

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

HOW TO FIND INSPIRATION IN
THE AGE OF INFORMATION

MICHAEL SMITH



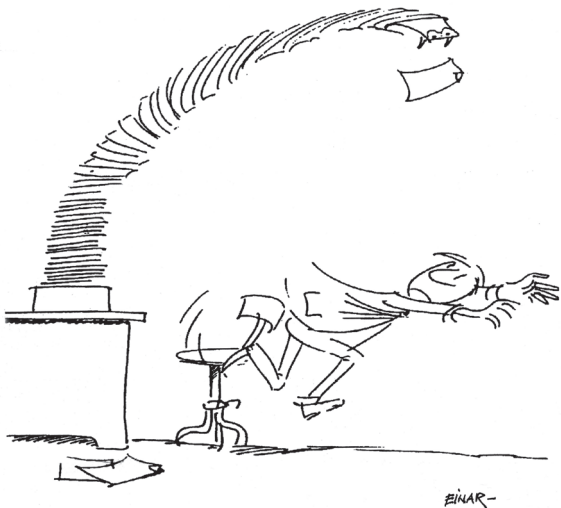
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The age of Information has transformed the world, shrinking time and distance. Communication has become virtually instant. The media bring the traumas and hopes of the world into our homes as they happen. We have access to almost unlimited information at the touch of our keyboards. We are more aware of the great social, moral and ethical issues the world faces than any previous generation, developing in us a strong social conscience. And social media keep us connected.

Are we any wiser? We still face gross injustices between the rich and poor worlds, the scourge of deadly diseases, unprecedented environmental and family breakdown, climate change, racial and religious conflict, terrorism and war which fuel mass migration. We all too easily feel ineffective towards the issues the world faces and—unless we have access to the levers of economic and political power—unable to do anything about them.

Yet we are more empowered to make a difference—to change the world—than in any previous age. We campaign and lobby, protest and demonstrate, support charities and give our time and energy to worthwhile causes. We boycott the products of sweated labour and buy fair trade produce. And we do our bit to save the environment.

All these are worthwhile. But they may not give us the great themes—the direction—for our lives. For that we need to stand back and gain perspective; to reflect

on the direction our lives are taking. How do we find a sense of purpose? How do we live in an age of information—and often information overload? Online social media increase our connectivity with each other but they rarely increase our connection with our inner selves. In order to do that we may need to turn away from the addictiveness of cellphones and tablets; to switch them off and set time aside, away from their attraction. As the veteran French journalist Bernard Margueritte comments, ‘The illness of our age is not lack of information but lack of meaning.’ In the knowledge economy, we need a special kind of knowledge to live in harmony with each other and the whole of creation. In the welter of the world’s information we need skills of discernment.

HOW TO GAIN THESE SKILLS?

How to gain a sense of priorities and a meaningful life? How do busy people find unhurried time for each other and largesse of leisure in the hurly-burly of life? And how can the unemployed or under-employed find motivation and a sense of being needed?

We need life skills just as much as technical skills. All the more so at a time when the threat of terrorism and reprisal can paralyse us with fear—and when the passions that lie deep in the heart of a person can be a matter of life or death.

Technical skills allow us to make use of information and technology. But they cannot tell us what is harmful and what is healthy.

One of the most important skills is to know how to access the source of spiritual insight and initiative which can prompt the human mind and heart. This may be more vital than accessing information from the Internet.

What, you may ask, do you mean by ‘spiritual’? It is essentially that which prompts and informs the human spirit—intangible rather than material. The spiritual relates to our sense of satisfaction, well-being, and ultimate happiness in life. For the millions around the world who adhere to a religious faith, it also relates to the soul—the ‘seat of human personality, intellect, will and emotions’, as one dictionary defines it.

It seems that our brains are hard-wired for spiritual experience. A report, *Hardwired to Connect*, by

Dartmouth Medical School, New Hampshire, suggests that the human brain is 'biologically hardwired for enduring attachments to other people and for moral and spiritual meaning'. There are areas of the frontal cortex which produce transcendent feelings. Some people tap into this through drugs, others through music. Far safer than drugs, though, and far more common is prayer and quiet meditation. Many believe that this enables us to interface intuitively with a source of information or 'guidance' that is beyond mere human reasoning or intellect.

In May 1956, Frank Buchman, the American founder of the campaigning spiritual movement now known as Initiatives of Change, spoke of 'the electronics of the spirit' which 'circles the globe instantly'. A thought could slip into a person's mind 'at any time of day or night' which could be 'the thought of the Author of mind'.

In 1980, Tim Berners-Lee developed the software which made the world-wide web of information on the Internet possible. He called it Enquire, after an old Victorian encyclopaedia he remembered from his childhood called *Enquire within upon everything*. His invention, wrote *Time* magazine in 1999, has ensured 'that all of us can continue, well into the next century, to enquire within upon anything'.

The source of spiritual information also encourages us to enquire within upon anything. It acts like a wireless technology, an information superhighway of the spirit—a world-wide web of ethical and spiritual values—to which we can all connect, and from which we can download wherever we are located on the planet. It is truly global. But it is also within us, in the silence of the human heart.

Such spiritual information gives us a sense of calm and reassurance, courage and inspiration, perspective and purpose in life. It is much more than just conscience—though it may well reawaken a dormant conscience, nudging us perhaps towards apologies for past wrongs, restoring for deceptions or choosing to let go of resentment or hatred.

Internet entrepreneur Béla Hatvany likens it to the central nervous system which allows the body of human-kind to function. This experience, of finding spiritual information, is common to people of many faith traditions and can be equally real to non-

believers and agnostics. In this spiritual sphere there is no digital divide between those who have access to information and those who don't. Spiritual information is available to everyone, anywhere, regardless of wealth or background, creed or status, or location.

Tim Berners-Lee's dream for the world-wide web, described in his book *Weaving the Web*, was that it would become 'a much more powerful means for collaboration between people. I have always imagined the information space as something to which everyone has immediate and intuitive access, and not just to browse, but to create.' Likewise, spiritual information inspires us to collaboration and creative action.

HOW CAN WE ACCESS THIS SUPERHIGHWAY OF THE SPIRIT?

Many around the world practise a daily 'information space', or 'quiet time', to gain 'immediate and intuitive access' to the well-springs of spiritual and ethical insight. By taking time in silence we can log on to this spiritual information at any time of day or night, to collect our personal and unique e-mails from our ISP— the infinite spiritual provider.

Once we have created our daily information space, what should we expect to happen? Perhaps nothing dramatic at first. Maybe a deeper sense of repose. A sense of being grounded in a greater peace, a heightened awareness of reality. Some may receive very specific thoughts: a task to undertake; an apology to make; a person to care for; a relationship to repair; or a dishonesty to confess. For some it may lead to profound changes of direction.

For believers, these thoughts are the whispers of God, prompting change in us, giving us instruction, touching our souls, rearranging the furniture of our minds, liberating us from past wrongs and setting before us new goals in life. Above all, whatever our religious belief, spiritual information and insight reveal a purpose in life for each of us which, if pursued, might turn out to be beyond our wildest dreams. I never imagined, for instance, that I would become an editor of an international magazine, and spend several years serving in India.

Erik Andren, who ran training programmes in

values for democracy in Eastern European countries, used a different analogy. He spoke of R&D time—a time of research and development, reflection and decision, for each individual.

WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS FOR RECEIVING SPIRITUAL INFORMATION, FOR PRACTISING THIS KIND OF R&D?

Firstly, silence. We need to make silence our friend. ‘Silence,’ writes the Italian poet Rosa Bellino, ‘allows the muddy waters of our minds to clear. Silence is the womb, the space that allows one to hear “a harmony and a rhythm”. Silence is the inner shaft that lets us go deep within ourselves to the place of stillness where, having forgotten ourselves, we become “like children” and enter the kingdom of God.’

Silence is the sister of the divine, writes John O’Donohue, in his best-selling book *Anam Cara—spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world*. ‘Silence is the great friend of the soul.... You must make space for it so that it may begin to work for you.... If you have a trust in and expectation of your own solitude, everything that you need to know will be revealed to you.’

Mahatma Gandhi wrote that silence was ‘both a physical and spiritual necessity for me... In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light, and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness.’

‘How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given,’ run the words of a popular carol. ‘So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.’ In the age of information we find that real inspiration comes in times of silent reflection.

When is the best time for silent reflection? Any time, of course. Some do so at the end of the day, as a means of stocktaking. In some spiritual traditions, such as the Quakers, people meet together for times of meditation. Others advocate taking time alone. Many have found it especially helpful to take unhurried time first thing in the morning. Musicians tune their instruments before the concert begins rather than when it is over. So we too can tune our minds and hearts to the Author of mind before the rush of the day presses on us. For myself, this has been a daily discipline for nearly 50 years.

This early morning ‘space for grace’, as it has been

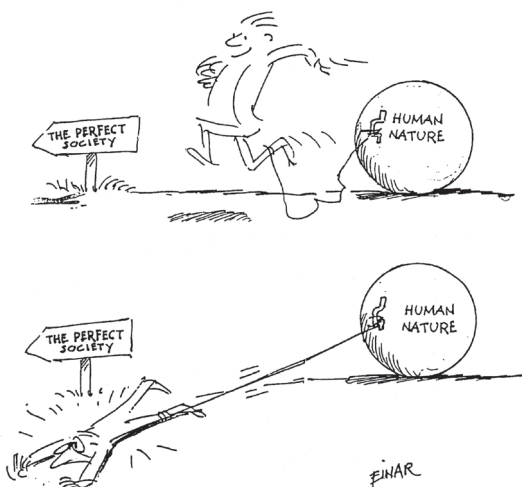
called, can help us to set priorities, to gain perspective, to increase our productivity. At its most mundane, it is a way of getting on top of the day before the day gets on top of us.

But it can also lead to moments of real insight and wisdom—shafts of inspiration—for ourselves, for others, for the situations we face, for the world we are in. It can be a time to let go of the endless list of things that have to be done, or to focus on a difficult decision that needs to be made. Reading a spiritual book from our various faith traditions can especially help.

For some, the whole notion of silence may be totally alien. It may seem easier to drown out difficulties with loud music or constant activity. Taking time in inward reflection, however, can be a route to true healing and forgiveness, hope and reassurance.

There is nothing mechanistic about times of silence, though it may need *enough* time to allow the unexpected thought to drop into one's mind and heart. I find I need at least half an hour, sometimes longer.

There is another great advantage in silent listening. It increases our emotional intelligence—our empathy for others and what they are truly saying to us. Not just their words, but their inner words, their body language, their hopes and fears, pain, disappointments and longings, the look in their eyes. We can begin to perceive their real needs and care for them.



A second condition for receiving spiritual information is to run our personal virus checker. We need to be sure that the information we receive from the still, small voice within is not corrupted by our own suspect motives and delusions. Moral values help in this: honesty, purity of heart and motive, unselfishness, love for people and forgiveness. They act like a computer's firewall which filters on-line messages, allowing through only those that come from trusted sources.

Such values will never wholly shield us from temptations—to hatred, greed or vice, for instance—but they can prevent us from succumbing. They can help us to transcend the dark side of our nature. They prevent us from doing wrong and liberate us to do right. Paradoxically, personal discipline is the route to personal freedom.

These values are also great levellers. We are all in the same boat: we all fall short of the ideal. Many have likened moral standards to the North Star—a fixed point in the universe by which mariners through centuries have steered their ships. The absolute is untouchable but provides us with a star to steer by.

Those inspired by Christ, like myself, find strength in his life and teaching. All religious traditions hold to the example of their prophets. Mahatma Gandhi spoke of 'the inner voice' and the need to 'make God your guru'. Buddhists advocate the practice of meditation and detachment. For Muslims, the very word Islam means submission to the will of God and peace within and between human beings. Jews and Christians find God in the 'still, small voice' within.

Striving for the ideal is not arrogance but humility in the face of eternal time and space. We need the grace of forgiveness, and to acknowledge that we are all, in one way or another, flawed. But we can also recognise that what we give out to others is what we receive back. Hate too easily begets hate; love begets love. As we run our personal virus checkers each day we become free from egotistical motives. Free to have creative care for others.

Thirdly, when downloading spiritual information, it helps to print it out, rather than leaving it unattended on the hard disk of our minds. Writing down our innermost thoughts acts as an *aide mémoire*,



so that they cannot be conveniently ignored.

Père Alphonse Gratry (1805-72) wrote: 'How can I listen to God, you ask me. This is the answer: you write.' An old Chinese proverb says that 'the strongest memory is weaker than the palest ink'.

Finally, we can share the thoughts we receive with trusted family, friends, colleagues or spiritual mentors—and even those who we think are likely to disagree with us—before acting on them. In being transparent ourselves we create a basis of trust. Ideas that come to one person may be heightened by others. Equally, one person may bring a breakthrough inspiration to the whole group. In the end, taking action on an inspired thought is an act of faith.

All this, then, is much more than just a matter of private concern, without consequence for others or for the wider world.

The *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman writes, in his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (2012), that one of the characteristics of globalization is 'super-empowered individuals', who are enabled to enlist others around a cause through information technology. He cites the experience of Jody Williams who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her campaign to outlaw land mines by gaining support through emails. Another example was the Jubilee 2000 campaign for international debt remission, which also depended on mobilizing public opinion. And members of the ATTAC movement, who campaign at world social forums for a more just globalization, say they aim to 'change the world'.

Friedman says that there are six dimensions of globalization: financial and business, political, cultural, security/defence, technological and environmental. One could also add the religious and spiritual dimension, in an age when different faith traditions rub shoulders in the world's major cities. Friedman emphasises the need for 'globalists'—people

who look at the whole picture, the global scene.

Frank Buchman also expressed his message in global terms—‘remaking the world’. In one sense, whenever someone decides to act differently, out of a new motivation, then the world has already become a different place. But Buchman also encouraged people to ‘think for continents’—to let the pain and glory of the world filter through one’s heart and mind. And he saw the need for ‘super-empowered individuals’ in the spiritual context. Such individuals, working together, contribute to integrity, justice, healing and reconciliation, and good governance in business and public life.

Imagine, Buchman said, a hundred million people listening daily to the still, small voice within. Or, today, we might imagine a billion people listening to that sound of silence. It would certainly create a calmer, more peaceful, more just world. Wherever we are, we can all make a difference—in our families, communities and places of work.

For many around the world, the daily time of silent reflection has become an anchor, and a springboard to action, over the years. It has become an indispensable tool of a lifetime. Taken seriously, it affects every area of life: family relationships, your job, your use of money and the world’s resources, your friendships and, maybe, choice of partner in life. It makes a world of difference. ■

Initiatives of Change (IofC) is an international network of people of all faiths and backgrounds working to change the world by first seeking change in their own lives. These moments of personal transformation often mark a new direction in a person's life. Some of them have resulted in the various initiatives of change currently being undertaken by this global network. They include Action for Life, Agenda for Reconciliation, Caux Initiatives for Business, Caux Scholars Program, Creators of Peace, Farmers' Dialogue, Hope in the Cities, Initiatives for Land, Lives and Peace, Renewal Arts, Tools for Change, and Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy. All these have grown through networks of empowered individuals. IofC works on the principle that changes in people's motives, attitudes and behaviour are not only possible but are the only sure basis on which wider lasting change in society can be brought about. This is the experience of millions of people, whether involved in IofC or not, who have decided to start the 'change process' in their own lives. IofC's main international centres are in Caux, Switzerland, and Panchgani, India.

www.iofc.org

www.caux.ch

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Michael Smith's experience of listening to the 'sound of silence' drew him into publishing and journalism with the international programme of Initiatives of Change. He qualified in typography and print design at the London College of Printing in 1970. He served for three years in India, 1971-74, on the production of Rajmohan Gandhi's newsweekly magazine Himmat, and has visited India 14 times, reporting stories of industrial development. In 1987 he became one of the founding editors of For A Change magazine, published by Initiatives of Change in London. He is now a freelance journalist working with Initiatives of Change. He is the author of Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy (2008), The Fullness of Life (2012) and Great Company (2015).
He and his wife, Jan, live in Wimbledon and they have two children.

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