

THE SUNDAY COOK

Angela Hartnett's one-pot winter warriors

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Kitten Grayson, queen of the stylish planter

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MODERN MANNERS

Sophia Money-Coutts on kitchen-table Botox

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# Sunday



## How to find your calm in an age of chaos

*We're surrounded by noise and rage – no wonder 2019's biggest wellbeing trend is the quest for 'stillness'...*



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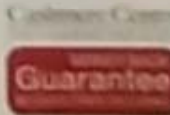
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We're very fortunate to have so many choices in the modern world, but it's easy to lose ourselves.



will give you your phone and checking your email, or meditating for three minutes using a mindfulness app, is not true disconnecting."

There may be an even greater opportunity for us to embrace wellness than to prevent burnout and reduce stress. Luke Kline, a representative lecturer at Duke University, North Carolina, US, found that two hours of silence a day helped encourage cell growth in the brain - specifically in the hippocampus, which controls memory, emotion and learning.

But that achieving stillness is increasingly so easy as it becomes. Catherine Wooten, who has undergone a 10-day Vipassana retreat like Jack, recently says: "How mind chatter can increase before it decreases."

"In a group retreat you may be with a group of interesting-looking new people, but you can't talk to them and the mind, which can be frustrating."

And although silence sounds like it would be the quiet ideal, Dr. Brown says that many people find it of little to no use in a busy place. "One of my favorite places to meditate is a nearby park where you can hear a railway line."

"I sat on a bench, close my eyes and then I checked my watch." He says. "Visually, I knew my connection to the world around me - everything from walking to the railway to the trees passing to the sky."

It's not like the experience of listening to John Cage's experimental composition "4'33" in the Lincoln Center, where Cage instructed his musicians to do down their instruments for four and half minutes, allowing the audience to listen on the ambient, environmental sounds in the silent silence. "A study was done on hearing impairment of 432 by the silent action, but that was not the case."

Dr. Brown says his personal meditation helps him "because there aren't any of my own internal chatter throughout, there isn't any."

The idea is itself is something. After all, it's finding your inner stillness in the only way to manage our noisy, chaotic world, who wouldn't want a piece of it?



The cynical journalist in me looked on in horror as I threw myself into group singing

# THE SOUND

Quakers, as you might know, worship by sitting in a circle in silence that is only broken when someone has a spiritual revelation. I am 26 and so far all I know this is what people born before mobile phones used to do for fun. I wouldn't say we have a deficit of silence - even turning the pages of a book is noisy - compared with phone going - but we definitely have a surplus of stimulation.

Let's run an experiment right now, in which I tell you how rebellious my phone notifications are. I had a colleague text me a message on a minute ago. Before that I had a Guardian TV news Telegraph push notification. Before that some friends put some boring stuff on Instagram and the app was fit to tell me. Before that there was a flurry of group chat. Huh, huh, HAHA. I resent my constant connectivity but cannot seem to sever it.

I reckon this time is more than it does most of my peers, so I was happy to spend some time at



GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL: Woodhouse Quaker Study Centre, above right; Tom Ough in the library, right; Woodhouse Quaker Study Centre, below left

## STOP THE WORLD

Woodhouse Quaker Study Centre applies the brakes at Sharpsham House

"You seem a bit isolated," my housemate says. Sitting on the sofa, staring into the middle distance I mull over her proposition. How long is too long before I say something? Finally: "It's fine." I reply.

It's been 48 hours since I returned from Sharpsham House. An 18th-century Palladian villa set in 100 acres overlooking the River Great Ouse in south Devon, specialising in individualism courses and retreats. For four nights I dived in prolonged periods of silence, ate food unenthusiastically, and meditated three times a day. Returning to the world I feel like I see the faded eye of a hurricane, around which my eyelids fly round. I'm not sure if it's a good thing.



When my editor asked me to go to Sharpsham I was apprehensive. I wondered, jokingly, if I might lose my mind. All that quiet. All that introspection.

I knew I needed it, though. Like many in London, my attitude to stress is unhealthy. I compare it out of this air as I duck and weave on the Tube. The incessant chatter of WhatsApp is watched by my mind, an incessantly self-critical voice, agonising about the past and future.

Even the decision to go to Sharpsham caused much head wringing. Did I have time? Was it safe to leave my housemate with the cat? I turned to my personal trainer, "but you're a busy person," she said. "You're a busy person," she said. "You're a busy person," she said.

As I left, I felt anxious. The Christmas tree needed taking down, the car's time to be emptying - the bus lane topped as I arrived it down the residential road of my block of flats. As I reached the house, I composed my personal matters that had long kept me changing on "I am an engine."

That evening, I "headed" at Sharpsham. I carry out



of us set apprehensively to a circle, as the course leader instructed us to put our feet together, hands on knees, eyes closed, and take a big breath in. It was the first of many handings.

Established in the early 1930s by Ruth and Martin Ash, the Sharpsham Trust aims to connect people with nature. Something a sense of well-being.

I was attending a course called "Introducing Conscious Breathing From The Heart", intended for people from the caring professions, health and charity workers. All these working women, I thought that an exclusive world like a tendency to self-criticism and a dependence on qualified me. But I would command wholly after the first session, I switched off my phone and left it in my room.

not to turn up to everything, I read, I went for a walk along the river.

The cynical journalist in me looked on in horror as I threw myself into group singing. Yet I could feel the soothing effects of being at Sharpsham, surrounded by beauty. By caring people. Listening rather than talking to others, as well as myself. Just being.

One last circle on Monday morning. There were ten. I wondered what had happened to me, and felt scared about returning to the real world.

Back home, slowly examining every thought, I worried I'd been brainwashed. Two weeks on I'm no longer so strongly retained, and while I'm not cured of my addiction, I do now have strategies to cope with them. The ability to identify when I'm being well-served, or being closed, or even not taking a deep breath (as there are caring words back to the present).

I was not meant to crash through your life as a person, but Sharpsham has shown how not the best way.

The next Sharpsham Conscious course is on March 18, 2016, 4.00pm. sharpshamtrust.org

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"Lovely fabric. Good fit."

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# STOP THE WORLD

*Boudicca Fox-Leonard* applies the brakes at Sharpham House

"You seem a bit sedated," my housemate says. Sitting on the sofa, staring into the middle distance I mull over her pronouncement. How long is too long before I say something? Finally: "Hmm," I reply.

It's been 48 hours since I returned from Sharpham House, an 18th-century Palladian villa set in 550 acres overlooking the Dart river in south Devon, specialising in mindfulness courses and retreats. For four nights I dabbled in prolonged periods of silence, ate food mouthful by slow mouthful, and meditated three times a day. Returning to the world I feel like I am the hushed eye of a tornado, around which my cyclonic life rushes. I'm not yet sure if it's a good thing.

When my editor asked me to go to Sharpham I was apprehensive. I wondered, jokingly, if I might lose my mind. All that quiet. All that introspection.

I knew I needed it, though. Like many in London, my attitude to stress is unhealthy. I conjure it out of thin air as I duck and weave on the Tube. The incessant chatter of WhatsApp is matched by my mind; an unremittingly self-critical voice, agonising about the past and future.

Even the decision to go to Sharpham caused much hand wringing. Did I have time? Was it OK to leave my housemate with the cat? I turned to my personal *I Ching*: "For goodness' sake," said my mother on the phone. "Just go." As I left, I felt anxious. The Christmas tree needed taking down; the cat's litter trays emptying – the bin liner ripped as I carried it down the communal corridor of my block of flats. As I fetched the dustpan I repeated my personal mantra that has long kept me chugging on: "I am an engine".

That evening, I "landed" at Sharpham. Twenty one



of us sat apprehensively in a circle, as the course leaders instructed us to put our feet together, hands on knees, eyes closed, and take a big breath in. It was the first of many landings.

Established in the early Eighties by Ruth and Maurice Ash, the Sharpham Trust aims to connect people with nature, fostering a sense of well-being.

I was attending a course called Sustaining Ourselves: Breaking Free From Burnout, intended for people from the caring professions; health and charity workers, full-time working mums. I doubted that an overactive social life, a tendency to self-criticism and a dependent cat qualified me. But I would commit wholly. After the first session, I switched off my phone and left it in my room.

The timetable was packed; early-morning meditation, breakfast, washing-up rota, Tai Chi, nature walk, creative exploration, meditation, dinner, meditation and deep relaxation. All optional; but I strived to be at everything. And then silence, each evening, from 8pm until 11am. We broke it in a circle, exploring how we felt.

We explored the cycle of burn-out; questioned what our internal drivers were: to be perfect, to please others, to be strong. We walked out into nature asking: "What do I need to sustain myself?" In mindful meditations we practised self-compassion, fostering a kind inner voice that outshouts critical thoughts.

On the third day the silence lasted until 2pm. I gave myself permission

not to turn up to everything. I read. I went for a walk along the river.

The cynical journalist in me looked on in horror as I threw myself into group singing. Yet I could feel the soothing effects of being at Sharpham, surrounded by beauty, by caring people. Listening rather than talking, to others, as well as myself. Just being.

Our last circle on Monday morning. There were tears. I wondered what had happened to me, and felt scared about returning to the real world.

Back home, slowly examining every thought, I worried I'd been brainwashed. Two weeks on I'm no longer so strangely becalmed. And while I'm not cured of my anxieties, I do now have strategies to cope with them; the ability to identify when I'm being self-critical, or how closing my eyes and taking a deep breath can draw my racing mind back to the present.

I was on course to crash through 2019 like an express train, but Sharpham and silence has put the brakes on.

The next Sustaining Ourselves course is on March 14, £385-£495, [sharphamtrust.org](http://sharphamtrust.org)