

Never Waste a Good Pause
(How Sister Stillness is teaching me her verbs)



ceremonial teapot, ceramic and aspen, john paul lederach

i.

I have been in a thirty-year conversation.

This might better be called a sitting or slow-walking conversation. Some might say I am just talking to with myself.

In my doctoral studies, Professor Elaine Yarbrough, also a Quaker, suggested to our class that we have a family of voices within us.

She went further.

This family, like most families, have dominant and quieter members. Elaine recommended that we not only name a few of our inner voices, but that we give more attention to the least noticed among them.

It took me a good long while to notice the quietest of inner voices and give her time to speak.

I vividly recall my first real encounter with Sister Stillness. 1998. In a hospital bed in the Basque Country in the aftermath of a car wreck. Ribs shattered. Every movement a source of pain. I really had no place to go but inside. I suppose you could say that my long-avoided inner travels began.

Other siblings in my little inner community who tended to dominate, like Brother Busy, Dr. Writer, and The Right Reverend Mediator, had all been sent to the waiting room. For the first time, Sister Stillness had the space to come out from the edges.

She had things to say. And I had time listen.

ii.

Over these decades I discovered fears and misguided understandings about Sister Stillness. She had been with me since birth. But until that accident I had never regarded, much less cherished her, nor had the openness to receive her gifts.

Fortunate for me, Sister Stillness holds no grudges.

At one point, in our early conversations, I asked: *What is my single greatest misconception of who you truly are?*

Her answer, like most of her answers, was short, evocative, and discombobulating.

You always saw me as not doing anything.

You never understood that I am verbs.

She was right. I never thought, let alone noticed, how her presence moved in me. Much less how she moved the world.

Can you teach me your verbs?

Yes, she smiled. I must have come across impatient. Maybe harsh.

But only one verb per decade. Learning with me takes time. And practice.

iii.

Decade 1: To Attend

I am not inaction, she shared early on in our first decade walking together. I am the act of gathering attention.

You mean to focus my gaze? It was the first thing that came to mind.

Yes. And.

Sister Stillness has this way of shifting beyond first questions.

Gathering attention requires whole body, unfragmented sense-focus so that spacious noticing becomes possible.
She went on.

Spacious noticing attends to what is, to what has been present but unnoticed, to what sits at the edge.

I open way into what matters.

Some years later she added a nugget.

To attend, to notice – these actions open the generative threshold of curiosity. In this act, compassion begins.

Near the end of the decade, she circled around, as she often does, to where she began.

Remember: I am not inaction. I attend to what matters.

You must learn over and again, whether in the length of a breath or the space of a lifetime: Never waste a good pause.

iv.

Decade 2: To Wellspring

As our second decade conversations began, Sister Stillness made a startling observation.

You asked me to teach my verbs to you. Yet, by my view you already know. In fact, you named one of them.

How so? I could not imagine what she meant.

She laughed. *Do you remember when you and Brother Busy would get back from yet another impossible trip to Belfast, Bogota, or Mogadishu?*

She paused.

Just the mention of those cities flooded my mind with memories. Years, decades, half centuries of endless pathways and so few results.

She continued. *When you returned inevitably someone would ask you: So how did the travels go? Did you make any progress?*

She rarely looked at me directly when we talked, but this time her question held our gaze.

Do you remember your answers?

I stammered.

I only remember that those were my dreaded questions. I never knew how to answer – whether to go into a million details of why things were so complex, or why nothing really changed, or why we had to start all over again, or whether I should take the easy out and just cut the conversation short. And...

I stopped.

Yes, *that!* She interjected emphatically. *You paused.*

Some years later I heard you call this your vocational pause – those fractal seconds when years of work and a thousand thoughts all landed in one question: Is any of this worth it?

I nodded. As usual, Sister Stillness was spot on.

Maybe what you do not recall is how you turned me into a verb.

I stared at her blankly.

You sometimes have difficulty catching important things you are trying to say to yourself. Let me offer what I heard.

No matter what explanation you gave, you always ended with these phrases:

Still at it.

Still plugging away.

Still going.

Still here.

The great gift of the quiet listener is always this: To create the space where you can notice and hear yourself.

Still. You recognized me as a verb. One that keeps feeding your spirit of place and purpose – the Where-With-All to connect into what matters and stay with the long journey.

Near the end of the second decade, she had only two notes.

Remember, I am not inaction.

I wellspring resistance and resilience.

v.

Decade 3: To Vessel

Somewhere in the first months of the third decade, she hit me with another totally unexpected question.

Have you ever tasted Kentucky moonshine?

At first, I did not want to respond. Frankly, I was a bit taken aback. But how would I possibly hide anything from someone who travels with me 24/7?

Of course, I blurted. And I prefer to call it the finer art of savoring bourbon.

Yes, I know you do. And can you tell me how this moonshine is made?

I had no idea where this conversation was going but tried to follow along.

Well, I guess you mix the dry rye or wheat with yeast and water, and you let it sit and bubble, and then you extract and purify the good parts out of the mash?

And, she nudged. What do they call this place where the mashy mess sits and bubbles and finds its way into the world as fine rye?

It suddenly dawned on me. *A still?*

Yes! A still! Her response was a bit more emphatic. *The vessel where the yeasty, creative mash transforms. And...* She stopped.

It seemed a longer than normal pause.

Do not be misguided, she stated bluntly. Still is a verb. The container embodies an aliveness, like your body. It creates the conditions for the unexpected to emerge.

Near the end this third decade, a mere few weeks ago, Sister Stillness offered another of her simple gifts. A few words with deep meaning.

Remember, I am not inaction.

I vessel the creative act.

vi.

We are still conversing Sister Stillness and me.

These days the uncertainty of the world seems only to pull toward the certainty of a great reckoning.

Too many things are coming apart at the same time.

The great despair of urgency diminishes our attention with endless anxiety.

Time sends us flittering and fleeing and feeling like time is always running short.

Pace trumps pause.

Amidst it all, Sister Stillness carries a wisdom.

She gifts it in those moments when the noise of inner and outer voices diminishes and essence rises in greater clarity.

In our swirling worlds of demands, confusions, and untold reckonings, her presence and wisdom invite us all into deeper questions.

How do we attend to what matters?

How do we wellspring the courage to resist harm and stay true to our deepest convictions?

How do we vessel the creativity that transcends and transforms vicious cycles of violence toward pathways of healing?

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21 september 2026

For Reference:

Elaine Yarbrough. "Intrapersonal Conflict Management," in *The Psychology of Public Communication*, Alan Goldman (ed.), Robert E. Kreiger Publishers, Huntington, N. Y., 1983.