

Welcoming Silence¹

*“Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning,
that without listening speaking no longer heals . . .”*

– Henri J. M. Nouwen²

As I have come of age, my country has been reminded of the far-reaching consequences of the sins of its childhood. Over recent years, several well-publicized tragedies have resurrected the issues of race and racism in our collective American consciousness. We have been compelled to acknowledge that a few decades spent trying not to talk about race have neither healed the scars of slavery and Jim Crow nor obliterated less apparent systems of racial oppression.

Much digital ink has flowed on Facebook and Twitter—the new public square—following these tragedies: the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, nine black churchgoers in Charleston, Laquan McDonald . . . the list continues to swell. The tweets, posts, and comments have followed broadly predictable scripts, with some asserting that these events are clear symptoms of ongoing racial oppression in our society and others desperately attempting to portray them as the result of anything other than racial bias.

The biracial son of a mom from Wisconsin and a dad from Jamaica, I spent the first decade of my life in the diverse San Francisco Bay Area and the second in the predominantly white suburbs of Minneapolis. I now attend an overwhelmingly white evangelical university

¹ I would like to thank [redacted for anonymity], [redacted for anonymity], and [redacted for anonymity] for their comments on this essay.

² Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2004), 6.

in [redacted for anonymity]. Through all this time, I have been largely oblivious toward the realities of racial tension in America. Having rarely suffered discrimination rising above the level of microaggression, I have generally been able to ponder racial injustice in abstract, dispassionate terms. However, as I have become increasingly aware of the racial tensions beneath the shimmering surface of American culture, my reflections on race have been animated by a sense of anger. I have become angry about the 400-year history of racial oppression on this continent and angry about the denial that characterizes many white responses to that history.

This anger burned most fiercely in response to what I viewed as bewilderingly callous defenses of the Confederate flag after the mass shooting in Charleston in June of this year. I was furious as I encountered a startling number of people on social media—not all strangers—declaring the flag a symbol of “Heritage, not hate” and trivializing the emotional response many have to it as a symbol of slavery and segregation. (A particularly memorable meme, shared by a dead-serious classmate, drew a dazzling comparison between the offense felt by many at the display of the Confederate flag and the offense felt by Minnesota Vikings fans at the display of Green Bay Packer paraphernalia.)

Staring at the screen of my MacBook Air, I felt like an invisible man with a silent voice. I could speak through a post, comment, or tweet, putting myself at risk of being seen as petulant. However, I had a growing sense that even if I allowed the cold fire of anger to spring forth from its lodging place under my lungs, I would not really be heard. As Ta-Nehisi Coates tweeted shortly after the shooting, “There never seems to be much time for anger, sorrow, even hate, for black people.”³ I suspected that if my voice, if not simply lost in the torrent of other voices on Facebook and Twitter, would encounter largely dismissive or reactive responses.

³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, Twitter post, June 21, 2015, 8:20am, <http://twitter.com/tanehisicoates>.

I began to wonder how conversations about race in America would be altered by a simple willingness on the part of white America to be silent—to allow for silences that could be filled with the resonant voices of black Americans.

This is not an essay on race. It is, rather, an essay on silence. Specifically, it is an essay on the moral value of exercising hospitality through silence: welcoming silence that creates space for the voice of the “other.”⁴ Perhaps especially in our culture—a racially, religiously, and politically diverse culture where silence is often buried in a cascade of noise—this welcoming of the other through silence is a vital exercise of virtue.

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Hospitality, like all philosophical concepts of significance, cannot easily be defined with precision. Even so, we all have a general sense of what it means to welcome another and of how it feels to be welcomed by another. Hospitality, as I broadly define it, is the willingness to allow others to *be* “other” *in our presence*. It is an exercise of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Practicing radical hospitality is often painful, complicated, and exhausting; perfect hospitality is arguably unattainable for creatures like us in a world like ours.

Silence is a crucial element of hospitality. Our voices, our ambassadors to those around us, can only be welcomed by being welcomed into silence.

Silence is the blank canvas upon which noise gains its legibility; it is that in which our voices live and move and have their being. Often spoken of in reverent tones, silence is not inherently sacred. Like the desert floor upon which Moses encountered the God of his

⁴ References to “self” and “other” are common in modern philosophy, but it seems fitting to acknowledge my indebtedness to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. See Levinas’s *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Champaign, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

ancestors, silence is holy because of that which makes its home in silence. Chopin's *Nocturne in C minor*, a Chris Rock comedy routine, the laughter of a close friend, Drake's "Hotline Bling"—all these must be immersed in silence in order for their meaning to be preserved.

Without silence, our voices cannot be shown hospitality, and, by extension, neither can we.

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The desert of silence is, ironically, fertile ground; torrential noise lays waste to the harvest.

We live in a noisy culture, which banishes silence at almost every opportunity. It would be easy to rhapsodize on various sources of noise in this modern American life (entertainment, news, political debate, sports, advertising, etc.). I will limit my reflections on the current lack of silence—a lack I've found striking as I've reflected on the racial conflicts of recent years—to the exploration of two ubiquitous sources of insidious "silent" noise.

The first of these wellsprings of noise is the pure interiority of consciousness.

The observation that our voices, in order to be heard, must be welcomed by "external" silence is so obvious as to be trivial. It is less obvious, but just as obviously true, that after traversing external silence from speaker's mouth to hearer's ear, the voice must encounter a certain sort of "internal" silence in order to be received in its fullness.

To speak is to break silence, and we routinely sacrifice silence on the altar of our desire for self-expression. The vast majority of our speech, however, never crosses our lips. Rather, it takes the form of an ongoing internal monologue (or, perhaps, dialogue).

I tend to value the chatter in my own mind above the voices of those around me. Whenever I listen to a speech, read a book, or simply browse Facebook, my mind latches on to various details of arguments that are being made, seeking out bits of fallacy and foolishness to object to—or, if I happen to be in a sunny mood, searching for arguments which could be structured more tightly or articulated in more delightful prose. Of course, this is exactly what I have been trained to do over the course of my undergraduate education in philosophy. This sort of critical ear makes for a smart philosopher and a slick debater.

It doesn't make for a hospitable listener. Through the noise of my silent internal monologue, I fail to allow for welcoming silence in which the voice of the other may dwell in its richness. Like the words of an author obscured by marginalia, the voice of the other is lost in a sea of interpretation. If not utterly erased, it is reduced to a dry mechanism for advancing arguments—instead of welcoming it as the ambassador of an external “Thou,” I process it as the purely analytical input of an external “It.”⁵ In this way, I ultimately avoid exercising hospitality toward the other almost as effectively as if I constantly interrupted him or her. (None of this is meant to suggest that a critical mind is the enemy of hospitality—we *should* critically process the ideas and arguments we receive from others, but we should process *after* receiving these ideas and arguments in their fullness.)

While the inner voice of the mind is eminently private, the second wellspring of silent noise I wish to reflect on is eminently public. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, social media is the new public square. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram . . . to these we dutifully flock to share our thoughts, to vent, to grieve, to preen—sometimes all at once.

When I open the Facebook app, I am greeted with blank spaces set aside for my words—sometimes explicitly asking me to share my thoughts (“What’s on your mind?”). I

⁵ My reference to “I-Thou” vs. “I-It” relationships is, of course, borrowed from the work of Martin Buber. See Buber’s *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

obligingly post or comment and am offered some degree of social validation through vaguely appreciative “likes.” This positive feedback loop creates the impression of a welcoming silence.

Of course, when it comes to “likes,” to receive is better than to give. Social media, by nature, is highly production-focused; it encourages us to focus on what we want to say rather than on what others are saying. As a result, the pages of Facebook, Twitter, etc., are inundated with emaciated voices (a voice crammed into 140 characters is an emaciated voice). Even if we speak in tongues of angels, if we speak through social media, we are clanging gongs—gongs no one wants to listen to and over which no one can be heard.

The noise of social media spills over into the rest of our lives in the form of near-constant notifications. Following the birth of smartphone and its younger sibling the smartwatch, few silences are safe from the pops and pings which invite us to re-enter the vibrant but somehow hollow world of constant connection.⁶

Undoubtedly, we often refuse to allow for welcoming silences because we dislike or fear the voices those silences may be filled with. It seems likewise undeniable, however, that our failures to allow for welcoming silence are often not the results of conscious effort, but rather the side-effects of noisy habits—habits that we easily overlook. As we become conscious of the silent noise of our private minds and digital public square, we may find it easier to fall silent, making space for voices we would do well to hear.

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⁶ My thoughts on social media have been broadly influenced by Jacob Silverman’s insightful *Terms of Service: Social Media and the Price of Constant Connection* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

Silence, exercised as a form of hospitality for “the widow and the orphan,” the oppressed and disenfranchised, seems obviously virtuous. It likewise appears virtuous when used to welcome voices we disagree with but do not find particularly vile. However, are we morally obligated to create welcoming silences for racist, sexist, homophobic, or generally prejudiced voices? Is hospitality for inhospitable voices counter-productive?

In this cultural moment, we are swift to view disagreement in the terms of warfare and to view those who disagree with us as not simply mistaken or ignorant but oppressive. We often assume that we should silence oppressive, inhospitable voices in order to protect the oppressed. The catch is that, in the contexts of various “culture wars,” each side views the other as oppressive and therefore dangerous. For example (and here I speak in almost criminally broad terms), liberals view conservatives as oppressive for their rejection of abortion, euthanasia, and gay marriage, and conservatives view liberals as oppressive for their support of these three.

We are faced with a dilemma. It is hard to see how the most intractable conflicts in our society can be mediated without a willingness on the part of both sides to leave silences open for the allegedly oppressive views of the other to fill. In allowing for such silences, however, we may fail in our duty to protect the oppressed.

Since we speak of our cultural controversies as culture *wars*, it seems reasonable to look to the ethics of war in order to determine a way past this moral quandary. Of course, physical war is composed of unimaginable horrors, and our conduct in conversation rarely carries the moral gravity of soldiers’ conduct in warfare. Still, speech can be *violent*, as can the suppression of speech, so analogies can easily be drawn between verbal dispute and physical war.

Pacifism, the affirmation of nonviolence as the proper response to violence, parallels the welcome of all voices at all times. Such radical nonviolence, when applied to the context

of (physical) war, has three main motivations. First, it is motivated by the understanding that, even when practiced in self-defense or defense of defenseless others, violence results in “moral injury” to the one who acts violently.⁷ Second, it is motivated by the conviction that by refusing to respond to violence with violence one honors the human dignity of all. Third, it is motivated by the hope that suffering violence without responding in kind will, in some mysterious way, strip evil of its power.

These three motivations can all support a willingness to show radical hospitality to all voices. First, showing inhospitality to inhospitable voices causes moral injury since, in doing so, one *practices* inhospitality—inhospitality that, I suspect, one thus becomes more likely to exercise toward threatening but *not* oppressive voices (like the voices of black Americans I mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this essay). Second, by showing a willingness to hear all voices, one affirms the inherent dignity of all human beings. Third, by letting evil be voiced, one allows it to be seen for the empty, vicious thing that it is.

There seems to be good reason, then, to welcome all voices at all times. However, while pacifism is popular, many view it as unsatisfactory in the face of atrocities like the Holocaust. It may likewise be unsatisfactory in the face of certain sorts of oppressive speech (e.g., hate speech).

Just war theories offer what may be seen as more practical or “grounded” responses to oppression and violence than pure nonviolence. These theories emphasize, first, the defense of the defenseless, second, self-defense, and third, the fittedness of violent response to violent instigation (for example, they urge strongly against the killing of non-combatants).

Just war theory, applied to the ethics of welcoming silence, suggests that when the privileged use their voices to denigrate the oppressed (in the presence of the oppressed), we

⁷ For a recent articulation of this “moral injury” objection to just war, see Robert Emmet Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

have a responsibility to “close” the silences these voices depend on. Further, we may justifiably deny silence to voices which directly threaten us—for example, I need not humor certain racist voices. However, just war theory warns us to be wary of the ways in which “limited inhospitality” can swiftly evolve into broad inhospitality. Just as we are not justified in killing civilians simply because we are justified in killing soldiers, we are not justified in exercising inhospitality toward *everything* a person has to say simply because *some* of what they have to say is threatening to the oppressed.

By applying a just war approach to various “culture wars,” we can see that there will *always* be times when it is fitting to exercise hospitality toward even the most morally wretched voices—namely, times when the oppression carried in those voices is not targeted toward anyone within earshot. For example, I may be obligated, as a straight male, to create welcoming silences for sexist or homophobic voices in certain private contexts. My white friends may likewise be called to exercise hospitality toward racist voices—but not necessarily in my presence.

A common objection to just war theory is that almost *any* act of war can be described so as to fit the criteria of a “just” war.⁸ While the mention of “pacifism” may call to mind images of ivory-tower idealists, the mention of “just war” may call to mind images of overzealous medieval crusaders marching off to Jerusalem. Perhaps, instead of fully embracing either nonviolence or just war, we should pursue a middle road.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, we get a glimpse of the moral logic that allowed him, a radical pacifist, to join an assassination plot against Hitler. Bonhoeffer argues that in the midst of the chaos of this world, we cannot wash our hands of evil—in fact, God may

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas raises this objection in debate with Nigel Biggar. See Justin Brierley, “Just War vs. Pacifism—Nigel Biggar and Stanley Hauerwas,” *Unbelievable?* Podcast, November 18, 2014, <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-Just-War-vs-Pacifism-Nigel-Biggar-Stanley-Hauerwas>.

command us to pursue concrete paths of loving action that are *evil* and for which we must repent.⁹

Inspired by Bonhoeffer, we may declare that it is indeed good for us to practice hospitality in all things. We may hold that inhospitality is *always* wrong. However, we may also recognize that, as Bonhoeffer writes, “Only at the cost of self-deception may [we] keep [our] private blamelessness clean from the stains of responsible action in the world.”¹⁰

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to embrace, and a time to exclude; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.¹¹ There is a time to practice hospitable silence, even for the voices of those we find insufferable or wicked. There is also a time to exercise inhospitality toward certain heinous voices, although this “necessary evil” should be cause for lament, not self-congratulation. In order to navigate these troubled waters, we must cultivate a sort of moral agility—perhaps best described as discernment.

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I have always appreciated impressionism more than painstakingly detailed works of art, as the agile, seemingly effortless brushstrokes capture something of the *liveliness* of the world. This essay is, clearly, more impressionistic than detail-oriented. There are a host of issues I have—by choice, negligence, or necessity—failed to touch upon, and the issues I

⁹ Many thanks to my friend [redacted for anonymity] for introducing me to this reading of Bonhoeffer’s ethics. It should be noted that Bonhoeffer’s moral logic is explicitly *theological*, so further reflection would be necessary to satisfactorily apply his thought to a broadly secular context.

On Bonhoeffer’s pacifism, see his *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 131-136. On Bonhoeffer’s response to the inescapable moral “messiness” of the world, see his *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 76-102 and 380-387. See especially 385-386.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 80.

¹¹ This is almost a direct quote of Ecclesiastes 3:1, 5b, 7b (NRSV). I have altered the original slightly to allude to the title of Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

have given a cursory glance could be delved into far more thoroughly. I regret none of this, as modern philosophy has a tendency to miss the painting for the chemical composition of the paint.

The picture I have sketched is as follows. We live in a culture filled with tensions and conflicts, old and new. In order for us to have any hope of flourishing together, we must learn to exercise hospitality toward one another, allowing those who *are* “other” to *be* other *in our presence*. Fundamental to this practice of hospitality in the face of division and distrust is the simple willingness to allow for silences—welcoming silences, in which the voice of the other can dwell in all its irreducible strangeness. The cultivation of welcoming silence requires that we notice and, at times, minimize or eliminate the noise that surrounds us—perhaps especially the “silent” noises that reverberate between our ears and throughout social media. Finally, while welcoming silences are often straightforwardly good, especially when provided for those who, like black people in America, have for too long been forced into silence, they are much less straightforwardly good when they create space for the voices of those who perpetuate oppressive, inhospitable ideologies. Confronted with such inhospitable voices, we may sometimes find it our duty to act inhospitably—but we should do so with sorrow rather than the bravado of crusaders.

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I introduced this essay with a reflection on the way that, in the midst of recent arguments over race and racism, I have felt silenced by a lack of silence. I hope that the noise of my writing inspires the creation of welcoming silences, especially in contexts where the voices of the oppressed are presently obliterated by noise.

I hope that, if nothing else, this essay reminds *me* to allow for welcoming silences in my encounters with the various "others" in my life—family, friends, classmates, coworkers, irksome strangers on Facebook. I hope to become increasingly willing to welcome silence, and, through silence, my neighbor. And I hope that, as a result, the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart would be ever more worthy of the silences they fill.

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