, 'Spirituality', 200.

<sup>113</sup> McCarthy, 'Spirituality', 202.

<sup>114</sup> McCarthy, 'Spirituality', 203-4.

<sup>115</sup> Some support for her concern is offered in the findings of a 2010 study into perceptions of the role of praise and worship activities amongst young Pentecostal Christians in South Africa, which found they 'ranked "Prayer" as the most important activity with "keeping "Silence"' as 'least important'. However, this inquiry's context—a group of young people from a Christian worshipping tradition which values exuberance in worship—should be taken into account. See Bhekani G. Tshabalala and Cynthia J. Patel, 'The Role of Praise and Worship Activities in Spiritual Well-Being: Perceptions of a Pentecostal Youth Ministry Group', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* (February, 2010), 15 (1): 73.

enabling 'individuals and communities to function, not more effectively, but more faithfully', as Swinton and Mowat state spiritual practices should do.<sup>116</sup>

McCarthy proposes questioning practice origins, purpose and function, suggesting consideration is given to why we might choose to retrieve particular practices and how they might help us.<sup>117</sup> Veling states growing appreciation for the importance of hearing such questions as crucial within hermeneutics. Paraphrasing Gadamer, Veling suggest 'we do not come to new understanding so much by coming to answers, as we do by hearing the questions that present themselves to us. To enter the realm of the question is to recognize that we do not know ... to allow our familiar worlds to be provoked by an unfamiliarity, a strangeness, a "lure" that hooks us and begins to reel us in.'<sup>118</sup> McCarthy's questions have not yet been a sufficient 'lure' for practices of silence to be explicitly addressed by practical theologians.

## 2.6 Silence and solitude

*A Book of Silence* charts Sara Maitland's eight year exploration of silence in a variety of solitary locations. Maitland identifies two contrasting types of silence experienced by those who choose solitude: the eremitic silence of hermits and the silence sought in nature by the Romantic Movement. Maitland presents eremitic silence as an emptying of egoic self. Boundaries of self become permeable to others, with the mind and body purged of all

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<sup>116</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 257.

<sup>117</sup> McCarthy, 'Spirituality', 203.

<sup>118</sup> Veling, *Practical Theology*, 60.

desires and made blank, 'on which the divine can inscribe itself.' She contrasts this with a romantic quest for silence, whose goal is self-fulfilment. Here, boundaries of egoic self are strengthened, becoming less permeable, egoic self-knowledge is deepened and asserted against society's expectations, enabling greater voice, autonomy and freedom for egoic self.<sup>119</sup>

Contrasting experiences of contestants in the 1968 Globe solo round the world yacht race—some of whom flourished, whilst others committed suicide—Maitland concludes the same type of silence impacts people with significantly different consequences.<sup>120</sup> She proposes that humanity perceives our rationality and language distinguishing us from the rest of creation: we live in 'Chthonic terror' that the silence of the infinite cosmos will overwhelm our language, and we will cease to exist.<sup>121</sup> Her proposition is reminiscent of Blaise Pascal's terror of the eternal silence of the universe: 'le silence eternal de ces espaces infinies m'effraie'.<sup>122</sup>

Maitland critiques feminist attempts at liberation through communal sharing of experience. She questions how women find authentic voice by speaking in groups when the Romantics needed silence and physical solitude to find authenticity.<sup>123</sup> Her proposed explanation is the

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<sup>119</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 250.

<sup>120</sup> However, this suggests Maitland assumes all contestants experienced their solo voyage as either eremitic or romantic silence. In reality, the vast majority are likely to have experienced this silence as fluctuating between the two, with one type predominating.

<sup>121</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 128-131.

<sup>122</sup> 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.' Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, III, Francis Kaplan, ed., (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1992), 206, referenced by Nicholas Lash, *Holiness, Speech and Silence*, 77. I have used Pascal's French text to show that he was clearly expressing fear of unending silence and not a more general silence—a frequent, yet inaccurate portrayal in other literature I have encountered.

<sup>123</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 246.



collision between oppressed, nineteenth century political liberation movements (who were silenced) and Romantic individualism (where silence was chosen), leading to the development of a new silence, located not in the person of the oppressed individual, but in an external listener—the therapist.

However, with the exception of briefly discussing short-term attendance at Quaker Meeting and Maitland’s acknowledged impossibility of experiencing desert silence alone, her explorations of silence are grounded in solitary practice and physical isolation.<sup>124</sup> Maitland’s text is one of the ‘other books on silence ... that seem to discuss silence but are really about being alone’, referred to by Ross.<sup>125</sup> As similar comments have been made to me by others who have read Maitland’s book, I suggest a more accurate title would be ‘A Book of Solitude’. Although describing herself and others exploring similar ways of life as ‘silence seekers’,<sup>126</sup> Maitland states she found going into the desert ‘in company difficult’ and devotes a chapter to ‘The Bliss of Solitude’.<sup>127</sup> Her pursuit seems closer to the detached individualism and somewhat dissociative ‘self-sufficing power of Solitude’ found by ‘escaping from the city into the country’ she quotes from Wordsworth’s *Prelude*.<sup>128</sup> This contrasts with Boyce-Tillman’s assertion: ‘as Christian seekers moved from the city to the desert in the third century, now the move is back to finding contemplative solitude in the midst of the

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<sup>124</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 141-145.

<sup>125</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 1. Ross confirmed this in personal email correspondence, 22.9.14. A recent publication, Sara Maitland, *How To Be Alone*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2014), supports perceptions that it is perhaps physical solitude more than silence which is her lure.

<sup>126</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 91.

<sup>127</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 224 and 223-257.

<sup>128</sup> In describing Wordsworth’s search for freedom from the pressures of society Maitland quotes several sections of the first and second books of *The Prelude*. Maitland describes how this formed part of Wordsworth’s intentional review of his own mind, nature and education ahead of beginning to compose his unfinished philosophical poem to be entitled “Recluse”. See Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 236-8.

commerce of the city.’<sup>129</sup> Boyce-Tillman’s statement is supported by Paul and Karen Fredette’s 2001 research into the lives of solitaries across 28 countries. Amongst 122 respondents, 60% lived in urban or suburban settings, 30% in rural locations, and only two reported living in ‘wilderness’ settings.<sup>130</sup>

These observations illuminate Maitland’s criticisms of feminist’s search for voice and freedom through sharing their experiences. A self-acknowledged feminist, Maitland’s reproach is questionable as her comparison is with the Romantic Movement, from amongst which she refers almost exclusively to male experience and writings. Just as Beverley Lanzetta states

We cannot assume that traditional maps of the soul’s journey ... perform in contemporary women in a similar way and with a similar spiritual process as their medieval counterparts; or that they are effective for women, actually leading them to the desired freedom,<sup>131</sup>

so it is erroneous to assume individual experiences of men two centuries ago provide an appropriate plan or comparison with women seeking authentic selfhood in contemporary society. Maitland overlooks that feminist literature has repeatedly demonstrated women’s liberation as necessitating different arcs of self-discovery from that of men, past or present; that women’s self-actualisation is enabled by experiences other than those deemed suitable

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<sup>129</sup> June Boyce-Tillman, ‘Foreword’, in Bernadette Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude: Women and New Monasticism*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), xiv.

<sup>130</sup> Paul Fredette and Karen Karper Fredette, *Consider the Ravens: On Contemporary Hermit Life*, (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2011), 61-2. This was a 22% survey response rate from 600 subscribers to *Raven’s Bread*, a quarterly newsletter for solitaries, sent to hermits in 28 countries outside the USA. That two thirds of respondents were female corresponded to the ratio of female and male recipients of the newsletter.

<sup>131</sup> Beverley Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 16.

by patriarchal society; and that women's journeying requires different points of development and telos from trajectories that facilitate liberation and authenticity for men. Further, her retreat into isolation to encounter silence fails to recognise that, as Diarmaid MacCulloch highlights, 'From the beginning, silence and contemplation were constructed in the midst of ordinary society' more than texts whose over-emphasis on 'deserts' and 'wildernesses' leads contemporary readers to suppose.<sup>132</sup>

Throughout *Embracing Solitude: Women and New Monasticism*, Bernadette Flanagan emphasises the need for appropriate spiritual companionship amongst women seeking liberated, authentic selfhood through solitary living. Although naming silence within a group of associated concepts—quiet, stillness, aloneness, privacy, isolation and retreat—Flanagan's focus is their collective exploration as 'solitude'. She presents solitude as a vital counterpoint to superficial relationalities associated with hyper-networking, contemporary life. Recognising that quests to live from solitude are no longer the exclusive preserve of 'professional monastics', having assumed 'global dimensions in recent decades',<sup>133</sup> she also acknowledges that desiring solitude does not necessarily coincide with its quest. Flanagan initially focusses on developments within new monasticism, before seeking insights into solitude from the lives of five women from the fourth to eighteenth centuries.<sup>134</sup> She proposes that although solitude is traditionally associated with physical locations which

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<sup>132</sup> MacCulloch, *Silence*, 74-5.

<sup>133</sup> Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 8 and 114, respectively.

<sup>134</sup> Syncretica, a founding desert Amma of the fourth century, whose 'historical factuality' Flanagan acknowledges is questioned by some scholars; Moninne/Darerca (c. 432-518), an early Celtic Christian in Ireland; Mary of Oignies (1176-1213), a Beguine from Medieval Flanders; Angela Merici (1474-1540) a third order Franciscan in Renaissance Italy and Nano Nagle (1718-84), an activist for the poor during Ireland's colonisation.

nurture the soul and the development of wisdom, today it is more helpfully considered from a 'psychospiritual' rather than geographical perspective. Solitude is 'more an attitude than an environment: a lived belief in the need for regular withdrawal to the inner room of each one's being.'<sup>135</sup> Flanagan describes solitude as a quality of personhood, not found in physical separation but in 'a quality of the heart' which 'consists primarily in opening to the embrace of divine love.'<sup>136</sup> Echoing Flanagan's non-geographical portrayal, Lanzetta depicts solitude for contemporary women as an

inner monastery where she and her beloved divinity are alone ... enclosed in a sanctuary where God and the self are one. No one is allowed to disturb this primary relationship, this bond of intimacy that makes all other intimacies what they are and long to become.<sup>137</sup>

Such understandings of solitude offer women 'space ... to discover the very essence of one's own being, what is utterly original and unique', and which the Spirit seeks to animate in each moment.<sup>138</sup> For Flanagan and Lanzetta, this interior space, accessed through disciplined silence, is 'crucial' to women's spiritual growth, enabling development of 'a woman's full presence in the world'.<sup>139</sup> Describing the unity and integration found in this solitude of the heart as 'a silent music that calls each one to dance in its rhythm', Flanagan continues,

Embracing solitude is the intentional creation of a space where we suspend the external music that can so easily set the pace and rhythm of

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<sup>135</sup> Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 4. Throughout the centuries, however, the writings of mystics from Christian and other religious traditions have repeatedly depicted solitude as an interior state rather than merely a physical separation from the world. Whilst St. Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* is perhaps the best known, similar presentations of solitude by women are widely discussed in literature addressing the writings of Christian mystics. See, for example, Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, or Carol Lee Flinders, *At the Root of this Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

<sup>136</sup> Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 3-4.

<sup>137</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 168-9.

<sup>138</sup> Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 4.

<sup>139</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 169.

our daily motion and where instead we redirect our attention to the more fundamental score of the Spirit ... in order to encounter the divine, inalienable core of one's being in the eyes of God. ... While embracing solitude seems at first to exclude, [it becomes] clear that this sea sustains those who swim and dive and sail and float. In the place of solitude we see the face of God in all who live and love. We are awakened to the burning bush of presence<sup>140</sup>

Flanagan reflects on the turn to solitude recorded in recent spiritual autobiographies of women from a range of religious and secular contexts, revealing similarities in the trajectories of their journeys. In pursuing a deeper, inner life by 'returning to the hearth of being in God',<sup>141</sup> their unfolding, authentic spiritual self develops a deep, 'connected solitude'<sup>142</sup>—with their own being and bodies, with divine mystery and with others. New-found authenticity gradually draws them into embracing roles of spiritual teacher, writer, leader and guide, often in ways which challenge the cultural expectations of their different contexts. Portraying these particular narratives as a selection from a wider canon, Flanagan concludes they evidence a Spirit-led turn towards transformational solitude, propelling women 'into the frontiers of spiritual awareness' and imagination.<sup>143</sup> Although Flanagan does not focus on contemporary women's practices of silence, she depicts today's women seeking and defining appropriate disciplines to enable their spiritual development. This growing body of autobiographical narratives and the impact of their pragmatic, social legacies on communities where the authors live authenticates their personal

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<sup>140</sup> Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 4-5.

<sup>141</sup> Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 115.

<sup>142</sup> This term is not used by Flanagan. In her 'Foreword' to *Embracing Solitude*, June Boyce-Tillman applies it to the different spiritual practices of solitude set out by Flanagan throughout the book. The phrase appears to be taken from the title of a referenced work by Philip Roderick, 'Connected Solitude: Re-Imagining the *Skete*', in Graham Cray et al., *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010), 102. See Boyce-Tillman, 'Foreword', xii, and *Embracing Solitude*, 23, respectively.

<sup>143</sup> Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 127.

transformations. Their writing provides practical signposts, psychological support and spiritual accompaniment for other women risking adventure beyond the confines of ecclesiastically sanctioned practices which have not served well enough their need for spiritual nurture and challenge.

## **2.7 Silence in interdisciplinary perspectives**

Practical theology is dialogic and interdisciplinary in nature, drawing other theoretical and practical disciplines into mutual conversation to assist its processes of reflection and understanding.<sup>144</sup> Practical theologians 'engage in interdisciplinary learning because the theological tradition does not itself provide all the information about the modern world'.<sup>145</sup> As noted by Graham et al, exponents of critical correlation methods state 'the realms of human reason and enquiry are capable of manifesting God's truth', even though this must be brought to completion by revelation in Christ. They acknowledge some contemporary perspectives, like feminist theology, recognise 'extra-theological sources and insights are often necessary as critical correctives to the failures and distortions of Christian history.'<sup>146</sup> Whilst Swinton and Mowat highlight potential idolatry in giving equal voice to non-theological partners,<sup>147</sup> their epistemological prioritisation of theological discourse fails to acknowledge theology as itself a human construction.

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<sup>144</sup> Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 104.

<sup>145</sup> Woodward and Pattison, *Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 9.

<sup>146</sup> Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, (London: SCM Press, 2005), 138.

<sup>147</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 83.

As some practical and feminist theologians acknowledge the potential significance of practices of silence, but offer little developed reflection or research into these practices, I explored discourses of silence within other disciplines. Ballard and Pritchard observe 'creative insights often come precisely at those places where disciplines overlap or challenge each other'.<sup>148</sup> As silence and speech are inter-related, my exploration began in linguistics, before following emergent references and themes into psychodynamically informed therapies, ending in my own discipline, music therapy.

My intention for exploring of silence within these disciplines was threefold. Primarily, given theology's limited interpretations of silence, I wanted to deepen and question my own perceptions. Secondly, I wanted to bring insights into silence from disciplines outwith theology into critical correlation with perceptions from Christianity and findings from my research.<sup>149</sup> Practical theology's aim is to contribute to Christian theology 'to help, alter, deepen, or even correct theological understandings'.<sup>150</sup> Given this, my final intention was to indicate how, in combinations with my findings, interdisciplinary insights may 'exercise a corrective and renewing effect upon the Christian tradition' and its practices of silence, whilst also suggesting how my own inquiry may support, extend or challenge perceptions within these wider disciplines.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 107.

<sup>149</sup> Graham et al, *Theological Reflection*, 138.

<sup>150</sup> Woodward and Pattison, *Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 8.

<sup>151</sup> Graham et al, *Theological Reflection*, 140.

In the remainder of this discussion I will outline perceptions of silence within the literature of disciplines noted above. This literature will not be correlated with Christian understandings of practices of silence here, but will be brought into dialogue with the findings of my research in later chapters.

### 2.7.1 *Silence in linguistics*

Although practical theologians have not investigated practices of silence, linguistics researcher, Bohdan Szuchewycz, explored these practices within the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) prayer movement in Galway, Ireland, in the mid 1980's.<sup>152</sup> Szuchewycz contests Daniel Maltz's absolutist understanding that 'there is only one kind of silence but many kinds and degrees of noise'.<sup>153</sup> Maltz's discussion repeatedly refers to Quaker authors, particularly Richard Bauman, but fails to acknowledge the multiple types of silence Bauman identifies within Quaker worship. In one paragraph of *Let Your Words Be Few*,<sup>154</sup> Bauman outlines five different types of silence within Meeting.<sup>155</sup> Maltz's ongoing reference to this literature, whilst asserting only one kind of silence exists, is incomprehensible. With reference to CCR interview material and additional Quaker commentary, Szuchewycz

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<sup>152</sup> Bohdan Szuchewycz, 'Silence in Ritual Communication', in Jaworski, *Silence*, 239-260. The research was conducted between September, 1983 and July, 1984, although published in 1997.

<sup>153</sup> Daniel M. Maltz, 'Joyful Noise and Reverent Silence: The Significance of Noise in Pentecostal Worship', in Tannen and Saville-Troike, *Perspectives on Silence*, 131.

<sup>154</sup> Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>155</sup> Bauman, *Let Your Words Be Few*, 125. The five distinct silences noted are an initial or preparatory silence, silence as the desired outcome of the process of worship, the 'silent communion' of the worshippers, the inward silence of anyone who speaks, and a silence whose condition is able to be enhanced by proceedings.



convincingly demonstrates silence having many 'kinds, degrees and meanings', describing these as 'ranging from "dead" or "not real" to "beautiful" and "deep".'<sup>156</sup>

Maltz presents meanings of silence and noisiness as potential equals as, divergent from norms of social behaviour, both contrast with the ordinary. However, for Maltz, silence and noise are fundamentally opposites, existing at extreme ends of a continuum where zero represents silence, and infinity, absolute noisiness.<sup>157</sup> Maltz refutes Richard Baer's earlier attempts to equate glossolalia, liturgy and silence as functional equivalents,<sup>158</sup> demonstrating that silence and noise can express opposition to each other.<sup>159</sup> Szuchewycz uses his findings to concur with Baer's claims that silence and noise *can* be functionally equivalent. He presents the CCR members' understanding of silence as 'a means to achieving spiritual growth, and a sign of its achievement.'<sup>160</sup> Szuchewycz compares this with glossolalia, also perceived as signifying spiritual growth, maturity and closeness to God in the early years of CCR. By tracing CCR's history through their journals and interview material, Szuchewycz presents glossolalia's role as superseded by silence, concluding that silence is therefore its functional equivalent. The functional equivalence debate is also implicitly indicated by philosopher, Don Ihde. He suggests composers could pile sound upon sound, creating a musical cacophony, in which 'The "final" limit is not reached except in silence. A noisy music

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<sup>156</sup> Szuchewycz, 'Ritual Communication', 244.

<sup>157</sup> Maltz, 'Joyful Noise', 130.

<sup>158</sup> Richard Baer, 'Quaker Silence, Catholic Liturgy, and Pentecostal Glossolalia—Some Functional Similarities', in Russell P. Spittler, ed., *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1976), 150-164.

<sup>159</sup> Maltz, 'Joyful Noise', 131.

<sup>160</sup> Szuchewycz, 'Ritual Communication', 243.

to which “nothing more” could be added would become so cacophonous and intense that it would itself appear as a kind of silence.’<sup>161</sup>

Having demonstrated that many kinds of silence exist, Szuchewycz does not explain whether all, or which of these are functionally equivalent to glossolalia. Declaring their equivalence, Szuchewycz then states ‘In public prayer the use of tongues *leads to silence* and an atmosphere of listening to the Lord’, and that used within private prayer ‘glossolalia becomes a technique which *facilitates contemplative prayer*.’<sup>162</sup> This incongruity is compounded by stating ‘the most significant spiritual benefit of using tongues is that by *creating an atmosphere of silence* and stillness it encourages an “openness to the Spirit” and contemplative or “receptive” prayer.’ Having concluded glossolalia is functionally equivalent with silence, Szuchewycz also presents it an enabling precursor *to* silence. Failing to acknowledge this contradiction, Szuchewycz neither explains or recognises his apparent reversion to implying there is one kind of silence.

Szuchewycz contests Maltz’s proposal that meanings of silence and noise are not arbitrary, but ‘constrained by both logical and experiential aspects of the phenomena’.<sup>163</sup> From interpretation of his findings, Szuchewycz asserts that meanings of silence are a consequence of social conventions and processes of group conformity, rather than having any logical or intrinsic properties of their own.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 185.

<sup>162</sup> Szuchewycz, ‘Ritual Communication’, 250, all emphases in this and subsequent quotations from Szuchewycz are mine.

<sup>163</sup> Maltz, ‘Joyful Noise’, 133.

<sup>164</sup> Szuchewycz, ‘Ritual Communication’, 251.

Stanford Searl's empirical, qualitative research exploring the meanings Quakers ascribe to silence in Meeting shares some similarity of method and conclusion with Szuchewycz's study.<sup>165</sup> Dialoguing mainly with Quaker Studies, Searl also engages with the ethnography of speaking<sup>166</sup> to question the relationship 'dilemma' between silence and verbal ministries which emerge within Meeting. Searl also utilises discourse from feminist theology,<sup>167</sup> Buddhist theories of non-conceptual awareness, and Christian rhetoric on prayer. His primary research aim questions 'what it meant' for his 47 participants to participate in the silence of Quaker Meeting. Echoing Szuchewycz, Searl suggests their participation, fundamentally, has 'social meaning'.<sup>168</sup> Oblivious to Dandelion's critique of Quakerism's cultural norms—silencing discussion and masking disunity—Searl states that silence's social meaning arises because Quakers corporately construct their meanings of silence through negotiation and coming to agreement.<sup>169</sup>

Searl explores what participants describe doing during Meeting—what they look at, listen to, observe and feel, as well as the different practices they recount. He notes the metaphors participants used for ascribing meaning to silence convey listening to internal processes,

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<sup>165</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 2.

<sup>166</sup> This discipline is described by Kristine Fitch as 'an approach to the study of discourse which focuses on particular ways of seeing and experiencing the world and how these are reflected in particular ways of speaking.' Prominent within such studies are what Fitch terms 'speech communities: groups of people who share at least one valued way of speaking, and interpretive resources within which that way of speaking is located'. Within Searl's research it is the valuing of silence and the speaking of vocal ministries which emerge from the silence and the ways in which these are interpreted communally which are shared, making them a 'speech community'—albeit a largely silent one. See Kristine L. Fitch, 'Ethnography of speaking: Sapir-Whorf, Hymes, and Moerman', in Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor and Simeon J. Yates, eds., *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 57-63, these references, 57.

<sup>167</sup> Particularly the writings of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, hermeneutics of suspicion, and its application to twentieth century Quaker writing, to which Searl devotes a chapter.

<sup>168</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 62.

<sup>169</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 62.

listening for God's voice within these, and listening for God's voice in the verbal ministry of others.<sup>170</sup> He asserts these responses indicate that, broadly, Quaker silence should be metaphorically understood as a container within which participants corporately wait upon and listen to the Spirit.<sup>171</sup> Searl states that, in silence, Quakers discover a resonant container 'through which to engage in a variety of spiritual practices, informed by the group, but a distinctively inward, improvisatory set of spiritual disciplines.'<sup>172</sup> Despite identifying the inwardness and individuality of their practices, Searl proposes that in gathering together, Quakers understand their ostensibly personal practices to be corporate, connecting them to those present and with Quakers who have worshipped in the same location over generations. Those who have gone before become 'conduits for settling into the worship silence.'<sup>173</sup> Suggesting this 'meaning' of silence is primarily 'subliminal', Searl describes their connection to past and present as an internalised spiritual strategy which helps the community to individually and corporately enter silent worship.<sup>174</sup>

Searl applies feminist theological discourse concerning the silencing of women's voices to Quaker studies. He identifies that throughout at least the twentieth century, formative texts explaining Quaker worship were written by men using the language and insights of other men, whether or not they are Quakers.

None of the visionary, prophetic voices of Quaker women ... appear ...  
Instead, one listens to the compelling, deeply patriarchal voices of Quaker  
men ... as the authoritative keys to understanding Quaker history and

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<sup>170</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 76.

<sup>171</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 67.

<sup>172</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 70.

<sup>173</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 27-28.

<sup>174</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 111-112 and 28.

theology. ... any traces of women's prophetic, visionary voices have been eradicated and silenced<sup>175</sup>

Despite the recent re-emergence of women's voices within Quaker Studies, Searl states their work is not given a central place in its discourse. Whether feminist, historical or biographical, women's writing is consigned to the edges of Quaker Studies 'in ways that marginalize these alternative sources of authority and power.'<sup>176</sup> In response to male dominance of Quaker discourse Searl calls for the application of Schussler Fiorenza's hermeneutic of suspicion to the Quaker canon.

For linguistics scholar, Adam Jaworski, silence and speech cannot be extremes of the same continuum, as Maltz advocated. Jaworski suggests silence itself has a mode of occurrence which is its most prototypical, making this the centre of its own continuum.<sup>177</sup> He identifies qualitative and quantitative changes in silence as perceived subjectively, differing from person to person:

what may seem as an absolute and undifferentiated span of silence to one person (the observer) may consist of various, however subtle and inexpressible, silences charged with different overtones and meanings for another.<sup>178</sup>

Jaworski rejects absolutist interpretations of silence: were it absolute, every instance would be equally perceived by all encountering silence.<sup>179</sup> That equal perception is not the case

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<sup>175</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 137.

<sup>176</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 150-151 and 137, respectively.

<sup>177</sup> Adam Jaworski, *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*, (London: Sage Publications), 44-45.

<sup>178</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 43. The accuracy of the perception of experiencing shallow and deep levels of silence, as described by practitioners from all religions over many centuries, has been attested to by advances in medical science, where EEG's (electroencephalograms) detect different levels of alpha brain wave activity.

<sup>179</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 41.

raises questions of meaning, authenticity and legitimacy which implicitly underlie all discussion of silence, but often remain unacknowledged.

Jaworski extends Maltz and Szuchewycz's functionality debate by considering silence and noise/speech as functional *opposites*. He concludes this cannot be: it would consign silence to being a communication failure opposite speech functioning as a working medium for communication.<sup>180</sup> Recalling Bakhtin's 'false silence,' where communication is not experienced, Jaworski presents lack of communication as a 'negative function of silence', and proposes this is perceived differently within distinct people-groups. Prototypical meanings of silence vary between communities, and attitudes and beliefs about silence vary across cultures.<sup>181</sup> Metaphorically, American society sees humans as machines who, when silent, are no longer perceived to be working,<sup>182</sup> whilst in Japan, those reticent in speech are perceived as honest and sincere.<sup>183</sup> Consequently, norms of quantities of silence and speech are culturally and socially prescribed, and can depend on hierarchy of social rank, secular or sacred role, age and gender.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 47.

<sup>181</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 45, with reference to H. Giles, N. Coupland and J. M. Wiemann, "'Talk is cheap" but "My word is my bond": Beliefs about talk', in K. Bolton and H. Kwok, eds., *Sociolinguistics Today: Eastern and Western Perspectives*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 218-243.

<sup>182</sup> Ron Scollon, 'The Machine Stops: Silence in the Metaphor of Malfunction', in Tannen and Saville-Troike, *Perspectives on Silence*, 21-30.

<sup>183</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 67-8. For an autobiographical discussion of the 'deconstruction' and subsequent 're-construction and re-affirmation' of one Japanese man's cross-cultural perceptions of the significance of silence for pastoral care when he moved to America, see Shuji Moriichi, 'Re-discovery of Silence in Pastoral Care', *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Spring/Summer, 2009), 63 (1-2): 1-6.

<sup>184</sup> Saville-Troike, 'The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication', in Tannen and Saville-Troike, *Perspectives on Silence*, 4 and 11-12. Saville-Troike also comments that the rules for silence within communication are different between children compared to the 'adult' world.

Nessa Wolfson's 'bulge' theory identifies differences in conversational silences between people, depending on their depth of relationship.<sup>185</sup> Wolfson proposes linguistic forms contain more silence between intimates, and strangers, than within superficial relationships. Thought as a continuum, relationships at the extremes require less, if any negotiation to be secure, or are of little importance and security is unnecessary. Similarly, Saville-Troike and Jaworski observe silence's usage in preventing initiation of conversation and maintaining social distance.<sup>186</sup> However, where relationships require verbal assurance to maintain stability or acceptable levels of independence and involvement, little interpersonal silence occurs. Jaworski also identifies a reverse 'bulge': secrets are shared within intimate relationships and, at times, with the anonymous person—a priest in a confessional, or a stranger with whom no continuing relationship is intended—whilst with acquaintances 'secrets of a great personal nature are usually silenced.'<sup>187</sup>

Reminiscent of Muers, Jaworski perceives silence contrasting with speech as intersecting, yet distinct and equally relevant communication categories. Advocating a nonessentialist approach to the communicative values of silence, his position stems from acceptance of Karol Janicki's sociolinguistic philosophical orientation. Janicki rejects any possibility of arriving at final, essential definitions of objects, concepts and words. Due to ongoing 'terminological disputes' definitions will always remain incomplete, with further questions

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<sup>185</sup> Nessa Wolfson, 'The Bulge: A Theory of Speech Behaviour and Social Distance', in Jonathan Fine, ed., *Second Language Discourse: A Textbook of Current Research*, (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1988).

<sup>186</sup> Saville-Troike, 'The Place of Silence', 4, in Jaworski, *Silence*, 27.

<sup>187</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 27.

posed about the meanings of words used in any definition.<sup>188</sup> Jaworski contrasts this approach to silence with the inadequacies he perceives in essentialist thinkers like Dauenhauer and Ganguly. For Ganguly, people's frustration at the ambiguity of language, and their insecurity and lack of freedom in its usage, render words neither good nor rich enough to communicate truths of the meaning and purpose of life.<sup>189</sup> To Ganguly, 'silence is silence and completely different from any kind of language'.<sup>190</sup> He therefore advocates choosing silence over words as the route to ultimate security and freedom.

### 2.7.2 *Silence in therapy*

Sigmund Freud viewed silence as the patient's extreme resistance or defence, to be overcome by the therapist.<sup>191</sup> Andrea Sabbadini records change by 1926, when psychoanalysts first recognised what is spoken is not of primary importance:<sup>192</sup> 'It appears to us more important to recognize what speech conceals and silence reveals.'<sup>193</sup> Within the psychoanalytic tradition, Michael Balint and later Jacques Lacan were critical of Freudian

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<sup>188</sup> Karol Janicki, *Toward Non-essentialist Sociolinguistics*, (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990), referenced in Jaworski, *Silence*, 29-32.

<sup>189</sup> S. N. Ganguly, 'Culture, Communication and Silence', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (December, 1968), 29 (2): 195.

<sup>190</sup> Ganguly, 'Culture, Communication and Silence', 200.

<sup>191</sup> I use the term 'patient' here, as this was Freud's chosen terminology. Debate about how to refer to persons attending therapy continues. Often usage of 'patient' or 'client' is indicative of the school of psychotherapy to which the therapist is most closely aligned, with 'patient' mainly used by psychoanalytic psychotherapists or psychoanalysts. Throughout the remainder of this discussion I will use the term 'client', favoured within my own profession, and used predominantly by psychotherapists and counsellors.

<sup>192</sup> Andrea Sabbadini, 'Listening to Silence', *British Journal of Psychotherapy* (1991), 7 (4): 406-415.

<sup>193</sup> Theodor Reik, *The Inner Experience of a Psychoanalyst*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), p126, referenced by Sabbadini, 'Listening to Silence', 407.



early views,<sup>194</sup> now generally perceived as limited<sup>195</sup> and inadequate.<sup>196</sup> However, some analysts continue to perceive silence as indicating disturbance and mistrust in clients.<sup>197</sup>

Whether silence facilitates movement for clients in therapy was first raised in 1942 by Carl Rogers, originator of the 'client-centred' therapeutic school.<sup>198</sup> Eventually, in 1964, John Cook conducted quantitative analysis of silences in session recordings, seeking to answer Rogers' question and find an optimum proportion of silence during therapy.<sup>199</sup> Cook reports silence being 'associated with more successful cases, and lack of silence characterized unsuccessful cases.'<sup>200</sup> Despite this early attempt to explore silences within therapy, in 2008 Nina Brown stated there is 'very little literature that directly addresses this topic.'<sup>201</sup> Several writers share her perception, noting the lack of teaching or texts to support trainee therapists in utilising silence or responding to client silences.<sup>202</sup> Similar observations are made of linguistics by Saville-Troike, who concludes 'the important position of silence in the total framework of human communication has been largely overlooked ... only a marginal

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<sup>194</sup> Michael Balint, 'The Three Areas of the Mind', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* (1958), 39: 328-340. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, A. Sheridan, trans., (Bristol: Routledge, 1977), referenced by John Gale and Beatriz Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence in Psychotherapy with Particular Reference to a Therapeutic Community Treatment Programme', *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* (2005), 19(3): 209.

<sup>195</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence', 209.

<sup>196</sup> Sabbadini, 'Listening to Silence', 407.

<sup>197</sup> Robert Langs, *A Clinical Workbook for Psychotherapists*, (London: Karnac Books, 1992), 124, referenced by Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence', 209.

<sup>198</sup> Carl Rogers, *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1942), referenced by John J. Cook, 'Silence in Psychotherapy', *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (1964), 11 (1): 42.

<sup>199</sup> Cook, 'Silence in Psychotherapy'.

<sup>200</sup> Cook, 'Silence in Psychotherapy', 46.

<sup>201</sup> Nina W. Brown, 'Troubling Silences in Therapy Groups', *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* (2008), 38: 81.

<sup>202</sup> Christopher F. Sharpley, 'The Influence of Silence upon Client-Perceived Rapport', *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* (1997), 10 (3): 237; Clara E. Hill, Barbara J. Thompson and Nicholas Ladany, 'Therapist Use of Silence in Therapy: A Survey', *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2003), 59 (4): 514; Sabbadini, 'Listening to Silence', 406. This was also my own experience in post graduate training as a music therapist in the mid 1990's.

amount of data is available'.<sup>203</sup> Angela Harris states that silences are explored even less within client-centred work than within psychodynamic therapies: Rogerian therapists predominantly understand silence as clients internally working through material arising within the session.<sup>204</sup> Given Ballard and Pritchard's assertion that Rogerian counselling theories are foundational to pastoral theology,<sup>205</sup> Harris' reflection offers valuable insight into the minimal exploration of silence in practical theology.

Increasingly, therapists are writing of silence more positively. For Brown, silences can signal reflection and have positive outcomes.<sup>206</sup> Sharpley concurs with Cook's assessment: his quantitative study reveals increased instances of silence and greater overall silence amongst clients rating high levels of rapport with the therapist.<sup>207</sup> Yet Piotr Rajski's statement—'important things happen during therapy *even when* the therapist and client say nothing'—indicates the value of silence remains poorly understood and theorised within therapy.<sup>208</sup>

Virtually all therapeutic research I accessed addressed silence from the therapist's perspective, suggesting little substantive interest in client perceptions of silence, or its impact on therapeutic outcomes. A possible reason is found in feminist critique of therapy, which highlight that psychotherapeutic theories are founded in rationalist patriarchal

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<sup>203</sup> Saville-Troike, 'The Place of Silence', 15.

<sup>204</sup> Angela Harris, 'The Experience of Silence: A Client Case Study', *Counselling Psychology Review* (February, 2004), 19 (1): 5. Harris is a Rogerian therapist.

<sup>205</sup> Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 58.

<sup>206</sup> Brown, 'Troubling Silences', 85.

<sup>207</sup> Sharpley, 'The influence of silence'.

<sup>208</sup> Piotr Rajski, 'Finding God in the Silence: Contemplative Prayer and Therapy', *Journal of Religion and Health* (Fall, 2003), 42 (3): 184, emphasis mine.

discourse. Here, the knowledge and expertise of therapists is elevated, giving them power over clients, who are perceived as inadequately knowing self.<sup>209</sup>

Sharpley's quantitative research seeks to explore silence's role in client-perceived rapport with the therapist.<sup>210</sup> However, it does not research experiences of *actual* clients but uses a single, 'standardised client' as its research tool.<sup>211</sup> The only discussion I found addressing client perceptions of silence was an article by a telephone-based listening organisation, Befrienders International, staffed by volunteers. The authors' aim is exploring volunteer's fears of callers' long silences on the phone. Scott and Lester suggest the feelings of threat caller silence evokes is unconsciously reminiscent of infancy, when a mother's temporary leave-taking is experienced as abandonment. They quote extensively a woman whose repeated silent calls, lasting up to 47 minutes, continued over months before she finally spoke. Recalling her experiences, the woman wondered 'whether the talking helped more than being silent for all those weeks. And I don't know the answer.'<sup>212</sup>

Almost all research into silence in therapy is quantitative. However, the quantitative investigation by Hill, Thompson and Ladany,<sup>213</sup> and its corresponding qualitative study, with

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<sup>209</sup> For a discussion of Freud's patriarchal understanding forming the narrative and theories of psychoanalysis, see Bons-Storm, *Incredible Woman*, 92-98.

<sup>210</sup> Sharpley, 'The Influence of Silence'.

<sup>211</sup> A 'standardised client' is described by Sharpley as a single therapist in training, who has been schooled in responding with given responses and behaviours from a fictional life scenario, and who then plays the role of a client with multiple student therapists in a single session with each, presenting the same client material in every session. Further methodological detail can be found in Sharpley, 'The Influence of Silence'.

<sup>212</sup> Vanda Scott and David Lester, 'Listening to Silence', *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* (1998), 19 (3): 107.

<sup>213</sup> Hill et al, 'Therapist Use of Silence'.

O'Brien, is an unusual 'pair' of papers.<sup>214</sup> The authors are unaware of any other research into therapists' perspectives of their use of silence. Survey responses to the first paper identified therapists' uncertainty in using silence appropriately: respondents report avoiding silence, or using it to cover their anxiety when unsure how to respond to clients. The authors conclude those from a psychodynamic orientation use silence to facilitate client reflection, correlating this to theoretical emphasis on insight as key within therapy, whilst those from humanistic, existential, or experiential approaches use silence to convey empathy, support and respect. Ladany et al's paper reports therapist-identified, client-centred reasons for using silence as giving clients space, honouring something expressed, holding, nurturing and giving permission to be authentic. This paper also indicated therapists perceive the therapeutic outcomes of silence as positive, irrespective of theoretical approach. It also identified that male therapists use silence as a boundary or shield with all clients, but female therapists do not. All therapists used silence in this way more with male clients than female. This indicates silence being used more defensively by, and with men than between women. This observation has potential implications for silence in people's relationship with God, dependent on whether God is perceived as male, female, or ungendered.

Gale and Sanchez criticize contemporary psychotherapy for 'categorical errors' in giving value and meaning to silence by ascribing to it 'quasi mystical qualities',<sup>215</sup> and in perceiving silence as a form of communication which can function aside from spoken language. Gale

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<sup>214</sup> Nicholas Ladany, Clara E. Hill, Barbara J. Thompson and Karen M. O'Brien, 'Therapist Perspectives on Using Silence in Therapy: A Qualitative Study', *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* (2004), 4 (1): 80-89.

<sup>215</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence', 216.

and Sanchez understand silence as integral to language. They criticise therapists like Michael Del Monte,<sup>216</sup> for whom silence can communicate what cannot be articulated in words. With reference to Heidegger's 'being-with', used to express the developing ontological quality as we listen to and hear another, Gale and Sanchez present silence as essential to authentic discourse by making listening and hearing possible: silence and speech are interdependent and equally essential for authentic personhood:<sup>217</sup> 'speech will not be authentic unless it includes an element of silent self-listening, as well as listening to the other.'<sup>218</sup> It is notable that no similar observation is present in Morton's discussions of 'hearing to speech' and authenticity. Gale and Sanchez advocate cultivating silence at three levels: with self, in relationships, and within institutional environments. In these, silence confers meaning on discourse, enables reflection, aids serious thought, assists in digestion and internalization of interpretations, fosters capacity to be alone, and increases self-confidence, all of which promote acquisition of insight.<sup>219</sup>

Miriam Elson gives similar attributes to silence, crediting it as 'fertile ground', with capacities to restore initiative and self-esteem to clients, helping deepen, strengthen or acquire missing elements of psychic structure.<sup>220</sup> Elson maintains that, in silence, being 'the object of unwavering attention' is strengthening, encouraging relationality rather than estrangement and isolation. She suggests silence allows affirmation of experiencing self as

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<sup>216</sup> Michael Del Monte, 'Silence and Emptiness in the Service of Healing: Lessons from Meditation', *British Journal of Psychotherapy* (1995), 11 (3): 369-378.

<sup>217</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 206, referenced by Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence', 213.

<sup>218</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence', 213-4.

<sup>219</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence', 217.

<sup>220</sup> Miriam Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse: A View from Self Psychology', *Clinical Social Work Journal* (Winter, 2001), 29 (4): 351-360.

the 'centre of initiative', with self-righting capacity.<sup>221</sup> It facilitates reflection, within which distorted self-perceptions are transformed. Echoing early psychoanalytic perceptions of silence as resistance, and Bons-Storm's 'unstory', Elson also portrays silence as revealing deliberate withholding of parts of self which clients find shameful, in case 'the tenuous threads of relationship be severed'.<sup>222</sup> She cautions that if therapist responses to client silence fail to meet their needs, further retreat into silence is likely, evoking feelings of abandonment and isolation.

Stanley Olinick states most communication has a 'phatic', non-cognitive function, intended to establish affective contact between people, as opposed to transmitting information:<sup>223</sup> its goal is 'reassuring, stress-free interrelatedness'.<sup>224</sup> Olinick proposes a state of 'phatic silence'—interpersonally experienced as soothing and comfortable—also exists between communicators. Such silence is a potential source of inspiration, creativity and innovation. Olinick links phatic communication and silence with Donald Winnicott's transitional objects and phenomena:<sup>225</sup> their function is both adaptive and defensive, alleviating separation anxiety and affects concerning loss of object. Olinick presents phatic silence as a sought after, momentarily regressive and primitive expression of mature object relations, replaying effective affect attunement in early mother-infant interaction—the infant's pleasurable

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<sup>221</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 353-5.

<sup>222</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 358.

<sup>223</sup> Olinick borrows the term 'phatic' from Weston LaBarre, *The Human Animal*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1954), where it connotes the use of speech to reveal or share feelings or establish sociability, as opposed to communicating ideas. Stanley L. Olinick, 'Meanings Beyond Words', *Psychoanalytic Perceptions of Silence and Communication, Happiness, Sexual Love and Death*, *International Review of Psychoanalysis* (1982), 9: 463.

<sup>224</sup> Olinick, 'Meanings Beyond Words', 461.

<sup>225</sup> Donald Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', in *Collected Papers*, (New York: Basic Books, 1958), 209-242, referenced by Olinick, 'Meanings Beyond Words', 463.

experience of satisfaction and fulfilment.<sup>226</sup> This ‘soothed reassurance’ is a satiated silence: part of the ‘personal search for understanding and expression, for solace, inner peace, reunion or merger, for perfection, the absolute, and happiness.’<sup>227</sup> Olinick denotes client experiences of dissatisfying or irritable silence as expressive of frustrated and conflicted yearnings, where the unconscious seeks and fears merger and symbiosis with the therapist. As these desires and fears cannot be articulated, they seek regressive, non-verbal satisfaction. Due to their preverbal nature clients may experience such silences as ‘unreal or uncanny’. Whilst such silence may feel dissatisfied or irritable, it ‘yearns towards solace and contentment.’<sup>228</sup>

In 2007 Gregg Blanton observed that with growing recognition of the role of spiritual beliefs in facilitating healing, these are increasingly explored within therapy.<sup>229</sup> Blanton discusses potential benefits of integrating contemplative religious practice—‘freeing the mind from thought’—with narrative therapy. Its philosophy perceives language as the primary medium through which people ascribe meaning and understanding to their lives.<sup>230</sup> Blanton suggests this perception overlooks the potential wisdom of silence which offers silent space between a person and their oft repeated self-narrative. Once familiar ‘storying-self’ is quietened, a

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<sup>226</sup> Affect attunement is the name given by Daniel Sterne to the interplay of engagement and withdrawal in mother-infant interaction, and used subsequently throughout much psychodynamically informed literature. Sterne describes it thus: ‘The episode of engagement, and the subsequent time-out episode, appear to function as *retaining units* in the *regulation* of interaction. During each episode of engagement, both mother and infant are trying to stay within the boundaries of the optimal ranges of excitement and affect. The engagement episodes come to an end when an *upper* or *lower* boundary has been exceeded. More often the infant signals this.’ Emphasis in original. See Daniel Sterne, *The First Relationship: Infant and Mother*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 81-2.

<sup>227</sup> Olinick, ‘Meanings Beyond Words’, 468.

<sup>228</sup> Olinick, ‘Meanings Beyond Words’, 466.

<sup>229</sup> P. Gregg Blanton, ‘Adding Silence to Stories: Narrative Therapy and Contemplation’, *Contemporary Family Therapy* (2007), 29: 211.

<sup>230</sup> Blanton, ‘Adding Silence to Stories’, 212.

previously unknown, transcendent self emerges. Reminiscent of ‘unstory’, Blanton states stories of self are socially constructed, and identifies the liberational potential in discovering that frequently reported self-narratives can be discarded: ‘hidden’ self is gradually discovered and incorporated into more robust and complex self-narratives containing enlarged, previously unknown and unarticulated aspects of identity.<sup>231</sup>

In 1995 Del Monte reflected that, in the preceding 30 years, professional journals paid considerable attention to the value of meditation in Buddhist and Hindu traditions, yet barely acknowledged Christian practices.<sup>232</sup> Relating the meditation advocated by Main and Griffiths to psychoanalytic concepts advanced by Freud and Wilfred Bion, Del Monte draws parallels between silence in psychoanalysis and Christian meditation. Main insists internal monologues of the mind and repressed thoughts should not be engaged during meditation. Del Monte contrasts this with Griffiths’ recognition that many people cannot stop their flow of thoughts. These should be attended to, ‘like clouds in the sky’,<sup>233</sup> never hindering the movement of the Spirit which may liberate unconscious thoughts as a resource for healing. Del Monte compares Griffiths’ understanding of meditation as unlocking and disentangling our personal and collective histories with Jungian theories of the collective unconscious. Presenting Main’s view of meditation as learning to be at one with God, Del Monte portrays

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<sup>231</sup> Blanton references the work of Gene Combs and Jill Freedman, ‘The Poststructuralist Approach to Narrative Work’, in Lynne E. Angus and John McLeod, eds., *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy Practice, Theory, and Research*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 137-155.

<sup>232</sup> Del Monte, ‘Silence and Emptiness’, 368.

<sup>233</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ: Christian Meditation and Community*, Robert Kiley and Lawrence Freeman, eds., (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992), 36, referenced by Del Monte, ‘Silence and Emptiness’, 374.



Main teaching surrender of self to God, love of other and ultimately into death. He concludes by cautioning the path of silent meditation should not 'destroy the ego' but

accomplish the liberation of self from blind allegiances to impulses and from the impoverishment resulting from our defences. Meditation should allow the ego just to be ego—neither permanently subjected to repudiation [*sic*] through the *via negativa* nor indulged with narcissistic grandiosity.<sup>234</sup>

Del Monte's portrayal of the ideas of Main and Griffiths are brought together in Keating's writing. This Cistercian monk presents the silent practice of 'Centering Prayer' as catalytic in healing and purifying the unconscious.<sup>235</sup> Within the deep rest of this practice participants move from meditation into the foothills of contemplation. The 'psyche begins to evacuate spontaneously the undigested emotional material of a lifetime, opening up new space for self-knowledge, freedom of choice, and the discovery of the divine presence within.'<sup>236</sup> Within a growing bond of trust with the 'Divine Therapist', silence itself becomes 'divine therapy'. Keating's presentation is echoed by Rajski who, referring to the experiences of many mystics in his writing on contemplative prayer and therapy, also suggests that 'God, who is in silence, could be described as the Divine therapist'.<sup>237</sup>

### 2.7.3 *Silence in arts therapies*

Art and, more recently, music therapists have begun to consider the role of silence. In 1995, Caroline Case stated silence can strike both art therapist and client unexpectedly, leaving

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<sup>234</sup> Del Monte, 'Silence and Emptiness', 377. 'Repudiation' is the intended word.

<sup>235</sup> This specific practice is described in Chapter 3.

<sup>236</sup> Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 4.

<sup>237</sup> Rajski, 'Finding God', 185.

them feeling ‘dumb’ or ‘stupidly silent’, overwhelmed by emotion, paralysis, or lost in a space without words.<sup>238</sup> Case equates overwhelming silences where experiences are encapsulated beyond words with grief and trauma: when words fail to describe an experience the ensuing silence becomes ‘imbued with the affect we are unable to express verbally.’<sup>239</sup> Recalling Olinick’s insights, Case identifies silence facilitating the healing of early traumatic intrapsychic separations between mother and infant in the affect attunement between therapist and client. Emphasising the creative potential of silence from which new ideas, words, or images emerge, Case states that this silence is most familiar to art therapists ‘because they will discuss the painting being made in silence rather than the silence which enables it to be produced, silence which is a self-communication, from which the painting comes.’<sup>240</sup>

Julie Sutton was among the first and remains one of few music therapists to focus on silences.<sup>241</sup> She states ‘silences in therapy are delicate, complex and many-layered. Although acknowledged in the literature, their complexity is rarely focussed on separately or examined in depth.’<sup>242</sup> Sutton identifies a tendency ‘to concentrate on the words that come out of silences’ because, like musical sounds, they are more concrete and less difficult to discuss. Like Case, Sutton acknowledges the creative potential of silence, where ‘creativity itself is seen to emerge from silence, requiring stillness within the creator, a sense of

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<sup>238</sup> Caroline Case, ‘Silence in Progress: On Being Dumb, Empty or Silent in Therapy’, *Inscape* (1995), 1: 26-31.

<sup>239</sup> Case, ‘Silence in Progress’, 26.

<sup>240</sup> Case, ‘Silence in Progress’, 30.

<sup>241</sup> I was present when Julie Sutton and Claire Flower presented their paper, thought to be the earliest known work focussing on silence—as opposed to music—during therapy by music therapists. Julie Sutton and Clare Flower ‘Silence—“A Refined State of Musical Expression”: A Dialogue About Silence in Music Therapy’, *The World Music Therapy Congress*, Oxford, UK (July, 2002).

<sup>242</sup> Julie Sutton, ‘The Air Between Two Hands’, 178.

separateness from the world and space in which to flourish.’<sup>243</sup> Sutton also discusses silence’s regulatory function within affect attunement prior to the development of cognitive awareness. She describes how pre-verbal exchanges between mother and infant are played out in non-verbal, improvised musical interactions and silences between therapist and client, and states their potential for discovering and developing new behavioural patterns or contexts for self-experience.<sup>244</sup> She proposes silence facilitates emergence into new therapeutic areas by passing the time limit within which Daniel Sterne observes two musical events must occur for forward momentum to be maintained.<sup>245</sup> Silences extending beyond this threshold disrupt continuity, allowing shifts in focus and direction, enabling clients to maintain or trust shifts into a new inner state.<sup>246</sup>

Sutton also acknowledges her silence as therapist may be experienced as powerful by both client and herself as she silently listens to the client’s silences. Although not suggesting clients may also experience their own silence as powerful, Sutton proposes that such power arises when conventions of conversational exchange between two people are not followed and silence is allowed to continue.

Sutton reports that her collaborator, Danish music therapist, Jos De Backer, considers clients’ fragmentary silences as indicating an inability to sustain interaction: he proposes connection between therapist and client is broken as a result of underlying deep and

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<sup>243</sup> Sutton, ‘The Air Between Two Hands’, 173.

<sup>244</sup> Sutton, ‘The Air Between Two Hands’, 176.

<sup>245</sup> Daniel Sterne, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 46, referenced by Sutton, ‘The Air Between Two Hands’, 177.

<sup>246</sup> Sutton, ‘The Air Between Two Hands’, 177.

fundamental trauma.<sup>247</sup> Sutton compares De Backer's insights with Bion's suggestion that a therapist's readiness to abandon their expectations and needs creates a silent space within them, allowing the possibility of new spaces opening within the client-therapist relationship.<sup>248</sup> She suggests this quality of presence in the therapist, based in willingness to be in a place of not-knowing, facilitates change in clients. Such transformations takes place through focussed moments of silence which heighten a therapist's sensitivity to aspects of their client's state of being.

Reminiscent of Maitland's 'Chthonic terror',<sup>249</sup> observations by Scott and Lester, and Case,<sup>250</sup> Sutton cautions that experiencing deep silence can link to loss and absence as well as presence and being:

when we experience silence fully, it is a silence into which life itself is born. All subsequent silences carry the echo of the first universal silence, when we are in touch with our first personal experiences of silence, the silence in which our infant needs are not met, the silence of the first separation from the mother, the silence of loss, abandonment, loneliness and, ultimately, of death. In such ways silence may hold what is traumatic about our inner life, as well as what eventually becomes our departure from life.<sup>251</sup>

Ultimately, for Sutton, silence connects us with our most intimate selves, as either utterly present being or with profound loss, in a paradox where silence is able to be 'felt', whilst

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<sup>247</sup> Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands', 179. De Backer's unpublished PhD thesis based on therapy with psychotic patients is unavailable in the UK.

<sup>248</sup> Wilfred R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation: A Scientific Approach to Insight in Psycho-analysis and Groups*, (London: Maresfield Library, 1970), 26-30, referenced by Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands', 179.

<sup>249</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 128-131.

<sup>250</sup> Scott and David Lester, 'Listening to Silence'; Case, 'Silence in Progress'.

<sup>251</sup> Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands', 180.

also creating reflexive space. It is not absence, but a phenomenological space where we exist and meet one another in profound inter-subjectivity.<sup>252</sup>

## 2.8 Conclusion

Throughout the reviewed literature writers have remarked on silence's ineffability: it is difficult to describe. As this chapter has demonstrated, quite *what* phenomena literature attempts to describe is made more difficult because the nature of silence is contested, with widely differing perceptions of whether it is null, or neutral, has presence or meaning, and what these might be. Swinton and Mowat state that any limiting of ability to verbalize ideas highlights the importance of fragments of articulated understanding.<sup>253</sup> Extending this, Graham highlights the importance of *bricolage*—enquiry which pieces together fragmentary knowledge, whilst aware of its fragility and provisionality—in reconstructing Christian practices.<sup>254</sup>

In gathering together fragmentary and more substantial writing from feminist and practical theologies, and other selected disciplines, this literature review has repeatedly identified the following: silence's significance is frequently overlooked across multiple disciplines; when its value is acknowledged there is little questioning or explanation of the worth it is ascribed; its empirical researchers, theoretical observers and practitioners alike continue to state that

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<sup>252</sup> Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands', 185-6.

<sup>253</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 239.

<sup>254</sup> Elaine Graham, 'Practical Theology as Transforming Practice', in Woodward and Pattison, *Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 106.

silence has not been adequately investigated; there is inadequate examination of its existing roles within the lives of individuals and communities; and academic discourse has paid scant attention to the potential of engagement in chosen practices of silence for personal and corporate transformation. The sources reviewed here provide valuable insights to illuminate and enrich the findings of my research. In subsequent chapters, as I bring insights from these sources together with perceptions of silence offered by the women who participated in this study, I aim to begin to address some of the gaps and inadequacies identified here.

## MAPPING SILENCE

Virtually every spiritual tradition that holds a vision of human transformation at its heart also claims that a practice of intentional silence is non-negotiable. Period. You just have to do it ... this form of spiritual practice is essential to spiritual awakening.

Cynthia Bourgeault<sup>1</sup>

We are cartographers of neglected landscapes, charting maps that have not been made, until now.

Nicola Slee<sup>2</sup>

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins my presentation of data from interviews and findings of my analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Speaking about silence can be challenging. Yet extracts from the women's narratives provide rich and thoughtful perceptions about a spiritual discipline often portrayed as ineffable. Predominantly speaking with their 'private' or 'personal' voices, collectively they offer significant insight into individuals' disciplined engagement in silence, which are rarely exposed to public scrutiny. This chapter focuses on the women's practices of silence. Three subsequent data chapters explore the women's perceptions of engagement in these practices, highlighting their valuing of silence as a place of relationality—with God, self and others.

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2004), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Nicola Slee, 'Feminist Qualitative Research as Spiritual Practice: Reflections on the Process of Doing Qualitative Research', in Slee et al, *Faith Lives of Women and Girls*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> The order of chapters 3 and 4 given here has been reversed from that originally presented in the thesis as a correction requested following the viva voce examination. Chapter 4, which follows, will deal comprehensively with methodological concerns. Chapters 5 to 7 then continue the presentation of findings from my research.

### 3.2 Exploring Silence

In this chapter I outline practices of silence the women identified as belonging to their spiritual discipline. Individual women's comments are contextualised within their wider perceptions of silence, the trajectory of their lives and their spiritual journeys. Initially I discuss the women's early encounters with silence in faith communities and the wider world before illustrating the development of their practices of silence as they journey in adult faith. Next, exploration of the women's general perceptions of silence is foundational to beginning investigation of silence in the context of faith. The remainder of the chapter surveys the women's practices of silence, framing these within pairs of terms frequently used to discuss these practices: external and internal; individual and corporate. I also discuss difficulties they reported in sustaining a discipline of silence.

#### 3.2.1 *Beginnings in silence*

The women's development of a spiritual discipline of silence varied considerably. The impact of early encounters with silence may have faded or become overestimated with time. However, having encountered what Dandelion and Jaworski identified as differing 'cultural norms' of silence during their formative years, these remain affirming foundations for some but linger unhelpfully for others.<sup>4</sup> Many recalled exposure to silence within faith communities as children. A small number experienced extended periods of silence in worship from early in life. Coming from a Quaker family, Mary's engagement with silence

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<sup>4</sup> See Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 250-258; Dandelion, *Liturgies of Quakerism*, 105-110; Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 67-8.



was nurtured at home and weekly Meeting for Worship from infancy. The centrality of silence throughout her faith-life was so self-evident that, after identifying her Quaker heritage, Mary offered no elaboration of her spiritual background beyond remarking she became 'more of a Christian/Quaker' at university. Rhona's reflections on silence within her childhood Brethren community, where entire services were conducted by 'men' who spoke only 'as the spirit led', were more ambivalent: memories of feeling silenced by this still reverberate.

Families, church or church schools offered most women experiences of faith-based silence. Several fondly remember participating in traditional, silent devotional practices with mothers or aunts, at home or church. Julay commented that for many 'cradle Catholics' the silence experienced with family and school friends through the rhythms of the Rosary, prayer, meditation, and hushed churches adorned with candles 'is very important' as a 'strong first memory of the/draw/of silence'. A small number identified the impressions left by mandatory observance of silence within denominational schools at high points in the Christian calendar as particularly significant.

Some recalled the infrequency of silences in their childhood faith communities. Rebecca's Methodist worship had 'no silence/ever', apart from 'communion' services which she valued because its liturgy offered 'time when there was some silence'. Moving from a traditional to evangelical Baptist church left Sian attending services 'far less marked by the presence of silence', which she rediscovered attending chapel at an Anglican college. Lynne recalled

word domination in the Strict and Particular Baptist community of her youth. Silence was expected of her so adults could hear the preacher's 'word':

I'd sit through  
when I was very little  
three quarters of an hour sermons  
and  
have to find things to do so  
erm  
silence was to do with not speaking and  
it was  
to do with  
keeping quiet and  
not interfering with  
the real stuff that was going on

Also from a word-based but informal church, Sally's trip to Taize—where periods of silence are integral to worship—was a 'landmark'. Relishing time to 'sit and be', she felt none of her friends' frustration at wanting to 'stand up and clap their hands'.

Other women's significant childhood experiences of silence were predominantly outside religious life, even if they belonged to faith communities. Noteworthy encounters frequently related to nature. Catriona loved the silence of sparsely populated agricultural lands in her South American upbringing. Claire now perceives 'times of silence/pondering' at 'nature outdoors/and/the wonders of science' as a child, and her teenage 'stargazing stage' developing her engagement with silence as significantly as deep involvement in her Roman Catholic community. Uniquely, Claire acknowledged it is with hindsight she recognises nature's importance in journeying towards a spiritual practice of silence:

I'm not sure how much at that time I would have connected that

to my faith  
but yet I can  
paradoxically be clear  
that it did seem part of God's creation  
and that  
so God was around  
somehow in it

Parents and extended family also impacted on childhood engagement with silence. Some credited their ease with silence as a spiritual discipline to being an only child. Barbara's appreciation of 'depth' in silence was formed in the steadiness of relationship with her father, who spoke only when he had something to say. Una and Claire identified lonely silences when separated from their immediate family. For Una, deep love of an almost silent, atheist aunt during a year away from home in a foreign country is closely 'associate[d] with God': in her eighties, Una still describes God as 'like my Auntie Nellie'. Claire recounted the loneliness of culture shock leaving her northern Roman Catholic community for the south, where 'very few people' were Catholic. Her loss was not of silence, but a community with whom to share it. Una and Claire's 'yearning for relationship'<sup>5</sup> drew them into silence, seeking relationship with God. Michaela contrasted the controlling use of silence by her mother, who 'didn't go anywhere near a church', with 'amazingly supportive' aunts: all four were nuns. Their lives, with its 'base/of silence', were a 'spiritual/almost like/ring around us': a sanctuary where she and her siblings were received at traumatic points in childhood. Rebecca described life dominated by her parents' inability to be quiet. Reminiscent of Wolfson's 'bulge theory',<sup>6</sup> their constant, verbal re-negotiation of a dysfunctional marriage

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<sup>5</sup> Comment by Claire. Subsequent attribution of single and multiple comments will be indicated by the appropriate names or pseudonyms.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfson, 'The Bulge', 21-38.

left her uncomfortable in silence with others because ‘there was/hardly ever/silence’ at home.

### *3.2.2 Developing adult engagement with practices of silence*

Half the women’s childhood faith-based exposure to silence continued largely uninterrupted into adulthood. Practices of silence became embedded within their life, integral to relationship with God and spiritual growth. For others, developing this discipline as adults was either a gradual assembling of multiple fragmentary but significant experiences, or sparked by specific exposure to practices of silence propelling them to further exploration.

Amongst women whose early experiences of silence within Christianity had lain dormant or who first encountered practices of silence during adult life, interest in silence coincided with significant life changes or a specific opportunity for spiritual development. These included moving location, joining different faith communities, ordination training or faith-based courses, attending or training in spiritual accompaniment, discovering writing about silence and attending quiet days or retreats. For others, adult engagement with silence began or was re-awakened during difficult times in life. In their accounts, silence offered solace or peace which, over months, gradually developed into an intentional discipline.

Two women’s narratives featured teenage rejection of childhood Christianity, then return following periods of atheism. When moving for an academic post, Elizabeth’s loneliness at losing support networks pushed her from frequently declared atheism to praying

‘experimentally’. This opened a ‘tiny little chink’ which God burst through in an ‘irrefutable’ way. Mystical experiences in silence drew Elizabeth back into her Anglican heritage, determined to also learn about silence from other faiths. Julay described a teenage ‘inverted conversion’ to atheism, and a decade of ‘fairly/violent/reaction against’ Roman Catholicism. She deliberately pursued Buddhism as ‘godless religion’ until convinced of God’s existence by a second ‘conversion’ on retreat to make her Buddhist profession, and returned to Roman Catholicism. Having valued Buddhist meditation, she sought similar Christian practices, longing to continue encountering God. Elizabeth and Julay continue to embrace teachings on silence from other spiritual traditions.

Few women identified scripture or Christian writings as significant in developing practices of silence. Only Claire and Dawn named scripture as integral to their discipline. Most references to bible texts were brief and fleeting: Rhona, Sally and Julay mentioned Elijah hearing God’s ‘still small voice’ from ‘sheer silence’.<sup>7</sup> Alison and Rachel quoted single phrases by Richard Rohr,<sup>8</sup> and Alison and Ali (a non-Quaker) referred to *Quaker Faith and Practice*.<sup>9</sup> Ali and Rhona made passing reference to The Desert Fathers. Uniquely, Rebecca identified ‘key texts’ which facilitated her explorations of silence at university.<sup>10</sup> A third of

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<sup>7</sup> These are two different versions of the same text in 1 Kings, 19:12. The first, more familiar translation is from the King James Bible and the second from the NRSV.

<sup>8</sup> Alison referred to Rohr’s comment that contemplation is ‘a long and loving look at what is real’, in Richard Rohr, *Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go*, (New York, NY: Crossroads Publishing, 2003), 92. Rachel referred to Rohr’s comment that ‘The desert is where we are voluntarily understimulated’, in Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, (New York, NY: Crossroads Publishing, 1999), 77.

<sup>9</sup> *Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, (London: Britain Yearly Meeting (Society of Friends), 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Those she listed were as follows: Per-Olof Sjögren, *The Jesus Prayer: Learning to Pray from the Heart*, (London: SPCK, 1975); Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980); Anne Long, *Listening*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990) and the journals of Thomas Merton.

women referred to poets or poems that encapsulate perceptions of their experiences of silence.<sup>11</sup> A similar number named works of art and classical music as gateways into silence.

Relationships, mostly with women, significantly influenced all the women's adult engagement in silence. These included family, friends, respected older Christians, brief relationships on retreats or workshops, some who facilitated ordination training or spiritual direction and, for a handful, people from other religious traditions who also practise silence.

### 3.2.3 *Perceptions of silence*

The women's general perceptions of silence and more specific understanding in relation to their spiritual practice were explored separately. Broader descriptions of silence featured some form of absence. This divided into overlapping categories: absence of either external noises, or distractions. Beyond this core perception, explanations were varied and complex, with individual descriptions extending or refuting those of other women.

Amongst those perceiving silence as an absence of external noises, what was subsequently specified varied considerably. Absence of speech was cited most frequently, recalling Bakhtin's limited definition of silence.<sup>12</sup> Most followed this with fluctuating exclusion of mechanical or rhythmic sounds derived from human activity, echoing Maitland's anecdotal

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<sup>11</sup> Most frequent were Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Herbert, T. S. Eliot and Adrienne Rich.

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 133-4.

reporting that many people perceive such noises to 'break' silence.<sup>13</sup> Catriona's description was typical:

silence would be no  
no spoken  
word ...  
no (7)  
no speaking  
no singing  
erm  
no people making noises [*laughs*]  
erm  
and sometimes it includes  
erm  
mechanical noises  
cars and things  
but  
sometimes it doesn't

Several women share Cage's conclusion that humans cannot experience complete auditory silence as bodily sounds become apparent when all else falls silent.<sup>14</sup> Refuting Baer and Szuchewycz's proposition of the functional equivalence of silence and extreme noisiness, and Ihde's suggestion that sound upon sound would itself be silence,<sup>15</sup> uniquely, Ali offered only an apophatic perception:<sup>16</sup> 'not silence/is/a lot of noise'. Defining silence became less precise when considering any artistic medium which evokes deep attentiveness. Music was most contentious: silence is 'definitely an absence of music' for Rebecca, whereas Sally and Catriona's perceptions includes some wordless music. For some, silence as an absence of

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<sup>13</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Discussed in Brooks, 'Pragmatics of Silence', 101.

<sup>15</sup> See Baer, 'Quaker Silence', 150-64, Szuchewycz, 'Ritual Communication', 39-260 and Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 185.

<sup>16</sup> Here I am using apophatic as it is understood in apophatic theology, as previously described. This is in contrast to cataphatic theology, where God is spoken of using affirmative language, 'God is ...'. Later in this chapter these terms will be used with a difference in emphasis, as this relates to practices of silence within cataphatic and apophatic prayer.

external sound was connected to intentionality: the deliberate exclusion of unwanted sounds, human interruptions, and bodily stillness. This overlaps with perceptions of silence as primarily an absence of distraction.

Women offering this perception were quicker to suggest some noises can be accommodated within experiences of silence. Unsurprisingly, comments about which sounds were varied, but all included examples from nature: wind, birdsong and various forms of water-based sounds. Ali's description was typical:

there are certain sounds that are easier  
to ignore  
or to incorporate into it  
so  
things like  
erm  
the wind  
the sound of birds (3.5)  
... you're aware of them as sounds  
but they don't distract from the core ...  
if there was a lot of traffic ...  
it is harder

Perceiving silence as an absence of distraction was rooted in wanting less chaotic or cluttered environments, attending to something specific, focussing on their internal world, or finding inner peace or calm.

A minority offered no comment about silence relating to absence. For them, absences identified by others are external quiet—quite separate from silence. Their distinction highlights the benefits of differentiated words for silence as verb or noun, as Davies



discussed in relation to 'molchanie' and 'tishina'.<sup>17</sup> These women's language for silence was of receptivity, not exclusion. Sian identified silence as 'invitational/it isn't a word that/involves loss'. Wanting to convey Quaker silence as 'something positive', a 'free' and 'open' space, Mary describes it carefully so others do not think of it 'in terms/of/absence/of something that's not there'. Elizabeth's perception of silence having 'fullness' and 'depth' seems contrary to Mary's openness. Yet both indicate receptivity: Mary conveys space to receive, Elisabeth, that much can be received. Others spoke of silence only in relation to their own internal state or practices, omitting any comments about silence more generally. No-one described silence as 'neutral', as Ross proposes,<sup>18</sup> or empty of meaning without further contextual signification, as Davies advocates.<sup>19</sup>

Transcripts revealed discrepancies between women's first descriptions of silence and later references. Although most began simply, in negation, their ongoing narratives reveal this is unsatisfactory. Silence does not relate to an essential entity whose perception is shared by them all, or even used by one woman consistently throughout her interview: its polyvalent nature is without question. Rather, their understandings of silence are complex, multiple and fluid, and cannot be contained by conceptualisation based solely in exclusion.

When describing silence in relation to faith-based practices, the women's responses reflected Rich's poetical mapping of its form,<sup>20</sup> shifting from notions of absence to language

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<sup>17</sup> Davies, 'Soundings', 202.

<sup>18</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Davies, 'Soundings', 222.

<sup>20</sup> Rich, 'Cartographies of Silence'.

denoting presence: 'it's not absence of anything/it's a really full presence/the fullest presence I know!'<sup>21</sup> Narrow general perceptions of silence were replaced by expansive descriptions:

- Ali: it is about for me  
the kind of silences that foster  
connection
- A:<sup>22</sup> mmm hmm
- Ali: and encounter ...  
the ones I'm  
think of  
'bout  
being part of spiritual practice  
would be about the ones that are fostering connection
- A: mmm  
connection and encounter with...?
- Ali: erm  
well the most obvious one is God  
erm  
whatever is meant by God  
but also (3.5 )  
with that i i it is  
that that is bound up with  
the world that is around you ...  
God that is  
also making you to attend to what's around you what  
erm  
the truth of things might be...  
opening yourself ...  
to the connections between people

Silence became related to engagement with God, their own being, connections with other people and the world beyond self. These associations will be the focus of detailed discussion in subsequent chapters.

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<sup>21</sup> Gaynor.

<sup>22</sup> Here, and in other transcript extracts where my own interjections are given, I have used 'A' rather than 'Alison' for my comments to avoid confusion with one of the participants, referred to as 'Alison'. Although I was also an interviewee, extracts from my interview are referred to using a pseudonym.

The predominant image of silence relating to spiritual practice was of stillness. This was articulated by more than three quarters of the women. Many expressed the importance of bodily stillness. The majority spoke of silence as inner stillness: being, waiting and listening as opposed to doing. In this, they exemplify qualities McCarthy describes amongst those seeking authentic and faithful spiritual practices.<sup>23</sup> All associate a discipline of silence with seeking mental stillness, expressed as emptying the mind or having no thoughts. Although this can be interpreted as returning to absence, their intention is stilling unnecessary chatter of the 'monkey mind' leaping from one thought to another<sup>24</sup> and, for some, sinking into Ross' 'deep mind', where egoic consciousness falls away.<sup>25</sup> Greater mental stillness shifts their focus from the past or future to being open, receptive and fully attentive to richness in the present moment. This understanding mirrors Tolle's advocacy of attentiveness to 'the now' as an antidote to the mind's habitual dwelling in past or future events. Through this habit, the mind continues its egoic dominance over the reality of human existence, which can only experience the present.<sup>26</sup> As in Tolle's writing, mental stillness is intimately connected to the quality of the women's presence, frequently described as more centred, rooted, grounded or fully present in silence.

At the heart of the women's practices is shared longing for God's presence. After long faith journeys they concluded that drawing closer to God is best facilitated by creating time and space for silence. As Carol Lee Flinders suggests 'In the presence of the sacred, and even

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<sup>23</sup> McCarthy, 'Spirituality', 200. See discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>24</sup> Alison.

<sup>25</sup> See Ross, *Silence*, 76.

<sup>26</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 48-50.

while we're waiting for it, we fall silent.'<sup>27</sup> They are intentionally 'open' to God and value time to 'listen' to and 'be with' God. Silence offer space to 'recognise God's presence', for 'meeting' God, or 'encounter with God'.<sup>28</sup> It creates opportunities for 'waiting to receive' from God and, ultimately, is the place of 'entering into the Divine' through 'surrender' into God's presence.<sup>29</sup>

Silence is often, though not exclusively, a comfortable space.<sup>30</sup> It was described as having 'warmth', being 'cosy', a 'comfortable' or 'embracing darkness', a place they are 'deeply at home' or feel 'held', evoking feelings of contentment.<sup>31</sup> Experiencing silence as a place of truth, honesty and acceptance also comforts some women. Descriptions of others indicate satiation, reminiscent of Olinick's soothed, stress-free and reassuringly interrelated 'phatic silence'.<sup>32</sup> This has a fullness, often related to God's satisfying presence, but is also described as full of the creativity and potential Olinick identified as a hallmark of 'phatic silence'. Its vast spaciousness, openness or timelessness offers boundless potential for newness, growth or change.

Quaker women, or those with close associations with Friends, identified their practices of silence fostering connection with others, which supports their practice. A few simply stated this, with no further explanation. Some expanded further, describing wordlessly holding

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<sup>27</sup> Flinders, *At the Root of this Longing*, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Sally, Julay, Dawn, Nancy and Gaynor.

<sup>29</sup> Claire, Sian and Una.

<sup>30</sup> Many of the women's reported difficulties of engaging in practices of silence will be explored below and in chapters which follow.

<sup>31</sup> Lynne and Julay, Nancy, Una and Elizabeth, and Julay. Feeling held in silence was identified by fourteen of the women.

<sup>32</sup> Olinick, 'Meanings Beyond Words'.

others before God, and longing for greater relational truth within communities to which they belong. Their comments support Searl's findings that an overarching 'meaning' of Quaker silence is social, fostering receptivity to others, and facilitating engagement in silent worship.<sup>33</sup>

Miroslav Volf writes 'The whole Christian way of life, with all its practices, is supported and shaped by something outside that way of life—by what God has done, is doing, and will do. The Christian faith is not primarily about human *doing* but human *receiving*.'<sup>34</sup> Although the women's perceptions of silence within spiritual discipline varies, they display a commonality that reflect Volf's portrayal of receiving from God as foundational to Christianity. They share a fundamental desire to dwell in increasing attentiveness to God, open to possibilities of transformation that recognising God's presence in self and others can engender. The silence they seek is 'deeper/than/any sort of mental/or emotional experience ... the silence of *being* ... truly being'.<sup>35</sup> Here, they foster receptivity to whatever God is doing, in self and beyond, open to Volf's commendation of the gospel injunction to 'Receive yourself and your world as a new creation.'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 111-112 and 28.

<sup>34</sup> Miroslav Volf, 'Theology for a Way of Life', in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 254, emphasis in original.

<sup>35</sup> Claire.

<sup>36</sup> Volf, 'Theology for a Way of Life', 254.

### 3.3 Practices of silence

The women's practices span the range of distinctions customarily made about disciplines of silence. These fall into two pairs of apparently opposing categories: external or internal, and individual or corporate silence. Before focussing on these, consideration of a further pairing—cataphatic and apophatic—is foundational to ongoing discussion of practices of silence.

In writing about prayer and spirituality, cataphatic classically denotes prayer which engages faculties of reason, emotions, memory, imagination and will.<sup>37</sup> Cataphatic prayer originates in and reinforces these structures of unique, egoic selfhood, which Cynthia Bourgeault describes as 'the normal functioning zone of the human mind'.<sup>38</sup> Almost all Christian worship is cataphatic, including meditation and practices using the imagination.<sup>39</sup> Cataphatic awareness has become Christianity's accustomed way of engaging in faith and relationship with God. Apophatic prayer moves beyond or transcends egoic perceptions central to cataphatic practices.<sup>40</sup> It bypasses familiar mental processes and self-perceptions, generating states of awareness egoic self best describes as vastly spacious, empty or having a feeling of nothingness.<sup>41</sup> From within cataphatic awareness the apophatic always appears

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<sup>37</sup> Sometimes spelt 'kataphatic'.

<sup>38</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Ignatian style meditation, for example. For a full discussion of this usage of cataphatic and apophatic and their relationship to *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* from the sixteenth century and the anonymous, fourteenth century *Cloud of Unknowing* see Frederick G. McLeod, 'Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer?', *Spirituality Today* (Spring, 1986), 38: 41-52.

<sup>40</sup> Although derived from the same Greek root as apophatic and cataphatic theologies, the terms apophatic and cataphatic as they relate to a spiritual discipline or practice of prayer are understood as described here.

<sup>41</sup> The 'nothingness' in the apophatic prayer experiences of Christian writers renowned for such practices through their writings—Teresa of Avila, St Bonaventure, the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* author, Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart—are discussed extensively by Beverly J. Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness: Towards a Theology of Radical Openness*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

a vacuum, which egoic self persistently attempts to colonise with thought. Apophatic awareness is sometimes termed ‘formless prayer’. Bourgeault states such descriptions are misleading, as

once a more subtle discrimination begins to develop ... we learn that apophatic prayer is far from either formless or empty. It, too, makes use of faculties, but ones that are much more subtle than we’re used to and which are normally blocked by an overreliance on our more usual mental and affective processing.<sup>42</sup>

Bourgeault presents cataphatic awareness alone as an ‘immature stage of practice’, appropriate to early faith, or times of woundedness in mature faith. Without movement from the ‘cataphatic safety zone’ towards apophatic awareness, Bourgeault cautions we ‘eventually limit the level of selfhood we are able to realize to the egoic self’,<sup>43</sup> never discovering subtle perceptive faculties that emerge as apophatic selfhood develops. Although such comments are sometimes interpreted to suggest greater worth is placed in the apophatic, this is misplaced. They are contrasting and complementary faithful practices, valued as different rather than relative disciplines. Using classical texts from Christian tradition which epitomise cataphatic and apophatic forms,<sup>44</sup> Frederick McLeod details their different approaches, refuting any notions of a hierarchical relationship: ‘*neither* ... is of itself necessarily of higher value. Faith is simply being experienced in different ways’.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Sarah Coakley acknowledges that, whilst advocating apophatic awareness may ‘smack

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<sup>42</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 32.

<sup>43</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 46 and 51.

<sup>44</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* and the anonymous fourteenth century *Cloud of Unknowing*, both published in a variety of editions.

<sup>45</sup> McLeod, ‘Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer?’, 52, emphasis in original.

suspiciously of elitist progressivism' to some, what their commendation 'most emphatically does *not* propound is the intrinsic spiritual superiority' of one over another.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.3.1 *External and internal silence*

Practices employing external silence are multiple and varied. Their objective is directing attention towards God. Clustering around withdrawal from or silencing of sounds external to self, some also limit visual stimulus by focussing on an object or closing the eyes. Whilst many entail physical stillness, some involve rhythmic bodily motions. Engaging egoic mind, self-awareness remains located in the realm of the cataphatic.

Several key themes emerged from the women's descriptions of practices incorporating external silence. Creating time for auditory silence apart from or within life's business and responsibilities, particularly 'multi-tasking/as a mother',<sup>47</sup> is crucial for re-connecting with self and God. As well as formal prayer times, journeys by car, bike, public transport and on foot are frequently set aside for this. Rhythmic, repetitive household tasks were identified as gateways into silence: most frequently cited were washing up, food preparation or ironing. These are 'very integrated', hidden practices which 'nobody notices' happening in the women's lives: they 'just sort of build those things in'.<sup>48</sup> These practices are valued particularly for enabling discrete connection with God in and amongst communal life. Rhythms of energetic activities like walking, jogging and gardening, or gentler actions

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<sup>46</sup> Sarah Coakley, 'Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology', in Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 93, emphasis in original.

<sup>47</sup> Dawn.

<sup>48</sup> All three comments by Ali.



involved in handicrafts offer similar, often more lengthy opportunities for re-connection.

Barbara's description typifies this use of external silence:

it's really good for my body to be doing something  
to still my mind  
hence the weaving and [laughs]  
the bread making and  
things where my  
my  
physical  
body  
is busy  
about some  
some  
some  
creative but not  
too consuming a task [laughs] ...  
to get myself out of thinking ...  
relink my brain with my body ...  
some sort of  
activity involved that's fairly  
erm mechanical like swimming ...  
I can pray and think and  
and  
be

External silence also enables time for practices involving focussed reflection on particular issues or engagement with scripture. Journaling, creative and poetic writing were frequently named as enabling reflection on significant events: such 'writing ... frees me/in a way/to move on'.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, walks in nature are valued for 'churning' or to 'chunter through' unprocessed experiences with God.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Alison.

<sup>50</sup> Sally and Rebecca.

Half the women identify either *lectio divina* or Ignatian style meditation having belonged within their practices.<sup>51</sup> Reflection using scripture or other writings aids the beginnings of movement beyond ordinary states of awareness by helping the women let go of internal distractions. It is preparatory to engagement in deeper silence, enabling the women's concerns and anxieties to dissipate: they 'get to a point where/it's all gone ... and sometimes then I can find the most/profound silences'.<sup>52</sup>

A final common theme in practices of external silence was ritual. Berry states ritual provides a framework 'beyond words, where symbols, bodily movement and symbolic actions' become 'vehicles of meaning'.<sup>53</sup> Ritual structures time in silence and creates opportunities to expand beyond word-based reflection. It enables expression of what the women cannot put into words, calling or responding to God through action. Their rituals include symbolic use of candles or natural objects, communicating or offering something to God. Gaynor's description of the significance of a specific location for silence was also typical: 'there is a *place [emphatically]*<sup>54</sup> ... I go to my place/I light my candle/I have the whole [*laughs*]/ritual'. A familiar place associates silence with safety or sanctuary, 'even when everything's kicking off outside that door'.<sup>55</sup> Frequent references to physical position indicated the women's bodies are also significant within their practices of silence. Their positions predominantly

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<sup>51</sup> Scripture meditation using *lectio divina* refers to a specific practice, as opposed to the limited, more general use of scripture within engagement in silence noted earlier in this chapter. The four stages of *lectio divina* are read; meditate; pray; contemplate. Although not necessarily followed in this order, movement is generally from active to more stilled mental activity. Ignatian-style meditation on scripture or other texts involves the reader imagining themselves in the role of a character present, or imagined by them, within the narrative. It is sometimes referred to as 'imaginative prayer'.

<sup>52</sup> Rebecca.

<sup>53</sup> Jan Berry, *Ritual Making Women: Shaping Rites for Changing Lives*, (London: Equinox, 2009), 2.

<sup>54</sup> All subsequent italics in extracts from interviews indicate these words were said with particular emphasis.

<sup>55</sup> Sian.

conformed with tradition—kneeling or sitting, alert but comfortable before God—  
contrasting with physically exerting practices noted above, less conventionally associated  
with silence. Una’s account offered an exception to customary body positions, revealing the  
impact of suddenly inability to attain a position used over decades:

I had various  
signals  
that silence was I mean I would  
I would squat on my heels  
and  
drop into a pool a dark pool  
when I was learning [*laughs*]  
and for years and years and years  
I I couldn’t really pray in any other  
way ...  
I had a hip operation when I was seventy-  
eight  
and I could no longer  
drop on my heels  
I was surprised by how difficult it was to get into the silence  
because my bodily  
hab  
habitual  
signal to myself ...  
was gone

Discussing ritual as performative, Berry states the need for attention to ‘what is done and enacted in ritual.’<sup>56</sup> The women’s rituals differentiate sacred space from the rest of their busy lives. Berry portrays the physical and time-limited boundaries of ritual creating safe space within which women express, confront and negotiate feelings and experiences.<sup>57</sup> Demarcating periods of time and physical space for silence and making these known to others—where necessary—facilitates the women’s engagement in their practices. Rituals of

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<sup>56</sup> Berry, *Ritual Making Women*, 201.

<sup>57</sup> Berry, *Ritual Making Women*, 2.

time and place enact outward, visible signs that their silence is underway and that this sacred space should be respected as inviolable.

Practices of internal silence contrast with those rooted in external silence. Meditative or contemplative in nature, they tend away from ordinary egoic awareness of cataphatic prayer towards apophatic suspension of thought. Considered alongside Wolfson's 'bulge theory',<sup>58</sup> they indicate intimate relationship with God. Usage of the terms 'meditation' and 'contemplation' varies considerably. Coakley portrays 'meditation' as 'discursive reflection on scripture' and 'contemplation' as merely 'wordless prayer', within which she includes practices like using 'a repeated phrase', or mantra.<sup>59</sup> Coakley's depiction of 'contemplation' would, therefore, include many practices termed 'meditation' in my preferred understanding, rooted in François de Sales' distinction: here, 'meditation' refers to practices drawing on mental activity, however limited, rendering them cataphatic; 'contemplation' moves beyond mental activity and self-conscious thought, and is therefore apophatic.<sup>60</sup> This distinction will be used throughout this study. Although meditators often use both terms interchangeably, contemplatives usually use these terms with consistency. Whether seeking internal silence through meditative or contemplative practices, external silence is also

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<sup>58</sup> Wolfson, 'The Bulge', 21-38. Wolfson's theory indicates increased silence between intimates.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Coakley, 'Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of "Vulnerability" in Christian Feminist Writing', in Daphne Hampson, ed., *Swallowing A Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, (London: 1996, SPCK, 1996), these references, 107-109. In critiquing Daphne Hampson's feminist rejection of *kenosis* (usually translated as 'self-emptying') as an unhelpful paradigm for women, Coakley identifies six different historic strands of understanding of *kenosis* as a speculative christological theory, rooted in the term's only New Testament usage in Philippians 2: 5-7. For Hampson's original text, see Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 155.

<sup>60</sup> A discussion of François de Sales' contribution to the development of the distinction between meditative and contemplative practices is found in MacCulloch, *Silence*, 82-83.

usually sought, although those long established in internal silence can sustain this despite external distractions.

Bourgeault sub-divides practices of internal silence into three types, naming these from the mental approach applied.<sup>61</sup> Firstly, *concentrative* methods, familiar within eastern spiritual traditions, but also practiced within Christianity. This broad area of practice limits mental activity. They use an anchor-point for focussing attention, to which the mind is returned from any wanderings. Typical focal-points are breathing patterns, a body part or a specific object. In others concentrative methods, repeating a mantra, aloud or silently, is focal.<sup>62</sup> Such practices within Christianity include the Jesus Prayer,<sup>63</sup> rosary, or Christian meditation as advocated by Main.<sup>64</sup> All were named by several women and identified as valuable 'to pare away/the words/and language/going on in my head' and in 'stopping just/the endless flow of/words'.<sup>65</sup> Uniquely, Mary identified using a word 'more like an icon', settling with 'one word/for an hour'. Functioning as a central point, new associations emerge like contour lines encircling a mountain summit on an Ordinance Survey map. In generating fresh connections, Mary's practice appears opposite to those focusing attention by limiting mental activity. However, it is valued for the focus and visionary insights brought to activities which are a practical outworking of Mary's faith.

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<sup>61</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 20-21.

<sup>62</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 20.

<sup>63</sup> An ongoing repetition of the phrase 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner', or its diminutions in various forms, most simply reduced to 'Jesus'. See Sjögren, *The Jesus Prayer*. Mental repetition of 'Jesus' as a meditative practice has been advocated within Eastern Christianity since the fourth century monastic founder, Macarius the Egyptian. See MacCulloch, *Silence*, 76-77.

<sup>64</sup> This particular practice teaches the ongoing repetition of a mantra, such as the Aramaic word, 'Maranatha' — 'Come, Lord'. It is particularly promoted by The World Community for Christian Meditation following the teachings advocated by John Main, *Word into Silence*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980).

<sup>65</sup> Rebecca and Mary.

A quarter of the women expressed eventual dissatisfaction with concentrative methods, which ceased corresponding with emergent ways of relating to God. Their focus shifted to Bourgeault's second and third categories, retaining body or visual based practices and external silence as preparatory to these internal silences, as Merton suggests.<sup>66</sup> Increasingly drawn towards contemplation, they rarely abandon earlier practices that formed and shaped them, just as 'a concert pianist never ceases from the mundane, and often tedious, practice of scales'.<sup>67</sup>

Bourgeault's second type, *awareness* methods, are frequently associated with Buddhist meditation. In awareness practices self is aligned with an 'inner observer', paying attention to internal shifts as thoughts and emotions emerge, form and dissipate. Egoic mind observes, sometimes naming its observations.<sup>68</sup> This is a method for learning radical separation from pure psychological being, allowing movement into deeper self-awareness. With limited exceptions, awareness methods were absent from the women's descriptions. A former Buddhist, Julay used awareness meditation for ten years but, as with mantras, eventually found this unsatisfying. Sally and Ali described irregular times of turning awareness towards internal observation. Both identified needing to 'acknowledge' and 'integrate' or incorporate what they perceive, allowing this to be 'encompassed' by the mystery of God's presence, but do not use these methods regularly. Claire's practice seems nearest to awareness methods. When thoughts or feelings emerge in silence she will

notice them

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<sup>66</sup> Merton's perception is discussed in Teahan, 'The Place of Silence', 98.

<sup>67</sup> Coakley, 'Deepening Practices', 90.

<sup>68</sup> Bourgeault gives the example of 'angry thinking'.

and name them  
and almost acknowledge and even befriend them  
and then  
to let go ...  
gradually inviting them  
to take a seat for a while

However, Claire's practice does not fit awareness methods completely, straddling Bourgeault's final category, below. Bourgeault describes awareness adherents developing 'a laser-like clarity and a fierce, unshakable *presence*.'<sup>69</sup> The women's minimal engagement in awareness practices may relate to discrepancies between the 'fruits' Bourgeault indicates and their hopes for engagement in, or reasons for valuing silence. These tend away from sharp, personal focus towards gentler qualities of acceptance and nurture of self and other, using silence to convey the empathy, support and respect Hill et al identified amongst therapists from non-psychoanalytical approaches.<sup>70</sup>

Bourgeault's last type, *surrender* methods, bypass any focussed attention. These are characterised as prayer "'not of attention, but of intention"'.<sup>71</sup> Allaying such practice with *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Bourgeault names their effectiveness as the 'gesture of release' of all thoughts as soon as these becomes apparent—what *The Cloud* author describes as 'naked intent direct to God.'<sup>72</sup> Bourgeault's discussion focusses on Centering Prayer: a specific

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<sup>69</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 21, emphasis in original.

<sup>70</sup> Hill et al, 'Therapist Use of Silence'.

<sup>71</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 21, referencing Thomas Keating. Bourgeault does not give an exact reference, but similar statements by him are found in Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995), 39 and 51.

<sup>72</sup> Bourgeault quotes the translation by Ira Progoff, ed. and trans., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, (New York, NY: Delta Books, 1957), 76.

practice belonging to *surrender* methods.<sup>73</sup> Following earlier aborted use of *concentrative* and *awareness* methods, this practice has become central for several women.

After Julay's decade of Buddhist concentrative meditation ended in re-conversion, delight at discovering similar Christian meditation was short-lived. Using mantras or awareness methods became 'uncomfortable', seeming 'in many ways/identical' to 'godless' Zen, 'just using different words': they did not help engage with God, whom she now believed existed. Julay's description of Centering Prayer<sup>74</sup> is an evocative portrayal of shifting from the edges of egoic awareness into apophatic silence.

I would  
say to myself 'ok I'm gonna give  
the next  
twenty minutes' ...  
let go of everything else  
and just  
be still  
and  
allow  
God  
to be God ...  
for quite a while  
there'd be  
sort of random sort of  
thoughts  
and all sorts of rubbish ...  
I would be aware  
that the thoughts  
would be becoming  
kind of  
less coherent  
more

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<sup>73</sup> It is associated with practice outlined by the author of *The Cloud*, developed in the latter half of the twentieth century by Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington. For more detailed descriptions of Centering Prayer see Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, or Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*.

<sup>74</sup> Here edited to less than half its original length.



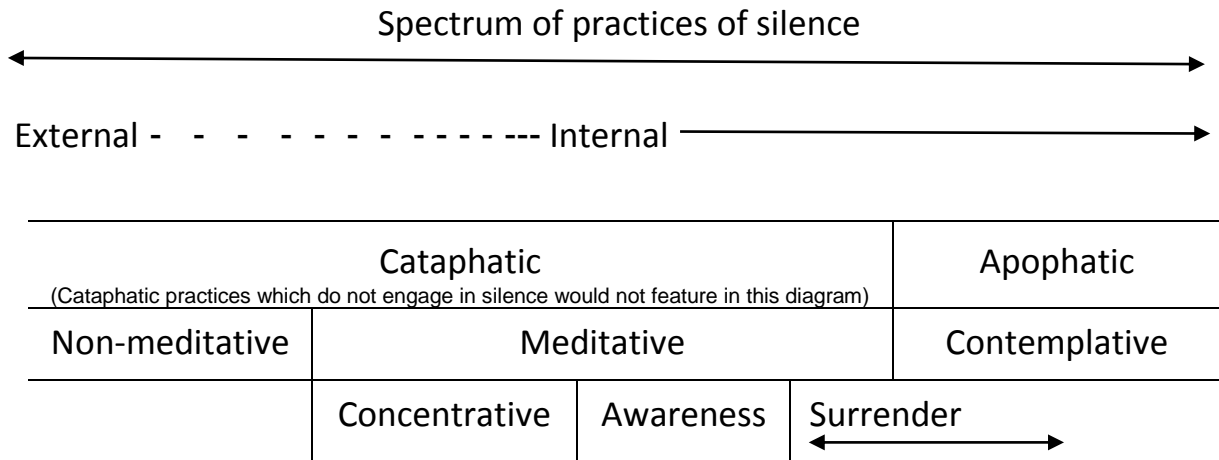
like fragmentary  
and eventually  
this sense that  
y'know they're not  
that they're just beginning  
and I can now  
sort of follow them or I can not ...  
there is a point  
where  
there is  
silence  
y'know  
there there is not actually anything  
bubbling up  
there is just  
complete  
sort of peacefulness and silence  
and at that point ...  
you just rest  
rest in it ...  
and come in and out of it and  
till the time's up

Bourgeault's depictions of concentrative, awareness and surrender methods exposes demarcation between external and internal silence as misleading. Rather, all practices of silence occur within a spectrum moving from one towards the other. As Jaworski proposes, silence has its own continuum, separate from any associated with speech.<sup>75</sup> Terms applied to the types of practice span different areas of the spectrum. The diagram below shows the areas they occupy, demonstrating how these terminologies can be understood in relation to one another.

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<sup>75</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 44-45.

Diagram 1: Spectrum of practices of silence



On the left is external auditory silence, with varying degrees of inclusions and exclusion. Central, meditative practices operate across external and internal silence, which Bourgeault’s descriptions help clarify are more porous and imprecise than binary terminology implies. All meditative practices are cataphatic, whilst contemplation is apophatic. Meditation equating to Bourgeault’s concentrative methods is located within the cataphatic. Although awareness methods are located within cataphatic meditation they move towards apophatic silence and contemplation. McLeod’s description of cataphatic and apophatic practices as ‘neatly distinguishable’<sup>76</sup> contrasts with Bourgeault’s presentation: surrender methods are initially meditative, but traverse into contemplation and apophatic awareness.<sup>77</sup> Sharing Bourgeault’s assessment, I represent them straddling the cataphatic and apophatic realms. This placement recognises that although egoic self emerges in

<sup>76</sup> McLeod, ‘Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer?’, 51.

<sup>77</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 21 and 50.

thought, feeling and sensation within surrender methods, a gesture of intent instantly releases these, redirecting awareness back towards contemplation. Surrender methods occupy movement from cataphatic meditation into apophatic contemplation, from egoic assertion to the beginnings of egoic surrender. Inhabiting liminal space at indistinct borderlands, they oscillate between cataphatic and apophatic awareness. As contemplative silence becomes established, awareness located in egoic self ceases and subtle perceptions only available to apophatic awareness emerge.

Most women's practices spanned the cataphatic range portrayed in the diagram. Half also described practices indicating movement into apophatic awareness. As specific internal processes associated with these practices were not individually explored in detail, it is impossible to locate them further with certainty.<sup>78</sup> However, from descriptions their practices appear comparatively fluid and undifferentiated, as Claire acknowledged: 'in some ways/the distinction/is unreal/'cause/they do/all these types of silence they merge/into one another'. It is probable that in one period the women move in different directions within the cataphatic section of the spectrum as they enter, settle into and emerge from silence. Women who intentionally engage in practices drawing them into the apophatic may not always make the associated shift of awareness. Conversely, women whose practice is not intentionally contemplative may pass into liminal space where the apophatic and cataphatic bleed into each other, and encounter unsought contemplation.

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<sup>78</sup> The interview time needed to allow a detailed categorisation of each practice with each individual was not appropriate to this initial, broad research into women's practices of silence.

Unsurprisingly, women whose silence leads into contemplation did not describe specific practices for this. By definition, apophatic awareness cannot occur through egoic effort. Its slipping beyond self-consciousness happens outwith practice, other than intent to release any emergent thought.<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth likened drifting into contemplation to writing poetry. Acknowledging ‘there are practices that one can do’ to develop writing and movement towards contemplative silence, she continued, ‘but the thing itself you can’t really/erm/choose to/achieve’. Instead, contemplation is like ‘when ... a poem arrives’ and ‘works’ without any ‘technique’: it is not something to ‘go fishing for’ and cannot ‘be forced’. As Teresa of Avila recognised, in contemplation, the ‘source of water is right there, and the trough fills without any noise.’<sup>80</sup> Contemplation’s arrival is gift ‘in the deepest sense imaginable’.<sup>81</sup> Coakley notes temptation to regard cataphatic practices ‘as entirely self-propelled’ when beginning to engage in them.<sup>82</sup> Gradually, practices necessitating ‘more demanding levels of response to divine grace’ are encountered, slowly uncovering ‘fundamental reliance’ on God if engagement in them is to continue. Coakley suggests even sceptical outsiders have to acknowledge that within the apophatic ‘the ostensibly bland term “practice” must give place to an overt theology of grace.’<sup>83</sup> Contemplation is

strictly speaking, God’s practice *in* humans—a more unimpeded or conscious form of that distinctive human receptivity to grace that has sustained the process all along and that is itself a divine gift.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Bourgeault discusses questions concerning ‘who’ is aware of the emergence of any thought or sensation and making the choice to let these go. See Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 37-41.

<sup>80</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle, The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Volume 2, Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, trans., (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987), 283, reference by Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 111.

<sup>81</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Foreword’, in Ross, *Silence*, x.

<sup>82</sup> Coakley, ‘Deepening Practices’.

<sup>83</sup> Coakley, ‘Deepening Practices’, 80.

<sup>84</sup> Coakley, ‘Deepening Practices’, 92.

In this, contemplation resonates with Kwiatkowska's depiction of 'cognitive silence', foregrounding ever-present Divine grace as egoic self-awareness is surrendered.<sup>85</sup>

Nancy's description of contemplation affirms Elizabeth's portrayal of its effortless arrival and Coakley's insistence it occurs through divine grace. She implies why the apophatic is sometimes described as a place of nothingness and can even lead to *The Other Side of Nothingness*, as Lanzetta proposes:<sup>86</sup>

Nancy: inner silence is a very still place indeed

erm  
a very quiet place

A: how does- how do you experience that?

Nancy: [*big breath intake, then sigh*] (5)

mmm (3)  
do you mean what does it feel like?

A: possibly

Nancy: because sometimes it's diff- it's a bit difficult to describe it as an experience—  
it's almost a non-experience

A: mmm? [*with upwards inflection: a question*]

Nancy: because everything else is so very experienced it's almost like the counter  
point to  
normality

[*sighs*]  
if I said 'what does it feel like?'  
I think I'd have to say (5.5)

it's  
a deep and a  
it's a deep place  
and sometimes it's dark  
and sometimes it's light ...  
more like a place of ultimate encounter where you feel you can't go any  
any further ...  
it's absolutely where you  
you cannot make anything happen and you don't even want to because  
you've gone beyond that ...

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<sup>85</sup> Kwiatkowska, 'Silence Across Modalities'.

<sup>86</sup> Lanzetta, *Nothingness*. However, compare Bourgeault's rejection of such language as misleading, discussed earlier in this chapter.

maybe it's just the way we use the word experience but you tend to think of  
experience as associated with  
going through something or doing something or  
being proactive ...  
and this is not  
proactive it's  
just  
it's a  
almost like erm  
the sheer being of it  
the beingness of it  
rather than  
experiencing ...  
happening ...  
an existing thing rather than a  
a doing thing

As writings of mystics throughout the centuries reveal, contemplation is not formless, nothingness or darkness. Were it so, any descriptions would be impossible: they would be utterly inaccessible to awareness. Rather, this language reflects the negation of egoic awareness 'because you have to try to describe it somehow'. Nancy is aware of being and existing, but rejects entering the apophatic as something known with normal perceptions. She used metaphors of 'different/colour', 'burning/whiteness', 'different/timbre' or 'going under water' to intimate her glimpses of contemplation's subtle perceptions.<sup>87</sup> Bourgeault's statement pinpoints the difficulty: 'The cataphatic cannot watch the apophatic'.<sup>88</sup> The structures of self cannot observe their surrender: this instantly pulls them back to egoic consciousness. Egoic desire to witness its own contraction reveals its determination to maintain control by restating self-awareness: it will not voluntarily relinquish existence to

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<sup>87</sup> The section of transcript quoted above is edited down from a longer passage in which these references occur.

<sup>88</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 38.

consciousness where its participation is unrequired and which occurs more readily in its absence.

Lanzetta describes contemplation as a 'revolutionary act', subverting the tedium of contemporary existence.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Ross states surrendering egoic self is a 'subversive act' in today's culture of accelerating consumerism sustained by the commodification and subsequent dehumanisation of people.<sup>90</sup> Lanzetta asserts contemplation is particularly subversive 'for women, especially those who labor to raise children, work, and tend to families'. Echoing Boyce-Tillman's statement that contemplatives increasingly live in the midst of urban communities,<sup>91</sup> Lanzetta continues,

Bombarded daily with conflicting cultural commitments and media images ascribed to females, most women probably do not ... believe they are capable of leading a contemplative life. However, unlike our spiritual predecessors, women today do not need to confine themselves to a cloister or cloak themselves in religious clothing to live in a contemplative way.<sup>92</sup>

Flanagan's depiction of past and contemporary women's contemplative lives as a 'solitude of the heart' flowing out into wider community engagement,<sup>93</sup> is also evoked by Lanzetta. She suggests that through contemplation, 'a woman's relationship to the world is shifted from being primarily other-directed, to focussing on an interior solitude from which flows the richness and pleasure of all relations', with God, self and others.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 168.

<sup>90</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 11.

<sup>91</sup> June Boyce-Tillman, 'Foreword', xiv.

<sup>92</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 168.

<sup>93</sup> Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 4-5.

<sup>94</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 168.

### 3.3.2 *Individual and corporate silence*

The second pairing of apparently opposing categories into which practices of silence fall are individual and corporate silence. Maitland portrays individual practices as rooted in the eremitic tradition,<sup>95</sup> typified in images of a solitary at prayer, waiting for their cell to teach them everything;<sup>96</sup> or of Jesus' instruction to the disciples, 'Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door';<sup>97</sup> or Jesus' own silence, alone in the desert, on the Mount of Olives, or some other 'deserted place'.<sup>98</sup> Many of the women's practices of individual silence are represented in the discussion of internal and external silence, above. Further specifics of their individual practices will emerge in subsequent chapters. Cumulatively, these offer substantial insight into the women's individual practices.

Within Western Christianity corporate silence is rarely discussed in detail. It is unfamiliar, poorly understood and less established than individual silence. Whatever corporate practices are used, their central feature is that Christians gather in sustained, intentional silence, primarily to be attentive to God. Invitations to collective silence within liturgy are customary, but usually too brief for any practice of meditation or contemplation. Other comparatively familiar examples are the periods of silence observed during Taizé worship or

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<sup>95</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 189-222.

<sup>96</sup> 'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything', is the well-known and often quoted counsel of one of the Desert Fathers, Abba Moses, to a brother who came to visit him at Scetis. See Benedicta Ward, *Selections from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publication, 1975), 48.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew 6: 6.

<sup>98</sup> Matthew 14:13; Mark 1: 35; Luke 4: 42 and Luke 5: 16. However, McCulloch discusses whether Jesus' 'withdrawal', as portrayed in Matthew's gospel, was deliberately seeking spiritual sustenance, or whether this is more correctly understood as strategic withdrawal from society echoing Mary and Joseph's flight to Egypt. See MacCulloch, *Silence*, 37-38.



notional understandings of 'silent' Quaker worship.<sup>99</sup> Although corporate silence varies more than these limited perceptions suggest, for these women, and most Christians, opportunities for participation in sustained corporate silence are relatively scarce. Ongoing, small-group gatherings for corporate silence primarily occur within networks established to foster meditative or contemplative prayer. Some support practitioners of specific methods, such as meditation practices rooted in Main's teachings, or Centering Prayer. At other groups, such as Julian Meetings, participants gather in silence but may not share a common practice.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, quiet services or retreats may include times of corporate silence, but these are predominantly occasional experiences rather than regular disciplines.

The women's experience of and participation in corporate silence varies considerably. For three Quakers, their primary practice of silence is corporate, weekly Meeting. Only one other woman regularly participates in any other corporate silence group. Six have sporadically attended Taizé services and four have visited the Taizé community in France on several occasions. Retreats of differing kinds give most women regular, if infrequent, opportunities for corporate silence. Beyond these, the women share silence with others in small, irregular pockets of time, offered unexpectedly in faith-based study days or workshops, reflective, non-traditional services, or in intimate, small groups of friends or close family. For most, corporate silence is an adjunct to their individual practices. Several

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<sup>99</sup> Although Quakerism has its own body of extensive writings, these are rarely discussed in any detail within other Christian theological discourse.

<sup>100</sup> Current UK bodies who facilitate corporate silence and any specifics of their practice can be found on The Retreat Association website: <http://www.retreats.org.uk/leaflets.html>. This indicates seven such bodies, collectively with around 850 groups throughout the UK. Advertised gatherings range from weekly to as infrequently as once each quarter.

commented similarly to Sally that ‘silence with other people’ is something ‘I/very rarely choose’. Comparative unfamiliarity with corporate silence may contribute to why a significant proportion prefer individual silence. Many also stated they often find corporate silence difficult, uncomfortable, unsatisfying or frustrating.<sup>101</sup>

Although rarely acknowledged, an important distinction exists between an experience of corporate silence and a practice of silence experienced corporately. In corporate silence several different practices may be exercised, ranging across the spectrum of cataphatic and apophatic disciplines already discussed. Julian Meetings explicitly function in this way: ‘We do not teach any particular method of meditation ... We encourage people to find out what is right for them’.<sup>102</sup> Conversely, in groups intentionally supporting one practice, such as Centering Prayer, all participants use the same practice, whilst also corporately sharing silence. Although Claire prefers individual over corporate silence, she identified the ‘intensity’ of corporately practicing Centering Prayer as something of real ‘value’. Claire described this as

an  
almost overpowering experience...  
not just by being drawn into a centred place  
but the power  
of that happening  
with  
lots of other people in that one place

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<sup>101</sup> This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

<sup>102</sup> See <http://www.thejulianmeetings.net/about-meetings/4587239243>.

As Jaworski identified, absolutist views of silence are undermined by acknowledging that qualitative and quantitative changes in any silence are subjectively perceived by each individual.<sup>103</sup> Even when a practice is used corporately, participants experience corporate silence, and their own practice within it, differently. Further complexity operates during silent Ignatian retreats.<sup>104</sup> Starting at the same point as others for each exercise, participants are guided in using the same meditative practices, but follow their own journey within each time of meditation. Silence is corporate, the overarching practice held in common, the retreat structure shared,<sup>105</sup> but each person's experience is unique.

This almost paradoxical dichotomy around corporate silence and its interplay with individual and corporate practice was commented on by Nancy: 'Corporate silence/I think is a funny thing/it's actually quite difficult to achieve it'. Its complexity is seen in contrasting comments by Mary and Sally, typifying reflections of other women. For Mary, the vital element of a 'gathered Meeting'<sup>106</sup> amongst Quakers is that it is 'not individualised and not about/separating yourself off from other people'. Again reflecting Searl's findings about the centrality of the collective, social meaning of silence in Meeting,<sup>107</sup> Mary continued, 'it's important that it's/communal ... so/it's/not something that's/y'know/a/nice experience for

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<sup>103</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 41.

<sup>104</sup> These focus on working through the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, usually over 30 days. Some settings also offer these sub-divided into two or three retreats spread over a period of months. The spiritual exercises can also be completed in the 'nineteenth annotation'. This refers to Ignatius Loyola's nineteenth note on completing the exercises, stating that those who cannot make a retreat from life can complete the exercises within their daily routine.

<sup>105</sup> Participants on Ignatian retreats usually eat together in silence, see a spiritual director daily, and attend the round of daily offices as appropriate to each retreat house or monastic community.

<sup>106</sup> This term is used by Quakers to describe 'the state of a meeting for worship when most of those present experience a condition of deep inner quiet, waiting wordlessly before God ... experiencing an invisible connection with the Divine and with one another.' In Margery Post Abbott, Mary Ellen Chijioko, Pink Dandelion and John William Oliver, *The A to Z of the Friends (Quakers)*, (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 118.

<sup>107</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 62.

me'. Sally spoke of silence that punctuates the repetitive, simple chants of Taizé worship as 'solitude ... sat in a church full of/thousands'. Like Sally, nearly all these women find corporate silence helpful in fostering individual practice through engagement in silence at the same time. Their perceptions differ subtly from Searl's findings amongst Quakers, where Meeting is understood as a shared 'container' for intentional corporate waiting upon God, even if the practices of doing this are individual.<sup>108</sup>

Often, encounter with sustained corporate silence first occurred as part of day or weekend retreats. Prior to attending such retreats many women's individual practice of silence varied from being occasional to regular parts of life. However, it was common to their descriptions that corporate silence on retreat had been catalytic in beginning to practice individual silence in a more disciplined way, or deepening their engagement in an established practice. Rachel's retreat journey typified many. Her prayer life had been predominantly 'about/words'. Ordination training invited engagement with spirituality in different ways, through poetry and art in particular, and she felt increasingly 'liberated from words'. Rachel's exploration of silence was 'inextricably linked with ... going/away' on retreat. Over a few years she has 'gone gradually' and 'chosen/increasing/amounts of/silence'. Her first was a guided retreat at a Franciscan friary:<sup>109</sup>

at meal times  
you met people  
and usually they were talking meals ...  
there was tea and coffee time  
so I could go and get company

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<sup>108</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 67.

<sup>109</sup> On guided retreats participants usually see a spiritual director, accompanist or friend for around an hour each day. The preferred terminology for this supportive role changes between institutions and individuals.

Later, she went to

a retreat in a house  
that was kept silent  
so you were  
with other people you didn't know  
but you were silent

In her early retreats Rachel would 'just get/fed up' with silence and 'switched the television on and watched/rubbish TV/and then regretted it'. Most recently,

this last time  
was the first time that I've  
been  
to  
a place where  
not only is it silent but you hardly see anybody ...  
that was another step  
going and being  
almost  
completely by yourself as well

Beginning in corporate silence, over several years Rachel gradually took bigger steps into silence on retreat. Although retreats became incrementally more solitary for Rachel and other women in terms of physical proximity to and time with others, initial, supportive experiences of corporate silence on retreat are remembered appreciatively. They are credited as significant stepping stones for developing deeper individual practices of silence and, for three quarters of the women, regularly attending silent retreats has become the norm.

Many people suppose Quaker worship to epitomise corporate silence within a faith community.<sup>110</sup> However, theologian and life-long Quaker, Rachel Muers, writes that Quaker worship can only be ‘imprecisely described as “silent”’.<sup>111</sup> Friends gather to better hear, give voice to and discern God’s will, offering what they hear in silence as spoken Ministry.<sup>112</sup> Muers writes ‘words may be spoken in all the various moods characteristic of liturgical worship ... praise, affirmation of faith, the giving of testimony; the optatives of prayer; the imperatives of exhortation or command; and so forth’.<sup>113</sup> God’s ‘communion ... inspiration and guidance’<sup>114</sup> is sought corporately in silence, encountered individually and communicated to those gathered, ostensibly in response to prompting by the Holy Spirit.

When describing Quaker Meeting to others, Mary does not say ‘it’s silent worship’ but ‘unprogrammed worship based on/silence’ which ‘starts out with silence and is framed with silence and/silence is/integral to what’s going on’. Her description is carefully worded to counter perceptions of Meeting as some form of emptiness. As corporate silence is foundational to Quaker worship, many non-Quakers presume their practice extends beyond individual listening to God. This is not necessarily the case amongst contemporary Friends. Dandelion demonstrates how their corporate liturgy no longer seeks corporate, transcendent experience of God, as amongst ‘early’ Quakers.<sup>115</sup> Now it is primarily located

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<sup>110</sup> Whilst others may point to professed religious communities, members of these orders have been excluded from this research. Quaker practice is probably the most familiar example of corporate silence apart from these communities.

<sup>111</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 150.

<sup>112</sup> See Dandelion, *Social Analysis*, 15.

<sup>113</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 150.

<sup>114</sup> *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 2: 16.

<sup>115</sup> Dandelion describes early Quakers as referring specifically to those from the 1650’s and 1660’s. See Dandelion, *Liturgies of Quakerism*, 5.

within the individually self-conscious, cataphatic realm of listening to God.<sup>116</sup> This shift reflects Bourgeault's statement that the 'deep and persistent proclivity' amongst Christians is 'to regard silence as a backdrop for ... "listening to God"', making it 'hard to erase this cataphatic programming from our hearts and our expectations.'<sup>117</sup>

The primary Quaker text, *Quaker Faith and Practice*, states silent worship should not be about concentrated mental isolation from others, but united, corporate endeavour:

'individual experience is not sufficient ... there is a giving and receiving between members ... in the depth of common worship it is as if we found our separate lives were all one life'.<sup>118</sup>

As 'birth' and long-term Quakers, respectively, it remains 'important' to Mary and Alison that Quaker silence is communal, not individual. For Mary, corporate silence is 'to do with the way ... one experiences the/presence of other people' because 'a gathered Meeting feels like a gathered Meeting ... regardless of/whether anybody's spoken'. It is 'not something that you can engineer' or 'the equivalent of being/on your own'. Challenging Dandelion's perceptions, Alison described the corporate silence of a gathered Meeting as

spiritual communion  
incredibly powerful  
connection with the people there at an unspoken depth

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<sup>116</sup> For a full discussion of the gradual shift in the focus and self-understanding of silence of Quaker worship as a liturgical form, see Dandelion, *Liturgies of Quakerism*. Dandelion demonstrates the movement in Quaker thought and practice away from an original intention that silence was a space of intimacy and communion with God to a position today where increasing numbers of Quakers claim no belief in God and place self at the centre of a private quest. See specifically 122-126, where, on 125 Dandelion writes, 'The seventeenth-century Quaker worship is about transformation, the nineteenth about purification, the twenty-first about aversion and restoration in the face of increasingly low internal integration and low levels of separation between participants and the world.'

<sup>117</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 43. In practices where the intent is *listening* to God, attention is necessarily directed towards receptivity of communication from God, thus always falling within the scope of the cataphatic. This is in contrast to the apophatic, which bypasses any engagement in focussed attention or the faculties of reason, emotions, memory, imagination and will.

<sup>118</sup> *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 2: 11 and 36.

united centred  
grounded ...  
transcendent ...  
it's extraordinary ...  
you can't have on your own  
that sense of ...  
togetherness

However, Michaela, a recent Quaker, observes increasingly individualistic silence in her Meeting. She categorised Quakers as either spiritual, religious, Christian or 'an awful lot of them who/have no belief in God and actually find the God language very difficult'. Her remarks resonate with Dandelion's assertion that Quaker silence—both of Meeting and the cultural silence of not discussing its meanings or their theology—can mask disunity.<sup>119</sup>

Michaela continued,

have thirty  
Quakers in a room and you'd have thirty different understandings of  
what meeting's about or what  
the silence is for or  
their  
understanding of  
the light  
God  
whatever

Yet, perhaps shockingly for long-standing Quakers rooted in Christianity, Michaela concluded 'that's great'. Her observations support Searl's findings that practices of silence and their associated beliefs are varied and individualised amongst contemporary Quakers, but understood as conducted within the intentionally corporate 'container' of silence.<sup>120</sup>

Kathryn Tanner's writing on the imperative for theological reflection on Christian corporate

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<sup>119</sup> Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 258 and *Liturgies of Quakerism*, 105.

<sup>120</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 67.



practices indicates the existence of such variety of understandings should not be startling. Tanner highlights that practices become 'undeveloped, ambiguous, or many sided' as numbers engaging in them grow, placing increasing pressure on maintaining the initial practices and associated beliefs or value commitments of the original group.<sup>121</sup> Dandelion proposes the drift towards individual belief and practice has drawn Meeting's silence away from the corporate, 'intimate transcendence' indicated in Alison's comments and sought by early Quakers. Instead, Meetings are slipping towards 'an individual event pointing ... to an intimate immanence, or even, in some cases, self-divinity.'<sup>122</sup> The conspiratorial look accompanying Alison's wry comment—'a lot of people feel moved to speak'—indicated her questioning of how much 'ministry' was superfluous, offered from egoic rather than divine motivation. This contrasts with Alison's care in speaking at Meeting, and its impact on her:

people  
interpret the urge to  
stand and speak in  
in many different ways  
but for me it's something that  
you really have to ...  
test  
whether you've  
actually been called to say something and  
and if you are  
and you get up it  
it costs something  
what you  
what you say  
you know it makes you vulnerable it  
it exp- I mean I say things in meeting for worship [*laughing*] and I  
often come out thinking 'oh my goodness ...  
how on earth did I have the courage to say that?'

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<sup>121</sup> Kathryn Tanner, 'Theological Reflection and Christian Practices', in Volf and Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology*, 230.

<sup>122</sup> Dandelion, *Liturgies of Quakerism*, 6.

Alison's feelings of vulnerability and costly self-exposure is radically other than any movement towards self-divinity and non-involvement identified by Dandelion. Yet given Alison's observations of the 'ministry' offered in Meeting, Dandelion's quotation from the annual Swarthmore Lecture some fifty years earlier is salutary: Quakers are cautioned against abandoning a corporate practice of silence, otherwise

worship will be nothing more than an unspoken exercise in the psychological game of free association—a succession of daydreams with a religious flavour. A silent meeting can have an air of outward sanctity, and yet be nothing more than a collection of inward chatterings.<sup>123</sup>

As with external and internal silence, the binary terms, 'individual' and 'corporate' silence do not adequately convey the diversity of these practices, or their interconnectedness. Early in my research I wondered whether practices of silence could be portrayed on an x-y graph.<sup>124</sup> It was in considering how the paradoxes of individual silence—which can be experienced as deeply connected to others—and corporate silence—which may consist of individual practices within shared silence—could be represented that I realised seeking such portrayal was futile. Although these terms inadequately convey the subtle complexities of practices of silence, they remain useful in drawing initial distinctions. Of necessity, they will be used as descriptors in my ongoing discussion. However, having highlighted the complexity of such practices, more nuanced perceptions must be taken into account whenever these terms occur.

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<sup>123</sup> T. F. Green, *Preparation for Worship*, Swarthmore Lecture, 1952, (London: Quaker Home Service, 1983), 13-14, referenced in Dandelion, *Liturgies of Quakerism*, 120.

<sup>124</sup> Where horizontal and vertical axes bisect each other, usually centrally, forming a cross shape. I considered plotting external and internal practices from top and bottom of the vertical, with individual and corporate practices left to right across the horizontal.

### 3.4 Difficulties in maintaining practices of silence

Almost all the women spoke of silence as scarce. Finding external silence is difficult in their mostly suburban or city-dwelling lives. Undesirable sounds, from barking home-alone dogs to wailing emergency vehicles, were described as ‘horrible’ and intrusive ‘noise pollution’, invading their desired auditory silence.<sup>125</sup> Even when Michaela lived as a non-religious within a monastic community, ‘silence was a thing that you grabbed and you got, rather than it was easy’. In an age where ‘instant gratification, instant messaging, twenty-four hour news’ clamour for their attention,<sup>126</sup> many acknowledged not setting appropriate limits on their internet, television, radio or mobile phone usage. Rachel articulated the tension between silence she wants, yet fails to take:

I’m  
sometimes in this house by myself  
why  
therefore  
do I go and  
switch on the radio or switch on the tv? ...  
I don’t know why I do that  
but I do ...  
if you ask me ‘well why  
why don’t you extend the blessings of it<sup>127</sup> more generally into your life?’ I mean  
partly it is because it’s full but  
it’s a weird thing that I erm  
I don’t take the opportunities for silence that I could

Given its scarcity, the women have to proactively ‘make space for silence’.<sup>128</sup> Alison had ‘been meaning to do it for years’ but until the last few, when her children reached junior

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<sup>125</sup> Sally and Catriona.

<sup>126</sup> Rhona.

<sup>127</sup> Referring to silence.

<sup>128</sup> Rhona.

school age, had 'not found a way to build it into my life'. Many, like Alison, found it difficult to discuss with families their desire for time in silence:

I felt a bit  
shy  
a bit inhibited  
erm  
to kind of declare that space from the family  
and yet  
it's been  
really really beneficial

Having established silence within daily life, Alison recognised with regret that her anxiety and hesitation to ask for what she needed had been unnecessary:

within the immediate  
family it's  
very interesting  
how once I had the courage  
to say  
I'm going to go off  
and be quiet  
erm  
how easy it  
it is  
I mean  
you wonder [*laughing*] why it's taken you so long

Despite this, Alison's description of a silent retreat revealed she can still be overwhelmed by an imperative to place the needs of her just pre-teenage children and husband ahead of her own:

I'd been thinking  
'how  
could I give more time  
to the members of my family?' ...

I was going to ask them all  
'if there's one thing I could  
spend more time doing *with you*'  
y'know 'what would you like it to be?'  
and she [*the retreat director*] said something about  
'beware of being too generous with your time'  
and I  
realized that  
y'know in fact  
what I needed to do was to [*laughs*]  
take more time for my  
self and  
hold it and  
not be  
giving it away: and in fact they  
just automatically  
sap it [*laughing*]

Although heeding the director's caution, Alison still maintains the 'vow' made when beginning her daily practice of silence—that she 'wouldn't be/completely uninterruptable' for her family:

if one of the boys  
really needed something  
y'know I would  
I would respond  
I wouldn't ignore them: I wouldn't say 'go away' ...  
I sort of made a decision  
in one sense  
about the boundaries weren't going to be  
absolute

For all the women, maintaining regular silence amidst busy schedules and family responsibilities takes effort, flexibility and courage. The biggest barrier is giving themselves permission to allocate time to their own needs, particularly for working mothers or those with caring responsibilities. Their flexibility concerning boundaries around needs and desires

evokes Ladany et al's finding: female therapists far less frequently reported using silence to create boundaries with clients—those they 'care' for.<sup>129</sup> Amongst these women, silence is rarely imposed or demanded in the self-protective way Ladany et al report amongst men. When time-pressured, the women's practices become predominantly small pockets of silence: as Catriona commented, 'sometimes/a minute/30 seconds/is all you have/and you just have to take it'. Many expressions of desires to be 'able to practice it more/regularly/maybe when the kids have left home' reveals the level of practice currently sustained is less than many women would choose.<sup>130</sup> Several identified that sometimes it requires a partner to recognise their need and take on caring responsibilities—for a while—to enable them to create time for silence.

Quakers and non-Quakers long for aspects of corporate silence unsatisfied by their own worship. From a distance, each other's worship seems desirable. Non-Quakers expressed frustration at insufficient modelling, teaching or support for engaging in silence within their faith communities. Repeatedly, they described going to church and 'wishing for silence', for silence being 'wanted'.<sup>131</sup> They 'long for less noise' and 'would value more/silence within/organised worship' because there is 'not enough room/for silence'.<sup>132</sup> In liturgy 'the silences/are/usually very/token', with insufficient silence to give 'space/for processing' what resonates for them within the service.<sup>133</sup> Desiring greater silence and less sound than the norms Jaworski highlights as being socially prescribed in any given culture, they experience

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<sup>129</sup> Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives'.

<sup>130</sup> Rachel.

<sup>131</sup> Lynne.

<sup>132</sup> Barbara, Claire and Rhona.

<sup>133</sup> Alison and Lynne.

marginalisation and/or alienation from their worshipping communities.<sup>134</sup> Some commented on this with humour. As Sally observed, even when people are invited to hold silence in church ‘it’s literally like two seconds ... I’ve only just started to go into the silence/and it makes me laugh’. Jennie Knight reports similar frustrations amongst participants in her research into women’s images of God. They criticise churches for being ‘too much in the head’: worship is centred on the words of orders of service, leaving insufficient time for silence, which Knight’s research participants value as opportunities to engage with God creatively. Without silence, services reinforce their childhood images of ‘the white, male, ruler God that they have been painstakingly trying to dethrone with other, more life-giving images’.<sup>135</sup>

Amongst my research group, several women were considering attending Quaker Meeting to resolve frustration at minimal silences in church worship. However, longer-term Quakers—Mary and Alison—identified different difficulties when framing worship within silence. For Mary, expectation surrounding the silence of Meeting sometimes ‘gets in the way’. The absence of non-verbal outlets for expressing feelings, particularly of joy or happiness, results in her ‘bottling stuff up ... not properly acknowledging’ these emotions. Conversely, Alison said Meeting ‘can be dreadful’ during times of emotional pain, leaving her ‘locked up in the misery’, which silence seems to ‘make more obvious’. She felt the comfort of familiar imagery in hymns or liturgy would support sorrow better than Quaker Meeting. Her perceptions challenge undeveloped statements about the value of practices of silence made

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<sup>134</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 45.

<sup>135</sup> Jennie S. Knight, *Feminist Mysticism and Images of God: A Practical Theology*, (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2011), 157.

by some practical and feminist theologians.<sup>136</sup> Without nuanced discussion of the need for silence to be attended by non-verbal symbolism and ritual, as suggested by Walton and Berry,<sup>137</sup> feminist theology's limited acknowledgement of the worth of silence is perfunctory. Similarly, both Mary and Alison's experiences challenge the appropriateness of Searl's assertion that silence is an effective container.<sup>138</sup>

Although practices of other forms of worship may tantalise, sustained engagement with them may eventually expose a new array of inadequacies: the dissatisfaction expressed by non-Quakers may eventually also be experienced by them in Quaker worship, and vice versa. Ross' critique of religion's relationship to silence suggests reasons for such dissatisfaction:

Religion is an attempt to gesture with words towards that which is beyond words. It is a dialogue with silence ... If religion refuses its servant role of bringing the worshipper ever more deeply into silence, if it points to itself, it muffles the silence ... It is no longer religion. It becomes a caricature of itself.<sup>139</sup>

Quaker and non-Quaker worship centre around cataphatic practices, where silence is corporately experienced, but not through a corporate practice. Having identified shortcomings in worship forms which do and do not privilege corporate silence, the women's longings for silence to connect honestly with God, self and other may be met more fully where not only shared silence, but also a specific shared practice of silence is the cultural norm. This would resemble Jaworski's 'reverse bulge' theory, which suggests that

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<sup>136</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>137</sup> See Walton, 'Speaking in Signs' and Berry, *Ritual Making Women*, 2.

<sup>138</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Quaker Silence*.

<sup>139</sup> Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding*, (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), 52.



deepest experiences are shared within the most intimate relationships.<sup>140</sup> Movement towards apophatic silence offers greater intimacy of relationship with God, awareness of a deeper life of self beneath immediate egoic concerns and increased awareness of unity with others. Amongst these women none regularly participate in a corporate practice of apophatic silence, yet such practice, which would be most closely exemplified in Centering Prayer groups, may best meet their felt needs, as intimated in Claire's earlier comments about corporate, Centering Prayer. However, engagement in corporate apophatic silence was very limited and no comments concerning difficulties in sustaining this corporately were made.

Most women described accessing appropriate support to deepen their discipline of silence as problematical. Their difficulties varied, but include time, finances and finding people whose practice is developed sufficiently to advise them. For many, such assistance is unknown locally: Sally would like to sustain her individual practices for longer, and felt this would be easier 'if I had someone/guiding me and helping me through that', but has not located such help. Outside Quakerism, corporate silence groups are few, occurring inconveniently to the women's location or life-patterns. Clergy and those working within local or institutional theological education do not necessarily have a discipline of silence. Although more common amongst spiritual accompanists, their support often involves payment, travel costs and time away from home life, which the women struggle to prioritise. Attending retreats or courses places similar demands on already busy schedules and stretched finances. Although Nancy would 'love to do a 30 day' Ignatian retreat, 'it's just not

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<sup>140</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 27.

possible' as the primary carer for her daughter with complex disabilities. Una is now physically and financially unable to continue her annual eight day retreats. Instead she has 'to find it/in my own home ... in bits/and pieces'. They contrast with Ali who is healthy, has no partner or children and, working full time, afforded a week's silent retreat in the desert. Sustaining and developing a discipline of silence with little support is spiritually demanding and can leave the women feeling isolated, existing on the fringes of faith. They 'struggle' with 'loneliness' and 'not belonging and all those sorts of emotions'<sup>141</sup> because there is little comprehension of their spiritual practices in their worshipping communities and few people to offer guidance.

A final difficulty is the women's perceptions that their engagement in silence is inadequate. This undercurrent emerged in many narratives through the harsh language and metaphors of self-denunciation describing their sense of struggle or failure with practices of silence. Typical were Barbara's comment that she's 'never been good' at regular spiritual practices and Sian's description of herself as 'quite a poor ... practitioner'. Sally said she 'felt bad' if falling asleep when trying to sustain silence; Loretta spoke of giving herself a 'hard time' for not spending longer in silence; Rebecca negatively compared herself to Julian of Norwich and St John of the Cross, saying 'I've spent a long long time/giving myself a hard time/that I can't achieve/that sort of silence'; although Ali tries 'not to beat myself up' she feels she 'ought to be a bit more disciplined about' her practice, and similarly 'for ages' Barbara would 'beat myself up about' her inconsistent discipline.

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<sup>141</sup> Claire.

A few explicitly condemned themselves for inability to use a specific practice of silence.

Most striking was Catriona: having been taught a meditative practice by an 'expert', she described attempts to follow this as 'torture'. Her sharp self-criticism is emphasised when noting that, for Catriona, meditation

is what  
I interpret as the  
*the*  
ultimate  
silence  
erm  
when it comes to  
erm  
getting closer to God  
erm  
but I just can't get  
erm  
I don't understand it  
erm ...  
it  
I  
I don't know I can't do it ...  
yeah  
mmm  
I don't  
I don't know what else to say really [*last 2 lines almost inaudible*]

Catriona's anxiety at feeling unable to engage in the 'ultimate' way of relating to God is evident in halting speech, repeating starts to expression, frequent erms and her gradual loss of volume. Yet a later description resonates with phrases which suggest Catriona's practice moves beyond cataphatic meditation into apophatic depths:

if it's a long silence then  
then there are  
there are big  
silences within the silence ...

where I don't think anything  
erm  
I'm  
I'm not talking to God  
I'm just ...  
taking it in  
and  
enjoying the moment

Teaching Catriona received left her believing that 'maybe/if one day/I manage to erm/do meditation properly ... and/figure out how it works', relating with God will become deeper and more satisfying than the contentment she already knows resting effortlessly in God's presence in apophatic silence.

Contrastingly, Nancy's self-criticism concerns her perceived inability to express her experiences of silence adequately, in words or other media.

I've tried to talk to my spiritual director about it and I just can't ...  
I don't know whether she finds that a frustration  
she's too professional to say [*laughing*] ...  
I've  
tried writing  
poetry and  
it  
scratches the surface a bit  
but it's not  
really what I want to say ...  
I did a painting once  
of how it  
felt ...  
the trouble was  
when I showed it to my spiritual director she wanted me to  
talk about it  
and analyse it  
and then I got stuck again ...  
[*sighs*]  
I have tried to dance it

sometimes but  
I'm not a very good dancer either so  
I just felt that was in a way inadequate  
yeah

Nancy's frustration is made more acute as, having worked as a journalist before ordination, she considers herself 'a words/person' so it is 'kind of ironic/that I can't/actually get the words/that satisfy me': they are 'way too deep/I just can't get them' to accurately depict engagement in silence. This, and Nancy's other highly articulate descriptions of contemplative silence, scattered throughout my four data chapters, indicate that her sense of inadequacy is entirely unfounded. Her anxiety could be reduced with knowledge of Bourgeault's statement that apophatic awareness cannot be observed or easily explained by the cataphatic mind. Nancy's unfamiliarity with this, and Catriona's unawareness of the validity of her deeply apophatic practice, highlights the significant need for access to supportive relationships amongst others with wisdom about practices of silence.

The women's desire for affirmation of their discipline became apparent during interviews: several asked how their experiences compared to those of other women. This was exemplified in the insecurity apparent when Julay asked 'I'm just wondering/how/easy/have you found/that people/have found it/to do this?' Julay sought my reassurance that her practices are adequate and comparable with that of other women who self-identified as having a discipline of silence by coming forward to participate in this research. She was not alone.

Their concerns contrast with Una who, in her early eighties, has the longest experience of cataphatic practices of silence and seemingly the deepest encounter with apophatic awareness. Although Una shares some practical difficulties with the other women, she has moved beyond insecurity in her own practice. Instead, Una accepts that the contempt and ridicule of others at choosing to devote her latter decades to contemplation may even be justified. Stating that 'the whole thing might just be delusional thinking', she is 'content to be a pejorative' and considered 'silly' or 'potty' by others for sustaining her disciplined life.

For Una, long practice and commitment to silence has gradually dissipated, or developed into acceptance of the difficulties experienced in sustaining her discipline. She has become 'conditioned' to silence as a way of life and is content to 'walk on blindly', faithful to her calling and trusting her future to divine grace, despite growing uncertainty about God's existence.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Amongst these women, silence generally relates to absence of sounds of human origin. When discussing silence as part of a spiritual discipline their understanding shifts, their language becomes more expansive, and their descriptions shift to focussing on presence.

After varied, foundational experiences of exposure to practices of silence as children within families, different faith communities and through nature, some women's adult engagement in this discipline continued without interruption. Amongst the women who did not follow

this pattern, re-engagement with silence occurred at times of change or difficulty in their adult life. All the women identified the significance of relationships in facilitating their development of a discipline of silence as their adult faith matured.

Practices of silence are frequently described using the terms external or internal. This chapter proposed a spectrum of silence which further sub-divided these into types of practices that differently utilise or surrender the ordinary awareness of egoic mind.

However, I proposed that such distinctions are more blurred and porous than simple binary terminology suggests. In addition, the language applied to cataphatic and apophatic practices is sometimes used in a hierarchical manner, erroneously implying that engagement in them is dependent on human application, as opposed to God's gift of grace. Similarly, the familiar terminology of individual and corporate practice is inadequate, obscuring the deep connection with others that many women report in practices usually considered to be solitary, whilst at the same time masking the individuality of practices and disunity which may exist within times of corporate silence.

Within family lives and different worshipping communities, finding sufficient time for appropriate engagement in silence is difficult. Similarly, the women have difficulties in accessing adequate support and affirmation in a variety of areas which would sustain and further develop their discipline of silence. These difficulties have led to periods of self-condemnation for some. This contrasts with the experience of those long-practiced in silence, whose appreciation of the fruits of a life-long struggle to maintain their discipline

ultimately gives them confidence to withstand the marginalisation and ridicule they encounter through sustained, chosen engagement with silence.

Having mapped some of the different contours and forms of silence by discussing the different practices identified by these women, three subsequent data chapters will explore silence's significance as a place of relationality in their faith lives and spiritual journeys. First, the next chapter will explore issues of methodology and the methods used in my research.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> The order of chapters 3 and 4 given here has been reversed from that originally presented in the thesis as a correction requested following the viva voce examination.



## LEARNING TO HEAR: DEVELOPING METHODS FOR LISTENING TO WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF SILENCE

The way we listen as women researchers is, I suggest, a form of spiritual practice that has many of the qualities of prayer understood as the most attentive listening to self, other and God we can manage. ... We listen to what is explicit ... what is implicit but not directly said, and to what is null or absent—the inconceivable, unsayable, or not yet capable of being articulated. ... As in prayer, so in research, the discipline of waiting is a core gift and skill.

Nicola Slee<sup>1</sup>

The act of listening as a person or a group describes their faith practices is fundamentally a theological act. ... Listening is that crucial act of love for which human beings long. With careful listening can come gifts of being heard, known, understood.

Mary Clark Moschella<sup>2</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

As the focus of my inquiry is women’s chosen practices of silence, it was important the methodological approach I adopted, and the resultant methods used in gathering and analysing the data, privilege experience as a locus of knowledge and women’s experiences over historical androcentric biases in the ‘gender-blind’ study of religious practices.<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Nicola Slee, ‘Feminist Qualitative Research’, 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 149-50 and 254.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula King, ‘Gender-Critical Turns in the Study of Religion’, in Ursula King and Tina Beattie, eds., *Gender, Religion, and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 1-2.

chapter outlines the methodologies and methods chosen for consistency with these concerns, and the overall design and processes of my research.<sup>4</sup>

## **4.2 Principles informing the research design**

This inquiry is located within feminist practical theology. Neither feminists nor practical theologians espouse a single methodology. Similarly, ontological and epistemological positions held within these disciplines are multiple. I will therefore outline the basic principles from within the spectrums of beliefs, values and practices within these fields which together form the interpretative framework for my research. As research methods used by feminist practical theologians are equally varied, recognising the value of qualitative and quantitative inquiry as a feminist research tool,<sup>5</sup> these principles also inform the methods selected in my research design. The three principles informing my inquiry are listening to women's different experiences, empowerment and liberation, and researcher reflexivity.<sup>6</sup>

### *4.2.1 Listening to women's different experiences*

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<sup>4</sup> The order of chapters 3 and 4 given here has been reversed from that originally presented in the thesis as a correction requested following the viva voce examination.

<sup>5</sup> Toby Epstein Jayaratne and Abigail J. Stewart, 'Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in the Social Sciences: Current Feminist Issues and Practical Strategies', in Mary Fonow and Judith Cook, *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 85-106, this reference, 91. Referenced in Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Although differently formulated, these echo the five principles of feminist research Slee identifies in *Women's Faith Development*, 48-52.

This overarching principle combines two fundamental principles of feminist research. Firstly, this research explicitly foregrounds women's experiences of a chosen discipline of silence. This commitment reflects Ruether's statement that feminist theology's uniqueness 'lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of women's experience'.<sup>7</sup> Foregrounding women's experiences exposes normative assumptions around male authorship of spiritual practices and the absence of discussion of women's practices of silence within the dominant discourses of feminist theology. Reclamation of women's experience from its 'invisible, unnamed and underground'<sup>8</sup> position beneath the dominant and assumed male norm is central to feminist theory and theology. Instead, women's experiences from all aspects of life are acclaimed as normative and a source of knowledge: they are used as a primary resource for reflecting upon reality and testing theological doctrines and assertions.<sup>9</sup> As Sandra Harding states, basing research in women's lives leads to claims about women that are 'less false—less partial and distorted' than those which emerge when the starting point is male experience.<sup>10</sup> However, feminists long since recognised the philosophical and theological difficulties of beginning from an undifferentiated presentation of women's experience, obscuring differences of race, class, religious affiliation, education, (dis)ability and sexual orientation. Yet Graham proposes that although generalisation renders 'women's experience' an 'unsatisfactory' category, this term

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<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, (Boston: Beacon Press, [1983] 1993), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 172.

<sup>9</sup> Slee, *Faith and Feminism*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 185, referenced in Susan J. Hekman, *The Future of Differences: Truth and Method in Feminist Theory*, (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1999), 44-5.

remains a 'strategic utility' for speaking about women's lives as feminism continues to expose and oppose failures to acknowledge women's full humanity.<sup>11</sup>

The need to acknowledge particularity within women's experience necessitates the second fundamental principle: listening for difference and diversity as women name their experiences. Feminism's critique of its earlier lack of differentiation in presentations of women's experiences highlighted the imperative to acknowledge diversity: 'if the experience of women create knowledge and reality, then it must be the case that this knowledge and reality are plural, because the experiences of women are varied and diverse.'<sup>12</sup> However, difference is not straightforward within feminist discourse.<sup>13</sup> Graham identifies three distinct uses: women's experience as distinct from assumed, normative understandings of human experience rooted in those of men; acknowledgement of plurality of experience amongst women, which also rejects suggestions of any single difference between binary categories of gender; and finally, the poststructuralist perception of difference as an unstable social construct which, in its enactment, entrenches the diversity of societal interests. Attending to difference and otherness between women emerged and remains a key hermeneutic principle in feminist theology.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as Linda Hogan suggests, utilising a hermeneutic of difference requires more than valuing difference. To be central within the

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<sup>11</sup> Graham, 'Feminist Theory', in Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion*, 199.

<sup>12</sup> Hekman, *The Future of Differences*, 38.

<sup>13</sup> Elaine Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology*, (London: Mowbray, 1995), 172.

<sup>14</sup> See Linda Hogan, *From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 166-168.

interpretative process of research it requires 'employing difference as an analytical category and allowing it to inform both our interpretation and our underlying philosophy.'<sup>15</sup>

Valuing and intentionally seeking differences between women's experiences requires attentive listening to the women's words and non-verbal communication, and also to the particularity and situatedness of each individual. The knowledge participants offer is situated within their unique narrative, 'filled with specific meanings, values and expectations.'<sup>16</sup> To interpret an individual's comments it is necessary to understand what these mean 'to that particular person within her particular context.'<sup>17</sup> In addition, situated knowledge is spoken by what Tina Miller identifies as one of three different subjective voices: a 'public' voice—what is professionally defined and acknowledged; 'private'—the voice of lay knowledge derived from informal interaction with others; and their 'personal' voice—the voice of self, often constructed around emotions, intimacy and the body, which seldom fits closely the accounts offered by public or private voices and may contradict or challenge these.<sup>18</sup> As Slee states, researchers must not assume that participants speak 'with a coherent and consistent voice'. In dialogue with self and the researcher, participants are 'constantly situating and resituating ... in shifting relation, both to the other person and to [their] own rehearsed and retold meanings.'<sup>19</sup> Recognising the different public, private or personal voice with which a participant is commenting becomes crucial for interpretation of

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<sup>15</sup> Hogan, *From Women's Experience*, 168.

<sup>16</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 103.

<sup>17</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Tina Miller, 'Shifting Layers of Professional, Lay and Personal Narratives: Longitudinal Childbirth Research', in Jane Ribbens and Rosalind Edwards, *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research*, (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 58-71.

<sup>19</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 48.

their narrative. Miller also highlights that speaking with the personal voice involves risky self-disclosure, particularly if what is expressed is not thought to be commonly shared or is known to be discussed infrequently. As a result, it requires courage from the participant and trust in the researcher if the personal voice is to be articulated: gathering women's private and personal voices with the intention of placing them in the academic arena exposes these voices to public scrutiny.

#### 4.2.2 *Empowerment and liberation*

A key theme within feminist discourse is that in telling stories of their experiences women construct new meanings and knowledge which empower and liberate them. For research participants this occurs primarily through finding language to voice their experiences. However, by disseminating research, women's empowerment and liberation is gradually extended into wider society. Neuger states that attaining empowerment to name 'one's self, one's environment, and one's God' by regaining voice and language has been 'a primary agenda' within feminist theology. She continues, 'It is in finding that language and claiming the right to speak it that empowerment for change is made possible.'<sup>20</sup> Yet assumptions that telling one's story is inherently liberating and empowering are challenged by Antze and Lambek: 'there is nothing liberating in narrative per se. Merely to transfer the story from embodied symptoms to words is not necessarily either to interpret it or to exorcise it'.<sup>21</sup> Telling, without hearing by both narrator and listener, cannot be an agent of change in and

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<sup>20</sup> Neuger, Christie Cozad, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 97.

<sup>21</sup> Antze and Lambek, *Tense Past*: xix, referenced in Berry, *Ritual Making Women*, 155.

of itself. Anne Opie identifies three ways that research participants may be empowered by their narrative being heard.<sup>22</sup> Firstly, marginalised people can feel empowered when they are heard and taken seriously. In addition, the 'inbuilt therapeutic dimension' of being listened to and listening to themselves creates opportunities for participants to reflect upon and re-evaluate their experiences,<sup>23</sup> in the moment of the interview and reading their interview transcript later. Such listening may empower them to respond differently, generating change or new freedoms. Third, research attending to experiences of marginalised groups has the potential to subvert established perceptions and undermine inequalities inherent in conventional structures of power. Despite opportunities for possible empowerment and liberation amongst research participants, and the eventual extension of these possibilities to wider society, Jan Berry concedes 'the empowering of some may mean the continued oppression of others.'<sup>24</sup>

Within feminist theology, Moschella proposes asking another to describe their religious practices is an empowering invitation because it 'honors the speaker', inviting entry 'into a theological conversation, free to express his or her own thoughts about God, rather than merely receiving the ideas of experts.'<sup>25</sup> However, Berry warns that describing experiences may disempower research participants by reinforcing feelings of humiliation, shame or victimhood.<sup>26</sup> This caution is pertinent to exploration of under-researched spiritual

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<sup>22</sup> Anne Opie, 'Qualitative Research, Appropriation of the 'Other' and Empowerment', *Feminist Review* (Spring, 1992), 40: 52-69.

<sup>23</sup> Opie, 'Qualitative research', 64.

<sup>24</sup> Berry, *Ritual Making Women*, 51. An example of this was given from Clark-King's research in Chapter 2. See Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*.

<sup>25</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Berry, *Ritual Making Women*, 157.

practices, where experiences recounted by male religious or clerics are perceived as normative, and where women's lives may necessitate different patterns of discipline from those traditionally sanctioned by patriarchal church authorities. Additionally, narratives can take on form and content linked to participants' perceptions of "acceptable" ways of voicing their experiences.<sup>27</sup> They may consider what is required, firstly in meeting any imagined expectations of the 'researcher', and then in perceptions of the researcher as a subjective individual: participants 'size us up' in order to situate researchers and determine what responses are expected.<sup>28</sup> Any potential for empowerment through discovering new personal or private knowledge may be subsumed beneath semi-conscious desires to please or 'get it right' faced with 'the power of public experts, based on disciplinary knowledge'.<sup>29</sup> Further, reminiscent of risks Miller identified in speaking with a personal voice, practical theologians Swinton and Mowat caution that interviews are 'a gift that can be received, treasured and accepted, or abused, manipulated and implicitly or explicitly discarded.'<sup>30</sup> Any such dismissive treatment disempowers participants and possible avenues for their liberation are curtailed.

#### 4.2.3 *Researcher reflexivity*

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<sup>27</sup> Miller, 'Shifting Layers', 69.

<sup>28</sup> Rosanna Hertz, ed., *Reflexivity and Voice*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), xi.

<sup>29</sup> Rosalind Edwards and Jane Ribbens, 'Living on the Edges: Public Knowledge, Private Lives, Personal Experience', in Ribbens and Edwards, *Feminist Dilemmas*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 65.



Within feminist research methodologies, researcher reflexivity<sup>31</sup> is accepted as ‘an essential feature of what is “feminist” about it’.<sup>32</sup> However, Ramazanoğlu and Holland suggest even though it has become a requirement of feminist research, achieving, and the meaning of reflexivity can be ‘difficult to pin down.’<sup>33</sup> They propose reflexivity is the attempt to make explicit the existence and exercise of power relations in the research process by unpacking ‘what knowledge is contingent upon, how the researcher is socially situated, and how the research agenda/process has been constituted.’<sup>34</sup> Their more concise description of reflexivity, as critical reflection ‘on the place of the researcher in knowledge production’, echoes Liz Stanley’s perception: reflexivity ‘should locate the feminist researcher firmly within the activities of her research’.<sup>35</sup> Simply construed, Slee describes reflexivity as having to do with transparency concerning the research process: it is evidenced in the way research is conducted and written up, making visible ‘the commitments of the researcher and the conditions under which knowledge is constructed.’<sup>36</sup>

Awareness of ‘explicit and hidden power relations’<sup>37</sup> between participants and researcher is central to designing feminist and qualitative research. Researchers hold significantly more power than participants. This begins in accessing and selecting participants, develops as questions are formulated and asked, and is fully employed as researchers begin analysis and

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<sup>31</sup> Sometimes also referred to as ‘critical reflection’, as discussed by Caroline Ramazanoğlu with Janet Holland, *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*, (London: Sage, 2002), 118.

<sup>32</sup> Liz Stanley, ed., *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology*, (London: Routledge, 1990), 12, referenced in Slee, *Women’s Faith Development*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Ramazanoğlu with Holland, *Feminist Methodology*, 118.

<sup>34</sup> Ramazanoğlu with Holland, *Feminist Methodology*, 118.

<sup>35</sup> Liz Stanley, *Feminist Praxis*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Slee, *Women’s Faith Development*, 51-52.

<sup>37</sup> Ramazanoğlu with Holland, *Feminist Methodology*, 118.

'take the women's private words' into the acclaimed, knowledgeable 'public world of academia.'<sup>38</sup> Feminist researchers seeking to empower and liberate women consciously utilise methods that aim to be as non-oppressive as possible. Frequently feminists adopt a 'bottom-up approach',<sup>39</sup> taking participants' words and perspectives as the starting point. Despite vigilance to minimise power differentials between researchers and participants in all stages of the process, the impossibility of designing a study that eliminates imbalances of power is widely recognised.<sup>40</sup> Any participant power 'begins to ebb away' once a consent form has been signed<sup>41</sup> for, as researchers listen to, interpret and represent participant's voices, they cannot help but reinforce the hierarchies of power and knowledge inherent in their respective roles as private and public individuals.<sup>42</sup> As Kay Standing states, 'However equal the methods of access and interviewing, we, as researchers, still hold the real power ... to translate and interpret.'<sup>43</sup> Given the scale of power imbalance it is imperative that ethical considerations about how researchers access and relate to participants before, during and following interviews, and how their experiences are heard, analysed, interpreted and re-presented in research findings are paramount in researcher reflexivity. Without this critical reflection any empowerment and liberation women gain through participation in research may be undermined by exploitative processes within the research design.

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<sup>38</sup> Kay Standing, 'Writing the Voices of the Less Powerful', in Ribbens and Edwards, *Feminist Dilemmas*, 189.

<sup>39</sup> Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet, 'Reflections on a Voice-Centred Relational Method', in Ribbens and Edwards, *Feminist Dilemmas*, 138.

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Joan Acker, Kate Barry and Johanna Esseveld, 'Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research', in Fonow and Cook, *Beyond Methodology*, 133-153; Janet Holland and Caroline Ramazanoğlu, 'Coming to Conclusions: Power and Interpretation in Researching Young Women's Sexuality', in Mary Maynard and June Purvis, *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 125-148.

<sup>41</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 65.

<sup>42</sup> See Standing, 'Writing the Voices', 190.

<sup>43</sup> Standing, 'Writing the Voices', 189.

Reflexivity only occurs if the researcher is committed to intensively listening to and scrutinising herself throughout the research process. She must attend to her own public, private and personal voices, acknowledging and reappraising the context, known biases and presuppositions her subjectivity brings to the research. Many feminist researchers develop reflexivity through writing a research journal. This becomes a repository for honest and open reflection where researchers actively document how their experiences, thoughts, questions and emotions contribute to the research's journey. Although remaining a personal document, journals are sometimes quoted to reveal limitations in the researcher's own perspectives, mistakes made in the process of research or how aspects of self-understanding relate to the lived experience of participants. Research journals are therefore a significant 'source of insight'<sup>44</sup> for reflexivity and in recording the creation of knowledge throughout the research process.

### **4.3 Designing a research framework**

In designing my research, methods were selected to reflect the principles outlined above, which together formed the interpretative framework for this study.

Blake Poland and Ann Pederson state 'As the "apparent" opposite of speech, silence is frequently overlooked in qualitative research. The degree to which the field is silent on the issue of silence is surprising'.<sup>45</sup> Silences in interviews generally remain unaddressed or are

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<sup>44</sup> Fonow and Cook, *Beyond Methodology*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Blake Poland and Ann Pederson, 'Reading Between the Lines: Interpreting Silences in Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* (1998), 4 (2): 293.

considered a 'problem' to be fixed so effective data gathering is not inhibited. Nairn, Munro and Smith assert that too often silence is interpreted 'solely as an indication of powerlessness' within feminist research.<sup>46</sup> Participant silence is rarely interpreted positively during interviews, infrequently heeded when creating transcripts, barely considered whilst analysing data, or discussed affirmatively in reflections on what interviewees say.<sup>47</sup> Poland and Pederson caution 'talk cannot properly be understood unless the context of the talk is understood.'<sup>48</sup> As this inquiry's focus is women's engagement with silence, I perceived attending to their silences and my own as of particular importance. Instinctive commitment to this was validated by Poland and Pederson's conclusion: 'a reflective stance towards silence in qualitative research would be an improvement over the status quo'.<sup>49</sup> In consequence, attending to silences in interviews was significant at all stages of my research process. As a neglected area within research, discussion of my methods will highlight silence's role, whilst also considering other significant aspects of the research methods used, if in less detail.

#### 4.3.1 *The research group*

The participants were twenty Christian women with an established discipline of silence. Their ages ranged from mid-twenties to early eighties, with most between forty and sixty. They included single and partnered women. Nearly all are mothers, with children from pre-

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<sup>46</sup> Karen Nairn, Jenny Munro and Anne B. Smith, 'A Counter-Narrative of a "Failed" Interview', *Qualitative Research* (2005), 5: 231.

<sup>47</sup> Poland and Pederson, 'Reading Between the Lines', 308.

<sup>48</sup> Poland and Pederson, 'Reading Between the Lines', 303.

<sup>49</sup> Poland and Pederson, 'Reading Between the Lines', 308.

school age into adulthood. Six are ordained<sup>50</sup> and all share long commitment across a range of denominations: four Roman Catholics, six Anglicans, three Methodists and Quakers, two Baptists, one from the United Reformed Church and one Anglican who no longer regularly attends church.<sup>51</sup> Attempts to identify participants from charismatic and larger free churches, were unsuccessful.<sup>52</sup> Despite efforts to find women from varied cultural backgrounds, only one woman was not white and, with another, had not grown up in the UK.<sup>53</sup>

When setting research boundaries I decided not to interview women religious, whose daily life is institutionally structured to facilitate silence. Although one woman spent two novitiate years in a teaching order and one had been a nun in a contemplative order, both left religious life more than two decades ago.

Participants were identified in two distinct phases.<sup>54</sup> Initially, I interviewed seven women, some well-known to me, and four suggested by other contacts. I also included myself as a research subject for three reasons. Firstly, to inform how I engaged with participants I wanted to better understand the experience of being interviewed. Additionally, I wanted to experience articulating my engagement in silence to better recognise the difficulties and opportunities for insight associated with doing so. Finally, as individual and communal

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<sup>50</sup> A seventh has been ordained since her interview.

<sup>51</sup> These represent the women's denominational attendance at the time of interview, but their denominational backgrounds were far broader.

<sup>52</sup> Almost exclusively, my emailed initial enquiries to leaders of such churches failed to receive any reply, even when these were directed to people with whom I had an existing association.

<sup>53</sup> Although English had been the language of her education.

<sup>54</sup> These were separated by an eighteen month gap, during which I moved between institutions.

practices of silence form part of my spiritual life, it felt appropriate to ‘hear my own voice’, as Jane Ribbens suggests,<sup>55</sup> and expose my own perceptions of silence to the same consideration I was asking other women to allow me to make.<sup>56</sup> Self-participation is described by John Creswell as a feminist research method used towards the goal of avoiding ‘objectification’ of interviewees.<sup>57</sup> In the second phase I interviewed twelve more women. One was a colleague; two I had met briefly through mutual acquaintances; nine were previously unknown to me—seven responding to an invitation circulated on my behalf by a director of silent retreats, and two suggested by other contacts.

As my inquiry focusses on a previously unexplored area, I aimed to find participants with varied experiences of practices of silence from a diverse cross-section of women. Although the group were not as diverse as initially hoped, many associated factors were unknown to me ahead of meeting the thirteen unfamiliar participants. Unintentionally, the women are educationally privileged: all are graduates, half have attained or were engaged in doctoral studies, with five more similarly at Master’s level. When pondering this, I recognised that given the acknowledged difficulties of speaking about engagement in practices of silence, only women with confidence in their ability to reflect upon and articulate their experiences were likely to volunteer. As my awareness of the impact of faith development on women’s engagement in spiritual disciplines developed, I also realised that the breadth of women

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<sup>55</sup> Jane Ribbens, ‘Hearing my Feeling Voice?: An Autobiographical Discussion of Motherhood’, in Ribbens and Edwards, *Feminist Dilemmas*, 24.

<sup>56</sup> I was interviewed by my supervisor who was therefore familiar with my research questions, initial findings from earliest participants and the overall methodologies and methods I was using.

<sup>57</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, (London: Sage Publications, [1998] 2007), 26.

likely to embrace non-verbal spiritual practices and confidently discuss these was more limited than I had envisaged. In addition, despite searching for participants from broad cultural backgrounds, eventually I recognised the difficulties of appropriately representing perceptions about silence without significant research into the cultural norms of silence within any communities of origin. Given these limitations, this group of twenty women provided a diversity of experiences and perceptions that offer a richness and depth of insights into practices of silence that exceeded what I hoped to discover.

#### 4.3.2 *Pre-interview*

Each woman received an information sheet describing my research and outlining procedures around consent, data collection, usage and storage, along with a copy of the consent form to sign at interview.<sup>58</sup> They were asked to choose whether a pseudonym or their actual name would be used in the research report and, invited to select any interview location, most chose their homes.<sup>59</sup> This approach epitomises Shulamit Reinharz' description of establishing a feminist, 'nonexploitative' relationship between interviewer and interviewee of 'respect, shared information, openness, and clarity of communication',<sup>60</sup> so participation was with genuinely informed consent.

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<sup>58</sup> There were two different Participant Information Sheets, one for each phase of the interviewing process, each reflecting the particular ethical requirements of the university where I was registered at that time. Differences between these are minimal but copies of both, along with the associated consent forms, are included in the Appendices.

<sup>59</sup> Two took place whilst the participants and I were together on a residential study course and one in a participant's workplace study.

<sup>60</sup> Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 265.

### 4.3.3 Interviews

The one-to-one interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, mostly lasting between eighty minutes and two hours. Initially asking participants to describe their spiritual background put them at ease and provide valuable background context. Next, their understanding of the word silence, and whether this changed when thought of within the context of their spiritual practice, was explored. Subsequently, interviews were unstructured. I asked pre-prepared questions only when relevant within the unfolding narrative flow or if an intended area of exploration had not emerged spontaneously by the latter part of an interview. Individual, in-depth interviews are frequently used in research from a feminist methodological standpoint as they are widely considered the most appropriate method for developing rapport. Although Reinharz suggests development of interviewee rapport validates the *researcher* as a human being, researcher and feminist, symbolizing their ethical standing, interview skill and sisterhood,<sup>61</sup> my intent was primarily directed towards participants: establishing rapport helped create a safe enough relationship for women to talk about 'personal' practices that usually remain invisible or unarticulated with others.<sup>62</sup>

Following Anne Oakley's assertion that interviewing women is a contradiction in terms, some feminist researchers seeking to develop rapport and non-exploitative relationships evolve an interview style that embraces mutuality. For Oakley, interviewing women is

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<sup>61</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, 266-7.

<sup>62</sup> Miller, 'Shifting Layers'.



necessarily conversational, asserting there is 'no intimacy without reciprocity'.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Swinton and Mowat propose interaction between researcher and participant 'is mutual and reciprocal.'<sup>64</sup> However, Berry suggests developing rapport is not about using particular interview techniques, but conveying genuine interest and desire to understand another's experiences.<sup>65</sup> Like some other feminist researchers, I found no need for the self-disclosure advocated by Oakley.<sup>66</sup> Instead, my sparse comments became more so with each interview, reflecting Melanie Mauthner's experience of her evolving style becoming ever 'looser' and asking 'fewer questions'.<sup>67</sup> When the women's words ceased I waited, inviting further comment by raising an eyebrow or making small, subtly different facial gestures communicating 'I haven't quite got that' or 'can you tell me more?' Despite this minimalist approach, time with each women felt intimate. Comments by many participants indicated they shared this perception.

In considering my interview style's impact on the women's narratives and our relationship, I reflected on two elements. Firstly, my professional work as a therapist. Gerson and Horowitz state in-depth interviews 'closely resemble the therapeutic interview of clinical practice ... between two engaged people, both of whom are searching to unravel the

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<sup>63</sup> Anne Oakley, 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms', in Helen Roberts, ed., *Doing Feminist Research* (London: Routledge, 1998), 49.

<sup>64</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 61.

<sup>65</sup> Berry, *Ritual Making Women*, 37.

<sup>66</sup> Rosalind Edwards, 'An Education in Interviewing: Placing the Researcher and the Research', in Claire M. Renzetti and Raymond M. Lee, eds., *Researching Sensitive Topics*, (London: Sage, 1993), 186.

<sup>67</sup> Melanie Mauthner, 'Bringing Silent Voices into a Public Discourse: Researching Accounts of Sister Relationships', in Ribbens and Edwards, *Feminist Dilemmas*, 49.

mysteries and meanings of a life.’<sup>68</sup> In research interviews and therapy attention tends towards one particular life, with both parties recognising they are present in different capacities. In interviews I instinctively drew on my therapeutic skills for engaging with and eliciting responses from others.<sup>69</sup> My research journal notes the similarity between interviews and first sessions with a client, where rapport can be established quickly with very few words if the therapist demonstrates their interest in and acceptance of the client by being fully present and listening patiently and intently. Such attention is often a relief as, given opportunity to tell their story, clients discover they are heard to the end, with minimal interjections. This observation mirrors findings in Claire Renzetti and Raymond Lee’s *Researching Sensitive Topics*. They state ‘in many instances ... research participants desire catharsis’.<sup>70</sup> Although rapport cannot always be established quickly, and may never develop with some,<sup>71</sup> familiarity with embodying therapeutic qualities enabled establishment of effective rapport with participants without a self-revelatory, conversational interview style.

Second, I pondered how silences shared with participants and my minimal speech related to the research focus. Multiple interview questions are often used to achieve James Spradley’s first principle of ethnographic interviewing: ‘keep informants talking’.<sup>72</sup> Spradley’s notion is

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<sup>68</sup> Kathleen Gerson and Ruth Horowitz, ‘Observation and Interviewing: Options and Choices in Qualitative Methods’, in Tim May, ed., *Qualitative Research in Action*, (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 210, referenced in Berry, *Ritual Making Women*, 37.

<sup>69</sup> These include attention, listening, stillness, patience, presence, an ability to tolerate knowing and unknowing in myself and in other, alertness for emergence of the new, attunement to when others need more time or input to enable them to continue, and not fearing silence, even if this contains elements of discomfort.

<sup>70</sup> Raymond M. Lee and Claire M. Renzetti, ‘The Problems of Researching Sensitive Topics’, in Renzetti and Lee, *Researching Sensitive Topics*, 6.

<sup>71</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, 265.

<sup>72</sup> However, this is not likely to be a principle underlying research into spirituality. James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 80, referenced by Poland and Pederson, ‘Reading Between the Lines’, 295.

representative of those for whom silence during interviews indicates either a 'troublesome interviewee' or interviewer failure to 'draw out' information from participants. However, silence within interviews is rarely an area of inquiry: 'In the many manuals on interview techniques, the possibility that something could be learned from silence is rarely entertained. Silence is a problem to be overcome'.<sup>73</sup> Steinar Kvale contests perceptions of interview silence as problematic, identifying silence as a strategy for enhancing data collection by developing interviews similarly to therapeutic settings: it allows participants 'time to associate and reflect and then break the silence themselves with appropriate information'.<sup>74</sup> I consciously used silence to invite further comment from the women, without compelling them to say more. This non-directive inquiry gave them more control and choice, indicating freedom to reveal more but also gesturing towards permission *not* to comment further. It offered choice to develop their train of thought or initiate a different area of discussion, rather than following directions proposed by further questions. My silence privileged the women's voices and particular ways of articulating their stories, conveying interest in hearing them 'Speaking out on a topic that has been shrouded in silence'<sup>75</sup> and fostering their empowerment by providing space to bring their 'authentic' voice about this hidden area into language.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Poland and Pederson, 'Reading Between the Lines', 295.

<sup>74</sup> Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviews*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 134-5.

<sup>75</sup> Dale Spender, 'The Gatekeepers: A Feminist Critique of Academic Publishing', in Roberts, *Doing Feminist Research*, 200.

<sup>76</sup> Discussed in Ribbens, 'Hearing my Feeling Voice', 37, where she paraphrases Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

In my research journal I frequently questioned whether the contrast between my silence and conversational methods reported by feminist researchers made my style erroneous. I was encouraged to trust my instincts by my supervisor and words by Jack Douglas who, in *Creative Interviewing* advised, 'This above all, to thine own experience—and, thus, your own self—be true.'<sup>77</sup> Douglas' description of the listening he advocated resonated with the quality of attention I sought to offer:

the more of a listener the interviewer is, the more sensitive, the more openly intimate, the more sincerely interested in and warmly caring about the other person, the more he can temporarily surrender to the experience and soul of the other person, the more successful he will be<sup>78</sup>

In discussing interview-based research as a spiritual practice, Flanagan indicates the nature of the interviewer's success: 'Reverent and attentive listening' evokes confidence in interviewees to share their 'most authentic perceptions of the dimension of spirituality being investigated', generating 'data of profound significance.'<sup>79</sup> This was my hope. Lee and Renzetti state privately held knowledge is sensitive. Sensitive topics include those 'where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience' and 'deals with things sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned.'<sup>80</sup> As silence is often practised alone, rarely discussed, and relates directly to what is sacred within these women's lives, I was asking them to share 'sensitive', 'personal' perceptions. The sensitivity of researching silence also supported my interviewing style: I

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<sup>77</sup> Jack D. Douglas, *Creative Interviewing*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1984), 35.

<sup>78</sup> Douglas, *Creative Interviewing*, 57-8.

<sup>79</sup> Flanagan, '*Quaestio Divina*', 135.

<sup>80</sup> Lee and Renzetti, 'The Problems of Researching', 6.

needed to be a 'care-full' listener.<sup>81</sup> As in W. B. Yeats' poem, it felt necessary to 'Tread softly' around experiences trustingly laid out before me.<sup>82</sup> To comment about my own practices without request seemed an inappropriate intrusion,<sup>83</sup> which could dilute any cathartic effect the women derived from the process.<sup>84</sup> I was also acutely aware that, at times, articulations of their perceptions of silence were tentative and faltering: many commented on struggling to express their experiences, and how partial or unsatisfactory their descriptions felt. These difficulties further increased the sensitivity of interviews, and aware they may evoke feelings of failure or diminishment, I attempted to mitigate against this by assuring the women of the value of their comments whenever inadequacy for the task was voiced.

My instinctive response to difficulties describing engagement in silence was to foster periods of silence within the interviews, speaking into these only when women indicated a question was welcome. This style felt validated by Poland and Pederson: 'When we train interviewers, perhaps too much emphasis is placed on asking questions, when the real skill may be listening.'<sup>85</sup> I listened, attentive with mind, body, intuition and soul for whatever the women's silence may reveal. As Moschella writes, 'In order to hear the deeper stories,

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<sup>81</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 141. Also, compare Harris' 'care-filled listening', noted in Chapter 2. See Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 30.

<sup>82</sup> W. B. Yeats' poem, 'The Cloths of Heaven', concludes with the lines 'I have spread my dreams under your feet;/ Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.'

<sup>83</sup> I was only once asked for thoughts about my own perceptions of silence during the body of the interviews, by the youngest participant, as the interview was concluding. As I had been invited to stay for lunch I suggested we could discuss this over lunch. A few participants inquired about my own practices and perceptions of silence in the general conversation that followed the interview, once the recording had been stopped.

<sup>84</sup> Lee and Renzetti, 'The Problems of Researching', 9, discussed above.

<sup>85</sup> Poland and Pederson, 'Reading Between the Lines', 296-7.

pastoral ethnographers must “listen” with all their senses’ to words and intonation, but also to ‘silences, gestures, and actions.’<sup>86</sup> After two interviews I reflected in my journal that silence created opportunity for the women to dip back into this briefly. It seemed to enable re-connection with previous times of silence in an embodied way, and was frequently followed by greater clarity of expression. Following this, their body posture often relaxed, and they sometimes smiled, suggesting satisfaction with communicating new knowledge. As interviews progressed, I recorded my surprise at the women’s eloquence about silence, given the many written references to its ineffability:

they *are* able to be incredibly articulate about silence, particularly when given the space to re-engage with it in the interview. Or it could even be perceived as being when I *trusted* that they could articulate their experience for themselves, when shown genuine interest in their response and given time to put this into words. In fact, the women don’t have as much difficulty articulating their experiences of silence as I expected, particularly when given opportunity to do so in a way that allowed this re-engagement. Maybe that is the success of the method?<sup>87</sup>

Poland and Pederson emphasise the value of silence for participants, commenting that in today’s Western culture which ‘waits for nothing, there is something to be said for giving people time to reflect, ponder, and engage with you and with the subject matter at their own pace—namely, being willing to wait.’<sup>88</sup> Writing from a non-religious context, they recognise that in religions of the East and West ‘silence is valued and revered for creating a space for spiritual renewal and growth’, stating this to advance their argument for its usage within interviews.<sup>89</sup> Lee and Renzetti suggest that, contrary to expectations, participants are

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<sup>86</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 141.

<sup>87</sup> Emphases in original.

<sup>88</sup> Poland and Pederson, ‘Reading Between the Lines’, 296.

<sup>89</sup> Poland and Pederson, ‘Reading Between the Lines’, 297.

frequently willing to divulge knowledge of sensitive areas of research: speaking about these freely can be liberating—as catharsis, but also through enhancing self-knowledge.<sup>90</sup> Any interview may produce new self-knowledge, irrespective of whether a researcher fosters and attends to silences. However, several women remarked that when another question could have been asked, my silent waiting was appreciated: it allowed new insights to emerge. This transformed interviews from a setting where the women gave of themselves into one where they felt much was also received:<sup>91</sup> as Moschella remarks, when ‘care-full’ listening ‘happens, it is almost always experienced as gift.’<sup>92</sup>

Professionally, I knew silence can be experienced as judgemental, threatening or leaving the speaker feeling pressure to say more, or something different. Similarly, silence can be perceived as indicating comments have not been ‘acceptable’: in further response participants may seek to say what they feel the interviewer wants to hear.<sup>93</sup> As interviewer silence can, therefore, be a locus of power, even when her intention is to minimise this, it was imperative that I was alert for any indication of my silence being interpreted in these ways. On these occasions, I attempted to dissipate any such unease with an appropriate comment or, if more appropriate, asked a question to intentionally move the focus of discussion.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Lee and Renzetti, ‘The Problems of Researching’, 9.

<sup>91</sup> This will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

<sup>92</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 141.

<sup>93</sup> Poland and Pederson, ‘Reading Between the Lines’, 296.

<sup>94</sup> Some examples of these two strategies will be discussed in subsequent chapters, although it was only necessary to use the first on a few occasions and the latter hardly at all.

Since *Women's Ways of Knowing* was published,<sup>95</sup> many feminist researchers have employed the metaphor of midwife or midwife-teacher to describe a woman supporting the voicing of others' experiences and emergence of their new ideas. As Harris notes 'revelatory Birthing comes in its own time, in the healthy unhurriedness of the process.'<sup>96</sup> It occurs in hidden spaces where women listen to one another. Portraying midwives as co-participants in birthing the new, Brita Gill-Austern describes the midwife-teacher 'guiding one to see what needs to be focussed on and attended to and creat[ing] the kind of space where one can become relaxed and be oneself.'<sup>97</sup> Gill-Austern emphasises the importance of asking questions without predetermining the answers. Instead, a midwife-teacher's questions facilitate revelation by listening for others' truth. Her response to the expression of new thought 'helps half-baked ideas and perceptions develop in dialogue to fuller maturity.'<sup>98</sup> Often, waiting with a woman in the vulnerability of new thought teetering on fruition, my silent presence echoed portrayals of midwife-teachers and resonated with Spradley's description of inquiring of others:

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and, Jill Mattuck Tarule, eds., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1986).

<sup>96</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 81.

<sup>97</sup> Brita L. Gill-Austern, 'Pedagogy Under the Influence of Feminism and Womanism', in Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern, *Feminist and Womanist*, 152.

<sup>98</sup> Gill-Austern, 'Pedagogy', 152.

<sup>99</sup> Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, 34.



Although silence forms part of my spiritual discipline, the experience, phronesis and length of practice of many participants far exceeded my own. As the authority, experience or knowledge assumed in the term 'midwife-teacher' was not mine, I sought a more apposite term. Moschella describes the 'care-full' listening I was attempting as 'difficult because it requires us to give up the role of expert, and become a learner again ... as you stop being an expert, you start really being there'.<sup>100</sup> By inquiring into these women's perceptions and practices they were helping me learn about silence. Yet 'midwife-learner' did not fit either, stripping away the equality I felt with the women as a co-practitioner. 'Midwife-researcher' was also inappropriate, pointing away from Margaret Guenther's description of midwives 'doing things **with**, not **to** the person giving birth'.<sup>101</sup> As a co-practitioner, inquiry into each woman's experience was focussed on shared development of a deeper understanding of our practices. In consequence, I settled on 'midwife-inquirer' to describe this aspect of my role within interviews.

Any birthing necessitates time for gestation and a transitional period of labour when the birther and their supporters work towards successful delivery. In birthing new knowledge, the gestational journey—from not knowing, to wondering, and increasing understanding—may be comparatively brief. Its transitional period begins as tentative perceptions are first expressed and is delivered safely when its articulation can be cogently completed and comprehended. In exploring birthing as a metaphor for girls' faith development, Phillips states 'Birthing should not be done alone: optimally, it requires the companionship of a

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<sup>100</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 141 and 142-3, respectively.

<sup>101</sup> Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening* (London: DLT, 1993), 90, emphasis in original.

midwife for assistance and support'.<sup>102</sup> Whilst the birther may feel out of control or fearful, Guenther describes midwives recognising the desolation and difficulty experienced during transition as signs 'of breakthrough and great progress'.<sup>103</sup> The midwife encourages the process, acknowledging the difficulties and allowing time for resting, but also indicating when to push in the last stage of birthing. Within interviews, our combined ability to tolerate the discomfort of remaining with the unknown developed alongside growing trust that I would assist in transition towards birthing new understanding, either by supportive questions, or sufficient silence for new ideas to be delivered safely. The women's tentative perceptions may not have developed sufficiently to be birthed as new insights without time and attentive support for these to be explored, and if their unknowing and struggle to express emerging ideas had not felt held safely within 'the creative tension of silence'.<sup>104</sup> As in every birthing, what eventually emerged had potential to challenge and change the woman's self-perceptions, behaviours, practices and relationships.

#### 4.3.4 *Post-interview*

Immediately after each interview I wrote descriptive and reflective notes, knowing from my professional practice that recall of significant details fades quickly. Notes included occasions when women asked to begin with a prayer or period of silence and any pre- or post-interview comments from participants which related to the recorded interview. Seeking to

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<sup>102</sup> Phillips, *Faith of Girls*, 166.

<sup>103</sup> Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 90-91.

<sup>104</sup> Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 52.

be reflexive, I recorded my initial perceptions of each woman and any comments they made about our developing relationship.

As interviews are richer in content than later transcriptions,<sup>105</sup> I detailed moments where body language or gestures contributed to understanding that the audio recording would not capture. Similarly, I recorded moments of high emotion for participants, or where the atmosphere or connection and understanding between us—or their opposites—was particularly noteworthy. These records enabled later augmentation of transcriptions, without which, understanding of particular sections of interview would have been less comprehensive. They were invaluable memory-joggers when verbal comments which made sense during an interview were confusing when stripped of non-verbal cues that convey additional information face-to-face.

I also logged thoughts about silences, recording my perceptions of each woman's norms of silence and any moments when silence had been particularly fruitful or difficult. I noted silences of unusual length, documenting whatever I perceived occurring for participants and myself within them. These records were helpful in considering how silences impacted on the content and journey of each interview during data analysis.

#### 4.3.5 *Transcribing*

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<sup>105</sup> Kvale, *InterViews*, 129.

Generating interview transcripts is a creative act. In effect, researcher and participants are co-creators of transcripts as, although most words are spoken by participants, the researcher chooses how these are transcribed.<sup>106</sup> Transcripts cannot be exact representations of the interviews: they are abstractions to be re-interpreted, 'as topographical maps are abstractions from the original landscape'. Transcripts 'emphasize some aspects ... and omit others, the selection featured depending on the intended use.'<sup>107</sup> Decisions about transcription can significantly impact how participants' words are perceived and interpreted by the researcher during analysis. Attention given to transcribing must, therefore, mirror that paid to participants during interviews: 'transcription quality should not be neglected.'<sup>108</sup> Creating several different transcript versions from each interview became necessary to facilitate my research aims and uphold the values inherent within my methodological standpoint. A first transcript was completed within three or four days of each interview. As exploring the role of interview silence was an aim of my inquiry, the primary transcript needed to make silences visible. I adapted the use of 'speech spurts' evolved by Slee.<sup>109</sup> Each line of text recorded the words uttered between pauses in speech, and silences longer than two seconds were numerically noted in red font.<sup>110</sup> Visually, the resulting transcripts resemble sparse poetry. This format adheres to Carol Grbich's proposal that maintaining the

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<sup>106</sup> Kvale, *InterViews*, 183. This is, of course, assuming that the researcher transcribes the interview recordings themselves.

<sup>107</sup> Kvale, *InterViews*, 165.

<sup>108</sup> David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 200.

<sup>109</sup> Slee's own method, discussed in *Women's Faith Development*, 57, was an evolution of an earlier mode of transcription developed by Susan E. Chase, 'Taking Narrative Seriously: Consequences for Method and Theory in Interview Studies', in Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich, eds., *Interpreting Experience: The Narrative Study of Lives, Volume 3*, (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 1-26.

<sup>110</sup> Although discourse analysts often note the length of all pauses, timed to within fractions of a second, I chose to record silences of two seconds and longer because silences longer than this reflected the gap after which Sterne proposes interactional momentum is lost. See my comments in Chapter 1, taken from Sutton, *The Air Between Two Hands*, 177.

rhythm, tone, pauses and repetition used by participants is essential in retaining the ‘proper flavour’ of an interview.<sup>111</sup> These transcripts also noted para-linguistic features—sighs, laughter, tears, speech fillers such as ‘y’know’ and ‘like’—and non-auditory communications recorded in post-interview notes. Although no transcript is a complete account of an interview, as they are artificial constructs, ‘frozen in time and abstracted from their base in a social interaction’,<sup>112</sup> I termed these ‘full’ transcripts: they contain the most detail. Once completed, I re-listened to the interview, checking for errors, beginning the ongoing shift from attending to detail to listening for wider narrative and themes, which continued throughout the process of analysis.

Each woman received a transcribed version of her interview within two weeks. To ensure participants retained as much control as possible over their stories they were invited to amend or remove any comments with which they were not comfortable: few were requested. However, as Kvale highlights, many participants are shocked by verbatim transcripts including their ‘fillers’, grammatical errors, repetitions and speech structures that diverge from good written language.<sup>113</sup> Discussing the ongoing empowerment of women within relationships, Janet Surrey states that responsibility is not limited to moments of interaction, but necessitates ongoing consideration of future actions in light of other’s needs, feelings and perceptions.<sup>114</sup> To send transcript versions that did not empower the

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<sup>111</sup> Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 318.

<sup>112</sup> Kvale, *InterViews*, 166.

<sup>113</sup> Kvale, *InterViews*, 172.

<sup>114</sup> Janet L. Surrey, ‘Relationship and Empowerment’, in Judith V. Jordan, Alexandra G. Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene P. Stiver and Janet L. Surrey, *Women’s Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Centre* (NY, London: The Guilford Press, 1991), 167.

women and honour their insights felt inappropriate. Valuing their contribution involved creating versions that resembled familiar prose sentences as closely as possible. In these I reinstated normal lines of text, added appropriate punctuation and removed conversational ‘fillers’, word repetitions, corrections and intrusive grammatical errors.<sup>115</sup> I termed these transcripts ‘participant’ versions.

Whilst full transcripts identified silences in each interview, their fragmentation made reading each narrative for meaning and comprehension difficult. Yet reading participant versions removed attentiveness to the ‘nuances and the differences, the transformations and discontinuities of meaning’ revealed in excised repetitions, ‘fillers’ and corrections which ‘become the very pores of knowledge.’<sup>116</sup> This led to a third, ‘cleaned up’ version, retaining all utterances, but structured as more readily readable prose. Each pause was visually represented by capitalizing the first letter when speech re-commenced, and red, numerical notation of longer silences were retained. A final, ‘sectioned’ version divided each ‘participant’ version into discrete areas of discussion, which became the reference points for coding within data analysis.<sup>117</sup>

#### 4.3.6 *Data analysis, validation and re-presentation*

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<sup>115</sup> Despite having created these transcript versions, in response to receiving her copy, one woman, who was also conducting her own qualitative, interview-based research, commented at how surprised she was in reading her conversational language, stating it was no wonder she preferred writing because in this she was more coherent than in speaking.

<sup>116</sup> Kvale, *Interviews*, 168.

<sup>117</sup> I did not use a line by line referencing system as line numbers would have needed to be added to every line of the ‘full transcripts’, which would have resulted in cumbersome line reference numbers in excess of 4000 for many transcripts.

Mauthner and Doucet state data analysis is a ‘deeply disempowering’ stage for participants.<sup>118</sup> Interviewees have no control over decisions about categorising their comments, issues chosen to focus on, interpretation of their words, or extracts quoted. Participant voices and perspectives risk being ‘lost and subsumed to the views of the researcher, or to the theoretical frameworks and categories that she brings to the research.’<sup>119</sup> Within data analysis and the subsequent re-presentation of participants words and insights, researcher reflexivity becomes crucial.

Working predominantly from ‘cleaned up’ transcripts, each interview was analysed in a variety of ways intended to minimise loss of the women’s voices. My reading of transcripts for categorising, analysing and interpretation reflected Jennifer Mason’s three ways of evaluating data.<sup>120</sup> I read *literally*, according to content and meaning in the women’s words. This overlapped with an *interpretative* reading, where I sought the women’s implied meaning, reading beyond the words and generating categories which name the tacit. Finally, a *reflexive* reading concentrated on my influence within interviews, particularly the silences.

All statements in each interview were categorised using a method broadly based in a grounded research approach, which aims to allow categories and themes to emerge from the data. As new categories emerged—when a statement did not fit existing categories, necessitating a new category label—earlier transcripts were re-read for similar or

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<sup>118</sup> Mauthner and Doucet, ‘Reflections’, 138.

<sup>119</sup> Mauthner and Doucet, ‘Reflections’, 138.

<sup>120</sup> Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2005), 148.

contradictory comments. Using this method each transcript interacted with and impacted on categorising others. This process continued until saturation—when no further categories were necessary. Although categories were undoubtedly shaped by my experiences, hunches and questions, this method attempted to privilege each individual’s comments, rather than squeezing them into categories generated from my preconceptions. However, as Bill Gillham notes, in constructing categories from participant’s words ‘you have to make judgements about *latent* meaning, i.e., what they “meant” by what they said’:<sup>121</sup> researcher interpretation is inherent in the process, becoming increasingly dominant as data is further analysed and re-presented.

Each interview was also read for responses to broader, emergent questions which guided my research,<sup>122</sup> and further questions arising from considering these areas. In addition, categories relating to key interview questions were added: what is understood by ‘silence’? Did this differ when applied to spiritual disciplines? What are the women’s practices of silence? What are their experiences and perceptions of corporate silence? What is difficult about silence? Finally, following Slee’s identification of ‘metaphoric faithing’ as significant in women’s articulation of their faith,<sup>123</sup> and Grbich’s statement that attending to participants’ metaphors can bring clarity to their meanings,<sup>124</sup> I categorised metaphors used to speak about silence.

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<sup>121</sup> Gillham, *The Research Interview*, (London: Continuum, 2000), 69, emphasis in original.

<sup>122</sup> See Chapter 1, ‘The Aims of the Study’.

<sup>123</sup> Slee, *Women’s Faith Development*, 65-67.

<sup>124</sup> Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 35.



Through these processes, significant themes and areas of unique insight emerged from the women's narratives. Although my description suggests a linear process of data analysis, it was necessarily more fluid in nature. As Mauthner and Doucet state, in the 'somewhat unsystematic process' of data analysis researchers 'are undoubtedly influenced, whether consciously or not, by our own personal, political and theoretical biographies.'<sup>125</sup> Aware that my own biases might distort perceptions of what was significant,<sup>126</sup> my categorisation of several interview transcripts was validated in two settings. First, these were considered and then discussed with a fellow student at a similar stage of research in a joint supervision session. Following this, similar consideration of the derivation of categories from transcripts was explored with doctoral students and post-doctoral scholars in a feminist theological research group to which I belong.

In addition, I also used quantitative data analysis to mitigate against any undue influence of my personal biases. The number of comments by each woman were counted for each category, recorded in a spreadsheet and each category for all twenty women totalled. Total comments that contradicted or challenged each category label was also recorded. Although quantitative methods are infrequently used in qualitative research, this data offered some triangulation with my perceptions: tabulating the totals verified that my identification of categories on which to focus were, numerically, most prevalent or unique. It also identified which categories were commented on by every woman on multiple or on at least one

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<sup>125</sup> Mauthner and Doucet, 'Reflections', 121-2.

<sup>126</sup> Mauthner and Doucet, 'Reflections', 121-2.

occasion and clarified perceptions about which categories and broader areas were of particular significance for each woman.

In beginning to interpret the emergent themes I sought to give voice to already hidden, unacknowledged qualities of the women's engagement in silence without further disempowering them by taking away agency and ownership of sensitive, sacred aspects of their life, or appropriating their experiences merely for my academic gain.<sup>127</sup> Minimising any exploitation required an open, attentive and reflexive response as further abstracted interpretation was attempted. I kept in mind Kvale's caution that transcript data can become an 'opaque screen' between the researcher and the original interview, drawing attention to text and making their empathically experienced, lived meanings fade away: 'the dried pale flowers of the herbarium replac[ing] the fresh colourful flowers of the field.'<sup>128</sup> In interpreting the data, I learned not to seek answers quickly, but 'to be patient ... and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.'<sup>129</sup> These two evocative insights grounded my analysis in valuing the transcriptions as representations of the women's generously offered experiences of silence which, given their sensitive and ineffable nature, it may have been costly to share.

My interrogation and interpretation of the women's comments covered the following areas. I identified how their understanding of silence changed over time and how each individual's

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<sup>127</sup> Dangers identified in Mauthner and Doucet, 'Reflections'.

<sup>128</sup> Kvale, *InterViews*, 168-9.

<sup>129</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, M. D. Herter Norton, trans., (New York: Norton, 1954), quoted by Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 68.

presentation of silence shifted within their interview. In identifying their specific practices of silence I attended to how these differ from those traditionally associated with a discipline of silence, as well as any reasons given by each woman for not using particular practices. I sought to understand why they value their chosen practices, how engagement in these differ between participants, and how these might be significant for women in contemporary, western culture. I explored the reported outcomes of their practices, in their own lives and those of others. I attended to where engagement in silence led to changes in the women's lives, and how faith and theology are shaped by their practices. Any conflicts and tensions associated with engagement in silence were particularly noted. I looked for indications of where the value or difficulties of engagement in silence relates to dominant discourses of practical and feminist theologies. Finally, I considered the role of silence within interviews, exploring what silences in the women's narrative flow pointed towards, and how my silence impacted on the women's comments and each interview's trajectory. I looked for what could be learned by attending to silence within these interviews which may benefit future research into women's lives beyond this study. These areas of investigation encompass all stages of the pastoral cycle—exploration of experience; analysis; theological reflection and responsive action—which is central to much inquiry within practical theology.<sup>130</sup>

In re-presenting the women's comments within my findings I was mindful of my 'authority'—the power associated with writing using their words<sup>131</sup>—and the creativity inherent in

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<sup>130</sup> See Graham et al, *Theological Reflection*, 188. Also referred to as the praxis model or pastoral spiral, it is derived from Paulo Freire's theories of learning which originated in the context of the development of liberation theology in Latin America in the mid 1970's.

<sup>131</sup> As discussed in Moschella, *Ethnography*, 239.

this stage of research. Having asked questions, researchers ‘must bear witness’ to the answers, ‘however surprising, moving, or disturbing’ these are.<sup>132</sup> Although Moschella suggests researchers should also ‘honour their own creativity by beginning to think of themselves as artists as they watch, weave, write’,<sup>133</sup> I wanted my creativity and authorship to also honour the women as author-ities. In attempting to retain some balance between our different author-ities, chapters 3 and 5 to 7, discussing my findings, quote the women extensively, aiming towards Gillham’s proposal that participants’ contributions should form a third to half of the discussion.<sup>134</sup> Often I use long interview extracts, allowing women’s insights to be read within some of their wider context, with minimal abstraction. In addition, chapters 5 and 6 each offer a detailed profile of an individual participant. Claire and Loretta were chosen for this re-presentation as their narratives exemplify many areas discussed in each respective chapter. Although their experiences are particular, case studies enables a more in-depth picture to emerge of how significant findings impact across a woman’s life than otherwise fragmented use of material in these chapters allows. By quoting extensively across the four data chapters and offering the narratives of two women in greater detail I create as much space as possible for the women’s voices to be heard.

In re-presenting the women’s words I retain conversational fillers, para-linguistic features and silences. All contribute towards a fuller understanding of what is communicated, and this is often discussed within my interpretation. In short quotations, brief pauses are

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<sup>132</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 145.

<sup>133</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 239.

<sup>134</sup> Gillham, *The Research Interview*, 76.

identified with a solidus.<sup>135</sup> In longer extracts I retain the structure of ‘full’ transcripts. Both retain numeric indications of longer silences in seconds. Para-linguistic features are shown in square brackets. In using multiple, extended quotations from full transcripts I intentionally create opportunity for readers to ‘listen’ attentively to the women’s voiced comments and silences for themselves.<sup>136</sup> Lisa Mazzei proposes in these silences ‘very fat and rich information is yet to be known and understood.’ She states ‘fat material requires our listening differently’ if the rich interplay between silences and words is to be more readily recognised within qualitative research.<sup>137</sup> Although Mazzei suggests listening to silences within interviews allows *researchers* ‘to evoke the truths present in the silences, not to avoid them’, I intend readers to equally share this opportunity to listen differently, ‘for the silence to breathe and inform’ appreciation of the women’s perceptions.<sup>138</sup> In this, readers are invited to co-create meaning found in participant’s different forms of self-expression. However, as Mazzei cautions, the danger of listening to silences is that those attending to them may force the silences to say what they want to hear. Silences are even more ‘slippery’ and open to interpretation than transcribed words. Those attending to silence cannot ‘claim that every silence is intentional, discernible, or knowable.’<sup>139</sup>

Reflecting Muers and Ross’ presentation of the unknowability of others,<sup>140</sup> Mazzei reminds researchers that some silences will remain unintelligible. Therefore, silences must be

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<sup>135</sup> Where a line break was used in the original, ‘full’ transcript.

<sup>136</sup> I encourage readers not to move quickly over the longer silences, particularly in the extended extracts, but to consider pausing for at least a long enough time for this to be representative of the length of silence within the woman’s narrative. In this text, numeric indication of longer silences have, necessarily, been changed from the original red to black font.

<sup>137</sup> Lisa Mazzei, ‘Inhabited Silences: In Pursuit of a Muffled Subtext’, *Qualitative Inquiry* (2003), 9: 358.

<sup>138</sup> Mazzei, ‘Inhabited Silences’, 362.

<sup>139</sup> Mazzei, ‘Inhabited Silences’, 366.

<sup>140</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 72-86; Ross, *Silence*, 81.

listened to reflexively, for meanings that are present, and for silences whose meaning cannot be ascribed, as well as the sources and motivations behind these meanings—‘that we let the silence speak’ only what it will.<sup>141</sup>

In any presentation of findings, the selection of quotations made and omitted, and their interpretation, directly reflects the subjective nature of qualitative inquiry, which locates significant power with the researcher. As Berry remarks, ‘What is not said, and the process by which it is omitted, is as significant as the finished text.’<sup>142</sup> Yet whatever attempts I make to ensure the women are re-presented faithfully, and the processes used in arriving at my findings explicit, I ‘must also recognise the impossibility of creating a research process in which the contradictions in power and consciousness are eliminated’.<sup>143</sup> Mauthner and Doucet emphasise the need to accept this process is always unequal, as power and control over ‘conceiving, designing, administering, and reporting’ remain with researchers. Quoting Pamela Cotterill, they concur ‘the final shift of power between the researcher and the respondent is balanced in favour of the researcher, for it is she who eventually walks away.’<sup>144</sup>

However, my experience offers a counter-narrative I have wanted to include or omit from this discussion at various times. Since beginning interviews, phrases from the women’s transcripts resound during my own discipline. Often, they reflect supportively what is

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<sup>141</sup> Mazzei, ‘Inhabited Silences’, 367.

<sup>142</sup> Berry, *Ritual making Women*, 43.

<sup>143</sup> Mauthner and Doucet, ‘Reflections’, 139.

<sup>144</sup> Pamela Cotterill, ‘Interviewing Women: Issues of Friendship, Vulnerability and Power’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* (1992), 15 (5/6): 604, referenced in Mauthner and Doucet, ‘Reflections’, 139.

happening, reminding me that others encounter silence in similar ways. At other times—usually when struggling to still my thoughts—their emergence feels a mocking critique. Occasionally, phrases recounting difficulties with silence offer comfort. Yet all appear unbidden, disturbing stilled thought, or contributing to a cacophony I feel powerless to subdue. I repeatedly reflected on Berry stating the significance of omission, and Moschella's proposal that the power of research is its ability to 'challenge or disrupt tacit power arrangements that privilege some voices and quiet others.'<sup>145</sup> Whilst Moschella's words were not intended to imply the quieting of researchers, I concluded if I did not acknowledge this unwelcome phenomenon, the imposed impact of my research into women choosing silence upon my own practise would become what Mary Daly termed 'nondata':<sup>146</sup> that is, 'data that does not fit into the Respectable Categories ... thereby rendering it invisible'.<sup>147</sup> It would reverse my identification of feminist theological discourse silencing women's chosen practices of silence. Such self-censorship would silence a significant effect of the attentiveness and 'care-ful'<sup>148</sup> hearing I sought to bring to the women's own voices and silences. It would also silence the cautionary note my experience highlights as appropriate to sound in response to Slee's otherwise profoundly insightful description of feminist qualitative research as spiritual practice, for its effects have been to disrupt my own.<sup>149</sup> Finally, in response to Cotterill's proposal that the balance of power remains with the researcher, who walks away, I propose that more often than is acknowledged, participant's

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<sup>145</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 151.

<sup>146</sup> Although it has been acknowledged with my supervisor and the subject of conversations with my spiritual director and those with whom I trained in this ministry.

<sup>147</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, (London: Women's Press, 1986), 11.

<sup>148</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, 141.

<sup>149</sup> Slee, 'Feminist Qualitative Research'.

words—and silences—weigh heavily on researchers long after completion of the inquiry. Their lasting impact upon the researcher is potentially equal in significance, if different to that for participants. Although there is a certain incongruity in ending a discussion of methodology within feminist research with a discussion of myself, its reflexivity acknowledges that, for me, the women's voices continue to resound: I cannot 'walk away' at will from echoes of their comments which, uninvited, intrude powerfully into my silence.



## SILENCE AND RELATIONALITY WITH GOD

in silence I connect more  
 than in anything else  
 with y'know with other people  
 with myself  
 with the divine

Michaela<sup>1</sup>

[A] prominent theme in women's writings on female experience is the primacy of relationality as a primary mode of being and doing ... and [its] growth-enhancing qualities.

Kathleen Grieder, Gloria Johnson and Kristen Leslie<sup>2</sup>

### 5.1 Introduction

Disciplines of silence have frequently been associated with physical solitude and, as a consequence, degrees of withdrawal from others. However, analysis revealed that irrespective of whether the women engage in silence individually or corporately, their participation in these practices is primarily experienced as relational. Silence is fundamentally valued by them for enabling encounter and deepening relationship with God, self and others.

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<sup>1</sup> A participant.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen J. Greider, Gloria A. Johnson and Kristen J. Leslie, 'Three Decades of Women Writing for Our Lives', in Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern, *Feminist and Womanist*, 34.

This chapter, and the two which follow, will explore how the women's engagement in practices of silence contributes to development of one of these three areas of relationality, beginning here in relationship with God, via self towards that with others. From an underlying sense of repetition as these chapters unfold, it becomes clear how transformations in one relationship are mirrored and built upon, enabling change in the next.

## 5.2 The importance of relational presence

Optimally, human life begins in relationship: between those who, together, have conceived and birthed their baby. As Donald Winnicott observes, 'There is no such thing as a baby ... If you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing *a baby and someone*.'<sup>3</sup> To be human is to be intrinsically relational, existing in the giving and receiving matrix of I and Thou,<sup>4</sup> interdependent with others for continued existence and ongoing development. Yet this capacity for relating becomes obscured by the psychological and emotional defences erected in response to early inadequacies and ruptures in relationships. People of faith have recognised that human longing for connection cannot be fully met by other people. This deep desire finds fuller satisfaction when relating extends out beyond humanity.

Despite their variety of practices, central to the women's descriptions is that in silence they experience a profound sense of presence: another beyond and different to self, whose

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Winnicott, 'Further Thoughts on Babies as Persons', in *The Child, The Family, and The Outside World*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), 88, emphasis in original.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Walter Kaufman, trans., (New York: Free Press, 1971).

intensely real and vital being is so attractive they are drawn back into silence hoping to meet this presence again. Ali said

in silence ...  
there is something else  
and it is not the absence of sound it is the presence  
of something  
erm  
but (2.5)  
it feels like (3)  
ah  
it feels like an encounter  
it's  
a sort of  
a secret pleasure ... (9.5)  
I don't have that presence other than  
in silence ...  
it is silence that creates the awareness of the presence ...  
it's very concentrated  
erm  
you almost seem to touch it (4)  
erm (8.5)  
and it is alive (4.5)

In silence the women feel surrounded by the rich vibrancy of this presence, who all identified as God. With distractions stripped away, God initially seems more easily accessible and more tangible or real. In response, they developed patterns of returning to silence, hoping that here, their longing for closer relationship with God would be satisfied. For some, once a stable, sustainable practice of silence was established, it remained a consistent space of encountering God—although over time their practices have shifted into new forms more appropriate for their deepening relationship. The majority described a fluctuating pattern of relationship with God in silence, sustaining then falling away from their discipline, often at times of new family commitments or expectations. Frequently, they

returned to a familiar practice of silence at a point of difficulty or crisis. Often, it was discovering a fresh practice that seemed right for them which led to silence becoming their predominant spiritual discipline for developing a deeper, ongoing relationship with God.

### **5.3 Participant profile: Claire**

Claire's relationship with God is 'inseparable' from her practices of silence: she doubts it would have developed without them. Its deepening traces back through four strands of silence from childhood: belonging to a faith community, science, scripture meditation and loneliness. Over years, these were 'weaving together', pulling her closer to God like threads twisting into a shorter, stronger cord.

Silence was part of her Catholic family's night-prayer, weekly and special Masses, and occasional two hours silent devotion before the 'Blessed Sacrament' at school. Faith and its associated silences were 'just part of the whole of life'. The young Claire spent much time in imaginative silences, 'wondering ... pondering ... daydreaming' about the natural world. As a teenager, DNA and astronomy fascinated her. Intuitively, she felt her musings were spiritual experiences: 'God was around/somehow in it'—beyond and greater than her, yet meeting Claire in a relationship which was 'actually very real'. As 'the winds of Vatican II/blew through ... sixth form', teachers introduced the 'novelty' of bible reading: scripture meditation became part of Claire's silence. Leaving the North to study biochemistry in an area with few Catholics was an isolating silence. Homesick and 'yearning for relationship', Claire questioned her identity, God's, and their interrelationship. Scripture meditation

'rooted' her in God, offering 'sustenance/to cope with ... loneliness' and the 'psychological/upheaval' of losing her community and identity.

Years later, lonely at home with a baby and toddler, Claire's relationship with God drifted. She remembers asking 'what/has God/and my faith/got to do with this life/of/sloppy food crying babies/nappies/no brain use?' In night-time silence, awake with the youngsters, God 'invited' her back to meditating on scripture.

that's where my cry if you like  
the  
'what on earth has this God got to do with my life?'  
started to work its way  
through

Soon, Claire's three year old was critically ill. When the trauma left her unable to know how to cry out to God, meditating on bible verses made this possible:

sitting in silence by the bedside  
in a  
single room  
and had  
a view ...  
to the hills  
and I can remember the silence of  
'I lift up my eyes to the hills'  
a- and what was going on in that silence was sustaining  
erm  
to the extent that  
an odd person commented  
on how I didn't look more stricken  
I must have looked like a heartless mother!

Sitting with her child, scripture, nature and God, Claire felt sustained and enabled to hold on to faith 'in the depths of the circumstance'. As trust in God grew, this relationship transformed anguish and heartache into 'a good experience'.

Two years on, an at-home mum with three children under six, feeding a baby in silence at night shifted Claire's relationship with God again. Exhausted, Claire moved beyond pondering scripture and nature into wordless encounter with God:

it was when I was by this cot in the night  
that I actually dared to sit there just in  
the presence of God in silence ...  
I felt that real invitation  
to  
to just let it be  
in that  
relationship  
of  
silence  
beyond  
the scripture ...  
just sitting in silence beyond that  
and beginning to  
in some way  
directly encounter ...  
God who I felt was personal to me

Letting her safety net of scripture go to begin less word-based meditation exposed aspects of self Claire found unacceptable. Evoking Adam and Eve, Claire spoke of 'wanting to get my fig-leaves out' to hide what felt shameful before God without the cover of scripture. Daring to risk vulnerability and name what shamed her was 'the first step/from the hiding' into a more truthful relationship. In doing so, silence with God became 'a place of intimacy/rather than a place of exposure'.

In the decades since, Claire was drawn to increasingly silent communion with God, first using mantras then, from Centering Prayer, her relationship with God progressively dropped into mentally stilled apophatic silence:

a bit like when you ring the bell it sort of gradually  
erm  
the vibration just goes  
less and less ...  
it goes to a  
place of (4)  
I think encounter or presence is probably the best I can get that ...  
in my relationship with God I can't see that  
how that would have  
developed without  
silence

Using these different practices, Claire's awareness of encountering God, and her self-awareness, passed through different types of knowing: in her mind, emotions and embodied physicality. In contemplation she does not know self or encounter with God at any cognitive level, but with sensorial perception, which Claire terms 'the deepest' knowing:

there's no  
insight  
in terms of  
mental insight  
or or  
'wow'  
or sense of real  
mental amazement ...  
there is less  
of  
an emotional  
felt engagement ...  
if we're talking about actual feelings of delight or  
erm (4)  
joy or—  
I'll leave grot- [*mis-spoken*]

gratitude out because that's  
I think that is  
something slightly different for me  
what (4.5)  
what remains  
in  
is  
the body sense  
and that (6)  
that is the level at which I (3)  
I'm more and more conscious  
of  
of how  
how my  
body is  
and  
how  
that (3)  
is telling me things  
about  
myself  
and about God  
without the mind  
interfering ...  
it's a it's a  
body  
presence  
that I  
I rely on more and more  
because the mind and the feelings aren't there

Here, Claire speech became fragmentary. In frequent, longer silences she delved into sensorial memory to express encounter with God beyond mental insight or emotion. As Claire refers to earlier, emotional ways of knowing—delight, joy and gratitude—her speech increased in fluency. This dissolves into halting, broken words as she expresses knowing at the deepest level, reappearing as Claire returns to speaking of the mind and emotions. In contemplation, Claire became aware of more subtle faculties for knowing, reminiscent of sensory perception in infancy which is obscured by the developing brain's increasing reliance



on cognition. Encountering God and self through sensation evokes relationships centred in trust and intimacy: the unconditional love of mother for new born child, the flawless interplay of dancers partnered over years, or the abandon of self-giving between lover and beloved. Pamela Cooper-White states that such nonverbal and presymbolic ways of embodied knowing belong to a different level of consciousness. Corresponding with Ross' 'deep mind', where egoic awareness is surrendered,<sup>5</sup> this knowing emerges from a state of being of which 'we are only dimly aware' and 'from which creativity springs'.<sup>6</sup>

Claire took time to suggest a metaphor to describe such encounters with God, twice commenting she wanted to 'not think it', but let it 'unfold'. Its emergence entailed over ninety seconds of silence as, eyes closed, Claire dipped into sensorial memories of 'deep mind' to help express what was 'very difficult' to articulate.

Claire: it's something that's spreading  
in a (9)  
a  
a a  
and it's mobile  
it's definitely got  
a sort of fluidity to it (34)  
I'm trying to think of a metaphor that  
that  
that just  
I I'm trying to  
not think it  
but allow it  
t- to emerge  
because it's  
something that's describing (4)  
the nothing there

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<sup>5</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 1 and 76.

<sup>6</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *Many Voices: Pastoral Psychotherapy in Relational and Theological Perspective*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 63.

but the utter certainty that everything's there  
a- and I don't think I (11)  
mmm (21)  
mmm (20)  
there's  
there's some sort of  
of dance  
emerging  
out of the movement but I  
I can't erm (4)  
so it's  
it's a spreading  
it's  
it's it's  
it's  
it's it's an emergent  
movement  
that's got a dance  
type quality to it

A: mmm (5)

Claire: but it's  
totally unpredictable  
it's not got steps in  
it's more like a flowing (5.5)  
what one does the other  
will just react to [*here, dancing her two hands with palms facing each other at  
neck level, moving together in an opposite mirroring*]  
a bit like—  
ah!  
you know when the flocks of birds behave such that they develop these sort  
of amazing patterns?

A: mmm

Claire: there's something of that quality to it ...  
the encounter has that  
that sense about it of that movement of  
of  
of birds  
that you sometimes see  
in a flock [*this reflected her hands' movement*]

Each suggestive word tumbling gently towards the metaphor—'spreading'; 'mobile';

'fluidity'; 'emergent'; 'dance'; 'movement'; 'unpredictable'; 'flowing'—adds insight until

Claire's 'ah!' moment arrives and her murmuration takes flight. Cumulatively, they intimate interaction and interdependence between the metaphorical birds: fluid proximity and distance, attentiveness, acceptance, growth, trust, change and freedom, each necessary as a flock crosses continents together. Collectively, the metaphor and language advancing it indicate the nature of Claire's encounters with God: a coming together in mutual attentiveness and responsivity, both giving and receiving, communicating struggle and need, belonging and joy, and delighting in secure, unconditional love within which freedom from control and openness to all that is brought into the dance of their evolving relationship is enfolded.

However, words offering significant insight into Claire's relationship with God could easily be overlooked. Claire gives time for a metaphor time to emerge 'because' it is describing 'the nothing there/but the utter certainty that everything's there'—her 'because' indicating the importance of Claire's apparently paradoxical perception about the nature of their encounter. The 'nothing' indicates Claire's experience of the apophatic. Yet, paradoxically, Claire stated this occurs without losing any sense of identity. Instead, she is 'expanded/by being there' as the Holy Spirit 'enlighten[s]/even the/the parts of me that might not even know that's what's happening'. The vestige of self which remains aware is that fullest expression of being, made in the image of, and yearning towards return to God. Here, Claire ceases to know self as separate. She is 'almost absorbed' or 'dissolved' into God's presence,

knowing existence only in and through the divine: self which some traditions speak of as the being we were before we had a face.<sup>7</sup>

In further paradox, when 'naughting' egoic self,<sup>8</sup> Claire retains 'utter certainty that everything's there'—all that is needed for her continued existence and the sustaining of all that is created, from the components of DNA to her companionable, far-flung stars. In her deepest discerning, beyond thought and emotion, Claire senses this to be the source of identity, sustenance and certainty: re-connection between her 'deepest part', its origin in the divine and all created matter, where everything is 'held/in the/greatest spirit of God ... or whatever you want to call that'. In surrendering separate self, Claire is gathered into the completeness of God's generative activity, aware of her being as part of the overall movement of the flock, itself 'onyd' with the divine.<sup>9</sup>

Emerging from these times, Claire is aware of elusive gratitude, known in an embodied rather than cognitive or affective way. Likening it to the flash of Hopkins' kingfishers as they 'catch fire' in flight,<sup>10</sup> this fleeting sensation in returning towards ordinary awareness is Claire's 'primary hallmark' of having encountered God. Re-surfacing from this encounter always entails feelings of 'regret at the same time as great wonder' in recognising moments

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<sup>7</sup> This particular formation is taken from Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 51, but within Zen Buddhism is often expressed as the face we had before our parents were born.

<sup>8</sup> Julian of Norwich's uses this word to speak of self-emptying before God. For this definition of her usage, see the glossary in *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love, Made to a Devout Servant of Our Lord, called Mother Juliana, an Anchorite of Norwich: Who Lived in the Days of King Edward the Third*, George Hargreave Parker, ed., (Leicester: John S. Crossley, 1843), 209.

<sup>9</sup> Julian of Norwich's uses this word to speak of being in union with God. See the glossary in *Sixteen Revelations*, Parker, 210.

<sup>10</sup> See Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', in *The Major Works*, Catherine Phillips, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 129.

of profound relationality have occurred within apophatic silence which, as Slee states, remain at the very edge of any cataphatic knowing.<sup>11</sup>

Latterly, Claire feels God is offering a new invitation: to remain open to the intimacy of encounter 'amidst it all happening' as well as in the protected space and time set aside for this spiritual practice. Gradually she is discovering

there are moments  
in the midst of  
what appears to be life's chaos  
where  
I can be in that space and  
and just  
ask to be  
somehow rebalanced in that moment of  
internal silence  
and that presence allows things to be as they are

Claire is discovering that her fullest identity, known in intimate silence with God, is 'there/actually all the time/if I can/just/you could say rest into it'. In doing so, she is more fully present to the realities of situations, without her identity being separated from rootedness in God.

Claire described her journeying towards apophatic silence as gradually 'falling back into that' which is 'the truth of things/rather than the illusion that persists most of the time in my mind'. Knowing what takes place and what such encounters with God are for is beyond her ordinary comprehension: she 'can't express it as what it is' because what occurs in its

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<sup>11</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 165.

hiddenness is 'mystery'. Instead, she waits in silence, 'trusting/that that/emptying out/is not a/a wasteful/process/of time/or energy/or whatever', sustained by a belief that what occurs there with God is 'crucial' if she is to continue the transformative movement of embracing her true identity, made manifest through egoic surrender into intimate relationality with God.

#### **5.4 Silence and relationship with God**

The majority of the women have not experienced the type of contemplative encounter with God which Claire described, in an ongoing way. However, all identified that the intensity of relating with God in silence is beyond what they ordinarily experience through other spiritual practices. Although these also nurture relationship with God, silence is where awareness of God's presence is greatest. They spoke of its importance in the following ways: it is Gaynor's 'primary spiritual practice so it's/where I meet God' and 'how I connect to the divine'; Elizabeth is most 'conscious of my relationship with God in silence'; Julay spoke of silence as 'the way' that relationship with God is 'being offered to me': however else she tries to relate to God, silence 'is where I keep getting brought back to'. Mary's practices of silence are 'how I/focus on/my relationship with God ... it's not an add-on', but 'a lot of the whole thing'. To Catriona, silence is 'almost the *essence*/of my relationship with God', while Michaela described silence as where their relationship in its 'purest expression ... purest form'. Loretta simply stated 'I think silence is my relationship with the divine ... it's God's language'. As for Claire, sustaining a discipline of silence has become inseparable from the women's ongoing relationship with God.

#### 5.4.1 *Being with God in silence*

Many of the women's discipline of silence originated in intentionally quieting self and offering space into which they hoped God would speak. This often stemmed from a Christian background where quality of relationship with God was indicated by the quantity of communication received. When talking to God no longer seemed to illicit response, they explored whether they could better discern God's communications in silence. Some initially equated the amount of time spent in silence with how much they were likely to 'get out of it'. When first going on silent retreat, Rachel 'would spend *hours* in a concentrated silence ... in a chapel or ... down on my knees ... which means/"now I am waiting for God to speak"'. Although not typical, Rachel's comment represents an undertone that it is the women's responsibility to make themselves available if the 'gold standard'—as Sian described it—of hearing God's messages was to be achieved. These expectations were sometimes met for a brief period, but were more often disappointed. God was silent. At first, this was particularly difficult, until their attention shifted from wanting to hear from to wanting to *be with* God. When considered alongside Wolfson's 'bulge theory',<sup>12</sup> this change in communicative interaction suggests God's invitation to transition from the ongoing verbal negotiation required in superficial relationships into the greater silence Wolfson identifies as indicating the security of intimate bonding.

Other women made no reference to engaging in silence to hear from God. Several expressed incomprehension at notions that God should speak, often portraying this with humour: Elizabeth is 'amazed' when anyone recounts hearing from God with the certainty of

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<sup>12</sup> Wolfson, 'The Bulge', 21-38.

Old Testament characters; Barbara's God is 'not chatty' but 'the strong silent type' who any metaphorical partner would be 'piggied off with' for saying little or failing to give out instructions each Monday morning. Recognising language as only conveying some aspects of relationality and reality, their desire was to encounter God in the already existing intimacy of a relationship strong enough, according to Wolfson's theory, to be sustained without ongoing verbal negotiation.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever their starting point, all interpret their deepening relationship developing at God's instigation rather than something they made happen. As Lanzetta suggests, they stopped perceiving engagement in silence as 'self-willed activity'.<sup>14</sup> Instead, they recognise the divine initiative of grace at work, to which Coakley ascribes all human encounter with God.<sup>15</sup> With no prerequisite to listen or talk to God and nothing to get wrong or right, they gradually relinquished words, images of God and expectations of how their relationship should proceed. They recognise God's desire for them 'to share in the intimacy of the divine life',<sup>16</sup> in an abiding openness and attentiveness to one another's presence. They felt invited, simply, to be.

Recognising this invitation transformed the women's engagement in silence. Perceiving something of God's pleasure in their being together, silence became the expression of divine hospitality, offering ongoing entry into God's presence. Rather than relating with God being

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<sup>13</sup> Wolfson, 'The Bulge'.

<sup>14</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Coakley, 'Developing Practices'.

<sup>16</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 32.



rigorous or formal, in silence their relationship became free of such constraints and was approached with expectation that God would be encountered. Longing for God to speak transformed into yearning to meet with God. Wanting to leave silence with directions from God was replaced by desire to feel that they had been with God. Dreams of getting something specific from God were transformed into belief that something of infinite worth would be shared, indicating both God's reaching out towards the women, and their offering of self in reciprocal relationship.

God's invitation to being in one another's company without any agenda, distractions or expectations is different from their home and working lives. It is also perceived as different from other practices which constitute belonging to a faith community. Instead of needing to do, give, or be grateful recipients of care, shared, attentive being became recognised as the fullest expression of love in relationship. They discovered freedom from doing things for God, being asked of by God, and even expectation to ask of God on behalf of others. The language describing perceptions of being together in silence expresses their delight: it was spoken of as 'a happy place', a 'secret pleasure', a place of 'embodied/ongoing/deep joy' and 'real contentment' which 'feels good' and they 'really enjoy'. It is a source of 'great happiness', a 'wonderful ... really exciting' space which is 'very special', with several women echoing Catriona's sentiment of trying to 'stretch it out as long as I can/until I really really have to go'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ali, Rebecca, Sally, Julay, Mary and Catriona.

Their language draws on metaphors of bodily proximity, tactile connection and physicality. Many spoke repeatedly of sitting, resting, being centred or dwelling in God. Their tactile language often gestured towards physical affection, identifying the 'touch' of God, being held intimately, or embraced by God. Rhona described feeling wrapped in 'cloud ... velvet or some kind of soft material that you could actually/tangibly/experience', whilst also carefully expressing that this 'doesn't feel enveloping oppressively'; Rachel described encountering God as being 'swept off my feet'. Their language expressed immersion, osmosis, absorption, being dissolved or entering fully into the divine, recalling that used by female mystics conveying revelations of divine union through the metaphor of lovers. Others equated the 'felt love of God' to a 'womb-like' experience, some relating this to their own pregnancies.<sup>18</sup> The women's language and metaphors depict intensely intimate relationships with God, which reassure and sustain them in the everyday and offer comfort and consolation during periods difficulty. They evoke Olinick's descriptions of soothed, phatic silence as the goal of a search for solace, merger, reunion, inner peace and happiness.<sup>19</sup> Yet this is established without the verbal communication Olinick presents as central in achieving deeply affective contact.

The women's descriptions of God's attentiveness echo portrayals by the psalmists: they feel God looking directly at them with a steady gaze, like a mother's upon the infant in her arms or a lover's towards the beloved. As Elson identified, being the object of unwavering attention fosters deeper relationality.<sup>20</sup> Several times God's gaze was described in language

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<sup>18</sup> Julay and Alison.

<sup>19</sup> Olinick, 'Meanings Beyond Words', 468.

<sup>20</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 353-5.

usually used in portraying the contemplative gaze towards the divine, as a ‘long/and loving look’:<sup>21</sup> they expressed surprise at feeling looked upon with the wonder and awe more usually associated with how created beings behold their Creator. The constancy of God’s attentive gaze was perceived as indicating God’s care, faithfulness and steadfast love. In its steadiness the women’s attention shifted from seeking satisfaction of their needs to reciprocating God’s focus on them, turning to behold as they were being beheld. Ross describes this reciprocal, silent beholding as ‘Love holding love in being’.<sup>22</sup> She presents this mutual gaze as the beginnings of self-forgetfulness which can become the wellspring of transfiguration within ordinary life. Within the ‘silent space of love’—God’s beholding—new, growing security gradually emerges for the beheld, despite the discomfort this gaze evokes intermittently.<sup>23</sup> Consenting to being beheld by God, in returning this beholding, the beheld can also discover what it is to be healed.

#### 5.4.2 *Security in relationship with God*

All the women repeatedly identified silence as where they feel safe with God—most of the time.<sup>24</sup> Security in any relationship is dependent on both parties. Each require a resilient enough self-identity to risk relinquishing some of the autonomy and agency they bring into the relationship. Both must establish and communicate boundaries associated with this risk, whilst also remaining open to re-establishing different boundaries as their relationship

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<sup>21</sup> Versions of this phrase are variously attributed to Dorothy Soelle, Richard Rohr, Walter Burghardt or to writers in the mystical tradition more generally. This version was used by Alison.

<sup>22</sup> Ross, *Icon of the Heart*, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, *Icon of the Heart*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Times when this is not the case will be explored later in this chapter.

changes. Mindfulness of balance between the levels of vulnerability and power each holds across the different contexts of their relationship is also central to establishing safe relational space.

Perceiving silence as secure is foundational to growth in the women's relationship with God. Silence was described as easeful, welcoming, a place of feeling warmth, being cosy, wonderfully comfortable, like being in restful darkness or twilight where they feel 'deeply at home'.<sup>25</sup> Other comments indicated its safety: a 'sanctuary', 'refuge', or 'retreat', as 'protective' and offering 'a sense of security'.<sup>26</sup> Rhona described silence with God as 'my tortoise shell', depicting a temporary hideaway from perceived or actual danger. Silence feels 'safe enough' to continue exploring their relationship.<sup>27</sup> Ali said,

I want to experience more  
of this presence ...  
I feel safe in it ...  
it's the safety that gives me  
the opportunity to explore [*the relationship*] ...  
'cause if you don't have to worry about  
your  
your safety who you are your identity disappearing  
you're actually  
less focussed on yourself

The perception of silence as secure enough for relational exploration was common to all the women. Its security allows them, like Julay, to bring 'difficult things/painful things' before God in silence. Given Rajski and Keating's presentation of God as 'divine therapist',<sup>28</sup> this

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<sup>25</sup> Lynne, Una, Rebecca, Alison and Julay

<sup>26</sup> Lynne, Una, Rebecca, Alison and Sally.

<sup>27</sup> Comment by both Loretta and Barbara.

<sup>28</sup> Rajski, 'Finding God', 185; Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 4.

undermines Freudian insistence that silence indicates 'resistance' within relationships.<sup>29</sup> Instead, it affirms Sharpley's findings that relational silence indicates good rapport, Wolfson's proposal of silence between intimates, and Jaworski's 'reverse bulge' where secrets are shared with intimates.<sup>30</sup> This security offers respite from relational insecurity in daily life, where the women's inability to convey their feelings verbally and the inadequacy of the words of others to provide comfort is acutely felt. This contrasts markedly with relational safety with God in silence: firstly, because silence is felt able to contain the messiness and paradox of life's difficulties; secondly because the relationship generates phatic silence Olinick presents as reminiscent of the satiated and containing mother-infant interaction regressively longed for at times of distress.<sup>31</sup> Silence with God achieves both things without requiring recourse to verbal communication when using words effectively seems impossible.

Relational security with God is inextricably intertwined with discovering more about God's nature in silence. Biblical portrayals of God as tyrannical were identified as problematic and narrow. Gaynor described the 'intense labour' necessary in using the Bible as a spiritual resource, either personally or in ministry, without reinforcing images of God as discriminatory and judgemental. Increasingly, the women have come to trust God does not play games, deliberately hide or act in the overly 'noisy and busy'<sup>32</sup> way some feel the Bible suggests. Mirroring Knight's research participants,<sup>33</sup> they eschew a distant, berating male

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<sup>29</sup> See Sabbadini, 'Listening to Silence', 406.

<sup>30</sup> Sharpley, 'The Influence of Silence'; Wolfson, 'The Bulge'; Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Olinick, 'Meanings Beyond Words'.

<sup>32</sup> Michaela.

<sup>33</sup> Knight, *Feminist Mysticism*, 157.

God who demands obedience and threatens retribution. Cartoon-like images depicting God 'as a/big bloke with a/white beard/sitting on a cloud/babbling'<sup>34</sup> are replaced with more life-giving perceptions encountered in silence.<sup>35</sup> Sometimes referring to God's 'personality', their narratives are full of positive, expected references to God's nature: gentle, peaceful, kind, compassionate, loving, supportive, comforting and tender. Beyond these familiar characteristics, they offered images of God as humorous, delighted, mischievous, enthralled, amused, vibrant and deeply attractive, or sad, grieving, mystified and disappointed.

Although many recognised the tendency to create God in our image, and that humans do not have the capacity to fully comprehend the divine, they insisted silence enables encounter with aspects of God's nature they had not previously recognised. Perceiving God's nature as more rounded and balanced than they had previously helps them feel more comfortable with God. It also enables them feel secure enough to acknowledge greater breadth within their own nature and face painful truths about themselves.<sup>36</sup> There was consensus that perceiving God in new ways is precious, realising that God's nature towards them is not controlling, and always 'of loving intent'.<sup>37</sup>

Discovering God's constancy also enhanced their relational security. Many reported now dropping into silence throughout the day—on the bus, carrying out household duties, waiting in queues or claiming time with God in the midst of busyness by 'going to the loo'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Barbara.

<sup>35</sup> The women who made comments suggesting their perception of God still bore some resemblance to such images were Catriona, who referred to God as 'the big one up there', and who always spoke of God as male, and Dawn, whose references to God often presented 'him' as a male authority figure.

<sup>36</sup> This will be discussed in more detail later, in the current and subsequent chapters.

<sup>37</sup> Barbara.

<sup>38</sup> Dawn.

They are more conscious of God's ongoing availability, however unsacred or inappropriate they previously might have thought it to be to rest in God at that point. Elisabeth described God's availability within silence using a metaphor of ceaselessly flowing water:

I'm more often conscious of my relationship with God in silence  
I mean it almost feels like the silence is going on all the time ...  
you have eddies of the river but it just keeps running  
you know?  
it's always there  
and  
that relationship with God  
is always there whether or not I experience it—  
it may be a practice of silence  
sort of strengthens one's consciousness of it  
so it is like the sort of norm  
going on all the time [*laughs*]  
you can't have a background noise of silence can you?  
but it is like that [*laughs*] ...  
like a waterfall roaring away all the time

Recognising God's attentiveness in the silence behind human noise and activity, they have discovered, as Morton suggests, God's silent presence is not 'inept', but hearing people into response to God's self-revelation.<sup>39</sup> God does not force presence on the women but gives them freedom to 'tap into it,'<sup>40</sup> however briefly—in Kwiatkowska's terms, to increasingly 'foreground' God from the background of their attention.<sup>41</sup>

Repeated descriptions of feeling held also portrayed the women's security. They are not held by silence: rather, silence enhances their awareness of God holding them. Their language images being held tenderly: it is 'intimate', 'enclosing', 'comforting', 'warming', 'a

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<sup>39</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 60.

<sup>40</sup> Michaela.

<sup>41</sup> Kwiatkowska, 'Silence Across Modalities'.

hug', an 'embracing' or 'warm darkness' which 'has a depth to it'.<sup>42</sup> The language also implies feeling held safely, without risk of falling or being dropped: God's holding is like being 'enveloped', 'cocooned' and 'contained', offering 'support' which 'underpins' them.<sup>43</sup> Another clutch of phrases links God's holding to mothering: it is 'nurturing', providing 'solace', 'nestling in it', 'snuggling up a bit', knowing self to be 'cherished ... held in the certainty of love'.<sup>44</sup>

Although their language depicts God's holding as caring and protective, it could appear stifling. Images of cocoons, envelopes, nests, pinning and containing convey little possibility of movement or freedom, and danger that self could be engulfed within such impassioned embrace. Although I did not suggest this, several women countered this possible interpretation. Barbara spoke of 'being held/but not held "grasped"/just held open-handedly'. Claire described being held in silence as something she could be 'almost absorbed into', but qualified this as not diminishing her identity: 'it's not a self-loss'. Elizabeth was unconcerned about losing self because God's holding matches 'precisely' what she needs: she experiences God as 'embracing so accurately that you're accurately met' in each moment. These comments recall Hill et al's presentation of relational silence conveying care which is respectful and empathetic.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Elisabeth, Mary, Rhona, Nancy and Una.

<sup>43</sup> Rhona, Alison, Rebecca, Loretta and Ali.

<sup>44</sup> Alison, Catriona, Sian, Lynne and Loretta.

<sup>45</sup> Hill et al, 'Therapist Use of Silence'.



Many women's portrayal of God holding them reflected maternal nurture. For Alison, times of silence whilst carrying her unborn child felt like 'a sort of miracle', giving new insight into how she is held by 'God in whom we "live and move and have our being"'.<sup>46</sup> She described this holding as having 'freedom to move/and yet held in love' in a 'protective, yet not constrained' way, likening this to a foetus' unrestricted movement within the womb.

Other depictions of being held indicated satiation, suggestive of a newly fed child cradled in its mother's arms. Such descriptions again recall Olinick's reassuring and soothing interrelated phatic silence, alleviating separation anxiety by replaying the affect-attunement of mother-infant interaction where infants experience optimal satisfaction and fulfilment.<sup>47</sup> Lynne and Loretta directly related their relationship with God in silence to a depiction of this scene in Psalm 131: 'Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; Like a weaned child rests against his mother'.<sup>48</sup> For Lynne, this verse is the best image of God's holding as nurturing and nourishing. Having puzzled for years why a *weaned* child would be at its mother's breast, Loretta described realising this verse encapsulated what it is

to be held in the certainty of love  
of being loved  
of being safe  
of being  
cherished  
and  
to have no desire  
to want  
nothing—  
that's  
everything (6)

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<sup>46</sup> Acts 17: 28, which continues, 'For we too are his offspring.'

<sup>47</sup> Olinick, 'Meanings Beyond Words'.

<sup>48</sup> Psalm 131:2, New American Standard Bible.

[sighs]  
and I  
I love that image ...  
it's a perfect image of  
entering into  
the silence of God  
of being held  
and  
supported  
and  
cherished

Having also stated that being held tenderly was 'not what I experienced from my mother', renders Loretta's description even more powerful. It exemplifies God's silence healing the traumatic intrapsychic separations between mother and infant, discussed by Case.<sup>49</sup> Later, Loretta returned to the image of God's holding. Her multiply-repeated word emphasising the significance of silence as a place where she trusts God to hold her in the secure embrace she has longed for:

it's a wonderful  
wonderful thing to  
feel underneath it all  
what is it?  
'underneath us  
are the everlasting arms'<sup>50</sup> ...  
yeah ...  
it's wonderful  
wonderful

Feeling held in ways missing from infancy made Loretta's relationship with God 'a really positive experience', giving her confidence not only in 'entering into/the presence of

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<sup>49</sup> Case, 'Silence in Progress'. That such healing is taking place for Loretta is demonstrated in the following chapter, where her narrative is presented as a participant profile.

<sup>50</sup> Deuteronomy 33: 27 reads 'The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.' New International Version.

God/but also into the depths of me'. In this relationship she experiences enough physical, emotional and psychological security to risk encountering herself more fully.<sup>51</sup> She finally feels secure enough to 'get up/and go/and/have adventures' alone, confident that were she to 'fall and graze [her] knee', or if she 'messed up', God will welcome her back with love. Loretta concluded, 'it's/you're able to come back/that's/so precious'.

Such repeated portrayals of feeling held by God as a mother suggests the women encounter the emotional and psychological 'holding' expressed in Winnicott's well-known psychoanalytic concept, directly echoing Ladany et al's findings that therapists use silence for this purpose.<sup>52</sup> Winnicott's metaphor, rooted in a mother's tender, yet secure holding of her distressed infant, explores the interpersonal and intrapsychic mechanisms by which the infant's sense of being and continued existence is sustained.<sup>53</sup> As Elson states, and Loretta's descriptions demonstrate, such attentive, unwavering silence strengthens, deepens and even helps adults acquire missing elements of psychic structure not laid down when young.<sup>54</sup>

Ross describes the loving gaze of God, the primary beholder, and returned by the beheld, as 'a reciprocal holding in being'.<sup>55</sup> In these moments of mutual, intimate relationality between

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<sup>51</sup> Discussion of how relationship with God within a discipline of silence contributes to exploration of relationality with self will be the focus of the following chapter.

<sup>52</sup> Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives'.

<sup>53</sup> A detailed discussion of Winnicott's metaphor of holding as an ontological concept is offered by Thomas H. Ogden, 'On Holding and Containing, Being and Dreaming', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (2004), 85: 1349-64.

<sup>54</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

<sup>55</sup> Ross, *Icon of the Heart*, 23.

God and humanity, created beings become God-bearers along with Mary Theotokos.<sup>56</sup> Ross writes,

God, the creator of all, God who is beyond being, in humility allows us, created beings, to hold God in being in space and time, even as God is sustaining us in existence and holding us in eternity. ... it is in the depths of this beholding, in the silence of the loving heart of God, that the divine exchange takes place most fully, where each of us in our uniqueness and strangeness is transfigured into the divine life ... to abandon our very limited perspectives and ideas ... We bring everything to it, and we draw everything from it.<sup>57</sup>

Entering the silence at the heart of God where reciprocal holding in being occurs is possible only where sufficient security of relationship exists for self to approach God with openness and honesty. As the women's security with God develops in silence they began trusting the relationship is safe enough to risk honest self-disclosure, to God and self, enabling greater movement towards Ross' depiction of reciprocal holding.

#### 5.4.3 *Vulnerability, acceptance and the potential for change*

Being observed intently by someone with whom no safe relationship exists can evoke insecurity. Within a secure relationship sufficient trust exists that no intentional wounding will result in response to whatever the gaze reveals. Even though such observation may be exposing, whatever emerges can be explored without overwhelming fear of rejection. The insecurity of the former encounter is, here, better described as vulnerability. Vulnerability

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<sup>56</sup> In 431AD the Council of Ephesus decreed that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was 'Theotokos', most frequently translated as 'God-bearer'.

<sup>57</sup> Ross, *Icon of the Heart*, 23-24.

acknowledges the possibility of exposure without the extreme anxieties implicit in insecurity. Self-exposure by one party in a relationship promotes willingness in another to tolerate feelings of vulnerability, inviting a reciprocal response. This makes it possible for an interconnected pattern of revelation and acceptance to become the established way of relating.<sup>58</sup> Developing such a pattern fosters feelings of relational investment, increasing the likelihood of the relationship being sustained and deepened over time.

Although the women felt increasingly secure with God, many also reported feelings of vulnerability more frequently within silence than other areas of spiritual engagement. The limited use of language and vastness of silence left little cover when they felt exposed. However, willingness to remain present to these feelings was eased by perceptions that God, who risked the vulnerability of incarnation, was also willing to be beheld by them. God's vulnerability became more apparent without the layers of words constituting other faith practices. Within this openness, some women identified having a better sense of God's 'emotional tone'.<sup>59</sup> Most frequently they recognise vulnerability in the 'vast amounts of pain' God feels in response to creation's damage, fractures in relationships and all suffering.<sup>60</sup> God's ongoing sorrow is not hidden from them: God does not use silence to cover exposure of this vulnerability in the way Hill et al reveal some therapists use silence to

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<sup>58</sup> This behaviour can, of course, be manipulative and used intentionally to attempt to gain trust from those with whom no security of relationship has been established.

<sup>59</sup> Lynne.

<sup>60</sup> Ali.

mask their own insecurity.<sup>61</sup> Rather, this grief is shared with the women when they turn from their own concerns to meet the vulnerability in their creator's gaze.

Discovering God's vulnerability is catalytic in dismantling life-long defences erected to keep the women's weaknesses hidden from others, themselves and God. It gave some courage to risk exposure and, in others, created fresh impetus for the task which, having begun, had slowed or stalled. Gradually, the women felt safe enough to pretend less and present themselves more honestly to God's gaze. They began lowering masks worn in attempts to hide their shame or enact an acceptable persona before God. This enabled ever deeper relationship to develop as they and God 'got to know each other/through that vulnerability'.<sup>62</sup> Their descriptions reflect Ladany et al's findings that silence is used by therapists to invite authenticity.<sup>63</sup> They also offer a counterpoint to Elson's presentation of silence within a relationship revealing a deliberate withholding of aspects of self which are considered shameful in case their revelation severs the threads of relationship, and the possibility of movement to telling Bons-Storm's 'unstories'.<sup>64</sup>

The women's early perceptions about God's judgement often left deep scars. Although believing God loves them, many struggled to find freedom from deeply embedded fears of God's criticism and rejection for not being 'good enough'. Their ability to sustain ongoing vulnerability with God was increasingly possible because, instead of dreaded condemnation,

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<sup>61</sup> Hill et al, 'Therapist Use of Silence'. Many, though not all, schools of therapy discourage any vulnerability as described above from the therapist to their clients: self-revelation is all but excluded from the therapeutic relationship.

<sup>62</sup> Sally.

<sup>63</sup> Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives'.

<sup>64</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 358; Bons-Storm, *Incredible Woman*.

exposure was met with growing awareness of God's acceptance of who they are. As Una commented,

it's that encounter  
with love ...  
knowing that I am loved ...  
not knowing that I'm bad that transforms me ...  
it's never been  
criticism of that kind  
that's changed my life it's been moments of love  
that I've been  
I've been aware of or moments of  
acceptance  
in the silence

The significance of knowing self as accepted and loved rather than judged by God is extended by Cooper-White. Acknowledging our human complexity, she names God's unconditional acceptance as what distinguishes human love from God's:

It is the juxtaposition of being known and being loved—in all our multiplicity, changeability, fragility, and flux—that perhaps most distinguishes the love of God for each human person from the experience of human love, which is rarely so unconditional.<sup>65</sup>

The women identified silence as where they most consistently feel God's acceptance and unconditional love, as portrayed by Psalm 139. Nancy spoke with sadness that, despite such passages, western Christians are almost 'trained' to think of God 'judging you all the time'. She continued, 'that's a very unhelpful way/to conduct a relationship with God ... we've got to get over that/and I think silence is a good place/to do that'. Even though it is where her

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<sup>65</sup> Cooper-White, *Many Voices*, 65.

weaknesses have become most apparent, Nancy described encountering God's unconditional love within silence:

Nancy: you might actually  
see  
your  
own  
sin and culpability  
in  
much more clearly  
and much more poignantly  
and yet know that you're not  
forever damned by it if that makes sense

A: mmm

Nancy: so yes it's changed things a lot for me because  
I can see now that I'm a  
I'm a  
mixed up messed up  
human being  
just like  
everybody else  
but that doesn't affect the way God  
loves me  
and  
and I think  
using silence  
has really helped me to  
understand that

Nancy's reference to the poignancy of acknowledging the realities of self resonates with the sadness some depicted emanating from God at observing their failings. Recognising God's sorrow, as opposed to judgement, enables the women to not shrink from their shortcomings but face them honestly with God. In silence, fears about their culpability are stripped of power by God's perfect love, allowing the emergence of appropriate sorrow, which mirrors



God's own. Their descriptions recall Muers' proposal that God's silence should be perceived as a deeply relational communication of the ultimacy of God's love, not judgement.<sup>66</sup>

Within the women's discussions of God's judgement and acceptance, only Dawn spoke of forgiveness. Three separate times she named silence as where she feels God's forgiveness, delighting in her certainty of 'knowing that God will forgive me/for any/offences'. Each reference to God's forgiveness links to a remark about forgiving herself. However, Dawn did not speak of recognizing God's acceptance of her, nor of self-acceptance, at any point.

Rather, she commented

it's as if I have to  
find ways to  
improve ...  
I've always had to find ways to  
improve ...  
just search deeper ...  
I haven't been stagnant  
you see I have moved on  
and it's very  
very important

Dawn's strivings to become good enough reflect Nancy's perception that many western Christians believe they have to try harder because God is constantly judging them. Attempts to 'improve' imply that although Dawn feels forgiven and reports forgiving herself, she does not believe herself to be acceptable to God as she is, and so also lacks self-acceptance. The effort surrounding her need to do better conjure an image of one who, looking down at the floor as sentence is passed, has not yet found courage to raise her face to see the

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<sup>66</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 224.

compassion and acceptance in her judge's eyes or receive assurance that their ongoing relationship is not contingent upon her self-improvement.

Knowing God's forgiveness or acceptance of the darkest parts of self enables the women to move towards emancipation from internal criticism and self-condemnation. As Nancy said,

I don't think I go around under a  
hammer of judgement  
like I used to  
I think that's been a significant change and I don't think it would have taken place  
outside the use of silence  
because that's where you get that encounter<sup>67</sup>

The association between discovering God's unconditional acceptance and a new sense of freedom is acknowledged in Cooper-White's exploration of relational and theological perspectives of pastoral care. She writes,

divine love ... does not depend on performance, perfection, or any other human criterion. ... God does not turn a blind eye to human failures ... But God's judgement is not condemnation or rejection. God lifts up the weak, and God is the power of emancipation for those who are unfree (and from a psychological standpoint, we may understand unfreedom as caused by both internal and external forces of oppression).<sup>68</sup>

Often, relief at discovering God's unconditional acceptance was embedded in comments indicating the women believe this emancipatory grace must, by extension, be available to all: 'we are all equally naked underneath our clothes.'<sup>69</sup> Barbara's comment that, 'we all mess

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<sup>67</sup> This comment follows on directly from the last extract from Nancy's interview. The 'encounter' she identifies here is, therefore, with God who loves her, despite her being a 'messed up/human being'.

<sup>68</sup> Cooper-White, *Many Voices*, 65.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, (London: SPCK, 2012), 120.

up big style' but this 'doesn't diminish God's/graciousness and loving/longing for us all/to be in his company' pinpoints a resultant longing: for others to encounter acceptance. Similarly, Cooper-White proposes that freedoms found in knowing God's acceptance expands people's capacity to live as accepting, loving beings. God's love and acceptance are received abundantly until, spilling over, they are shared, propagating new life and freedom in others, just as they have in the one from whom they now begin to overflow.<sup>70</sup> The correlation between the outwards flow of acceptance from God, to self and eventually on to others is a significant strand running through the women's narratives, which, in ongoing discussion in this and the following chapters, binds together my three areas of relational focus.

Some women described discovering that God does not condemn their weaknesses as more significant and promoting greater change than knowing God's blessing on, and appreciation of aspects of self which are perceived as strengths. This was most succinctly expressed by Claire:

to be  
in the case of God accepted in that place [*of vulnerability*]  
is more profound  
than (7.5)  
than almost a knowing  
there are certain parts of you  
that are more gifted  
and [that] you do  
generally respond in what might be perceived are  
a good or satisfactory fashion

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<sup>70</sup> Cooper-White, *Many Voices*, 65-66.

Certainty in God's unconditional love frees the women from anxiety that their mistakes will result in rejection. Discovering that God's love is not withdrawn when they acknowledge aspects of self of which they had previously been ashamed also releases energies directed at keeping these hidden into other endeavours. They are liberated to discover unknown potential within themselves and life becomes charged with possibilities for newness, growth and change.<sup>71</sup>

Although this discussion has presented elements of being, beholding, experiencing security, vulnerability and acceptance in such a way that movement between them appears linear, this implication is not intended. Nor would it be accurate to perceive these as stage-points in a cyclical or spiralling journey, sequentially returned to many times: each occurs less predictably. A more helpful image is the pattern of a spider's web. Its multiply intersecting lines allow for movement in almost any direction.<sup>72</sup> The generation of the multi-layered, encircling pattern which links the spoked anchor-threads of a web is also helpful. Its structure is formed by beginning at the centre of the web, spiralling out towards the periphery, linking the anchor points with myriad possible routes between them. In beginning construction from the heart of the web this image conveys God's initiative towards the women, offering unlimited ways of reaching the still centre where God is to be found, whatever their starting point.

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<sup>71</sup> This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

<sup>72</sup> Using this model to depict free movement between these key areas emerged in response to Helen Collins' description of a web as a model of data analysis in her unpublished paper, 'Weaving Worship and Womb: A Critique of Charismatic Worship from the Perspective of Early Motherhood', given at *A Symposium on the Faith Lives of Women and Girls*, The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham, 8<sup>th</sup> November, 2013.

## 5.5 Silence, relationship with God and loss

Until now, this chapter's focus has been key aspects of what the women portrayed as helpful, good or affirming for deepening their relationship with God in silence. Predictably, not all comments about silence and its impact on this relationship were framed positively. Every woman named more difficult aspects entailing elements of loss, disappointment at God's apparent silence, and needing to let go. Although eventually understood as necessary steps in the development of their faith lives, these presented challenges to be negotiated so further growth could take place.

### 5.5.1 *Loss of silence*

As it was implicit that practices of silence are predominantly positive for these women, at some point each was asked what impact it might have if they discontinued their discipline. This possibility was anathema to all the women. To consider abandoning something so entwined in their relationship with God was uncomfortable and shocking: this was apparent in their sharp intakes of breath, looks of horror, or similar emotion, and sometimes physical recoil the question triggered. These initial, almost involuntary reactions were reinforced in subsequent verbal responses.

Given the women's dismay, after each of the first few interviews I pondered the appropriateness of continuing to ask this question. However, as responses invariably indicated there was no likelihood of them relinquishing silence, and that being asked to think about this reinforced the value of their practise whilst also facilitating articulation of its

riches, I decided to retain this inquiry: ultimately, despite my concerns, its consideration empowered the women and affirmed the significance of their engagement in silence.

Many comments related to the impact a loss of silence would have on their sense of self or well-being.<sup>73</sup> Unsurprisingly, the women also believed it would be detrimental to their relationship with God. The most striking responses were from those unable to conceive of sustaining this relationship. Catriona's bare statement, 'I don't think I could have a relationship with God if I didn't have silence ... I just couldn't do it', was repeated virtually identically by Nancy, who continued, 'I know some people do/and I don't know how they do it/'cause I couldn't/I just/I wouldn't know how to start'. Their apprehensions resonate with Gale and Sanchez's position that silence is as essential as speech in maintaining authentic personhood and the shared ontological qualities of relational engagement.<sup>74</sup>

Most frequently the women expressed anxieties that they would feel disconnected from God and struggle to relate without a discipline of silence. Dawn said,

I'd be miserable really  
mmm (5)  
yeah  
and erm  
I would probably not be able to spend as much time with God ...  
so I would  
probably not be as close to God

---

<sup>73</sup> This will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>74</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence', 213.

Anticipation that loss of silence would distance them from God was expressed in language indicating this was difficult to think about, would be hard to bear, and would leaving them feeling desolate.

Many expressed anxieties that they would find it difficult to retain any perception of God and God's nature without being able to relate to God in silence. Nancy said,

I don't think I'd know who God was  
actually  
it's  
an essential part of the tool kit for me  
mmm  
erm  
as I say, I'm aware that not everybody  
uses it and they still have  
I'm not  
for a minute  
saying that they don't have a profound relationship with God: I'm sure they do  
but for me  
I can't imagine  
how it would be  
I just can't do it  
any other way  
so it's essential  
I think a healthy relationship should include silence

A primary concern was that without silence they would lose all the ground gained in discovering God's acceptance and return to hiding parts of self from God. Others expressed concern they would no longer be rooted in God and fall into deriving authority for any ministry from themselves, not God. This was particularly apparent throughout Rachel and Sian's narratives. Sian haltingly commented,

I would lose a sense of being erm

centred in God: I I and g-  
goodness knows  
you know I mean there  
there are many  
times when I don't feel  
particularly cent [*incomplete*]  
you know and thi- thi- this isn't a  
you know...  
but it  
you know  
it  
it jus [*incomplete*]  
it just doesn't say  
if I if I don't have silence  
it's *worse* than normal [*both laughing*]  
you know  
as far as I'm concerned  
erm  
I lose  
I lose that sense of being anchored  
and of working  
and of working from  
a deep place of connectedness with God  
erm  
rather than working  
from a place  
of Sian stuff

How difficult Sian would find the loss of silence is reflected in her struggle to articulate what she wanted to say. Even her laughter seemed to act as a way of breaking the anxiety around considering this loss. Comments by women concerned that without silence they would become the locus of authority within their ministry are a striking contrast to Elson's portrayal of silence as enabling self to be experienced as the centre of initiative.<sup>75</sup> As Christians seeking to live to serve God, the women value silence for facilitating their desire for God's initiative to remain central both in this relationship and in their service of others.

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<sup>75</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 353-5.



Imagined difficulty in sustaining relationship with God without silence demonstrate the significance of their practices: they are an essential building block, or 'tool', as Nancy suggested, in its continued development. However, some women have sensed God's invitation to relinquish their focus on external silence and live from a core of internal silence. This was discussed in Claire's participant profile. Ali also expressed frustration at the struggle to make significant movement towards accepting this invitation, whilst Una, the oldest woman, has spent retirement exploring living from a contemplative, internal silence whilst remaining engaged in the 'market place' of life.

These women represent different stages in a gradual erosion of perceptions that internal silence where they encounter God most intimately is an adjunct to practices of external silence. Instead, at God's initiative, their focus shifts to carrying the attentive intimacy of internal silence into the noise, distractions and busyness of daily living. Having identified the temptation to dualistic separation between relationship with God in external silence and the requirements of the day, they seek to maintain and integrate their internal silence within life, despite the absence of external silence from much of their day.

#### 5.5.2 *God's 'absence' within silence*

Although the prospect of losing silence was uncomfortable, this consideration was largely hypothetical. However, some women expressed the disappointment they feel when silence does not feel shared with God but as if this relationship has been lost somewhere within the

silence: God seems distant, impossible to connect with or a presence represented only by their awareness of seeming absence.

Most painful are occasions when God is felt to have disappeared. However much time or effort is expended trying to connect with God, re-establishing connection seems elusive. Such experiences were usually mentioned fleetingly, or only implied, suggesting they were difficult to dwell on: valuing silence primarily as a place of encountering God's presence it seemed uncomfortable to say much explicitly about times when God's absence feels overwhelming. Their sense of the lack of God's expected presence recalls Kwiatkowska's 'cognitive silence'.<sup>76</sup> Kwiatkowska suggests that ongoing silence noticed in the foreground—here, God's seeming absence—invites turning attention to what lies beyond. However, Elson highlights that when felt needs—here, desire for God's presence—seem not to be met, this may cause retreat from perceived relational failure into disconnected silence, where feelings of abandonment and isolation emerge.<sup>77</sup> If Elson's reported reaction occurs when God seems absent, it maybe that feelings of loss lead to withdrawal before the women have been able to attend to what lies beyond the 'cognitive silence'.<sup>78</sup> The resulting aloneness may be so overwhelming that re-connection with God becomes impossible at that point.

Lynne and Rebecca offered brief insights into these occasions. Lynne identified two extremes in her ways of relating to God in silence:

sometimes it can be more like crashing into

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<sup>76</sup> Kwiatkowska, 'Silence across modalities'.

<sup>77</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

<sup>78</sup> Below, I will return to what may lie beyond.

God and  
thumping my fists on his chest for example  
yeah or  
or  
keeping my distance sometimes

The second, fragmentary comment indicates Lynne's awareness that she, rather than God, holds herself apart from their encounter. Similarly, Rebecca identified occasions when she is 'keeping God at bay' because 'somewhere I know there is something that God needs to prod me about'. Lynne and Rebecca experience these times as God's absence, even though they recognise this is more accurately attributed to their unwillingness to engage with something God invites them to face. For both, knowing that the relationship was secure and strong enough for this to be possible was itself of significance. Lynne observed

there's a sense that  
even  
in  
keeping a distance I  
know I'm  
keeping a distance [*laughs*]  
you know there's a sort of  
there's a  
there's a relationship there to keep a distance in ...  
there's something important about that relating

—a relating she described as freedom to 'shout/silently' at God with her own 'stubborn silence'. Their brief comments hint that when God seems absent to other women, they too may be absenting themselves, trying to hide parts of self despite awareness that these will not damage their relationship with God. This contrasts with and challenges Elson's proposal that such hiding occurs to avoid severing a relationship.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 358.

An alternative interpretation offers insights into God's absence perceived as troublesome 'cognitive silence'.<sup>80</sup> On occasion, egoic self may be so caught up in its agenda that it fails to attend to any presence but its own. It is unable to look beyond God's seeming absence to recognise that God is, after all, still present. In foregrounding itself, self-observant ego relegates God's presence to the background: it is unnoticed. God's apparent absence leads to dissatisfaction: the relationship fails to meet felt needs, resulting in withdrawal into Elson's 'disconnected' and lonely silence.<sup>81</sup> However, Olinick's description of silence springing from dissatisfaction in therapy as expressive of frustrated and conflicted yearning, where the unconscious both seeks and fears merger with the therapist, offers further insight.<sup>82</sup> What may lie in the 'background' of troubling 'cognitive silence' is God's invitation to surrender egoic awareness and enter into apophatic 'deep mind', where existence is known only in and through union with God. Although desire for this profound relational encounter may underpin the women's engagement in practices of silence, invitation to self-surrender and subsequent merger into divine mystery is also a likely source of fear for egoic consciousness, primarily concerned with its own preservation.

Uniquely, Una spoke of God's absence in a sustained way. Despite naming this at several points, it was not until our time together was ending she finally revealed the extent of her sense of God's absence. Speaking in her early eighties, she said,

I remember when I  
first  
lost all sense of God—I must have been about forty

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<sup>80</sup> Discussed in Kwiatkowska, 'Silence Across Modalities'.

<sup>81</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

<sup>82</sup> Olinick, 'Meanings Beyond Words'.

forty-five  
I'd  
I said  
'I will have to learn to live  
as if there *was* God' (3)  
I've continued in that way for many many years  
without any perception  
of God at all<sup>83</sup>

Una's willingness to describe feeling God's absence in some detail without any apparent distress reflects her decades of acceptance of an ongoing sense of void in place of previously intimate presence. God's apparent perpetual absence is frequently reported by those journeying deep into apophatic silence. Evelyn Underhill added this overriding sense of God's absence as a penultimate step, which she termed 'the dark night', to Christianity's three traditionally acknowledged mystical steps of purgation, illumination and union.<sup>84</sup> This facet of apophatic living was brought into wider, contemporary awareness following Mother Teresa's death in 1997. Friends and admirers internationally were shocked when her previously unseen writings revealed she had not sensed God's presence for decades. Paul Murray writes

her *inner* world (the unseen, hidden places of her mind and heart) were, for many years, and to her own great bewilderment, caverns of a seeming emptiness, zones of an almost total darkness. ... This darkness was not ... an experience of depression or despair. Rather it was the shadow cast in her soul by the overwhelming light of God's presence: God utterly present and yet utterly hidden. His intimate, purifying love experienced as a devastating absence and even, on occasion, as a complete abandonment.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Una's comments did not end here, but as those presented here offer sufficient insight at this point, their continuation will be returned to as this section of the chapter draws to a close.

<sup>84</sup> Underhill outlined five steps in all, preceding the traditional three with an awakening or conversion. See Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, (London: Methuen, [1912] 1930).

<sup>85</sup> Paul Murray, *'I Loved Jesus in the Night': Teresa of Calcutta: A Secret Revealed*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008), 18-19.

In 1964, with words Murray describes as ‘astonishing’, Mother Teresa wrote of her relationship with God: ‘To be in love and yet not to love, to live by faith and yet not to believe. To spend myself and yet be in total darkness’.<sup>86</sup> Offering insight into Mother Teresa’s writings—which, like Una, also reveal doubts about God’s existence—Murray quotes from St John of the Cross, whose terminology Underhill borrowed for her fourth step towards mysticism: ‘though faith brings certitude to the intellect, it does not produce clarity, but only darkness’.<sup>87</sup> Murray describes darkness as a trial of faith which, in spite of the certitude it brings, remains constantly opaque to all reason, leaving believers feeling like unbelievers. However deep and dark the night of the soul, Murray emphasises that feeling unable to sustain belief in God is not a loss of faith but ‘a stage of radical purification, a graced bewilderment, a rite of passage towards an even deeper communion with God.’<sup>88</sup> This deeper communion equates to the fifth step of Underhill’s outline and Christianity’s traditionally recognised third—mystic union.<sup>89</sup>

Despite God’s sometime seeming absence, women who identified this largely retain belief they have been in God’s presence, even when this is not their felt experience. Several reported recalling familiar passages of scripture to sustain belief in God’s presence at these lonely times. Some referred to passages of Christ’s resurrected presence, whilst others

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<sup>86</sup> Murray, ‘*I loved Jesus*’, 31.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Murray, ‘A Graced Bewilderment: The Dark Night of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta’, *L’Osservatore Romano*, (Weekly English edition, Baltimore, MD: The Cathedral Foundation, 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2009), 10. This article can be found at [www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/darknightblter.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/darknightblter.htm). Murray does not give details of his reference to St John of the Cross’s writings beyond noting they are taken from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Underhill’s fourth step is named from St John of the Cross’ more familiar work, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, available in many editions.

<sup>88</sup> Murray, ‘A Graced Bewilderment’, 10.

<sup>89</sup> This is sometimes referred to using the Greek term, *henosis*, denoting mystical union or oneness, but should not be confused with *kenosis*, self-emptying.

identified God's presence with them through the Holy Spirit. Their use of scripture to retain a sense of grounding in God's presence resonates with words by novelist, Anne Michaels. In *Fugitive Pieces* she writes,

There's no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence. Memory dies unless it's given a use ... If one no longer has land but has the memory of land, then one can make a map.<sup>90</sup>

The familiar terrains of scripture have become the 'map' by which some navigate the lonely darkness back towards God's presence. Or, if not, at least to offer sufficient certitude that God remains present to hold them in faithful, disciplined silence where remembering its potential for encountering God may signify as God's presence.

On other occasions the women's disappointment centres around God's seemingly indifferent silence within their relationship. Although companionable silence within which God 'does not cough or mutter or shuffle his feet to reassure us that he is there' has increasingly becomes their relational norm,<sup>91</sup> most women indicated occasional dissatisfaction with this. Despite being surrounded by raucous laughter, Barbara's comment, 'if you were married to God you'd just/be pigged off with him 'cause/he's the strong silent type isn't he?' indicates frustration with God's silence. However beneficial it is to rest in God's presence without needing words, sometimes, like Rachel, they would like God to communicate 'a bit more/directly than ... she seems to do'. Their perception of an

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<sup>90</sup> Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 193.

<sup>91</sup> A remark by John Fenton to Oxford ordinands on God's most obvious characteristic being silence. Referenced by MacCulloch, *Silence*, 223 as quoted in Fenton's obituary by R. Eyre, in the *Guardian* (26<sup>th</sup> January, 2009).

unexpected shift from God's silence indicating relational intimacy to seemingly portraying indifference recalls Wolfson's 'bulge theory':<sup>92</sup> suddenly feeling as if God is treating them like a stranger is confusing. This was most frequently identified with early engagement in practices of silence before it was valued as a place of being with and beholding the divine, but continues to be experienced occasionally when this discipline is more established.

Discussing the silence Lynne at first felt indicated God's indifference to her pain, eventually she has 'come to/understand that it's not unkind', whilst acknowledging 'initially that was/not how things were'. Gradually she recognised that, just as within human relationships there may be no appropriate words to offer at moments of sorrow or pain, so sometimes 'there simply aren't the words' for God to say. She continued,

words  
won't do  
so silence is  
actually kinder ...  
so I don't  
experience it as  
un-  
kind  
now  
erm (3)  
but I experience it as  
peace

A number of women indicated either ongoing sadness surrounding times when God's silence feels unkind or still occasionally feeling God is withholding longed for communication.

Despite this, all demonstrated awareness that in mature relationality with God expectations

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<sup>92</sup> Wolfson, 'The Bulge'.



of God being anything other than silent 'much of the time' are misplaced.<sup>93</sup> Sally contrasted 'when I ask a question or I want to understand ... and there's no comprehensible answer ... and therefore God can feel/silent' with when 'God lets himself/be known in silence': even though 'God can feel silent' she doesn't 'think that means/God's not/listening or' is 'ignoring' her. Although she would prefer a direct response, Sally perceives God's silence as an invitation 'to/remain with this situation', trust it to God, who will be who God will be<sup>94</sup> and, by implication, do what needs to be done.

Other women more explicitly perceived God's silence as God not meeting them as they desire. Rachel recounted past sadness, entering silence 'hoping' she would 'meet God in/some sort of tangible way ... to be swept off my feet' or 'hearing messages' but also 'terrified that I won't'. Her expectations now are 'glimpses' of God through 'a veil being/thin or pulled aside'. Often God's silence was identified using familiar biblical metaphors of dryness or barrenness: there are 'arid' and 'bleak' times, like a 'desert',<sup>95</sup> leaving women feeling lonely in vast landscapes where God is more silent than the shifting sands. Similarly to perceptions of God's absence, it is unclear why even though God does not speak, silence is usually experienced as a place of refreshment and profound encounter, but occasionally the women feel so alone and unmet by God that their metaphoric language portrays deep thirst for relationship. Whilst Elson's comments on withdrawal when needs are not met are helpful,<sup>96</sup> further insight is suggested by Sutton's presentation of silence resonating with our

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<sup>93</sup> Lynne.

<sup>94</sup> Here Sally made reference to God saying 'I am who I am' to Moses in a translation which rendered this verse 'I will be who I will be'. See Exodus 3: 14.

<sup>95</sup> Elisabeth, Loretta and Rachel.

<sup>96</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

earliest, traumatic encounter with it.<sup>97</sup> This is the silence of our first separation from mother, experienced as abandonment, loss, loneliness and, echoing Maitland's 'Chthonic terror',<sup>98</sup> ultimately foreshadows our death and fears of dying hidden unconsciously beneath these emotions.

### 5.5.3 *Letting go*

Whether external or internal, choosing silence was repeatedly spoken of as a discipline which necessitates letting go. Stepping aside from the dominance of words in liturgy, scripture and thought into silence's limited usage is a conscious relinquishment of the power, distortions and limitations language can impose. Although this was welcomed as liberating, letting go of other experiences was repeatedly identified as more difficult.

In silence many women discovered needing to let go of long held perceptions about God. Doing so, they found freedom from received traditions, concepts and language which had left them 'tied to the "right" way of thinking' about God.<sup>99</sup> These included theological constructs of what to believe about God, expectations of how to conduct relationship with God and what this requires. Some experimentally let go of limiting 'correct theological formulae' which inhibited possibilities about God they had 'never thought of' from emerging.<sup>100</sup> By rediscovering the agency and initiative Elson suggests the 'fertile ground' of

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<sup>97</sup> Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands', 180.

<sup>98</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 128-131

<sup>99</sup> Ali.

<sup>100</sup> Ali.

silence offers, they began relating to God using images and metaphors which are more liberating. These changes in familiar accounts about the interrelationship between God and self support Blanton's proposal that silence as well as speech has an important role to play in facilitating new, more robust and complex narratives.<sup>101</sup> Predominantly, these changes were associated with self in relation to God but, by extension, also included God's relating to all of creation and vice versa.

Although freedom from unhelpful concepts of God and misperceptions about God's judgements and expectations are a relief, allowing other beliefs to fade is less comfortable. Moving from certain belief towards more liminal ambiguity and unknowing led to dissonance between their cognitive and felt perceptions of God. These were disorientating, leaving them contending with sudden and unexpected insecurity. At such times they feel lost and unsettled in silence, with potential to occasionally be 'flipped into' what Elizabeth described as 'a/terrifying expanse' or a 'desert/peopled with horrors', instead of 'a/wonderfully comforting holding space'. Their portrayals reflect Case's findings that silence can become imbued with emotions that cannot be expressed in words: movement to a place of unknowing in faith and relationship with God is echoed in feeling lost, vulnerable and fearful in silence.<sup>102</sup> For Elisabeth, sometimes fear turns into 'absolute terror': instinctively, she returns to 'rather mechanically/almost superstitiously ... praying ... with/words' which 'doesn't do much good'. Eventually, she returns to verbal silence. Her description continued, whilst I offered uncharacteristically frequent and occasionally unnecessary

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<sup>101</sup> Blanton, 'Adding Silence to Stories'.

<sup>102</sup> Case, 'Silence in Progress', 26.

sounds of encouragement. These indicates awareness of her need for additional encouragement and support, revealed in her non-verbal communication, as she searched for words to express her gradual transition from fear and dislocation from God back into awareness of God's sustaining presence.

Elisabeth: then there'll be a moment usually when it's just like the knot is loosened  
and  
A: mmm  
Elisabeth: something  
sort of drops down into a  
just a greater sense  
of  
of holding  
erm  
and safety  
which doesn't negate  
the  
the dangers  
A: mmm  
it's not  
it's not there aren't any dangers  
or there aren't any horrors  
A: mmm  
Elisabeth: at all  
but  
but the safety's  
even deeper  
A: mmm  
Elisabeth: erm  
it meets them  
erm  
but I don't think fears get blown away  
A: mmm  
Elisabeth: ... it's almost like  
even there  
God *is*

Elizabeth's narrative exemplifies comments by many women: fears around no longer knowing are not quickly dissipated. Yet, in courageously continuing their journey they usually discover a bright enough point of light to head towards, regaining a sense of direction amidst the remaining terrors of the darkness. Their reports of such transformation following a willingness to remain in a sustained place of unknowing support Sutton's proposition that ability to tolerate not knowing enables significant change to take place.<sup>103</sup> For most, entry into dark places of unknowing has been relatively short-lived. However, in researching women's faith development Slee identified that disconnection and contradiction can become so acute that maintaining a sense of self can become unsustainable, potentially risking some form of breakdown. Slee writes,

there is nothing automatic or easy about women's faith development ... the trajectory of a woman's life can descend into some fearful places in which the unmaking of the self may or may not be the precursor to some larger liberation.<sup>104</sup>

For a few women, loss of equilibrium they attribute to engagement in silence has been so sustained or acute that they have become concerned about their own mental health. Rachel was not alone in depicting finding herself thinking

'oh my God [*laughing*]  
I'm going  
I'm going to slip over into depression [*depicting terror at the time through facial expression and body language*]  
and there'll be no climbing out of it' ...  
erm  
it's as scary as that ...  
it hasn't happened but I don't know that it  
that it never would

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<sup>103</sup> Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands'.

<sup>104</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 92-96, this reference, 96.

No-one revealed experiencing mental illness as a result of spiritual practices. All who expressed moments of fear this may occur still perceive engagement in silence as liberating. But for Una, and those journeying into the inevitable unknowing of apophatic silence, darkness can seem endless as they face the unknowing of Underhill's fourth step of mysticism: doubting the validity of any remaining shreds of belief in God's existence. Una said

of course I doubt  
and most of the time I walk in complete darkness  
and I would be  
close to an atheist ...  
at least I'm contemplative in my agnosticism!

Having expressed this early in our conversation, Una returned to the theme as our time together concluded. Decades of non-awareness of God leave Una speaking of God using apophatic theology.

I walk  
in darkness (4)  
and there are times when none of my religious practices have any meaning for me  
whatsoever  
but I continue to walk in that way because  
it's become a way of life ...  
I still have no  
firm  
perception or concept of God 'cause I think God is beyond all  
images and all knowing and all  
all encounter

In *Radical Wisdom*, Lanzetta describes apophatic faith as that which, breaking ‘through the foundations upon which all that is false has been erected, it heals us of illusions that separate us from our ultimate source.’<sup>105</sup> Lanzetta continues,

the journey of faith moves away from known into unknown, from belief into doubt, and from everything that one has—up until now—accepted as true or real about self, God, or the world. ... [Its] negation takes apart all that is constructed ... linguistic coherence and structural logic ... to shock the person outside conventional notions of reality into another plane of existence.<sup>106</sup>

Una’s journey has brought her to this place. Earlier periods of intimate encounter with God sustain and hold her in faith, despite half a lifetime without any clear awareness of God, uncertainty about God’s existence, and having relinquished expectations of ongoing existence of self once earthly life is over. Una perceives letting go into agnosticism, as depicted in Underhill’s fourth step of mysticism, to be inevitable for those drawn increasingly into contemplative relationship with God. For Una, the ‘larger liberation’ Slee identifies as sometimes following the ‘unmaking of the self’<sup>107</sup> has been in discovering that, like Mother Teresa and other contemplatives, her faith abides, inextinguishable by the dark night and confronting God’s possible non-existence. Remaining much of the time in the dark night’s doubt, Una concluded her interview saying

I’m aware  
that  
the whole thing might just be delusional thinking  
and  
the whole thing may be a form of extreme egocentricity  
and that is where  
I

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<sup>105</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 14.

<sup>106</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 14-15.

<sup>107</sup> Slee, *Women’s Faith Development*, 96.

doubt and  
I live a very selfish life  
if you like  
I do practically nothing  
but  
I am something

Yet this ending, along with her penultimate comment that, held in faith despite agnosticism verging on atheism, she is enabled to 'live in the resurrection life in the here and now', hints at her journey's movement into Underhill's fifth step: union. Of this, Underhill concludes,

The wheel of life has made its circle. Here, at the last point of its revolution, the extremes of sublimity and simplicity are seen to meet. ... Here all the teasing complications of our separate selfhood are transcended. Hence the eager striving, the sharp vision are not wanted any more. In that mysterious death of selfhood on the summits which is the medium of Eternal Life, heights meet the deeps: supreme achievement and complete humility are one. ... Initiated into the atmosphere of Eternity, united with the Absolute, possessed at last of the fullness of Its life, the soul, self-naughted becomes as a little child: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.<sup>108</sup>

Recognising 'a lot of times' that unique 'something' which God created Una to be 'disappears/under/my frail humanity', she is content to 'just walk on blindly ... to be a pejorative' and considered 'potty' without need to 'ask/for anything more'. Accepting that her last years will be lived in the 'real aloneness' and 'marginality' of the contemplative, Una has let go of all possibility of any further known encounter with God.

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<sup>108</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 443.



## 5.6 Conclusion

For the women in this study, practices of silence are inseparable from and central to ongoing relationship with God. Although engagement in silence frequently developed from their desire to hear God speaking, all recognised a welcoming invitation to simply be in the intimacy of divine presence where, in beholding God, they discovered the delight of God's beholding gaze.

Experiencing God's constancy and ongoing availability enables the women to feel increasingly secure in this relationship. Its safety is primarily described in language conveying the tenderness with which a mother holds and nurtures her child. Within this trusting relationship the women are willing to risk the vulnerability of beginning to drop masks they have used to hide from God and, in doing so, discover that the reality of who they are is unconditionally loved and accepted by God.

Positive aspects of relationship with God in silence have associated struggles, centring around God's apparent silence when God seems distant or to not engage with the women as they long to be met. With time, they recognise God's seeming absence is instead often an indication of either their own intentional distancing from God or God's invitation to engage in more mature and responsible ways of relating. Although women with long experience of apophatic practices of silence may increasingly be unaware of any sense of God's presence, and cognitively even begin to doubt God's existence, paradoxically, their faith is not diminished. In self-surrender which no longer seeks or holds onto former concepts of God,

eventually it becomes possible to experience living the resurrection life of divine union in the present.

Irrespective of the length or depth of their engagement in a discipline of silence, all of the women identified that to lose silence from life would be detrimental to their relationship with God, their faith, and their self-understanding. Silence's role in relationship with self is addressed in the following chapter.

## SILENCE AND RELATIONALITY WITH SELF

an encounter with God must also involve an encounter with oneself.

Natalie Watson<sup>1</sup>

silence opened a space for me to converse with the deepest parts of myself ... the thoughts ... the hopes and dreams, the aspirations, fears, and visions I held inside.

Anne D. LeClaire<sup>2</sup>

It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her—by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be ... in order to be more than her self.

Hélèn Cixous<sup>3</sup>

### 6.1 Introduction

In silently beholding God the women became aware of being subjects of the divine gaze, knowing them completely. Beheld, they discovered ongoing encounter with God invites self-encounter. Acceding to this invitation required facing themselves in new and challenging ways. Although close self-examination was not their intention when beginning to engage in silence, development of a more intimate relationship with self has become a valued feature of their practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Watson, 'The Place Where Love is Possible: A Feminist Relational Attempt to Rethink the Cross', in Lisa Isherwood and Elaine Chambers, eds., *Through Us, With Us, In Us: Relational Theologies in the Twenty-First Century*, (London: SCM Press, 2010), 217.

<sup>2</sup> Anne D. LeClaire, *Listening Below the Noise: A Meditation on the Practice of Silence*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009), 160.

<sup>3</sup> Hélèn Cixous, 'Laugh of the Medusa', Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, trans., *Signs* (Summer, 1976), 1 (4): 878.

The women's descriptions of self in silence reveal they do not encounter a fixed, consistent or singular self, but rather a subjectivity which is in flux, developing and multiple. The validity of their complex self-perceptions is advocated by feminist philosopher and psychotherapist, Jane Flax. Discussing the emancipatory nature of multiple subjectivity, she writes:

I believe a unitary self is unnecessary, impossible, and a dangerous illusion. Only multiple subjects can invent ways to struggle against domination that will not merely recreate it. ... we encounter many difficulties when subjectivity becomes subject to one normative standard, solidifies into rigid structures, or lacks the capacity to flow readily between different aspects of itself ... No singular form can be sufficient as a regulative ideal or as a prescription for human maturity ... Emancipatory theories and practices require mechanics of fluids in which subjectivity is conceived as processes rather than as a fixed atemporal entity locatable in a homogenous, abstract time and space.<sup>4</sup>

The selves whom the women encounter in silence are temporally and contextually multiple.<sup>5</sup> Within silence, all identified engaging with selves that are differentiated over time, stretching from the past into the future. Most frequently, they spoke of encounter with their present selves; second, their past selves—aspects of self that may have been lost, forgotten, or repressed. Re-engagement with past selves allows for re-integration: aspects of past selves which have remained wounded can find healing and what had been lost can be embraced beneficially. Third, the women identified silence as foundational in transition towards selves who are becoming: new or previously forgotten aspects of self are identified,

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Flax, 'Multiples: On the Contemporary Politics of Subjectivity', in *Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Philosophy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 93.

<sup>5</sup> The temporal and contextual multiplicities discussed here are distinct from what are considered to be pathological multiplicities of personality, such as Dissociative Identity Disorder, most frequently developed as a defensive structure of self by some who have experienced ongoing abuse.

developed and integrated within a transforming sense of identity. Finally, in silence some glimpse embryonic, potential selves they may embody more consistently in the future. Almost all the women also articulated their subjectivity as contextually multiple, experiencing themselves in a variety of identities as they interact within different relationships and enact their differing life-roles.<sup>6</sup> These, and their temporally multiple selves, are encountered and explored within their practices of silence.

## **6.2 Participant profile: Loretta**

Loretta described recent years as ‘probably the best time of my life’. A decade earlier, in her 50’s, she ‘fell apart completely’ after a lifetime repeatedly scarred by trauma, relocation, loss of identity, isolation and a sense of failure in meeting the expectations of others. Since childhood she felt ‘caught/between/chaos outside and chaos inside’. Life seemed awful and Loretta believed she ‘was awful too’.

Despite her tumultuous life, Loretta’s retreat into the silence of school chapels and a month at Taize in her twenties fostered trust in God’s ongoing presence at the ‘core’ of her being, ‘untouched/despite the/lunacy ... raging around me’. A doctor’s suggestion to join a therapy programme gave Loretta hope she could access God’s presence at her core once again: she enrolled in a weekly, two year personal and spiritual development course at a nearby

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Ryle and Liz Fawkes offer a definition of contextual multiplicity as understood in Cognitive Analytical Therapy. I am using this term more loosely than in the technically precise way they detail, where contextual multiplicity is a repertoire of patterns of reciprocal role procedures acquired from childhood relationships and repeated throughout life. See Anthony Ryle and Liz Fawkes, ‘Multiplicity of Selves and Others: Cognitive Analytical Therapy’, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (February, 2007), 63 (2): 165-74.

pastoral centre. Here, through meditative exercises which began each session, Loretta re-engaged with practices of silence first discovered in Taizé. Although the course was helpful, it was this shared silence she 'loved/best/of all'.

Rediscovering silence was 'a really/positive experience'. Loretta likened its effect on her inner being to watching muddy water settle and separate out into useful, clear liquid and discardable dirt. In silence, she was 'not being criticised ... tried and found wanting', but experienced the 'revelation' that, however she feels about herself, God's attitude towards her 'is/one of/love and acceptance and/support/and nurturing'. Describing this acceptance as 'the touch of God', she equated it to patiently stroking her often still scared rescue dog when he trembles in distress.

God's acceptance enabled Loretta to inch towards elusive self-acceptance. Having been angry with family and a society she felt 'labelled' her as unwanted, Loretta realised this anger covered hurt and turmoil she felt inside. Silence became a safe harbour where she learned to sail without fear of 'sharks' or terror that the boat of her being would be 'swamped' by tempestuous waves. Beginning to feel 'much more at ease within', she was safe enough to face her pain 'and/stop/looking for other people to sort it out'. Loretta gradually acknowledged the reality and causes of her difficult emotions, accepted these without self-condemnation, and began taking responsibility for her behaviour in response to grief and anger she now owned in a new way.

Ongoing engagement in silence changed the way Loretta perceived herself. In discovering that her actions and responses were not 'weighed' by God, she also allowed them to 'fall into their proper perspective'. This enabled Loretta to

live  
out of a  
a different kind of space  
where [*sighs*]  
where I wasn't  
beating  
myself over the head

As Loretta's self-knowledge and understanding grew, new self-worth emerged. This impacted on her self-treatment and how she allows others to treat her. After decades of giving herself a 'hard time', she found kindness and compassion for herself and became 'nice' to herself, which feels 'wonderful'. Naming the role religious authorities play in 'creating burdens/for men's backs/and then not lifting a finger to help them',<sup>7</sup> with humour that also exposed the self-loathing in her past, she declared

I think I'll  
start my own religion  
the erm  
'do not give yourself a hard time' religion [*both laughing*]  
really  
y'know  
'treat yourself as a precious object' [*tone as if instructing me*]  
yes  
be nice to yourself ...  
if you go back to  
y'know  
Jesus  
quoting

---

<sup>7</sup> A reference to Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23: 3-5: 'They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.'

the old testament when he said erm  
'love your neighbour as you love yourself'  
if you don't love yourself  
you  
can't  
love  
anybody ...  
I was [*sudden gentle voice*]  
all for loving God—  
wehey!  
it was wonderful—  
but I didn't love myself

Loretta welcomes new ways of perceiving who she has been in the past and the growing sense of secure identity which emerged in silence. She metaphorically described her transformed self-perceptions using a butterfly's life-cycle. Regarding this as a powerful image of her spiritual journey, and silence as the place of stillness where development occurred, she identified her earlier life with that of a caterpillar's monotonous struggle for growth:

it's earthbound  
and  
it eats  
and then it  
sheds its skin  
and it eats  
and it goes on eating  
until it's completely stuffed  
at which point it  
curls itself up for a little snooze ...  
and wakes up to find [*gentle laughter*]  
'hang on!  
I am  
no longer  
earthbound  
and I don't  
want to eat  
ever again:



I will sip nectar  
for the rest of my life [*barely audible laugh*]  
and what's more  
I can fly!' ...  
it's just  
incredible ...  
then it takes off (3)  
that's  
wonderful ...  
it's the stillness ...  
the sense of  
of potential  
it's the sense of gathering  
energy  
of [*sighs*] (7)  
of not being skittish ...  
of being  
still and  
drinking the nectar

Loretta's metaphor portrays the magnitude of transformation in her sense of identity.

Secure in the self-worth found in her relationship with God in silence, she believes that when entering God's presence she also enters into what lies at the core of her own being. In these times are moments of knowing there is nothing else she needs to know, recognising her encounter with 'God within' as powerful and beautiful: 'the extraordinary within the ordinary'.

Unbound from past miseries, Loretta has freedom, energy and confidence to develop new skills and extend her opportunities for self-expression. With growing self-belief she began violin lessons—'laying a ghost' from childhood—and art classes to intentionally acquire skills to depict and examine yet-to-be-explored places of her inner world. In these and other fresh ventures she is discovering ways of communicating with a different, stronger voice. That

others listen and join her in satisfying dialogue is a delight, helping her to 'trust' that newly 'planted' seeds of self are growing without her needing to dig them up 'to see if [they've] developed roots yet'.

No longer 'completely churned up' by former self-deprecation, Loretta fears rejection less and is increasingly comfortable with others. Growing self-possession has given her confidence to 'have adventures': even if she gets hurt, Loretta trusts 'precious' knowledge that God will receive her back, bind any wounds and assure her again that she is 'cherished'.

She said, silence

has transformed my life  
I have never been happier ...  
when you've lived with ...  
constantly being undermined  
erm  
the feeling  
of being  
accepted  
and being  
ok  
is just  
priceless [*gentle laugh*] ...  
you can keep  
you know  
diamonds and  
tiaras and  
fancy clothes and all the rest of it ...  
I'm not interested

Having dismantled many defences protecting her from trauma and chaos, Loretta is no longer 'isolated' or 'miserable'. She knows there is still much journeying ahead: 'I'm still travelling/hmm/with lots of sitting down at the roadside and thinking/"what the hell am I

doing?/where am I going?'" Loretta has no illusions that developing a deeper relationship with God or greater self-acceptance and self-knowledge have dissolved all her problems: 'life is still/life:/one thing after another'. Yet she is no longer thrown back into turmoil and anxiety when facing life's unexpected challenges:

I'm very happy with uncertainty  
not  
the kind of  
chaotic  
uncertainty  
that I lived with ...  
but the kind of  
'it'll be ok  
whatever it is'  
y'know  
'all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well' (20)<sup>8</sup>

Whatever storms come, trusting she will always be held safely in God's 'everlasting arms' gave Loretta freedom to risk embracing life. By surrendering herself to the silence of God's presence she knows her journey of discovering deeper truths about self will continue. She longs for others to discover that they too 'can change':

the way I feel now—  
I would love to be able to bottle this  
and just  
hand it out to people [*laughs*] (4)

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<sup>8</sup> Quoting familiar words from Julian of Norwich's thirteenth 'Shewing', in which she records Jesus saying in her vision "'Sin must needs be, but all shall be well. All shall be well; and all manner thing shall be well.'" See Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich*, James Walsh, trans., (Wheatthamstead: Anthony Clarke, 1980), 91.

### 6.3 Enabling Self

The importance of silence as an opportunity to pause from life's frantic pace and take time to encounter self was a recurring theme across all the interviews. Many women expressed that setting time aside for rest and replenishing self was often difficult to achieve. Although they do make such provision for themselves, some indicated residual guilt that this time could be used to complete necessary tasks or to support others. However, demarcating regular time for spiritual practices intended to sustain relationship with God legitimised taking space from family or community life. This sense of legitimacy was usually implicit, but occasionally directly articulated by some women. As Michaela said,

in silence it's ok  
to do nothing  
and not to be making something<sup>9</sup> or  
phoning someone or worrying about someone or  
out there changing the world  
it's about giving  
giving yourself permission really ...  
silence is something that makes me just  
step back  
reflect  
let go a bit

In claiming time for sustaining relationship with God, the women discovered they are repeatedly invited to simply be in God's presence. In silence, rest for soul, body and mind, and the space this gives to re-collect self, resources them for other relationships and roles. Silence enables them for the ongoing being and doing of daily life.

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<sup>9</sup> During her interview Michaela talked about months of ongoing cake baking, sold to raise funds to enable her to do a charity walk in a remote part of the world to raise funds for a palliative health-care setting where she worked.

### 6.3.1 *A place to be*

The importance of silence as a place of being was a dominant theme within the narratives. Every woman spoke of valuing silence as a place to ‘be’ on multiple occasions.<sup>10</sup> Getting off ‘the treadmill’ and away from ‘the noise and chaos’ of daily life were identified as necessary precursors to experiencing self at depth.<sup>11</sup> For most, initially this required disciplined disengagement from distractions of the world beyond self, in a habitual space—often behind a closed door. In auditory silence their attention is more readily directed towards God and, mirroring the direction of the divine gaze, back towards themselves. Here, having relinquished their familiar busyness, the women appreciate the freedom silence gives to re-experience self as ‘a human being rather than a human doing’.<sup>12</sup>

Sally is a ‘busy, busy person’ whose life is ‘activity focussed and people filled’. Although work and community life are satisfying, contributing to her self-worth, she expressed the significance of stepping aside to experience existing without needing to accomplish anything.

I’ve always got a sense of achievement and  
satisfaction from the things that I do  
and produce and achieve and succeed in  
but actually  
there’s something powerful about just being  
and being in a way that only silence for me can bring about

Practices of silence help Sally find a more healthy equilibrium between being and doing:

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<sup>10</sup> The only other themes commented on by every participant on more than one occasion were difficulties associated with practices of silence and silence as a place of sustain and resourcing being, which will be discussed below.

<sup>11</sup> Dawn and Sian.

<sup>12</sup> Michaela.

if my life was only full of  
jobs  
activities  
things to be ticked off on the to do list ...  
I'd be trapped within  
a realm of doing things ...  
and  
I  
don't  
believe  
that is a  
very  
sustainable or  
refreshing way to  
live ...  
it's a tricky balance but  
that's sometimes why I need ...  
the opposite of that busyness  
of just complete silence

Withdrawal into external silence is the first step towards the stillness of heart and mind which exemplifies internal silence. Paradoxically, entering external silence with the intention of being rather than doing or thinking is often followed by increased mental activity—usually heightened awareness of the noisy internal discourses between cognitive, bodily and emotional self. Many women expressed frustration that their minds shift rapidly from one thought to another: it is distracting, uninvited, unwanted and undesirable. Over time, movement towards a place 'where your mind stops whirring' occurs gradually as attention is repeatedly brought back to the intent of their particular discipline.<sup>13</sup>

Although their decreased mental activity facilitates clearer thinking, more sustained detachment from endless thoughts was described as a liberation or relief. These comments

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<sup>13</sup> Sian.

were often accompanied by postural relaxation and facial expressions conveying contentment, emphasising the holistically embodied way the mind's slowing is experienced. The inner peace accompanying reduced thinking was frequently identified as an objective during silence. Such mental rest, where egoic self is quietened, enables encounter with deepest self made in the image of God, far beyond Descartes '*cogito ergo sum*'.<sup>14</sup> Achieving this requires more time and intent than many had initially expected. The language used to describe this transformed state of self-awareness indicated its value as the ultimate resting place. Here, anxieties are replaced with a depth of peace unknown at other times.

Mary developed a metaphor of Sabbath rest to portray her physical and mental respite within silence. This metaphor emerged to distinguish her spiritual discipline from other contexts of significant amounts of external silence: her solitary academic work and extended periods with a new baby still sleeping for many hours. Mary said,

it's not like work  
but it's not like leisure ...  
in a way Sabbath is that isn't it? 'cause it it's  
I mean Sabbath is is not  
oh you do what the hell you feel like ...  
you're  
being  
you're you're you're existing in  
you are  
living in a  
in a different kind of pace in a different kind of way ...  
you're being the whole of you rather than all the bits of you ...  
that's kind of how Sabbath is ...  
because everything rests

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<sup>14</sup> '*I think, therefore I am*', in familiar English translation of their Latin form from René Descartes, *Principia Philosophiae*, (1644). Emphasis in the original.

Mary's portrayal of just being, not working or doing, and 'slowing' the 'endless flow' of the mind<sup>15</sup> is extended by Catriona's metaphor for experiencing self in silence:

I guess it's  
like resetting  
the computer or  
resetting  
the system  
you know?  
and  
when I have  
my silence I  
reset myself  
so that I can (3)  
start afresh (3)  
for the next bit  
and  
and without that resetting I'd just get too  
too garbled  
too full  
of things ...  
oh I need those times

Both metaphors convey the silence of rest in and with God as necessary for being, facilitating the defragmentation of what is chaotic, complex or unprocessed in life, restoring a more stable sense of self and increasing the women's capacity to function well when they return to doing. Lanzetta portrays attaining a centrepiece of stilled stability as critical to women's spiritual growth and capacity to be fully present in the world because women's identities are so often located in being 'a self-for-others'. Lanzetta continues,

she who is relational; she who is available, she who is caregiver, helpmate, and mother ... Her spiritual centre is distracted by the numerous roles she is called to perform, the many commitments imposed on her and others that

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<sup>15</sup> Mary.



she internalizes and demands of herself. To find the monastery within is to discover the place of rest out of which all other relations flourish and grow.<sup>16</sup>

Many women named their desire to retain an inner stillness as they return to the relational roles of life. Although remaining permanently in this centred state is unattainable, their ongoing practices help develop a habit to 'pause a moment/and leave everything on hold and go and/spend that time' away from supporting and doing, giving the 'soul space to just be', however briefly, at appropriate moments throughout the day.<sup>17</sup>

The primary significance attached to silence as opportunity just to 'be' is virtually unacknowledged within therapeutic literature. Its stressing of silence for working through emergent material reflects therapy's theoretical emphasis on acquiring new insight, highlighted by Gale and Sanchez.<sup>18</sup> Investigating silence's role only from the perspective of therapists, a fundamental need for time simply to be with self and with another as a vital precursor to substantive change and growth has been overlooked.<sup>19</sup> A similar failure to acknowledge silence as antecedent to transformation is also found in practical and feminist theologies, where discourses dominated by doing and speaking neglect any prior imperative to be.

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<sup>16</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 169.

<sup>17</sup> Dawn and Sally.

<sup>18</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence', 217.

<sup>19</sup> The exception amongst studies discussed in Chapter 2 was Scott and Lester, 'Listening to Silence', which identified the importance of telephone support workers *not* disconnecting silent calls but being present with the caller in their silence.

### 6.3.2 *Sustaining and resourcing being*

Expectations associated with the women's many roles deplete their ability to function effectively, respond appropriately to others, and identify their own needs. Although opportunity for just being in silence contributes to re-enabling appropriate response and functioning, being and resting alone are insufficiently restorative. Experiencing sustenance and resourcing in silence were also identified as vital: facilitating more satisfying engagement in life, they also enable movement towards newly developing self and self-perceptions to be maintained.

Every woman expressed uncertainty about surviving without continuing opportunities to replenish her diminished resources in silence. For many, the combinations of words, body language and vocal intonation exposed genuine anxiety or fear at this prospect. Una was unable to imagine a way of living without silence: 'I can't live without it/I go to bits'. After a large, loud intake of breath, Gaynor said without silence 'I would die/I would shrivel up and die'. Having felt tension between family expectations on her time and recognition of her own need to continue her practices to ensure healthy self-survival, she recognised there was 'just no decision' to make about which must take priority: she did not relinquish her silence.

All the women used metaphors extensively in portraying how practices of silence sustain and resource them. Slee identified metaphor as an important faithing strategy through which women discern and embody 'shape, pattern, meaning and coherence' in life, particularly when it could otherwise seem incoherent or insignificant.<sup>20</sup> The women's range of similies,

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<sup>20</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 61-62.

analogies and images employed to depict feeling sustained and resourced in silence was original and creative. Yet they were less fluent and often unclear in conveying why this occurs particularly in silence and how such sustaining and resourcing happens.

Understanding their recourse to metaphor is aided by Morton's statement about women's need for metaphorical expression: 'If you could say it, you would not need metaphor. If you could conceptualize it, it would not be metaphor, if you could explain it, you would not use metaphor'.<sup>21</sup> Slee describes women's creative use of metaphor as indicating 'spiritual vibrancy and engagement in the claiming of experience and naming of the powers that be'.<sup>22</sup> Slee's comments affirm these women as spiritually alive: their desire to name and claim the worth of engagement in practices outwith verbal language makes them valuable sources of knowledge. Paying particular attention to their metaphors, mining these for rich, collective insights and unique perceptions is important precisely because of their struggles to expand their vivid imagery into more sustained, conceptual language, despite repeated expression of their perceived value of silence.

Many expressed the impossibility of living as well beings if they remain in the fragmented or dislocated state that enacting multi-tasking roles can cause. Silence sustains the women by offering uninterrupted space where fragmented aspects of identity can be gathered together and re-assembled, enabling them to respond to life with greater integrity. As the Fredette's comment, it is in relearning how to fully dwell in the now through engagement in silence that 'multi-tasking is unmasked as the impossibility it really is'.<sup>23</sup> Several women used

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<sup>21</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 210.

<sup>22</sup> Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> Fredette and Fredette, *Consider the Ravens*, 221.

metaphors portraying self as broken into pieces or scattered, which they re-constitute within silence. This was a significant thread in Mary's understanding of the importance of her discipline of silence, without which she can't 'ever' have

the whole of me together ...  
put the whole of myself in one place ...  
and it  
it shows because you can't go on living in bits  
erm  
for long  
erm  
without it  
it showing the strain

Mary's use of silence for 're-collecting' fragmented self is mirrored in the pattern of staccato utterances and word repetition which suddenly come together in longer, more lyrical phrases throughout her interview. Stating she puts 'life together' through silence further emphasises her perception that silence sustains her by re-integrating fragmented aspects of her being.

Re-collection of scattered aspects of self is central to the women's ability to sustain awareness of their unique selfhood. This was succinctly expressed by Catriona, whose practices of silence are 'times when I reconnect with myself/and/if you can't reconnect with yourself/you kind of lose your identity'. Such re-remembering was often associated with needing to temporarily lay down identities assumed or imposed by the many roles the women perform. This was vividly portrayed by Rebecca, whose silence enables her

to remember how to be me  
I think

because me got crowded out ...  
me got  
completely submerged in other people's needs ...  
just to remember again  
that actually I did exist as a separate being (4) ...  
I existed as well

Here, Rebecca's repeated ungrammatical use of 'me' reflects her loss of identity and need for space in silence to reinstate apposite boundaries of self and other, reclaiming her individuality as distinct from those for whom she cared.

The women's predominant metaphors for feeling sustained cluster around being held in silence. Last chapter I discussed security in relating with God, metaphorically portrayed as being held within God's arms. Two further metaphors of holding were prominent with regard to relating to self: being held by water and in ways implying increased stability. Dawn's depicted her peaceful silences as like a tiny duckling gliding over the surface of a pool. This was echoed in Loretta's sense of self in silence as 'totally weightless', like when floating in water and Barbara's image of being 'buoyant' and 'afloat' as if 'held on the surface of a meniscus'. Nancy described being sustained in silence as like the joy of swimming with less effort when you 'slip below the surface'. Similarly, Michaela likened deep silence to 'diving into the sea/or a swimming pool': she trusts it to hold her unharmed even though she doesn't know where she is going in the silence, equating this to diving in when 'your eyes are closed', knowing the water will receive her safely. These images convey silence as sustaining and upholding by hinting at the relief of needing less effort or not striving. Reflecting Ladany et al's findings that client-focussed reasons for using silence

include enabling them to feel held,<sup>24</sup> and, in floating, something of Elson's presentation of silence as having self-righting capacity,<sup>25</sup> the women have developed confidence that, like water, silence will buoyantly sustain them as they rest and journey within it.

Loretta and Sian combined images of water and stability, depicting silence as an anchor, holding them stable whilst retaining freedom to move with life's ebb and flow. Sian described this 'steadiness' as counterbalancing mental activity, facilitating emotional security and generating an internal core of stillness, which provides a stronger, more stable place from which to live. This gives Sian a solid platform to explore broader vistas than 'the smallness of my normal daily living', allowing her to be 'attentive to new horizons that might be emerging'. Many other women identified the effect of silence on their inner world using land-based metaphors of feeling more grounded, whilst Elizabeth uniquely described it as her 'bedrock'—a solid foundation upon which all else stands. Invariably, developing inner stability was associated with growing abilities to interact with others without being so easily destabilised by these encounters. Cultivating a habit of re-centring self in secure identity with God by dipping back into silence briefly has become a significant resource. Reminiscent of Elson's suggestion that silence allows self-identity to become known as the 'centre of initiative',<sup>26</sup> the women's new-found stability enables them to offer measured responses rather than reacting instantly, particularly in unexpected situations.

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<sup>24</sup> Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives'.

<sup>25</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 353-5.

<sup>26</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 353-5.

Silence was unanimously identified as vital in facilitating survival when facing life's difficulties, yet without any suggestion it obscures associated pain. Rather, self is sufficiently sustained to endure times of struggle with increasing honesty. In silence the women discover the possibility 'to see through/the pain/to some form of reality which helps you to/survive', which doesn't 'take away the pain but ... unite[s] that pain with something that was beyond it'.<sup>27</sup> Silence is also where the women receive 'strength/to face whatever would come'.<sup>28</sup> The emergence of deeply rooted, ongoing assurance that self is secure during times of suffering plays a dual role: it sustains during the acute phase of pain and, alongside growing acknowledgement of life's uncertainties, contributes to a slowly building resource of trust, repeatedly equated with Julian of Norwich's revelation that 'all shall be well'.<sup>29</sup> In gradually accepting God's ultimate unknowability, which Muers<sup>30</sup> and Ross<sup>31</sup> identify as accentuated by any sustained engagement in practices of silence, and in growing trust that self will be securely held in being by God at times of difficulty, the women discovered previously unknown hope for their own, unknowable futures.

References to silence as a place of resourcing used language that connotes being re-energised. It gives 'energy', 'fuel' and 'power';<sup>32</sup> is a space to be 're-charged', 'charged up', 'empowered', or 'renewed';<sup>33</sup> it is a place for 're-fuelling', that 'keeps me going'.<sup>34</sup> It might

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<sup>27</sup> Una.

<sup>28</sup> Dawn.

<sup>29</sup> See previous reference in Loretta's participant profile.

<sup>30</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*.

<sup>31</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 81.

<sup>32</sup> Some words were used by several women. These three variously used by Catriona, Sally, Michaela, Loretta, Nancy, Gaynor, Alison and Rachel.

<sup>33</sup> Similarly, these variously used by Alison, Catriona, Gaynor and Rachel.

<sup>34</sup> Alison, Elisabeth and Rachel.

be expected that Christian women would make direct connections between silence, energy or power and the Holy Spirit, as Lanzetta implies: 'Silence ... is the electrical current that ignites the divine spark at the centre of our being.'<sup>35</sup> Surprisingly, only Rachel, whose practise is a 'safeguard ... from running on empty spiritually', made this correlation: silence enables her to be 'more Spirit resourced'. Nancy hinted at the Spirit's activity in resourcing, describing silence not as a source of, but itself 'the ultimate energy'.

Although 'a lot of people talk about "oh it's/it's about recharging your batteries" ... a sort of image of getting extra energy', Mary rejected this. She prefers the metaphor of 'gathering up scattered bits', discussed above, reminiscent of Griffiths' position that emergent, fragmentary thoughts should be heeded as they may be brought to mind by the Spirit as a resource for healing.<sup>36</sup> However, metaphors of energy and gathering fragments of self across many of the narratives coalesce in perceptions of silence as a place of renewal. This was central to Catriona's description of why she values silence.

I come out (3)  
renewed  
if I couldn't renew myself  
then (4)  
I  
oh it would be awful  
like a  
erm  
like an insect, you know?  
they  
they  
keep shedding their

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<sup>35</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 169.

<sup>36</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ: Christian Meditation and Community*, Robert Kiley and Lawrence Freeman, eds., (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992), 36-38, referenced by Del Monte, 'Silence and Emptiness', 374.



exoskeleton  
to grow  
and if you don't  
shed  
then you can't grow and  
so  
I need those times to  
shed [*laughs*]  
I don't know what I shed  
erm  
I really don't know  
but what I do know is that I come out  
renewed ...  
I couldn't live without my silences

Catriona's depiction of renewal identifies silence as a place of liberation and transformation of self.<sup>37</sup> Her metaphor highlights the importance of shedding whatever is constricting or burdensome, leaving capacity for additional resources that promote growth and change. Initially unable to name what she sheds, Catriona later said when she has not spent time in silence

I can feel  
myself  
building up this  
erm  
I don't know  
erm  
like a  
like a scum I guess [*laughs*]  
It builds up and builds up  
you know what you get on kettles—  
the fur  
that builds up?  
erm  
and  
and I feel [*sighs*]  
I just need to  
escape ...

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<sup>37</sup> This theme is discussed later in the chapter.

when I haven't had a silence for a long time I feel like  
the fur is seizing me up ...  
I guess what I shed it's the fur

Silence enables Catriona to shed the clinging, cumulative residues of life which constrict movement and prevent growth. Guenther offers a strikingly similar metaphor in writing about spiritual direction during transitional times in people's lives. Guenther describes how the snake who previously inhabited a discarded skin she found had to 'leave behind a part of itself' in order to survive and grow. She continues, 'I have no idea whether the shedding hurt or was a relief; but my imagination tells me that it was some of each.'<sup>38</sup> Both metaphors echo Blanton's proposal that silence creates space for narratives which have become restrictive to be challenged, discarded and replaced by new self-narratives that more accurately depict changes in self-identity.<sup>39</sup>

Images of silence renewing through the removal of whatever hinders were offered by several other women, who also commented on associated difficulties and relief. Silence clears Alison's mind and spirit by 'cleansing', 'filtering' and 'purifying' the murky waters of self. Rachel pictured silence as a 'drain cleaner ... unblocking' the 'hair and toothpaste and bits of gunk that have jammed up' her being. Silence is a place of 'emptying' Barbara's head when it's 'so full it's like the wheelie bin'. Her sorting through rubbish to recycle what is of use points beyond renewal towards creativity and new life. Calling to mind familiar words from Hebrews—'let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let

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<sup>38</sup> Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 103.

<sup>39</sup> Blanton, 'Adding Silence to Stories'.

us run with perseverance the race that is set before us'<sup>40</sup>—such striking metaphors were followed by expressions of being able to live with greater efficacy and freedom: some feel better able to recognise what is important; others spoke of being resourced to function more effectively, personally and in roles to which God has called them; several identified new freedom to be channels for God's love, healing and forgiveness.

Many also described silence refreshing them, using metaphors of the need for, or provision of water—the most fundamental element for sustaining life. In explaining her ongoing commitment to silence Lynne emphasised its welcome and necessary refreshment: 'returning to it/it's like going back for water/it's/kind of/for me it's/absolutely life giving refreshing/I *need* it'. Recalling Jesus' words, 'The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life',<sup>41</sup> some depicted abundant, clean water in wells, rivers or oases, returning to these to satisfy thirst or to wash, cool and rejuvenate their whole being like desert-dusted herds. Such refreshment was presented as filling to overflowing what had become depleted, enabling fresh outpouring from self to others within their caring and nurturing roles.

Metaphors of silence refreshing like abundant water were counterpointed by Una. Her time in silence is

like being  
earth waiting for the rain  
the earth is dry  
and cracked

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<sup>40</sup> Hebrews 12: 1.

<sup>41</sup> John 4: 14.

and  
thirsty  
and it can't do anything else but wait

Una offered the only recognition that, despite entering silence with thirst and longing, finding an oasis can be a long and difficult journey. The barrenness she depicted echoes the spiritual dryness of her loss of any sense of God and of finding little meaning in her religious practices. Her experience reflects Case's description of silence becoming permeated by affects associated with grief and loss which find no verbal expression.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of her seeming ongoing privations, Una continues to wait, in faith that through contemplation she is sustained beyond her perceiving and resourced with all she needs, despite having no awareness of God.

Silence was repeatedly described as nourishing, as identified in Ladany et al's findings.<sup>43</sup> Metaphors of being nourished by something rich and sweet, like honey, fruit or nectar were prominent. Often these included depictions of an infant receiving food from its mother, portraying that in silence the women feel nourished by God. Nourishment in silence is also found in meditatively reflecting on scripture or other spiritual texts: often memorised in the past, short passages are recalled and fed on at times of difficulty, and remain an internalised resource for the future. Some perceive it is the 'hushed space' of silence itself which provides the nourishment they receive.<sup>44</sup> Claire expressed needing 'actual silence to nourish me'; Nancy returns to her practices of silence because 'they feed me/there is just no doubt

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<sup>42</sup> Case, 'Silence in progress', 26.

<sup>43</sup> Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives'.

<sup>44</sup> Sian.

about it ... I wouldn't do it if it didn't feed me'; Claire and Elizabeth identified particular sustenance in night-time silence, and its 'deep absence of language ... that's feeding'.<sup>45</sup> Likening this silence to the blanket of animals lowered from heaven with the command to 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat',<sup>46</sup> Elisabeth voiced concern that if she 'didn't have that nourishment' she 'would be less present' to herself and to others. Their perceptions affirm Lanzetta's assertion that 'silence is food ... necessary for the nourishment of the whole person, and for the actualization of the deepest possibility of a spiritual life.'<sup>47</sup> Her perceptions of silence resourcing the development of deeper spirituality was emphasised by several women. Gaynor spoke emotionally of a time when losing silence left her 'just starving/I was starving', resulting in malnourishment she reported threatening her grip on life and Christian faith. Despite sometimes abandoning their practices, like Nancy, the women 'always come back to it', as a lack of the sustenance silence provides is debilitating after having been a regular part of their spiritual diet.

#### **6.4 Exploring self-identity**

One of the most substantial themes emerging from my research is that engagement in practices of silence creates opportunities for the women to explore their identity. Although not named as a reason for beginning a discipline of silence, descriptions of encountering self more deeply were scattered throughout every narrative. Separating themselves from life's distractions to seek encounter with God, each woman also discovered her own self crying

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<sup>45</sup> Elisabeth. For comments by Claire, see her participant profile in Chapter 5.

<sup>46</sup> Acts 10:13.

<sup>47</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 169.

out for attention. For many, the unexpected power with which self intruded into silence intended for God was an unwelcome distraction, initially. More surprising was encountering aspects of self they had forgotten or not been aware of and emergent questions about self which they had been avoiding—more or less consciously. Rachel said,

you're  
suddenly  
left alone with yourself ...  
it's  
so easy  
in a busy life  
to not meet yourself  
'cause you're  
so busy  
with two sons and a husband and  
four congregations and a family and  
everything else you know  
that the question 'who am I?  
what are my desires?'  
and 'what was I made to do?' all those sorts of [*trailing off, incomplete*]  
well you don't have to worry about them if you've just got a full diary  
you just  
do what's in the diary don't you?

Encountering God in silence, in turn, the women were invited to face realities about themselves. In the space of silence and the light of God's gaze, things they had avoided began to surface. As Blanton identified,<sup>48</sup> inauthentic or incomplete stories and self-perceptions repeatedly narrated to self and others were exposed, and could no longer be sustained. Engagement in silence and being faced by God also required commitment to encountering themselves 'terribly clearly' with 'no pretence, no defence'.<sup>49</sup> Like Dawn, they were

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<sup>48</sup> Blanton, 'Adding Silence to Stories'.

<sup>49</sup> Alison.

facing up to  
what you have to face  
and saying  
'this is the truth this is the absolute truth  
I can't run away from this'

In *A Spirituality of Survival* Barbara Glasson highlights the need for spaces and relationships which are safe enough to risk feeling unsafe.<sup>50</sup> Confronting realities of self inevitably generated vulnerability. However, increasing security in relating with God contributes to silence being safe enough to risk the discomfort of exploring self more honestly. In turn, this enables the women to embrace opportunities for change in self-perception and self-presentation.

#### 6.4.1 *Developing self-knowledge, awareness and identity*

Recognition that increased self-knowledge is significant in facilitating growth and transformation was a key component in the development of psychological and psychodynamic theories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its importance within spiritual journeys has been acknowledged far longer. A metaphor in the Gospel of Philip,<sup>51</sup> rich in biblical resonance, extends Paul's familiar commendation of faith, hope and love to include self-knowledge:<sup>52</sup>

If you're a farmer you need earth, rain, wind and sun;

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<sup>50</sup> Barbara Glasson, *A Spirituality of Survival: Enabling a Response to Trauma and Abuse*, (London: Continuum, 2009), 34.

<sup>51</sup> This gnostic text, found with the better-known Gospel of Thomas in a cave at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, is thought to have been written between 150 and 300AD. See Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), xi-xii.

<sup>52</sup> 1 Corinthians 13: 13 reads 'And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.'

God as your Farmer requires you to cultivate faith,  
hope, love and Self Knowledge.  
Faith is our fertile ground; hope, our gentle rain;  
Love the soft breeze; Self Knowledge, the sunshine!<sup>53</sup>

The worship of sun-gods by ancient civilizations was rooted in understanding the need for sunlight for a successful harvest. The gospel writer's metaphorical depiction of self-knowledge as sunshine indicates its essential role in enabling spiritual growth.

Choosing the sun—which rises and sets in perpetuity—as a metaphor for self-knowledge points towards its development as an ongoing process involving dawning and awakening to new aspects of selfhood and setting down of elements of identity that have run their course. Uncovering insights into one's own being, motivations and interactions with the world requires significant application of intent if development of self-knowledge is to be sustained. Yet, as Flanagan states, '*it is in the silence* that the learning is harvested, tasted, and digested.'<sup>54</sup> Sian described this process as a 'slow burn ... journey through to/a greater truthfulness', where every entry into silence 'builds on' what she uncovered 'the last time and leads to the next' moment of self-discovery. Mary—whose perception of the pitfalls in compartmentalising self was a recurring theme—stated that encountering God in silence prevents her from 'taking short cuts' or 'easy routes out' of uncomfortable self-knowledge, requiring her to lay out for inspection everything she knows about self:

unless

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<sup>53</sup> Alan Jacobs, ed., *The Essential Gnostic Gospels: Including The Gospel of Thomas and The Gospel of Mary*, (London: Watkins Publishing, 2006), 82. The capitalizations, retained here from Jacobs' translation, have the effect of repeatedly emphasising the significance of the addition of self-knowledge to the familiar trio of faith, hope and love, which occur in lower case, unless beginning a new sentence or sometimes a new line.

<sup>54</sup> Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 66, emphasis mine.



in some way I'm  
bringing it all and holding it all  
in the silence  
it  
you know  
doesn't work if you like  
nothing happens

Many women displayed similar commitment to honesty in encounters with God and self, knowing that without it, their growing self-knowledge would be compromised.

In 'When We Dead Awaken', Rich declares women cannot truly know themselves until they understand and reject assumptions about womanhood with which they are 'drenched' by society.<sup>55</sup> Neuger describes this drenching as patriarchal demands that women create and live out a false identity matching the societally expected feminine role, whilst simultaneously forgetting this assumed identity is false.<sup>56</sup> In *Engendered Lives: A New Psychology of Women's Experience*, feminist psychologist, Ellyn Kaschak, unmask such dissembling identities:

becoming a woman involves learning a part, complete with costumes, make-up and lines. Learning to behave like a woman involves learning to sit, stand, and talk in the appropriate ways and to make them appear natural, to have them become natural or, more aptly, second nature.<sup>57</sup>

Declaring women's search for self-knowledge to be more than a quest to reclaim lost identities subsumed beneath such expectations, Rich states the imperative for women to see

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<sup>55</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English* (October, 1972), 34 (1): 18.

<sup>56</sup> Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 76.

<sup>57</sup> Ellyn Kaschak, *Engendered Lives: A New Psychology of Women's Experience*, (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 89.

themselves fully and cease being haunted by internalized fears of being their real selves: it is an 'an act of survival'. Glasson describes such survival in terms of its French root, *sur vivre*, to live above or on top of, contrasting this with *sous vivre*, to be below or underneath as 'the victim of a terrible silence.'<sup>58</sup> For women, being real necessitates a surfacing and claiming of identity which rejects the self-destructiveness imposed by male-dominated society. Lanzetta proposes 'Silence is the balm that soothes whatever has falsely named and blamed' them.<sup>59</sup>

The women repeatedly identified silence as where they recognise false aspects of identity. Increasingly unwanted, falsehoods are refuted and begin to be stripped away. This was most prominently articulated amongst ordained women, who struggle against capitulating with expectations of how they should behave, think, speak or look physically. Throughout Rachel's narrative, her recurring concern was awareness of the lure to inhabit the expectations others have about the role of an ordained woman, which would make her existence like 'an empty shell' that 'looks ok from the outside'. For Rachel, 'that's/what silence ... is a safeguard against', giving her 'space to examine ... time/[for] testing authenticity and integrity and truthfulness' in self-presentation.

Although rarely named as associated with societal expectations, amongst lay women, expressions of living out the expectations of others more frequently centre around responsibilities towards others. Michaela's narrative was typical: she tends 'to/perform and/put on' the appropriate 'face' or enact her expected 'part' in practically and emotionally

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<sup>58</sup> Glasson, *A Spirituality of Survival*, 2-3.

<sup>59</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 169.

supporting others, often at great cost in terms of her time, asserting her own needs and finding space and relationships where these are met. Reflecting Ladany et al's findings that a client-focussed reason for using silence is giving permission to be authentic,<sup>60</sup> Michaela feels she comes home to herself in silence. She is able to be 'just me', free from expectations associated with the different faces she wears. Michaela described the relief of being real with self and God as like wearing old slippers, her favourite, worn out pyjamas and being wrapped in a fleecy blanket. Here, she recognised a previously unconscious fear: ceasing to enact what is false within her caring roles may curtail the conditional love, appreciation and acceptance received from others who value those aspects of her. By relinquishing false identity these relationships, and her related sense of self-worth, may deteriorate. At the same time, Michaela's experience of God's unconditional love for her in silence has been 'fertile ground' for developing appropriate self-love and esteem, as Elson proposes.<sup>61</sup> Slowly, unconditionality in this relationship is diminishing her reliance on the conditionality of other relationships, enabling increased self-authenticity within them.

Changes in self-perception necessitates leaving behind some of what is known and feeling the loss and poignancy which can accompany renouncing aspects of self that have served well. As Guenther observes, 'there is often "nothing wrong" with the old identity ... it is simply not useful any more and, if clung to, stands in the way of growth'.<sup>62</sup> Silence, and the security and acceptance found in relationship with God, provide a safe space for encountering previously veiled aspects of self. Here, the women risk the initial discomfort of

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<sup>60</sup> Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives'.

<sup>61</sup> This will be discussed later in this chapter. See Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

<sup>62</sup> Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 103.

discarding masks used as protection from the gaze of God, self and other. They begin to seek, observe and attend to what is genuine, cultivating new self-awareness.

Developing greater self-awareness does not require self to be measured against any imagined or expected ideal. Rather, it offers the possibility of becoming comfortable with an enlarging and more accurate self-assessment, without imposing judgement, criticism or pressure to change. As self-awareness evolves, the women identify realities which have been hidden to them, but may have been apparent to others. Illusory self-perceptions are recognised, addressed and laid aside. Repeatedly, the women used metaphors of seeing and hearing to describe these self-encounters. Some portrayed themselves as ‘more blinkered’ or ‘more blind’ to who they were and how they presented to the world before engaging in silence,<sup>63</sup> now seeing themselves with an increasingly realistic perspective of who they have been, are and are becoming. Although shifts in self-awareness are sometimes sudden and dramatic, like Loretta’s description as being ‘someone who couldn’t see in colour/suddenly being allowed to see in colour’ or ‘a deaf person being able to hear’, usually, expanding self-perception occurs incrementally: a gradual ‘waking up’, as if from deep sleep.<sup>64</sup>

Projections of idealised identities which the women wanted—and also wanted others—to believe are recognised more clearly. The women recognised using these identities to conceal aspects of self they fear are unacceptable, manipulating others’ perceptions of them

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<sup>63</sup> Michaela and Sian.

<sup>64</sup> Gaynor.

to avoid criticism, judgement and rejection. Increasingly they identified construction of what Sian described as 'illusional ... scaffolding' to support cherished misperceptions about self. In silence these are explored and gradually dismantled, enabling distortions in self-perception to be transformed, as Elson suggests.<sup>65</sup> However, facing unpalatable realities of self or acknowledging that their desire to be accepted has resulted in self-suppression bordering on sabotage, can be 'confusing, disorienting, and painful',<sup>66</sup> as Sian's description suggests:

I sometimes don't want to confront the truth that silence offers to me  
sometimes the illusion is much, much, much more comfortable  
and I can control that [*chuckles*]  
rather than  
having to deal with  
the truthful  
bit that comes up  
from being silent ...  
I don't want something deep worked on  
because I  
you know  
my ego's very happy with it ...  
to spend time in silence  
is hard work  
and it's  
a bit painful:  
bit's going to be clipped off or  
pruned ...  
frankly  
sometimes  
I just avoid it  
for that reason  
and there are other times when I  
make myself do it regardless

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<sup>65</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

<sup>66</sup> Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', 18.

Sian's honesty identifies that sometimes self-relating falters, exemplifying Elson's suggestion that silence is used to hide from 'shameful' aspects of identity for fear that acknowledgement will damage deepening relationship with self.<sup>67</sup> But Sian's depiction highlights that this is not always the case. Frequently the women confront emerging realities of self, having learned from changes in their encounters with God that sustaining integrity in a deepening relationship necessitates truthful self-exposure. This is made bearable, and therefore possible, by the developing security of identity in God and with themselves.

Kathleen Fischer states 'The loss of an idealized self can be frightening at first, but it is also freeing. The identity that emerges is larger and more complete, more attuned to the realities of past, present, and future.'<sup>68</sup> This pattern was evident in all the women's accounts. Sian's resistance to facing herself more truthfully and letting go of constructed identities generated feelings of 'rawness'. Gradually acknowledging the reality of past and present selves, she experienced increasing disengagement from false self-images, describing this as 'quite a liberating thing': as a result, 'a more honest and robust place to live from actually emerges'. Writing of her self-encounters in silence, Sister Jeremy Hall depicts this transition as marking movement from identity mindlessly projected onto self and mindlessly accepted, towards a deeper, inner personhood which ceases all crowd-following. Reflecting Del Monte's presentation of practices of silence offering liberation from impulses and blind

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<sup>67</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 358.

<sup>68</sup> Kathleen Fischer, *Autumn Gospel: Women in the Second Half of Life*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 133.

allegiance,<sup>69</sup> the development of self as an increasingly authentic centre of being gathers pace, enabling engagement in life from the deep mystery of genuine human selfhood.<sup>70</sup>

When venturing into the 'vast territory' beyond the confining, narrowly defined identities and experiences any dominant sociocultural narrative 'allows' women, Bons-Storm describes them encountering 'shame and guilt feelings, mixed with rebellious feelings of an emerging and developing subject quality' as they inhabit liminal space between a perceived need to conform and the beginnings of liberation.<sup>71</sup> Although generally safe enough space for self-observation, paradoxically, the spaciousness of silence sometimes magnifies apparent imperfections or omissions of identity. At these times, the women experience feelings of 'nakedness', 'exposure' and discomfort.<sup>72</sup> This makes it difficult to remain present to painful aspects of self and the shame and guilt engendered, especially when newly acknowledged realities of selfhood fall outside the narrow remit of culturally acceptable norms. When beginning to address these painful truths, exposure can only be endured for short periods of time. It feels 'threatening', 'scary' or becomes so 'unbearable'<sup>73</sup> they may 'escape' by abandoning their practices and 'avoiding' silence for a while.<sup>74</sup> As Rachel commented, 'you meet yourself and then you think/"I want to go back [*mock horror on face and in voice*]/I don't like this ... stop me meeting [myself]". Although Nancy expressed similar difficulties, she gradually learned to tolerate this exposure:

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<sup>69</sup> Del Monte, 'Silence and Emptiness'.

<sup>70</sup> Sister Jeremy Hall, *Silence, Solitude, Simplicity: A Hermit's Love Affair with a Noisy, Crowded, and Complicated World*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 94.

<sup>71</sup> Bons-Storm, *Incredible Woman*, 134.

<sup>72</sup> Gaynor, Ali and Claire.

<sup>73</sup> Claire, Sally, Rachel and Alison.

<sup>74</sup> Una.

it can be  
hard to be there ...  
because of the self-exposure the vulnerability that you feel ...  
although  
I would say I'm on a journey of learning  
that  
vulnerability and God are  
an ok combination  
it's still not always comfortable ...  
sometimes  
you don't feel that  
your *self*  
is very comfortable  
to be with

Having developed a more secure relationship, Nancy mostly accepts the vulnerability she feels before God: it is being with the reality of self which remains uncomfortable.

The ability to tolerate only so much new self-awareness at once was movingly portrayed by Ali, not only in words, but through sighs, uncertainties, repetitions and silences, reflected in annotations I made during transcription:

Ali: there can be things about me [*each word slow and deliberately*]  
erm ...  
when I find I'm just not in the right  
place to handle it  
A: mmm  
Ali: erm (3)  
and that can be it can be very exposing (3)  
I think  
and sometimes that's not what you want hmm? [*questioning 'hmm', checking  
I've understood*]  
A: mmmmm [*longer than usual: empathetic, affirming response to questioning  
'hmm'*]  
Ali: or what you're able to cope with (7.5)  
and if you don't  
[*sighs*] (4)  
you you go out the the  
the flip side of



the positives ...  
if there's a part of you that just does not want that ...  
then you're not going to want the silence  
because the silence is pulling you that direction ...  
for whatever reason I might want to block it ...  
you know  
'put down that which is  
false  
look at  
the thing which is challenging or painful'

The women's narratives imply that despite feeling exposed leading to temporary withdrawal, eventually this is weighed against needing to return to silence because of the wider impact of losing the benefits of this discipline from life. When the negative impact of withdrawal outweighs the challenge of confronting truth, they choose to re-engage with silence. Sometimes this is accompanied by conscious acknowledgement—verging on confession—of deliberately avoiding silence to try to escape these painful realisations. Whether or not such thought-out reflection occurs, most women demonstrated awareness that the healthiest way through difficult emotions when encountering self honestly is to return to silence and face reality. This was most explicit in Alison's description of abandoning silence when encountering self felt unbearable. After several months, 'keeping on running' became unsustainable. Longing for an end to the 'desolation' of not engaging in silence and the comfort it offers, she returned to her practices. There, Alison discovered she

was actually  
fully acknowledging  
how difficult it was ...  
I wasn't overwhelmed  
I was just  
moved to tears  
and wept for a bit  
and

thought  
'yes  
it's that hard'  
but I felt I was  
dealing with it ...  
rather than bottling it up

Shortly after returning from withdrawal, Alison began chastising herself during her silence: a difficult neighbour had become angry and Alison felt she 'hadn't handled it well'.

Acknowledging her discomfort, suddenly an unaccustomed voice emerged, asserting "'well it's very difficult living next door to these people/and being harangued on your doorstep/at no notice'". Immediately, Alison described feeling new 'compassion for myself', recognising for the first time her vulnerability facing the threatening behaviours of someone with significant mental health problems. Instead of continuing in self-condemnation, an emerging identity—perhaps what Miller would term her 'personal voice'<sup>75</sup>— spoke boldly in self-defence. This contrasted with her familiar 'private' and 'professional' voices of self, which felt guilt and shame at not responding with societally expected compassion towards her neighbour. Alison was 'quite surprised ... but also really grateful' when a stronger identity emerged with permission to feel compassion towards herself, instead of condemnation.

Alison's narrative exemplifies Bons-Storm's proposition that rebellious subjectivity arises when narrow societal expectations placed on women are transcended.<sup>76</sup> Quoting Richard Rohr's description of contemplation, Alison described how silence enabled her to take 'a

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<sup>75</sup> Miller, 'Shifting Layers'.

<sup>76</sup> Bons-Storm, *Incredible Woman*.

long, loving look at what really is':<sup>77</sup> in returning to silence she saw herself with increased honesty and, as Sutton suggests, when a previously hidden or undeveloped element of self-identity unexpectedly emerged, was able to trust and maintain this shift to a new inner state.<sup>78</sup> Beatrice Bruteau describes transformation through encountering God and self in silence as initially like holding up a mirror, but gradually becoming space where what is encountered is the 'real environment of our natural face'. She continues, 'It is a matter of looking with perseverance ... into the perfect law of liberty until there is no more question of our looking away and forgetting our true identity.'<sup>79</sup>

#### 6.4.2 *Developing self-acceptance*

Church liturgies emphasise humanity's continuing lack of love despite the gospel imperative to love and accept others.<sup>80</sup> Less attention is given to the second half of Jesus' statement, 'love your neighbour *as yourself*.'<sup>81</sup> This command implies adequately extending God's love to others flows from an ongoing journey towards appropriate self-love and acceptance. Without self-acceptance, engagement with genuine self generates self-condemnation, stalling further honest encounter rather than liberating into authentic selfhood. Seventeen years after entering the Gethsemani Abbey as a novice, Thomas Merton wrote

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<sup>77</sup> Rohr, *Simplicity*, 92.

<sup>78</sup> Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands', 177.

<sup>79</sup> Beatrice Bruteau, 'Prayer and Identity', in Thomas Keating, ed., *Spirituality, Contemplation and Transformation: Writings on Centering Prayer*, (Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books, 2008), 84-85.

<sup>80</sup> In the general confession used at the beginning of many Roman Catholic, Anglican and some non-conformist services, God is addressed using a form of these words: 'we have sinned against you and against our neighbour'. This form is taken from *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 165. There is no recognition that those speaking these words may also have sinned against themselves.

<sup>81</sup> Matthew 19: 19, emphasis mine.

Finally I am coming to the conclusion that my highest ambition is to be what I already am. ... I will never fulfil my obligation ... unless I first accept myself ... it is the unaccepted self that stands in my way—and will continue to do so as long as it is not accepted. When it has been accepted—it is my stepping stone to what is above me ... our Godlikeness begins at home. We must first become like ourselves, and stop living 'beside ourselves.'<sup>82</sup>

The women's language for referring to self showed a marked shift between past self-condemnation and the developing self-acceptance they associate with engagement in silence. Former self-criticism was expressed using language conveying physical harm. Examples include how they would 'give myself a hard time', or 'go around under a/hammer of judgement', 'beating myself over the head', 'battling with yourself', being 'knocked into shape', and 'running myself round ragged'.<sup>83</sup> Such language softened, depicting kinder self-treatment as aspects previously rejected or judged severely became sufficiently accepted to be re-integrated within a healthier, more realistic self-identity. Sally is 'learning how to/be kind to myself' and 'loving' herself; Una spoke of being 'very kind to myself now/much, much kinder than I used to be'; Gaynor felt herself 'more/cherished and/reverenced'; Rebecca identified relief in no longer trying to be 'perfect'; Loretta discovered she could 'be nice to me/which is really nice', twice speaking of 'treating myself as a precious object'.

Self-acceptance was implied to evolve most frequently in moments of vulnerability facing previously unacknowledged aspects of self. With many years' experience as a spiritual accompanist, Una identified her own and other people's astonishment at feeling 'very

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<sup>82</sup> Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed., (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 220-221.

<sup>83</sup> Rebecca, Nancy, Loretta, Dawn, Elisabeth and Sally.

affronted by/how awful they are'. She suggested that when truths bound up in the 'incredible complexity/and the egocentricity' of our nature are brought honestly before God, initial shock is gradually transformed into self-acceptance in the presence and recognition of God's loving acceptance. Una described this as the work of the Holy Spirit, which self can participate in, or obstruct. She likened this choice to two analogies depicting God's presence in auditory terms. Firstly, the legend of St Seraphim imagining the sound of the Sanctus bell whilst descending into the overwhelming abyss of 'profound conflict' between 'love and hate';<sup>84</sup> secondly, the sudden, unexpected emergence of a high note of hope amidst the battle between good and evil depicted in Mahler's Resurrection Symphony.<sup>85</sup> For Una, horror and conflict within self are transformed into self-acceptance through willingness 'to carry that note ... to want to hear that note and be aware of the presence' of the Spirit when facing the truth. Similarly, for Michaela 'accepting who you are/or/your past your present your future' necessitates being prepared to 'tap into' self-acceptance, which is 'always there' as a choice to make. The women's growing self-acceptance is reminiscent of Hill et al<sup>86</sup> and Ladany et al's<sup>87</sup> findings that in conveying empathy and support, silence invites further disclosure of authentic selfhood which, when not rejected, promotes the development of self-acceptance. It is in facing reality, risking God's judgement, but finding instead unconditional love that self-acceptance flourishes and, like the high note of hope, cuts through any conflict between God's acceptance and inclination towards self-condemnation.

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<sup>84</sup> See Iulia de Beausobre, *Flame in the Snow: A Russian Legend*, (London: Constable and Co., 1945). This legend depicts the life of Seraphim, a hermit living in the forests of Savrov, Russia in the late eighteenth century, widely venerated in the Russian Orthodox Church. Sanctus bells, also known by various other names, are rung during Mass or Eucharist at the points of consecration of bread and wine, highlighting the moment in the Mass when Christ's full presence is embodied within the elements.

<sup>85</sup> The title commonly given to Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 2 in C minor.

<sup>86</sup> Hill et al, 'Therapist Use of Silence'.

<sup>87</sup> Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives'.

Una and Michaela's portrayals were echoed in Claire's description of choosing between refusing to face up to her own selfishness, or risking admitting this to herself and God:

I don't want to know  
that I'm actually quite selfish  
but daring to say that  
to God ...  
there's something that happens  
in the silent  
vulnerable moment  
that can go in two ways ...  
close down  
or  
naming it

When not closing down, Claire's vulnerability is transformed from 'a place of exposure' into 'a place of intimacy' with God and self. She is secure enough to face what is culpable within herself, and to accept this, 'daring to stand there with it/and say "this is me"'. For Claire, such acceptance of flawed aspects of self has a 'more profound' impact on her self-perception than any recognition of features of self which others consider 'gifted'.

In seeing themselves more favourably several women identified increasing freedom from needing affirmation from others to bolster flagging self-worth. As Elson suggests, self-worth develops alongside self-acceptance: they act together, affirming all that forms part of self.<sup>88</sup>

Elizabeth identified that this helps to

change me into myself the more  
because that feeling of  
absolute acceptance  
is really good [*gentle, laughing sigh*]  
the more I

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<sup>88</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

regularly experience it the more  
possible it is to live it

Increased self-worth and acceptance generate positive feelings about engagement with others and what is encountered in the rest of life: the women become less likely 'to flee from the possibility of being warmly received and understood.'<sup>89</sup> Instead, they cope with everyday rejections more appropriately and retain a more accurate self-assessment without this being undermined by comments from others.

For some, greater self-acceptance has decreased critical assessment of their participation in a variety of spiritual disciplines, enhancing their confidence as practitioners. Rebecca described movement from attempting 'to be this/perfect hermit monk silent/contemplative' to feeling the short periods of internal silence she manages most days are 'acceptable'. Letting go of unrealistic, self-imposed expectations to 'be St John of the Cross or Julian of Norwich ... sat there for three hours in this raptured silence', she has found 'an acceptance ... that actually what I do is ok'. Similarly, Ali now accepts her mind will fixate on unwanted thoughts during silence. When she notices, Ali is no longer frustrated, trusting that eventually her mind will return to stillness. However, Ali's comment that she will 'sometimes wonder if I ought to be a bit more disciplined about it' is a reminder that occasions persist when self-acceptance remains a struggle.

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<sup>89</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse', 357.

### 6.4.3 *Silence as a place of growth and healing*

Claire's statement, 'silence changes me/it changes me enormously', echoed throughout every woman's narrative. Their language expressing transformation through engagement in silence depicts expansion, fecundity and growth. Words like 'deeper', 'wider', 'broader' and 'larger' were frequently used to denote enlargement of their self-perception.<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth described how silence 'roars with ... potential ... in a fantastically sort of creative way', equating this to her understanding of the Sanskrit word, 'shyam':

the blue-blackness  
which is  
the sort of  
the beginning of everything: it's not  
it's not null black: it's  
a sort of  
fertile black

—like the rich darkness of earth in which new life germinates. Many others used metaphors associated with plant fertility and propagation. Mary identified silence as 'a growing space'; Alison as where she can 'flourish'; Gaynor's silence is 'incredibly fruitful' enabling 'great/spiritual growth'. To Michaela silence is a place for 'sowing seeds', letting them 'bed down' and waiting for new growth to 'emerge' into the light. For Sian, it is 'a place of nurture': time in silence is

a growing season  
when I'm conscious that things are underground and  
something's happening  
but I've no ideas what it is  
and then in due course  
things start to break through the soil  
and start to grow ...

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<sup>90</sup> Each of these words was used by multiple women.



God gives me the space  
for that growth to happen

Sian compared new aspects of self emerging in silence to imagery from D. H. Lawrence's poem, 'Shadows'.<sup>91</sup> Lawrence depicts tree limbs splitting during a storm to represent being reshaped in God's hands, which Sian likened to her experiences in silence. Echoing biblical narratives where pruning increases fruitfulness, Lawrence portrays God's 'breaking' promoting fresh growth: 'new, strange flowers' burst into being, with God 'send[ing] me forth on a new morning, a new man.' Sian continued,

he talks about 'new blossoms of me' ...  
my experience of silence would ...  
be somewhat similar ...  
the practice of silence  
has enabled at least a recognition of  
new blossoms of me

To Sian, silence is not 'static' but 'an organic/dynamic/place' full of 'potential ... a place of possibility'. It is safe enough for what is broken to be stripped away, enabling renewed growth when further flourishing had seemed beyond hope. When Sian enters silence, 'every time' it is 'a journey/that enables new things to happen', helping her 'be attentive to new horizons that might be emerging' and recognise 'the number of/possibilities in life'. Describing this as 'life giving', Sian perceives silence opening her up to 'new challenges and/new ways of growing' which transform the focus and orientation of her being.

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<sup>91</sup> See *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, David Ellis, ed., (Herefordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), 613.

As self-acceptance, self-worth and self-affirmation develop alongside growing knowledge and awareness of self, the women gradually relinquish habitual articulation of their familiar self-narratives. Silence is a catalyst in exploring their shifting stories and unfolding identity using new modes of self-expression, as Blanton proposes.<sup>92</sup> It is a liminal, qualitatively different, 'in between/place', full of the potential of the 'creative moment' that hovers in the borderlands between waking and sleeping, where new connections or ways of perceiving emerge.<sup>93</sup> In this 'womb-like' space, the previously inconceivable comes into being.<sup>94</sup> Although the women 'don't know/what it's going to do or where it's going to open things up', they value silence's opportunities to 'play ... and see what happens'.<sup>95</sup> Jacco Hamman describes play as transformational, awakening imagination which can 'get us unstuck and save the day' by allowing defensive masks to be removed, ideas tried out, mistakes made, alternative possibilities sought and errors rectified in safety. Hamman depicts play fostering and enriching faith, deepening hope and helping love for self and neighbour to grow 'by minimizing conflict and opening new possibilities for being in relationship.'<sup>96</sup> In silence, where these women relate to self as temporally and contextually multiple, non-verbal play offers a constructive environment where tensions between different selves can be acknowledged, explored and resolved. When irreconcilable paradoxes emerge between multiple selves, silence contains their co-existence safely in the playful process of creative self-expression.

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<sup>92</sup> Blanton, 'Adding Silence to Stories'.

<sup>93</sup> Barbara.

<sup>94</sup> Julay.

<sup>95</sup> Julay and Barbara.

<sup>96</sup> Jacco Hamman, 'Playing', in Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion*, 42.

Although some Christian literature encourages spiritual exploration through creative expression, this is rarely presented as belonging to a discipline of silence. Similarly, texts describing practices of silence rarely include creative expression. Amongst these women, activities facilitating creative self-expression were explicitly named as practices of silence and vice versa. The only exception was Elizabeth, a professional writer of fiction and poetic texts, who sometimes distinguished between ‘work’ and creativity within her spiritual practice. However, Elisabeth also highlighted ways that silence and creativity in her work and spiritual disciplines overlap and cross-fertilise: her writing and thinking about her writing come from silence, are born of her listening in silence, often interrupt her silence, and sometimes draw her back into contemplation.

Interconnection between the women’s practices of silence and creativity reflect perceptions of arts therapists, Case<sup>97</sup> and Sutton.<sup>98</sup> They present silence as generative of creativity because both require degrees of inner stillness, separation from external distractions and space where new images and ideas can flourish. Just as creative activity frequently draws the women more deeply into silence, so engagement with silence often generates a flow of creativity. Michaela’s narrative provides a significant example. Recognising resistance to change concerning grief she was unable to discuss verbally, Michaela’s spiritual director on an eight day silent retreat encouraged using artistic expression to explore her feelings. This unleashed prolific creativity: sixteen paintings of sufficient quality for the director—also a

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<sup>97</sup> Case, ‘Silence in Progress’.

<sup>98</sup> Sutton, ‘The Air Between Two Hands’.

painter and sculptor—to inquire whether Michaela had considered going to art school. In this silence Michaela was ‘woken up’ to realising

I need to be creative ...  
not just for the finished product ...  
it’s a sort of knowing that  
the creativity—it isn’t necessarily about making it—  
it’s  
very often it’s about getting emotions out ...  
because I’ve got  
so much going on in my head ...  
I should get them out in another way ...  
in silence ...  
that silence—  
there’s something very  
vulnerable and exposing about it  
but also  
incredibly  
safe  
powerful ...  
awakening

Whilst silence facilitates Michaela’s engagement in creative processes, enabling her to take ‘a deep breath ... to grieve or to let go’ in safety, through this creativity Michaela can also ‘find silence enormously’ in a ‘very/very powerful’ way: creativity within external silence became her gateway into contemplative, internal silence—‘the most healing thing’ of all.

Michaela’s experiences of loss being transformed through creative self-expression reflect findings of research into the role of creativity in preventing clergy burnout, by psychotherapist and priest, Anne Holmes. Psychoanalytic theory recognises that creativity is adversely affected when grief or trauma remains unprocessed and that, conversely, when appropriately addressed, new creativity is released. Holmes uses ‘creative repair’ to

describe healing of damaged selfhood through engagement in the creative arts. Her term brings into conjunction '*repair*' as in the repair of a damaged object in Object Relations Theory within psychoanalysis and *creative* as applying to the creative arts.<sup>99</sup> Holmes writes,

drawn into the creative arts, we hand ourselves over so that God can replenish us. ... submitting ourselves to the creative process ... we meet God as Creator via our humanity and our strength is renewed. ... when we engage or participate in creative activity we are drawing from the wellsprings of the divine Source and thus are bound to repair ... if we are open to that possibility.<sup>100</sup>

Stating 'there is often little that we can say or do' for those experiencing loss and trauma, Holmes proposes 'the capacity to be present, silently ... is itself of profound help'.<sup>101</sup>

Although not explicitly describing a role for silence in *creative repair*, nor stating that being silently present with self is a helpful part of this process, she identifies that some who participated in her research reported they 'preferred silence itself to the still attentiveness of a particular creative art'.<sup>102</sup>

For some women, sustained silence frequently produces an outflowing of creative, poetic writing. Often exploring trauma, loss and pain in relationships, this is a form of 'creative repair'. Creative writing emerging from silence is reminiscent of Gale and Sanchez' presentation of silence as primarily generating new meaning by enabling reflection on experiences, promoting the acquisition and integration of new self-insight.<sup>103</sup> Alison's

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<sup>99</sup> Anne C. Holmes, "'Choose your Companions from the Best" (W. B. Yeats—"To a Young Beauty")', *Practical Theology* (2010), 4 (1): 68.

<sup>100</sup> Holmes, "'Choose your Companions'", 78-79.

<sup>101</sup> Holmes, "'Choose your Companions'", 78.

<sup>102</sup> Holmes, "'Choose your Companions'", 79.

<sup>103</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence', 217.

writing has become integral to her daily silence, allowing her 'to put words down on the page', recording whatever emerged in silence as a way of continuing to 'hold on to them' and 'hold on to myself'. This helps Alison continue processing 'the important things' she doesn't want to forget—fleeting moments of tentative, new self-understanding and glimpses of a slowly emerging identity she fears would otherwise get lost in resuming 'the hurly-burly of family life'. Alison relishes returning to new insights preserved in her writing, concluding, 'if I didn't write then I'd not have that'. Writing about what she has been processing in silence 'feels cleansing' and healing: it 'clears my mind/clears my spirit ... frees me/in a way/to move on ... I always feel/better/having done it'.

#### 6.4.4 *Silence and loss of self*

In stark contrast, every woman identified the stifling or diminishment of identity which would occur if they ceased practicing silence. Most spoke of losing something or all of self: 'I would lose a big part of me', 'I wouldn't be fully me', 'I'd lose any sense of who I was', 'I'd feel I wasn't my whole self', 'loss ... of being fully alive ... of myself', 'I wouldn't be me any more', 'I don't know how I would exist', 'that would be to lose life'.<sup>104</sup> Many expressed the detrimental impact it would have on their state of being: they would 'flounder', be 'out of kilter' with or 'closed off' to self, become like a 'headless chicken', 'less of a nice person to be around/for myself', increasingly superficial, 'shallower ... harder ... harsher' and overall 'very unpleasant'.<sup>105</sup> Several feared the impact on their mental health: 'I would just

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<sup>104</sup> Michaela, Sian, Nancy, Julay, Rebecca and Loretta.

<sup>105</sup> Gaynor, Lynne, Sian, Mary, Rachel, Julay and Catriona.

be/miserable inside', 'I'd go bananas', 'I would lose my mind', 'I'd go crazy very quickly ... not just nuts but/insane', 'I'd be seriously depressed'.<sup>106</sup> A number found thinking about the consequences for self difficult: it was a 'horrible thought', 'almost unsurvivable ... it seems to me crucial', 'it's unimaginable'.<sup>107</sup> For others, the anticipated outcome was unwanted regression: 'chaos outside and chaos inside ... I would hate to go back to that', or 'stepping back to a place where/I don't want to go'.<sup>108</sup> Two women recounted periods when they had abandoned silence, returning to metaphors of cultivation to describe how growth was stifled. Looking back, Alison said of that time, 'I think of plants and water and not being able to grow without it and/not being able to flourish at all'. Similarly, Gaynor described losing silence, and the community with which she shared this, as a spiritual desert. Identifying herself as a plant with 'deep roots/in a community', where she 'flowered immensely', its loss was like 'being yanked out of the ground and taken and just suspended in the air'. Finally, in what seems an inexplicably paradoxical experience, Una portrayed her loss of silence on entering a contemplative convent as one which 'very nearly destroyed' her.

I went in  
knowing what silence was  
and knowing how to hold silence in the middle of chaos ...  
but I lost my silence  
I couldn't hold on to it ...  
there was such an emphasis on work ...  
on doing you know  
rushing down the stairs  
five times a day to say  
offices ...  
in the end  
I only rediscovered silence by leaving it because I couldn't  
actually

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<sup>106</sup> Dawn, Nancy, Elisabeth and Barbara.

<sup>107</sup> Michaela, Claire and Julay.

<sup>108</sup> Loretta and Nancy.

keep up the pace of  
their life ...  
it took me five years to recognise—  
I thought enduring it  
was the way  
and I very nearly lost my soul over it

Although silence has been a place of developing authentic, egoic self, a small number identified their discipline leading towards intentionally relinquishing this self in the self-surrender of contemplative silence. Barbara described how the apophatic facilitates both loss and gain for self, explaining that these are

the same—  
and that's  
losing  
identity  
and  
certainty and  
and that kind of sense of  
of silence  
being more than one's self ...  
they're not opposites ...  
my exploration of that  
is  
erm  
both  
wonder and terror (115) [*almost two minutes' silence*]

Although letting go of parts of identity and certainty about life and belief is a form of loss, Barbara also recognises losing inauthentic identity as gain: it is essential in journeying towards authentic selfhood. Similarly, relinquishing fictitious belief in any certitude liberates her into recognising her only real certainties are found in God. The magnitude of this awareness is reflected in the last line, preceding the longest silence across all the interviews.



Barbara described welcoming entry into this unknowing of identity and certainties as an acknowledgement that silence is

about our dying as well as our birthing ...  
silence is our destination ...  
it is  
awesome and terrifying mystery  
isn't it?  
and there's so much of death  
and dying  
as well as birthing that's  
kind of integral to being

Her narrative echoes the familiar start and conclusion of T. S. Eliot's 'East Coker':<sup>109</sup> 'In my beginning is my end' and 'In my end is my beginning.' This latter line was embroidered on Mary, Queen of Scots' cloth of estate.<sup>110</sup> Her inspiration was a salamander—the emblem adopted by her grandfather-in-law, François I of France—which ancient civilisations believed self-ignite at the end of their life, to rise from the ashes, reborn.<sup>111</sup> Una portrayed sustained engagement in apophatic silence as a similar transformation:

I think that  
all the mystics  
in all of the religions  
who have entered into profound silence  
have known it as a journey  
through death into resurrection life and I think I know that now

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<sup>109</sup> The second of his *Four Quartets*. See T. S. Eliot, 'East Coker', in *Four Quartets*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), 21-27.

<sup>110</sup> The canopy which hung above persons of royal or high noble birth. This text was written in its French form, '*En ma Fin gît mon Commencement*'.

<sup>111</sup> See <http://www.marie-stuart.co.uk/Mariaregina.htm>.

Una no longer perceives 'resurrection' as new life entered by conscious self at the end of mortal existence. Instead, her understanding of the journey towards resurrected life is through surrendering egoic self. Contemplation has gradually revealed to Una that resurrection can be internally encountered and lived whilst earthly life continues, rather than only hoped for after human life ceases and bodies begin being recycled into the fabric of creation.

I'm well aware that  
as far as my rational self goes  
when I die I'm going to die ...  
I've found I live in the resurrection life in the here and now  
and I don't ask for anything more...  
and when I come to die ...  
I've had a foretaste of that journey  
in the here and now  
in that marginality  
that solitaires  
and people who are silent do have

Together, the salamander, Eliot's poetic lines and these two women's reflections on apophatic engagement in silence evoke New Testament statements that Christ's resurrection offers believers certitude during earthly life that it is no longer they who live: Christ lives in them, and authentic identity 'is hidden with Christ in God.'<sup>112</sup> In such silence Gaynor has

become more true in myself  
and then I  
and because I  
am connected (3)  
to the divine reality  
at times [*laughs*]—

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<sup>112</sup> Galatians 2: 20 and Colossians 3: 3, respectively. Many similar affirmations of new identity in Christ are found in particular in the writings attributed to Paul.

I try to be—  
erm  
then I  
then I can be who I'm supposed to be  
to participate  
to be a part of that  
divine reality being more manifest in the world

#### 6.4.5 *Silence and finding voice*

Morton records how during workshops in the 1970's, women experienced 'depth hearing ... that is more than acute listening. A hearing that is a direct transitive verb' in the silence of others.<sup>113</sup> For Morton and the gathered women this deep hearing functioned as what Paul and Karen Fredette describe as a 'healing silence', allowing 'minds and bodies to recover their original depth of feeling and keenness of perception'.<sup>114</sup> In silence, women were freed into 'new speech that has never been spoken before',<sup>115</sup> finding voice to express what had been inaccessible, lost, or impossible to communicate to others. As Harris stated, 'It would be difficult to find a more pervasive theme in the lives of contemporary women than the theme of silence, with its accompanying task of finding a voice.'<sup>116</sup>

For the women in my research, silence in relationship with God and self provides a similar space. In their practices of silence they are gradually being heard into their own authentic voice—through God's ever-attentive, all-hearing presence, and willingness to risk hearing

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<sup>113</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 205.

<sup>114</sup> Fredette and Fredette, *Consider the Ravens*, 221.

<sup>115</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 205.

<sup>116</sup> Maria Harris, *Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 182.

themselves 'all the way'<sup>117</sup> within that relationship's safety and their increasingly secure self-identity. Sian observed that through encountering God and self she has gradually experienced 'finding one's own/clearer voice' which she 'might have missed' without disciplined engagement in silence. Similarly, Gaynor remarked that in silence her 'substance of/being was formed/so that I have/something to say ... but', she concluded

I wouldn't have a damn thing to say if I  
didn't start in silence!

Her comments resonate with Neuger's writing about the pastoral counselling of women: a woman's gaining voice is not about eliminating realities she needs to face but that 'she can now face them with a sense of being a subject in her narrative rather than a character written and manipulated by outside forces.'<sup>118</sup>

## 6.5 Conclusion

For all the women, choosing to engage in a discipline of silence in the hope of fulfilling their desire for deeper relationship with God not only enriches this, but also relationship with themselves. In silence, they gradually relinquished long-cherished hopes of hearing God speak to them more directly and clearly. Instead, in acknowledging the complexity of their temporally and contextually multiple selves, they encountered themselves more fully, often uncovering and daring to face hidden truths of their identity and depths of their unexpressed needs and desires, sorrows and loss, pain and anger, for the first time.

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<sup>117</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 205.

<sup>118</sup> Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 91.

Having provided the women with space to hear their realities and falsehoods reverberating in the silence, their sustained practices have increasingly enabled them to lay aside imposed or assumed identities and embrace greater authentic selfhood. Silence has offered a safe enough space for them to explore ways of creatively beginning to express themselves authentically, in art, written and eventually spoken word.

Relationality with God and self, which has been central to their practise, has taught them much about the fundamental importance of attentive listening and the responsibilities of speech. Through engagement in silence and its impact on their lives they recognise that it is in developing authentic selfhood, finding the language to name this and beginning to speak its truths that empowerment for transformation is made possible<sup>119</sup>—in their own lives and the lives of others.

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<sup>119</sup> See Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 71.

## SILENCE AND RELATIONALITY WITH OTHERS

We learn that the most precious gift we have to offer anyone, in person or in prayer—a gift that can only be given in secret—is a space where they too can enter silence, where they can dwell without pressure or manipulation to receive the unmediated transfiguration of God’s love. We come to realise that in this spacious silence of beholding, the whole of creation is present and that we are given the eyes of compassion.

Maggie Ross<sup>1</sup>

And if there is no one to listen, the parts of us that are only born of such listening never enter this world, not even in a dream.

Anne Michaels<sup>2</sup>

### 7.1 Introduction

Given the traditional connection between silence and solitude, asserting that a personal discipline of silence is associated to relationality with others may be unexpected. However, the value placed on silence within relationships with others by women in this research is striking. Through longstanding exploration of varied practices of silence its place in interpersonal interaction has become increasingly significant to them. In this chapter I highlight ways they expressed the importance of silence in relationships with others and in relating to the wider world. I begin by discussing the most obvious point of intersection between a practice of silence and relationality: corporate silence.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, *Icon of the Heart*, 42.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Michaels, *The Winter Vault*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 318.

## 7.2 Corporate silence

The women's participation in intentional silence with others varied considerably.<sup>3</sup> It ranges from Mary, who has attended weekly Quaker Meeting throughout life, to Dawn, who only recalled silence with more than one other person when requested during church services: these lasted 'three minutes at most'. The other women have, minimally, participated in corporate silences lasting upwards of ten minutes on a number of occasions, with the majority having had more experience than this. All but two have participated in silent retreats of between one and thirty days.

There are marked differences in the centrality of corporate silence to the women's spiritual discipline. For Ali, Mary and Michaela, corporate silence is fundamental. Ali's engagement in silence is 'always ... about the/community aspect of it', to 'foster/connection and encounter' with others, with its potential to impact on 'how we behave, what we do, the choices we make/the values that we have/erm/the communities that we're part of'.<sup>4</sup> Mary perceives her daily individual silence as an 'offshoot off the communal', which is 'different/more of a deal', and 'not equivalent to being on your own'. Its significance lies in being 'there at that particular time with that particular set of people' and the way 'one experiences the presence of other people.' Corporate silence is Ali and Mary's primary practice, with individual silence flowing out of the former. This contrasts with Michaela who, after years of individual practice, in the last five discovered corporate silence as 'a real

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<sup>3</sup> A fuller discussion of the variety was contained in Chapter 3: comments here serve as a brief reminder of the women's engagement in corporate silence before discussing their reported relational value.

<sup>4</sup> In this extract punctuation has been added to facilitate comprehension.

liberation' and 'very/refreshing'. Her valuing of corporate silence is grounded in the egalitarianism she feels sharing silence with whoever attends Quaker Meeting.

Four women expressed preferring individual silence. Gaynor finds corporate practice an 'okay experience', but is rooted in individual engagement. Similarly, Claire is 'not/over fond of corporate silence' but questioned the validity of her statement, recalling she has had 'some/experiences that have been very/very powerful' within it. Claire concluded her apathy relates to sensing others' discomfort during corporate silence.<sup>5</sup> Catriona perceives relationality with others as deeper and more lasting when encountered in individual silence. Although corporate silence is 'renewing', giving her 'a very good/feeling' of belonging, this doesn't continue: 'it's very much/of/the moment or the evening/and then it's gone'. She concluded, shared silences are 'good/but they're not/not a patch on the other/kind'. Although Sally knows corporate silence is beneficial, it can feel a barrier to the relationality she is most at ease with—dialogue-based relationships of mutual support and accountability. For these women corporate silence is a less sustained, comfortable relational space than their individual practices.

The variety of perceptions of corporate silence supports Jaworski's rejection of the possibility of any absolutist interpretations of silence.<sup>6</sup> However, despite the women's range of engagement and its differing centrality to their discipline, all identified positive aspects of corporate silence.

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<sup>5</sup> Echoed by many women, this will be discussed later as a difficulty of corporate silence.

<sup>6</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 41.



### 7.2.1 *Positive aspects of corporate silence*

Many find it easier to maintain silence when engaging in this with other people. Their presence has a supportive, 'holding' function.<sup>7</sup> Echoing Searl's finding of the containing role of corporate practice,<sup>8</sup> they feel 'sustained' in silence 'simply by the fact that somebody else is practicing theirs'.<sup>9</sup> Typically, Michaela said, 'you all know it's tough/so it's quite nice to have the discipline of each other/to do it together'. Some identified how helpful it is when everyone present understands the intentional purpose of shared silence: 'mutual' 'responsibility' to be 'quiet for the people around' helps them re-engage when attention wanes, mitigating against temptations to abandon their discipline.<sup>10</sup> Ali, Julay and Claire commented that others' supportive presence enables them to remain focussed in silence far longer than they would individually: 'it's possible to do hours and hours ... supported/by/the group'.<sup>11</sup>

Many expressed a variety of ways they are powerfully aware of connectedness with others during corporate silence. Collectively, these suggest Searl's assertion of the centrality of social meaning in Quaker corporate silence is shared somewhat by non-Quakers.<sup>12</sup> Corporate silence feels 'companionable',<sup>13</sup> a place of 'deeper meeting' and increased 'awareness/of the community'.<sup>14</sup> Sally described it as 'a uniting/experience', connecting those present beyond 'mental comprehension' in profound, communal encounter 'that goes

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<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth.

<sup>8</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*.

<sup>9</sup> Ali.

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth, Rhona and Michaela.

<sup>11</sup> Julay.

<sup>12</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*.

<sup>13</sup> Both Mary and Nancy.

<sup>14</sup> Elisabeth and Julay.

beyond words'. Sometimes this is felt with an 'almost overpowering' intensity.<sup>15</sup> Recalling Quakerism being described as an attempt at group mysticism, Alison portrayed gathered silence as 'spiritual communion': an 'extraordinary' and 'incredibly powerful/connection with the people there at an unspoken depth', generating a sense of 'togetherness' that 'you can't have on your own'. For Rhona, shared silence has a 'communal sense of purpose': openness to receiving from God, corporately and individually. Some expressed its potential for 'giving and receiving things of/one another', as well as from God.<sup>16</sup> Despite the absence of spoken communication, it is a place of openness to one another's state of being. Many recounted their grumpy or restless moods being contained and transformed more quickly in corporate than individual silence. For a few, openness to God and those present was extended to include 'listening together' to the state of 'the wider world'.<sup>17</sup>

Corporate silence was named as enabling a profound quality of relationship to be established, sustained and deepened. For some, this occurred with one other person. Uniquely, Dawn recounted the importance of her before 6am, ten minute, daily silence over a mobile phone in sustaining both a friendship and her discipline, but also preserving a shared culture of getting up early to pray in their African homeland. A silent retreat with nuns at Taizé enabled Sally and a university acquaintance relate with a new type of awareness:

it really deepened our friendship on a level that  
I haven't had with  
a lot of my friends ...

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<sup>15</sup> Claire.

<sup>16</sup> Mary.

<sup>17</sup> Michaela.

we learned how to be with each other without having to  
say 'hi, how are you? how's your day been? what's have you been up to?'  
erm  
'how are you feeling?'  
and I think that requires quite a level of trust ...  
I wondered how [she] was finding it and I just knew I had to just pray for her and  
and let her be

Their relating was 'about/being open': the absence of language to ask after or 'explain'  
themselves created greater relational vulnerability, within which they 'got to know each  
other' more deeply than in verbally sustained friendships.

Other women described relationships deepening within a group, leaving all feeling 'very  
close', 'quite odd', with an unusually close bond.<sup>18</sup> On a desert retreat with strangers, who  
Ali later discovered were 'pretty high-powered people', silence was a significant leveller. Ali  
was 'really glad' there was no initial opportunity for 'stuff about/who you are, where you are  
from, what's your job?':<sup>19</sup> she would have been 'extremely intimidated' by their answers. By  
the retreat's end, details usually revealed at the beginning of relationships were 'irrelevant':  
they 'already knew who so-and-so was ... through shared experience of silence', where egoic  
trappings of status held little significance.

Barbara identified silence as a place for knowing others in profound, wordless encounter:

beyond the garb and the [*laughs*]  
the chatter ...  
that kind of silence is fantastic  
because it's about  
an understanding of being

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<sup>18</sup> Julay.

<sup>19</sup> In this extract punctuation has been added to facilitate comprehension.

in a place beyond words...  
I think that's  
probably  
erm  
one of the most  
profound and Godly places  
that I  
I know

Each of these examples demonstrate the greater quantities of silence shared between intimates, depicted in Wolfson's 'bulge theory'.<sup>20</sup> This quality of relating was also seen to reflect the depth of encounter with God in silence: relationships which develop a depth of understanding beyond verbal expression exist in a silence which resonates with the presence of the Divine. Similarly, when gathered in openness to God and one another some recognise their being 'onyd'<sup>21</sup> in profound communion as the Body of Christ.

Some narratives offered related reasons for developing profound relationships within corporate silence. Several identified it as a place of collective equality. Ali's comments about her desert retreat, above, are an arresting example. For Michaela, the way authority and its associated power is deconstructed within Quaker Meeting, creating equality between 'the five year old ... or the 86 year old sitting next to you', is 'very very powerful'. She values the collective responsibility to seek and maintain gathered silence without any ministerial leadership: 'we own this space and the silence/as a group'. Surprisingly, the form of Christian worship which feels most like Quaker silence to Mary, is Pentecostalism. In its exuberant worship

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<sup>20</sup> Wolfson, 'The Bulge'.

<sup>21</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*.

whatever's said and sung and so on  
is coming out of and going back into a kind of  
a kind of  
shared erm  
pres [*incomplete*] erm  
collective  
presence of everybody there  
you know the presence of everybody there in the presence of God ...  
the words aren't the point

What Mary finds synonymous between Quaker silence and Pentecostal worship is

full participation of  
with with everybody participating I think  
you know it's a sort of tie ...  
it's  
'oh yeah this is more like what I normally do'

Although Pentecostal leadership is often powerfully held by an individual male, the whole community involvement and belonging Mary identified in its worship parallels the shared ownership of silence in Quaker Meeting identified by Michaela.<sup>22</sup> Their insights reflect Searl's findings of the significance of social connectivity and receptivity to others within silent Worship.<sup>23</sup> Mary's perceptions also recall the 'functional equivalence' debate concerning silence, extreme noise and glossolalia between Baer, Maltz, and Szuchewycz.<sup>24</sup> However, focus on whether phenomenological equivalence exists between corporate silence and Pentecostal communal expression misses the significance of their common fruit: the

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<sup>22</sup> However, references to texts by Dandelion in earlier chapters demonstrated that perceptions of equality within the silence of Quaker Meeting may mask disunity and significant difference between Friends.

<sup>23</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*.

<sup>24</sup> Baer, 'Quaker Silence'; Maltz, 'Joyful Noise'; Szuchewycz, 'Silence in Ritual Communication'. See discussion in Chapter 2.

sense of belonging and associated feelings of equity perceived through full congregational participation in collective spiritual practice.

Claire's narrative identifies interdependence as a further reason for profound relationality within corporate silence. Extending comments that corporate practice makes sustaining silence easier, Claire continued

the depth of presence of any one person there seems to sustain  
the  
the rest of  
us  
who at other times [*hand gesture, implying silence wouldn't continue*]  
it's almost like  
as long as one is anchored in that space, there's something (4)  
keeping that presence  
that you can't keep  
so easily yourself at that level for such a time ...  
it is sustaining the whole  
it's interacting to sustain each other there  
erm  
there's an in- [*unfinished word*]  
an interdependence I think

Collective intention sustains the group in silence which, held for the common good, generates interdependence between those present. Carol Gilligan observed that the development of interdependence flowing from collective intentionality occurs when self is no longer a primary consideration. When asserting self or self's needs no longer seems risky,

the concept of relationships changes from a bond of continuing dependence to a dynamic of interdependence. Then the notion of care expands from the paralyzing injunction not to hurt others to an injunction to act responsively towards self and others and thus to sustain connection.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, 149.

Claire values such responsive interconnection in corporate silence: ‘whenever it’s happened/I’ve thought ... /“I should/do more of this” ... it’s reminded me/how important those times those moments have been’. Not a Quaker, Claire’s perception of this interdependence suggests Searl’s findings that deep interconnection sustains Quakers in their silence is also applicable to other settings.<sup>26</sup>

Other narratives identified corporate silence drawing people towards transformation and healing. Sian recounted belonging to a church ‘full of the lame and the lost ... people who had significant issues in their lives’. Silence together ‘seemed to resonate with this community’, enabling ‘something ... to tangibly happen within/the group’: peace, resolution or healing was found for individuals and the community they formed. Lynne described silence bringing healing and reparation following a church community conflict. Whilst words ‘impose a particular/take on truth’, negating ‘a whole/range of other experience ... visual ... sensual ... intuitive’, silence allowed ‘a whole weave of complexity’, allowing space for their varied perceptions and forms of knowing. Corporate silence can safely contain omissions, contradictions and paradoxes which constitute collective experience, enabling pain and difficulties to be felt, acknowledged and gradually transformed within individuals and their community.

Despite Dandelion’s critique of corporate silence masking disunity and inhibiting theological reflection,<sup>27</sup> these women’s insights suggest its positive role should not be underestimated.

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<sup>26</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 111-112 and 28.

<sup>27</sup> Dandelion, *Liturgies of Quakerism*, 110 and Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 258.

It facilitates equal participation, creates interdependent communities who reflect God's presence, and effectively contains disparate, valid perceptions held within groups, enabling transformation and healing in individuals and groups.

### 7.2.2 *Difficulties of corporate silence*

The women also identified difficulties and discomfort within corporate silence.

Responsibility towards others can feel like hard work: 'effort' is particularly required when others are not settling in silence.<sup>28</sup> The superficialities Nancy named—'throat clearing and the/fidgeting and the/shuffling and the/putting the book down/ten minutes later than everybody else'—can be frustrating. When attention turns towards disturbances, some reported reminding themselves, like Sally, that silence is not merely absence of noise and distraction: it is 'about/a place within myself' being attentive to God 'that I need to foster/even when there is noise around'. Yet a few seemed unable to move beyond placing responsibility for their distraction wholly on those creating disruption. Only Michaela acknowledged that sometimes she causes disturbance. Their descriptions recall Olinick's presentation of irritable silence when the desired affective contact with other—in this case, with God and other participants—is not met.<sup>29</sup>

Distractions are greatest when amongst people unfamiliar with silence, who may be finding it uncomfortable themselves. This often occurs when silence is requested unexpectedly in

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<sup>28</sup> Sally.

<sup>29</sup> Olinick, 'Meanings Beyond Words', 466.



services or other settings. Nancy commented how ‘horrendously’ hard people can find this: even if leaders sustain silence ‘for a very very short time/people find it inordinately difficult’. Rather than ‘panicking and going “oh help/I’ve got to stop this now because/it’s awkward”’, Barbara suggested containing the fears of those unaccustomed to silence ‘takes a lot of strength/and/courage and confidence’: enabling silence necessitates leaders being comfortable with ‘holding it safely’ themselves. Barbara described this as ‘really important’ for people’s spiritual growth, but concluded sadly, ‘I don’t know there’s many people do it well’. These observations reflect Hill et al’s findings of therapist anxieties about appropriately holding silence with others, particularly if the person being silent is unsure of their intent or uncomfortable enacting this role.<sup>30</sup> Perceiving their lack of experience, a few women expressed a desire to ‘learn more how to help’ facilitate silence,<sup>31</sup> whilst also recognising this necessitates becoming more personally comfortable in corporate silence.

The ordained women frequently facilitate corporate silence. Recognising that whoever enables shared silence ‘is not going to that place themselves’,<sup>32</sup> they rarely fully engage in this. When leading, Rachel’s ‘brain’s a bit fixated for how it is for everybody else/rather than being able to be/free/for myself’ to enter silence. Consequently, these women have few opportunities to receive ‘the gift’ they enable for others.<sup>33</sup>

Habituation to leadership leaves some struggling to participate in silence when not facilitating it. Sian described being so used to this role that her leadership ‘antennae/are

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<sup>30</sup> Hill et al, ‘Therapist Use of Silence’.

<sup>31</sup> Sally.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara.

<sup>33</sup> Rachel.

working' overtime. Having problems turning these off, Sian takes 'too much responsibility/for the good functioning of the group' when 'that's not my job': this makes it difficult to engage appropriately in rare opportunities for corporate silence purely as a practitioner. Sian concluded, 'on my own'—in individual silence—'I don't have to worry about that'. Leadership leaves little room for the women to nurture their spirituality in the company of others as, exhausted from constant interaction, they choose to use available time in individual spiritual practices. This further limits already infrequent opportunities to benefit from engaging with others in equal, mutually enriching spiritual practices. Yet with obvious delight, Nancy commented how someone else facilitating silence can 'hit the nail on the head' when her spiritual life feels dry.

Two women identified the difficulty of dealing with emotions in corporate silence. Alison struggled with grief during Quaker Meeting following the deaths of close friends: it 'can be/dreadful if you're going through/a difficult time/because there's nothing to carry you'. All familiar feelings of 'togetherness' and 'communion' dissipated. Instead, she felt 'completely/excluded' and 'locked up in the misery'. For months Alison avoided Meeting because her pain was 'enhanced' and 'more/obvious' in the silence. Years later, Alison realised she 'might have been better off going to church', where hymns or enacting liturgies may have offered the comfort she failed to find in the starkness of corporate silence during that time.

Sometimes Mary has 'difficulty knowing what to do with emotion' in corporate silence. Where individual silence offers freedom, she described her sense of loss that, although

‘communal silence is really important ... sometimes/it feels like it gets in the way’. Mary perceives Quaker worship’s ‘struggle’ as its lack of ‘capacity’ for an equivalent ‘to shout hallelujah really loudly’, continuing, ‘we all ought to do that sometimes’. Instead, she encounters the restrictions of prescribed cultural norms of silence previously identified,<sup>34</sup> experiencing ‘a certain kind of group pressure or demand not to’ express her feelings. In contrast with Alison, Mary notices difficulties more with ‘emotion which is/happy’:

meeting’s  
erm  
always better at the  
kind of dealing with acknowledging allowing to stand doing something creative with  
negative emotion ...  
than with positive

Rather than ‘not properly acknowledging’ all she feels, Mary longs for the positives as well as painful feelings to be honoured, ‘to put it there to allow me to see it’.

Mary and Alison’s difficulties suggest expectations around corporate silence in Western Christianity sometimes inhibit full emotional participation: there is a need for a ‘more tangible ways of expressing it’.<sup>35</sup> Cixous commended women that to know themselves, ‘Your body must be heard.’<sup>36</sup> Although silence facilitates listening to the body, corporate silence’s cultural norms predominantly inhibit bodily expression beyond stillness: the women reported little opportunity for shared ‘speaking in signs’.<sup>37</sup> Recognising that ‘bodily

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<sup>34</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2: particularly Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, 242, but also Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 67-8; Scollon, ‘The Machine Stops’; Saville-Troike, ‘The Place of Silence’, 4 and 11-12.

<sup>35</sup> Mary.

<sup>36</sup> Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, 880.

<sup>37</sup> Walton, ‘Speaking in Signs’.

movement [is] a very important part/of worship', sometimes what Mary 'actually want[s] to do is/I don't know/jump up and down or something', but corporate silence 'forces you to damp it down'. Expectations that participants remain motionless—in part to avoid distracting others—restricts any other embodied expression. This is a marked contrast to Mary's reference to Pentecostal churches, where full vocal participation is often accompanied by demonstrative gestures. Although stillness physically mirrors external silence, a stilled mind and centred being, Mary feels that

physical  
movement  
say as part of liturgy or whatever  
*isn't* the equivalent of saying words ...  
it's operating on a different level  
and it's probably operating on a level that's  
closer to the way in which silent worship  
operates ...  
engagement of the whole person  
it's  
very real time

For Mary, embodied expression can enable full, attentive presence similarly to a discipline of silence. The last lines, above, suggest these even help to remain in the present moment.

Physicality is seen in some silent spiritual disciplines of other faiths: Muslim women gently rock to and fro; the slow moving Chinese spiritual practice of Tai Chi is frequently practiced *en masse* and in silence. No comparative embodied practice seems to exist amongst Western Christians. Closest are the Catholic's rhythmic fingering of rosary beads whilst saying associated prayers, or walking a labyrinth whilst thinking about spiritual journeying. Neither were named amongst these women's practices of silence.

Loretta portrayed corporate and individual silence as 'like the difference between/swimming in a pool and swimming in the sea'. Asked to clarify which was which, she faltered: 'I was going to say that/the group of people around it's more like the sea/but I'm not sure'. Reflecting further, Loretta was unable to decide, but insisted the metaphor accurately depicted her experiences. In considering the collective comments about silence I reached my own interpretation: when corporate silence is with people accustomed to this it may feel like swimming in a deep ocean: sustaining, and rich with interdependent presence. With those uncomfortable in silence, it may feel like the echoing noisiness of an indoor swimming pool. Individual silence can follow a similar pattern: with a quieted inner world, encountering God, self and other may feel like swimming in a deep ocean, but when internally unsettled, silence may feel like a shallow, noisy pool. This interpretation indicates the astuteness of Loretta's metaphor, whilst also offering an explanation for her struggle to explain it.

A striking incongruity exists between the women's presentation of positive and difficult aspects of corporate silence. They value it for reasons antithetical to authoritarian patriarchal inequalities: a space for interdependence, equally shared ownership and responsibility, and containment of paradoxical experiences and perceptions within a community. Focus on safeguarding these equalities might well have been expected. Yet their reported difficulties cluster around responsibilities of leadership, control of what is happening, and frustration when expected behavioural norms are not adhered to or, conversely, feel unable to be breached. Despite depicting corporate silence as promoting equality, significant tension remains between this and deep-rooted expectations around

authority. They struggle to overcome or balance their difficulties with shared silence in ways which foster communal equality whilst fulfilling a role conferring authority or power.

Evidently, these observations are drawn from women with widely differing experiences of corporate silence. Whilst profoundly perceptive comments on its value came from women with vast experience, and others for whom it is a less familiar discipline placed greater emphasis on their difficulties, the reverse is also true: many narratives straddled this spectrum. If each woman's dissonant perspectives are accurate and valid, their variety suggests experiences of corporate silence vary tremendously for individuals from one occasion to another. They reflect Jaworski's proposal that shifts within silence are subjectively perceived, rendering any absolutist presentation of engagement in silence implausible.<sup>38</sup> Given shifting internal self-states, expecting to experience communal silence with recurrent uniformity or depth of equality is imprudent. Yet over time encounters in silence—both corporate and individual—gradually dismantle defensive structures of identity and notions of independence, awakening participants to the *Imago Dei* within self and other. In silence, slowly they recognise and reverence individual and collective identities in all their brokenness, increasingly united as the wounded Body of Christ.

### **7.3 Silence and wider perceptions of others**

Although much description of the role of silence in the women's relationships with others centred around people in the present, engagement with two additional significant 'others'

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<sup>38</sup> Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, 41.

also emerged: their relationship with the natural world and their connection with other people throughout geographical space and time past and future.

### 7.3.1 *The natural world as other*

In the latter seventeenth century, the Enlightenment reinforced notions of society and culture favouring 'individual difference' and 'isolated distinctiveness'.<sup>39</sup> Their exportation resulted in global suppression or destruction of cultures with egalitarianism or 'earth-centred values' at their core. In recent decades, voices across the worldwide Christian community began drawing attention to humanity's relationship with creation in discourses around interaction between issues of social justice and environmental concern. The poverty of relationship between humanity and creation has been a consistent theme amongst feminist theologians. Forty years ago, Ruether urged women that their demands for liberation must be united with those of the ecological movement, as women's and the earth's bondage both result from a society where the 'fundamental model of relationship is domination'.<sup>40</sup> Since then, advances within astro-physics and quantum mechanics<sup>41</sup> have enhanced understanding of human interconnectivity with creation, from universal to sub-atomic levels. Emphasising the need for theology to engage with the cosmic interdependence inherent in these disciplines, Diarmuid O'Murchu writes

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<sup>39</sup> These and next reference, Diarmuid O'Murchu, 'How to Relate in a Quantum Universe', in Isherwood and Chambers, *Through Us, With Us, In Us*, 138.

<sup>40</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, (New York: Seabury, 1975), 204.

<sup>41</sup> Astrophysics explores the physics of the known universe, investigating the properties of celestial entities and their interactions. Quantum mechanics seeks to explain the behaviour and interactions between matter and energy at the atomic and sub-atomic scale.

Connection and interdependence are inscribed in every domain of creation. Humans are challenged into deeper relationality not merely because it guarantees a more sane and humane world, but rather because it is the collective inheritance for every organism that inhabits planet earth.<sup>42</sup>

Many of the women identified nature as an other with whom they relate in silence.

Liberating them from any requirement to use words, their relationship with creation is distinct from all other relational encounters. Lynne remarked, 'the point is that you/are there/to not talk'. Relating through their senses, they feel drawn more deeply into silence by 'absorbing the raw stuff of nature' through 'looking at water/feeling a stone/walking in the snow' or 'listening to sounds and feeling the wind'.<sup>43</sup> Heightened awareness to creation's timeless presence enables them to temporarily relinquish concerns about the past and future. Relentless thought slows and significantly diminishes, freeing them to relate to the surroundings of the moment. Like Claire, they relish

just being present  
in  
the magnificence  
of  
of the whole  
whatever (3)  
beauty is there at the time ...  
the diversity  
the magnificence of nature ...  
the  
silence of  
I think being present to things ...  
utterly present to what's there

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<sup>42</sup> O'Murchu, 'How to Relate', 144.

<sup>43</sup> Sally, Una, then Sally again.



Likening relating with nature to a 'sacrament of the present moment',<sup>44</sup> many described encountering nature as profoundly spiritual, enhancing their presence to God, themselves and God's activity within the world.

Many reflected on how nature relates to them: if they are receptive, it is constantly giving. Being out in creation restores vitality, opens them to wider perspectives on life, offers solace in distress and is a companion during loneliness. Lynne recalled a time of vulnerability, when

standing with my  
back to a tree  
kind of  
erm  
there was something important about  
erm  
being strengthened in  
in taking something from the solidity of the tree ...  
time to process to receive  
erm  
to be  
without expectations

What is offered by and received from nature differs significantly from most relationships because it is 'like a gift' given without expectation of reciprocity.<sup>45</sup>

In silence, heightened attention to the natural world awakens awareness of the interdependence between creation and humanity. Women spoke reverently of 'how we're

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<sup>44</sup> Claire's comment refers to the title of a translated book, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, Kitty Muggeridge, trans., (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1981). This title differs significantly from that originally given to the text by the author, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Treatise on Self Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Algar Thorold, trans., (France: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966).

<sup>45</sup> Sally.

all/connected/to the earth' as part of the richness of God's creation,<sup>46</sup> emphasising the importance of this relationship to self as developing spiritual beings. For the majority, relating with creation extends beyond earth to the visible solar system. Looking towards the horizon from the seashore Loretta feels intensely connected with the deep silence of space: 'the amazing sense of/it goes on/up there/on and on and on!' Perceptions of the unending silence of the universe draws a few into communion with the whole cosmos, beyond what is seen through earth-based telescope or microscope.

Seemingly limitless vistas where 'silence is everywhere'<sup>47</sup>—mountain tops, deserts, oceans, or night skies—enhance the women's awareness of their own smallness. Camping in the desert, seeing myriad unfamiliar stars and the Milky Way, Julay realised

usually  
I think of myself as the sort of the centre of the universe or something  
and suddenly  
it's not:  
the universe  
is the centre  
and it's (3)  
and I'm tuning in to it

The women's comments contrast with Maitland's portrayal of the Romantic's quest for silence in nature: searching for self-fulfilment, where boundaries of egoic self are strengthened and made less permeable, enhancing autonomy and enabling self to be more strongly asserted.<sup>48</sup> Creation's wide open spaces accentuate cosmic silence. The women are

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<sup>46</sup> Catriona.

<sup>47</sup> Julay.

<sup>48</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 235.

‘reminded of the immensity of/God’, ‘humble’ before ‘the Lord and/creator of the universe’.<sup>49</sup> As Lanzetta suggests, ‘Silence recharges and restores the powerful yet fragile awareness of life’s radical awe.’<sup>50</sup> Although vast universal silence emphasises Divine immeasurability, evoking feelings of insignificance and humility, God is experienced as utterly present in loving and generous self-offering through the overwhelming magnificence of creation. In response, assessment of their own egoic significance ‘collapses and emerges’ with a more honest perception of their unique but fleeting place in the universe.<sup>51</sup>

Through the profound connection experienced in silence the women are aware of sharing relationality with their ‘source’—the ‘divine as an energy that/enlivens/the universe’<sup>52</sup>—with creation. This perception echoes O’Murchu’s proposal that theologians can no longer perceive God’s self-revelatory encounter as exclusively with and for humanity. Divine relationality encompasses the entire cosmos. God’s ‘revelation is an invitation, not merely to dialogue, but to a *relational encounter* far beyond the anthropocentric context we have long taken to be normative.’<sup>53</sup> Many women identified development of their relationship with nature echoing this wider, ongoing relational encounter in silence between creation and its creator. Rebecca said,

we are one  
speaking species  
on one planet  
in one  
galaxy

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<sup>49</sup> Sian and Catriona.

<sup>50</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 169.

<sup>51</sup> Carla Grosch-Miller, *Psalms Redux: Poems and Prayers*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014), 51.

<sup>52</sup> Gaynor.

<sup>53</sup> O’Murchu, ‘How to Relate’, 138, emphasis in original.

but beyond  
this  
there is  
a universe ...  
whatever exists beyond that  
it is silence  
it is God's silence ...  
actually  
*not* silence  
is  
the minority  
experience  
within the universe  
but because  
it's not ours  
we perceive that silence as the minority ...  
I want  
to try  
to be in that  
erm  
some bits of liturgy talk about that eternal silence  
'the silent music of your praise'<sup>54</sup> ...  
that place of oneness

Rebecca's identification with a minority of people encountering God in silence is sustained and strengthened by her wordless relating with nature. Perceiving creation's vast silence as cosmic, universal worship of its Creator, she closely aligns herself with the silent music of praise offered by all God's 'works', rather than only that of a small, earth-bound minority. Her identification of universal silence as part of cosmic Eucharistic relationality is echoed in Elisabeth's perception that all creation silently declares the awesome holiness of God:

what I  
sometimes have touched and what I think is so  
is really that silence is a silence  
of the whole of cr- [*incomplete*]

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<sup>54</sup> Rebecca was referring to the following: 'From the beginning you have created all things and all your works echo the silent music of your praise.' This occurs in Eucharistic Prayer G, *Common Worship*, 201.

the creation saying 'holy holy holy is the Lord God'<sup>55</sup>—  
*always* saying it  
you know? ...  
it's Hopkins' 'The world is charged  
with the grandeur of God'<sup>56</sup>

Rebecca and Elisabeth perceive all creation worshiping God in silence as equals, rather than with humans 'the crown of all creation', as the Eucharistic prayer states.<sup>57</sup> Whether attending to floral detail, landscape topography, or imagining universal immensities beyond spectacular night skies, encountering nature invites the women to deeper awareness of the interconnectedness of all creation and the interdependence between humanity and the natural world. For, as Hopkins' poem concludes, all are dependent on the warm breast of the brooding Holy Spirit for their existence.

### 7.3.2 *Connection with others across space and time*

Although silence draws the women into the present moment, paradoxically, they also identified it as non-temporal and non-linear, transcending boundaries of time and space. With this perception, a third of the women expressed silence's significance in connecting them with people across spatial and temporal distance. Their comments extend Searl's findings—that practices of silence connect those present in Meeting with all who

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<sup>55</sup> The opening line of the 'Sanctus' of the Latin Mass, said or sung in most versions of the Eucharistic Prayer.

<sup>56</sup> Elisabeth was quoting the opening line of Hopkins' poem, 'God's Grandeur'. See Hopkins, *Major Works*, 128.

<sup>57</sup> This line occurs in the sentence following that referred to by Rebecca from Eucharistic Prayer G, *Common Worship*, 201.

worshipped in the same location over many centuries, and with Friends throughout time—  
beyond Quakerism.<sup>58</sup>

When intercession leads into internal silence, some reported profound connection with those they love, living at a physical distance. This was most frequently identified by women separated by sea from family or communities with which they feel a sense of belonging.

Describing silence as a deep well, Elizabeth continued,

the well shaft goes down  
and then  
the ocean goes everywhere  
and so  
people might go down their individual well shafts but they will  
go into a place where  
you all meet

Despite geographical distance, the depth and breadth of silence facilitates maintaining intimacy with people in far off places, helping to sustain relationships through knowledge that each other is held and somehow met before God.

Uniquely, Una described contemplation as communion with those suffering across the world. From within contemplative silence she offers comfort and strengthening to those in need. In this ministry Una perceives 'I sit here alone/and yet I belong to the whole world': no longer her own, she is God's instrument through which love flows to others. Una described this understanding of her life's purpose as 'absolutely bizarre stupid ridiculous ... potty!' Wryly, she commented that contemplative life can be 'profound arrogance or it can

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<sup>58</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 111-112 and 28.

be profound humility/but you're not going to know which'. For Una, 'the hardest thing about silence' is maintaining contentment in not knowing whether she is 'deluding' herself believing in a God who uses her life this way.

In silence, 'Time bleeds into eternity.'<sup>59</sup> Entering silence in locations it has been practised over many centuries facilitates the women's awareness of interconnection between people throughout time.<sup>60</sup> Resting in silence in surroundings virtually unchanged from bygone eras heightens these connections, particularly with others who prayed in that space but whose earthly life is past. Rhona commented,

in an old building  
feeling that sense of  
hundreds of years of  
sort of stones being soaked with prayer and people's feet where the flags are worn ...  
I'm thinking well who else has sat on this pew and  
you know that sense of just connectedness ...  
with other generations

Following a close friend's death, Ali's pondering about 'the whole issue of death as silence' during her desert retreat was reminiscent of Sutton's presentation of silence holding what we encounter as traumatic in life as well as our eventual departure from life.<sup>61</sup> Ali concluded if death is entry into silence, then 'it is in silence we are closest to our dead'. This reflection brought transformation and healing to Ali's experiences of separation through

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<sup>59</sup> Nick Baines, 'Musings of a Restless Bishop: Nic Baines's Blog', 24<sup>th</sup> December, 2013, see <http://nickbaines.wordpress.com/2013/12/24/christmasmeans>.

<sup>60</sup> Locations named included churches, religious communities or other places associated with long spiritual tradition, including shrines, cave dwellings, islands, deserts or geographical sites which have historic and spiritual significance within Christianity. No locations were named which relate to non-Christian traditions.

<sup>61</sup> Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands', 180.

death, offering a way to continue relating with loved ones whose physical presence she misses. Ali's narrative resounded with being 'very moved' by silence connecting people across space and time:

the connections aren't just about between people  
in the present  
but they are something about  
our connection as part of  
all the people who have passed through this place and will pass through this place ...  
a sense of being part of a community through time as well as through space

Perhaps because of insights following untimely loss, Ali identifies strongly with belonging to a long line of people faithfully seeking God in silence, finding solidarity in connection within its temporal ambiguities. In trusting such connections 'will continue for hundreds of years/when I am no more', Ali hopes that at death, silence will sustain connection with those who love and miss her and go on connecting her with future generations who she will not know during earthly life.

Through reference to the Communion of Saints, several others identified silence connecting them with Christians across time and place.<sup>62</sup> In individual silence Sian described 'a very keen sense ... that I am part of the Communion of Saints'. Here, she feels neither 'isolated/from' or 'independent from the greater prayer ... [and] presence of/the church/before God'. Instead, belonging is 'quite a strength', keeping Sian 'on track'.

Perceiving silence as heightening awareness of belonging within the Communion of Saints

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<sup>62</sup> Although theological understandings of the Communion of Saints differ between Roman Catholic, Orthodox and some Protestant thought, this term generally relates to both living members of the church and those who have died in the faith.



connects the women with those who suffered for their faith, with Saints of the church, and ordinary, unremarkable followers of Christ. As Searl's findings indicate,<sup>63</sup> such pan-temporal interrelation within silence supports and strengthens their faith and practices.

### 7.3.3 *Others in the future*

Although a significant proportion identified silence as connecting them with others across times past and present, Ali was unique in expressing connection with Christians in the future. The lack of perception of connection with future generations is notable. Although looking forwards towards resurrection life is a foundational theological narrative within Christianity, future time is virtually absent from the women's descriptions of silence as temporally fluid. Its absence suggests that, despite depicting silence as non-linear and non-temporal, this is only conceived in terms of temporal existence of which the women have conscious experience on which to draw.

Similarly, although the created universe is an other to whom the women relate in silence, their narratives also lacked reference to the future of creation. Given that many spoke of their own future lives, or those of partners, children, wider relationships, and even the future of the church, this is also a striking omission.

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<sup>63</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 111-112 and 28.

## 7.4 Valuing silence in relationships

Intentional silence is a necessary component of healthy relationships. All the women consider it vital for developing strong relational bonds and transforming relationships by contributing to their quality and depth of interaction. Its absence is felt to restrict relational growth and flourishing. Their perceptions echo Gale and Sanchez' assertion that silence is essential for authentic interaction, making attention to the developing quality of personhood of self and others possible.<sup>64</sup> Deliberately incorporating elements of silence within relationships was unanimously named by the women as an extension of their personal spiritual practice.

### 7.4.1 *Offering silence to meet need in others*

Perceiving silence as necessary for sustaining authentic selfhood and relationality, many women expressed concern at its increasing absence and decreasing appropriate usage in contemporary Western lives. Technological proliferation was portrayed as shrinking people's tolerance of periods without external stimulation, whilst intruding into previously unimpeded relational space. Appropriate relational silence is decreasing because there are 'too many easy switches to press', filling awkward or potentially fertile silences with more comfortable distractions.<sup>65</sup> As a result, the women believe silence is an underestimated and untapped resource for developing fulfilling relationships. Many also sense that numerous people of faith and in wider society have a 'felt need' or 'hunger' for silence and the quality

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<sup>64</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence'.

<sup>65</sup> Nancy.

of relationships it facilitates:<sup>66</sup> they are ‘thirsty and looking for it’, but ‘don’t know how to do it’, ‘where’ or ‘how to find it’.<sup>67</sup> The women’s narratives identified that if silence’s assets were more widely employed between people, relationships would be more responsible, lives more fruitful, interpersonal crises lessen, mental health improve and need for professionalised relating within counselling or therapy would diminish.

Echoing Ross,<sup>68</sup> Hall states ‘our silence can be a gift to others’.<sup>69</sup> Grateful for silence in their own lives, and recognising others’ need for its benefits, the women intentionally extend their own silence to others as an ‘offering’ or ‘gift’.<sup>70</sup> The importance of ‘giving’, ‘facilitat[ing]’ or ‘enabl[ing]’ experiences of silence with families and friends, in workplaces, church, para-church, inter-faith and community settings was stated frequently.<sup>71</sup> The significance of their desire for others to benefit from their gift of silence becomes more apparent when considered alongside Lewis Hyde’s comments on gifts.

Between the time a gift comes to us and the time we pass it along, we suffer gratitude. Moreover, with gifts that are agents of change, it is only when the gift has worked in us, only when we have come up to its level, as it were, that we can give it away again. Passing the gift along is the act of gratitude that finishes the labor. The transformation is not accomplished until we have the power to give the gift on our own terms. ... Giving a return gift is the final act in the labor or gratitude, and it is also, therefore, the true acceptance of the original gift.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Nancy and Gaynor.

<sup>67</sup> Una and Loretta.

<sup>68</sup> See the epigraph to this chapter.

<sup>69</sup> Hall, *Silence, Stillness, Solitude*, 79.

<sup>70</sup> Rachel.

<sup>71</sup> Rhona, Barbara and Claire.

<sup>72</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, (Edinburgh: Cannongate Canons, 2007), 48 and 52.

Gifting silence to others points towards the abundance of its work in the women's lives: transformation and expression of authentic self-identity and emergence of appropriate self-love. Such self-worth is 'not self-created, but relational, and depends upon others' willingness to make space and make time, to listen':<sup>73</sup> it develops within relationships. These women's self-worth has been nurtured in the context of relating to God and self within silence. By extending silence into wider relationships they hope to facilitate its development in others, mirroring Elson's perception of silence in therapeutic relationships as 'fertile ground' for restoring and strengthening self-esteem.<sup>74</sup> Carol Lakey Hess describes women caring for others from a strong sense of self as 'a woman who knows God and herself and ministers to other out of an overflow of grace and positive self-understanding.'<sup>75</sup> In this endeavour, as members of the Body of Christ seeking to reflect their encounters with God's relational grace, the women represent God to others—consciously or unconsciously—silently loving and accepting, as they have been themselves.

Ability to offer this quality of presence to others is cultivated within the women's practices of silence. In mirroring God's attentive silence to them as they seek to be fully present to God, they develop the discipline required for attentive listening: as Sutton proposes, in silence they re-connect with their most intimate selves as utterly present.<sup>76</sup> This profoundly stilled self is the core of their gift of silence to others. Of such self-giving, Cixous writes

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<sup>73</sup> Linda Woodhead, "'Because I'm Worth It': Religion and Women's Changing Lives in the West', in Kirsten Aune, Sonya Sharma and Giselle Vincett, eds., *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing 2008), 149.

<sup>74</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

<sup>75</sup> Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women's Development in Communities of Faith*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 83.

<sup>76</sup> Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands', 185-6.

Everything will be changed when woman gives herself to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. ... It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself<sup>77</sup>

#### 7.4.2 *Silence of self to hear others*

Within Practical, Pastoral and Feminist theologies the importance of *Listening to Others*<sup>78</sup> and *Hearing Beyond the Words*<sup>79</sup> is frequently expressed. Although disagreement exists on whether 'listening' or 'hearing' is most apt to name attending to another's communication,<sup>80</sup> the women used both frequently and interchangeably when speaking of relating to others. Perhaps more surprising is their perception that attending to another's communication is not *merely* listening or hearing. Instead, they name this an intentional practice belonging to their spiritual discipline of silence. Maitland writes

the capacity to create such a listening silence is a strange and beautiful thing. So many people, when I have asked them about positive experiences of silence have mentioned this ... the sort of speech, of self-knowing, drawn out by a good listener has a creative quality to it that often surprises the speaker<sup>81</sup>

The women's intent in offering such silence is twofold: to hear others as completely as possible and that others experience being fully heard. Having learned to still self to be fully

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<sup>77</sup> Cixous, 'Laugh of the Medusa', 881.

<sup>78</sup> Joyce Huggett, *Listening to Others*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988)—a well-known book which, for many lay people in evangelical churches in the late 1980's, was a call to recognise listening to others as a counterpoint to the more frequently articulated call to listen to God.

<sup>79</sup> Emma J. Justes, *Hearing Beyond the Words: How to Become a Listening Pastor*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006).

<sup>80</sup> Authors sometimes make a case for one being inferior to the other. Perhaps most well-known within feminist writing is Nelle Morton's description of 'hearing that is more acute than listening'. See Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 205.

<sup>81</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 248-9.

present to God equips the women to be wholly attentive to others. Their offered silence is not only the absence of speech. It is a deep listening, sometimes characterised as ‘the opposite of preparing to speak’,<sup>82</sup> where internal thoughts and agendas are stilled: self is fully present to whatever is expressed, whilst also listening for silences indicating what cannot yet be put into words. As Elson proposes, they recognise ability to listen attentively to all that others long to communicate encourages deeper relationality and can facilitate an end to feelings of isolation and estrangement for those who encounter their unwavering attention.<sup>83</sup>

Realising words ‘can just be a sort of shorthand ... one can listen to ... and not attend so/to what else is happening’,<sup>84</sup> internal silence also helps them pay careful attention to all others express non-verbally. They listen care-fully,<sup>85</sup> not just with ears, but in a ‘motherly’ way, using all their senses and intuition ‘to pick up/all the cues’.<sup>86</sup> As the women’s silence encompasses heightened awareness of their own internal feeling state, they are alert to distinguishing the emotions of others from their own. Deep listening enables them to receive what others intended to express but also notice what is unconsciously communicated. Internal silence also helps to identify when what they have ‘heard and what [another] was wanting me to hear were completely different’.<sup>87</sup> Hearing beyond and

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<sup>82</sup> This phrase originates from the listening training offered by St Ethelburg’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace which seeks to facilitate relationships in situations of division and difference of all kinds. See [www.stethelburgas.org](http://www.stethelburgas.org)

<sup>83</sup> Elson, ‘Silence, its Use and Abuse’, 353-5.

<sup>84</sup> Elisabeth.

<sup>85</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 30, in Chapter 2; Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 141, in Chapter 4.

<sup>86</sup> Alison.

<sup>87</sup> Una.

beneath words, whilst communicating silently through eyes, face, posture and presence that another is infinitely precious, is an 'art and mystery, the profoundest gesture of respect.'<sup>88</sup> Conveying empathy and support, their respectful attentiveness accords with the primary use of silence identified amongst client-centred therapists by Hill et al.<sup>89</sup> Mirroring how they have been heard by God indicates their desire that others experience similarly profound attentiveness, for

If there's anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people's stories— listening to them and honoring and cherishing them, and asking them to become even more brightly beautiful than they already are.<sup>90</sup>

Offering silence in which another experiences 'a depth hearing'<sup>91</sup> communicates 'I want to know who this person is'.<sup>92</sup> It is 'about connecting with the other person/about the person knowing they're understood'.<sup>93</sup> As Ladany et al's findings suggest, it communicates permission for the speaker to be their authentic self.<sup>94</sup> It invites speaking 'truthfully', facilitating profound relational encounter where others discover whatever is 'different and challenging or/intriguing and/complex' about them is received uncritically.<sup>95</sup> The intimacy of such encounters were spoken of with awe, and often referred to as a privilege or unexpected gift received by the women.

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<sup>88</sup> Billman, 'Pastoral Care', 31.

<sup>89</sup> Hill et al, 'Therapist use of silence'.

<sup>90</sup> Mary Pellauer, in Katie G. Cannon et al, *The Mud Flower Collective, God's Fierce Whimsy*, (New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1985), 134, referenced in Neuger, 'Pastoral Counselling', 98.

<sup>91</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 205, discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>92</sup> Barbara.

<sup>93</sup> Lynne.

<sup>94</sup> Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives'.

<sup>95</sup> Sian and Barbara.

Verbal response to significant self-revelation can be inappropriate, likely to 'demean' or 'take away from the depth of the moment' by removing opportunity for the magnitude of what is expressed to resonate.<sup>96</sup> By contrast, attentive silence, hearing the whole 'quality of a life ... flowing or ... sometimes restricted and hurt and brittle', honours the vulnerability of self-disclosure and communicates that others' particularity is valued, and even revered.<sup>97</sup> This parallels Ladany et al's findings that a client-centred reason for holding silence within therapeutic relationships is to appropriately honour what has been expressed.<sup>98</sup>

Sometimes, maintaining silence is the only appropriate response. People need time and permission to express themselves fully, held within unbroken attention, without interruption. This necessitates offering silence as

a big space sometimes because  
it's not easy to articulate ...  
you've just got to sit quiet while people do that ...  
it's  
not a vacuum silence but  
a being with silence<sup>99</sup>

Several women identified interjecting beyond a 'few ... measured' words has potential to 'damage' the primary speaker, their relationship with the listener, and even future relationships.<sup>100</sup> Achieving an appropriate balance between a listener's silence and interjections aids movement towards healing and resolution for the speaker. Elson suggests

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<sup>96</sup> Michaela.

<sup>97</sup> Elisabeth.

<sup>98</sup> Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives'.

<sup>99</sup> Nancy.

<sup>100</sup> Lynne and Una.



it enables life-changing transformation by facilitating the acquisition of elements of psychic structure not appropriately established in primary caring relationships.<sup>101</sup> Although sensitivity is always necessary when listening, this was recognised as particularly important when trauma or loss are revealed. The capacity to remain silently present to expressions of pain is paramount:

if you speak too soon then you silence something  
erm  
so you close things down and you  
shut people up<sup>102</sup>

Any silencing of tentative attempts to communicate pain may trigger feelings of abandonment and isolation, causing retreat from discussing the incident(s), as Elson suggests.<sup>103</sup> Associated feelings may be dissociated or locked away—lost to further conscious reflection. Creating this additional loss is profoundly damaging, as ‘That which is hidden in a closet cannot be healed or redeemed.’<sup>104</sup>

Silence may be imperative when traumatic experiences cannot be expressed in words. Julay’s identification of such silence as verbally and emotionally non-violent makes it apposite with those enduring great suffering. In *Speaking in Signs*,<sup>105</sup> Walton paraphrases writings of holocaust survivor, Elie Weisel, suggesting that when traumatic narratives cannot be spoken ‘it is our duty to preserve the sacred silence of those who suffer—but in a way

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<sup>101</sup> Elson, ‘Silence, its Use and Abuse’.

<sup>102</sup> Lynne.

<sup>103</sup> Elson, ‘Silence, its Use and Abuse.’

<sup>104</sup> Bons-Storm, *Incredible Woman*, 18.

<sup>105</sup> Walton, ‘Speaking in Signs’.

that communicates rather than obscures the pain'.<sup>106</sup> When verbal communication fails, Walton proposes that images and metaphors of poesis offer ways of articulating trauma without supplying meanings or resolutions for others. An exponent of such writing is Anne Michaels. Her post-holocaust novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, resounds with poetic cadence: 'Some stones are so heavy only silence helps you carry them.'<sup>107</sup> Michaels' arresting words highlight that sometimes silence is necessary and responsible when 'being faced' by another's inexpressible pain.<sup>108</sup> A hospice employee, Michaela often sees people's fear of death, the unknowing of how long someone has left, and grief at future absence for significant family events. Michaela asked

what do you say  
other than acknowledge it  
and just hold it? ...  
I do use silence  
as a response  
and just  
stay with them  
in that silence

This responsible silence is affirmed by Holmes: 'When we are alongside those who are experiencing loss ... there is often little that we can say'.<sup>109</sup> At such times, Lynne identified 'to be silent is to/say that words are not enough ... there are no words for this'. In the absence of words, Holmes portrays attentive silence to the suffering of others as 'the outworking of the Holy Spirit'. She describes those with capacity to offer such silence as 'silently representing God as Christ loving his neighbour'. Their ability to remain present and

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<sup>106</sup> Walton, 'Speaking in Signs', 4.

<sup>107</sup> Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 77. See also the epigraph to this chapter.

<sup>108</sup> Veling, *Practical Theology*, 124. See my discussion of 'being faced' in Chapter 1.

<sup>109</sup> This, and references below, Holmes, "'Choose your Companions'", 78-79.

share others' burden of pain 'is itself of profound help' when words may obliterate rather than preserve the 'sacred silence' Weisel ascribes to those who suffer.<sup>110</sup>

The women's self-offering of attentive presence models a quality of listening that invites others to hear their own intimate, 'personal' selves.<sup>111</sup> They long for others to experience being heard and accepted, facilitating greater self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-expression. Ultimately, they desire more than that others are heard, or even heard into speech, but that like the women, they might be heard into increasingly authentic being.

#### 7.4.3 *Silence for others to encounter God*

Significant in the women's relationship with God, their silence is offered to others from what Una named a deep 'desire/for them to encounter the God I've encountered'. This silence is a deliberate stilling of anything which could come between others and the work of the Spirit. Taking her own memories of encountering God in silence into relationships, Rachel spoke of

wanting  
to be a channel ...  
through which  
somehow  
the Spirit  
flows  
through ...  
a channel of God's love and healing and forgiveness

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<sup>110</sup> See Walton, 'Speaking in Signs', 4.

<sup>111</sup> Miller, 'Shifting layers'.

It can be a 'tool for/unblocking' others' relationship with God through creating space for reconnection.<sup>112</sup> Offering silence also enables attentiveness to the Spirit's work for listener and speaker, creating space which 'lets God set the agenda'.<sup>113</sup> Una emphasised that when listening to others 'you've got to want to ... be aware of the presence' of God resounding above any emotional noise and difficulties expressed by others, taking that desire 'into the silence'. Without this attentiveness the women can become 'completely immersed' in what is expressed,<sup>114</sup> leaving both overwhelmed by emotion and, as Case suggests, feeling lost and paralysed in a space where the listener is unable to support appropriately,<sup>115</sup> or to be conduits for other's encountering God's love. Conversely, the women described others and themselves feeling deep 'reverence' or 'peace' when space is given for encounter with God.<sup>116</sup> Some reported speakers frequently expressing gratitude at such encounter, particularly if another 'hasn't sensed God' previously in the situation they articulate.<sup>117</sup>

This silence is reminiscent of the invitational space in the foreground of Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity. Entering it, Lynne suggested all are 'connecting with something/bigger ... in the room'. In offering silence to others, 'people reveal love/which reveals God/who then reveals love/who reveals people/and it kind of/circles'.<sup>118</sup> The invitation to others to encounter God in the women's offered silence is often turned back towards them as, in staying present, they too encounter God. Together, they participate in a dance of relational

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<sup>112</sup> Rachel.

<sup>113</sup> Rachel.

<sup>114</sup> Una.

<sup>115</sup> Case, 'Silence in Progress'.

<sup>116</sup> Claire and Lynne.

<sup>117</sup> Claire.

<sup>118</sup> Julay.

transformation where each becomes known more intimately to self and one another, reflecting the inter-relationality of Trinitarian perichoresis.

### **7.5 Perceptions of others' use of offered silence and its impact on self**

A shift in style occurred when the women moved from discussing silence as a place of encounter with God, self and others to how silence offered to others is received and what this may facilitate. Comments became fragmentary, less conceptual or abstract and contained few metaphors. What they expressed was in one of two narrative styles: most frequently, stories of offering silence to others, or autobiographical accounts portraying how benefits of silence offered to them may be similarly valuable for others. The women's comments yielded little citeable material about how their offered silence is perceived by others. Yet their belief in its significance in facilitating transformation in others and others' perceptions of life was clear: this was predominantly seen in the women's extrapolations from their own experiences.

However, having highlighted the limited consideration of silence within research interviews,<sup>119</sup> the women's interviews also indicate how offering silence is valuable to others. Although the presence of silence in interviews may be acknowledged, it 'is seldom considered in its own right as an area of reflection and inquiry.'<sup>120</sup> Transcripts indicated how

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<sup>119</sup> See my discussion in Chapter 4.

<sup>120</sup> Poland and Pederson, 'Reading Between the Lines', 295, referencing to Andrea Fontana and James Frey, 'Interviewing: The Art of Science', in Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, eds., *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 371.

my intentional silences impacted on what the women expressed. Paying attention to the women's own silences revealed further valuable insights. In this discussion I will therefore also draw on examples from the interview process to illustrate how offering silence facilitates change.

Material concerning how offered silence is received and how it facilitates change is frequently ambiguous or incomplete. In any research, fragmentary data risks being overlooked in favour of substantial material which appears more manageable and reliable. Yet, as Swinton and Mowat highlight, 'the researcher *must* take seriously the importance of the fragments of truth that people offer' where participants' ability to articulate their perceptions is limited.<sup>121</sup> Although referring to people with impaired verbal and cognitive ability, their observation applies equally to research where participants' comments are constrained by the nature of the research. The difficulties of speaking about silence have already been discussed. This is compounded when trying to express the impact one's own silence may have on another, as evidenced in the lack of research and comment by therapists on client perceptions of silence in therapy, noted by Brown, and Harris.<sup>122</sup> The women's insights are themselves necessarily created from fragmentary knowledge: combining often brief verbal and non-verbal responses from others—which some recognised could be equivocal—with their own perceptions, they offer tentative, partial reflections. Applying the process of *bricolage* to their interviews allows this research to offer some

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<sup>121</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 239, emphasis in the original.

<sup>122</sup> Brown, 'Troubling Silences', 81; Harris, 'Experience of Silence', 5.

limited understanding into the role silence offered to others may play, which could otherwise only be obtained by further detailed inquiry.<sup>123</sup>

#### 7.5.1 *Silence facilitating others' reflection, self-knowledge and self-acceptance*

Valuing reflection in individual silence, the women are 'very aware' and appreciative when people give them reflective space within interactions.<sup>124</sup> In turn, they offer silence to facilitate reflection, communicating to others that the listener is 'not in your face/she's giving you space'.<sup>125</sup> Extending Gale and Sanchez, Hill et al, and Elson's finding that silence is offered to facilitate client reflection,<sup>126</sup> it gives speaker *and* listener time to reflect, facilitating considered responses rather than reflex reaction in further comments by both.

At the close of interviews several women mentioned the silence left around their own comments. Like Alison, they 'really appreciated the way you've asked the questions/and just the quietness in between'. She remarked, 'I welcomed it as an opportunity just to/reflect more'. In listening, the women know 'when someone hits something' significant, silence is needed to 'allow' what has 'touched' another opportunity to penetrate 'deeper'.<sup>127</sup> Rather than being quickly passed over, silence enables acknowledgement and internalisation of new insights, leading to change or resolution, as Ladany et al, identify.<sup>128</sup> Transformation is not

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<sup>123</sup> Graham, 'Practical Theology', 106. See comments in Chapter 2.

<sup>124</sup> Julay.

<sup>125</sup> Rhona.

<sup>126</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence'; Hill et al, 'Therapist Use of Silence', and Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

<sup>127</sup> Claire.

<sup>128</sup> See discussion of Ladany et al, 'Therapist Perspectives', in Chapter 2.

due to opportunity for self-expression alone, but consideration of thoughts, feelings and implications which arise during further reflection. As Sutton proposes, silence allows a new inner state to emerge and be maintained:<sup>129</sup> others are changed 'because/of the silence/because they experience resolution within the silence'.<sup>130</sup>

Some identified the importance of being aware how much silence others need or can tolerate. Too long a silence can be uncomfortable—too wide to hold<sup>131</sup>—and cause a counterproductive withdrawal from interaction if it evokes feelings of abandonment and isolation, as Elson suggests.<sup>132</sup> Listeners must recognise the 'balance' between 'discerning the moment/that needs to go deeper' and being able to 'sense that/someone is maybe struggling a bit', needing comment 'inputting' from the listener to 'just/enable them/to get hold/or to focus' again.<sup>133</sup> Recognising appropriate levels of reflective space within groups is more difficult to balance. Rhona recalled her year 8 class reading *The Red Pony*,<sup>134</sup> who belonged to a boy of similar age:

    this pony is  
    dying  
    and gradually  
    the kids  
    just went  
    down  
    and down  
    and down  
    and I continue to read  
    and they end up with

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<sup>129</sup> Sutton, 'The Air Between Two Hands'.

<sup>130</sup> Una.

<sup>131</sup> Elisabeth.

<sup>132</sup> Elson, 'Silence, its Use and Abuse'.

<sup>133</sup> Claire.

<sup>134</sup> By John Steinbeck.



their heads on their desks ...  
the bell goes  
I close the book  
nobody moves  
and we have ten minutes  
of profound silence  
while those kids absorbed  
the death of the pony

Rhona's attentiveness to the pupils' needs created reflective silence. Some perhaps considered implications for the mortality of pets and significant people, whilst others may have reflected on losses already experienced. Asking rhetorically, 'what effect is it having on them as people?', Rhona wondered what implications this silence might even be having in the present day. Her question reflects Flanagan's proposition that when 'any encounter is underpinned by an active, lived presence, its impact can be of exceptionally long duration' and 'may even reverberate during the whole of a lifetime.'<sup>135</sup> Rhona suggested offering silence creates opportunity for unacknowledged feelings to be recognised and more sustainable structures developed to contain and explore these difficult emotional states, which otherwise remain unprocessed. If silence for facilitating reflection within relationships is not offered, moments rich in potential for growth may be squandered and development of secure structures of inner identity inhibited.

Offering silence was frequently associated with a 'moment of awakening' for others, where new self-knowledge or understanding emerges.<sup>136</sup> Internal silence helps intuit when others verge on recognising something for themselves or when comment is necessary to facilitate

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<sup>135</sup> Flanagan, '*Quaestio Divina*', 129.

<sup>136</sup> Rhona.

new understanding. Rhona remarked what ‘a huge amount of self-management’ is required to allow others the joy of noticing for themselves connections which seem obvious to their listener. Claire named the ‘reverence’ she feels when witnessing that another ‘knows something’ new. At such points, silence needs ‘to be held for/some time’ so emergent knowledge can be integrated.

Listening and giving others opportunity for reflection ‘draws out of them’ new insights ‘that words never could’.<sup>137</sup> Examples of the women facilitating this were implicit across narratives too lengthy to reproduce here. Despite this, interview transcripts demonstrate how my silence contributed to emerging self-knowledge. A significant number of women commented on how much they had discovered during their interview. Alison ‘made a few discoveries’; Michaela was ‘surprised at what’s come up ... it’s triggered off lots of questions/and thoughts ... that’s been the power of the moment’; for Ali, my silence helped her ‘realise some aspects of it I hadn’t/ever tried to articulate before’. Elisabeth noted she ‘lapses between/you know/silence and then something will kind of emerge/you know/out of the silence and then/back into the silence’ which ‘set me thinking in new directions’. Speaking about silence had ‘been quite stretching’ for Ali. She recognised ‘starting off in one place/and/y’know I could actually hear myself thinking/“nah/that’s not all there is”’, eventually, in silence, reaching a ‘turning point’ about perceptions of her practices. As her interview concluded, Claire commented,

you’ve brought out things that  
I don’t know [*‘don’t’ in place of didn’t*] ...  
had not

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<sup>137</sup> Alison.

quite  
honed down myself ...  
I'd not actually thought of images around the silence and<sup>138</sup>  
what's going on there so that's  
so I'm  
very very grateful for the experience ...  
I've learned ...  
many other things ...  
it's a very powerful thing ...  
the silence

As women's responses to questions unfolded further when I remained silent and attentive, rather than probing with further questions, this revealed development taking place in their self-understanding. When asked if engaging in silence was changing her, Dawn's response was a striking example. Initially, she replied, 'I wouldn't know'; then 'I think somebody has to tell me that'. Over eight minutes Dawn continued exploring this question. Her responses covered all five perspectives of the ways women know identified by Belenky et al.<sup>139</sup> Starting from the silence of not knowing, she then relied on external opinions. Brief, hesitant moments of conditional assertion emerged—she can 'imagine' silence 'might' change her—then were retracted. Gradually, she moved towards an emerging clear, internal voice: 'probably' she can 'attribute' change to silence. This voice eventually spoke authoritative, new self-knowledge constructed from reflecting on her experiences, relational contexts, the subjective comments of others and a stated desire to make fair-minded, balanced judgements:

something you are doing over a period of time  
you know  
day in day out

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<sup>138</sup> This is a reference to her metaphor of silence as the murmurations of flocking birds in Chapter 5.

<sup>139</sup> The five perspectives on women's ways of knowing are silence, then received, subjective, procedural and constructed knowledge. For a full description see Belenky et al, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, 15.

is going to change you ...  
so  
I can do it  
and it can change me  
you see

Belenky et al, describe movement into an authoritative, interior voice as ‘the hallmark of women’s emergent sense of self and sense of agency and control.’<sup>140</sup> I suggest this process was in part enabled by the sparsity of my three questions within an otherwise lengthy silence of eight minutes, during which I was attentive and hospitably present to Dawn’s self-exploration. Her interview was not alone in being a space where an initially tentative voice gained strength and confidence, contributing to an emerging awareness of self and agency by the time of its conclusion.<sup>141</sup>

Transcripts revealed lengthy silences within the interviews. These occurred predominantly in their latter half or third, suggesting the women gradually realised I was unlikely to foreclose their need for silence with instant questions. When their words ceased, I waited: these silences resonated with potential for more to unfold. In Morton’s reporting of a woman being given time to speak, from which the phrase, ‘hearing to speech’ emerged, she writes, ‘no one moved. No one interrupted her. ... No one cut her experience short. We simply sat. We sat in a powerful silence.’<sup>142</sup> Feminist emphasis on finding authentic voice has perhaps resulted in oversight that this took place within ‘powerful silence’. Morton’s depiction of silence as integral to ‘hearing that is more acute than listening’ reflects these

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<sup>140</sup> Belenky et al, *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, 68.

<sup>141</sup> A similar pattern was present in Catriona’s interview, and, to a lesser extent in that of Loretta and Julay, though this was spread across the entire interview rather than observed within one discrete section.

<sup>142</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 202 and 205.

women's perceptions that hearing others belongs to their spiritual practice of silence. Her suggestion that deep hearing within powerful silence evokes new speech was in evidence following long silences within the interviews.<sup>143</sup> Often intimate, these silences were almost invariably followed by the articulation and development of significant insights: they enabled transformation of what was thought to be known and the emergence of the previously unknown.

Some described others' emerging self-knowledge during silence as the Holy Spirit's work. Often this was implicit in descriptions of moments of spiritual connection and revelation. Others explicitly stated offering silence to create space for 'the Spirit/working in the other'.<sup>144</sup> When offering silence, Claire tries

to  
dispose myself the best I can  
with the grace of God  
to an internal  
silence  
that can listen  
that can make space  
for  
what is the work of the Spirit  
not my work

Intentional participation with the Spirit makes the women 'more than an observer in the process' of others' self-discovery.<sup>145</sup> The women are responsible for maintaining awareness of God's presence, whilst also recognising that 'the Holy Spirit/does the work not us'.<sup>146</sup> In

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<sup>143</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 205.

<sup>144</sup> Claire.

<sup>145</sup> Claire.

<sup>146</sup> Una.

these encounters the women are also changed. Una described their fruits as shifting her perceptions, citing increase in love for others, a greater understanding of others and self, and attentiveness to developing a non-judgemental attitude towards others and their experiences. It is surprising that literature discussing silence within therapeutic relationships makes no reference to silence offered to clients facilitating change in the therapist. This may reflect the historical elevation of therapists' knowledge and expertise and their focus on clients' development. Naming the transformations resulting from encountering God in silence as gradual entry into 'resurrection life', Una longs for others to be offered space for such encounter that they too may 'change and become truly themselves made in the image and likeness of God'.

As some described listening to people existing in a state of self-loathing, unable to 'feel that they're worth anything',<sup>147</sup> silence is also offered that others may experience acceptance and move towards greater self-acceptance. Recalling their own past self-loathing, the women seek to reflect God's unconditional love in accepting the failings, complexity and egocentricity of others, in order to facilitate the transformations they have experienced flowing from self-acceptance. Their intention parallels the centrality of unconditional positive regard in client-centred therapy, first described by Carl Rogers,<sup>148</sup> whose work is named as foundational to pastoral theology.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Una.

<sup>148</sup> Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications, and Theory*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1951).

<sup>149</sup> Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 58.

Grounded in internal silence, the women are open channels for God's love, which they direct towards others. Experiencing such love—whether God's directly, or its image in another—was described by Una as the 'only thing' which helps people recognise themselves as having worth and develop greater self-acceptance.

### 7.5.2 *Difficulties in offering silence to others*

Sustained, effective listening necessitates the women taking responsibility for addressing their own needs through formalised relational accountability, ensuring they retain capacity to contain what others share. Predominantly, this includes combinations of professional supervision, personal therapy or counselling, and spiritual direction. Although most participate in one or more of these, maintaining their practices of silence is also essential for sustaining a resilient 'core/of silence' to offer others.<sup>150</sup> When she maintains this, people 'gravitate towards' Michaela. They seek her out as 'the person to pour out whatever' distress they are carrying, opening up about 'the most bizarre situations'. When failing to sustain core silence, Michaela commented, 'my living isn't as generous'. Reserves of its fruits become depleted, adversely affecting encounters with others: relationships feel less satisfying; listening is more difficult and less effective; the women are less present, becoming 'more blind ... deafer' or 'blinkered' to those around; they are more reactive and less responsive; their own being seems diminished and less spacious, shrinking capacity for openness and hospitality towards others. Any 'sense of silence/spilling from/your

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<sup>150</sup> All extracts in this paragraph by Michaela.

silence/into/everything you do' disappears until core silence is sufficiently restored to withstand being offered once more.

Sometimes others need their silence when ability to offer this is depleted. Claire explained how then she is

focussing and saying  
that it's not  
how you would like it to be  
but just desiring to be in that present place  
where you can listen ...  
to  
dispose myself as best I can  
with the grace of God

When the weakness and inadequacy of self is acknowledged, leaving the women reliant on God's grace, some indicated awareness of new freedom for the Spirit to work in the lives of others.

Offering silence carries hidden dangers. A fundamental risk is that the women's needs and identity become negated as dialogue concerning self is surrendered and previously shared conversational space given over to others. Any theology or pastoral care that 'reinforces women in their propensity to give themselves away does not promote authentic community; it rather promotes false relationality.'<sup>151</sup> Hess portrays this as a particular danger when significant parts of a woman's journey towards maturity have not been negotiated. She describes appropriate, voluntary self-giving within relationships as that which 'gives out of

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<sup>151</sup> Neuger, *Arts of Ministry*, 70.



what it has without destroying (or precluding) its fundamental identity'.<sup>152</sup> Hess distinguishes between two types of 'genuine' caretaking: 'empathic' and 'conversational'. An empathic carer's focus is understanding and supporting others by responding to their cues, 'listening to who the other says she is'. She is flexibly present for others, demonstrating self-negation and vulnerability, and willingly learns from and is changed by their encounter.<sup>153</sup> Granting integrity to their differences, she responds appropriately. Hess states women are predominant 'carriers' of empathic caring, developing these abilities to facilitate their survival: empathic attunement to the whims of superiors is a self-protective defence against rejection and abandonment.<sup>154</sup> Conversational care differs markedly. It is 'extravagant with listening *and* generous with sharing; it is a to-and-fro movement between two others who represent difference whilst also finding commonality.'<sup>155</sup> Conversational caring is more than listening, requiring response and reciprocity. It avoids inappropriate self-abnegation, whereas within empathic care, over-identification becomes a 'constant disavowing of the self', supressing self-development by inappropriate willingness to accommodate others at the expense of self. Describing this empathic self as 'self in hiding', Hess continues

women hide and repress a strong sense of self out of fear that their true self will not be acceptable to those with whom they are in relation. ... Thinking that they are supporting and nurturing their relationships to others, women in hiding actually falsify those relationships along with their selves. This is the unfortunate consequence when empathetic caring absorbs conversational caring.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 80.

<sup>153</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 96-7.

<sup>154</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 98.

<sup>155</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 103-4, emphasis in original.

<sup>156</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 104.

Hess' description suggests that if the women lose 'conversational' care elements as they offer silence to others, it is in danger of becoming self-abnegating, 'empathetic' care, masking 'avoidance of responsibility for the activity involved in understanding or entering dialogue.'<sup>157</sup> Although positive elements of empathic caring must be components of relationships, these should not be the only form of interaction. As Gilligan contends, 'To seek connection with others by excluding oneself is a strategy destined to fail' because 'relationship implies the presence of both self and other'.<sup>158</sup> Empathic caring's self-negation contrasts with the intentional stating and retaining of particularities of self central to conversational care. Recognising and celebrating these differences enhances possibilities for relational and personal change.<sup>159</sup> If empathic does not give way to conversational care, 'then communication and community do not happen'<sup>160</sup> and development of self, others, and responsible, interdependent relationships is inhibited. Although Hess' descriptions are insightful in considering silence offered to others, I suggest her term 'conversational care' may be more helpfully named 'relational' care. This term can encompass all that Hess portrays, but also points towards a generosity of sharing in relationship which acknowledges that responsible caring requires times of attentive silence when non-verbal responses and reciprocity are most appropriate.

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<sup>157</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 62.

<sup>158</sup> Carol Gilligan, 'Teaching Shakespeare's Sister: Notes from the Underground of Female Adolescence', in Carol Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons and Trudy J. Hanmer, eds., *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 9.

<sup>159</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 104.

<sup>160</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 103.

A few women revealed that becoming skilled hearers of others can be ‘two-edged’.<sup>161</sup>

Although it is a privilege, frustration and anger emerge when *they* are not heard effectively.

Barbara commented,

the frustration is  
because I’m trying to do it for others  
and  
I need people sometimes to hear me

Although not being heard by family, work or church communities is disappointing, ineffective listening was most frequently identified within institutional structures or individual relationships with those in authority. Unwillingness to hear and lack of an appropriate alternative listener with any influence is ‘very frustrating’, resulting in them feeling ‘really angry’.<sup>162</sup> These feelings are intensified because ‘embodying’ hearing others has become a focus in these women’s ministries and relationships.<sup>163</sup> Its conspicuous absence in others causes distress—to the women, but also for others they recognise experiencing the same failure to be heard by these individuals and structures.

### 7.5.3 *Silence with another to hear self*

In offering silence to others, self is also heard with greater clarity. Silence enables the women ‘to hear what’s going on inside me as well as/listening to them’.<sup>164</sup> Listening and responding to their internal voice is imperative if relationships are to remain healthy and

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<sup>161</sup> Barbara.

<sup>162</sup> Barbara and Lynne.

<sup>163</sup> Comment by both Barbara and Una.

<sup>164</sup> Lynne.

their silence is not to deteriorate into the detrimental self-negation Hess depicts. In *Listening Below the Noise*, LeClaire reveals how, during her seventeen year 'experiment' with a day's silence each week, she realised continual judgements about others rendered her 'unable to hear' her own habitual, unvoiced responses towards them. 'With the distance and space that silence provided, I was able to recognize the motivations and intents beneath my unspoken words', which would otherwise have continued unobserved.<sup>165</sup> Many of the women followed a similar journey, recognising that, as Gale and Sanchez identified,<sup>166</sup> authentic relationships require simultaneous listening to others and self-listening, which attends to misperceptions held about both. Una narrated a frank example. As a GP, she developed a symbolic practice to carry internal silence into each interview. Touching her head on her desk between consultations, Una let the previous patient 'go completely out of my mind/so that I was empty/totally empty for the next person'. This enabled her to listen compassionately to a patient with little physically wrong, whose frequent request for an unfitnes to work certificate felt like 'blackmail'. In silence, Una eventually heard the strength of her 'prejudice' and 'arrogant desire' to refuse. In a 'quite extraordinary' 'silence of encompassing love' before one appointment, Una recognised 'the utter/destitution of this woman', unable to 'behave in ways that made her lovable'. She realised 'this woman had never/experienced love', even from her, because of Una's sense of superiority. Having identified her intolerance and need to validate her ego, both began to dissipate. In hearing herself in silence she had sought to offer, Una also heard her patient's desperate need for compassion. From then on, Una gave the certificate 'with love/which was different/from the

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<sup>165</sup> LeClaire, *Listening Below the Noise*, 120-121.

<sup>166</sup> Gale and Sanchez, 'The Meaning and Function of Silence'.

way I'd/grudgingly given it to her before'. Una became able to respond in ways that were 'life enhancing/for her and for me/because ... it altered our relationship' positively as her patient journeyed towards death.

Offering silence to others also creates space to hear self notice warning signs that relational engagement is becoming inappropriate—by either party—and must be challenged. Hess names caregiving that confronts relationship failure as 'prophetic' care.<sup>167</sup> She defines this as being 'caring enough to confront a person or group when they are not holding up their end of a relationship (to other persons, to subject matter, to themselves).'<sup>168</sup> However, Hess' depiction fails to acknowledge times when verbal challenge will be unsuccessful or others are unable to bear the direct conversational confrontation it implies. A few women portrayed intentional silence as occasionally the most appropriate way to challenge relational failure: it is sometimes a wiser, more disciplined response than verbal confrontation. It functions as acknowledgement that others are not ready to face verbal challenge, gives opportunity for movement towards openness to any challenge being heard 'in love and not as an accusation',<sup>169</sup> and creates space for as yet unexplored or unexpected possibilities to emerge which may render verbal challenge unnecessary: silence itself may be challenge enough. This silence differs from the hearing of others in 'empathic' and 'relational' caring. Birthed in identifying that behaviours or attitudes are inappropriate, it mirrors more closely the confrontation of Hess' prophetic care. On occasion, it becomes the locus of challenge to the women's own relational conduct.

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<sup>167</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 111-112.

<sup>168</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 111-112.

<sup>169</sup> Una.

Offering silence also enables identification of others' increasing value to the women. Many reported times of appreciating 'the/actual qualities of a person' they had not previously noticed, 'recognising' the wonder of another 'sitting here before me'.<sup>170</sup> Elizabeth recounted the 'real privilege' of 'meeting people in such a place of truth'. Her perception of privilege was echoed widely. Appreciation of another was frequently associated with growing recognition of their worth to God. This recognition sometimes extended further, heightening awareness of every individual's value. Descriptions of such moments resulting in intensified perceptions of the unity, equality or dignity of humanity suggest they transcend usual consciousness. They always seemed to occur as an unexpected gift or blessing, and were recounted using verbal and non-verbal communication indicating reverence for the memory of these experiences. Such encounters are treasured for facilitating deep awareness of the inherent unity in relationships between God, self and others.

Similarly, internal silence enables attentiveness to both the narrative of others and to hearing how these illuminate the women's culpability in other people's struggles and pain. They notice shadow sides of self reflected in the life experiences, attitudes and difficulties of others. The unfairness of criticisms they have applied to others' lives becomes clearer: such judgements also apply in their own lives. Equally, as the women listen to others revealing damage they have caused in relationships, the women identify their own part in perpetuating similar harm. Opportunity to recognise this gives them what Una described as 'ability to see that you are part of the problem' in others' lives. The women recognise with

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<sup>170</sup> Elisabeth and Sian.

increasing clarity their equal ‘need [for] forgiveness as much as they’—those to whom they listen—‘need the forgiveness’ of God, others and self.<sup>171</sup> In paying attention to their own internal responses to what is expressed by others they notice empathy and compassion arising. Just as Sally recognised within silence that her judgemental attitudes towards others also pointed towards harsh self-criticism, so growing compassion for others’ pain can expand their capacity to respond to damaged aspects of self with similar compassion.

The women’s offering silence to others reflects Dorothy Soelle’s suggestion that the outcome of an intimate relationship with God is the development of ‘a different relationship to the world—one that has borrowed the eyes of God.’<sup>172</sup> Mirroring God’s beholding of the women, in silence, their gaze asks others ‘Who are you?’, inviting self-expression with an increasingly authentic voice. Their inquiry echoes Muers’ question derived from considerations of Morton’s ‘hearing into speech’: ‘Who is heard?’<sup>173</sup> Together, these recall my midwife-inquirer role during interviews. The women’s silence offered to others and my attentive listening to them share a desire that others can be heard into new, authentic self-expression. Recalling Slee’s discussion of feminist qualitative research as spiritual discipline, similarity between the women’s practice of silence and my approach to this inquiry point towards interviewing—and, by extension, this research—having become part of my

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<sup>171</sup> Una.

<sup>172</sup> Dorothy Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 293, referenced by Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude*, 40.

<sup>173</sup> For Muers’ derivation of this, and the subsequent question, from Morton’s ‘hearing into speech’, see Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 18.

discipline of silence.<sup>174</sup> Within it, I have developed a deeper understanding of the women's practices of silence and their value and role within their faith journeys.

Listening to others within this inquiry has also been a journey of self-discovery. This reciprocating nature of women's listening was highlighted by Belenky et al. They propose

Women typically approach adulthood with the understanding that the care and empowerment of others is central to their life's work. Through listening and responding, they draw out the voices and minds of those they help to raise up. In the process they often come to hear, value and strengthen their own voices<sup>175</sup>

This step echoes Muers' further question, 'Who hears?' As the women return to personal silence they consider further questions of self-knowledge that arise within silence they offer to others. Ultimately, they are drawn back to encountering an increasingly authentic self-identity in the relational silence of mutual beholding with God.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has identified ways that the women perceive their engagement in silence to be significant in their relationships with other people and with all of creation in past, present and, to a limited extent, future forms. Whilst enabling them to be more attentive to relationships in the present moment, paradoxically silence also heightens awareness of their relationship to all that has been and will be, throughout space and time.

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<sup>174</sup> Slee, 'Feminist Qualitative Research'.

<sup>175</sup> Belenky et al, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, 48.



Although the centrality of corporate silence within the women's lives is varied, and their levels of engagement in this are diverse, my discussion has highlighted its role in supporting their ongoing practices and enhancing the depth of their connection with other people and all of creation. I have shown how practices of silence facilitate the acknowledgement and development of interdependence, mutuality and responsibility between individuals, within groups and with nature. I have also indicated ways that corporate silence is perceived to contribute towards healing and transformation within relationships and communities.

Fundamentally, I have demonstrated how intentionally offering silence through hearing and listening to others is specifically named as a practice of silence by women who participated in this research. This gift is primarily offered that others may experience being fully heard. In addition, by reflecting the unconditional love and acceptance the women have discovered in the silence of their relationship with God, they hope to contribute towards developing self-knowledge and self-acceptance in others, whilst also acting as conduits for others to encounter something of divine presence, through the women and within themselves.

I have also demonstrated that, in offering silence to others, the women's self-listening is enhanced, increasing awareness of how their habitual, inner responses can cause damage—to others, in their relationship with God, and within themselves. In turn, this new self-knowledge enables further transformation in the women's own self-identity.

In discussing the difficulties associated with silence in relationships, I have highlighted that relational silence is not always comfortable for individuals or within a group. Rather,

responsibly engaging in shared silence or offering silence and encountering others within this can be challenging and stimulating, simultaneously inviting acknowledgement of the pain of what has been and the possibility of transformation in a continuing journey towards wholeness.

## CONCLUSION

To try to name, to give definition in any way to that which we sense to be emerging is to experience the process of form-giving. And when it seems that what is trying to emerge is a level of consciousness which will be critical to the quality of our lives together, the urge to bring forth truly worthy, eloquent forms becomes all the more pressing. ... the call most challenging and most needful of our response is the one which asks us to discover and be who we are ... It is the form-giving at the center of them all. ... May we be gentle with ourselves and one another as we hover near the edge of who we might become.

Karen Thorkilsen<sup>1</sup>

### 8.1 Introduction

A brief review of the aims of this study is followed by a summary of its primary findings. I then acknowledge some limits of this investigation and suggest areas of future research within feminist and practical theologies arising from my inquiry. Following this, I propose the metaphor of a web in order to represent the processes of change that emerged from my analysis. I describe how its structures and associations offer an organising model for more nuanced consideration of transformations identified in the women's relating to God, self and others than is possible with simpler, cyclical forms used within practical theology. Next, drawing from analysis of the women's descriptions of deepening engagement in this process, I suggest possible explanations for why feminist theologians turned away from considering women's chosen practices of silence, and outline how re-engagement may

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Thorkilsen, 'The Edge of Knowing: Commitment to the Discipline of Creative Vulnerability', *Context* (Spring, 1984), 5: 4-6.

facilitate the development of more responsible relationships through ‘relational’ care.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to their neglect of silence, my discussion culminates in raising a question for consideration by feminist theologians, and offers Miller’s presentation of women’s different voices as a platform from which to begin this conversation. Finally, with the intention of reflecting some of the themes of this inquiry in a way which also draws readers towards a place of beholding and stillness, my conclusion moves towards its own silence through a piece of creative writing.

## **8.2 Review of research findings**

The primary aim of this study was to investigate practices of silence amongst a cohort of twenty contemporary Christian women. This was sub-divided into two parallel areas of inquiry: identifying and describing the women’s practices of silence, and exploring their role in the women’s ongoing faith journeys. This exploration encompassed inquiry into the women’s perceptions of silence, what they value from engagement in this discipline, and consideration of silence’s role within their interviews.

The women’s general perception of silence is predominantly an absence of noises of human origin. When considering silence as it relates to their spirituality, this perception alters. Silence is no longer about absence, but presence: initially God’s presence to them, but also their presence with God and their attentive presence to others, which includes people throughout time and geographical space, as well as creation. Many forms and practices of

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<sup>2</sup> See my proposal of this term in the discussion of Hess, *Caretakers*, in Chapter 7.

silence the women weave into their lives reflect those commonly recognised within this spiritual discipline, but others—such as shared silence over a mobile phone—are perhaps documented for the first time. A spectrum within which these practices can be located was offered. Although helpful for identifying differences between practices, binary distinctions of internal or external and individual or corporate silence do not adequately convey the more subtle and complex ways in which these practices intersect. The women's striking metaphors contribute to more subtle understandings of their perceptions of silence and how engagement in this enhances their lives. However, this study also identified difficulties of engaging in practices of silence, clustering around God's silence and struggles to remain engaged in this discipline due to the women's distractions and expectations, or those of others. Despite these, the women are determined and imaginative in carving out opportunities for intentional silence in and amongst the multiple responsibilities that limit the time available for sustaining their discipline.

Whether engaged in corporately or individually, the women primarily value their practices for facilitating transformation in relationships with God, themselves and others. In silence, change occurs within the women's encounters with God and temporally multiple self as they let go of longing to hear God speak. In being with God without words they encounter God's unconditionally loving gaze more deeply. Soothed and nurtured, they feel held intimately and safely enough to explore difficulties and paradoxes in life. As defences are dropped, revealing more of themselves, the women encounter God's acceptance of who they have been and are which, in turn, releases new self-potential. Transformations in the women's relationship with God are mirrored in changes identified in their relationship with self,

leading to increased self-acceptance, new self-knowledge and enhanced self-expression and creativity. These contribute to developing a more authentic self-identity, which is known to be 'hidden with Christ in God.'<sup>3</sup>

These women name listening to others as a practice of silence. They offer their silence as a gift to those by whom they are 'being faced'.<sup>4</sup> This attentive silence mirrors the invitation to authentic selfhood they discovered in being beheld by God. They seek to enable similar transformation in others by reflecting the unconditional love, openness, vulnerability, acceptance and safety they experience when held securely in God's loving gaze. In supporting the emergence of authentic selfhood for another, their exploration of self also continues: what is encountered in silence with others often challenges self-perceptions which, in turn, are explored with God in future times of personal silence. In this interplay of giving and receiving, the gift of silence offered to enable change for others also facilitates transformation in the life of the giver. This practice and its outcomes are pivotal in the metaphor I offer below to depict the relational shifts in self-understanding which occur as the women engage in silence.

My analysis presents these women's engagement in silence as a spiritual discipline with relationality at its core. This offers an alternative interpretation to more familiar portrayals of silence as associated with physical or interior solitude. Although Searl's proposition of the 'social meaning' of silence for Quakers has some resonance with this finding,<sup>5</sup> my research

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<sup>3</sup> Colossians 3:3.

<sup>4</sup> See discussion of 'being faced', with reference to Veling, *Practical Theology*, in Chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> Searl, *Meanings of Silence*, 62.

significantly expands his analysis by extending this relational perspective beyond corporate Quaker practices, and specifically including those usually described as individual.

My attentive silence within interviews facilitated the creation of secure relational space, within which I functioned as a ‘midwife-inquirer’. Here, new knowledge and understanding were birthed, and articulated by the women with increasingly authoritative and authentic voices. As my attentive listening to the women—during interviews and analysis—mirrored their intentional offering of silence to others, this inquiry can be represented as having become part of my own discipline of silence.

### **8.3 Some limits of the research and areas for future investigation**

My research investigated an area of women’s lives which has received little attention from feminist or practical theologians. As the first exploration into chosen silence in contemporary women’s faith lives, potential avenues of inquiry emerged which it has not been possible to pursue within the limited scope of this study. Although rooted in practical theology, this research has not interrogated practices with the detail that an inquiry focussing on these alone would demonstrate; it has not explored beliefs associated with the women’s practices of silence in depth; it has not examined gaps between the women’s practices and stated beliefs; it has given little space to considering what theological challenges or insights any gaps may pose; and it has paid limited attention to changes in the women’s theological understanding and faith development resulting from sustained engagement in silence. As feminist theological research, although its focus has been

narrowly constrained to mapping the women's practices of silence and perceptions of their relational impact, it has not engaged in detail with feminist discussion of developing self-identity, relationality or associated theologies, or with psychological studies addressing women's perceptions of selfhood and relationship. Although creation is identified as a significant 'other' with whom the women relate in silence, there has been no discussion of their perceptions in relation to feminist theological discourses around Gaia, Theology or wider eco-feminist theological concerns. Whilst it has engaged with a number of key theological concepts, such discussion has been comparatively brief, with wider theological reflections woven throughout the overall discussion.

In order for feminist and practical theologies to offer theological reflection on practices of silence with the attention given to other aspects of Christian life, further inquiry into areas identified within the above limitations of this study is required. In addition, within feminist theology, research into silence with women who do not self-identify as white, educated and middle-class is essential. Similarly, following Phillip's work into girl's faith development,<sup>6</sup> explorations of silence's role amongst this group would enable feminist practical theology to consider how women can be resourced to engage in this discipline from early in their faith journeys. As my research excluded inquiry with women religious, investigation amongst this group and comparison with beliefs and practices of non-religious may be revealing. Equally, although I failed to locate participants from Pentecostal or charismatic churches, given the discussion of functional equivalence between silence and glossolalia, and Mary's association between Quaker silence and Pentecostal worship, exploration of women and men's

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<sup>6</sup> Phillips, *Faith of Girls*.



perceptions of silence within these groups is of potential significance to both feminist and practical theology. Any of the above could similarly be applied to investigation into men's discipline of silence, enabling comparative studies of practices and beliefs between women and men. In addition, longitudinal studies would allow exploration of the impact of practices of silence within faith development of children, women and men across the life course. Although these suggestions are not exhaustive and do not cover all aspects which arose as considerations from analysing data for this inquiry, they indicate key areas of further study which are different enough from this investigation to provide a wider or deeper understanding of contemporary practices of silence within Christianity. Finally, there is significant scope for comparative research into practices and beliefs associated with silence within other religions, as well as exploration of the potential for practices of silence within interfaith dialogue and participation.

#### **8.4 The transformational web: an organising model for the process of change**

Despite necessarily describing shifts in the women's self-understanding and relationships in a relatively trajectorial way, in Chapter 5 I highlighted this as a non-linear process which is also inaccurately portrayed by either cycling or spiralling models of change associated within practical and feminist theologies. Having stated that many women experience their learning and development being cast by inappropriate moulds into forms or styles that 'feel quite foreign', Harris advocates women's liberation through spirituality that promotes natural movement:<sup>7</sup> women 'do not come to the next step by planning it beforehand, but by doing

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<sup>7</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 1 and 14.

the bodily work from which the next step emerges.’<sup>8</sup> Seeking a more appropriate form than either linear or circling models, which suggest planned, ongoing forward momentum, I propose the metaphor of a spider’s web allows a more nuanced representation of the unpredictable and complex directions of travel taken in the processes of change facilitated by these women’s engagement in silence. As Harris recognises, it is inaccurate to perceive that once a step has been experienced ‘we need never return or repeat it. On the contrary, each step is a dwelling place which continually teaches us’ each time it is re-entered.<sup>9</sup> Although cyclical models encompass return to previous steps, they imply revisiting these in a repeating sequence. Such predetermined forms may obscure or, if followed, inhibit women’s processes of change. As the women offer silence to others, internal responses to what is expressed can necessitate their return to any step within the process of change undergone through engagement in silence. Similarly, this applies to whatever emerges from their encounters with God and temporally multiple self. A web’s linking, spoked structure depicts re-visiting steps—each represented as a point of intersection of different possible pathways—without suggesting this occurs in any given order. It permits movement from side to side, down and up, from one place to a different sector altogether. Its form offers the possibility of linear, cyclical and spiralling journeys, movement to the centre, out to and around the margins, and from one to the other via a multitude of possible, criss-crossing and interconnected routes. A web structure offers images of repeated patterning and interdependence between multiple places of intersection. Its form also incorporates anchor

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<sup>8</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 15.

points, holding the whole in creative tension, but with enough flexibility and strength not to be snapped by winds of change.

Other associations and properties of webs support my proposition of this metaphor. Web structures recall Elisabeth's depiction of silence giving form to all things, as sky articulates the bare branches of a tree. Silence can similarly be conceptualised as space around a web, articulating its structure, and supporting and giving form to the relational transformation these women value as fruits of their practices. Space around the structure can also represent the silence of the ultimate unknowability of God, self and others, within which all relationships are enacted and expressed. As Ross and Muers propose, it is within the silence of unknowability we can know 'the most profound engagement' with our neighbours, our selves and God.<sup>10</sup> A web's intricacy evokes interconnectedness with others, not only in person, but also via the world-wide-web, connecting people who will never meet in their lifetime and, retaining traces of their history, with generations to come. The homespun healthcare of many ancient cultures knew webs to have antiseptic, healing properties and used them to close wounds. They are generated to provide nutrition, and although appearing delicate, the tensile strength of web silk is proportionally stronger and more flexible than steel. Finally, having existed for over 100 million years, their longevity reflects something of the eternal quality of silence.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ross, *Silence*, 81. Also, the developing argument throughout Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*.

<sup>11</sup> Their longevity is known from examples entrapped in amber.

The metaphor of a spider's web is not new to feminism or feminist practical theology:<sup>12</sup> both have re-appropriated the spider and her web from Native American stories as a positive image for women or metaphor for the feminine divine.<sup>13</sup> Within feminist practical theology webs are familiar through Miller-McLemore's modification of Anton Boisen's individualistic portrayal of people as 'living human documents' into the more relational image of a 'living human web'.<sup>14</sup> As Miller-McLemore proposes, using a web metaphorically is not intended to suggest that individual, or psychological study offering insight into personal dynamics should recede in importance, but to highlight that individuals are 'in inextricable relationship' with the broader web of humanity and creation.<sup>15</sup>

However, my usage of this metaphor to represent relational transformations resulting from engagement in practices of silence offers a unique model for considering processes of change—here, in relation to a discipline of silence. Its possibilities for representing ways the women's relationships change and how they inhabit their faith lives by developing authentic identity, new patterns of relating, self-expression, spirituality, practices of ministry and community, and the language and metaphors to convey these, offer fresh illumination into women's spiritual disciplines, and their associated ways of knowing and acting beyond practices explored within this study. The form of a web may, therefore, be a useful

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<sup>12</sup> For a full biographical listing of similar metaphorical uses of the web by feminist practical theologians see Bonnie Miller-McLemore, 'Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology', in Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern, *Feminist and Womanist*, 90.

<sup>13</sup> For example, terms such as 'Old Spider', 'Grandmother Spider' and 'Spider Woman', which are used by the Keres Pueblo people of New Mexico to speak of the supreme being, perceived as a female goddess. See Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992) and Paula Gunn Allen, ed., *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writings by Native American Women*, (New York, NY: Fawcett Columbine, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Miller-McLemore, 'The Living Human Web'.

<sup>15</sup> Miller-McLemore, 'Feminist Theory', 90.

organising model for practical and feminist theologians in considering other processes of change within women and men's spiritual journeys and within communities to which they belong.

This metaphor inevitably has limitations and associations which are problematic. Its primary limitation is that a single web form only portrays the complexity of shifting self-knowledge and relationality of an individual. A two dimensional tessellation of webs elaborates the possibilities, but does not allow for the multiplicity of relational interconnection of most lives.<sup>16</sup> Contrary to this limitation, it could be suggested this metaphor is over-complex in comparison to models of change represented visually by basic shapes, following a single direction of movement or clearly identified, alternative pathways. Despite these limitations, I have proposed the image of a web for three reasons. Firstly, as a corrective to any unintended inference that processes of change identified within this study are linear or cyclical; as a visual *aide memoire* to the complex shifts in relationality identified amongst these women; finally, to invite ongoing recall that, whilst reflection on processes associated with personal and inter-relational change using simple forms have an appropriate place and purpose, over time, repeated simplification may be counter-productive. Usage of this metaphor by practical and feminist theologians may contribute to reducing this possibility.

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<sup>16</sup> Multiple sheet webs occur in nature at times of unusual spider population expansion. Their combined area can cover several acres. An example is the giant communal spider web at Lake Tawakoni State Park, Texas, discovered in September, 2007. See Texas A & M University, 'Enormous Spider Web Found in Texas', 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2007, Science Daily, see <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/09/070912145919.htm>.

Further limitations of the metaphor relate to words and associations which may emerge in response. Whilst feminist and practical theologies demonstrate ongoing commitment to liberating or empowering those who experience injustice and oppression, webs may provoke a string of associations at odds with these principles. Webs are generated for entrapment, not freedom; they evoke phobias and memories of dark places and sudden shocks; they may conjure words like 'deception' and 'intrigue'; and they are often identified with representations of horror or practices of witchcraft. Although these connotations exist, as life-affirming associations are already recognised within these disciplines through ongoing usage of Miller-McLemore's phrase, the 'living human web', Gill-Austern's model of the 'web of Christian care' and Neuger's 'web of creation', I hope that any troublesome connections will be balanced by these familiar, affirming associations.<sup>17</sup>

### **8.5 From neglect to responsible relationality: a role for chosen practices of silence**

Having focussed attention on ways women's experiences and voices are silenced within Christianity, and the expectations of identity imposed by patriarchal church and society, feminist theologians promoted women's quest for authentic, self-defined identity and a voice to more adequately name themselves, their experiences and their God.<sup>18</sup> Traditional beliefs, practices and rites which silenced women's lived experiences were critiqued, rejected or transformed through feminist revision, whilst rituals, liturgies and practices that more adequately support women's search for authenticity were created. However, feminist

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<sup>17</sup> Miller McLemore, 'The Living Human Web', Gill-Austern, 'Rediscovering Hidden Treasures for Pastoral Care', *Pastoral Psychology* 43 (1995), 4: 233-253 and Neuger, 'Women and Relationality', 119.

<sup>18</sup> See Neuger, 'Pastoral Counselling', 97.

theologians have not adequately responded to Harris' more than twenty-five year old proposition: 'If we would be wise women attending to silence which destroys, we need at the same time to be engaging the silence which creates and heals.'<sup>19</sup> Neither has Coakley's counsel been heeded that engagement in silence is not 'a silencing', but rather, that which 'builds one in the courage to give prophetic voice', and which 'Christian feminism ... ignores at its peril.'<sup>20</sup>

Within the expanding milieu of seeking to give voice to women's experiences and denounce what was judged to inhibit authentic self-identity, I suggest practices of silence were neglected by feminist theologians through perceptions that, if their exploration begins in relinquishing voice, they were detrimental to women's development of authentic self-expression. Yet my research has demonstrated that engagement in cataphatic practices of silence is transformative for women in their discovery, acceptance and expression of authentic, egoic selfhood. Choosing to engage in these practices complements the feminist theological quest for authenticity of identity, voice and self-expression. By failing to attend to practices of silence, the 'public' voice of feminist theologians<sup>21</sup> has overlooked their potential for advancing key elements of the feminist agenda.

Limited explication of silence within teaching and worshipping faith communities has resulted in widespread ignorance of distinctions between the apophatic and cataphatic

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<sup>19</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Coakley, 'Kenosis and Subversion', 108, emphasis in original, and 111.

<sup>21</sup> See the descriptions of 'public', 'private' and 'personal' voices in Chapter 4, with reference to Miller, 'Shifting Layers'.

practices. Harris' statement that it is what does not fit or has been omitted which 'forcefully educates and miseducates', and her proposal that recognition of what has been omitted is frequently 'the clue leading to new knowledge', are apposite.<sup>22</sup> I suggest that an inadequate understanding of the apophatic, in particular, has further contributed towards practices of silence being disregarded by feminist theology.

This proposition derives from the following considerations. My study has identified the contrast between essentially egoic, cataphatic practices, dependent on the normal functioning of the mind, and apophatic silence which, in surrendering mental processes and self-perceptions, transcends egoic mind.<sup>23</sup> Cataphatic and apophatic silence closely equate to Maitland's portrayals of romantic and eremitic silence, respectively.<sup>24</sup> In romantic silence, self-fulfilment is the goal: egoic self is strengthened, gradually finding voice, freedom from societal expectation, and autonomy in an authentic identity that evolves from its own experiences. Within the latter, boundaries of self are loosened, becoming permeable to others. Seeking its continuing existence, egoic self attempts to fill what it perceives as vacuity in the apophatic with thought. Egoic consciousness contrasts markedly with apophatic awareness, which is known only through *intentional* surrender of egoic self. As feminist theology's concern for women's development of authentic identity is central to this discussion, it is pertinent to acknowledge that only as much of egoic self can be relinquished as has first been genuinely embraced. It is also germane to recall Maitland's conclusion that when silence leads to contrasting feelings of *jouissance* or sensory deprivation syndrome,

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<sup>22</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 11. For my earlier discussion of this, see Chapter 3.

<sup>24</sup> Chapters 6 and 7 of Maitland, *A Book of Silence*. See my discussion in Chapter 2.



the difference lies in whether silence is chosen or imposed. From these observations it becomes apparent how apophatic awareness, requiring the chosen relinquishment of egoic identity, and the historical silencing of women, can be erroneously conflated to suppose that apophatic silence is a further imposed silencing of women's authentic, egoic identity. From this viewpoint, engagement with apophatic silence appears diametrically opposed to feminist theology's agenda to advance authenticity amongst women.

However, in this inquiry participants whose discipline includes apophatic silence describe this enriching their identity differently from cataphatic practices. In relinquishing egoic identity, authenticity is encountered in enhanced awareness of divine indwelling beyond normal egoic perception. Their descriptions echo and extend Harris' suggestion to women that 'Contemplative silence can be the thematic universe where we discover ourselves made in the image of this divinity, and are able to use her wisdom, her truth, her power as our own.'<sup>25</sup> Within apophatic awareness these women discovered something akin to permeability or osmosis between themselves and the divine, through which they progressively identified egoically surrendered self as at one with God. Yet this increasing sense of union was described as not involving any loss or absorption of self. Relinquishing egoic self 'is not a negation of self, but the place of the self's transformation and expansion into God.'<sup>26</sup> The women did not indicate an absence of awareness of identity within apophatic silence. Rather, their self-awareness is epistemologically different: knowing self to be united with God occurs at a deeper, sensorial and embodied level of consciousness

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<sup>25</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Coakley, 'Kenosis and Subversion', 108.

than egoic mind. Their deepening awareness of union with God is not a separate identity from egoic self-awareness but, increasingly, becomes the ground of being on which egoic identity rests. They perceive an invitation from God to maintain awareness of unity with the divine within daily life, particularly in care-filled,<sup>27</sup> attentive listening to others. It is in this practice their cataphatic and apophatic engagement in silence appear most closely intertwined. Held together in balanced tension, neither cataphatic nor apophatic awareness, nor their differently known identity, is subordinate or in opposition to the other. Together, authentic, egoic self and their non-egoic awareness of self as hidden with Christ in God reflect—however partially, and with the distortions of an imperfect mirror—the incarnate divinity of Christ in whom ‘we live and move and have our being’.<sup>28</sup> It is this self, centred in the differing forms of self-knowledge to emerge in cataphatic and apophatic silence, which offers fullest expression of authentic identity. It is this authenticity of being the women in this research seek to offer in attentive silence when ‘being faced’ by others.<sup>29</sup>

Chapter 7 identified that offering silence to others risks becoming self-abnegating care which masks avoidance of responsibility to develop relationships through appropriate dialogue.<sup>30</sup> Although ‘empathic care’ is understanding and supportive, its primary function is self-survival. It promotes false modes of relationality which are irresponsibly unhealthy rather than encouraging development of authentic relationships and sustainable community. By contrast, ‘relational care’ is an appropriately responsible, voluntary self-offering.<sup>31</sup> It gives

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<sup>27</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 30, and Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> Acts 17:28, directly referred to by Alison: see Chapter 3.

<sup>29</sup> Veling, *Practical Theology*, 124, as discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>30</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*. See my discussion in Chapter 7.

<sup>31</sup> I proposed this term in favour of Hess’ original ‘conversational care’ in Chapter 7.

freely from what is available of self without destroying or precluding its fundamental identity. Where empathic care erects barriers to protect self against rejection, thereby inhibiting formation of authentic relationships, relational care involves a reciprocal interplay that acknowledges difference whilst seeking what is common, without which development of authentic relationships and community cannot take place effectively.<sup>32</sup> Empathic care shares hallmarks such as self-actualisation and freedom from societal responsibility with the development of egoic selfhood within Maitland's 'romantic'—or cataphatic—silence. Features of non-egoic, apophatic awareness, such as intentional surrender of egoic self and permeability to other, more closely resemble those identified within relational care, reflecting its flow of unrestricted communication and receptivity.

Amongst women in this study it has been engagement in both cataphatic and apophatic silence which, together, enable the greatest development of identities whose security is demonstrated in egoic surrender, and openness and permeability to others. If increasingly authentic relationships and responsible communities are to be created amongst women, developing only egoic identity is inadequate to facilitate the relational care this requires. Empathic care must give way to relational care, whose development is facilitated by apophatic silence. Without relational care, the authentically communicative relationships that enable the construction of flourishing, responsible communities envisaged in Williams, Strawser, Davies and Ross' portrayals of silence,<sup>33</sup> will fail to be either adequately formed or sustained.

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<sup>32</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 103-4.

<sup>33</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1.

## 8.6 A question for further feminist theological discussion

Bringing together different strands of my research, I proposed that feminist theologians' quest for authentic self-expression, and critique and rejection of oppressive faith practices or beliefs, resulted in practices of silence being overlooked as resources in women's search for authenticity. In addition, I suggested inadequate explication of apophatic silence has contributed to misperceptions that egoic surrender into apophatic awareness further silences women. Together, these possible explanations for the neglect of chosen practices of silence in feminist theology engender a question I believe it must now address: has its discourse evaded exploration of contemporary women's chosen silence because, through these, God draws us towards apophatic silence, where egoic identity—prized by feminist theologians—must be relinquished to enable emerging awareness of the graced authenticity of divine union?<sup>34</sup>

Hess states that women within communities of faith should responsibly hold others to account through prophetic care that challenges and confronts failure towards others, subject matter or themselves.<sup>35</sup> Identifying the oversights and misperceptions that provoked the above question can be interpreted as an act of prophetic care towards feminist theology. A comprehensive response is beyond the scope of any individual and the conclusion of this inquiry: it is one which the community of feminist theologians can only begin to answer

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<sup>34</sup> Although Coakley's discussion of *kenosis* points towards a similar query, our different portrayals of meditation and contemplation, discussed in Chapter 3, render our concerns somewhat different. Coakley's kenotic focus is the self-emptying of abusive power and embracing of vulnerability, without any reference to intentional egoic surrender. See Coakley, 'Kenosis and Subversion', particularly 106-110.

<sup>35</sup> Hess, *Caretakers*, 111-112.

together responsibly in dialogue arising from re-membered engagement in ‘the mysterious beauties of *silence* that is freely chosen.’<sup>36</sup>

However, Miller’s identification of the incongruities between women’s different voices offers a significant platform for beginning to reflect on my question.<sup>37</sup> It invites consideration of the possibility that feminist theologian’s ‘personal’ experiences of engagement in cataphatic and apophatic silence are more widespread than their ‘public’ discourse and ‘private’ accounts suggest. Miller proposes that women’s intimate, ‘personal’ voice rarely fits the accounts of their professionally acknowledged ‘public’ voice, or ‘private’ voice used in interaction with others, and may contradict or challenge these, particularly if what is expressed is not thought to be commonly shared or discussed. Placing this alongside the dominance of feminist theology’s agenda to find authentic voice, it becomes apparent how any ‘personal’ engagement in cataphatic practices of silence, and their leading towards surrender of egoic self, could be omitted from its ‘private’ and ‘public’ discourse: seemingly at odds with discourse of its public and private quest, in Bons-Storm’s terminology, ‘personal’ engagement in practices of silence appear to have been rendered ‘unstory’ within the feminist theological community.<sup>38</sup> Miller’s validation of the incongruities between an individual’s different voices illuminates how such discrepancy could occur, and provides an insight that defuses any perceived implication of a lack of integrity amongst feminist theologians in the question I have posed.

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<sup>36</sup> Flinders, *At the Root of this Longing*, 125, emphasis in original.

<sup>37</sup> Miller, ‘Shifting Layers’, discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>38</sup> Bons-Storm, *Incredible Women*, 57, discussed in Chapter 2.

Re-membering chosen silence in women's lives has potential to draw their 'personal' practices towards encounter with authentic selfhood other than and complementary to egoic awareness, and to transform feminist theology's agenda by expanding perceptions of what constitutes authentic identity and responsible relationality within its 'private' and 'public' discourses. Decades have elapsed since feminist theological response to the silencing of women began,<sup>39</sup> and substantial exploration into finding authentic voice to name women's experiences has occurred. Feminist theologians may now be amenable to regarding women's chosen practices of silence with a consideration that would allow these to emerge into the foreground of their discourse, and to reflect afresh on their potential in enabling women to discover authenticity beyond the limits of egoic self. Reclaiming feminist theology's longed-for, fullest expression of women's God-given identity may only be finally realised as, together, we risk choosing to relinquish our gains in egoic self-identity in the assured hope of finding authenticity united in Christ.

### **8.7 A reflection: Into silence**

Mid-morning sunlight glances across the pool as wind ruffles everything in the tree-sheltered glade. Vapour trails from half a dozen planes burst out like fireworks from behind the summit of Simon's Seat, almost mirroring in a cotton-dappled sky the ancient drystone walls which hatch the greening valley into pastures. An old woollen blanket protects me from what lingers of the dawn's chill, though the air is warmed enough now to write without

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<sup>39</sup> Chapter 1 identified David Ford's suggestion that a generational gap may be necessary after a significant occurrence before memories and wisdom to have emerged from this can be distilled into mature reflection. See Ford, 'Apophysis and the Shoah'.

gloves. Down near the abbey ruins lambs are bleating for their mothers—their call and response a punctuating base line for the massed bird choir rejoicing at spring's first sun-filled morn: the Feast of the Annunciation. This day, creation's praise is far from quiet. The sudden hammering of a woodpecker echoes out repeatedly through the pines, not so dissimilar to the occasional sounds of the work-gang resurfacing the narrow drive up to the Hall. The sounds and rhythms of their labours add semi-incongruous human parts to the symphony of the natural world.

Yet this is still a place of silence.

Had they come here, Celtic Christians would have called this a 'thin' place: where any separation between heaven and earth verges on the imperceptible. Instead, text carved in stone around the pool recalls the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus, offering visitors this hope: 'A spring of water welling up to eternal life'. Although a remote and hidden spot, the silence encountered here has little to do with absence. In a few weeks the gardens will buzz with mechanical noise as lawns are cut, trees pollarded and the edges of the formal gardens strimmed into summer neatness. I have been here on such days without any sense that silence is disturbed.

In the centre of the spring-fed pool a simply-dressed young woman sits, cross-legged, on a raft of lily-pads. Her stillness invites those who pass by to pause, drawing them to gaze on her a while. Silently, she faces the world beyond the valley. It seems her maker's intention

was that it would be impossible to look and not notice her hands, patiently held out to accept any offering. She never tires of her charge, is always alert for this to be the moment.

*She sits.*

*And waits.*

*Expectantly.*

*Prohibiting nothing*

*surrendering everything*

*admitting any possibility*

*she embodies being:*

*remaining*

*open to*

*receive*

Enthralled in divine silence, her presence intimates its proximity for those to whom her utterly attentive being is gift.

Kneeling at the edge, we now face each other and, with the delight of first-knowing, I encounter again my need for such silence: to unfurl with the dawn of light alongside myriad other delicate petals before, in seeming unity, all lift their dew-kissed faces and receive the blessing of the sun; to learn from a cloud, articulating itself in ever-shifting shapes at the breath of the wind, what it is to be transformed as the caress of the Spirit whispers its way through my being. Recognising desire to re-member my authentic self, and inspired for that



re-making by created things unashamedly living in the truth of what they are, I find courage to draw closer to the most authentic expression of being I am ready to risk. And to glimpse what I have the capacity to become.

*What if  
gradually  
the grace-given gift  
permeates her heart  
and she overflows  
with love of the giver?*

*I see the raft that bore her  
bare  
and lifting my gaze to wonder  
down the valley she faced these long years  
a woman dances into life  
finally free*

Within silence that transforms their relational world, women are heard beyond speech into the fullness of authentic being—the priceless pearl possessed by those who in beholding are beheld, who in facing are faced, and who in giving, receive.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix 1

### 1a: University of Birmingham Participant Information Sheet

#### **University of Birmingham Doctoral Research: Research Information Sheet for potential participants**

You are being invited to take part in a research study as part of a student project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

#### **Who will conduct the research?**

Alison Woolley. I am supervised by Dr Nicola Slee, Research Fellow at The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Somerset Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2QH.

#### **Title of the Research**

Changing the Subject: from choosing practices of silence to hearing into being.

#### **What is the aim of the research?**

This research project aims to collect information about the practises of silence engaged in by Christian women. Through individual, in depth interviews, the researcher aims to discover something of the breadth of different practises of silence that women consider to play a part in their spiritual journey and/or faith development. The research will explore the meanings that women ascribe to their various experiences of silences, and the impact that each participant feels their engagement with practises of silence has had in their life.

This research is a doctoral project to provide the researcher with information about the role of practises of silence in women's lives of faith.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

The researcher will be inviting up to 20 women to participate in this research project. You have been invited to participate because the researcher believes that your personal experiences of practises of silence can uniquely contribute to a better understanding of the breadth of women's practises of silence, and the role that such practices play in their spiritual development.

#### **What would I be asked to do if I took part?**

Participants would be interviewed individually by the researcher, either in their own homes, or in a neutral location, as the participant chooses. Participants would be asked to consent to the recording of their interview using an unobtrusive MP3 player. Material from the transcript of each interview will be quoted in the final report on the research project, at the researcher's discretion. Within the interview participants will be asked open ended questions about their personal practises of silence, and how the participant understands them to impact upon their spiritual journey and life. Participants should not expect that the researcher will discuss her own practises of silence in detail during the interview. Participants would be free to terminate the interview at any point, without explanation.

The interview process *may* lead participants to consider and discuss emotive aspects of their life. It is suggested that participants think about in advance who they could contact to ask for support, or to discuss further any issues which arise from the interview, should this feel necessary. Participants may find it helpful to alert the person they identify as a source of support, if required, of their intention to participate in a research interview about their practises of silence, and that the participant may request an opportunity to discuss any issues arising from the interview with them.

All participants will be offered transcripts of their own interview, and the opportunity to give any additional comments or feedback to the researcher once they have had an opportunity to review this. Participants will also be offered a copy of any resulting research papers, but not the final PhD thesis.

### **What happens to the data collected?**

The recorded interview material will be transcribed into text by the researcher, who will then highlight all significant comments made by the participant. This will be repeated with the interview material from each participant. Gradually, the significant comments from all of the participants will be grouped into distinct themes or categories, allowing the researcher to see areas of agreement between the participants, and also areas of unique experience.

The researcher will write a report about the findings of the research, which will quote extensively from the transcribed material from the interviews with all participants. The report will highlight areas of common experience and meaning within women's practises of silence, whilst also acknowledging additional insights offered by experiences unique to individual participants. The anonymity of participants will be maintained by not using the actual names of participants (unless expressly asked to use their actual name by an individual participant, in which case a first name only would be used). Transcript data which, in reasonable circumstances, would lead to the identification of any participant, will not be quoted.

### **How is confidentiality maintained?**

All participants in the research project will be given the option of either their actual name being used in the reporting of the findings, or a pseudonym. Those who choose anonymity will be allocated a first name pseudonym, which will remain known only to the researcher. This will be used to identify any electronically stored or paper copies of recorded interview data or transcripts, data derived from these, and in the identification of material in any written work (unless a participant specifically requests that I use their actual name, in which case a first name only will be used). No surnames will be used in any identification. Transcripts and derivative material will be discussed with the researcher's Supervisor and *may* also be subject to peer review by fellow doctoral students for verification of themes and categories.

Any transcript data which, in reasonable circumstances, would lead to the identification of any participant, will not be used in any work, whether in submission to fulfil requirements of the Doctorate, or in any other published work resulting from the research project.

### **What happens to the recordings and transcripts after the research project is finished?**

Access to this information will be restricted to the researcher. The recorded interviews will be deleted from the computer after transcription of each interview is completed. A copy of the recorded interview will be retained on 2 password protected memory sticks and a password protected external hard drive, which will remain in the home of the researcher. These will be stored for a maximum of 10 years. Interview transcripts will be deleted from the computer after the research project has been completed. Transcripts will be retained in electronic form on 2 memory sticks and an external hard drive for 10 years, which will remain in the home of the researcher. Any printed copies of transcripts will be filed and stored securely within the home of the researcher. The 10 year storage of data is required to comply with the regulations of The University of Birmingham Ethics Guidelines.

### **What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will retain this information sheet for your own reference, and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw from the research project at any time, up to the point of any publication which utilises data from your interview, without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself. In this instance any digitally or electronically stored data of any participants who choose to withdraw will be deleted from all storage systems holding such data, and any paper copies of data shredded. It will not then be possible for the participant to reverse this decision and ask for their material to once more be included in the research project.

### **Will I be paid for participating in the research?**

There are no financial incentives available to participants in this research project.

### **What is the duration of the research?**

It is expected that research interview itself will last for between one and one and a half hours, but participants are advised to allow an extra half hour for introduction and conclusion of the meeting.

Participants are also invited to respond in writing to their interview transcript. Any response, and the time taken to construct this, is at the participant's discretion.

### **Where will the research be conducted?**

Participants are invited to choose whether they would prefer to be interviewed in their own home, workplace, or in a more neutral environment. If participants would prefer to be interviewed in a neutral environment it is suggested that, in the first instance, the researcher enquiries of someone named by the participant within the participant's own church or faith community, if their church premises, or personal home could be used for the interview.

### **Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

The report that will be completed as part of this research project is intended for submission for assessment of the researcher's Doctoral degree at The University of Birmingham. It is also the intention of the researcher to seek publication of parts of the research within peer reviewed theological journals, such as *Feminist Theology* (published by Sage) and *Practical Theology* (published by Equinox). If the researcher is awarded her Doctoral degree much of the material submitted in the thesis *may* be published further.

### **Criminal Records Check (if applicable)**

Although it is not necessary for the researcher to obtain a CRB check to conduct this research, she holds a current and full disclosure CRB check certificate because of her paid employment.

### **Contact for further information**

If, having read this information you would like to offer to participate in this research project, my contact details are as follows:

Mrs Alison Woolley,

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet  
and for considering participation in this research project.

## 1b: University of Manchester Participant information Sheet

### **University of Manchester**

#### **Doctorate in Practical Theology Research: Research Information Sheet for potential participants**

You are being invited to take part in a research study as part of a student project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

#### **Who will conduct the research?**

Alison Woolley, Department of Religions & Theology, Samuel Alexander Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL

#### **Title of the Research**

“Silent threads: an exploration of practises of silence in the faith lives of Christian women”

#### **What is the aim of the research?**

This research project aims to collect information about the practises of silence engaged in by Christian women. Through individual, in depth interviews, the researcher aims to discover something of the breadth of different practises of silence that women consider to play a part in their spiritual journey and/or faith development. The research will explore the meanings that women ascribe to their various experiences of silences, and the impact that each participant feels their engagement with practises of silence has had in their life.

This research is a small scale project to provide the researcher with initial information about the role of practises of silence in women’s lives of faith prior to the development of a larger scale, more detailed research project beginning in September, 2009.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

The researcher will be inviting 6 or 7 women to participate in this small scale research project.

You have been invited to participate because the researcher believes that your personal experiences of practises of silence can uniquely contribute to a better understanding of the breadth of women’s practises of silence, and the role that such practices play in their spiritual development.

#### **What would I be asked to do if I took part?**

Participants would be interviewed individually by the researcher, either in their own homes, or in a neutral location, as the participant chooses. Participants would be asked to consent

to the recording of their interview using an unobtrusive MP3 player. Material from the transcript of each interview will be quoted in the final report on the research project, at the researcher's discretion.

Within the interview participants will be asked open ended questions about their personal practises of silence, and how the participant understands them to impact upon their spiritual journey and life. Participants should not expect that the researcher will discuss their own practises of silence during the interview. Participants would be free to terminate the interview at any point, without explanation.

The interview process *may* lead participants to consider and discuss emotive aspects of their life. It is suggested that participants think about in advance who they could contact to ask for support, or to discuss further any issues which arise from the interview, should this feel necessary. Participants may find it helpful to alert the person they identify as a source of support, if required, of their intention to participate in a research interview about their practises of silence, and that the participant may request an opportunity to discuss any issues arising from the interview with them.

All participants will be offered summaries of material from their own interview, and the opportunity to give any additional comments or feedback to the researcher once they have had an opportunity to review the summary provided by the researcher. Participants will also be offered a copy of the resulting research paper.

Participation in this project will not automatically exclude or assume participation in additional interviews as part of the larger scale research project to be developed in September, 2009.

### **What happens to the data collected?**

The recorded interview material will be transcribed into text by the researcher, who will then highlight all significant comments made by the participant. This will be repeated with the interview material from each participant. Gradually, the significant comments from all of the participants will be grouped into distinct themes or categories, allowing the researcher to see areas of agreement between the participants, and also areas of unique experience.

The researcher will write a report about the findings of the research, which will quote extensively from the transcribed material from the interviews with all participants. The report will highlight areas of common experience and meaning within women's practises of silence, whilst also acknowledging additional insights offered by experiences unique to individual participants. The anonymity of participants will be maintained by not using the actual names of participants (unless expressly asked to use their actual name by an individual participant, in which case a first name only would be used). Transcript data which, in reasonable circumstances, would lead to the identification of any participant, will not be quoted.

### **How is confidentiality maintained?**

All participants in the research project will be allocated a first name pseudonym, which will remain known only to the researcher. This will be used to identify any electronically stored or paper copies of recorded interview data or transcripts, data derived from these, and in the identification of material in any written work (unless a participant specifically requests that I use their actual name, in which case a first name only will be used). No surnames will be used in any identification. Transcripts and derivative material will be discussed with the



researcher's Supervisor and *may* also be subject to peer review by fellow doctoral students for verification of themes and categories.

Any transcript data which, in reasonable circumstances, would lead to the identification of any participant, will not be used in any work, whether in submission to fulfil requirements of the Doctorate in Practical Theology, or in any other published work resulting from the research project.

### **What happens to the recordings and transcripts after the research project is finished?**

Access to this information will be restricted to the researcher. The recorded interviews will be deleted from the computer after transcription of each interview is completed. A copy of the recorded interview will be retained on 2 memory sticks and an external hard drive, which will remain in the home of the researcher. These will be stored for 7 years, or until the storage technology is obsolete, whichever is sooner. Interview transcripts will be deleted from the computer after the research project has been completed. Transcripts will be retained in electronic form on 2 memory sticks and an external hard drive, which will remain in the home of the researcher. Any printed copies of transcripts will be filed and stored securely within the home of the researcher.

### **What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will retain this information sheet for your own reference, and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw from the research project at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself.

### **Will I be paid for participating in the research?**

There are no financial incentives available to participants in this research project.

### **What is the duration of the research?**

It is expected that research interview itself will last for between one and one and a half hours, but participants are advised to allow an extra half hour for introduction and conclusion of the meeting .

Participants are also invited to respond in writing to the summary of their interview. Any response, and the time taken to construct this, is at the participant's discretion.

### **Where will the research be conducted?**

Participants are invited to choose whether they would prefer to be interviewed in their own home, or workplace, where appropriate, or in a more neutral environment. If participants would prefer to be interviewed in a neutral environment it is suggested that, in the first instance, the researcher enquires of someone named by the participant within the participant's own church or faith community, if their church premises, or personal home could be used for the interview.

### **Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

The report that will be completed as part of this research project is intended for submission for assessment as part of the researcher's Doctorate in Practical Theology at The University of Manchester. It is also the intention of the researcher to seek publication of the final report within a peer reviewed theological journal, such as Practical Theology (published by Equinox). Data obtained from interviews in this research project are likely to be included in the report of the larger scale research project beginning in September, 2009, and may also be published in any later additional publications resulting from these research projects.

### **Criminal Records Check (if applicable)**

Although it is not necessary for the researcher to obtain a CRB check to conduct this research, she holds a current and full disclosure CRB check certificate because of her paid employment.

### **Contact for further information**

If, having read this information you would like to offer to participate in this research project, my contact details are as follows:

Mrs Alison Woolley,

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet  
and for considering participation in this research project.

Appendix 2

2a: University of Birmingham Consent Form

**University of Birmingham, School of Philosophy, Theology and Religions  
Consent Form for Participants Taking Part in Doctoral Student Research Projects**

**Title of Project:**

Changing the Subject: from choosing practices of silence to hearing into being.

**Name of Researcher BLOCK LETTERS:** ALISON WOOLLEY

**Department:** School of Philosophy, Theology and Religions

**Participant (volunteer)**

Please read this and if you are happy to proceed, sign below.

The researcher has given me my own copy of the participant information sheet which I have read and understood. The information sheet explains the nature of the research and what I would be asked to do as a participant. I understand that the research is for a student project and that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded unless subject to any legal requirements. S/he has discussed the contents of the information sheet with me and given me the opportunity to ask questions about it.

I agree to take part as a participant in this research and I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, and without detriment to myself.

**Signed:**.....

**Date:**

**Family Name BLOCK LETTERS:**

**Other Name(s) BLOCK LETTERS:**

**Researcher**

I, the researcher, confirm that I have discussed with the participant the contents of the information sheet.

**Signed:**.....

**Date:**

**Family Name BLOCK LETTERS:** WOOLLEY

**Other Name(s) BLOCK LETTERS:** ALISON

2b: University of Manchester Consent Form

**University of Manchester, Faculty of Humanities  
Consent Form for Participants Taking Part in Student Research Projects**

**Title of Project:**

“Silent threads: an exploration of practises of silence in the faith lives of Christian women”

**Name of Researcher BLOCK LETTERS:** ALISON WOOLLEY

**Department:** Religions & Theology

**School:** School of Arts, Histories & Cultures, University of Manchester

**Participant (volunteer)**

Please read this and if you are happy to proceed, sign below.

The researcher has given me my own copy of the information sheet which I have read and understood. The information sheet explains the nature of the research and what I would be asked to do as a participant. I understand that the research is for a student project and that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded unless subject to any legal requirements. S/he has discussed the contents of the information sheet with me and given me the opportunity to ask questions about it.

I agree to take part as a participant in this research and I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, and without detriment to myself.

**Signed:**.....

**Date:**

**Family Name BLOCK LETTERS:**

**Other Name(s) BLOCK LETTERS:**

**Researcher**

I, the researcher, confirm that I have discussed with the participant the contents of the information sheet.

**Signed:**.....

**Date:**

**Family Name BLOCK LETTERS:** WOOLLEY

**Other Name(s) BLOCK LETTERS:** ALISON

## Appendix 3

### Interview Schedule

#### **Opening questions:**

- Context - Can you tell me a little about your spiritual **background**?
- ‘Silence’ different things to different people – what does ‘**silence**’ mean for you?

*I’m exploring the range of practises of silence that Christian women perceive as part of their spiritual lives or journeys, & what meaning these silences have for them. So...*

- What would “**silence**” mean for **you** in that context?
- Can you tell me about the **different practises of silence** that you think of as part of your spirituality? (*Have these changed over time?*)
- If you look back, what **made you interested** in exploring using practises of silence as part of your spirituality or faith?
- Have there been times in your life when **silence** has been **particularly important**?
- What is it about practises of silence that **keeps you continuing** with them?
- What might life be like if you **didn’t** have silence in your life?  
(*Are there things you would lose, or miss?*)
- Are there things that make it **difficult for you to continue** with practises of silence?
- How have your practices of silence impacted on your **relationship with God**?
- How have your practices of silence impacted on your **relationship with others**?

*ONLY if not covered earlier:*

- Are there any **other areas of your life** where silence has had an impact?

#### **Concluding question:**

- Is there anything you’d like to add before we finish?

#### **Post interview information/questions:**

**Transcript** – within 2 weeks SAE so you can make any additional comments, corrections

**Data use** in additional publications as result of research? Yes/No

**Actual first name, or pseudonym?** Name/Pseudo (Interview No: ..... Date: .....)

Appendix 4

4a: Full transcript version

Extract from Julay's interview

<p>A: Can you say what that feels like When you find that Really deep silence? (10)</p> <p>J: I think above all actually [laughs] I think it feels kind of good Y'know It feels (6) It feels Well Peace (4) A kind of a joy A joy in it (3) A kind of ex- Pansiveness Y'know Just that there's No walls no boundaries [laughing] Y'know That there's just (5) So much given kind of thing: there's a sense of slight gratitude I think As well p'rhaps That That there's There is Vastness And erm (6) That's all I can describe [laughs] A: Mmm (4) When you think about your practices of silence Is that the only thing that you would Choose to include within it Or Do you think of those earlier stages as being part of that silence As well?</p>	<p>J: Oh yes I do Yes I think that's erm I don't know sort of how it works really But I do think the earlier stages are Are really Important sort of for life Because (3) It's where you kind of Understand What's really going on Y'know What what the true Sort of motives For things are and Y'know What the reality is About feelings and And things like that (12) But other than kind of sitting Erm I I kind of cycle and walk a lot And one of the reasons I like that is Is again Y'know the sort of silence of Erm y'know The activity Is good I like deserts [laughs] [I recall being unsure if this was a metaphor or real.]</p>
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#### 4b: Cleaned up transcript version

The same extract from Julay's interview. A bold 'I' indicates it followed a pause.

Can you say what that feels like When you find that Really deep silence? (10)

I think above all actually [*laughs*] I think it feels kind of good Y'know. It feels (6) It feels Well Peace (4) A kind of a joy A joy in it (3) A kind of ex-Pansiveness Y'know. Just that there's No walls no boundaries [*laughing*] Y'know That there's just (5) So much given kind of thing: there's a sense of slight gratitude. I think As well p'rhaps That That there's There is Vastness. And erm (6) That's all I can describe [*laughs*].

Mmm (4) When you think about your Practices of silence Is that the only thing That you would Choose to include within it, Or That Do you think of those earlier stages as being part of that silence As well?

Oh yes, I do. Yes. I I think that's erm I don't know sort of how it works really But I do think the earlier stages are Are really Important sort of for life Because (3) It's where you kind of Understand What's really going on Y'know What what the true Sort of motives For things are, and Y'know What the reality is About feelings and And things like that. (12)

But other than kind of sitting Erm I I kind of cycle and walk a lot. And one of the reasons I like that is Is again Y'know the sort of silence of Erm y'know The activity Is good. I like deserts [*laughs*] [*I recall not being sure if this was a metaphor, or real.*]

#### 4c: Participant transcript version

The letter sent with a participant's copy of their transcript explained that capitals indicated a pause in their flow of speech. Although it would have been preferable for participants to receive transcripts without these, the time it would have taken to substitute all inappropriate capitals with lower case letters across twenty interview transcripts was prohibitive.

The same extract from Julay's interview.

Can you say what that feels like When you find that Really deep silence?

I think above all, actually, [*laughs*] I think it feels good. It feels, Well, Peace, A joy in it, A kind of Expansiveness, Just that there's No walls, no boundaries [*laughing*]. That there's just So much given there's a sense of slight gratitude. I think, As well perhaps, That There is Vastness. And That's all I can describe [*laughs*].

Mmm. When you think about your Practices of silence Is that the only thing That you would Choose to include within it, Or Do you think of those earlier stages as being part of that silence As well?

Oh yes, I do. Yes. I don't know how it works, really, But I do think the earlier stages Are really Important for life Because It's where you Understand What's really going on, What the true motives For things are, and What the reality is About feelings And things like that.

But other than kind of sitting, I cycle and walk a lot. And one of the reasons I like that Is again the silence of The activity Is good. I like deserts [*laughs*].

4d: Sectioned transcript version

The same extract from Julay's interview.

Can you say what that feels like When you find that Really deep silence?

**24)** I think above all, actually, *[laughs]* I think it feels good. It feels, Well, Peace, A joy in it, A kind of Expansiveness, Just that there's No walls, no boundaries. *[Laughing]* That there's just So much given there's a sense of slight gratitude. I think, As well perhaps, That There is Vastness. And That's all I can describe *[laughs]*.

Mmm. When you think about your Practices of silence Is that the only thing That you would Choose to include within it, Or Do you think of those earlier stages as being part of that silence As well?

**25)** Oh yes, I do. Yes. I don't know how it works, really, But I do think the earlier stages Are really Important for life Because It's where you Understand What's really going on, What the true motives For things are, and What the reality is About feelings And things like that.

**26)** But other than kind of sitting, I cycle and walk a lot. And one of the reasons I like that Is again the silence of The activity Is good. I like deserts *[laughs]* *[I recall not being sure if this was a metaphor, or real.]*



Appendix 5

Final categories list

Cat No.	Category
aaA	Descriptions of what is/isn't silence (external)
aA	Descriptions of what is/isn't silence (internal)
A	Descriptions of specific practices of silence
B	Descriptions of physical experiences/sensations in silence
C	Metaphors for (experiences of) silence
D	Difficulties of silence
E	Comments re <i>silencing</i>
F	Personality impact re silence
G	Mothering
H	Can't do or not good enough self-perception
1	Loss (lack) of silence -ive impact on self
2	Loss (lack) of silence -ive impact on rel with other
3	Absence
4	Presence or not absence
5	Internal silence, apophatic (not cataphatic) practice
6	Apophatic
7a	Rare or scarce
7b	Gift or highly valued
8	To Be
9	Sustain being
10	Resourcing, refreshing & carried with
11a	Dev. deeper self-knowledge, awareness
11b	Place of self-honesty, truth, integrity
12	Place of (spiritual) growth & change, journeying
13	Newness, creativity, birthing
14	Reflection
15	Freedom from expectations
15b	Other freedom or liberation
16	Space from external stimuli
17	Space from (verbal) interaction with others
18a	Acceptance of forgiveness from God
18b	Self-acceptance or self-forgiveness
19	Healing place
20a	Safe or comforting/able place
20b	Not safe or comfortable
20c	Silence & conflict or challenge
21	Free from (male) language
22	Ineffability or difficulty of words to express
23	Different experience of language (S as place where lang exp differently)

<b>Cat No.</b>	<b>Category</b>
24	Other forms of knowing or expression
25	Place of (holding) paradox or contradiction
26	Hold pain
27	Letting go of control or submitting
28	Place of openness (space-wise, not as in rel to God etc)
29	Silence & death
30	Contentment or happiness
31a	Value silence in secular heritage
31b	Value silence in spiritual/sacred heritage
32	Value silence in worship
33a	Structure or support needed in silence
33b	Silence & stillness, solitude, space, simplicity
34	Relationship with God
35	Openness to God
36	Communal Relationship with God & others in Silence
37	Whole person, all of life before
38	Encounter with God/'love'
39	To hear God speak directly (auditory, images etc)
40	To hear God speak more indirectly (scripture, nature, others)
41	Silence to distance from God
42	Connection with God as Creator
43	Silence in nature
44	Heightened attention or awareness
44b	S. as non-temporal, non-linear, beyond usual boundaries, present moment
45a	Communal silence
45b	Connection to others across space/time in silence
46	Silence leading to acceptance of others (& <i>vice versa</i> )
47	Valuing the place of Silence in (deepening) relationships
48	Acknowledging. value of silence for others
48b	Silence in work/ministry context
49	Silence of self to hear others
50	Silence allowing other to be heard/understood connection
50b	Silence of self to allow others' encounter with God
51	Silence allowing other to reflect
52	Silence to hear own self when with others
53	Silence of self allowing others increased self knowledge etc
54	Perceived need for silence in world/other's lives
55	Complexity of silence
56	Cycle of silence offered to others → changes in self

Appendix 6

6a: Transcription coding example

Extract from Rachel's interview

S7): A: *What might life be like Without silence?* (9)

36) I just Fear, Erm What I fear [Laughs] Is that Erm I could have, I mean I, I know I keep on talking About this in terms of my role and My vocation rather than A more holistic, Y'know, who I am, but I think I do experience the fear in terms of Of my Role in full time ministry. Erm I fear that I could have what Feels like Superficially Erm Quite a successful Ministry, Y'know, I can string two words together in a sermon, I can do event organisation, y'know, I'm Quite good at talking to people, and empa...Yeah, I can, I could almost Can Do all that sort of stuff. Erm And I fear that I could Carry on doing it: everybody's very pleased with it, Y'know, I've a very Successful ministry In that sort of way, And Erm Then Wake up one day and Think "I don't believe a word of it," or Y'know, I I would end up as I say I [laughs] Fear Other colleagues might end up: erm An empty Shell that is It all looks ok from the outside, Erm But that My...the Sense of connection, the sense of base, or whatever, Has just gone. I mean, In a sense, Going into silence Can be quite Scary because It is a time To ex...To Give the space to examine, Y'know, "Do I still believe in god?" [laughing]

A: Mmm

37) Erm it's 'Cause you're doing it All the time: "I believe in god," I'm praying to god, You're talking about god, You know, Self-evidently To everybody, Including yourself, you believe in god, Erm Obviously [laughs] [A joins in with gentle laugh] 'Cause you're talking about it all the time. Erm But in stillness You get to test the Erm Test the theory against the practice. Erm And as I say I I think that is genuinely part of the scariness of it because Silence for me is a time of erm Of testing authenticity and integrity and truthfulness, And you might come across the horrible [laughing] Conclusion that When you go into silence You meet yourself, And you think, y'know, "I just don't believe any more!" Erm But erm I'm willing to risk doing that Annual check rather than Carry along for Sort of y'know years until Either you burn out or you just wake up one day and think "Why am I doing this?" y'know, "I don't believe this any more." Erm And that going through the motions Is In what even might Still be quite a successful sort of ministry Is one of my great fears. (3.5)

A: Mmm. *That touches on some of the ways that silence is Difficult. What other ways is it difficult?* (11)

38) Well I've talked already about the The meeting yourself and not liking yourself.

A: Mmm (3)

39) And I've sometimes felt that Erm To the extent that erm I suppose I've been r... Quite worried that I could almost tip over into depression in silence with Erm You know you worry about, Or I worry about the fact that Erm Generally I'm, You know, When you're Busy busy You've always got something to distract you. When you stop, when you meet yourself, you don't like yourself, you've still got three days to go. Erm I usually get very tired, I fall ...so I sleep a lot. I don't feel, Y'know I feel horrible, Erm And I, Y'know I worry. Erm it's a it's a bit like Erm Yeah when you stop for Christmas and easter, Or after Christmas and easter, You always get ill Erm Because your Adrenaline level Has been So high For so many weeks That erm All the illnesses are staved off, and then You stop, Your adrenaline levels go down and You immediately get all the Illnesses that have been lurking at the door and Erm, You know, I I have Felt so Immediately just horrible - 'cause generally I'm quite a sort of positive happy person - Erm But I thought "Oh my god, I'm going I'm going to slip over into depression, And there'll be no climbing out of it. Eurgh!" [laughing at the beginning of Q, faked terror by end] [A laughs] Erm It's as scary as that, I think, when erm When I do When I do go into silence. I[t]...it hasn't happened but I don't know that it That it never would. I don't know. Erm That's That is scary.

40) And Erm (3) And Sometimes I just get Fed up with it all, Erm Just Want company, just Just get Sometimes I just get Fed up. Erm I have gone and Switched the television on and watched Rubbish tv, Erm And then regretted it. Erm But it just doesn't Almost a, Y'know, "Oh, What are you playing... Don't be stupid." A sort of Wanting to There's, Well, Maybe it's a Temptation: the wanting to Deny The sort of Holiness of it all: "Oh...For goodness' sake, Grow up." Erm [Laughing] And there's There's that. Erm (5) The last time I went on retreat Was the first time that - Erm I've I've sort of gone gradually: I went to Erm The franciscan friary where I spent most of the time by myself, So I was silent but At meal times You met people, And usually they were talking meals. Erm Or there was tea and coffee time, So I could go and get company. Then I I moved into a A retreat in a house That was kept silent. So you were With other people you didn't know, But you were silent. Then this last time was the first time that I've Been To A place where Not only is it silent but you hardly see anybody as well. Erm And I I did get a bit lonely, I'm sort...it was only a bit 'cause mostly I was really enjoying it but I was a bit lonely and I I sort of solved that for myself by I went on a walk, Erm On a well known walk that was well frequented So that I Erm I met lots of people, but all you had to say was hello to them because they were on the same path, but I was w...With people: in a sense I needed to go out and just make Human contact again 'cause Erm In a sense that was another step, Going and being Almost Completely by yourself as well. So I think those are the erm Those are the difficulties I've come across.

A: Mmm



6b: Section of category total comments table for all participants (Numbered 1-20)

Cat	Label	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
aaA	Descript. of is/isn't external S.	2	1	-	-	1	5	3	3	3	1	3	2	2	1	3	4	2	1	2	3
aaA	Descript. of is/isn't internal S.	4	2	1	6	-	3	4	3	2	3	4	2	1	4	5	4	2	4	1	7
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
A	Descript. of specific practices of S.	10	13	5	13	12	1	17	11	7	8	5	3	12	9	10	6	12	9	12	11
B	Descriptions of physical experiences/sensations in S.	2	5	2	3	2	1	1	4	6	8	8	4	5	5	7	2	3	13	5	6
C	Metaphors for (experiences of) S.	3	6	5	9	5	6	-	6	5	8	8	4	5	9	4	14	5	6	1	6
D	Difficulties of S.	9	9	3	22	10	4	22	15	10	6	4	5	13	13	13	5	11	7	3	13
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
E	Comments re <i>silencing</i>	1	2	2	4	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
F	Personality impact re S.	4	2	2	2	2	-	2	-	-	3	6	-	1	3	5	2	2	-	-	4
G	Mothering	-	8	2	1	7	1	-	1	-	1	1	4	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	4
H	Can't do or not good enough self perception (Also see Cat 22)	-	2	-	-	-	2	4	1	1	-	1	1	-	3	-	1	1	1	1	-
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1	Loss (lack) of S –ive impact on self	1	4	5	2	6	8	-	3	3	4	3	2	3	7	3	1	5	3	7	3
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	1
2	Loss (lack) of S –ive impact on rel & others	-	3	-	-	2	4	-	2	1	2	5	1	1	6	2	-	-	1	2	2
3	Absence	-	-	1	-	1	1	3	1	1	3	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	-	1	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4	Presence or not absence	-	-	1	8	4	-	5	2	9	8	5	2	2	2	5	3	1	3	4	4
5	Internal S, apophatic (not cataphatic) practices	3	1	2	8	-	3	6	3	3	-	2	1	4	3	8	2	4	1	-	8
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
6	Apophatic	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
7a	Rare or scarce	3	1	1	2	2	8	1	2	1	2	-	2	8	4	1	-	5	-	2	3
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2
7b	As gift or highly valued	1	1	1	-	2	5	1	2	1	1	1	5	6	9	5	2	-	2	2	1
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
8	To be	4	9	9	4	9	6	21	4	11	8	9	6	8	5	10	7	9	7	7	9
9	Sustain being	4	7	7	7	9	7	5	3	3	7	7	5	10	11	11	8	7	8	18	7
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
10	Resourcing, refreshing, carried with	3	6	8	4	1	5	5	1	-	5	7	2	7	10	10	2	4	5	11	4
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
11a	Dev. Deeper self knowledge, awareness	1	10	5	5	4	-	-	2	4	1	5	-	-	4	5	13	5	4	3	5
	<i>Contra</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

6c: Section of descending total category comments table

Final column is number of women to comment in this category. C followed by number = number of these women who only make *contra* comments.

Category	Label	Total No. of affirmative comments	Total No. of contra/challenge comments	Total No. of comments	Total No. of women to comment
D	Difficulties of silence	197	2	199	All
A	Descriptions of specific practices of silence	188	-	188	All
8	To Be	161	-	161	All
9	Sustain being	151	3	154	All
11b	Place of self-honesty, truth, integrity	131	2	133	18
12	Place of (spiritual) growth & change, journeying	128	-	128	19
47	Valuing the place of S in (deepening) relationships	120	7	127	19
C	Metaphors for (experiences of) silence	111	-	111	18
38	Encounter with God/love	104	2	106	18
34	Relationship with God	105	-	105	19
10	Resourcing, refreshing & carried with	100	1	101	19
45a	Communal silence	91	10	101	All
32	Value silence in worship	65	29	94	All
13	Newness, creativity, birthing	87	-	87	All
11a	Dev. deeper self knowledge awareness	84	2	86	18
B	Descriptions of physical experiences/sensations in silence	82	-	82	All
48b	Silence in work/ministry context	81	1	82	17
20a	Safe or comforting/able place	81	-	81	19
1	Loss (lack) of silence -ive impact on self	75	3	78	19
20b	Not safe or comfortable	75	-	75	17
33b	S. & stillness, solitude, space, simplicity	67	3	70	17
14	Reflection	66	3	69	17 (c1)
4	Presence or not absence	68	-	68	17
aA	Descriptions of what is/isn't silence (internal)	63	1	64	18
44	Heightened attention or awareness	63	-	63	18
5	Internal silence, apophatic (not cataphatic)	62	1	63	17
15b	Other freedom or liberation	57	4	61	17
22	Ineffability or difficulty of words to express	57	-	57	18
27	Letting go of control (or submitting)	57	-	57	14



6d: Mind map and planning example



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