

THE VALUES OF SILENCE

By Fred Hobbs

Pointless discussions have centered around the question, “which would be worse, losing your sight or your hearing?” Obviously both of these faculties are precious gifts to humans and all members of the animal kingdom. Great challenges face those who have lost all or partial use of one or more of these senses. We know the amazing story of Helen Keller who lived a remarkable life of achievement despite being born both blind and deaf. But of the two handicaps, loss of hearing is generally considered the one that a person can cope with most effectively.

Silence actually has been highly touted in some quarters as an effective method of communication. According to cultural norms, silence can be positive or negative. Moments of silence in respect for the recently departed, silent prayers in a religious setting or at a person’s own bedside often are more meaningful than words which are harder to conjure up.

My granddaughter is involved in debate classes and competitions at her high school and is learning the value of silence by practicing the rhetorical trick of saying nothing when the opponent expects something to be said. In conversation, so-called “pregnant pauses” can be effective or embarrassing depending on whether or not they were planned.

In the courtroom or the police interrogation room, witnesses or the accused can remain silent, sometimes at their own peril.

Just a few words are needed when “pleading the 5th” – expressing the right to remain silent lest you incriminate yourself.

Silence actually can enhance music, slight pauses or “rests” that add color and nuance to melodies and rhythms. Time was in both radio and television when a tiny fraction of silence was built in between commercials, but the advent of computers has automated the process to allow those messages to run non-stop together. Added up, in a day’s broadcast this allows a few more advertisements to be aired and a few more bucks for the station or network to make.

These days, broadcast newscasters are taught not to provide any silence between stories. The listener or viewer might wonder at what point the car crash story ended and the lost dog feature began. Not to mention the obvious question: “When does the anchor man or woman take a breath?”

Having catalogued a few of the values of silence, I must admit I’m not the silent type and I am very uncomfortable without some kind of sound surrounding me.

I am not overly fond of jackhammers, heavy metal music or the incessant high pitched yapping of some of the tiny dogs that seem in abundance in our otherwise pleasant 50-plus housing environment.

Truth is, though, I must have sound. Even now as I am composing this little essay, I'm listening to pleasant background melodies on the cable TV music channel, "Easy Listening."

It is said by some that silence is golden. If that is true, then sounds such as those of nature, good music or invigorating conversation must be platinum.