

AN ESSAY

Vacuum

*On a four-second silence, eighteen vacuums,
and the person you can be quiet with*

BY CHRIS WYATT · A EIGHT-MINUTE READ

THERE IS A TEST I RUN ON PEOPLE WITHOUT TELLING them. It takes about four seconds.

Somewhere in a conversation a gap opens. Nobody has anything to add, and for a moment nobody adds it. With almost everyone I know I can feel a clock start. One second is nothing. Two is a breath. At three, somebody's eyebrows go up. By four, one of us has said something about the weather, and it is not about the weather. It is a rescue.

We are quick to take our turn. In 2009 a team led by the linguist Tanya Stivers studied conversations in ten languages. Across their sample, the average gap between a question and its answer was about a fifth of a second. Two hundred milliseconds, give or take, with differences between languages. We often begin preparing a reply while the other person is still speaking. We are ready to go.

A gap can change how a conversation feels. Psychologists at the University of Groningen asked viewers to imagine themselves as one of the people in a recorded conversation. In one version, a four-second silence followed her remark. Compared with viewers who saw the conversation flow without the pause, they reported feeling more rejected and less like they belonged. Four seconds was enough.

So here is the test. Find the person with whom the clock does not start. Not being alone. Being alone is easy, or at least it is easy for me. A person. Someone who could say something at any moment, who does not, and whose not-saying does not register as a gap at all.

I have one. Her name is Erin, and she is my wife, and I have tried to imagine sitting in that quiet with anyone else on earth. I cannot do it. With everyone else there is a hum in the room, the turn-taking engine idling. With her the engine is off. I did not turn it off, and neither did she. It simply is not running, and it has not been for years.

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I want to be precise about what the quiet is, because the word silence is wrong. The house is not silent. There are two Great Pyrenees in it. The dogs have plenty to say, especially after dark. What Erin and I have is the absence of something else, and the something else is pressure.

Nature abhors a vacuum. Erin owns eighteen. I have counted. Wet, dry, mop, stick, battery, plug-in, hybrid. There is a vacuum for the stairs and a vacuum for the car and one whose purpose I do not understand and have decided not to ask about. I once counted the hot sauces in this house and got to twelve and thought that was a lot. The vacuums beat the hot sauces by half again, and unlike the hot sauces, they run.

The house gets cleaned to a standard I could not reach with a staff. Eighteen is apparently what it takes.

Then there is the white. Everything she owns is white, or is on its way there. The dogs are white. The walls are white. The house, when she is finished with it, is the color of a page nobody has written on. I did not bring this with me. I came into the marriage with the ordinary conviction that a flat surface is a place to put things, and somewhere in the first year I lost it and have not missed it since. She taught me minimalism the way you learn a language from someone fluent in it, not by instruction but by exposure, until one morning you notice you are thinking in it. A bare

counter now reads to me as rest and a full one as noise. That is hers. I only live here.

Here is the part that took me years to notice: the person who owns eighteen machines for removing what is not supposed to be there, who paints the walls the color of nothing and keeps two dogs to match, is the same person who can sit in a room and not fill it. A minimalist is someone who believes that what is not there is doing something.

The pressure in a conversation is harder to point to. It is the sense that someone is supposed to be speaking and it might be you. The need to come up with something, to keep the thing moving, to make sure the other person knows you are still there. Remove that pressure and what remains is room.

In 2024 Netta Weinstein and her colleagues published four studies of silence in romantic relationships. They asked people about their experiences and their reasons for being quiet. Silence freely chosen for connection was associated with better feelings and greater closeness than silence driven by pressure. The researchers connected the calm of shared silence with earlier work on solitude. That sounds familiar to me: some of the ease of being alone, with Erin still on the couch.

Silence can also mean that someone feels unable to speak, or is trying to shut the other person out. A hostile silence has a temperature and an anxious one has a tremor. I know the difference in how a room feels to me. That does not make me the authority on how it feels to her.

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Erin runs marathons. I do not mean she has run a marathon, the way people have been to Paris. I mean she runs them the way other people play tennis, and she is elite at it, a word I can use but not comprehend. I have tried.

A marathon is twenty-six miles and change. That is a long way to keep doing something difficult. Erin chooses the whole distance, at speed, for pleasure.

She has spent more hours alone inside her own head, at effort, with nobody to talk to and nowhere to go but forward, than anyone I have ever met. She does hours of it on a Sunday morning and comes home wanting to know what is for breakfast.

She does not cook, incidentally. I would like to be kind and say she cooks poorly. She does not cook. A great deal of the culture's picture of a loving woman has been organized around the kitchen, and I am here to report from the far side of that picture that it was never the kitchen. The person who notices you are hungry is doing something that matters before anybody touches a pan. She notices. Someone else can handle the pot.

She wins awards at work, and I find out about them by accident. She makes humble look humble. Frankly, it is annoying. And it would be easy to read the quiet and the humility as the same thing, a low flame, a person who simply does not have much going on. That is the mistake I made about quiet people for the first half of my life, and she is the reason I stopped making it.

She has a fire in her that burns hotter than anything in me, and it makes almost no noise. The person who can sit in a room with me and say nothing is the same person who keeps running through mile twenty-two. It is a fire that does not need to be told it is one.

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She loves her dog. The dog loves her back by lying down somewhere nearby and watching the door. A livestock guardian has work to do even when it looks as if nothing is happening. I mention the dog because I did not fully understand what Erin and I have until I watched her and the dog have it too.

To take something for granted is to take it on trust. The engineers who built your town's water system have done their job when you can turn on the tap without thinking about them. You get to live in the house.

I do not want to spend the quiet on the couch inspecting the quiet on the couch. But I can notice it. I can write down what is here.

Gratitude, I wrote once, is the inventory you take while the house is still standing. This is the inventory. Eighteen vacuums. Two white dogs. Bare counters. Marathons. Awards I hear about by accident. A person I can sit beside without trying to think of what to say next.

She will read it and shrug, because she is humble to the point of provocation, and then she will go find a vacuum.

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In the seventeenth century, Otto von Guericke put on a show. He made two metal hemispheres that fitted together at the rim, sealed them, and pumped the air out. Teams of horses pulling in opposite directions could not separate them. When air was let back in, the halves could come apart.

The hemispheres were not bolted, welded, or tied together. What held them was atmospheric pressure on the outside, with much less pressure pushing back from within. The empty space was doing something. I like that part of the picture.

I spent a lot of years thinking love was something you put between two people. Words, mostly. Plans. Evidence of effort. All of that has its place. But there is something about sitting beside Erin with none of it happening that I could not have understood before I had it.

The trouble with the hemispheres is what happens when you open the valve. Air gets in and the bond is gone. Follow that picture too far and you end up treating a question as a leak. Copper does not have anything it needs to tell you. A person does.

A silence worth having has room for that. If something needs to be said, saying it should not count as breaking the thing we were enjoying. The quiet does not have to be protected from us.

So this is the picture I keep. Erin, the white dogs, a room with the engine off. Nobody has to say a word. Nobody has to keep one back. ♦

Sources

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