



Golden

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Golden rays of sunlight were drifting up my wall when the chirping unceremoniously woke me up. The window was open. It was my fault—I wanted the room cold—but I still resented the bird. The birdsong's cheeriness just made it more jarring. I knew I was being unfair, but it still felt personal. The bird was mocking me.

Later that morning, I met a patient in outpatient psychiatry. I felt the air heavy with their despair when I entered their room. They had been grappling with an overwhelming sense of grief. I introduced myself and tried to make some small talk to build rapport. They responded, but did so more slowly. There were long pauses between sentences. These quiet moments felt like frozen elastic bands, stretching hazardously and threatening to snap. A parade of words spilled out of my mouth, cascading over each other in desperate attempts to fill the silence. I offered assurances. I used empathic phrases. I asked specific follow-up questions to show I was listening.

But the more I talked, the further away they seemed to retreat inward.

After the encounter, my heart felt heavy. A lump materialized in my throat, warning me of impending emotional turbulence. I felt like I had entered the room and inflated a thousand mylar balloons—invading their space with discordant, space-occupying clutter.

An insidious thought echoed: *Was I the bird to that patient?*

Tossing and turning in bed that night, sweating, I questioned why I needed to dispel silence. What had I been afraid of? I had been so intent on banishing silence that I failed to see its value.

The next day, I made a choice. I chose to power through my discomfort and be intentional about silence.

The first patient I met was sobbing before I entered the room. Between heaving breaths, they shared that their brother had died of pancreatic cancer recently. They said the world had lost all color. Then, they stopped talking, turned to me, and paused expectantly.

My heart was pounding. I could not find the right words to respond. I said, “I am so, so sorry. I...” My mind raced ahead, trying to continue. Then, I remembered the commitment I had made. So, despite a knot of apprehension in my stomach, I let the silence sit.

They seemed taken aback. Then, they nodded, grasping what I was saying by not saying anything. When words failed, silence became an acknowledgment of the unspeakable. It was a space where the patient's trauma could exist, unjudged and unarticulated, but still recognized and respected.

The patient was the first to break our shared silence. They asked if we could sit together for a few minutes. Then, they shared that within our silence, they saw in me a willing listener and a safe space to unload their burdens.

Later that day, another patient was overtly relieved at my silence. Their eyebrows furrowed, and they opened their mouth to say something. My mind screamed *Tell them you aren't being indifferent! Tell them you were listening! Tell them something, anything.* Then, they said, “Thank God! Finally, someone lets me speak.” They confided that it was the first conversation in the hospital where they felt any sense of control. They taught me that offering silence can be like providing patients with a blank canvas, ready to be filled with their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

At the same time, a moment of peace for some is a yawning chasm for others. Silence is a chameleon: it takes on the color of its surroundings. Calming or overwhelming, contemplative or detached—it is a mirror reflecting our feelings and fears. When wielded thoughtfully, though, it can become a safeguard against knee-jerk reactions. It forestalls immediate responses and signals genuine listening.

I have just spent hundreds of words espousing the power of silence. Honestly, though, those quiet lulls in conversation

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still make my heart race sometimes. My anxieties live in soundless places. So, I have tried reframing: remaining silent is an active choice. I am choosing to communicate without words. Whenever there is a pause in the conversation, every breath taken without interruption speaks volumes.

The sun was setting as I ended my day, painting the sky once again in hues of gold. I thought back to that bird, and the disproportionate weight of its presence in my past and future mornings. I chuckled and shook my head.

The next morning, the chirping was right on cue. But I approached it with understanding and gratitude. It reminded me of my fear of silence. Perhaps it was singing to ward off anxieties, too.

In my head, I thanked the bird for helping me think about the phrase “silence is golden” in a different way. Taking away my morning’s silence gave me the gift of reflection. It held up a mirror to show me how I might be coming across to the patients I am trying to help.

The absence of words is not the only reason silence is golden. That luster also comes from the potential of what can replace it. Since being intentional about silence, I have noticed a shift in my meetings with patients. There is a deeper connection. When we do speak, our tones and cadences harmonize. I leave the room feeling like I have a more genuine understanding of who they are as a person—an understanding that blossomed in the quiet moments.

This morning, I saw the bird perched on its tree just outside my window. Its eyes were closed, its body swaying

gently in the breeze. It was quiet and content. In its silence, I found peace.

Perhaps the bird sings because it hopes to replace silence with beauty. If so, our intentions are similar. When we break silence, it is often done earnestly, to reach patients. But as the bird also rests in silence, so must we—to listen, to understand, and to connect.

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