

# Transitions: The Sounds of Silence

BY ANN DALY, PHD



In an early episode of the TV drama, “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,” a kidnapped woman’s husband grows impatient with investigator Gil Grissom, who has been listening to the ransom message over and over and over again. Why are you sitting here listening to this tape for the 20th time, the frustrated husband asks, when you should be out there looking for my wife?

“Sometimes, if you listen closely,” replies Grissom, the Zen master of forensic scientists, “you can hear a lot.”

When I give keynote speeches on clarity or leadership or living a legendary life, I’m invariably asked the same question in one form or another: “But how do I get clear about (fill in the blank)?”

I can sense the impatience in the questioner, much like the kidnapped woman’s husband, as well as his willfulness. What I’m really being asked is: “What can I do to (fill in the blank)?” But sometimes, as Grissom points out, listening trumps action.

After another run-through of the ransom message, Grissom deduces the location of the kidnapper. The husband admits his amazement, and asks, how did you do that? Grissom just shrugs. “I listened.”

The clarity we are seeking—whether it’s a career decision or a life transition or something deeper, like a sense of purpose—simply cannot be obtained by force of will. In fact, the harder we work at figuring it out, the more stuck or uncertain we become. Spinning our car wheels in the mud rarely gets us anywhere but deeper in the muck.

It’s only when we pause to listen that we can hear what we’re trying to say. Because we already know the answer.

You may not “know” it at an intellectual level, but you “know” it in your depths.

Years back, when I began to realize that I needed to slow down if I wanted to connect with that place

within myself, I was heartened by a bookmark emblazoned with this quote from Virginia Woolf: “It is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top.”

Don’t you love the word, “idleness”? So quaint, so refreshing. Visions of mint juleps on the veranda at dusk.

Unfortunately, our culture has literally been driven to distraction. There is no idleness (excuse me, “downtime”) permitted. No place to unplug. The more cell calls we receive, the more important we are. The more we’re juggling, the more accomplished we are.

Now that the research results on multitasking are in, we know that the opposite is true. In fact, multitasking diminishes our capacity to learn and to achieve. There is no substitute for focused attention.

If you want to get clear about what’s most im-

portant to you, then you need to slow down and tune out the world. You need to press “pause” long enough to hear what you have to say.

Even Maria Shriver, first lady of California (Arnold’s wife), has learned this lesson. In her new book, *Just Who Will You Be?*, she pledges to give herself 10 minutes of silence a day.

In my book, *Clarity: How to Accomplish What Matters Most*, the first of the five steps I outline is an injunction to do 15 minutes of nothing a day. Of everything I say in that book, these seven words attract the most response. It’s unthinkable to so many people, to devote a mere 15 minutes a day to themselves! Then there is the creative group I love. They try to get special dispensation for a “two-fer.” For example: Does my manicure count? Can I walk the dog, too?

It’s only in this silent space of grace that we can hear what I call our “flutters.” That’s how I knew that I was called to make the move from teaching to coaching. I felt a kind of flutter in my body when I heard about this new kind of helping profession. It was quiet, it didn’t say anything, it was a wave of a flag. “Hey, pay attention to this.”

Oftentimes we signal our deepest desires not in thoughts or even in emotions, but in physical sensations like the “flutters.” It takes 15 minutes of nothing a day to train ourselves to connect with those fleeting messages and to gently, kindly, and compassionately observe what they mean, without judgment. Once we’re used to attuning to our sensations, feelings, and thoughts during this 15-minute training interval, we can better attune to them in the rest of our everyday life. We can understand immediately that we really don’t want to say “yes” to that invitation, or that your recent job offer isn’t a good fit.

If you listen closely, you can hear a lot.



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