

## What Happens in Silence

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One might wonder why people would go away together for a weekend and not talk to each other. Why they would take a vow of silence from 8:00p.m. on Friday until 10:00a.m. on Sunday?

Well, there are lots of reasons. One person said, "I've never been silent in 76 years, and I want to see if I can do it." Another person said, "I want to know people in a different way, without the influence of the conscious and unconscious social contentions that go with conversation."

I've been on several weekend silent retreats and enjoyed them all. Silence removes a huge amount of distraction. And what do you find? Many things – colors, smells, feelings you didn't know you had, heightened awareness. Several things about the weekend stood out for me.

Carrot soup. It's amazing how *orange* carrot soup is, how pleasing it was to see those chopped green onions sprinkled over the top of the potage, and the intense green of the romaine on my sandwich.

The scores of college students present for a cross country track race hopped and flapped and pushed up and sprinted and stretched in the alternating sun and rain, as I watched them from the porch. Then they stripped off their brightly-hued warm-up suits, dropped them helter skelter, and took off in a hoard at the sound of the gun. The men first circled the parade group, a luminous, brilliant grass green that fairly glowed in the fall sunshine, before they raced off up the road and into the woods. Later I walked through those pine-smelling woods, and when a small group of runners jogged by, I caught a whiff of fresh laundry, as if their shirts were just washed in Tide and brought in from the clothesline. If I'd been talking with someone, I'd have missed these colors and smells, or they would have been far less vivid.

Of course there are the long walks on the beach at Camp Casey. As the clouds came and went, I noticed how the color of the water changed from blue to gray and back again. I sat for a long time and watched the gulls. Especially, how they come in for a landing, stall and drop right down in the midst of a tightly packed flock, without touching each other. Amazing – how can they do that? All those feathers and ligaments working just so! I continued my walk down wind as a young couple came to the beach from the cliffs and the smell of her perfume puffed by in the breeze and was gone in a second. Then there was just the clean, cold saltwater air to breathe.

I would have liked to know how my fellow retreatants were, though I couldn't ask. You watch the expressions, the body language, you know that lots is happening in an inner way, but you must bide your time until the end, when we had time to share our experience. But meanwhile there are smiles and hugs and other gestures of support and companionship.

I think we all noticed the intensification of what came to us through our senses, when we weren't distracted by talking and reading. But we also noticed a lot going on internally. On a silent retreat one has time to *really notice* one's emotions, to be with them, to see how one's behavior is affected by them, to see how they come and go, to examine and reflect.

Silent retreats are wonderful experiences. Silence is truly golden.