"Toward the Great Silence,"
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 31, 2010

Earlier this month, I almost ran out of gas. I'm not talking about my car. I'm talking about the tank that's in here, my energy level, which got a little low. It was because of busyness--long days and too much noise, lots of meetings, one evening after another. Leaving home early and coming back late. You know how this feels, don't you? One night, on my way home, I realized I was exhausted.

So I did something about it. The next morning I stayed home a bit later. I went to my prayer place and I sat there. And I remembered these words from St. Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." I rested in that presence, that spirit I call God, and my heart and soul were refreshed. I was reminded, once again,of the need to rest in something larger and wiser and quieter that myself.

As an introvert, I need a certain amount of quiet. But even if you are an extrovert, you need some quiet too. I've been reading a book about silence, and the author, Robert Sardello, says something that has changed my understanding of silence. He says "We have a strong tendency to imagine Silence as the absence of sound. This imagination deprives Silence of being anything in itself, makes it an emptiness, a void... But Silence was here before anything else, and it envelopes everything else..."[1]

I thought silence was something I could create, by driving without the radio on, or by going to a quiet place. Sardello helps me see that quiet and silence are not the same thing. Quiet allows us to be aware of the presence of Silence, but quiet is a condition and Silence is more than than that--something in and of itself, a presence. He says, "If we drop into quietness for just a moment we feel the presence of Silence as an invitation."

This week I invite you try it; to drop into quietness for a period. I encourage you to be still, and breathe and just be. See if you can feel the presence of Silence. There's something powerful, and a little nerve-wracking, about being in silence. If it makes you nervous, don't worry, with practice it might grow on you!

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[1] Robert Sardello, *Silence* (Goldenstone Press, 2006), p. 8.

You may notice that Silence does not require absolute quiet. Silence isn't threatened by a softly crying baby. Or the clanging of a radiator. Or the hum of traffic, or even a siren going by. Silence can abide these things.

Today we remember those who have died, those we have loved and lost. We remember that we are mortal. I offer you these words from Mary Oliver's poem "When Death Comes":

When death comes...
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?
And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,
and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,
and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.[2]

One of the great privileges of my work is being with people around the time of death. For me the key moment in a funeral or memorial service is near the end, when it is time to let the loved one go. I say these words:

"All around us and within us there is a mystery, which shines with a light that reveals to us that which is beautiful and good. To that mystery we must now give back our beloved One. May she rest in peace. To our heart's remembering and to God do we commend her spirit, in the sure and certain hope that beyond what separates us from those we have loved and lost, there is a unity that makes us one and binds us forever together." [3]

This is my faith and my hope, that in spite of everything, we are part of a great Love that connect us on to another, and will never let us go. The Quaker Parker Palmer puts it this way. He says, "At birth, we emerged from the Great Silence into a world that constrains the soul; at death. we return to the Great Silence where the soul is once again set free."[4]

The Great Silence--what a lovely way to imagine death. The Great Silence, which is not emptiness or nothingness, but pregnant with possibility. A presence from which we came and to which we will return.

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[2] Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes," in *New and Selected Poems: Volume One* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 10.

[3] These words draw on and borrow from words I've received from two other UU ministers: the Rev. Lee Bluemel, minister of the UU Church in North Andover, MA, and the Rev. David Bumbaugh.

[4] Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 160.

A taste of that presence is possible right now, is available to us, if we want it, if we will invite it in. This requires some effort, and it's worth it. Parker Palmer says "our culture is so fearful of the silence of death that it worships nonstop noise... (But) in the midst of all that noise, small silences can help us become more comfortable with the Great Silence toward which we are all headed."

He says, "Small silences bring us 'little deaths,' which, to our surprise, turn out to be deeply fulfilling... As we settle into silence... we may experience a temporary death of the ego, of that separate sense of self we spend so much time cultivating. But this 'little death,' instead of frightening us, makes us feel more at peace and more at home.... Silence brings not only little deaths but also little births — small awakenings to beauty, to vitality, to hope, to life."[5]

Silence offers us these awakenings, openings to something More. Where we might be still and know. Where we might hear what we need to hear. You have made us for yourself, God, and our souls are restless until they rest in You.

We live in the midst of joy and sorrow, pain and beauty, life and death. We sing our hymns to the Silence, and it is good.

Amen.

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[5] Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco: Jossey -Bass, 2004). p. 160-61.