

Silence Heals

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SILENCE HEALS

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In my end is my beginning: *I have come home again. I move forward, carried by this lightness. And understand that it is the beginning, the very beginning of the path to be lived. A path which for me is interwoven with exchanges between the narrow human condition and the vast, luminous sky... I have just arrived back home. Tomorrow, or in a short while maybe, I will have lost it again. Or it will have changed, new each time encountered and yet unchanging... without bearings, I will move forward guided by silence, this silence that manifests through its presence, through its absence.*

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PROLOGUE

How could I find a project that would engage my heart as well as my mind? I was living in Switzerland, marooned on an island of European intellect where my creativity was stifled. I had spent five cold winters in Quebec and now, on a chilly February day in Switzerland I pondered on where I should go next.

Then a dear friend, a long-time comrade, whose opinion I had learned to respect called me:

“How much do you charge to do an interview?”

“Interview? You know I’ve given up that sort of thing.”

“...”

My friend is good at conveying much while saying nothing.

“Well,” I said, “it depends on the subject. I mean who the person is and what I am to interview them about.”

Two weeks later I was driving towards Annecy.

It was one of those clear days that are the reason humans love mountains. The clouds were white, the mountain peaks were white, while the slopes and valleys were dotted with sunlight. Somehow the vastness of the scene reminded me of Yolande. Yolande whom I was on my way to interview.

Last time we had met it was in Quebec. It was freezing cold,

really cold (-25C), but, unlike the chilly European torpor through which I had just been living, in Canada we were in a swirling, energetic flurry of snow, of speed, of laughter. We had gone on a spur of the moment outing with mushers and their dogs who lived close to my cabin—a sled ride, the blur of snow swirling around us as we ran with the mushers, laughing, dreaming, shivering, running, pushing, encouraging the dogs and capsizing the sled.

I had only met Yolande the previous evening and she had left for France the very next day. She was returning to France, the country I had fled in an effort to get away from the heavy atmosphere, which reflected my own state of mind.

From time to time a mutual friend sent me news: Yolande was leaving for..., was arriving from... One day she was at home, the next she was invited somewhere else in France, then she was in Spain, and now she had been invited to America. Sometimes she would live like a recluse—at other times she lent her apartment to a young homeless couple, and took to the road, or explored the Alps, or went to California, where people were hungry to learn about awakening—then she would be back again in France, involved in the crazy routine of a restaurant in Savoy.

Laughing, joyful, unpredictable, silent behind exchanges willingly shared—Yolande represented freedom to me. She had just lost her son when I first met her, but her joy could not be shaken. Her brief visit had left me with a barely perceptible trace of her: the perfume of a presence in which light and gentleness danced together—strong, simple, intense, contagious in its silence.

“Yolande is ready to talk,” our friend had told me, two weeks earlier. I had been busy with daily life and it was only now that I realized that some part of me had been waiting to hear these very words ever since her visit.

It was as if our sled adventure had taken place only three days ago, so quickly did we re-connect on the phone. Spontaneous as

ever, she confirmed what our friend had said: at first she could find no words to explain this process which she had observed playing out within her, but now the words had started to come. Yes, maybe, she was ready to talk about this inner adventure that she had been experiencing in silence for nearly five years.

“Let’s just meet, without any definite plans,” we agreed, “If it is fun and words appear, there will always be time to write it up and do an article for the magazine, 3ème Millénaire.”

The challenge would be to write an article about something ineffable that manifests in silence. All the words such as awakening, liberation, enlightenment have been devalued by Western seekers, with their confused hopes of salvation. How could I write about silence?

So, as I drove that afternoon to meet with Yolande, I was on the track of this silence. A silence filled with presence, as she was soon to describe it. An empty fullness, sudden and overwhelming.

Five years earlier, on a summer’s day, Yolande had disappeared, swallowed up by... something. Seen from the outside, nothing had changed. A young woman was still there, still busy in her apartment. Her body, gestures, perceptions, thoughts were all intact. But her identity, her identification with this body, these perceptions, these thoughts had dissolved into silence. A tremendous silence, full of life, had taken over.

Weeks went by, and months – even traumatic life events could not pull her back from this silence – and the feeling of identity never returned. In its place was this growing realization that there was nothing separating Yolande from the world as it appeared from one moment to the next. Yolande had dissolved. All that remained was the present moment, a whole world that ceaselessly emerged, from moment to moment, from pure reality, this ‘ineffable’ which she simply called this thing so as to not misrepresent it. All of this brought her to admit, after months of observing this

metamorphosis: "I am more alive than I have ever been—and dead at the same time."

Yolande wiped out! Seized, erased, absent. And yet so present, my memory whispered. Absolutely, intensely present to everything and to everyone that appeared. I had been invited. Me—the eternal seeker who was so sick of sham and pretend spirituality—I had been invited to draw near to this presence. This silence, this mystery, this... thing.

So that's how I came to be driving to Annecy on a spring day—a season which reflected my own hopes for renewed growth. Driving towards Yolande, towards the unknown, towards a meeting that was to become a friendship, in which words would flow intermittently, interspersed with silence, for a whole year.

Meetings, words and silence—all reflected in this book.

Joy is in the air...

That first meeting had left me feeling enchanted. Now time had passed and I wondered. I wondered how both of us might have changed – and whether our separate life paths had brought us to a fleeting equilibrium before veering off course again.

I needn't have worried. By Lake Annecy, where the banks borrow the blue of the water, we walked and sat and talked. This was no superficial exchange of pleasantries. We told each other the story of our life journeys, with nothing held back and nothing embroidered to make it sound better. With Yolande there was no other way to be – her gaze was so clear, so pellucid, so free of any personal agenda that I could be myself, I had to be myself – hiding nothing, open and free.

Joy was in the air.

Yolande's apartment was perched above the medieval city with its narrow streets, canals and primrose-dotted parks. In this apartment, with microphone and notepad as discreetly placed as possible, we started our interviews.

I

WHERE HAVE MY THOUGHTS GONE?

*From bliss all beings are born,
From within bliss they exist,
To bliss they return.*

Taittiriya Upanishad

It happened in August 2003. The day had started like any other summer's day. My son had gone out. I was at home alone, doing this and that. Then all of a sudden I noticed...

Noticed what?

There was a *silence* in my head. Yes, *silence*. It was strange – where had my thoughts gone? There was a space, an interval between my thoughts that made them seem as if they were in the background. As if they no longer belonged to me, or at least no longer had any hold over me. I felt a lightness, a well-being, I felt in tune with and connected to myself like never before. Connected to something that I could not explain nor find words for: this *silence*...

I wondered what had happened to me. And I started taking note.

And...?

It felt as if my inner mode of functioning had changed. Suddenly—like being struck by lightning—something had come upon me. I had not seen it coming and it had taken hold of me unawares. This *thing* that words cannot describe had taken over everything.

You did not see anything coming?

Nothing. I just noticed that everything was different. At the time, it was the *silence* that struck me. But in the days that followed, I realized that I was no longer experiencing things as I had done previously. The dozens of trivialities that used to irritate me every day, a door banging, the keys that disappear just when you are ready to go out, some worry or other, all the minute details that used to constantly bother me, without my being aware that they did: none of that bothered me anymore. If I noticed the door wasn't properly closed or the keys weren't in my pocket, I went and closed the door, started looking for my keys—without the slightest comment, either thought or spoken. Things were what they were. My way of perceiving them, of reacting to them, had changed.

In fact, you were no longer reacting?

Exactly, I was not reacting anymore because the *silence*, the tranquility, had completely invaded me, and allowed me simply to see the situation the way it was.

At first, I kept it to myself, watched it deep inside, wondering what on earth it could be. As I had just turned forty, I said to myself: *Wow! It's wonderful turning forty! I finally feel in tune with myself! I feel so light, so good.*

Really, you thought it was because you had turned forty?

Yes, that's what I told myself in the beginning. But when I started talking to people around me about it, I noticed that, even though they had turned forty they did not feel like I did – they did not see things the way I did.

All my friends were rationalists – materialists even. Like me, they were all busy with daily life. They had never asked themselves metaphysical questions or opened a 'spiritual' book, or read about personal development, any more than I had. They knew me as a person who was always on the go: hardly had I arrived somewhere than I already wanted to be somewhere else. And now they saw me laid back, calm, serene. But they did not know anything more about what I was experiencing than I did.

That is when I started wondering about what happens in the invisible world, about what happens inside oneself. I started searching, going into bookstores, looking for books that just might explain a little something of what I was experiencing.

As time went on, I stopped trying to understand. The more time went by, the more I let this *thing* take over, content to observe, discover what was happening, discover everything that kept on coming, ever more intense, more alive, more clear. However in the beginning I wanted to understand.

Well ?

Well, very soon after that, there was the accident.

It happened two months later, at the end of October. I was away on a business trip in the North of France. The cell phone was silent: no network. And then I connected to a network and saw all these messages waiting for me. *Wow*, I thought, *something must have happened*. I dialed a number. At the end of the line, my best friend faltered: "Your son.... On the road.... An accident... he's gone...."

At first, I don't think I believed it. 'An accident', that I could understand. As for the rest: *It's not possible, she made*

a mistake! And I drove, I drove to the agreed meeting place, my sister's house. I didn't think, I just drove. At one point, there was one thought: *If this is true, my life is ruined.* But this thought did not last. It collapsed into this same tranquility that I had been living for the past few weeks.

When I got to my sister's, they were all there waiting for me. My family, my friends, everyone. So I knew it must be true. Everyone drew around me, to tell me about the tragedy. I felt a sort of release, I let myself go.

Meaning ?

I let myself go. The situation was what it was – no tears, no crisis. I went up to my room where it was quiet. I saw my friends and family, worried, come to see what I was up to. I saw them trying to talk to me, trying to find out where I was at with it all. In fact, I was quite calm. The hours passed, it was still the same: I saw that people were busying themselves with things, but how can I put it? Deep inside me there was no agitation, no revolt. Not the slightest outburst, no agonized cry like: *It's not possible! This should not have happened.*

I have a hard time remembering exactly what happened, but I did not feel the pain that everyone thought I would. I saw that pain is not caused by a situation. At least, not in my case, not when there is this *silence*; the situation cannot cause me any pain because pain cannot co-exist with *silence*.

At first I did not say anything to anyone. I could not act a part either. So I stayed the way I was – calm. Of course, I didn't jump for joy, but I did not fall apart either. I was in a sort of neutral space. My close friends, thinking I was devastated, said, "It hasn't hit her yet." But it wasn't that. I had totally understood, but I still perceived this same *silence* in my head, that enabled me to stay calm.

I let the weeks go by, one after the other, with agitation and upset all around me. There was the funeral, the condolences,

the absence; but I experienced all of this from within a tranquility, which never ceased. I had to admit the obvious—that something deep inside me enabled me to live through all this in peace. It was incredible, yet it was true.

Then an intense feeling of wonderment struck me deep inside. And I let myself go with it, more and more, deeper and deeper. After a while it was so enjoyable that I let myself be totally taken over by it. And the more time passed, the more I felt it there, deep inside me, strong and gentle and caring and everything one can imagine... about the unimaginable.

Those around me thought I was numb. They were waiting for the moment when I would finally realize what had happened and move on to an overt grieving process. But I was totally conscious, I knew what had happened!

You knew and yet it did not pull you out of this peacefulness? Or were there moments of despair? Or a switching back and forth between the two?

What I did notice, back then, were moments of sadness, how can I put it—I saw them. I saw them coming, I saw them leaving.

As if the sadness was a visitor and not 'I am sad' ?

That's it. I felt the emotion coming. Then, I felt it, as it was there, but I could not hold on to it. So it continued on its way. It left.

So this neutrality is not indifference?

Not at all! Of course, seeing me from the outside, someone could think I was numbed out, that I wasn't feeling anything. But on the inside, everything I was experiencing was very intense. I was not in the least bit dead. There were moments

of sadness, moments of burnout, but they flowed on through me. *Silence*, this unknown space, was constantly there. And the more time passed, the more I abandoned myself to this *thing* that had awakened within me, that had taken over everything. I fell madly in love with it. Everything else subsided into the background.

Carefree

If I had expected a typical interview—two people sitting face to face, one in the role of interviewer, the other that of interviewee, I would have been disappointed. Fortunately I had not imagined anything at all. Reality was going to take care of things in its own way, without needing me to make any plans. Every one of our meetings confirmed that Yolande would always be spontaneous and unpredictable. One day I showed up, my head spinning with questions and words. I was ready to probe incisively into this unknown thing that she was going through, this thing that was indeed her very existence. That day the sun was shining brightly and we felt the call of fresh air and open space. Window-shopping or walking by the lake, the wind, the shops, our laughter, cafés that welcomed us here and there, her friends—everything was opposed to our working on anything serious.

The next time, trying to take things seriously, we sat at either end of her sofa, recorder and notebook at the ready, and it was silence itself that meddled with our plans. Hardly had a word escaped her lips in response to a question, than the following word skipped away into infinity before revealing itself to Yolande: silence had taken over again and refused to release her. One minute passed, then another; the silence persisted. At first I was thrown by this, then dismayed, then it was my turn to succumb. The question's urgency faded away. Flooded with sensations which were subtle and yet so delicious that they absorbed my attention, I abandoned myself to them. A look from Yolande confirmed that

nothing was expected of me, I dropped my notes, closed my eyes. Time went by. That evening, back home, the wonderment was still with me.

I reproached myself about the carefree attitude that characterized so many of our meetings, but when I remonstrated with Yolande she said gently, "Look, we are working!" And I had to admit that, even if very few words had been recorded, work was being accomplished.

Work? Hidden from sight, a transformation was being nurtured simply by observing—by simply noticing that everything was happening at exactly the right moment. There was no need for a plan. And when I did give in to my old habits of projecting, of predicting the next course of action, gesture, word or meeting, the moment took care of unraveling everything. These moments had the same characteristics as Yolande herself. The absence of self brought with it an overwhelming presence that seemed to possess her; it was in the vivid brightness of her smile, in her every movement. It was that presence that gave the perfect response to my concerns.

"Let silence do its thing: it knows." Her words produced quietness within me. My worry about time was swallowed up by a space which stopped all thought in its tracks, a space that was intense and at the same time gentle.

So far I had nothing concrete or coherent which I could write up for the planned interview. Neither did I have anything in my box of tricks to make sense of the mystery which my new friend was experiencing. We were like two friends on holiday—walking and talking, sharing secrets and making merry over our meals together. But as time went by, the mystery I had thought I would tame, started to tame me. Not with words, but by its very presence.

2

EVERYTHING HAS RETREATED INTO THE BACKGROUND

The moment in which God created the first man, the moment when the last man disappears and the moment in which I speak are all the same in God, for there is only one present moment. For man lives in one and the same light as God; this is why he knows neither suffering nor its aftermath, but unchanging eternity. Truly this man can no longer be surprised by anything, and within him the essence of all things is to be found. Thus there is nothing new for him in future events, nor in chance events, for he dwells in eternal presence, unceasingly renewed.

Meister Eckhart

Could you describe this thing, that took hold of you back on that summer's day in 2003 and which has not left you since? You speak of silence, strength, benevolence.

It's not easy to put this into words. This invisible *thing* is ineffable. It manifests through this remarkable *silence* as an intensity, a strength, a gentleness. But all this, all this manifestation is already in the background. This *thing* is before the manifestation. It is before everything I thought I was, before everything I thought reality was, both inside and outside me.

Can you say more?

Once upon a time, the reality I was living in consisted of a waking state, a dreaming state and a sleeping state, and an individual who experienced these three states. Suddenly, this *thing* stepped in front of all that. It is what illuminates these three worlds – waking, dreaming and sleeping. It has taken over these three states and their contents. It has taken over everything. Everything has retreated into the background.

As if it existed prior to them?

As if it existed prior to everything I thought I was, prior even to what I see, feel and think.

It is as if a seeing has taken hold within me. This seeing observes that this *thing* is both much stronger and much gentler than anything that could possibly exist, than anything I thought I was, than anything that can be thought or imagined. So once I recognized that, once I saw how I was at ease with that, I completely abandoned myself to it.

As if you came to rest entirely within it, instead of within yourself?

As if I no longer existed as an individual, like I did before. As if something of myself had ended; as if this *thing* had a sudden power such that it was guiding me, as it guides me now. As if the individual, the ego, had ceased reconstructing itself from moment to moment.

In other words you are not making decisions: you don't decide to go to a place – you don't think it would be better to go to one place rather than another?

Of course we all think we make decisions, that we've decided

to do this, go there, do that—I used to believe it too. But since this happened I am profoundly sure that is not the case.

You are sure that this thing exists prior to the three states, prior to the sense of I/me as well?

It is what enables all that to appear, to take place. Yes.

Is this certitude a perception, a vision? How would you describe it?

It is more than a vision. There's no arguing about it. It's a deep feeling, something that is so strong, that if in the moment, I only see what everyone else sees—a sofa, a table, someone sitting opposite me—this vision is there even before that. And it is so strong that it takes the place of what my eyes and other senses seem to tell me.

The eyes seeing, the ears hearing, the skin feeling, are no longer used to define reality. For on a profound level, this *thing* is there before everything else, all the time, every single moment. It is there prior to all phenomena, prior to all the experiences that made up my existence in the past. Or, if I try to say it in another way, phenomena are seen, as it were, from this *thing* which is in the foreground; and everything I see, hear or sense in any way appears in the background. Even what I see with my eyes closed, which is so much more real than ordinary reality.

What you see with closed eyes?

Yes. When I lie down, when I close my eyes and relax, I slip into another state. It is not at all like the waking state, nor the dreaming state nor deep sleep. I am totally conscious; at the same time I have lost all awareness of my body. I have the impression I am nothing but sight—sight with eyes closed. There, phenomena

appear: faces, landscapes, intense and fleeting forces, things charged with such reality that, once back in the waking state, the words 'seeing' or 'real' take on a totally different meaning.

But even without these phenomena even in daily life, 'seeing' has taken on a totally different flavor. Because the *silence* prevents us from recreating ourselves from moment to moment, because it prevents us from interfering, thinking, projecting and maintaining this mental filter. Reality appears to be much more alive, much more real.

Do you see things you did not see beforehand? Or are they just of a different intensity, seen from a different perspective?

It is much more subtle than that even. It's as if the moment in which the radical change (or whatever it is called) took place is etched into the present so that it's visible all the time. That moment cannot be forgotten; it has given meaning to all the rest. This *something* is there before everything else and enables me to perceive things without being there. Something which, in hindsight, lets me know that what I see, what appears before me, appears now, and only now. In a split second, what appeared is finished, gone.

There is nothing but *now*. The previous moment, the following moment, are just two abstract ideas.

The deep feeling, the invisible *thing*, that always plunges me into this sensing, is really what sees. It is a strong, obvious clarity that no longer allows me to blind myself with what my physical eyes see. It is simultaneous; at the same time I see with my eyes, just like I used to, I see things appearing, just like I used to, but at the same time I perceive the *silence*, the constant presence which prevents me from staying in the head, in the past, in the future. This simultaneity brings me to life in the moment. This is what makes the moment so intense, and it is this, too, that results in there being nothing but the moment. Because there is simply no room for anything else. This is true

for 'Yolande' and it can be true for anyone else, too.

So you are saying that it is this invisible thing that sees?

Yes. I would say it is the intensity, this sensation in the foreground, which sees. It is before seeing, before the eyes, before the sense of sight. And it sees before the eyes – so what does it see with?

(Silence takes over, broken only by the discordant music of a lawn-mower)

It sees – period. I don't perceive through my eyes, nor through my understanding or my thoughts. And this vision is so powerful that I cannot take the phenomena that appear for real. I just can't. That has become impossible.

At the same time, the *silence*, the constant presence, is so intense that I feel that I am constantly alive – alive like never before. Even in those uncomfortable moments in life when I am sick, tired or whatever, this sensation, the presence, is there. So I feel like I am really alive.

You say you feel it like one feels a sensation or an emotion? Do you feel it in your body?

Not even... words fall short. It is touch without being touched, something is there that is neither touch nor emotion. It is what you might call the joy of being nothing.

In this intensity, the presence is so... present, that I cannot be anywhere else. I cannot get caught up in my thoughts, or by what I see, what I feel or what I do. It is as if the ego cannot reconstruct itself anymore. It is like a fourth state which is so strong, so alive that it prevents me from returning to one of the three usual states – waking, dreaming or deep sleep. There's no functioning in a personal way like before.

At the same time, this presence feels like a sensation that could be likened, at a stretch, to touch. Touch, as in a finger poised at the level of the heart. It emanates from the heart and encompasses everything. Everything that appears, from one minute to the next, appears within this *thing*. This profound feeling that I am there without being there. Something continues to see, to function, but I can no longer be tricked or trapped in my old psyche. Things perceived no longer have any power. They are there in the background. Even if Yolande's way of doing things does not seem to have changed, inside, this *thing* is there in the foreground, each and every minute there in the foreground.

Clearly it diminishes the importance of what is experienced. All attention is focused on the *silence*, the presence, whether or not I want it to do so. There is nothing but that and everything that happens from one minute to the next is there in the background.

It's exciting. I have fallen in love with this *thing*, fallen in love with the present moment, or, more precisely with what precedes the present moment. I have fallen in love with this *thing* that makes it possible to live in a calm and gentle fashion. This vision which sees, which enables *seeing* without the I/me being there: how could anyone do anything but fall hopelessly in love with it!