

“Life is full of trials—yet sometimes we may suddenly perceive an eternal light in the midst of the worst tribulations. There is much in life that does not make any sense, so we need witnesses whose life says: and yet! and who keep on smiling through their tears. This book is such a smile, compelling in its authenticity.”

—Benoît Standaert
Benedictine monk of Saint Andrew’s Abbey
in Bruges, Belgium
Author of *Sharing Sacred Space:*
Interreligious Dialogue as Spiritual Encounter

*“Learn to be still and learn to do nothing and learn to wait.
The secret of those who became giants always lay in this: they were
prepared for the long haul.*

—Thus wrote poet Henriette Roland Holst.
It is what Bieke Vandekerckhove wanted to learn—living with an incurable disease, she had to. Listening, meditating, persevering in the silence, she became one of the giants, and she wrote a book that consoles.”

—Huub Oosterhuis
Dutch theologian, poet, author, liturgist,
and ecumenist

the taste of silence

how i came to be at home with myself

Bieke Vandekerckhove

Translated from the Dutch by
Rudolf V. Van Puymbroeck

Foreword by
Ton Lathouwers



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

De smaak van stilte © 2010 by Bieke Vandekerckhove

Originally published by Uitgeverij Ten Have, Utrecht

Cover design by Jodi Hendrickson. Cover photo: Dreamstime.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vandekerckhove, Bieke.

[Smaak van stilte. English]

The taste of silence : how I came to be at home with myself / Bieke Vandekerckhove ; translated from the Dutch by Rudolf V. Van Puymbroeck.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8146-4773-8 — ISBN 978-0-8146-4799-8 (ebook)

1. Spirituality. 2. Spiritual life. I. Title.

BL624.V34513 2015

204'.4—dc23

2015003707

*For Gaby, who taught me to live “the great silence,”
and for Bart, my love and companion on the journey.*

do not close the windows
soon it will enter
the greatest silence.

J. C. van Schagen

contents

foreword to the Dutch edition ix

Ton Lathouwers

preface xiii

1. to fall 1
2. thinking doesn't do it 5
3. the spark that lives within 9
4. light without form 19
5. new year's wish 26
6. out of boredom 33
7. strangely familiar 39
8. jump into not-knowing 44
9. and still not-knowing 50
10. things as things 55
11. what confuses 61
12. my desert 66
13. ever . . . 68
14. going against gravity 73
15. tsimtsum 77
16. room for the unfamiliar 84
17. up to here and not farther? 89
18. stretched out in the grass 94

- 19. nobody's breath 99
- 20. troublesome companions 104
- 21. live your questions now 106
- 22. the one seat 111
- 23. being at home with yourself 117
- 24. to practice for others 123
- 25. bull power 128
- 26. not the winter but the duration 134
- 27. short story about love 142
- glossary 147
- bibliography 149
- websites 154
- translator's note 155

foreword to the Dutch edition

The first image that comes to me, now that I am writing this foreword to Bieke Vandekerckhove's book, is that of the wall. This image has stayed with me ever since I first encountered it in Dostoevsky, some sixty years ago. Ten years later, when I was studying Slavic languages, it showed up again in my favorite Russian-Jewish author, Lev Shestov. In Shestov's work I encountered the phrase that "every authentic search ends in a lonely path, and that all lonely paths inevitably end at a wall." Another ten years later I came across this "wall" again in classic Zen literature, the best-known collection of which is aptly called *Wall without Gates*.

This image of the wall runs like a red thread through *the taste of silence*, even though Bieke does not say so explicitly. Perhaps I can best clarify its meaning by giving two citations. The first is from Dostoevsky's novel *Notes from the Underground*, the second is borrowed from the final chapter of *Wall without Gates*:

One can understand everything, have insight into everything, every impossibility and every stone wall, and yet not resign oneself to a single one of these impossibilities and stone walls.

Don't be surprised that walls without gates prove to be so difficult and that they trigger intense anger in Zen monks!

In one of the chapters of the book, Bieke expresses in a particularly moving way what is referred to in these quotations. It's the chapter in which she talks frankly about her own

experience in hitting the wall, in coming to a dead end that appears impossible to accept, but at the same time, realizing that this “dead end” must never be allowed to have the last word. Bieke uses an impressive quotation from French author Sylvie Germain about the insufficiency and the impotence of current religious language when faced with this “dead end.” The biblical figure of Job occupies a central role for her. Job perfectly reflects what is meant about the wall in the two quotations above: anger, rebellion, a holy nonacceptance and nonacquiescence, and, especially, a refusal of every attempt at explanation and justification of what is unacceptable.

And precisely there, in the apparently senseless screaming and raging of Job, may lie an unexpected opening. Precisely here one can fall silent—*To Fall Silent* is also the title of a movie about Bieke—the unconditional option for silence as the only way that remains. For me, Bieke’s quotation from Sylvie Germain is one of the most impressive expressions of witness in her book. It translates her own yelling, her own revolt against the wall, and finally her own entering into the silence, the silence of Zen meditation with which she has become familiar now for so many years.

This is the other image of the wall, the wall that can never be conquered with words and violence. This is the other image of the wall that stands at the beginning of the Zen tradition. It is said of the legendary founder of Zen Buddhism, Bodhidharma, that he sat in meditation in front of a wall for a full nine years before finally breaking his silence. This is how he expressed his own waiting and vigil in silence and mindfulness, his own not-knowing and his own, based on nothing, primal confidence that the wall does not constitute the last word, that no wall constitutes the last word.

At one time Bieke told me that it was exactly the confrontation with the wall that taught her to look for what she called the “deepest reality.” What I found particularly mov-

ing was the fact that she translated the abstract-sounding “deepest reality” in a manner that rendered it concrete and immediate. I’ll never forget her reaction to a Russian story I told her about a dying young soldier in the Second World War who, just before he passed away, only had interest in a blue dragonfly that flew above the water close to him. She recognized immediately that the seemingly incomprehensible captivation of this dying boy by something so simple was a profound revelation at the edge of eternity. “Yes, so common and at the same time so uncommon is the deepest reality,” she wrote me.

There is also a whole other way in which Bieke appears to be extremely close to the deepest reality. Time and again she forgets her own suffering when she sees the difficulties of others. By a fortuitous set of circumstances in the past few weeks I witnessed this myself. Acting in this way, she expresses, in a manner that serves as an example to me and many others, what is most essential in Mahayana Buddhism, of which the Zen tradition is a part. The deepest reality is not, as is so often supposed, an engagement with our own well-being but, rather, the fact that our own deliverance—whatever that may mean—is unconditionally connected with the deliverance of the “other.” This is summarized in a short and powerful manner in the so-called “First vow of the Bodhisattva,” which is recited daily in all Zen temples: “No matter how numerous the living beings may be, I commit to liberate them all.”

That is not the only way in which Bieke serves as an example to me. I also want to mention her drive, her courage, her radiating joy, and the many activities that she has taken on despite all limitations. Bieke leads a meditation group, writes articles, carries on an extensive correspondence, and now publishes her book.

Her work *the taste of silence* is for me a particularly authentic and deep witnessing of the humanly “impossible” that human beings are capable of. At the same time, the

book expresses, in contemporary and lively language, a quest that many people will recognize. It is a quest in which the recurring themes are hope and fear, doubt and—even more so—faith against all evidence, longing, and especially love and compassion. The witness that the author gives to all of this can, I am deeply convinced, be a guide for many on their own inner journey.

The author's familiarity with Buddhism and Judeo-Christianity, the two great religious traditions that encounter each other ever more frequently these days, adds an extra dimension to this guide. Psalms and sutras, prayer and silent meditation, verbal expression and fundamental not-knowing, all make a regular appearance, standing shoulder to shoulder, maintaining thereby their own unique value, and—certainly equally important—they are always approached with an attitude that is as critical as it is open.

Throughout all of this, ultimately what mainly resounds is Bieke's witness to what was referred to in the above quotations about the wall: the primordial confidence that exists despite everything and that appears to be based on nothing, which is also expressed in the language of the psalms, a language particularly dear to the author: "with the help of the Eternal One I can surmount even the highest wall."

Ton Lathouwers

preface

*One does not write to be published,
one writes to breathe.*

Samuel Beckett

This book has its origin in my life's journey. When I was a nineteen-year-old psychology student, I fell ill. The diagnosis was harsh and inexorable: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Cause: unknown. Treatment: nonexistent. Probability of cure: zero. Life expectancy: two to five years. Course: progressive paralysis of the muscles, respiratory difficulties, trouble swallowing, leading to death. There's the sum total of what I had to deal with. How do you survive something like that? What do you do when all that's left is a paltry bit of life? Circumstances led me to an abbey. The quiet of the place moved me. I decided to live the short time I had left with the Benedictine sisters, in accord with the rhythm of the silence. There I became familiar with the spirituality of Benedict and with praying the psalms. It influenced my life for good.

My physical condition kept deteriorating until, after about three years, the doctor gave me a variant of the good news/bad news routine. The good news: as inexplicably as the illness had started, it had gone into remission. The bad news: it could start up again at any time and, of course, I would never get better. Again I had to pick myself up and begin to build a new life with a damaged body. Where to start when you practically can't do anything? My arms are just about

completely paralyzed, so I can do nothing on my own. I need continual help with the simplest things: eating, drinking, washing up, putting on a coat, and so on. It has taken a lot of effort, but I have now been living with ALS for twenty years. I am married and have two personal assistants to help me with all daily activities.

During the last ten years I came upon the silence of Zen. I got to know the Maha Karuna Ch'an with Zen teacher Ton Lathouwers. That encounter proved decisive.

The chapters in this book reflect what I have experienced, seen, and tasted in the stillness of life. Benedictine spirituality and Zen Buddhism play a constant role. They have become the two lungs through which I breathe. They are my two major sources of inspiration. The situation in which I found myself forced me into "no-action" and many hours of silence. Nothing was more difficult. But I discovered that there is nothing more dynamic. Everything that happens in that silence is what this book is all about. It brings together a number of pieces written over a course of years. A few were published previously, sometimes under a different form, in various periodicals. The pieces are not arranged chronologically. While each text can be read on its own, together they form a whole, like a puzzle.

It is with much trepidation that I let go of these reflections. I hope they reach people who, just like me, have been touched by the taste of silence.

I thank the Trappists of Saint Sixtus Abbey in Westvleteren and the Benedictine sisters of Saint-Lioba Convent in Egmond-Binnen for their hospitality over the years. I thank the many monks and religious who crossed my path in Zevenkerken, Zundert, Bethanië, and Chevetogne. I want to mention by name Abbot Remi, Br. Godfried, Br. Johannes, Br. Benoît, Br. Andrew, Sr. Karin, and Sr. Zoë. I am grateful to the Maha Karuna Ch'an in Steyl and the Zen sangha in Ghent with Zen teacher Frank De Waele for giving me the

opportunity to connect deeply with Zen, notwithstanding severe physical limitations. I thank the many “co-sitters.” It gives me pleasure to name Fernanda and Geert, who opened the door to Zen. Also Nicole, Louise, Pat, Karin, Hilde, Geert, Liliane, and Lut who assist me whenever necessary. I want to thank Ton for his humor and depth, and for encouraging this writing adventure; my parents for their trust in the life they gave me; my family and friends for the encounters that make life meaningful. My thanks also to Jenny Dejager for allowing me to use one of her poetic images for the title of this book. Finally, I also want to thank Bart, my husband, my first reader and soundboard, my puzzler without whom this book would never have seen the light of day.

Bieke Vandekerckhove



“Resilience,” Els Vermandere
(photo: Benoit Goffart)

to fall

*A scared bird
moribund
frozen
perched
on a withered branch.
Frail support
like empty words.
Where leads the doubt?
Who breaks its fall?*

Jenny DeJager

Scared to death. Exhausted. Broken. Lost. Angry. Incon-solable. In an infinite, indifferent universe, I feel endlessly alone. Horrible!

And then the burden of your body. So much of a burden that you don't dare go to the doctor. Not yet. When you fear the worst, that's what happens. Stick your head in the sand just a bit longer, 'cause you can't tolerate bad news. Not yet.

In the meantime, you're climbing up the walls. You don't feel good anywhere. Again and again you swallow the lump in your throat . . . until you can't anymore, and the lake behind your eyes seems bottomless.

Everything loses its glow. Nothing makes sense anymore.

The things that used to preoccupy you for days on end, how silly they all appear!

Fear. A searing pain in the soul. Panic. While that one oppressive question keeps hammering in my head: How much time do I have left? How do I manage this without losing my mind?

Even now, eye to eye with the aggression of the incurable illness, from somewhere an odd realization bubbles up against the thought of committing euthanasia: no act is without consequences. You have responsibilities. Even now. Not for what happens. What happens to you, you don't have control over. But how you handle it . . . That, yes! Whether or not you carry on makes a big difference for those around you. And, also, how you carry on. Oosterhuis shows the way: handle your sorrow in such a way that it does not isolate or embitter you. Stay connected. With others. With God. "Yours is the future, come what may." Fine words. Hard to live with. I'll do my best. But I don't know if I can pull it off.

Suddenly, severe doubt. I fall . . . Will there be somebody to catch me on the other side of this life? Then there's the realization that an infinite number of people have fallen before me, throughout the ages. Who catches them? Or the equally infinite number of people who are falling around me, all over the world. Is there really something that saves us?

If there is nothing, then this life is no more than an absurd, deeply tragic accident—the blind consequence of an equally blind evolution in which people, animals, and things are pitilessly sacrificed to the jaws of an insatiable evolutionary principle. Not an attractive proposition!

Unexpectedly, some consolation from a phrase in a Buddhist text. About the deliverance of all living beings. Even the smallest plant or blade of grass . . . There has to be something, whatever it may be. But when you're falling, this gives you nothing to hold on to.

I fall ever lower. I can't figure it out. I know nothing anymore. I am only capable of despair, and a deep cry for help. This is our rawest, most intimate self, I think. To fall. To doubt. To want to believe with all your heart. To be unable to. And to cry out for help . . .

A friend told me that believing precisely consists in this: throwing yourself backward into the abyss and shouting for help. I had to laugh, despite my distress. He is not thin, by any means. I am skin over bones. With his talk of falling and jumping, I suddenly felt transported into the world of Toon Tellegen's animal stories. As if my friend were the elephant, I the ant, and together we were doing an exercise in falling. And perhaps our life is indeed like these stories. Because the animals of Toon Tellegen don't know a thing. At least if by *knowing* you mean: "to have a perfect explanation." They just try this and that. They have high jinks. They err miserably. They are a disorderly bunch. And yet Tellegen ends and begins their story with: "Perhaps they knew everything." The animals of Toon Tellegen, they dare: to jump and to fall, into the abyss, toward the unknown.

To fall. A shout. A longing, too. To come clean with everything. That also. The rest fades away. It no longer matters at all. To come clean . . . With what you did to others. With what others did to you. I find that in the face of death you want to give and receive forgiveness. Strange.

Death is the great unknown. We approach it *naked*. With empty hands. Alone and defenseless. "Death is the only thing that is just," my physical therapist likes to say. "It's the only thing that is the same for everyone." "It is then that you have to stand on your own two legs," sings Willem Vermandere. That's all well and good. But today it does not console me either.

I am scared to death of the eventual decline. Of the thousand things I need to let go. Of the absolute unknown. Of

saying farewell to the face that I cannot and do not want to miss, because I have grown into it so intimately. There is a poem that says: “It’s nice to be a house for the only heart you don’t want to leave behind.” I didn’t realize it, but love is a house. Friendship is a path—a wonderful combination of paths, that sometimes diverge considerably, and of intersections. Love, on the other hand, is a house. It has to do with “under one roof.” If day after day the two of you share the same house, share your meals, share life, love, and pain . . . you grow into each other. If night after night you sleep side by side, you become closely bonded. I am beginning to understand what it means to become “one flesh.” Your life can become entwined with that of another on many levels. You can have such an intense history together that you can’t imagine your life separate from the other. If you really love someone, you cannot and you do not want to die, just as you do not want the other to die. Love wants to be a house that spans beyond death. Love hurts terribly.

thinking doesn't do it

*Thinking leads no more
to your true origin,
than boiling sand
will give you rice.*

Buddha

“Go stand where there is no place to stand” says the *koan* of modern Japanese Zen master Hisamatsu. For me, I had no choice in the matter. I was flung onto that place. Life forced me onto a place where I did not want to stand at all.

I had always been a busy bee. Until I became paralyzed in my arms and all of a sudden became unable to do anything at all. Done with studying. Done with my many activities. Done with my independence, my freedom of movement. I was nineteen. The doctor’s diagnosis was bad news: I was suffering from the life-ending illness ALS and did not have much longer to live. I was crushed. I could only despair. My whole world fell apart. I had to give up one thing after another. I lost everything that was dear to me. It was hell. Go stand where there is no place to stand. Well, now, for me there was no longer any place to go stand at all!

Nevertheless, there was something in me that did not want to give up. Maybe it was just stubbornness—I’m a very stubborn person. I wanted to search, even though I did not know where or what. Hisamatsu’s phrase “Go stand where there is no place to stand,” could drive me wild. Now I say: these

words express something incredibly profound. I even dare say that there's no other way.

Two years long I searched for a way out of my despair. Nothing worked. When, however, I no longer knew where else I could look, at that low point where I had lost everything, where I thought "this is the end," "I don't see any way out," just at that impossible place with nothing to dull the pain and only the prospect of death, there opened before me—out of the blue—something of a path. And that path still opens up from time to time. But I could not hold on to it then and cannot hold on to it now, and I cannot label it. I can only say that there is something that makes me go on, right through the night . . . in tears, yes, but not broken. And that it's not an easy way.

This path revealed itself in silence. Totally by happenstance. Through a friend's initiative, I ended up at the Trappist monastery of Westvleteren. We were going to spend three days there. Before ringing the bell, my friend made the strange proposal that we would not talk to each other. Ok, agreed. We saw each other at mealtimes, we attended the liturgical prayer services, and the rest of the time we kept to ourselves. Since then I have often thought that his proposal had created an opening, an opportunity. Although at that time I felt it was weird. But I kept to it. I left him alone and passed the time by myself, in silence on a bench, just as I observed the monks did. In the year prior to this I had hit so many walls that, by way of speaking, all I could do was sit down—desperate, at the end of my rope. I was down for the count. To this day, I don't understand it in the least. I did not talk with anybody in those three days. I just sat there in silence. When I departed, my situation was as hopeless as ever but, to my and my housemates' amazement, I arrived home laughing, not understanding how or why. This experience has never left me. It was the beginning of my path with and in silence. It marks my life to this very day.

Shortly after my stay at that abbey I read the diaries of Etty Hillesum. Her words moved me. Not that I understood what she wrote about—at that time I couldn't really grasp all the things I was dealing with, they were too overpowering—but I held on to the feeling. Her words struck me particularly because of the circumstances under which they were written: the Second World War, the persecution of the Jews—a situation just as hopeless as mine. But what impressed me most was that this utter lack of hope did not destroy her. In the midst of the horror, she knew how to get to the essence of things. She arrived at love, a love so deep that she accompanied her people into the night, even though she herself could have escaped. I have always held on to that, and still do! She gave me hope that all was not lost. She kept alive in me the belief that there is a way (out), even if everything appears to lead to a “dead” end.

Years later, after spending many hours of quiet time, I began to understand the value and the truth of her words—pointing to a path of silence, just as in Zen. Etty writes somewhere that thinking never quite does it. I found that unimaginable and shocking. At the time I was studying at the University of Leuven and I lived completely in my head. Not to approach things with your mind was inconceivable. But if all you have left is tears, thinking doesn't do much for you. When I fell ill I thought and read until I was groggy with fatigue, searching for meaning. I had to and would find an answer. And then you read, from an intelligent woman, that this is not the way, “that you can never think your way out of difficult emotional states. That then something else has to happen. That you have to become passive and that you have to listen. That you have to reconnect with a bit of eternity.” And also: “That another person cannot help you. That you have to listen to what is inside you.” Etty Hillesum has a beautiful word for it: *hineinhorchen*. To listen within, and there “to wait until you become one big space inside,

without the sneaky bushes that obstruct the view. So that in this way something of God enters into you. To wait until something wants to melt and wants to start flowing in you.”

This mysterious, indefinable way with and in silence is what I want to deal with in this book. About my struggle with a situation without prospect but also about *hineinhorchen* and listening to what is within. Because the words of Etty Hillesum, together with the silence in that abbey, definitively led me into another direction, and there is no going back. I no longer look for answers. I only look for silence. Silence allows something wonderful to be born. The way of silence is, however, also a tough and difficult path. Hopeless misery remains hopeless misery, a wall remains a wall, and living with that is no laughing matter. And yet, there *is* something else. I simply cannot do without seeking out silence, time and again.