

## Chapter 1

Through past experience I had become familiar with many different types and levels of silence. There is a silence within, a silence that descends from without; a silence that stills existence and a silence that engulfs the entire universe. There is a silence of the self and its faculties of will, thought, memory, and emotions. There is a silence in which there is nothing, a silence in which there is something; and finally, there is the silence of no-self and the silence of God. If there was any path on which I could chart my contemplative experiences, it would be this ever-expanding and deepening path of silence.

On one occasion, however, this path seemed to come to an end when I entered a silence from which I would never totally emerge. But I must preface this account by saying that on previous occasions, I had come upon a pervasive silence of the faculties so total as to give rise to subtle apprehensions of fear. It was a fear of being engulfed forever, of being lost, annihilated, or blacking out and possibly never returning. In such moments, to ward off the fear, I would make some movement of abandoning my fate to God—a gesture of the will, a thought, some type of projection. And every time

I did this the silence would be broken and I would gradually return to my usual self—and security. Then, one day, this was not to be the case.

Down the road from where I lived there was a monastery by the sea, and on afternoons when I could get away I liked to spend some time alone in the silence of its chapel. This particular afternoon was no different than others. Once again there was a pervasive silence and once again I waited for the onset of fear to break it up. But this time the fear never came. Whether by habit of expectation or the reality of a fear held in abeyance, I felt some moments of suspense or tension—as if waiting for fear to touch me. During these moments of waiting I felt as if I were poised on a precipice or balanced on a thin tightrope, with the known (myself) on one side and the unknown (God) on the other. A movement of fear would have been a movement toward the self and the known. Would I pass over this time, or would I fall back into my self—as usual? Since there was no power of my own to move or choose I knew the decision was not mine; within, all was still, silent and motionless. In this stillness I was not aware of the moment when the fear and tension of waiting had left. Still, I continued to wait for a movement not of myself and when no movement came, I simply remained in a great stillness.

Sister was rattling the keys of the chapel door. It was time to lock up, and time to go home and prepare dinner for my children. Always in the past, having to abruptly pull out of a deep silence was difficult, for my energies were then at a low ebb, and the effort of moving was like lifting a dead weight. This time, however, it suddenly occurred to me not to think about getting up, but to just *do* it. I think I learned a valuable lesson

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here, because I left the chapel as a feather floats in the wind. Once outside, I fully expected to return to my ordinary energies and thinking mind, but this day I had a difficult time because I was continually falling back into the great silence. The drive home was a constant battle against complete unconsciousness, and trying to get dinner was like trying to move a mountain.

For three exhausting days it was a battle to stay awake and ward off the silence that every second threatened to overpower me. The only way I could accomplish the minimum of chores was by persistently reminding myself of what I was doing: now I'm peeling the carrots, now I'm cutting them, now I'm getting out a pan, now I'm putting water in the pan and on and on until, finally, I was so exhausted I would have to run for the couch. The moment I lay down I immediately blacked out. Sometimes it seemed I was out for hours, when it was only five minutes; at other times, it seemed like five minutes when it was hours. In this blackout there were no dreams, no awareness of my surroundings, no thoughts, no experiences—absolutely nothing.

On the fourth day I noticed the silence easing up so I could stay awake with less effort and, therefore, trusted myself to go shopping for groceries. I do not know what happened, but suddenly a lady was shaking me and asking, "Are you asleep?" I smiled at her while trying to get my bearings because, for the moment, I had not the slightest idea how I got in the store or what I should be doing. So I had to start all over again: now I am pushing the basket, now I must get some oranges, and so on. The morning of the fifth day, I could not find my slippers anywhere, but when getting breakfast for

the children I opened the refrigerator and what I found there was unbelievable, positively ludicrous.

By the ninth day, the silence had so eased up I felt assured that a little while longer and all would be normal again. But as the days went by and I was once more able to function as usual I noticed something was missing, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Something, or some part of me had not returned. Some part of me was still in silence. It was as if some part of my mind had closed down. I blamed it on the memory because it was the last to return, and when it finally did, I noticed how flat and lifeless it was—like colorless slides on an antique film. It was dead. Not only was the distant past empty, but also the past of the previous minutes.

Now when something is dead you soon lose the habit of trying to resurrect it; thus when the memory is lifeless you learn to live as one who has no past—you learn to live in the present moment. That this could now be done effortlessly—and out of sheer necessity—was one good outcome of an otherwise exhausting experience. And even when I regained my practical memory, the effortless living in the present never left. But with the return of a practical memory I discounted my earlier notion of what was missing and decided that the silent aspect of my mind was actually a kind of “absorption,” an absorption in the unknown, which for me, of course, was God. It was like a continuous gaze at the great, silent Unknowable which no activity could interrupt. This was another welcomed outcome of the initial experience.

This interpretation of the silent aspect of my mind (absorption) seemed sufficiently explanatory for about a month when I again changed my mind and decided that

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this absorption was actually an awareness, a special kind of "seeing" so that what had really happened was not a close-down of any kind, but actually an opening-up; nothing was missing, "something" had been added. After a while, however, this notion also did not seem to fit, it was somehow dissatisfying, something else had happened. So I decided to go to the library to see if I could solve this mystery through someone else's experience.

What I found out is that, if it cannot be found in the works of John of the Cross, it will probably not be found at all. While the writings of the Saint were well known to me, I could not find there an explanation of my specific experience; nor was I able to find it anywhere in the library. But coming home that day, walking downhill with a panorama of valley and hills before me, I turned my gaze inward, and what I saw, stopped me in my tracks. Instead of the usual unlocalized center of myself, there was nothing there, it was empty; and at the moment of seeing this there was a flood of quiet joy and I knew, finally I knew what was missing—it was my "self."

Physically I felt as if a great burden had been lifted from me, I felt so light I looked down at my feet to be sure they were on the ground. Later I thought of St. Paul's experience, "Now, not I, but Christ lives in me," and realized that despite my emptiness no one else had moved in to take my place. So I decided that Christ WAS the joy, the emptiness itself; He was all that was left of this human experience. For days I walked with this joy that, at times, was so great, I marveled at the flood gates and wondered how long they would hold.

This experience was the height of my contemplative vocation. It was the ending of a question that had plagued me for years: where do "I" leave off and God begin? Over the years the line that separated us had grown so thin and faded that most of the time I couldn't see it at all, but always my mind had wanted desperately to know: what was His and what was mine? Now my quandary was over. There was no "mine" anymore, there was only His. I could have lived in this joyous state the rest of my life, but such was not in the Great Plan. It was just a matter of days, a week perhaps, when my entire spiritual life—the work, the suffering, the experiences and the goals of a lifetime—suddenly exploded into a million irretrievable pieces and there was nothing, absolutely nothing left.