

# Silence Day at Nga Tawa Diocesan School

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**For one day on Wednesday 2nd July 2008, Nga Tawa School stopped talking!**

Nga Tawa is an Anglican, integrated, girls boarding school under the control of the Diocese of Wellington. It is situated about a hundred and eighty kilometres north of the city in the beautiful rolling, rural landscape that is New Zealand's lower North Island.

In this idyllic spot, two hundred and fifty young women, fifty adults and sixty-one horses get on with the business of education. All but a handful of students are full boarders, so this education needs to be truly holistic if it is to provide for the needs of the students and the society into which they will one day take their place.

It is undoubtedly the case, and any working educationalist would recognise it, that when teaching in such a setting one has a much better chance of success, due to the fact that one is working in, and with, a learning environment separated from many of the distractions of modern urban life.

Life here is good and, while never turning our back on the world, we do have the chance to sidestep its worst features. Some things, however, are all pervasive and cannot be ignored...

Today's world is fuller than ever with personal noise, delivered into our senses, often without our permission, from all forms of electronic media. Television was the beast of which my own father complained when I should have been doing "something more useful instead". Radio was presumably his father's equivalent. Now the range is so vast: game-playing computers, music down-load and delivery systems, and cell phones, while masquerading

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**"People smiled at each other more because they were not able to talk."** *Yr. 9*



as communication, are actually in the hands of the indiscriminate, a barrier to it. Noise, and often not the shared, enjoyable noise of the rock band's public performance but rather the self-absorbed and therefore self-limiting noise of personal music and messaging systems, is used to fill every leisure moment. And every moment not so filled, is considered "boring".

"The world cries out for some quiet" says Teilhard de Chardin in an oxymoronic moment. But, with respect, those of us who teach the young know that that is not quite true. The world of western teenage youth actually cries out for more and more noise. They cannot cry out for quiet for the simple reason that they do not know what quiet is. And that is where we of DAN come in.

Our *Five Strands* include Stillness and Silence and, though always appearing last in the list (a point worthy of consideration at another time), it is crucial to what we are trying to achieve.

Minds, in order to be open and critical, need the time and conditions to reflect. A person cannot be expected to choose quietness

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over noise if they have never experienced quietness. When adopting the DAN way of Religious and Philosophical Education we undertake to provide that quietness and then hope that, as students come to know what it is, they may well "cry out" for some more.

The world's major faiths know this of course and, from their inception, have valued and promoted quietness and contemplation. Abraham came to the realisation of the one true God because the **Urban** culture in which he was living provided him with the time to reflect upon his world, and work out that as

## Being silent puts you alongside the poor and powerless, for the poor and powerless have no voice.

all things are linked, then one creating and sustaining force was adequate. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have continued that reflective tradition even to the point where they have all, in their own ways, set aside places and methods of funding to allow chosen members to give up the role of economic unit and become instead our still and silent contemplative sisters and brothers.

Humanity's need of quiet is set deep within our culture and, even if many appear to reject it, it still holds great interest and fascination. Witness the popularity of the BBC television series filmed at Worth Abbey in 2005 and its many derivatives. Prior (pardon the pun) to seeing this programme many people would have condemned the monastic life as delusional and escapist. Now they "cry out" for more!

**"Such a pity it didn't go on all night as well as all day."**  
*Boarding Manager*

The sell-out tour by the Abbot of Worth, Christopher Jamison, his best selling books *Finding Sanctuary* and *Finding Happiness* which deal with the relevance of the monastic rule to everyday life, and the plethora of books which deal with similar topics – reveal that, like our students, once adults have had an experience of stillness and silence, they usually want more.

Quietness and stillness are important because they provide opportunities for contemplation and reflection and thereby allow people to better understand themselves and the world and through that understanding become more fully human: a very laudable reason for providing some quietness in a Christian school.

But there is another reason, and it is a reason that often gets lost in the debate. Being silent puts you alongside the poor and powerless, for the poor and powerless have no voice.

So, for these two reasons – time for reflection and concern for the poor – the whole of Nga Tawa Diocesan School stopped talking for a day! And "the whole" means *everyone*, students and the whole staff, including teaching, maintenance, catering and administration.

Lessons were delivered, food was served and eaten, Chapel prayer was offered, visitors were greeted, sick were tended and broken things were mended... all in silence. The only exceptions were emergencies (of which there were none) and answering incoming phone calls. Added to this, as a concrete effort on behalf of those less fortunate than ourselves, everyone gave five dollars to this year's designated charity. This donation was collected by the charity's representative at our lunchtime silent Chapel service. She was speechless!

**"Somehow things slowed down, there seemed to be loads of time to think."**  
*Yr 13*

It is without doubt the case that the whole community benefited from the experience, even those who do not live with us at the school and who, therefore, did not share the experience first hand. Parents were encouraged to engage their children in discussion of the event during their next visit home and the feedback was all positive including some newfound respect for daughters who could live without talking for a whole day!

It is worth making the point, for those who would wish to organize such a day in their own schools, that students did not come unschooled to the process.

All students at Nga Tawa regularly have opportunity for silent reflection.

One one-hour lesson per term for each class is given over to stillness and silent meditation. This meditation follows the Benedictine model of making the body comfortable and then, through the action of the imagination, going to a place where one's mind is also restful.

This overtly Christian model then goes on to imagine the presence of another person sitting beside you. You do not look at this person but simply talk to them about your joys and worries. The other person remains unseen and silent. This other person is *Christ* and the talking and thinking is *prayer*. (*To the non-Trinitarian sisters and brothers of our common Abrahamic line this methodology is familiar, but includes presenting oneself before God who "knows and accepts" your joys and sorrows.*)

**"I like our quiet lessons but I thought a whole day would be a waste of time, but it wasn't... everyone joined in and the feeling of calmness grew stronger throughout the day."**  
*Yr. 13*

When first introduced these sessions were greeted with some embarrassment. Now the students are comfortable with the whole process and are keen to ensure that they receive their allotted time. As with all meditative process, practice improves one's ability to engage. Over time students find it easier to move into a relaxed meditative state and the idea of "going to your place" is readily understood.

*Our day of silence went so well that we will be making it an annual event!*

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### 'THE MONASTERY': A NEW KIND OF TELEVISION

'The Monastery' and 'The Monastery Revisited' is a BBC TV series first transmitted in the UK in 2005/6 to record audiences. The original series is still being broadcast on other networks around the world including the ABC. The programme also generated a new format that has been used to make other BBC programmes such as 'The Convent' and 'The Retreat', as well as Discovery Channel's 'The Monastery' in the US and ABC's 'The Abbey' in Australia.