

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

**Hold Your Breath**

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I have a problem with silence. There, I said it. To many of you that comes as no surprise. One of the perks that I found in giving a senior sermon was that I am allowed to talk with no possibility of interruption to fill all the silence I see fit with music and message. I have a need to fill that empty space. Maybe it's my childish obsession with banging on anything with a pair of sticks, my hands, or my feet. Maybe it's because I can kick a wicked vocal percussion beat, everybody needs a little techno music now and then. Maybe it is just that I don't know when to shut up! It is just that conversation is just so interesting, and to stop it with that awkward silence drives me insane.

Picture just your average day and you sit down with one of your friends and you decided to talk about really important things. The whole conversation goes great, you both have input that flows from each other without a hitch, amazing flow of knowledge goes across that bonding bridge and you feel great; but then comes the inevitable part about conversations, the part that I hate. . . . Silence! I have always thought of them as "uncomfortable silences." It is like you don't have enough in common with the other person in the conversation to keep the tempo going. I must not be comfortable enough with that person or interesting enough. Therefore I am always cutting that lull short by filling it in with something: a song, a noise, random thoughts, hacking. In conversations the words are so important, and when they stop it feels like they have lost their impact. When they are gone, you feel somewhat rejected that, that is all there is for you to be

told. I want to learn more. John stated that, “In the beginning there was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Words bring the possibility of communication of ideas; ideas like salvation and forgiveness. God is all knowing, never-ending, and all-powerful. All God had to do was speak simple words, “Let there be light,” and there was light. “Let there be water separated by land,” and it was so. I’m not telling that I think I have as much power with my words as God does, even though many of you think it crosses my mind now and then. The bible doesn’t say, “God stared into the darkness . . . waiting. . .” If God has so much power with his words, then why is it that sometimes I cannot find that conversation, no matter how hard I try? I find it hard to believe that there is nothing else to teach me, so I sit in my “uncomfortable silence” with God.

Then one day I had a sudden break through about my preoccupation with silence. I was sitting in Music History class. It was a day filled with too much talking, like usual, when the teacher threatened to play for us John Cage’s **4’33”**. She said that it would help us appreciate silence a little more. For those of you who might not know what this work is, I’ll explain it. Cage attempted to prove a point in music that the rests are just as important as the notes. The piece only calls for one player and a piano. The musician comes up to the piano and “plays” a rest that lasts four minutes and thirty-three seconds, and then he leaves. During the piece there is actual music that the performer follows, complete with page turns. It is preferred to be played in three movements, with the second being the longest (2.5 minutes). The first movement is filled with tension, where the last movement is very light hearted and tends to be an audience favorite. A whole piece made of rests, a.k.a. “glorified silence.” It makes you think a little bit. Is Cage’s

piece still music? Can you have music without notes? Can you have a conversation without words? Can you hear God's message without his words? Can I do good deeds by not doing anything at all? Sometimes physical silence is almost as bad as verbal silence.

Without stillness in life, we would not be able to appreciate the wonders that come to us through the chaos of homework and friends. So it is with the appreciation of words. Maybe God is giving me an opportunity to sit back and take in all that he has presented me? God has presented me with an opportunity to sit and reflect on the teachings I've already been given.

How long has it been since you just sat and listened? Listen to the world and what it has to offer you.

God often speaks in this silence. By being able to clear your mind of all the useless clutter, you may soon find the many ways that God is trying to speak to you. There are so many good words, helpful anecdotes, helping hands that go unappreciated when there was no one there to listen, comprehend, or accept them. When the word became flesh, there were many people who did not stop and listen, but there were many people that did and they reap the rewards of their patience and listening.

I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that I have mastered the "Art of Silence," but I'm working at it. If we happen to have a conversation today, tomorrow, or even next week, I will probably be stirring the conversation with random thoughts. I am trying to stop and hear God's words in my environment, but I sometimes think that I cannot do it. You know what, I am thankful that I know I can not do it right now. I'm completely incapable of embracing silence by myself. He has given all of us family,

friends, and his unconditional love to help us reach that comfortable stillness. We are assisted in our striving for silence, and the comfortable grace that it reveals.

