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a film by PATRICK SHEN

# IN PURSUIT of SILENCE



*"Soon silence will have passed into legend. Man has turned his back on silence. Day after day he invents machines and devices that increase noise and distract humanity from the essence of life, contemplation, meditation." -Jean Arp*

# **IN PURSUIT OF SILENCE**

## **Discussion Guide**

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## **Sketching a Map – An Introduction**

By Kevin Johnson, The Inner Room

“Silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything.” – Gordon Hempton

*In Pursuit of Silence* is an extraordinary documentary in that it offers us time and space to reflect on the very ordinariness of silence. The most profound encounters of our life are those that are bathed in silence and so it may be easy to not notice and even to mislabel it as nothing worthy of our attention. Why speak of what’s missing when our attention is drawn to the sounds, ideas, and experiences of our lives? Yet, the above quote from Gordon Hempton is an important corrective allowing us to realize the topic of the film is not about an absence at all. The silence that is being pursued is something else entirely. It is not only half of our existence. It is foundational to it as well.

It is a foundation that needs to be reclaimed though. Over and over again, the movie points out how silence is misunderstood and pushed aside by a culture of achievement, of experience, of control, and of noise. Silence, is not an isolating individual experience but instead it is an interconnecting communal encounter and one that we could let slip away as we teach ourselves to not notice what we actually crave.

How to rectify this? What can a study guide filled with words and ideas offer when actual silence cannot be thought about or analyzed? The attempt to tame the wilderness of silence is just more of the problem that the film attempts to point out. What we need is to let Silence speak and to do this we must learn the proper relationship between silence and words. To give a basic orientation, let us make it clear: Silence is the shift in attention from knowing and controlling the situation via words and ideas to releasing the words and ideas and being open to what is present to us right now where we are. In order to remain true to the film and to the silence the film pursues, this study guide will not digress into long explications about silence nor will it offer discussion questions intended to get us to think about and notice our “experience of silence.” Instead, this guide is intended as a map pointing toward where to look as one studies – better yet – as one is studied by silence. The guide is intended to direct one on a path but the point, of the map is to actually walk the path.

This brings us to the very first point. The Silence that this film pursues is an actual practice. It is something done and it is known by doing it.

## **Silence – A Practice**

There are plenty of ways to speak of silence. It can be discussed as a lack of sound. It can be discussed as an abstract philosophical concept about the limits of language or ideas or knowledge. Yet, those definitions of silence are the barest outlines of the topic and really still are in the realm of thoughts and words. Further, they are really only a piece of what the film is about. Silence is what one confronts and is confronted with when one sits with the film. The natural sounds, the dancing poetic images, the play of light and shadow on the screen, even the spacious quality that arises as one is lost in the film all are part and parcel of the silence. Silence appears when self-consciousness drops from view. It is a natural and ordinary part of our participation with reality but it is easily ignored as we have been trained to focus on our personal experiences, our thoughts about those experiences, our words we use to label those experiences, etc.

Silence only appears when words, ideas, and self-consciousness are quietly let go and our attention opens more broadly and rests. One can be confused by this because in order to describe silence and what one does in silence one uses words and concepts but those words and concepts are unfortunately not part of the practice and process of silence. Our descriptions and instructions are turned into definitions and concepts – leading us out of Silence.

If we can keep in mind that Silence is what we have available all the time if we just turn to it, we could keep from wandering off the trail. We must learn how to allow ourselves to naturally shift our attention from one form of consciousness and awareness to another type. Suggestions on approaching the infinite pathways into Silence will be offered below.

## **Silence – The Invisible Aspect of Knowing**

If we are to continue to sketch our map to get our bearings, we shift to the categories of thinking, wisdom, and education. The current lens we use to examine the world and the language that accompanies that lens has a way of filtering out what once was assumed. Returning to the foundations of all Western Thought and Knowledge, Plato reminds us wisdom is saturated in silence. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, begins in wonder, an emotion of contemplation, surprise, and deep attentiveness. One must also keep in mind, philosophy was originally a way of life. It was focused on practices to discover wisdom and people could engage in those practices that opened one up to wisdom. The word philosophy did not just mean jargon and abstract thinking. Therefore, it was not necessarily limited to a few experts. Over time, schools developed. This too assumed silence as the word school meant stillness or a form of “leisure” and quiet attention that allowed for learning. Each specific “school” taught its own practices to engage with the world in a deep way in order to understand it. Just knowing this very basic foundation allows us to see that Silence is not just any practice or activity. Silence is profoundly rooted in knowing anything. Whether we seek to “know thyself” as the ancient Delphic oracle once offered, or to know the world, Silence and knowledge are indelibly linked. Further, pursuit of Silence opens up the transcendent aspects of knowledge and being human. In crossing the threshold of Silence the realms of the metaphysical, aesthetic, and ethical all spring forth as categories to explore and evaluate. The creative impulse that has perpetually appeared in human culture and manifested in its religious and artistic expressions appear here too.

Not surprisingly, as Western culture developed, the focus on silence as an actual practice that is connected with knowing was overshadowed by the knowledge gained, the words used, the technology developed, and the self that appears and we are aware of when one experiences anything at all. A normal working mind will flow in and out of silence continuously as we come to know things but a constant focus on words, ideas, techniques, and technology has made us misunderstand the process of knowing and how we come to know. Now Silence may better be thought of as the contemporary blind spot of the mind analogous to the blind spot in the eye. For instance, the end of the optic nerve where it joins the retina creates a blind spot in each eye but is absolutely essential to seeing. In a strange twist, blindness is the very ground of vision. Here, a form of unknowing – the shift away from words, thinking, concepts that we currently consider knowledge – is the foundation for knowing. We need to allow for more silent unknowing in educational spaces so that we can work with how the mind naturally comes to know.

In Pursuit of Silence does us all the great service of pointing out the blind spot so we are aware of it and we can adjust our approaches to the world and to each other. We need to be reminded of the gifts that silence offers if we just engage it. The film does many things brilliantly and gives us much to study but it also models for us a way forward. It allows silence to speak. The hope for this study guide is to offer support so that we can allow for the proper conditions to truly listen.



## THE PROBLEM WITH NOISE

**Noise impairs our ability to hear the world around us.** In 2011, Johns Hopkins University conducted a study\* and found that hearing impairment among Americans is reaching epidemic proportions with one in five over the age of 12 suffering from some degree of hearing impairment. Each day millions of New York City subway commuters are exposed to a piercing 107 decibels of screeching and buzzing, which according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) will cause permanent hearing damage to the human ear if exposed to those levels for more than three minutes and forty-five seconds. Studies show that even prolonged exposure to sound in the lower decibel ranges, such as from an iPod, can cause hearing impairment.

\* [One in Five Americans Has Hearing Loss, Dr. Frak Lin, John Niparko, M.D., of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and Luigi Ferrucci, M.D., Ph.D., of the National Institute on Aging](#)

\* [BASIC FACTS ABOUT HEARING LOSS](#)

**Noise impairs our children's ability to succeed.** According to a 2007 study conducted by the University of London, "children exposed to chronic environmental noise have been found to have poorer auditory discrimination and speech perception as well as poorer memory requiring high processing demands. Finally, chronically exposed children tend to have poorer reading ability and school performance on national standardized tests."\* Our noise problem has become so severe that the entire auditory cortex of many children may now be rewired for noise which leads some experts to suggest that the rise in incidences of autism among children is directly tied to our noise problem.

\* [Noise pollution: non-auditory effects on health, Stephen A Stansfield, Mark P Matheson \(2003\)](#)

**Noise kills.** As early as 1971, the World Health Organization referenced noise as a “major threat to human well-being.” \* In a 2007 study by the World Health Organization, findings revealed that “noise pollution is causing more deaths from heart disease than was previously thought” \* and that the numbers could reach up to “the hundreds of thousands around the world.” As our technologies expand and as our dependency on them grows more extreme, the world will simply get noisier and more dangerous to our mental and physical health.

\* [Noise Pollution: A Modern Plague, Lisa Goines, RN and Louis Hagler, MD \(2007\)](#)

\* Noise Pollution: The Sound Behind Heart Effects, M. Nathaniel Mead (2007)

\* [“Altogether, Europeans are estimated to lose a total of around 61,000 years of healthy life annually through noise-associated heart disease, and suffer an estimated 3000 deaths, Kim says.”](#)

\* [WHO Burden of Disease from Environmental Noise \(2011\)](#)

**Noise can influence our behaviors.** Implications for our physical and mental health aside, noise also shapes our experience of a time and place and can even manipulate our behaviors. Corporations worldwide commonly use sound as a subliminal means to manipulate consumers in order to hike up profits. Inspired by studies which show that faster, louder music increases chewing by almost a third, restaurants have developed computerized sound systems that are preset to raise the tempo and volume of music at hours of the day when corporate wants to turn tables. All of us have experienced the obnoxious booming music echoing throughout certain retail outlets. There’s a science behind that too. According to author George Prochnik, “the principle is derived from the effects of military music on the speed of marching soldiers. Not only does the process of falling into step with a drumbeat make the pace of the marcher subject to manipulation and lead to general arousal; recent research has demonstrated that when people are moving in synchrony to a beat, their behavior is more compliant to the collective will.”

\* [Does background noise make consumers buy more innovative products? \(University of Chicago, 2012\)](#)

\* [Restaurants’ table turnover tricks boost business \(Sarah LeTrent, 2010\)](#)





## SILENCE RESTORES US

*"I wish to hear the silence of the night, for the silence is something positive and to be heard."*  
-Henry David Thoreau

**Silence frees us.** When the noise of the world falls away, so does the cloud of busyness and anxiety that permeates every aspect of our lives. It is in silence that our greatest thoughts surface and revelations unfold. We become free from the world, free from simply reacting, and surrounded by infinite possibility.

*"In the center of breathless activities, we hear a restful breathing. Surrounded by hours of moving, we find a moment of quiet stillness"* -Henri Nouwen

*"Let silence take you to the core of life."*-Rumi

**Silence helps us see ourselves.** For many of us, there is too much noise in our lives, literally and figuratively, to allow us to focus on anything but the immediate which means that our innermost lives are often a mystery to even ourselves. Growth, wisdom, and healing come only when you confront yourself in quietness and shed the armor that we often mistake as our own flesh.



**Silence is healing.** Numerous studies have shown that meditative and mindfulness practices can be more effective in treating depression than drugs or counseling\*. Silence can help us manage stress and a host of other emotional problems and improve the overall quality of life. Silence leads to more restorative sleep and therefore faster recovery times in hospitals and less risk of cardiovascular disease and other health problems\*\*.

\* [Curing Depression with Mindfulness Meditation \(Danny Penman Phd., 2011\)](#)

\*\* [Impact of sound environment in healthcare settings \(Ecophon, 2014\)](#)

**Silence makes us better learners.** Researchers in New York examined the reading scores of children in a classroom facing a noisy elevated train structure and compared their scores with children attending classes on the quiet side of the building.\* They found that by the 6th grade, children on the noisy side of the building were nearly a year behind the students on the quiet side. Children exposed to the noisy trains complained that the noise made it difficult for them to think and their teachers complained that they came home more exhausted after teaching in these noisy classrooms. Several years later, after noise-absorbing materials were installed by the Board of Education in the ceilings of the classes and the Transit Authority installed resilient-rubber pads on the train tracks, the noise levels were significantly lowered and the students' reading scores caught up with their classmates who were on the quieter side of the building. (Bronzaft, 1981). Additionally, further research has shown that silence can grow the brain by way of developing new cells in the hippocampus after two hours of daily silence.\*\*

\* [The effect of a noise abatement program on reading ability \(Arline Bronzaft, 1981\)](#)

\*\* [Is silence golden? Effects of auditory stimuli and their absence on adult hippocampal neurogenesis \(Kirste, Nicola, Kronenberg, Walker, Liu, Kempermann, 2013\)](#)

All the masters tell us that the reality of life—which our noisy waking consciousness prevents us from hearing—speaks to us chiefly in silence. -Karlfned Graf Durckheim

**Silence makes us better listeners.** According to author George Prochnik, silence is the “particular equilibrium of sound and quiet that catalyzes our powers of perception.” Silence allows us to “observe the distinction between things” and therefore allows for a more complete engagement with the world - terrestrial and otherwise - around us. All of the world’s religions revere silence as a path to God and a reflection of God’s nature. For many people, silence is the way God speaks to us, and when we ourselves are in silence, we are speaking the language of the soul.

“In silence I notice the weaver of my world and then the life itself — the gift of breath.”  
-Anatoly Petrenko

“Silence is the mother of everything that has come out from the Depth. And Silence kept quiet about what she was unable to describe: the Unspeakable.” -Clement of Alexandria

## DISCUSSION POINTS

1. When did you feel most uncomfortable while watching the film?
2. Why do you think people generally avoid silence?
3. Is there an aspect of your life in which you'd like to reduce or minimize the noise?
4. How do you find and meet silence in your everyday life?
5. When was the last time you waited in line or drove in your car in complete silence (no phone, no radio, etc.)?

## FAQ (answers by Patrick Shen)

### 1) Why did you become interested in this subject?

Silence as an idea in itself didn't emerge in my consciousness until I was introduced to the beautiful film by Philip Groning INTO GREAT SILENCE. It gave me a vocabulary to explore all the questions I had been asking since I was a teenager.

### 2) The WHO rates noise pollution as the second public health burden after air pollution... Why, given the magnitude of the problem, noise is underplayed by most governments/ local authorities as a real problem?

We've become very good at blocking out noise to the point that it often doesn't consciously register even if we are in the midst of an incredibly loud environment. Also, we are visually driven organisms and noise is an invisible pollutant. The effects of noise pollution are even difficult to detect as they mostly take place on a molecular level in our bodies. The evidence linking noise pollution and stress is overwhelming. Now that health agencies are calling stress the health epidemic of the 21st century, I hope people begin taking noise pollution more seriously.

### 3) The poorer a country is, the noisiest it is? Is silence becoming a luxury when it should be a right?

I think that's generally true for poor urban cities. The cost of living in areas near airports, train tracks, and other noisy industry is often lower as those areas are less desirable. As we know from the research noise also has a tranquilizing effect on the human brain, which has inspired a host of sonic weapons popular among law enforcement agencies and military when they need to disperse or subdue a large crowd. When we are cognitively overloaded, our capacity to think clearly and proactively is significantly hindered. We make poorer choices. It's very possible that the noise present in these low income communities is also hindering its citizens from making choices that might better their cities and their lives. As silence becomes more scarce, it will require much more effort, time and money to find. It will naturally become commodified. That said, we pass by places and opportunities to find silence and be silent each and every day. Libraries and museums are typically very quiet spaces and offer low cost or free opportunities to engage with silence. Driving with the radio off has always been a very therapeutic activity for me.

#### **4) I have the feeling, though, that people in general are reticent to silence. Why do you think is that?**

Sometimes we crave the white noise of the world. Engaging with the world and yourself is hard work. Sometimes what we find when we take a real look at ourselves and our situations is that we're unhappy with it all. It can be overwhelming. Noise has an intoxicating effect on us. It sweeps us up under its spell and allows us to forget for a moment. There's a time and place for that surely. But we find ourselves in this day and age under the spell of some form of noise nearly every waking moment of our lives.

#### **5) What does silence gives us and why is it more necessary than ever?**

The noise of the world has reached a fever pitch. We are so consumed by its intoxicating effect that we've forgotten how to live without it. In the modern age we must shout to be heard. Corporations must make more noise in order to stand out from the others. Many news agencies must resort to more shocking and controversial headlines in hopes that readers will take the bait. It's more necessary than ever that we take a step back from it in order to gain perspective on who we are and what we believe about the world. Culture and progress thrive on original ideas and originality springs from a mind that is free to wander. Silence gives us that space.

#### **6) Any tips on what can we do from a citizen's point of view to demand more peace & quiet?**

Of course we should continue to support companies, politicians, and organizations who understand the importance of quiet and are committed to putting their money where their mouths are. There are manufacturers making quieter products and machinery for example. Restaurants and bars are under the false impression that we like spending time with friends in places where the music is pounding and where we leave with massive headaches. We can let them know otherwise or we can stop frequenting those places altogether. To be frank, I think it's important that everyone sees this film we've made. The movement to bring more quiet into our lives cannot grow unless this conversation reaches the mainstream.

## Form Out of Formlessness

Written by Patrick Shen

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven and earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to sort nothing  
A local habitation and a name.  
-William Shakespeare

I lost count of how many times someone suggested we change the title of the film to something more scientifically honest, like say *In Pursuit of Quiet*. They'd argue that because silence doesn't exist as a physical condition and that if it were, it would be undesirable to most, the name of the film is misguided or inaccurate. I'm grateful to these early critics as it forced us to define the scope of the film and grapple with all the inherent paradoxes and challenges we were up against. How do you visually portray silence and what does a soundtrack for a film exploring silence sound like are questions that surfaced time and time again throughout the entire three-year process. If silence, as centuries of literature tells us, defies explanation then how do you even talk about it let alone make a film about it?

I considered making a silent film, one resembling perhaps the work of one of my cinematic heroes Nathaniel Dorsky whose entire body of work is silent. But that kind of work requires a level of maturity that I feel I hadn't achieved yet. Plus, even if stripped entirely of a soundtrack does not the juxtaposition of images and composition choices say something or express something whether it's a specific narrative or aesthetic and therefore negate silence? I also found the conventional documentary format problematic and, well, noisy. Experts talking at length as if in a lecture hall, visuals having no purpose other than to direct, specify or define often leaving no room for viewers to fill in the blanks on their own. Silence after all exists in the space between our words and points to a reality beyond words. Wouldn't any attempt to discuss silence simply shatter the very material I intended to pay homage to? Just as silence doesn't exist in the sonic realm, so too does it elude us in the cinematic. Naturally, these paradoxes left me wondering if making a film about silence made any sense at all.

*"...not only does silence exist in a world full of speech and other sounds, but any given silence takes its identity as a stretch of time being perforated by sound."*  
-Susan Sontag, *Aesthetics of Silence*

As the Japanese would suggest, the shape and personality of the silences we encounter draw their identity from our surroundings, our past experiences, our memories, and even our emotional state. The hushed voices of a museum heard after the assault of a bustling city sidewalk has a vastly different quality to it than the dead quiet of an empty church interrupted by the occasional creak of wooden pews. Further, one might feel a sense of nostalgia in an old church whereas another might find it deeply emotional or perhaps suffocating adding yet another dimension to the experience. One person's journey into silence doesn't and shouldn't look like the next person's.

And so I began to ponder my own journey with silence for some clues. I thought about the existential yearnings of adolescence that sparked my journey inward. The theater listing in the newspaper that led to my visiting a movie theater one afternoon in 2007 to see *Into Great Silence*, the beautiful film by Philip Groning. The words of authors, filmmakers and poets like Max Picard, Nathaniel Dorsky, Mary Oliver, Rilke, Rumi, Henry David Thoreau, John Cage and Pico Iyer, to name a few, who write in a manner that embodies silence rather than attempts to demystify it. Then there was the music of composers like John Cage, Goldmund, and Arvo Part who treat silence as a collaborator rather than a space with which to fill their egos. It seems that my journey with silence had been informed and fueled in large part by an experience of words both spoken and written, sounds, and images. These experiences gave me insight, context, and the freedom to explore the spaces in between. These spaces in between, in fact, wouldn't exist without the interruptions of sound perforating the silence. I wondered if I would have even known where to look for silence without these interruptions. What I began to discover was that silence and speech were inextricably tied to one another and that silence, far from being what we in the west would define as the "absence of sound," is also inextricably tied to our experience of the world.

I felt this gave the team and I the permission to explore silence in a manner that mimicked our experience of the world. Just as the world informed my journey into silence thus far, so could the film, we thought, provide insight, context, and most importantly, freedom to explore the spaces in between. So, we began the work of filmmaking and the delicate work of selecting metaphors that would present an honest portrait of silence. A portrait that would - as all portraits do - capture a glimpse of something much larger and complex as it appears to the artist in a particular context and specific moment of time.

There is no answer to the questions about what a film exploring silence should look like and sound like of course. Like silence, it defies definition. However, it is clear that to be fair to the subject, we must think of it not as a vacuum or a state of nothingness but a much more complex phenomenon that is inclusive of our being and our experience in the world.

*"How strange this silence would seem without these crickets here to explain."*  
-William Michaelian

To learn more about the film and download additional resources visit:  
[pursuitofsilence.com](http://pursuitofsilence.com)

To learn more about Kevin Johnson and his work visit:  
[kevinmichaeljohnson.com](http://kevinmichaeljohnson.com)