

Does religion begin and end in silence?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

As Carol and I were hiking a looping trail in the Smokies, the quiet of the forest absorbed the rhythmic crunch of our footfalls on the remnants of autumn leaves. We walked for miles and never saw anyone else. It seemed we had the forest, the mountains, even the world, to ourselves. Each time we stopped for a breather or sip of water, we listened, hearing only silence. Our voices naturally became whispers. We didn't have the world to ourselves—silence reigned.

Henry Thoreau concludes his first book, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," with many words about silence. He's aware of that irony when he writes: "[The] most excellent speech finally falls into Silence. Silence is audible to all [people], at all times, and in all places." It's no accident he often capitalizes Silence. It approaches the love of Nature he claimed as his religion.

A friend and I attended a Friends Meeting last weekend. With a warm welcome on a chilly winter day, we entered the room slowly filling with quiet folks.

whispered words, smiles and silence. It was my companion's first Friends Meeting. Aware of that community's practice of silence, we sat, waiting for the "inner light" Quakers seek. I didn't find much light within that morning, finding my eyes and attention drawn beyond the windows to the illumination of crooked branches painted with smooth snow. A love of the natural world is a religion I share with Thoreau.

Declining a hospitable invitation to stay for a meal, we walked to the stream behind the building—a beautiful place to reflect upon the meeting, the friendly faces, and a new experience of peaceful silence. While theologically-trained ourselves, we were relieved the morning's quiet assembly was not disturbed by theology, creeds, scriptures or preaching. A "religious" gathering with no clergy! We laughed, appreciating that.

"Silence is the universal refuge," wrote young Henry floating home on his river. So, why is silence avoided so religiously by the religious?

Moses carries heavy words down from the mountain. In his desert cave, Muhammad receives word to "Recite!"—words later written into the Qur'an. Jesus emerges from his wilderness solitude with "Good

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