

# Meaningful Silence



by Jon Owen

Think about a time that you were in a group and it went silent – the talking stopped: what happened?

Was it a cause for embarrassment?

A yawning gap that just had to be filled?

If you were the leader, did you feel it 'your job' to do so?

**I**n this article, I want to prompt you to explore what silence means and has meant for you, and by extension, what it might mean for individuals within groups of which you are either a member or leader.

For many, silence in the presence of others is uncomfortable, or difficult to handle in some way. I suggest that this might be to do with significant events from our past in which silence played a part. It might also be to do with our personality type – certain psychologists have proposed that people can be divided into those for whom silence is a space to think, to feel and to re-energise, and those for whom silence is likely to be a void – a time stripped of stimulation.

The meanings that we habitually read into silence are frequently laid down in childhood, in the family or household in which we grew up.


- Can you cast your mind back to periods of silence in your household when you were a child?
- What did it mean?
- What did you associate with these silences?

It is common, for example, for parents to give each other 'the silent treatment' as part of a dispute or argument, intending that the hostilities go over their children's heads. Children, however, are often more astute than they are given credit for, and can begin to associate all silences with tension, or unspoken argument as a result.

Such historic associations are not always negative, of course, and their legacies echo down the years. When I was a child mum took me to Quaker Meetings on Sunday mornings, along with my brother and sisters. You may know that Quakers worship for the most part in silence. So we modelled my mum's peaceful contemplation and, whilst I'm not sure that God ever spoke to me with any clarity during those meetings, I did find the quiet to be restorative, a sanctuary of my own thoughts, a mental playground if you will.

I imagine that there are those of you who perhaps think that my mum was going against the nature of children by expecting me to sit in silence and 'do nothing' for extended periods of time – you might think that such a thing is tantamount to sensory deprivation. I don't recall that I felt oppressed by this, but if you are reading that kind of inference into my story, if you answer 'yes' to the majority of the following questions:

1. Would a long car journey on your own with no radio be an ordeal?
2. Do you tend to think as you speak, rather than gathering your thoughts first?
3. If you've had a hard week at work, do you want contact with people, to exchange stories?
4. At a party, do you want to talk to a lot of people, rather than in depth with one or two people with whom you have a lot in common?



- then there's a good chance that you have what the psychologist Karl Jung called a preference for 'Extraversion'. Not necessarily the same as the extravert of common parlance, Jung (and Myers and Briggs, who built on his work) proposed that such people ('E's) draw their energy from, and are primarily oriented towards the external world. They want contact with others and with their surroundings, and find this energising. As a result, stimulating conversation for 'E's is often lots of contributions from multiple people; they may interrupt as they spontaneously make a connection and share it as it occurs to them. The second of these two personality types is the 'Introvert': again, not necessarily as per the stereotype, individuals with this preference ('I's) may have plenty of confidence, and are primarily oriented towards their inner worlds of thoughts and feelings, and re-energise through turning inwards. 'I's tend to form their ideas and responses before sharing them and, as this takes time, conversation between a group of 'I's is more commonly interspersed with brief silences as individuals do this.

It is important to note that Jung, Myers and Briggs did not see one type as better than the other: in fact Myers and Briggs' principle motive in their research was to foster tolerance of difference. [You can explore their work in more detail, and take a full online questionnaire at [www.personalitypage.com](http://www.personalitypage.com)]

So what does this mean for the practitioner of outdoor learning? There are many implications, but here's one or two for starters:

Consider the contrasting orientations towards silence and stimulus of the two 'types' – one finds silence an important aspect of the

thinking (and learning) process, whereas the other may find too much quiet an impoverishment. I am not suggesting that you diagnose every individual you come into contact with, or subdivide your group into 'E's and 'I's for reviewing sessions. However, it is worth bearing in mind that if, for example, you have an 'E' preference but are leading a predominantly 'I' group, that your conversational pace may inadvertently deny them their thinking time –or in other words, you could do with shutting up a bit! If on the other hand, you have an 'I' preference but are leading a predominantly 'E' group, your pace could maybe do with a little acceleration, because they may be getting bored in the gaps between your inputs. One rule of thumb is a pause of two to three seconds before responding to what someone has said. Experiment with this – if that seems too brief, there's a good chance that you have an 'I' preference, and if 3 seconds stretches out like a life sentence ... you get the idea.

The danger with any of these categorisations, of course, is that they reduce complex individuals down to overly simplistic caricatures, and fail to address the uniqueness of each and every one of us, and individual responses to silence are as numerous as there are people. That said, work such as that done by Myers and Briggs on personality can be great starting point for understanding, talking about and valuing differences – and this kind of knowledge (of self) and tolerance (of others) is both a noble goal, and one that's not so hard to achieve when people gather together in red anoraks to cross shark-infested custard, and talk about how they might cross it.

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#### Authors Notes

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**Photographs** by Fiona Exon