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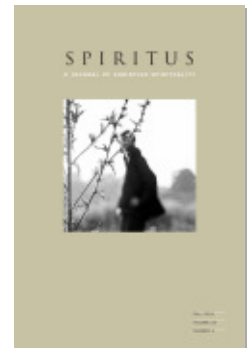
## The Taste of Silence

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# The Taste of Silence

STEVEN CHASE

*A*t the age of nineteen, Belgian writer Bieke Vandekerckhove was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS (a degenerative disease also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease). Doctors gave her two to five years to live. Though she became paralyzed from the waist up, the condition unexpectedly went into remission, and she lived another twenty-seven years, hampered by disabilities, requiring help from many, including her husband. During that entire time, the distinct likelihood of relapse and death was ever present. Bieke Vandekerckhove died in September, 2015.

After her diagnosis and for over twenty years, the practice of Benedictine spirituality and Zen meditation became, as Vandekerckhove said, the two lungs through which she breathed. Before her death, Vandekerckhove wrote a hauntingly honest book, *The Taste of Silence*, translated from Dutch and published by Liturgical Press in 2015. Vandekerckhove's silence "tastes" if you will, of two perennial, impossible to pin-down components of spirituality: wisdom and mystery. She writes of wisdom, almost by way of mantra, that wisdom rests in silence, courage, compassion, perseverance, humor, and of course in many guises, pain. She writes of mystery beginning with a quote from Thomas Merton: "There is more consolation in the heart of stillness than in an answer to a question."<sup>1</sup> Like stillness, mystery does not answer questions which in any case "can only diminish mystery."<sup>2</sup> Wisdom, likewise, does not seek answers; wisdom seeks healing, well-being, and kindness. The consolations of wisdom and mystery are never assured: both may engage in a life-long absence; both can come unexpectedly, like a revelation. The consolation of reading Vandekerckhove is, similarly, like an unexpected shower of revelation: with a taste of silence, she illuminates what you knew but did not know you knew.

Unfortunately, ours is a culture uncomfortable with uncertainty and thus is equally uncertain with mystery and wisdom, which together do not seek answers in yes or no, in certain or uncertain form. If acquired at all, wisdom and mystery are to be found in illusive, secret places of divine incomprehensibility. That these secret places are often found in divine incomprehensibility made luminous in human and ecological suffering should come as no surprise.

Vandekerckhove seeks those secret places in the silence. Specifically she solicits mystery and wisdom in the *taste* of silence, a relatively unusual sense by which to encounter wisdom or mystery, the holy or the divine (though “savory knowledge” is used by Jean Gerson, and one finds this spiritual sense in Song of Songs, 1:3-4 and in Psalm 23 as “taste and see that the Lord is good”). Augustine and his mother Monica, for instance, famously reach out and *touch* mystery. Thomas Keating and others focus on *smell*, writing that the first experience of the presence of God is analogous to fragrance, to perfume, while in 2 Corinthians 2:15 we are said to be “the sweet perfume of Christ to God.” *Vision* has always been a spiritual sense occluded toward mystery, toward wisdom, toward God. *Hearing* holds the honor of complementing silence.

What is not so unusual about Vandekerckhove’s taste of silence, her taste of mystery, her taste of wisdom, is that it is through her disease and her fear, her discomfort and loss of hope that she is able to cultivate the coordinates of mystery and wisdom at all. She is able first to enter formation in the cultivation of mystery and wisdom through the practice of attention: “Sometimes we push through to a power that borders on the unbelievable—only to slump into gloom afterward, when the crisis has passed. It’s as if suffering intense pain sharpens our attention.”<sup>3</sup> Sharpened attention in turn cultivates the probability of acquiring the tastes of silence.

So we find courage, we practice compassion, we persevere in the journey on the path of mystery; we persevere in the journey on the path to wisdom. We persevere because, always, there are new fears, new pains. “It’s not the winter, not the crisis per se, that breaks a person but the duration—without hope that it will ever end. The long duration pulls you down because a human life is filled with a thousand small desires and, conversely, with a thousand little fears and pains.”<sup>4</sup> Having written a commentary on the Book of Job, I am not normally a fan of redemptive suffering. But Vandekerckhove is well-credentialed in this realm of suffering; she naturally invites listening. So, how does one survive the duration of winter? One survives with cheerfulness. Cheerfulness? To be honest, I would never have thought “cheerfulness.” But Vandekerckhove has “cred.” In addition to more than her share of suffering and pain, she is also blessed with regular practice in forms of Benedictine spirituality and has received formal transmission as a Zen Master in the Chinese Ch’an tradition. So, given her credentials, when she recommends cheerfulness, I listen. I am silent. Such cheerfulness does not come easy. But her book on silence and pain, mystery and wisdom, is packed with humor.

And there are other ways to wisdom, to mystery. Vandekerckhove writes, “It is as if you have to create a space within which courage may have a chance. How? By building silence. By reading something inspiring now and then. . . . By writing. By developing a sense of humor. By making time for a walk

(preferably in nature) or for music. For other people perhaps it is working in a garden, painting, sculpting, or something else altogether. In other words, it has to do with working at expanding your horizons, with looking for situations in which stillness and contemplation can flourish—not just occasionally but regularly.”<sup>5</sup>

While reading Bieke Vandekerckhove’s book I found uncanny echoes of her work in the essays printed in *Spiritus* in this issue.

In his essay on *Space, Silence and the Self*, Colin Heber-Percy writes, for instance, of a school chapel he visited as a boy where he would sit dispirited, confused, and unhappy. Much later, aged and practiced, he found that this same space evoked a tectonic alignment, or realignment, of some fundamental aspects of himself. Another example of correspondence with *The Taste of Silence* is Jason Steidl’s essay on popular devotion and martyrdom in the context of LGBT struggles and rights in Chile. Steidl writes of a twenty-four year old gay man, Daniel Zamudio, who was brutally assaulted and killed. Since then, Zamudio has become a Chilean folk saint and a resource for LGBT Roman Catholics and their allies in the struggle against homophobic violence. Vandekerckhove reminds us that, “In moments of crisis, our head can be so clear. . . . It’s as if suffering intense pain sharpens our attention.”

In his essay on mystical theology, black theology, and the problem of light-dark aesthetics, Andrew Prevot makes the case that there is a polarized aesthetics of light and darkness pervading the Christian spiritual and theological imagination. He critiques light-centric expressions of Christian faith, warning of the consequent undercurrent of racial privileging of light (skin) over dark (skin) and the consequent tendency of turning light into an idol. At the same time, Prevot reminds us that light imagery, importantly, is woven tightly into biblical and traditional theology and remains beloved in certain black spiritual traditions. Vandekerckhove also struggles with a “polarized aesthetics” and word-centric discourse. But also, much like Prevot, she balances and realigns our perspectives and prejudices: on the one hand, her practice is silence; on the other hand, she is a writer: her practice is word.

In an article on Martin Buber’s identification with the Jewish Jesus, Tim J. Harding writes that Buber repeatedly asked a certain question: when a person is called upon from above, beckoned to respond in this mortal moment, who is speaking? Buber answers: “the moment God.” The moment God is the God we hear when we forget everything we imagine we knew God to be. It is the God we hear when we close the memory to all things, close awareness from all distractions and evils. How is this done? By rendering memory and daily awareness silent and mute, and listening to God in silence with the hearing of the spirit. The wisdom of Vandekerckhove’s God of mystery is not unlike Buber’s God of the moment. In fact the parallel is striking. Grounded in Zen

practice and Benedictine spirituality she too sits in stillness, listening. She is caught up in the taste of silence, in the God of the moment.

Lisa Dahill revises her Presidential Address for the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality for publication here in *Spiritus* where we find her also taking the risk of silence, listening, and eventually hearing the call of “the moment God.” Dahill takes a kayak ride down a river. In doing so, she sees, hears, tastes the world in a new, baptismal, sacramental way. She is “astonished.” Her description of becoming a part of the river in its slow journey to its source is a delight of sight and sound, of ecology and color, of diversity and organic unity. It is not to be missed. She finds that the water supporting life is itself alive. It is the water of life, it is baptismal, it is the River Jordan. Vanderkerckhove, paralyzed from the pelvis up, could never on her own descend a river in a kayak. But as she describes her *taste* of silence, we see she is on a journey that sharpens the taste to a holy moment of sacrament, a moment of cosmocentric Eucharist, on the tongue, in the mouth, in the presence of the mystery God, within the Body of Christ.

In his reflection on the *Epiphanies of Mystery*, Mark Burrows moves from our exploration of the “taste of silence” to the image of “hearing the music of silence.” Once more, we return to this attunement to silence. Within the final, short paragraph of his reflection, Burrows offers a fitting, summative culmination to this editorial conversation. Burrows writes, “It [a presence that lies beyond but also within us] is the source of that mystery which is at once unknowable and yet at the same time real and experienced within the arc of our longing. Those who hunger at these margins still know to listen to ‘the music of silence,’ sensing this as the wisdom of Spirit whose mystery reveals itself at the boundaries of tradition.” And with that, we taste the bread and wine of silence.

## NOTES

1. Bieke Vandekerckhove, *The Taste of Silence: How I Came to Be at Home with Myself*, trans. Rudolf V. Van Puymbroeck (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 137-39.
2. Vandekerckhove, *Taste of Silence*, 138.
3. Vandekerckhove, *Taste of Silence*, 134.
4. Vandekerckhove, *Taste of Silence*, 135.
5. Vandekerckhove, *Taste of Silence*, 137.