

Generative Leadership Group
Notes on
The Silence of God
by James P. Carse, 1985

At first, this small, philosophical book seems to have little to do with organizations and the daily business of business. In fact, the subtitle is “Meditations on Prayer.” Yet when it is read thoughtfully, it is clear that Carse has much to say about how we listen to each other that is very useful in both professional and personal settings.

The numbers below represent the pages from which these excerpts are taken.

21. What I am suggesting is that the silence of God does not necessarily mean that God is absent; what it *does* mean is that *we cannot present ourselves to each other as God*. Whatever other mode our speaking may take with each other, it may not take the mode of absolute truth, of divine authority. If I speak to you with the authority of God, I violate the limitations of our humanity in two ways: I regard myself as something considerably more than human, and I regard you as something considerably less than human. I see myself above error—and you helplessly caught in it. Because of God’s silence I can speak to you only as the person that I am, and therefore can in no way determine how you are to respond, meaning that you will answer only as the person you are.
22. Analogous to the eternal Tao that cannot be spoken...is the word of God that cannot be spoken as the word of God. The Bible is the work of persons as real and as flawed as we are—fully human but only human. Therefore, when we repeat their words we do so as the real and flawed persons we are, fully human but only human. They wrote these words on the assumption that it was they and not God speaking. When we repeat them we can do so only on the assumption that it is we and not God speaking. In sum, *to quote scripture is to declare the silence of God*.
23. ...it is necessary to look more closely at the nature of silence. I shall do so by distinguishing between two kinds of silence: one I shall refer to as the *silence of obedience*, and the other as the *silence of expectation*.

The silence of obedience is that which most frequently occurs in the presence of famous or powerful persons. We might applaud or cheer the entrance of the Queen or the President or the Champion, but that action is in effect a prelude to our own silence. Our applause draws attention to a special relationship between us and the honored personage. It is a way of acknowledging that when they are ready to speak we shall fall into silence—in order to listen.

25. Why *obedience*? Observe that in order to be [the Queen or President or Champion] one must have striven mightily...Each office does, of course, carry an enormous distinction and honor with it, but it also carries an aura of intense competition...There is an almost mandatory ritual that goes with winning an important competition. No sooner is the winner declared than applause is heard in all directions. But then, as on signal, the applause ceases and...silence fills the hall. The loser, in the meantime, may also give a speech, but it can only be a declaration of loyalty to the winner...and vowing that the loser will join with the silence of the audience. The loser concedes, in other words, the privilege of speech to the winner.

Our silence, and the silence of the loser, are ways of indicating our obedience to the winner. To be obedient is to be silent. It is to give away one's prerogative to speak for oneself in the area of the winner's new authority. In obedience we have no voice of our own. Obedience creates a silence in which our speaking has come to an end... Obedience, in other words, and the silence that goes with it, is a response to the office and not to the person who holds it.

26. The *silence of obedience*, in other words, is that form of silence which brings our speech to an end. The *silence of expectation*, on the other hand, is just the opposite: it is the silence that makes speech possible. The intuitive idea behind the latter form of silence is a simple one: unless we have someone to speak to we cannot speak, and unless someone is listening there is no one to whom we can speak.

This is a familiar theme in the contemporary philosophy of language...I cannot speak to myself any more than I can steal from myself, or make myself richer by placing the dollar I have in one hand into the other. If I had no one to talk to I would quite literally have to give up talking—except perhaps to continue in the sort of meaningless babble we call “talking to ourselves,” a characteristic of insanity—and what is much worse, I would eventually cease having anything to say.

Therefore, unless someone offers me a silence in the form of their listening I cannot speak. I am quite dependent on their silence to be able to say anything at all. I refer to this as the silence of expectation because it is a silence in which I am expected to speak. Another person has stopped speaking, has turned toward me with an invitation to speak, and is waiting for my words.

This is a matter of great human importance. Imagine what would happen if all the persons around you ceased to listen. Your own speech could be addressed to no one. You would have nothing to say. You may resort to violence or conspicuous and bizarre behavior with the intention of making others take notice of you and listen. If they continue to be deaf to you even those actions become meaningless. You become so isolated that even your own thinking will be useless. It is by no means difficult to see how one can effectively vanish into such a silence, ceasing actually to exist at all. To offer something of a variation on Descartes' famous formula, it is not because I think, but because I am heard, that I am.

Circumstances in which a person is sealed off into such a silence are not so rare as one might think. Indeed, it may even be a most common condition. It occurs whenever a person must relate only to those who consider themselves winners of some kind, who speak as holders of an office to an audience of losers. How common it is in families for parents not to speak *to* their children, but to speak *for* them without the merest regard for what the children might want to say for themselves. The same phenomenon occurs in the relations between employer and workers, between teacher and students, between one race or culture and another.

The implication here is that the person who does listen, who does turn toward me in the silence of expectation, has given up any claim to superiority and has in fact emptied himself or herself of any sort of office I must stand before in silent obedience. A genuine silence of expectation can occur only when one person listens to another in a circumstance of equal and shared humility.

28. The preceding account of the distinction between the silence of obedience and the silence of expectation has implied a similar distinction between two kinds of speaking. In the one instance, I speak to make you silent, in the other, I speak to give you voice. When I speak to your silent obedience I demand that you listen to me in such a way that you have no voice except what I authorize you to have. When I speak expectantly, as one who shares in all the limitations of your mortal existence, I invite you to respond in a voice that can only be yours.

Speech in the imperative mode is therefore contradictory. It is speech meant to end speech. The imperative speaker has no one to speak to, only persons to speak for—or persons whose voice is but an extension of the master's. If imperative speech is successful there results a silence so complete that there is nothing more to be said. *Sicut dixit dominus*. Thus speaks the lord.

Speech in the expectant mode is not contradictory but reciprocal. In speaking to you expectantly I do not intend to bring your speaking to an end, but to bring my own speaking to an end—and to bring it to an end in such a way that it makes your speaking possible. The reciprocity consists in the fact that if you do not respond to what I have said, I have not spoken to you at all. I so completely depend on your response that if my speaking does not transform itself into a listening I have not spoken. I have simply uttered words, mere sounds, into uncomprehending space.

This may seem to put speakers of expectation at a great disadvantage, for the only way they can communicate with others is through silence. Their speaking has no power in itself. Their words cannot move listeners to a desired end. They cannot have the slightest influence over listeners, for if they do they have moved from an expectational to an imperative mode. If you speak what I want you to speak it can only be because I have given you my voice and compelled yours to be silent.

On the other hand, though the speech of expectation is not powerful in the ordinary way, it is creative in an extraordinary way. In order to listen to me it is not enough for

you to sit before me waiting quietly. You must indicate somehow what you are listening for. Your expectation must point me toward certain possibilities of speech. Such pointing occurs subtly, and involves a disclosure on your part as to what it is in me to which you will be receptive. You may reveal your receptivity verbally or through other gestures that indicate an area of openness between us.

It is always the case that when someone listens to you with genuine openness you will find a voice to say what you have never been able to say before, and did not know you could have said. This is not simply having new words to say; it is rather an expanding, an opening toward oneself, an awakening of the heart. This could be put in even stronger terms. It is not that sensitive listening will lead you to *discover* a new depth to yourself; it will *create* a new depth. This is why listening, why speaking expectantly, is creative. I am heard therefore I am. I am who I am only because I have been heard.

33. [On Interpretation] Most interpretation seems self-consciously to be *about* something...It is the kind of activity I referred to earlier as theology. As such it is concerned with clarifying obscurities in the text, discovering its historical setting, making obvious the views of its authors, and correcting the errors commonly made by other readers of the text. Insofar as it is a theological and historical task it is concerned with providing true information, accurate readings of pivotal verses, generally eliminating the misleading and distorted interpretations of others. In other words, there is a tendency in all interpretation...toward imperative speech, toward achieving the silence of obedience in its readers and listeners.

Interpretation can certainly be done in the mode of expectation. When it is, its effect is not to silence its readers and listeners but to encourage them to become interpreters themselves. This means, of course, that all struggle for right or true interpretation is set aside, all attempts to get the accurate meaning of the text are dropped. The most effective interpretation is that which invites the broadest variety of interpretations in response.

66. How do we speak to someone we do not know, whom we cannot see or hear, who never speaks back at the other end of the phone? *How can we speak to someone when it is impossible to know what they have heard us say, or whether they have heard us at all?* When we speak to each other it seems as though we have a rather clear idea to whom we are speaking and how they therefore happen to hear it. We do after all share a language, and generally have enough experience in common that our minds are not ciphers to each other. Within a tolerable margin of error I can assume that you will understand what I am saying in the same way that I understand it.

While this seems to be a reasonable account of our use of language with each other, it hides a fatal contradiction within itself. To state the contradiction in its most pungent form, *If I know exactly what you understand when I speak to you, it is not you to whom I am speaking; I am speaking to myself.* It is certainly true that in most every instance we speak on the assumption that those who hear us will understand what we

are saying in the same way we do. But take note of the implications in this assumption. It would seem that I have no reason to speak to you at all unless I knew that what I wish to say you do not yet know, or do not yet understand. Therefore my purpose for speaking is to eliminate the differences between us; to render your mind identical to mine, even an extension of mine. This, oddly, has the effect of bringing speech to an end. Once you have been properly informed, neither of us has further need to speak—unless, of course, it develops that there is another matter in which you need to be informed and silenced.

67. Indeed, strange and even paradoxical as it sounds, *I can talk with you only if I do not know in advance what you understand when I speak*, only when I cannot know in advance what you will do with my words. In genuine conversation we speak words and sentences to each other over which we have abandoned all control. In fact, I do not even know what I have said until I learn what you have done with what I have said. The most creative conversation will therefore occur only where persons address those areas in each other most completely unknown to the speaker—creative because then each response must be a kind of surprise for the speaker, a discovery of something that could not otherwise have been known. This is really no different from saying that creative conversation occurs when people speak to each other as though they were truly listening to, and not simply recording, what the other is saying. In other words, if you are listening to me it is *you* listening, and it is *you* who respond. You are not responding according to my signals as though I had you programmed. If I can control what you hear or how you respond, it is no longer you listening.
68. The question is, how can we speak to persons whose minds are a cipher to us? The answer is that we can speak to persons only to the degree that their minds are a cipher. The most important implication of this answer is that if I cannot close your mind to the shape and content I desire it to have I must keep my own mind open to your response. The reason this is so very important is that keeping myself open to your response is indispensable to life itself. When I can no longer respond to you, or to anyone else, I am effectively dead. My inability to know in advance what you will do in response to my words and actions is not a hindrance to the smooth operation of my life, but an invitation to increasing growth and vitality. This also means, of course, that every overture to you, every word, entails something of a risk, a letting go of my control over the situation. It is a willingness, in other words, to listen. Genuine conversation implies a relationship of radical trust as I have described it.
72. What we can know for certain is that our listening to each other will always be incomplete. No matter how silently we present ourselves to each other, it is always the case that we will be listening *for* something in what anyone is saying. We are limited by the fact that we share a world with the speaker. By “world” here I mean an intelligible pattern of expectations. If you should suddenly yell, “Watch out!”, I can be counted on to jump out of the way, or turn quickly to see what is coming. You can anticipate to a large degree how I will respond to your words and actions—and I can know with some confidence what you expect me to do. I can share a world with you only when there is a limit to the amount of surprise in our responses to each other. If

every action is a surprise, I literally have no world to live in with you. A world become unpredictable has ceased being a world. To say that we have become unpredictable to each other is to say that because we do not share a language, and a great many other cultural customs, what we do is unintelligible to each other. In that case, we do not share a world.

74. When we speak to each other it is always within the context of one or another world, and therefore it is according to the expectations inherent in that world that we listen to what is said. That is why I do not simply listen to what you are saying, but listen *for something* that you are saying. I am listening to find out how I should respond to you within the world that we share.

We should take special note here of a peculiar characteristic of a “world” as I have spoken about it: the reason that our listening is always incomplete is that the world in which we speak precedes our speaking into it. We speak and listen in terms of an already existing world—or so we usually understand it...This is to give the world considerable power, for it would appear that we are shaped by the worlds in which we live and move.

Another way to say this is that we are never completely silent with each other...When you begin to speak I may be vocalizing nothing, and be silent in that sense, but I am attempting to identify a script—even if it is a very loose one—by which I will know how to reply; that is, reply in a way that is intelligible to you even if you had not expected me to reply with exactly these words.

83. The...possibilities of language are realized when we find ourselves being searched by the silence of another, and are thereby freed to say what we want to say, and to say what we want. Earlier I commented that although this kind of listening is powerless, inasmuch as it cannot arrange the world into a desired order, it is creative—and creative in a strong sense of that word. That is, a creative listener is not someone who simply allows me to say what I already want to say, but someone whose listening actually makes it possible for me to say what I never could have said, and thus to be a new kind of person, one I have never been before and could not have been before this directed listening.
97. I believe that the key here is to maintain a clear view of the fact that the world is something we *receive*, and not something we *have*. The dangerous error that confronts us here is that we will begin to think of ourselves as the possessors of a world, or to think of the world, in part or in whole, as our property...What then is the difference between having and receiving?

Consider first the nature of having. It is meaningless to say I have anything unless I can dispose of it entirely as I wish, and only as I wish. If I have a dollar I can do with all one hundred cents of it whatever I wish without the least interference from anyone else. It happens at present to be the case, however, that every time I spend a dollar the government requires that I pay eight cents of it in taxes.

98. The more accurate way to describe my relationship with the government is not to say that I am forced to pay taxes, but that the government *competes* with me for that money.

But how did I get that dollar to begin with? It is likely that I had to work for it, that is, remove it from another's possession by offering that person goods or services more desirable than the dollar...It is for this reason that we say one holds "title" to property—the property is a sign that its owner has triumphed over someone else in some kind of struggle. The nature of property is, in fact, often discussed under the theory of entitlement. I am entitled to have whatever I can successfully take from someone else in what both parties agree is a fair contest. Fair or not, it is still the case—and the crucial point for us—that *property is always held against others*...It is not *what* we own that divides us; it is rather that we choose to divide it among ourselves by way of ownership. Property is not the cause, but the result of our strife.

99. If having is always having something against each other, how is receiving different?

The first important difference concerns the *source* of whatever it is I possess or receive. As for what I possess, it is finally I who must be its source. That is, my possession of it must be the result of my own labor, or skill, or sacrifice. If it sounds a bit awkward to speak of being the source of one's own property, consider how this view is hallowed by such prosy wisdom as that found in expressions like, "only those who work deserve the bread," or, "money does not grow on trees." The implication is that you can claim possession to what you have only by the honest labor that went into obtaining it.

When we speak of receiving, on the other hand, it is evident that I cannot be the source of that which is given me. In fact I cannot be the source of it in any sense whatsoever. Even if someone gives me a gift because I make them happy, it is not truly a gift but a kind of payment that I have earned...In true giving there can be no *because*, no need or reason in the recipient for the gift.

That is why receivers can never anticipate what is to be given; indeed a true receiver would never attempt to anticipate either what, or if, anything will be given. To live as receivers, therefore, is to live in the mode of surprise. It is to have an eye for novelty, for the sudden appearance of possibilities that could not have been imagined, much less planned for.