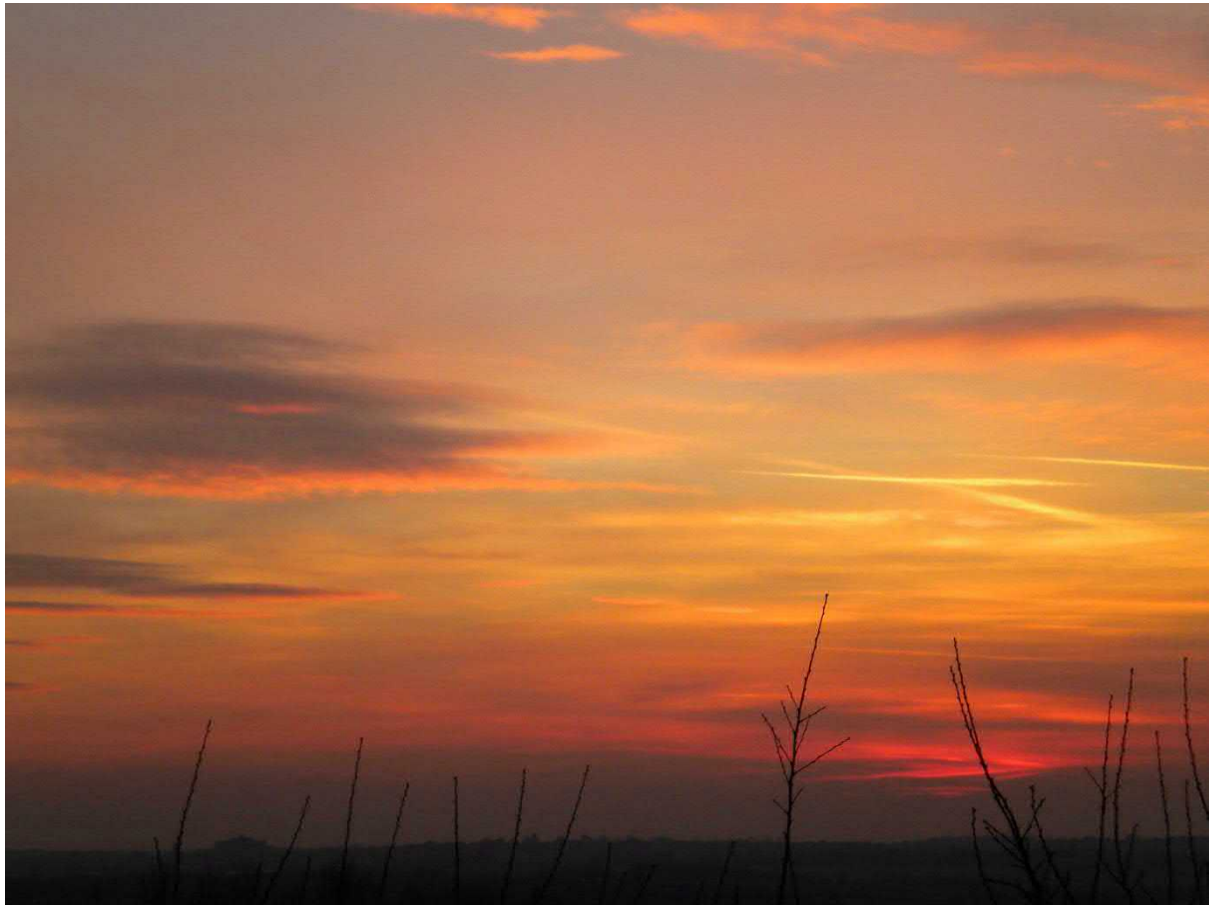


# **TEMENOS ACADEMY ONLINE PAPERS**

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**David Cadman**

**A REFLECTION ON WORDS, SILENCE AND LOVE**

## **A Reflection on Words, Silence and Love**

Nearly twenty-five years ago, when I was quite a young man, well, not as old as I am now, in fear and trepidation I gave one of the very few papers I have ever given for a gathering of the Temenos Academy. It was titled *Lost for Words*, and its premise was that although we are blessed with language, we are also constrained by it:

The blessings are self evident: language is useful; it gives access to the mundane and the practical; it reveals the marvellous and the poetic. But the constraints, though less obvious, are no less real...and much more dangerous.

“From our earliest childhood,” I said:

...we are encouraged to put a name to all that we see. As we grow, more names follow, and names not just for those things that we see or touch but now for all that we feel, until, at last, at the peak, if we try, we can even [give a name to] abstract ideas. Hurrah! Thus, the mind is taught to grasp at experience and clothe it in words...in language.

I went on to suggest that our language is never entirely our own, but is always governed by those in power. In the Middle Ages it would have been popes, bishops and archbishops; and now it is bankers and investment brokers, so that the language we use is all about prices:

The difficulty is not, of course, that, at times, we need to speak of prices and costs, because clearly we do, but rather that this language of accounting has outgrown itself and now extends beyond the market place, to define and limit all experience. It now rules in the hospital ward and the school room, in local and national government, in architecture and in the planning and development of our towns and cities. It is everywhere and governs all.

But, I said, this language may be less than it appears:

For even the masters of the language, those thought to have it firmly in their grasp, bankers and property developers, treasury officials and, dare it be said, accountants, oftentimes bear witness to the

frailty of the reality that, otherwise, they espouse with such confidence. Anyone who can remember the tales of ‘soft landings’ and ‘the green shoots of recovery’, will know that economies do not always behave as we are told they will, and failures, when they occur, can be spectacular: despite their image as bastions of financial probity, banks collapse or lend with astonishing imprudence; more money than most of us can imagine is lost in stock markets that ‘unexpectedly’ nose-dive; newly-built office buildings, carefully appraised with financial rigour and expertise, remain empty long after [they should]; and even the priests of this new religion, those most fetêd by their peers, sometimes are found to have feet of clay, their proclaimed capacity to turn all to gold proving to be illusory.

Looking back, I cannot help but smile at what I said, for this was written more than ten years before the financial collapse of 2008/09 to which I was unwittingly pointing. And speaking of the “frailty of reality,” I regret to say that fantasy persists, for now I wonder what kind of economy it is that requires that savers earn all but nothing on their savings (I gasp to recall that interest rates in 1996 were something like 7.5%, and now are little more than zero) and that markets can only be sustained by ‘quantitative easing’, by massive injections of money from the Bank of England (so far something like a trillion pounds). So much for the ‘invisible hand’ of free markets! So much for their reality!

Anyway, since giving that paper, and becoming old, I have come to see, more clearly than then I could have known, that not only is language a constraint, sometimes a damaging constraint, but that in words or texts we so often stumble to find Truth. Texts, prosaic texts – for poetry I think is another matter – seem to be riven with partiality and uncertainty, since every time we seek to name we limit and distort that which is.

Do you recall how Lao Tzu put it in the opening stanza of the *Tao Te Ching*?

The tao that can be told  
is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named  
is not the eternal Name.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Tao Te Ching: The Book of the Way*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (Kyle Cathie, 1988), Chapter 1.

The more we grasp at it, the more Truth escapes our capture. So perhaps it can only be discovered in the unwritten and the unspoken – in Silence.

I suppose this realisation should not have come as a surprise to me since, as a birthright Quaker, my childhood was founded upon regular periods of silence, both in the local Meeting House and, indeed, at home, where my father's after-lunch nap and Sunday afternoon sleep were sacrosanct. Silence was the punctuation of our lives, the spaces in between, the commas and the full stops of the everyday. I gave it no thought. It was all I knew. But now, so much later and in the midst of cacophony and unrest, I realise I was given a Great Gift.

I am writing this in January 2021. We are in Lock Down, and Suffolk, the county in which I live, has been moved into 'Tier 4', the most restrictive classification so far in the campaign to prevent the spread of The Virus, COVID 19. It all began nine months or so ago, when it was commonly supposed that the restrictions that were imposed would last perhaps a couple of months. But they have persisted and now The Virus has mutated to a more quickly spreading form. The wearing of masks is widely accepted, social distancing is part of our lives, and we have all reduced the amount we travel. At Christmas many families were separated at the very time when they would expect to gather together, and on New Year's Eve there were no public firework displays, just a few families letting off rockets and Catherine wheels in their gardens. It is a world we have not known before, and now it is everywhere. Vaccines are being given to more and more people, but there seems little prospect of immunity for everyone in anything like the short term.

A question arises: are we hoping to return to the way things were before The Virus, taking up once again our old habits; or are we, inevitably, being moved towards another way of being? Quite early on, I cannot remember exactly when or where, I read an article by two young Chinese scientists that said that The Virus was not an enemy, it was a messenger, that it was Nature's way of telling us that we had to stop what we were doing; that in forcing us to change, it was showing us what this 'other way' would be like – had to be like. If that is so, then perhaps the mutation is a way of reinforcing that instruction – slow down, consume less, travel less, give greater respect both to all other people and to Nature herself. If

that is true then any attempt to return to how things were before seems unlikely.

But how does this relate to the matter of Silence?

It seems to me that all that has happened, all that we are being shown, requires the deepening of the practice of Silence, especially Gathered Silence.

During these recent months, my local Quaker Meeting has been unable to meet in person, and so some of us have taken to meeting via Zoom. From quite early on we have been meeting every Tuesday morning for half an hour of Gathered Silence followed by what we call After Words, a period of about half an hour in which we can share with each other thoughts and feelings that have either arisen in the previous week or have arisen during our time of Silence. To start with we all felt the same unease and uncertainty at this form of gathering, but quite soon, since those attending became a small but constant group, we became familiar with the practice and, indeed, began to experience a quality of Silence that was different from usual. There was something about meeting from our own homes, and being able to see not only everyone else but also ourselves within the Zoom 'gallery view', that deepened the experience, bound us together.

Perhaps because a number of our group were living alone, in an isolation intensified by the forced separation, to begin with there was quite often an outpouring of emotion as Friends (as we Quakers call each other) shared their suffering at being unable to be with friends and family, to be living without any physical touch. But as the weeks and then the months went by something else happened. The Silence became deeper. And it began to change us. The solitude of Lock Down, took us to another place, a place in which we were surrendering to the stillness and silence, shedding parts of whom we had been.

I can only explain this – insofar as it needs explaining – in my way, and I cannot tell whether this will make sense to anyone else. But for me, it has made me realise that in Silence – and without words – we may be discovering something important about our true selves; that stillness and silence are more of who we truly are than restlessness and noisiness; that humanity was silent before it spoke; that we were slow before we became pacey; and that if Silence has always been there, hidden away in small places, now it is spreading,

now it is being found everywhere. For, it seems to me, that Silence is of the essence, the true realm of all that is.

There are many views of what Silence is.<sup>2</sup> Some speak of it being in the underlying silence of Nature or in sculpture and painting or in music, silence being the intervals between the separate and gathered sounds. It is there in the cloister and in the lives and stories of hermits and those who pray, not least those who say the Hesychast's prayer, prayer without ceasing.

Some present Silence as if it were an absence, a blank page, an entirely interior experience, a withdrawal. But that is not how I find it. For me, Silence is a presence, an ever-moving energy or force that permeates all that is both within and beyond. It courses through the Cosmos and it courses through each one of us. It is rather like water, which flows everywhere and finds the niches and cracks before pouring through, and which is sometimes hidden underground. It is in every cloud and rain drop, in every river and in the great oceans, and it runs through trees and plants and through the arteries and veins of our bodies and all that is. And it is as much in the muddy puddle as the clear stream. This is what Silence is like when we step into it.

One text that speaks to me of Silence is *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. The version I like to read is the one written by Jean-Yves Leloup, and translated into English by Joseph Rowe.<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of the gospel, Mary Magdalene is speaking of a recent teaching she has received from her Teacher, Yeshua or Jesus:

‘Henceforth I travel towards Repose  
where time rests in the Eternity of Time;  
I go now into Silence.’  
Having said all this, Mary became silent,  
for it was in silence that the Teacher spoke to her.

This is such a beautiful and intriguing text, since not only does she choose Silence, but she also refers to having been taught “in silence.”

In his commentary, Jean-Yves Leloup says that the place of ‘Repose’, the place to which Mary is travelling, is a place beyond ordinary time, a place where there is nothing for the senses to grasp

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Alain Corbin, *A History of Silence* (Polity, 2019); Robert Sardello, *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness* (Goldstone Press, Heaven and Earth Publishing and North Atlantic Books, 2006); and Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Eight Day Press, 2002, first published in 1948).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (Inner traditions, 2002), 37.

on to. It is a place which lacks all sensations, emotions and thoughts. There is only Silence. Even love does not feel like love in this space. Not as we know it. And yet it is there that we find the very source of Love.

As we try to come to terms with what the Virus is telling us, I have a sense, that we are now being asked to return to this place of Repose, this place of Silence, both to learn what has already been said about it and to experience it anew in every moment of our lives. To strike a new balance between action and words and stillness and quietude.

And this brings me back to my life as a Quaker.

Quakers worship in silence, but the silence is not just the context for worship, it is the worship, which is to say that the worship is a kind of surrender to Silence. It is a kind of waiting, not in the sense of anticipating but simply being there for. At this point, I should say, of course, that I cannot speak for Quakers as a whole. No Friend can do that, for there is no Quaker doctrine, no creed, no priest to tell us what the Church requires. Rather, I speak for myself and for the experience I have with local Friends.

Quakers are very careful with words. Within the setting of Gathered Silence, there may be ministry, when someone in the meeting will stand to speak, to ‘bear witness’; but, in accordance with the only book of guidance that we have, *Quaker Faith and Practice* – which includes guidance, reflections and what are called Advices and Queries – Friends are advised to think carefully before speaking and not to speak for too long. “Beware,” says Advice 1.3, “of speaking predictably or too often, and of making additions towards the end of a meeting when it was well left before.” And when one friend speaks, the others gathered there are asked to listen attentively. When the Friend has spoken, there should be a period of silence before anyone else speaks, and even then their ministry should not be in the form of a rebuttal or even an acclamation of what had just been said. Breaking the silence is significant and no-one should do it without feeling sure that what they have to say is being called for.

This careful practice is called ‘right ordering’ and it applies not only to regular meetings for worship but also to all meetings, including business meetings in which the minute of the meeting is agreed there and then, shared with Friends until all are content with what is being recorded. There is never a vote, the purpose of the

minute being to record ‘the feeling of the meeting’. Silence pervades the meeting, and no voice will be ignored. If the minute cannot be agreed, Friends will either move into silence and then try again, or leave the matter until another time when they will have been able to reflect upon what is best. You might think that this would mean that decisions are always delayed, but in my experience this is seldom the case, and, knowing they will be heard, Friends most often find agreement. Throughout such meetings, which are themselves regarded as meetings for worship, Silence is ever-present, it is the realm in which decisions are made. And this is because the Silence is active. It is not a context for what might otherwise be no more than a muted hearing, it is the very matter within which Friends speak and listen thoughtfully.

Amongst Friends, this sense of an orderly Silence is found in the following extract from a meeting held in Wiltshire in 1678. The meeting was one in which, in each quarter of the year, Friends would have been gathered to consider the life of their local meetings. This extract sets down “advice on the conduct of meetings for church affairs:”

Wherefore let whatever is offered, be mildly proposed, and so left with some pause, that the Meeting may have opportunity to weigh the matter, and have a right sense of it, that there may be a unanimity and joint concurrence of the whole. And if anything be controverted that it be in coolness of Spirit calmly debated, each offering their reasons in sense, their assent, or dissent, and so leave it without striving. And also that but one speak at once, and the rest hear. And the private debates and discourses be avoided, and all attend the present business of the Meeting. So will things be carried on sweetly as becomes us, to our comfort: and love and unity be increased: and we better serve Truth and our Society.<sup>4</sup>

Here the matter of silence is touched with a necessary gentleness and an attentive listening. Things are “carried on sweetly.” “True silence,” said William Penn in 1699, “is to the spirit what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment.”<sup>5</sup> And later, in words that speak of Silence as a refuge, John Bellows, in 1895, said:

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<sup>4</sup> *Quaker Faith and Practice*. Fourth Edition, 1994, 19.57.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 2.13.



I know of no other way, in these deeper depths, of trusting in the name of the Lord, and staying upon God, than in sinking into silence and nothingness before Him... So long as the enemy can keep us reasoning he can buffet us to and fro; but into the true solemn silence of the soul before God he cannot follow us.<sup>6</sup>

There is something attractive, even comforting, in the apparent certainty of faith in these Quakers of another time, but I have to confess that I do not share their anthropomorphic reference to God as singular and male. I have to confess that my 'God' is without gender and without form, something more akin to an ultimate reality, an expression of a Deep Love. But I share their intent, which I think is captured in these more recent (1937) words of Rufus Jones:

[The early Friends] made the discovery that silence is one of the best preparations for communion [with God] and for the reception of inspiration and guidance. Silence itself, of course has no magic. It may be just sheer emptiness, absence of words or noise or music. It may be an occasion for slumber, or it may be a dead form. But it may be an intensified pause, a vitalised hush, a creative quiet, an actual moment of mutual and reciprocal correspondence with God.<sup>7</sup>

But let me come back to the matter of words. Since giving my Temenos paper in 1996, I have again and again come across the difficulty of breaking into the mindset of convention, again and again being told that nothing can be done unless what is proposed fits into, or is spoken of in, the language of convention – the language of prices, returns and accounting, the language of economy in its narrowest sense. And yet we know that speaking in such a language only brings us back to where we are. Even now, after years of discussion about sustainability, corporate responsibility, responsible investment and the costs of environmental and social degradation, we remain in the place that this language has led us to, and it would seem that we cannot move beyond it. So if, as must now surely be the case, we see that we can no longer remain where we are if we are to avoid significant calamity, then we need to find another language, another way of being. For as we speak, so we are.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 2.15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 2.16

I recall these words of the late Philip Sherrard:

[How] we perceive things depends crucially upon the state of our consciousness, and...the state of our consciousness depends on the state of our being. This does not mean that the reality of things themselves varies according to the consciousness which perceives them, and still less that their existence is dependent upon their being perceived. It simply means that how they appear to us, *the kind of reality we attribute to them*, and whether we see them as they are or, as it were, through a distorting lens, have very little to do with the things themselves and very much to do with the quality of our own being, the purity of our soul and the level of our intelligence. And this in turn means that the way in which we see things *may not correspond in the least to the reality of the things themselves*.<sup>8</sup> (My emphases)

We have to find another discourse, and it is my suggestion that the practice of Silence, especially Gathered Silence, for the time being actual or remote, has a vital part to play in this. For in many ways it presents us with a different and necessary place to be in: it is still while convention is pacey, it is quiet while convention is noisy, it listens attentively while convention has no such time or inclination, it gathers us together while convention separates us, it consumes nothing while convention desires to consume more and more, seemingly without end. And, most importantly, as Jean-Yves Leloup suggests in his reading of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, this Silence is the place of Love.

Perhaps above all else, it is this matter of Love that has been my obsession for the past twenty-five years.<sup>9</sup> For me, Love is that ‘Ultimate Reality’ that Stephen Post refers to in his book on the writings of Sir John Templeton, the creator of the Templeton Foundation.<sup>10</sup> John Templeton apparently suggested that “the force and energy of Unlimited Love underlies the universe.”<sup>11</sup> And although I have only recently read his words, that is my view, too.

As I put it in *Love and the Divine Feminine*:

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<sup>8</sup> *A Sacred Trust: Ecology and Spiritual Vision*, edited by David Cadman and John Carey (The Temenos Academy, 2002), 2.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Why Love Matters*, edited by Scherto Gill and David Cadman (Peter Lang, 2016), David Cadman, *Love and the Divine Feminine* (Panacea Books, 2020) and davidcadmanatwork.com.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen G. Post, *Is Ultimate Reality Unlimited Love?* (Templeton Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* xvi.

There is a Presence, a form of Being which is beyond our understanding. It is Good and it is Loving. When we surrender to it, we are loved by it and we are drawn to love it. Given the limitations of our knowing, we begin to endow this Presence with personality, for that is what we find in ourselves. And then, for comfort, we call it God. But the moment we do so, at the moment we seek to name it, we begin to limit it, to make it less than it is. And then we limit it again and call it Father, excluding half of our nature, and if we are not careful, we place Him far away, in the sky above us and wonder how we shall ever reach Him.

Love is neither man or woman. Love is Divine Presence, and this Presence is the energetic force that shapes all relationships when they are most natural and at their best. Love is the primal impulse, and it is no *thing*, but rather a *movement* from and towards. We have to *be* in Love. This is the truth that lies behind the Christian commandment to 'love God' and to 'love one another', and to keep this commandment, we have to *be in Love*.

Just suppose that we are being called to a new Gospel of Love in which there is a marriage between the Divine Feminine and the Divine Masculine, an integration, a new consciousness. I think that this is possible, and that it is required.<sup>12</sup>

I suppose I am suggesting that an important part of resisting convention, and finding this place of Love, moving from what Riane Eisler and Douglas Fry refer to as a place of damaging dominance to a place of restorative partnership,<sup>13</sup> requires a discipline, a practice of engaged attention that can best be found in Silence. And perhaps this is what The Virus is trying to tell us, drawing us back to the Reality of Love. "Suppose," says Anne Baring in her book *The Dream of the Cosmos*, that "the cosmic source we come from is attracting us back to itself, helping our consciousness to connect with it, to respond to its evolutionary intention."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> David Cadman, *Love and the Divine Feminine* (Panacea Books, 2020), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Riane Eisler and Douglas P. Fry, *Nurturing Our Humanity* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Anne Baring, *The Dream of the Cosmos: A Quest for the Soul* (Archive Publishing, 2020), 438.