

## *The Sounds of Silence*

### **A Book Review by Owene Courtney**

**Sarah Maitland. *A Book of Silence* Paperback – August 3, 2009.**

#### **CONTINUED**

Gifts of silence for Maitland include more time and freedom from real time and psychic time, talking less and seeing more and thus praying more, and an overwhelming sense of being connected to the universe and the natural phenomena within it. One of the sensations that resulted from being connected to the universe, she said, was experiencing boundary confusion in oneness with the cosmos. “If an individual is one with and a part of everything, then it is not going to be clear where the self begins and ends.”

As Maitland’s autobiography continues, she develops a deeper understanding of how silence changes her prayers, sometimes has dangers, and even makes good use of distractions. The artist in her does, however, find conflict between creative silence and contemplative silence, because “solitude for writers exists so that they can hear their own authentic voices. The aim of religious silence is to get your own authentic voice to shut up so that you might hear something of the voice of God!” she says. Her prolific writing indicates that she has found a resolution to that conflict.

Maitland clarifies the difference between loneliness and solitude quite often in the book saying that spending time alone is in fact spending time with the person you know best of all and who knows you better than anyone else does. “Solitude deepens self-knowledge. Interestingly, the words “solitude” and “loneliness” ought to have similar meanings: “solo” and “alone” do after all. But faced with courage and determination they do not. Loneliness is a negative, sad feeling. Solitude on the other hand is bliss. And practice makes perfect. So, practice.”

Reading this book is an exercise in curiosity and wonder. Maitland’s extreme ways of living in pursuit of silence often seem impossible to believe, and yet her discoveries about silence are ethereal and rather holy. As one of my favorite priests said, “she strikes me as an eccentric on one hand and quite a realist on the other; not a function of anyone’s simple equation.” Former Archbishop Justin Welby called her book “a serious, important

and deeply engaging book which describes with equal honesty the risks and resources of silence.” With apologies to Simon and Garfunkel, I found her book to echo their song “Sounds of Silence” because she illustrates how the “words of the prophets are whispered in the sound of silence.” Because Maitland encourages us to practice silence, in preparation I encourage you to read the book. It is so good I will read it again.