

“ A few moments of silence can be like a cold sip of water after a marathon. ”

In these fast-paced, under-pressure times, we forget what silence is. Noise surrounds us and lives inside our minds – a constant churning of thoughts, feelings, literal noise and white noise.

A few moments of silence can be like a cold sip of water after a marathon.

It is strange that we crave silence and yet do so much to fill every waking moment with stuff to do, TV to watch and worries to process. Instead of creating silence and time to just be, we tend to keep going. And going some more. Are we scared of what we might find when we just keep ourselves company, what confrontation we might run into if we put everything aside to make time to just breathe?

An Italian friend of ours came to South Africa to hike and camp. He loved the adventure and the landscape, but at night the silence was too loud, too weird and too strange; it unsettled him to the point of insomnia. In the modern world, we can lose the capacity to listen and appreciate silence, yet it defines and shapes beauty.

Music is made up of notes, but embodies its real melody through the rhythm and moments where there is no sound: the moments of silence, the pauses, the in-breaths. Art calls to us through line, colour, design and proportion, and can only come into being through the open spaces that remain. At the cinema, silence can cre-

ate unforgettable atmosphere and magical movie memories. It creates tension or emphasis – actors use the “dramatic pause” to keep us in the palm of their hands. They lure us down the storyline while playing our emotions like a fiddle.

Equally and ironically, silence can be a destructive force.

Silence can be louder than words. When there is frustration, conflict and resentment in the air and we choose to say nothing about it, a tension is born that can become unbearable. Even toxic. It is a silence you can cut with a knife. The silence affects not only those who choose to remain silent or those who should be on the receiving end, but everyone who find themselves in ear-shot. It moves into every corner of the building and just hangs there: it inhabits a home or a workplace like a dark cloud. This silence can be escalated by the denial that anything is wrong, even when people enquire. The claim that “nothing is wrong”, while something clearly is going on, seals the deal and ensures that silence will reign.

“Fools,” said I, “you do not know

Silence like a cancer grows.

Hear my words that I might teach you

Take my arms that I might reach you.”

But my words like silent rain-drops fell,

And echoed in the wells of silence.

~*The Sound of Silence, Simon and Garfunkel*

“ To speak your truth and head into conflict brings risk to that relationship. ”

Facilitating groups and teams over the past several years, it has become evident that people choose silence over dialogue, conflict and honesty for various reasons.

1. Forced silence.

Let's face it; to speak up can be a CLM (Career Limiting Move) or even life-threatening under autocratic regimes. To remain silent is often the only option when the person who offended you has power over your career, your safety or your life.

It translates into icy exchanges and superficial politeness on the surface and heated, hushed conversations among those who share the frustration behind the scenes. This is a breeding ground for The Cabal.

2. Silence due to lack of relationship and trust.

To speak your truth and head into conflict brings risk to that relationship. It is easier to barge in when you know the relationship can handle it because you know that it is made to last through robust dialogue. But if the relationship is frail or new, it is less likely that you will stretch it that far.

If your partner continues to react with enormous anger or defensiveness when you confront them, you might opt to just stew in frustration in your own, isolated corner until it passes. You shut up.

If you are new in a job, it is hardly a smart move to start criticising everything in your first week of arrival. You keep quiet. The relationship does not feel “ready”.

3. Silence due to lack of words.

To communicate when the going gets tough is a critical skill at home and at work, yet it is clear that the world is in short supply of that skill. How comfortably do you address a potentially edgy topic? How well can you formulate your thoughts and feelings, while making it accessible to a potentially defensive listener?

Maybe you remain quiet while you are thundering and lightning inside because you don't know what to say or how to structure it. Or you feel that when you speak up you make things worse, cause more chaos or increase the gap in understanding.

4. Silence as a weapon.

Lastly, there can be a more sinister and strategic reason you choose to give someone the silent treatment. You can use silence as a weapon that confuses and punishes the perpetrator. The proverbial cold shoulder or dog box is arguably worse than being shouted at. Being on the receiving end of silence can render you powerless – you are forced to interact with the void.

5. Silence around Big Issues.

With few exceptions, all teams, groups and organisations struggle with the dialogue that drives to the heart of transformation. The TRC provided a platform for South Africans to be witnessed, heard and understood – the wrongs they endured, the pain of the past and how it affects the present. But clearly the TRC alone cannot bring the truth to every

South African. Newspapers, magazines and TV can bring us facts and insight, but not dialogue. The Dinokeng Scenarios emphasise how important nation building is for the future of South Africa. And 15 years down the line of democracy, there is still a real sense of racial tension, unprocessed anger and continued unconsciousness around the issue of racism. Unconsciousness is maintained through apathy and disengagement. What happens too often is that The Big Issues remain underground, unspoken, unaddressed. They sit within the realm of the Too Risky or Too Painful. They are silent.

The best thing we can do for the future of our country is to have the courage to converse. To engage in the issue of transformation. Not intellectually or via vote or a good attitude, but through engaging with heart and soul in dialogue that can help heal the wounds. If enough of us can “sit in the fire” and work with the highly emotive unspoken fears and hopes, we can truly earn our reputation of being a rainbow nation.

Savour the silence that creates beauty. Break the silence that promotes polarisation.

Take a risk. Help build the nation.