

## **Traveling Companion: I can't hear myself think!**

Fr. Michael Tracey

Probably one of the greatest inventions of our time was the cell phone. It was salvation in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It became a lifeline between family, neighbors and strangers at a very chaotic time. Our dependence and interdependence on the cell phone has not just become a necessity but often an obsession. The need to be constantly in touch has become a new religion. We have created a bubble of isolationism as we communicate with anyone and everyone, except ourselves.

I am always fascinated by the constant chatter of the cell phone phenomenon. I cannot escape it. I see it as I drive alone. I notice someone in the other car, talking to themselves. Well, they are not really talking to themselves. They are by themselves but talking to someone else who may be miles or states away.

Airports fascinate me also for the same reason. People are in constant contact with someone who is obviously not at the airport. I notice people rushing from gate to gate or waiting to board a flight and they are on a cell phone. People pass me by talking through a Bluetooth but no one is talking to anyone else. I hear all these snippets of conversation. They seem like pieces of a foreign language that has not been invented yet. It is business or pleasure or the obsession with the need to engage someone in idle chatter in order to escape the boredom.

We are obsessed with communication, with being in constant touch with everyone except ourselves. Still, at the same time, we have become more neurotic, more off-centered than ever before. If we cannot talk on the cell phone to someone, we can text them. We have become communication giants but silent pygmies.

I never turn on the radio in my car. I don't have any CD blaring in the background as I ride down the highway. I am too busy trying to be alert in case someone who is busy talking to someone else fails to notice me until it is too late and, if it is too late, then real communication begins.

One of my commitments every year, during Lent, is to turn off the TV. The silence can be deafening. I miss all the latest news, my favorite programs, the weather forecast, the latest scandals, the latest episode of..., the latest political polls as well as the ability to discuss anything on TV with anyone. It may seem that Lent might be a very boring time for me, but it is not. It is not easy, initially, because, in the back of my mind, I may wonder what I am missing. I may feel that I am less informed. But, positively, I realize what I am gaining. I don't sit in my self-created Lenten hermitage and groan about how painful Lent is. Instead, I realize how enriching it can be.

Without the constant din of noise and the disease of having to be saturated in involvement with others, I can embrace the silence within that replaces it. I can hear the silence speak volumes in decibels which my hearing can welcome, embrace and nurture. I am reminded of what contemplative writer, Thomas Keating said: silence is God's first language. Sometimes, I think it is God's only language and that speaks volumes to me. I am also reminded of how God speaks in the silence, especially in that wonderful passage from 1 Kings 19:11-13 where God is not heard in the mighty wind, the earthquake or the fire but in a tiny whispering sound. It is tempting to think that we can find God in the constant chatter and noise pollution. Instead, we can only find him in the silence we create and embrace within ourselves.

Maybe Kahlil Gibran, author of the famous "Prophet," challenges us to hear ourselves think when he says, "I have learned silence from the talkative, toleration from the intolerant, and kindness from the unkind; yet, strange, I am ungrateful to these teachers."

Now, I find it ironic that this article was born in silence because I was able to hear myself think.