

## *Verbal Frugality*

*Does not everything depend on our interpretation of the silence around us?*

Lawrence Durrell

*...the many moods and nuances of silence: the angry silence and the disapproving one; the appreciative silence and the loving one.*

Azar Nafisi

His first job was in a bookstore. The store was called Martindale's after dear old Mr. Martindale, who along with his store in Beverly Hills is long gone. He thinks he was in Junior High at the time and so could not have been more than fourteen. He has trouble remembering his age at various times in his life and wonders if this is a common experience or yet another sign of his mental shortcomings.

He doubts it was "your ordinary first job." To this day he can remember the smell of the new books and the distinctive scent they created in that relatively small space. Even then he knew the books, knew their titles, and authors. He could tell people what they were about and, without much of effort, get them to buy the book, and then one or two others as well. He has no idea how he was able to do any of that, especially at that age.

It was the young girl who worked along with him that made that summer so unforgettable. Her name was N, the clever, sprightly N, now well known for her literary and cinematic wit. He fell madly in love with her that summer at Martindale's. Those who know N may be aware she is slightly cross eyed. What young man could resist that?

But N could talk. She was clever, funny and bright. N was the first person he could ever really talk to. There have only been one or two others, many years later. He and N spent the entire time bantering and jesting with one another. It is a mystery how he managed to get anything done or sell any books, or remember to give the proper change to those well-healed customers.

He is sure N has no recollection of him or their “brief encounter” at Martindale’s Bookstore or probably even working there. But every time he hears about her or sees one of her films, he remembers the summer of his very first job. Books, magazines, paperbacks, and the beautiful cross eyed girl who talked with him.

He never thought much about it at the time; he was very young after all. He knew that he was much in love with N, but that was about it. He went back to school after that summer and only many years later, when N became famous, did he recall their time together at Martindales and only recently has he begun to appreciate its significance.

A character in Rachel Cusk’s *The Lucky Ones* says: “I felt a terrible despair at having failed to find another human being to corroborate my experience.” He thinks those words capture the meaning of that relationship and the few similar ones that followed long after the first.

He sees now that the experience gave him a chance to express himself, to be the person at his core, or that he imagines to be at his core, although he is fully aware there is really no such thing. He feels alive and at his best. They are both alive and at their best. They are moving somewhere together, each in turn bringing forth their best. The experience is startlingly different from anything else. They have hit gold.

He wonders why these experiences are so infrequent, why he so rarely meets someone to whom he takes an instant liking, who he can talk openly and honestly with from the very first moment, who in turn, responds to what he says with equal spontaneity and enthusiasm, where the conversation just seems to take off. Perhaps some persons are luckier than others, but it is clear he isn’t one of them.

The process has been beautifully described by Vivian Gornick in *Approaching Eye Level*.

*Good conversation is dependent on a simple but mysterious fit of mind and spirit that cannot be achieved, it just occurs. It’s not a matter of mutual*

*interests or class concerns or commonly held ideals, it's a matter of temperament; the thing that makes someone respond instinctively...In the presence of shared temperament conversation almost never loses its free, unguarded flow. In its absence one is always walking on eggshells. Shared temperament is analogous to the way a set of gears works. The idea is not complicated but the mesh must be perfect. Not approximate, perfect. Otherwise the gears refuse to turn.*

These exchanges are a striking departure from those he usually has, no doubt for most everyone else for that matter. Why is that? What is responsible for this type of responsiveness between two individuals? Those who have written about this kind of conversation claim that it is a mystery. It is said that it is not something you can learn or try to achieve. It simply occurs. But surely there is more to say about it, more that might be revealed by closer inspection.

However, the experience has not, to his knowledge, been systematically investigated. We do not know if certain individuals are more likely than others to have this experience, or if certain types of personalities are more disposed than others to match up this way, and we have no clue about the kind of situations where it is most likely to occur. But if, as been said, the experience is "analogous to the way a set of gears works," we will eventually come to understand it. He is curious about it. No doubt others are, as well. Rest assured that whatever we might one day come to learn about this "minor miracle" will in no way affect the thrill that is to be had when it occurs.

David Hare asks: "Have you ever been present at a panel on which one person's built on another's?" Almost never he thinks, as most exchanges just seems to go in two or more directions at once, each person saying one thing without regard to what anyone else has said. They are engaged in monologues, not dialogues. And yet there are exceptions, when out of the blue he has a genuine conversation, an actual dialogue with another person.

Not so long ago he met a person over tea to discuss a literary project. He felt engaged, he was being listened to, he was being heard. In turn, he knew she too was engaged and was being listened to. It was but a momentary experience, although its memory lingered long afterward. He wonders what was responsible? How did it happen? What is one to make of it? Perhaps he exaggerates its importance. Are such person's the path he didn't take? Would he be any different if he had, any more creative, better educated? It was never a choice.

He has been thinking about these questions recently since the most important person in his world has grown silent. Not completely, of course. Rather the periods of silence between them grow longer and more frequent. They might be together somewhere, say at dinner or driving in the car, and she would scarcely utter a word. More than anything, nothing is *initiated*. No questions, no how have you been, no what did you do while I was away, or how is the work going? It takes quite an effort to finally draw her out.

Maybe she had always been that way. From the beginning she was quiet, wonderfully so, in fact. And yet surely they must have had lively conversations in the beginning. Not so long ago they went to a café in Paris for afternoon tea. They went upstairs to have a drink. The café, near the Sorbonne, was filled with students and their professors chatting intensely about the latest intellectual fancy. The memory of that scene has lingered.

He is sure they used to do things like that when they were students. They would go to the Cellar, grab something to drink, and sit together, sometimes for hours, in a booth. What did they say to each other then? What did they talk about? Were they lively and enthusiastic like the Sorbonne students? He is at a loss to remember any of that now. How he wishes he could.

But he knows they never had wild conversations or did much in the way of bantering. She never liked to jest or joke around. Silence has its own appeal and he knows perfectly well that was always part of her beauty. Perhaps he should have thought more about it in

the beginning. But then it never seemed to matter. It never even occurred to him then that it might eventually be important and even now he is not sure if it is.

Yet he has begun to wonder if she has become quieter of late. It was difficult to tell, since they are together so often. And as he has become increasingly removed from the academic and social fray, he has become aware that he does like to talk every now and then and so perhaps he is simply becoming more aware of her silences. But he also knows that she has little interest in the world he has immersed himself in. He is reading obscure literary materials and writing about topics that have little appeal to her. Indeed, it is sometimes hard to find things for them to talk about anymore.

Still her silences are worrisome. He wonders if the dread disease is finally working its way upon her? More likely she is in a reverie about one thing or another, having little to do with him--her work, the unfinished tasks, the kids, the flowers in the garden. As he broods over all this, he begins to see silent relationships just about everywhere he looks.

He notices it first in the cinema after seeing *Lantana* a film that moves him deeply, so much so that he goes to see it several times again, surely because silence is its central theme. The married couple in *Lantana* have stopped talking to one another. They have drifted into a silent stupor, a lifeless inertia that goes on day after day. Only after they come face to face with a heartbreaking series of tragedies do they begin talking once again. He knows that sometimes it takes such a jolt to bring two people back together.

He reads about various forms of silent relationships in the journal articles that he continues to peruse. One in particular is brilliant. In it the authors write about something they called "blirtatiousness." Like everyone else, he is amused by how silly that word sounds. However, the authors are good scientists and they have gone through all the steps required to establish a personality dimension. They write:

*For some people, no sooner do thoughts come to mind than they fly out their mouth. The result is a whirlwind of words that may charm--or*

*overwhelm--those caught in its path. For other people thoughts and feelings require time to simmer before being expressed, if they are expressed at all. Moreover, when these persons do speak, their verbal frugality may leave their interaction partners starving for elaboration.*

He loves that last sentence, those two phrases—*verbal frugality, starving for elaboration*. Perfect. Starving for elaboration. Yes, that as well. That is what he experiences--a world of verbal frugality and a desire for elaboration.

Eventually she might respond to something he says—sometimes an hour or two later, sometimes as long as a week. It is somewhat like a recent TV ad that entrances him. A young couple is sitting across from one another at a table in a restaurant. They look at one another. She is radiant. He is unsmiling. She says, “I love you.” He stares at her. She waits expectantly. He says nothing. She turns in her chair, gets up, and walks away. He says nothing. Eventually the words emerge, “I love you too.” Timing is everything. Talking is all about timing, the timing of expressions that mesh perfectly with one another. This is one that didn’t, much like those in his life.

At dinner one night at an outdoor café in Italy, he observes a couple sitting silently together at their table. Each one holds in one hand their cell phone. He never sees them speaking to one another. Instead, they spend the entire time talking to someone on their phones. And when they are done speaking, they continued to fiddle with their phones. He suspects they are searching for their e-mail messages or poking around the web. He thinks there is a couple on the verge of a meltdown.

The following night at dinner he sits down next to a young Asian couple, equally silent, surely in the throes their own meltdown. They never exchange a word during the entire time he is there. They speak to the waiter but never to one another. They eat quietly, share some of their dishes, and never display any animosity. But as their meal comes to a close, he sees a tear or two falling down the cheeks of the woman. Eventually it becomes a torrent that ebbs and flows during the remaining time he is there.

Then there is the remarkable silence depicted in the film *Talk To Me*. A young woman lies motionless in a hospital bed. Her skin glistens, there is not a blemish anywhere, her chestnut hair has a lustrous sheen. She is asleep, in a permanent sleep, in a coma after being hit by a car. Benigno is by her side, he is telling her a story and then about his day, what he has been thinking and how they will decorate their apartment. She never says a word. She can't. It doesn't matter. Benigno continues talking. His talk is sweet, quietly animated. He is a nurse caring for Alicia in a hospital in Madrid. He has been doing this for years.

Can you talk with someone who is forever silent? How long can you continue to do that? What does it take to go on, day after day, talking to someone who is unresponsive? What else could it be but love? Benigno was in love with Alicia, although he hardly knew her. He was obsessed with Alicia. People began to wonder about him. But it never seems to bother Benigno for whom a response was not necessary. It was enough that he loved Alicia.

Do we need to communicate? It isn't necessary in Ann Patchett's novel *Bel Canto*. There a Japanese businessman and an Italian opera singer fall in love without being able to speak to one another. The music and the experience of being together are sufficient.

He sometimes feels like that. He gazes at his wife working in the garden or doing her needlepoint and realizes how much he still loves her. It scarcely matters that their encounter is wordless. He marvels at his good fortune that she has shared her life with him. At such times, he realizes there is no need for anything more and recalls an unusual passage from Christopher Wilkins' *The Measure of Love*

*Having nobody who loved me was more bearable than having nobody to love. At that moment love revealed itself to me as something that has really nothing to do with the feelings of any other person. It was love as a thing which you can neither give nor receive, but only feel within yourself.*

*You can never know for certain whether the loved one feels the same and because you cannot know you can at least hope. But if there is no love within you for another, you know it and there can be no hope. No possible hope at all.*

Yet there are still times when he and his wife have a sustained conversation, when they do seem to move forward, when they really hit their stride together. One day he reads about an air force pilot who deliberately crashes his jet into a remote area of the Rockies. He doesn't usually pay much attention to things like this but for some reason the mystery of this one takes hold of him. He is moved to write a poem of sorts about it. A few days later he sends it to her in an e-mail.

***Enigma***

*It is all over.  
Such a disappointment.  
They located the plane.  
Confirmed it was the pilot.  
Soon the bombs will be uncovered  
I had been so hoping  
It would remain a mystery*

*Where did the plane go?  
What was up with the pilot?  
How were the bombs to be used?  
What fun to speculate?  
Chapter one through six.  
A best seller.  
Blockbuster film.  
Italy each summer.*

After he sends her the poem, it does not take her long to reply in kind. Her reply itself is unexpected. It's speed totally unheard of. Her volley is sparkling.

***Enigma***

*No more mystery?  
I disagree.  
Why did he do it?  
What terrible thing ate at his soul?  
Why did he wheel away?*

*Only to land  
In the silent snow  
Buried in ice  
Fragments scattered*

*Did he long for the quiet?  
Turn off the engine  
Give up the struggle  
Had he dickered with dying  
Had he thought it all through  
Was it just an impulse  
Or nothing  
And everything  
A mechanical failure of the soul  
Or only a mechanical failure  
No more mystery?  
Ha!  
Now even more.  
Paris in the Fall*

He is overwhelmed by her reply. Their exchange is a breathtaking moment in the history of the Internet to say nothing of their marriage.

In this exchange he experiences, if only for a moment, that rarely encountered connection that brings forth his truest self and perhaps hers, as well. It seems as if together they were once again creating something new out of the exchange they were having. The process is not unlike the one described by Lyn Schwartz in *Rough Strife*:

*She thought about Michelangelo's statues that they had seen years ago in Florence in the first excitement of their love, figures hidden in the block of stone, uncovered only by the artist's chipping away the excess, the superficial blur, till smooth and spare, the idea shape was revealed. She and Ivan were hammer and chisel to each other.*

Isn't this the character of conversation at its best? How rarely it is approximated, but when it does occur, you know it is happening in a flash. And yet here it was again, just as unpredictable and unexpected as always.

And so as the years go by and his isolation increases, he realizes more and more that he too is a social animal after all. The realization does not come as a surprise. Yet it was one that he has resisted most of his life. He is not a hermit. Yet he is torn between two worlds. Silence is lovely. He knows nothing can be concluded from the absence of speech. He is aware that conversation does not overcome the craving for elaboration. Still he wants to be able to talk with someone every now and then, someone who is bright and well read, who is expressive, quick, and lively, who likes to play with ideas, to banter a bit. He wants to be somewhere different after they have spoken than he was when they began. He will not give up the quest.