

A GLOSSARY ON SILENCE

Ellie Wadsworth

Amplify

It seems paradoxical for the first section in an essay titled Silence to be called “Amplify.” And while, yes, ‘silence’ has the opposite meaning of ‘amplify’ when you take the time to truly sit in silence, your thoughts and emotions feel as though they’re being plugged into a speaker and become amplified inside your brain. The overpowering sound of silence can be enough to make someone’s skin crawl.

Brushing Teeth

Camping has many enjoyments to it, and as an experienced camper I know them well, but my favorite of all is brushing my teeth outdoors. The common routine of putting toothpaste on a toothbrush becomes so much more interesting when you are doing it at the foot of a waterfall. Instead of the sound of a running sink, one can hear the sound of water hitting against rocks falling into a flowing abyss. Meanwhile, a bird chirps overhead, soaring through the empty sky. I see myself from the bird’s view, standing on an outstretched flat boulder brushing my teeth. I am quiet. I am listening.

Cochlear Implant

A cochlear implant is an electrical device surgically implanted into the ear that allows for the detection of sound for someone who has a hearing impairment.

Cox, Trevor

The author of “Quietest Places in the World,” Trevor Cox, argues that the human ear is so sensitive that it can’t actually hear silence. Humans can’t hear the concept of silence because “the tiny bones of the middle ear, which transmit sound from the eardrum to the inner ear, vibrate by less than a thousandth of the diameter of a hydrogen atom.” Cox explains that even in the absence of sound the human ear is detecting the smallest vibrations; therefore, humans cannot hear silence.

Deaf

But what does that mean about people who are deaf? Do they hear the true definition of silence?

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, there are two types of deafness. One is partial and comes from an interruption of sound vibrations through the passage connecting the outer world to the nerve cells in the inner ear. The other type is nerve deafness: “some defect in the sensory cells of the inner ear or in the vestibulocochlear nerve prevents transmission of sound impulses from the inner ear to the auditory center in the brain” (Rogers). Trevor Cox and I would agree that this form of deafness is hearing true silence. But you can’t ask someone who is deaf what they hear. You can’t ask them to describe the silence. All they’ve ever heard is silence, and it’s not even really hearing.

Emma

Emma was the first deaf person I ever met. As I was going into third grade, my family was Emma’s host family—a designated family to welcome an incoming new student. Our moms made us go on a playdate to Water World so that we could get to know each other. Why they thought Water World was a good idea is still a preposterous concept to me. Emma has cochlear implants which are, in fact, not waterproof. With that in mind, Emma had to take off her cochlear implants for the day, which left us with no way to communicate.

Throughout the day we stood in lines silently staring at other faces. While I guess in some interpretations of the word ‘silently’ you could argue that we were ‘standing there in silence’; I, however, would argue that only Emma was standing there in silence. I could hear the murmurs of conversations around me, the sound of people splashing in pools of water, and the creaks the slides made as someone prepared to barrel themselves down the slide. Meanwhile, all Emma sensed was the absence of sound.

Great Sand Dunes National Park

A friend once told me the Great Sand Dunes “are the quietest place in the lower 48 states.” Where he got this information is unclear and it could very well be one of his own factoids, but there was no reason for me to doubt the authenticity of his fact because for the first time, in the Sand Dunes, I heard complete silence.

Seven of us lay lined up next to each other on a tarp barricading our sleeping bags from the sand. I awoke suddenly. The sleeping bag rustled around me as I sat up to stare at the moon-lit dunes surrounding me. The rustling stopped after I adjusted for comfort and that’s when I heard the silence. I couldn’t hear the congested breaths of my friends or the crickets chirping. I couldn’t even hear the constant sound of air. There was nothing. Maybe I was experiencing the sound deaf people hear or maybe the sound a dead person hears. Either way, it was the loudest silence to be heard.

Trevor Cox went to Kelso Dunes (another set of sand dunes located near Baker, San Bernardino County, California) and said he “experienced something quite rare: complete silence.”

Hear

Perceive with the ear the sound made by someone or something.

Honor

We use silence to honor the dead. We take a moment of silence to reflect on what has happened to them, to remember them, to honor them.

During the Black Lives Matter movement, we kneeled at the corner of Colfax and Speer in downtown Denver. The streets were blocked off by police officers and filled with attendants down countless blocks. We knelt in silence for eight minutes and 46 seconds. Eight minutes and 46 seconds. The same amount of time Derek Chauvin had his knee on George Floyd’s neck. Thousands of us covered the Denver streets honoring George Floyd silently for eight minutes and 46 seconds.

John Cage’s 4’33”

American composer John Cage created the controversial, influential, inspiring, perplexing, infamous piece 4’33”. It is a three-movement composition of four minutes and 33 seconds of silence.

When pianist David Tudor performed John Cage’s 4’33”, he sat down at his piano, covered the keyboard, and glanced at his stopwatch. During the four minutes and 33 seconds he raised and lowered the keyboard twice, careful to make no sound, and turned pages of sheet music which were absent of musical notes. When the time was up, he stood to receive applause from the audience.

Was it four minutes and 33 seconds of silence? No. Cage explains that although the composition itself is a silent one, there can be no such thing as silence when there are sounds all around: stirring wind, pattering rain drops, murmuring people—accidental sounds. Cage and Cox would agree that there is No Such Thing as Silence.

You can even listen to 4’33” on Spotify.

Lasagna

A family friend of mine just posted on Instagram with the caption:

“Real G’s move in silence like lasagna.”

Not sure what that means, but I suppose silence might have some relation to lasagna.

Moment of Silence

Let's take a moment of silence right now. Stop reading and take a minute of silence to focus on the sounds around you.

Now turn your attention to your breath.

Listen.

Reflect.

What do you hear?

Where have your thoughts wandered to?

Did your thoughts feel amplified?

I'm sitting here, writing this essay, silently. The people around me are not silent; they're having their own conversations. They're taking part in their own lives. Each one of us is living our own individual life and we connect with each other in this moment by being in the same space. Is the person sitting across from me aware of the fact that I am now focused on him? Where have his thoughts wandered to while he also sits silently, writing away at whatever it is on his laptop? Are we taking a moment of silence together because we are both currently quiet? I am here having my thoughts wander from one thing to another while maybe he sits there quietly contemplating whether or not to send a text message.

With that moment given to me to sit in silence my mind has entered into a loud world of moving ideas all chasing after each other, endlessly cycling, into a tumbleweed rolling on and on until the moment is broken by outside sound. When the minute is over, the volume of my head balances out with the volume of the world. There is no silence inside or outside of my brain but at least they are at average levels that are maintainable.

Oppression

Although we use silence to honor people, silence also leads to oppression against the same groups of people we're trying to honor.

Before and after the moment of silence at the Black Lives Matter protest, all the thousands of people in attendance marched through the streets of Denver chanting:

"Say his name, George Floyd!"

"Say her name, Breonna Taylor!"

"No justice, no peace! No racist police!"

"What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!"

Our voices don't stop there. Staying silent when we are facing any issue—whether it's political, environmental, health related, education related, gender or race related—is part of the problem.

There are other ways to help besides protests. You can donate, use social media to raise awareness, educate yourself, volunteer, and so much more. But whatever you do, don't stay silent. Use your voice.

Outdoors

The outdoors are my favorite places to appreciate silence. I appreciate it while brushing my teeth, waking up in the middle of the night in the Sand Dunes, hiking, and just sitting on rocks. There's no need to say anything when you're outside. All you need to do is appreciate the fresh air and the beauty of our planet. When I'm silent in the outdoors, like always, I get lost in my thoughts; but, this time my thoughts stay light. The fresh air and primitive feeling of being outdoors allow my thoughts to feel peaceful. They flow smoothly like the river I'm jumping over. They wander to intriguing and inspirational places like my curious feet wander over peaks and valleys.

Outer Space

Outer space is the closest environment to hearing true silence. In space, there are no air molecules to carry the chirping sounds of humans, the hustle of everyday life, or the surrounding vibration of air. Sound waves cannot travel without air molecules thus providing a truly silent place. Maybe you can still hear the inner sounds of your body: the crack of a knuckle or the rumble of a hungry belly. Or maybe you can't hear those sounds either and outer space is the ultimate location to hear true silence.

This, however, would not be a serene way to experience silence. The only way to hear it would be to float through space with no helmet, leading to an inevitable death.

Questions & Concerns

Is it technically correct for me to write 'hear silence'? I know the answer to this question is "no" based on the definition of 'hear' and 'silence', but I can't think of a better way to describe how someone senses silence. We definitely don't smell it.

Does saying things like 'the loudest silence' make sense?

Can one silence be louder than others?

Do deaf people hear silence louder than those who can hear?

Or is it also wrong to put 'hear' in the same sentence with the word 'deaf'?

Is it possible for a person to experience true silence (excluding deaf people)?

Silence

Absence of any sound or noise.

Vaults of Silence

The anechoic chamber is another way humans can try to sense the idea of complete silence. It is, in its most basic form, a vault of silence. Trevor Cox explains the anechoic chamber as "an acoustically isolated room that provides unchanging, guaranteed silence, uninterrupted by wind, animals, or human noise." It is a room within a room requiring you to enter three sets of doors before being inside the chamber. The room is made up of heavy, insulated walls and is mounted on springs to provide the user with a silent experience. Although the room is silent, Cox reminds us that users can still hear "internal noises that the room cannot dampen."

Wind River Range, Wyoming

The Wind River Range, located in the lower central part of Wyoming, is where I learned to appreciate silence. A group of 14 of us started our month-long adventure backpacking through alpine and lakes chatting daily on our hikes. As the trip went on we became more comfortable hiking in silence. Eventually, we reached the point where we could hike upwards of five miles without conversing. Though there were sounds of nature surrounding us, the comfort of hiking in silence with a group of other silent hikers showed me how to be peaceful with my swarming thoughts.

Zero

How would you describe silence? The absence of sound? The stillness of thoughts? Or the racing, muddle of thoughts that come from surrounding silence? Is silence good? Is it important that we use silence to honor those who we've lost? Or should we never be silent to help those in need of our voices? Where do you enjoy silence? In the comfort of your bed as you fall asleep at night or in the middle of a sand dune brushing your teeth? For people who are deaf, do you ever enjoy constant silence? What does it sound like to you...the complete absence of sound...zero sound...silence?

WORKS CITED

Cox, Trevor. "Quietest Places in the World." *American Scientist*, vol. 102, no. 5, Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society, 2014, pp. 382–85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43707842>.

"Deafness." *Britannica Academic, Encyclopædia Britannica*, 20 Jul. 1998. academic-eb-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/levels/collegiate/article/deafness/29631.

Gann, Kyle. *No Such Thing As Silence: John Cage's 4'33*, Yale University Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=3421154>.

Rogers, Kara. "Cochlear Implant." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2020, *Britannica Academic*. <https://academic-eb-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/levels/collegiate/article/cochlear-implant/543538#article-contributors>.