

# the sounds of SILENCE



Photo David Simoni

“I haven’t spoken to her in twenty-two years, and I don’t intend to start now,” my mother proclaimed, scrubbing at the already clean counter to emphasize her point.

“But Mom, it’s a *silent* retreat. You won’t be talking to her. In fact, you’ll be encouraged not to,” I said to the back of her head. I noticed her hair was still mostly black, with only a few specks of grey.

“Yes, well, as long as she doesn’t try to talk to me. I’m not having any of that.”

I’d made the mistake of telling my mother about a retreat I was going on with Aunt Gen. Knowing of my budding interest in Buddhism, Gen had found a course for me to take at Spirit Rock, a local meditation center. She offered to pay the fee, and, after we talked about it, asked if she could come along. I was delighted to spend time with my aunt, who’d taken up Spanish at 60, and tap dance lessons at 65.

**By Steven J. Moss**

After I told my mother she insisted on joining us. Not because of any interest in Buddhism, but to make sure her older sister didn’t spend any more time with me than she did. Still, she wanted to make it clear that while she was going to the retreat, she would not be speaking to my aunt.

“Mom, why don’t you talk to Gen?”

“Because of what she did to me.” She turned to face me, her lips clamped shut.

I’d asked her before, and knew I wasn’t going to get any more information. Once, after badgering her for more than a week, she’d told me her grudge had something to do with borrowed money. Gen said that her husband Sam had lent my father a few hundred dollars, which he’d never repaid. She claimed it was no big deal, and didn’t know why my mother still made a fuss about it. But I knew Sam, a gruff, self-made man with a long memory. If money were involved, Sam would not have let my father or mother forget it.

Since I’d initially agreed to go with Gen, I decided to drive with her. My mother said that was fine, but of course she wouldn’t think of being in the same vehicle as her sister. As Gen and I slid into Spirit Rock’s parking lot Mom slowly rolled in beside us.

“Hello, Sarah,” Gen called out, as we got out of our respective cars.

“Hmmm,” my mother nodded, and glared at me.

The meditation center was cool and cozy. A few dozen students were already there, shoes off, sitting silently. Gen and I picked out some pillows and found a place to sit. My mother did the same, but found a spot as far away from us as she could, while still maintaining a clear line of sight.

The teacher rang the bell twice, and instructed us on the day's activities: silent sitting, silent walking, silent eating. I looked across the hall at my mother, who was silently frowning.

The morning passed quickly, and, in my meditation I lost track of my aunt and mother, and sometimes, for a few short moments, even myself. I was surprised when, at lunch, my mother placed herself at the same table, directly across from Gen. Each of them chewed fiercely at their food, their eyes shooting needles across the table. Then, Gen stuck out her tongue at her sister.

"Oh, oh," I thought, "Here we go." I silently prayed that whatever happened wouldn't be too loud.

My mother straightened herself in her seat, and carefully placed her fork next to her plate. Using both her hands she pulled her mouth up and down, and pointed her eyes sideways while wiggling her ears.

Gen burst out laughing. My mother giggled. Both of them continued eating, flashing shy smiles the rest of the meal.

Later, during walking meditation, I saw them slowly and silently stepping, arm-in-arm. From a distance they looked like two graceful birds dancing together.

At the end of the retreat, as Gen and I were putting away our pillows, my mother walked passed us without so much as a glance.

"Wasn't that a nice day, Sarah," Gen called out.

"Hmmmmmh," my mother responded, without turning her head. She kept on walking, out of the center, and into the parking lot.

"Mom, Mom," I called, as I ran after her. "I thought you and Gen made up."

"No." She bit off the words. "I'm still not talking to her."

"But what about lunch, and walking with her?"

"That's not *talking* to her," she said, but for a second I thought I saw the shadow of a sly smile skip across her lips. Then she got into her car, and drove away.

To this day my mother won't talk to her sister. But every month, long after I'd lost interest in meditation, or Buddhism, my aunt and mother meet at Spirit Rock for a silent retreat. I know this only because Gen told me; my mother has never mentioned it. And, for now at least, it seems best that I keep silent. ●

San Francisco writer Steven Moss's work has been published in the *New York Post*, *San Jose Mercury News* and *Washington Post*.



Steven Moss with his Aunt Gen.



Photo David Simoni

*a man there was—  
a simple fool*

*(ah, youth!)  
(ah, youthful pride!) who*

*beat on the Buddha's  
open door, pleaded*

*threatened, nagged  
and cried, until*

*at length, he turned  
and read  
a notice at the side:*

*it calmly, clearly shows  
when all conditions ripen ...*

*the petals open  
row on row  
and every one on time —*

*there is no need  
for you to use*

*a crowbar  
on the lotus*

Rev. Alan Grierson (1948-2000)

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