

# Finding Silence

By Holly Lisle

We who write or aspire to write make much of place. A place to work, a room of our own, an office, a nice quiet spot at a corner diner where the waitresses know not to ask how we're doing if the pen is moving ... a place in the world to call mine.

We claim this space in the name of writing, and guard it jealously, because space set aside acts to validate our dreams, and reminds us of the promise we have made to ourselves—the promise to write. When we are in our space and writing, spouses need not visit, friends dare not call, children had better be bleeding or the house burning down before they interrupt. I have a place, and I love it.

My office is half of our small spare bedroom, a decent build-it-yourself kit desk, a computer and a comfortable typing chair with a firm back. I have a sliding glass door that looks out on the parking lot of the apartment complex next door, and plastic vertical blinds that don't keep out the sound nearly as well as I'd like when the crazy people in the apartment complex next door are jumping up and down in the parking lot threatening to kill each other. But most of the time, it's a pretty nice office.

Place matters. I hate to think of writing again without it. I've done it before, it wasn't fun, I got away from it as soon as I could and have done everything in my power since to keep from sitting in the living room in the middle of mayhem. But place only matters if we also have the silence to make use of it. And silence is harder to find.

I'm not talking about the sort of silence you get when the kids are at school and the spouse is at work and the phone is set to take messages at the first ring. That sort of silence

is fine, but not essential to work. I've worked in the middle of a convention with thousands of people streaming past me on either side, all talking loudly—I knew they were there, but I didn't hear them. And on many occasions I've tried to work in an empty, quiet house, and found that the noise in my mind made productive thought impossible.

The silence I'm talking about, the silence we as writers must have to be productive, is silence inside ourselves. That silence travels anywhere. We carry it with us as if it were a private retreat in the mountains nestled next to a crystalline, ice-cold lake, surrounded by forests and pervaded by peace. And this silence is hard to find and hard to hold. It is as elusive as a rainbow, as easily shattered as sugar glass, as rare as a white stag, as skittish as a wild colt. A single worry about an unpaid bill or an appointment with a dentist or a remembered argument can destroy this silence for an hour or a day, and no amount of gritting teeth and frowning at the monitor with fingers poised on keyboard will lure it back.

I have fought my battles with the noise of the mind, and have lost my own share of time and pages to stupid replays of arguments and fantasies of future greatness and worries that I can do nothing about at the moment. I've gradually come to a place where I've started winning the battle, though, and winning it often enough that I think I'm on to something. The search for your characters' voices and your story's action and the truth of the world that you are building begins in the silence of your mind. You can reach that silence through training your mind to stillness—not an easy task, but one that offers tremendous rewards. While I'm sure people have found dozens of ways to lead their minds to quiet, I've found that meditation works for me.

I advocate no religious systems and follow none—my meditation is nothing more than sitting cross-legged on the floor, my hands clasped in my lap in front of me and my eyes closed,

breathing to a slow count of four. Inhale to four, exhale to four. I slow my breathing and counting as I begin to relax, I acknowledge stray thoughts that wander into my mind and immediately dismiss them, and I sit for fifteen minutes. No more, no less. I have a little timer that I sit in front of me, and I set it to run backwards—I'm to the point now where, when I peek at it, I'm almost always just a few seconds to either side of fifteen minutes, and when my mind has behaved itself for that long, it seems to be long enough. Quieting my conscious mind allows me to hear what my subconscious mind—my Muse—has to say to me.

For the rest of the day while I write, I can reach that silence again with a couple of slow breaths while my eyes are closed. I keep a meditation journal, too, which most days doesn't say anything more than that I sat for fifteen minutes and more or less concentrated on my breathing. Some days in the middle of that lovely silence I have a revelation that electrifies my work. Occasionally while I meditate I break through a wall that has held me stymied. Mostly I just sit, and if I only just sat, it would be enough. Because on the days when I meditate, I invariably finish my allotted number of pages. On the days when I don't, and when my mind wanders and chatters and refuses to shut up, sometimes I still manage to succeed. Sometimes I fail.

Which would make you think that I would never skip a day of meditation voluntarily, wouldn't it? But I do.

Sometimes I get the same benefits from standing under the hot water in the shower—so I skip the meditation.

Sometimes I just skip the meditation anyway. The mind resists being made to behave, and offers all sorts of reasons and enticements and cajoleries for missing a day, or a couple of days, or a week, or a month. 'You don't have the time,' or 'you have to pay bills,' or 'you already know exactly what you want to write today so why don't we just get to it?' Sometimes

my mind is convincing enough, and sometimes I am lazy enough, that I skip it. And frequently I regret it.

Finding silence takes discipline, and I'm not always disciplined. It takes commitment, and sometimes I don't have the commitment. It takes living up to a promise I made to myself, and sometimes I don't live up to it.

When I do, I'm better, I'm happier, I'm more productive. And I keep hoping that the next time my noisy mind tries to get me to skip my morning silence, I'll remember that. Perhaps what it really takes is getting smarter. Maybe the silence will eventually even give me that.

**NOTE:** If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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