

The indigenous realm of silence

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In our modern Western life, traveling as quickly as possible from A to B – in a car, train or plane – has come to occupy an important place. What exactly lies between A and B usually escapes us. Due to many forms of hustle and bustle and distraction in today's society, even the deeper reality of place A or B often hardly penetrates us. As a result, we have often lost contact with the indigenous realm of silence – a process of alienation from the place where we live, which has had far-reaching consequences.

Indigenous experience of silence

The Dutch anthropologist Jan van Baal had noticed during his stay in 'primitive' indigenous communities – in Indonesia and New Guinea in the 1940s and 1950s –, that life there was characterized by an intense, omnipresent silence that we no longer know in the modern world: 'Life in nature is a life in silence, a silence of a magnitude that is wholly unknown to modern man.' Despite the fact that this persistent silence was occasionally interrupted by some sounds of nature, it was almost tangibly present and spoke to these indigenous people through a voice in their hearts. Van Baal indicated that this experience of silence was quite confrontational for them psychologically – and that talking, singing or drumming was a way to keep it at a distance. Therefore, they did not like to be alone and liked to spend their time in the presence of others, even during the hunt.

Interestingly, the silence in the landscape activated in these indigenous people a state of mind 'just above a light sleep, a state in which the subject lets go of its control and the subconscious has a better chance of getting close to the threshold of consciousness.' In this, we can recognize the so-called 'hypnagogic state' – the temporary form of consciousness on the edge of waking and sleeping, which we all go through in the morning and evening. With these indigenous people, this was apparently a fairly

permanent state of mind during the day. Not only could all kinds of memories and images from the subconscious end up in their consciousness, but from that depth the voice of silence could also penetrate them.

Indigenous tranquility and modern turmoil

Remarkably, despite its rather confrontational nature, this silence also allowed these indigenous people to relax ‘by doing nothing in particular, by simply sitting, with their hand resting on their laps, quietly listening to the murmur of a stream nearby, or the cooing of a pigeon without thinking of anything in particular.’ By being able to enjoy themselves without any form of activity, according to Van Baal, they possessed a capacity that we modern humans have largely lost. Not only are our lives often hectic and filled with various mechanical noises, but we have also been taught from early childhood to be constantly busy and do things.

His observations remind me of the 17th century French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who once stated that all the misery of humankind stems from the fact that humans cannot sit still in a room. At the time, Pascal does not seem to have been aware that his insight was limited to the indoor life in Western society. The people in the indigenous communities that Van Baal visited turned out – while they were probably sitting together outside under the open sky – not to be bothered by this modern unrest.

Thinking with the head or the heart

The fundamental difference between the relaxed indigenous life and the restless Western existence has also been noticed by others. For example, when the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung visited the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico in 1932, their ‘Chief’, Mountain Lake, told them that they considered the ‘white men’ – the descendants of the European settlers – to be crazy, because they were always restlessly looking for something. According to them, this was because the ‘white men’ thought with their heads. According to Mountain Lake, the people in his community thought with their hearts – implying that their inner peace was generated from this heart-centered thinking.

The silence of the surrounding nature must also have ensured that the Taos Pueblo were able to keep this peace within themselves. In this respect, the heads of the ‘white men’ were still completely trapped in the busy thought chatter of the culture that their ancestors had once brought with them from Europe. Their minds no longer appeared to be receptive to the soothing voice of silence.

Confrontation with the mystery

Van Baal has pointed out that opening up and listening to the silence of the surrounding landscape can be an overwhelming experience – especially when one is alone in it, on a moonless night. In this respect he spoke from his own experience: ‘Whoever opens himself up and listens to this, can suddenly be confronted with an all-encompassing power, which also permeates him with its mysterious greatness, absorbs him and convinces him of the presence of the mystery. (...) Once you have experienced something of this, you will forever know of the existence of a mystery whose content cannot be fathomed.’

This makes it clear that this omnipresent silence can unleash a spiritual power in us, making us look at ourselves and the world around us in a completely different way. The deeply connected side of ourselves, which had increasingly started to lead a hidden existence due to our dominating, egocentric self, is suddenly awakened again. We feel that the original balance between heart and head is restored within ourselves. Through this experience of silence we can become aware that – as the French priest Teilhard de Chardin beautifully expressed long ago – we are not people who have a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings who have a human experience.

Overwhelming experiences

An unexpected experience of silence can also be evoked in us. Despite the hustle and bustle of our modern existence, we can suddenly be overwhelmed by experiences that we can’t find words for and become inwardly silent. This can happen, for example, if we suddenly find ourselves in a breathtakingly beautiful landscape. But they can also be generated

when we perceive the mysterious wonder of nature in the small things around us – when we see, in the well-known words of the English poet and painter William Blake, ‘a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower’.

In English, these kinds of experiences are very appropriately referred to as ‘awe’. They leave us speechless for a moment, so we can’t say much more than ‘ooohhh...’ or ‘wow...’ Through these experiences, an experience of reality is brought to life in us that was, and often still is, an everyday affair for most people in indigenous communities. Although they are usually short-lived in our modern existence, they often have a profound, transformative effect on our minds. They remind us that we are not only part of a human society, but are always embedded in the larger – in fact, immeasurable – context of an animated, natural world.

The American psychologist Dacher Keltner has done a lot of research into these ‘awe’ experiences. He has shown that they not only expand our consciousness in relation to the surrounding natural world, but also awaken our empathetic and altruistic side in the interpersonal field. In other words, they also make us better people – people who are not only self-centeredly focused on fighting against other people, but have a greater willingness to listen to them and cooperate with them.

Belonging to the land

I mentioned earlier that – due to the intense, confrontational presence of silence – indigenous people like to spend time together. The New Zealand anthropologist Peter Wilson has confirmed that people in indigenous communities, such as hunter-gatherer societies, do indeed spend much of their time together, close to each other. As a result, he says, they not only develop an interpersonal sensitivity, making the relationships between each other open and intimate, but also acquire a strong bond with the landscape around them: ‘The association with the territory, with the landscape and its objects, identifies an indigenous person, an inhabitant of the place, someone whose life begins and focuses on this place.’

Importantly, he added that they do not yet experience the land in terms of exclusive, private ownership, but in terms of a collective sense of belonging. In other words, in this experience, the surrounding land is primary, and the presence of the people in it is secondary. Both are then living entities that have a reciprocal relationship with each other. It is in this experience of reality that the voice of silence from the surrounding land speaks to the people – and is also heard. The land, with all the animals and plants that live in it, is then the larger body, of which we humans with our small bodies are an inseparable part. Just like for our own bodies, we then take it for granted to take care of the land.

Listening to the land

We Westerners have always had the tendency to travel to faraway places for contact with indigenous cultures. This had also long been the view of the Irish journalist and researcher Manchán Magan. But after years of living in various indigenous communities around the world, he had suddenly come to realize that in his own country, especially on the west coast of Ireland, there were still remnants of a similar indigenous culture. He returned to Ireland to devote himself intensively to the study of that ancient culture – through the Gaelic language, folklore, mythology and ancient archaeological traces of that culture in the landscape.

Magan has recorded a very nice account of it in his book *Listen to the Land Speak* from 2022. In it, he showed that the reciprocal relationship between the people and the surrounding land has also been central to Irish indigenous culture. In his view, reconnecting with this culture is part of a global awakening process: in every country it is still present under the surface with very similar patterns. According to him, this can help to pierce through the artificial divisions between national identities. As a result, people would not only feel more connected to the living presence of the surrounding land, but also to each other, across national borders.

Although in the urbanized regions of the Low Countries – where I happen to live – for centuries the focus has on the history and on the cultural achievements we have associated with it, we must not forget that such an

indigenous culture once existed here too. Because of this focus, the existence of this ancient heritage, and its importance, have pretty much fallen out of sight. The deep need to reconnect with it, felt by more and more people in our time, is part of the global awakening process.

Rewilding

To fulfill our need for silence and indigenous connection, an important movement has emerged worldwide, which is referred to in English as ‘rewilding’. The beginning of this movement can already be found in America in the 18/19th century. But – as the Belgian philosopher Linde De Vroey has shown in her book *Verwildereren* (‘Rewilding’) – in that period the movement was still mostly driven by men, who wanted to heroically control the ‘wilderness’, so that it could be transformed into ‘civilization’. In their view, the wilderness was entirely at the service of human society. It is known that in their ‘civilization’ there was no place for the indigenous culture and their representatives.

De Vroey has shown that in our time we have started to look at rewilding very differently. Inspired by a number of contemporary researchers and thinkers, she herself has come to the fore with a more feminine approach to rewilding. This is aimed at making us feel truly at home in a ‘fuller form of existence’, in which we put ourselves at the service of nature again. In her view, ‘every landscape is the result of a wayward nature, but also of the stories that arise from the unique interplay between nature and culture.’

De Vroey also found these landscapes in Flanders, even close to her home. And according to her, the wild life exists not only outside of us, but also within ourselves. Rewilding offers an opportunity to find ‘the wild genes’ in ourselves. These are, of course, the genes of our distant, indigenous ancestors, who live on in us. Perhaps they will help to give us a little more access to their soothing experience of silence.

Do less, be more

To reconnect with the lost indigenous culture and the realm of silence, we would do well to shift our focus a bit more from doing to being. If we can

let go of the thought chatter in our heads, from the resulting inner silence we get more space for experiencing the emotional world of our heart. And if we succeed in thinking less in terms of landownership, then there will automatically be room in ourselves for an indigenous feeling of belonging to the living land.

Of course we have to remain realistic. Every now and then we will still want to travel quickly from A to B. But what good are new insights gained in faraway places, if we can't relate them to the place where our daily lives take place? Fortunately, like Van Baal, we no longer have to travel to the other side of the world to come into contact with the indigenous realm of silence. Researchers such as Magan and De Vroey have shown that the roots of our indigenous culture and of the wild life can also be found in our own region, and in ourselves. They urge us to focus our attention more often on the region where we live – in short, on place A. After all, do we actually know where we live? By reading more about it and by walking through it often, we may get to know it a little better.

The indigenous realm of silence is potentially present everywhere. In it, an extraordinary treasure of immaterial and spiritual wealth is patiently waiting – for all of us.

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Selected sources

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