

The Quiet Room By Susan Naomi Bernstein, PhD

My first encounter with the Quiet Room was shortly after 9/11/01 in Houston, Texas. The school where I was teaching at the time refashioned its auditorium as a place for silent prayer and meditation. This space was a refuge from the storm and tumult of emotions that seemed nonstop in those days. I was grateful for the dim lights, the solitude, and the silence. I have never forgotten that moment and the deep comfort that could be found in retreat in a quiet space offered in the midst of our busy campus.

The Tannenbaum Center for Interreligious Studies in New York City defines a [Quiet Room](#) as: “a space in the workplace designated for prayer, relaxation and reflection for all employees. It provides a temporary sanctuary in which employees can escape the fast pace of the work environment, while not interrupting general operations.” Indeed, the Harvard Medical School suggests the necessity of a “[quiet place](#)” for practicing deep breathing relaxation exercises that have long-term benefits for stress relief and wellness. In a similar vein, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society describes the community values enhanced by [sharing silence](#) as “a commitment to understanding the value of sharing space and time in a way that is supportive, meaningful, and infused with respect.”

A Quiet Room clearly illustrates the principle of “[Design for All](#).” As presented in The European Institute for Design and Disability (EIDD)’s 2004 Stockholm Declaration, “Design for All is design for human diversity, social inclusion and equality.” In other words, the Quiet Room, by definition designed for stillness and calm for all users, underscores the multiple purposes and benefits of silence. Even while offering space for prayer, relaxation, and reflection, the Quiet Room remains an especially safe haven for those of us with ADHD, autism, bipolar, depression, fibromyalgia, and other differences in [sensory and cognitive processing](#), perhaps most commonly experienced as sensory overload.



Sensory overload challenges our deeply embodied sense of wellbeing. (Friday night cacophony in Times Square, New York City. Bright neon lights, densely crowded sidewalks in front of trash receptacles, “Don’t Walk” traffic light; a cab passing by in the foreground. Photo by Susan Naomi Bernstein)

Imagine, for a moment, the experience of a CCCC plenary session as a person experiencing sensory overload. Your attention—your senses—cannot figure out where to

direct your main focus. You work on listening mindfully to the speaker's argument. You try to take notes to remember a source the speaker just cited. The fluorescent lights and the lively patterns in the carpet sting your eyes. The sound of whispering and shuffling papers three rows away hurts your ears. The scents of perfume and after-shave mingle with the smell of coffee and your sinuses ache.

You skipped breakfast—and your stomach reminds you of your hunger. Now, you are trying to ask a question, perhaps to challenge the speaker on a critical issue in the research. You try to frame the question rhetorically. You try to gauge how the audience is responding to your words. You have the sensation that you are watching yourself outside of your body, as if your actions are those of someone else, perhaps a large marionette or a cartoon figure moving at full speed. Your body language and your voice feel out of your control and you worry that everyone is staring, or at the very least, that your message remains unclear to your listeners.

People tell you to have more confidence in yourself, to think before you speak, to avoid offending anyone, to stop being so sensitive. You feel as if you are about to explode out of your skin. Such is the funhouse world of sensory overload, where even the touch of another's sympathetic hand on your shoulder can feel painful and invasive. You wish you could just close your eyes and escape this cacophony of emotion and sensation, teleport to a safe space, a silent zone without distractions—if only for a moment.

In that moment, the Quiet Room, by virtue of its design for all, can welcome us in silence, whether we need a place to regroup from sensory overload, or to collect our thoughts, or to pray or meditate. The Quiet Room affords us space away from the noise of the world and allows us to return to mindfulness. In these soundless moments of retreat, the Quiet Room offers a sanctuary of calm, in which we find comfort from the uproar embodied in our senses and rediscover the tranquility that brings inspiration to move forward.



A room designed with multiple needs in mind can offer benefits to us all. (Finding silence in a reconstructed abbey at the Cloisters Museum, New York City: large open area with natural light, stone floors, walls, columns, and porticos, a stone font with intricate carvings in the center, and three tall potted plants at the rear. Photo by Susan Naomi Bernstein.)