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Swedenborgian Church, S.F.

James 3:13-18

Mark 9:30-37

Is Silence Always Golden? The Wisdom of Speech for a Faith that Grows

We've all heard the phrase "silence is golden." But I hadn't realized until recently that the full aphorism is: "Speech is silver; silence is golden." Today I would like to explore with you the role of both speech and silence in our faith life especially as a community we call Church, in large part because not all silence is golden, and not all speech is silver. There's nothing inherently precious about either. Instead, speech and silence become precious through spiritual discipline. And one way to cultivate a spiritual discipline for speech and silence comes from our bellies. Let me explain.

My reflections for today began over a month ago. I was on retreat in Marin County exploring the Japanese understanding of *Hara*.¹ On that retreat we were exploring how speech that emanates from the deepest core of our bodies—our bellies—resonates with a profound wisdom that is very different from speech that springs from our minds.

¹ See Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, *Hara. The Vital Center of Man*. (1956; trans. 1962).

During those days of retreat, we noticed how we began to walk more slowly;

- we spoke more deliberately;
- and we listened more intently.
- Our breathing flowed more deeply.

Fewer words elicited deeper meaning. In large part this meaning came from the silence that we were allowing ourselves in between our words.

We discovered and experienced that this different mode of speaking came from the wisdom from the core of our bodies, from our bellies.

If you've ever been on a spiritual retreat you probably know what a shock it is to come back to our ordinary lives. This time I anticipated having more than the usual challenges. Even though I live a relatively mild mannered life, I had a feeling it would be difficult to continue talking from my belly. And it was.

- I couldn't keep up with the friendly banter of the effervescent checker at Trader Joes.
- People calling me on my cell phone kept interrupting: "hello, hello, are you still there?"
- But it was when I checked in on Facebook that I was jolted out of my contemplative complacency:

A friend's status line read: "Silence is golden. Except when you have two toddlers. Then it's sinister." My body stiffened.

As a long-time practitioner of silent meditation and silent prayer and as a strong introvert, I was befuddled. "What does this mean?" I wondered. Silence sinister?

It turned out that for this young mother, her toddlers had discovered the whimsical beauty of an unrestrained roll of toilet paper. For the few minutes they had been busy unrolling it, they had fallen into an unusual silent state, mesmerized by the bounty of light fluffy paper curling and swirling around the tile floor.

Clearly silence in a house with toddlers means: "uh oh. They're up to something." Silence signals the need to investigate.

Sometimes the same is true for adults: uh oh...we're up to something...

We see that in our Gospel passage for today when the disciples enter the house in Capernaum. They've really been fighting among themselves about which one is the greatest, but they don't want to admit it. How embarrassing to be caught in the act, bickering, "I'm the greatest," "na uh...I am."

Jesus turns to them, and in my imagination, he uses the same voice my father did when my family took road trips when I was a kid. From the driver's seat of his Ford station wagon, he'd shift the rear view mirror onto us in the back seat and say, "What's going on back there?"

If we said anything it was, “Nothing....” But usually we were stone quiet.

The disciples do the same thing: they’re silent.

Out of their embarrassment, shame, and maybe even fear, they chose to silence themselves.

This isn’t the same kind of silence I was practicing on retreat. This isn’t a silence that stems from Hara. It comes from somewhere else. It’s a silence that shuts down real communication.

This is a silence that can severely harm communities of faith.

The other example of silence from our Gospel similarly does not stem out of Hara. After Jesus has secured a time and place for solitude with his followers, he gives them his final teachings before he is to die. But the disciples are so overwhelmed with fear, they are silent. They choose to respond with silence rather than risk learning what could become even more edgy, difficult, challenging.

This is a silence that grows out of fear; it isn’t a silence than stems from Hara. This too can harm communities of faith.

The Gospels are clear in relating that the earliest disciples struggled mightily in their faith. And who could blame them. What they experienced was so new, so anticipated and yet unexpected: God-made-human among them.

But what texts offer models for our own faith, today in the 21st century, when we've grown more accustomed to the idea of God becoming a human?

Almost a century after the earliest disciples, as Christian communities were developing, the letter of James was written. We know that this letter was written to an established community of Christians who were struggling with internal conflict and differences of opinion. Like all communities that are growing or transitioning, this one struggled with how to handle the internal dissension. The author of this letter wrote to the community in order to offer advice on how to manage the conflicts.

Early on he summarizes his advice: "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger [James 1:19]. That sounds similar to what I had heard on retreat.

- Listen first
- Speak...in time

The fruits of this advice are summed up in the passage we read for today: The fruits are works done with gentleness that are born from wisdom. I would include works of speech in this. This seems to me to be an example of speaking from Hara.

Finally there is a Christian text that you won't find in your Bibles but that sums up a wise balance of silence and speech; discernment and action comes from the gospel of Thomas, a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. The text dates from around 200, so even later than the

Letter of James. And yet its wisdom is deep. In this gospel, Jesus is attributed with the following words, “If you bring forth that which is in you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is in you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

This sums up the Christian form of Hara. Within us at our core is a source of wisdom from which can flow wise speech and equally wise silence. I believe we are all called both to speak and to be silent. And our community of faith will grow in wisdom when we offer both our wise speech and wise silence to it in peace and gentleness.