

# Be Quiet, and Join the Conversation

by Frank Meaux

*“I personally detest noise and flee it whenever and wherever possible, because it not only disturbs the concentration needed for my work but forces me to make the additional psychic effort of shutting it out. You may get habituated to it as to over-indulgence in alcohol, but just as you pay for this with cirrhosis of the liver, so in the end you pay for nervous stress with a premature depletion of your vital substance. Noise is certainly only one of the evils of our time, though perhaps the most obtrusive. The others are the gramophone, the radio, and now the blight of television.”*

Noise, alcohol, radio and TV. Oh my! “These are a few of my favorite things” Well, more accurately, they were a few of my favorite things, until I was catapulted on the arduous journey towards stillness and quiet. I was born into a rural South La. Cajun community; my grandparents spoke only French and lived close to the earth. With the advent of our first TV, more progressive modern times entered my life. Our new TV stayed on all day. In 1964, I visited the World’s Fair in New York. The sights and sounds of Broadway and the marvels of technology at the Fair fascinated me. I liked the immediacy and intensity of the noise coupled with the promise of a life of leisure the GE pavilion promised. Like alcohol, it was addictive.

Dr. Jung, in this letter to Karl Otfinger printed in *CG Jung Letters—1951-1961*, identified noise as the “most obtrusive” of the evils of our time. That was 1957, before boom boxes, power blowers, iPods, Facebook, Twitter, and 24-hour news networks. I can only imagine his reaction to the volume of noise ever-present today. Of course, the racket inside my head was louder than any TV or boom box and the catapult to stillness came in many forms.

As Jung stated in his essay *The Development of Personality*:

*“Clearly no one develops his personality because somebody tells him that it would be useful or advisable to do so. Nature has never yet been taken in by well-meaning advice. The only thing that moves nature is causal necessity ... and that goes for human nature too. Without necessity nothing budes, the human personality least of all. It is tremendously conservative ...”*

Causal necessity often comes in the pain of symptoms within or without, penetrating through the crust of noise, surfacing long

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repressed angst-laden shadow energy. Frightful dreams, internal and external conflicts, and pleas from the body informed by the soul. We resist the invitations. And the symptoms inside and out get worse. The refusal to heed the voices of the inner calling, the inner yearning containing the soul’s code of one’s destiny, invites eruptions of the shadow. James Hollis notes that all symptoms are a conflict in stories; the inner story of our true nature abraded by the collective stories layered upon it. Would Moses have embarked on the quest that eventually led his people to the Promised Land had his shadow side not needlessly killed the overseer?

The denied destiny buried in the shadow erupts in the “lash of reality,” as Bill Wilson called it, or fate, as Jung described it. The business reversal, the market downturn, the addiction, the gnawing depression and anxiety, all have the voice of what has been held at bay by noise in its various manifestations. Perhaps these inner voices are Lucifer in the literal meaning of light-bringer. Whatever the case, the ego with its various persona guises, maintained by noise, is threatened by the erupting shadow.

Why, though, are we so noisy? Jung’s letter continues:

*“Noise is welcome because it drowns the inner instinctive warning. Fear seeks noisy company and pandemonium to scare away the demons. Noise, like crowds, gives a feeling of security; therefore people love it and avoid doing anything about it... Noise protects us from painful reflection, it scatters our anxious dreams, it assures us that we are all in the same boat and creating such a racket that nobody will dare to attack us. Noise is so insistent, so overwhelmingly real, that everything else becomes a pale phantom. It relieves us of the effort to say or do anything, for the very air reverberates with the invincible power of our modernity.”*

*“The dark side of the picture is that we wouldn’t have noise if we didn’t secretly want it. Noise is not merely inconvenient or harmful, it is an unadmitted and uncomprehended means to an end: compensation of the fear which is only too well founded. If there were silence, their fear would make people reflect, and there’s no knowing what might then come to consciousness. Most people are afraid of silence; hence, whenever the everlasting chit-chat at a party suddenly stops, they are impelled to say something, do something, and start fidgeting, whistling, humming, coughing, whispering. The need for noise is almost insatiable, even though it becomes unbearable at times. Still, it is better than nothing. ‘Deathly silence’—telling phrase!—strikes us as uncanny. Why? Ghosts walking about? Well, hardly. The real fear is what might come up from one’s own depths—all the things that have been held at bay by noise.”*

Turning away from the noise of our “invincible modernity” in the direction of quiet was a difficult task for me, as it is for most Americans. The requisite introversion and shadow work are not the American strong suit. In a letter dated April 10, 1958, Dr. Jung states:

*“The American is a problem in himself. It is his national prejudice to be as harmless as possible, or at least to appear to be so... he is always animated by the best motives and is profoundly unconscious of his own shadow.”* This unawareness, a form of resistance, holds us in the grips of the *participation mystique*, a term Dr. Jung used to describe the norms of a culture. Some of us though must turn, if we are to survive and thrive.

Dr. Jung speaks to the root of resistance in the Red Book, the chronicle of his personal inner journey. *“It seems impossibly difficult, so difficult that nearly anything seems preferable to this torment... Therefore I cling to everything that obstructs my way to myself... He who goes to himself, goes down...”*

**T**he ego resists the Self’s demands for wholeness. We raise the volume on the radio, ratchet up the noise on TV, drink more alcohol, and seek more distractions. We may look for refuge in more refined ways: books, scholarship, and more knowledge, the quest for the formula, the perfect guru. Often, to no avail. The symptoms persist and intensify. Maybe we avoid the dialogue with the inner realm in excessive work, the quest for the perfect “Pleasantville” experience, the perfect happy marriage, the retirement package, the best car, the merit badges and public accolades. But for many, even these variations on noise are insufficient to quiet “what has been held at bay.” A very successful man, one whose merit was unquestionable both financially and altruistically, came to consult with me. In his words: “something is chasing me and I don’t know what it is.” Perhaps he needed to stand in stillness, turn around, and face the shadow.

Stillness is the essential condition for going to oneself, for the development of authentic personality, the journey of individuation, the path to wholeness and balance.

Through cultivating stillness, in its many forms—working with dreams, active imagination, meditation, yoga, tai chi, other types of breath and body work, creative expressions of the soul through mandalas, writing, and other art forms—one begins to develop the capacity for real conversation. In order to engage in true dialogue, we must first be willing to sit with what arises from the dark underworld. And so our first conversation is with the shadow. The Red Book is a guide to the path ... a path that leads inward. I think of The Red Book as a chronicle of conversations... conversations with the inner voices, maintained to their conclusion.

The word conversation is related to the Latin word *convertere* meaning to turn around, to change directions, or to alter. A conversation alters direction. And, perhaps paradoxically, the essential requirement for conversation is quiet and stillness... a most difficult experience for those of us accustomed to this noisy world. For me, and my anxiety-ridden, Cajun-flavored, ‘*bon temps roulee*’ monkey-mind, the very thought of stillness was terrifying. Slowly, ever so slowly, by surrendering to the unfolding wisdom of the dreams in analysis, practicing hatha yoga and tai chi, and sitting in nature, the doors to the unconscious slowly creaked open. Thoughts and concepts gradually

diminished; a world of image and emotion began to appear. Symbols, manifested in dreams, imagination, and nature began to inform and energize me. As the Jungian analyst Pete Williams states: “The currency of psychic life is symbolic in nature.” I began to feel enriched and alive. Sitting in dark stillness, I began reclaiming long locked vaults of emotion-laden energy. I discovered a capacity for creative writing. I have noticed subtler indications of regaining balance. For example, after a year or two of often painful explorations of my shadow, I was finally able to hold a tree pose without toppling over. It all remains a work in progress.

However, stillness is not the same as stagnation. In the Taoist wisdom tradition, stillness is motion. Neither is stillness, and the concurrent inner journey, merely self-indulgent reflection. In *Symbols of Transformation*, Dr. Jung emphatically stated that the path of individuation comes with certain obligations. *“Individuation cuts one off from personal conformity and hence from collectivity. That is the guilt which the individuant leaves behind him for the world, that is the guilt he must endeavor to redeem. He must offer a ransom in place of himself, that is, he must bring forth values which are an equivalent substitute for his absence in the collective personal sphere. Without this production of values, final individuation is immoral and—more than that—suicidal.”* If we soften the noise, embrace stillness, attend to inner images and symbols in dreamwork and active imagination to embark on the path to wholeness and individuation, we incur a debt—one we must repay by robustly entering the conversation with our world.

In case you haven’t noticed, our planet is in desperate shape. It wobbles from the imbalances of unrestrained patriarchal power, rampant over-consumption of natural resources, and the abuses inflicted on the least among us. The healing conversation that rises out of quiet and stillness brings forth the values we have been privileged to discover on our inward journey. Those values may be in the arts: writing, poetry, sculpture, painting, dance, music, or other creative forms. I sense that the contributions of the poets and artists among us have thus far kept the increasingly polarized opposites from splitting the planet asunder. The conversations that will turn us in a new direction, however, are not limited to the arts. They must include meaningful and responsible commerce as a form of conversation. They must include technology and science that facilitates interactive connections between body and soul, and enhances links joining people, one to another. They must include listening to the wisdom of those who nurture and protect the rich plant and animal life of the earth. They must include spiritual paths that honor both the feminine and masculine presence in our true nature.

So, be quiet... and please, join the conversation! You may be surprised. I end with the wisdom of T.S. Eliot, from his *The Four Quartets*:

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.*