

Breaking the Silence: A Healing Story

By Zulmara Cline

*I have learned not to
Speak my truth
Because it offends
The powers that be.*

*I have learned
To silence my voice
For it pleases
The powers that be.*

*I have learned
To parrot the party line
For it silences
The powers that be.*

The Incident

My ears were burning, my mouth was dry, my stomach was tied in knots. I could feel myself becoming enraged as I sat listening to the “icebreaker” activity for the morning. The superintendent of our midsize Unified School District located in Central California was joking about the passage of the antibilingual-education Proposition 227. For our “icebreaker” we were to anglicize our school names as a symbolic “wiping out” of Spanish in the district and introduce ourselves as members of these newly renamed schools. Therefore, Linda Vista Elementary School was to become Pretty View School and Brisas Pacifica was to become Pacific Breezes. Even though the name changes were not real, the intent and effect of the activity was not lost on those of us in the room.

I was appalled, offended, and outraged that what had been perceived among many educated Latinos as racially motivated, anti-immigrant, and bigoted legislation was being praised and made light of within this district—a district, I might add, that was having trouble teaching the core curriculum to children of color, as evidenced by the just-released test scores.

Feelings of anger, hurt, and frustration welled up inside me. My colleagues—even the two Latinas and one Latino—had gone along with this charade without voicing or showing any discomfort. It appeared to me that everyone else in

the room, all of whom happened to be white and middle class except for four Latinos, were very comfortable with the activity and did not feel the offense and disrespect that it implied. They were all laughing and enjoying themselves as I was sitting there, about to have an anxiety attack.

I began a tumultuous internal dialogue to decide what I should do. Do I stay quiet and go along? Do I assume that nobody else feels the same way I do, so maybe I am being overly sensitive?

Or do I recognize it for the racism that it represents to me, decide that this is enough, and speak out?

Do I find my voice and break the silence? If I do, what do I say? Do I say I find this insensitive? Offensive? Indicative of the underlying reason why Latinos have such a difficult time succeeding in this district? And what if I do speak up? What are the consequences? At what point do I say enough is enough?

All those questions were reeling around in my head as I sat there listening to the jokes, getting more and more sickened by the meeting. I felt alone and isolated—the only one among my colleagues who was having difficulty with the activity, the only one not enjoying this “icebreaker” on the first day back. I wanted this turmoil to end. I wanted to break my silence, but I dared not. The consequences were too great.

I chose to stay silent for many reasons, none of them good. None brought me comfort or solace. All left me feeling more apart from the group than before. My refusal to speak up only increased the inner turmoil and struggles that I faced every day as a person of color in an unfriendly organization. Daily, I needed to decide: When do I break the silence of racism and the implied complicity? Is this the hill I am willing to die on? Is this the bridge I am going to cross?

*My silence speaks volumes
If only one would listen
My silence
is not compliance
Nor acceptance
It is my cloak
of survival.*

The Decision

There are many reasons why we choose, as people of color, not to give voice to our experiences with the social injustices that are visited on us at many different times in our personal and professional lives. However, in America there comes a time in the life of every person of color to take up the cause of social justice, human rights, and democracy by ending the complicity that is implied by our not speaking out. Nevertheless, the decision to break the silence requires inordinate courage, for there are consequences, real and imagined, for not going along, not playing the game, not helping to maintain the status quo.

The inner turmoil I faced that day was only one of many instances. At times I have spoken up at meetings and paid a price. I have been ostracized from the group, passed over for promotions, and had my ideas questioned. The sanctions are harsh, and my “different” way of viewing the world has made me unacceptable within various organizations.

Other times I stayed silent to protect my position. However, I paid a price to myself. The moment I realize I must answer to myself, the feelings of self-doubt begin anew. It is at these times that the reality hits—if not me, who? Who will finally offer another perspective? There are no easy answers. It requires courage and fearlessness from within that is not easy to find but necessary for every person of color working in a mainstream institution.

In her groundbreaking book on racism, Beverly Tatum (1998) eloquently writes:

Breaking the silence undoubtedly requires courage. How can we find the courage we need? This is a question I ask myself a lot, because I too struggle with fear. (203)

As I struggled to find the courage to break the silence, my reflections led me to a poetic journey of self-discovery and self-reflection that has truly allowed me to find my voice within a mainstream setting; that has allowed me, once and for all, to end my complicity. The public debate took place internally through poetry, often during those public debacles where I searched in vain for my voice.

Reflection

Poetry has provided a cocoon within which I engage in personal reflection and redefinition as I explore the many dimensions of my being, personal and professional. I wrote the following poem after the “icebreaker” incident to capture the tumult inside me.

*It pains me
to know*

*that others cannot
understand me, hear me
or appreciate who I am.*

*It pains me
to silence my voice
to never know
the place of privilege
to never hear
my own ideas reflected as normal.*

*It pains me
to never
hear the voice
of my ancestors
echoed in my own space
and my own mind.*

*It pains me
to know
that the hyphenated me
is not heard
appreciated or affirmed
by the mainstream.*

As I reflect on the events of that day and others like it, I am struck by the overflow of emotions, the intense anger, the second-guessing. Why did I not speak up? Why did I not leave? Did my participation imply agreement? What does it take for me to leave? What is involved in speaking up? When am I being oversensitive? When am I overreacting to events?

Poetry has helped me get a handle on my feelings. I have used poetry to achieve inner peace. My reflective poetry has taken me on a healing journey in which I have begun a quest for answers, help, insight, and inspiration. It has allowed me to reach my Rosa Parks decision, “to live a life divided no more,” as outlined by Parker Palmer (1997, 167). Palmer defines the divided life as one in which “the heart becomes a totally owned subsidiary of the organization” (167).

We inhabit institutional settings, including school and work and civic society, because they harbor opportunities that we value. But the claims those institutions make on us are sometimes at odds with our hearts—for example, the demand for loyalty to the corporation, right or wrong, versus the inward imperative to speak truth. (167)

Palmer describes a “Rosa Parks decision” and a decision to align our personal selves with our public selves in order for

our souls to survive. The following poem helped to clarify for me how I needed to integrate the parts of my life into a united and unified whole:

*When I tried to break my life
Into discrete pieces
I realized it was not
going to happen easily.
My life as a whole
an integration
of many pieces
that are the essence
of my soul.*

*When I try to live a life divided
My soul cries out
NO MORE.*

My reflective poetry has given voice to the silence that enshrouded me and allowed me to make some very difficult, life-altering decisions. I currently find solace in sharing my poetry with others and discussing the feelings we share as we fight for social justice and pay a price—social, personal, or professional—for battling the insidious racism that abounds in our society, plagues our institutions, and affects our lives. As I work to create the just society we all deserve, I have found many allies who are willing to take up the struggle alongside me. My poetry continues to guide me.

*The bridges we build
From our heart
To our soul
Can allow our spirit
To be set free
As the meanings
Of our lives
Are unfurled.*

*To build walls
To keep THEM out
Is to build walls
To keep my SOUL IN
If I knock down
The walls that define me
Will I be swallowed up by them?*

Revelations

Breaking the silence has become a reality as I have taken comfort in trusting my own feelings, appreciating the

patience it takes to achieve social change and social justice, understanding the significance of not just finding my voice but giving voice to others, and, most of all, acknowledging that I need to be kind to myself in the healing process.

*The lived experience
I struggle with
Is tantamount to the
Hoped experience I imagine.*

I have had to work on understanding that within the context in which I feel and experience racism, even if no racism is meant, it is there. I have had to learn to trust my own feelings and to realize that racism will not go away if I doubt my own instincts and start to question if I am being oversensitive, if I am reading the situation wrong, if I am the one at fault.

I have realized that I need to act on the reality I perceive, and not the reality that those perpetrating injustices are professing. I cannot allow others to define my feelings for me. I alone make the decision of when to act, when to pull back, and why.

I have also begun to understand that to be an agent of change I not only have to find my own voice, but I also have to start listening to the voices of others, especially the voices of those I perceive as racist when they claim not to be so. Why do I interpret their behavior as so offensive? If they mean no disrespect, why do I have such a strong physiological response to their questions, comments, innuendoes, and activities? It is difficult to get a grasp on how these interactions play out and what is the appropriate response in these situations. Attempting to understand those who are different and to empathize truly with their right to hold different views of the world, while simultaneously fighting the injustices that I see on a daily basis, has been and continues to be a challenge.

*Whose story do we tell
When we tell our story
Is it the story of those who
Have come before us?
Or the story of those who will
Come after us?*

*Whose story do we create
When we create our lives-
Is it the story of those
Who have created the past?
Or the story for those who will
Create the future?*

I appreciate that patience is required to deal effectively

with a change process that is slow in coming and creates many problems as it progresses. I now realize that social change will not happen in a day. It may not even happen within my lifetime. However, I can still inspire the change I wish to see.

The last and perhaps most important lesson I have learned is that I need to be fair to myself. I need to look at every incident as a potential victory and that living a life no longer divided takes time and is a process. It is more that a single event I must think of the example I set, and I must not exchange one tyranny for another. I realize that I cannot make all the changes at once; I will experience setbacks, be caught off guard, and make poor choices. I may even have some regrets, but in the balance of a month, a year, a decade, there will be more successes than failures.

Reaching Resolution

I have since left the toxic organization that did not recognize who I am or what I am about. The two Latinas who were in the room with me that day have also left the district in disgust. I never did discuss that day with them, but I do wonder if they had the same feelings I had. This particular school district wanted minority voices within their ranks. However, they were not willing to listen with open hearts, nor were they willing to participate in a dialogue that examined their own beliefs and practices.

The decision to leave was a difficult one. On the one hand, I felt as if I was letting *mi gente* down. I was not going to be there to offer a voice or reason or a different perspective. I kept thinking, if their tactics succeed in driving out all the educated Latinos, how can we begin to effect change for our less fortunate brethren? On the other hand, I knew that by staying in that environment, where my beliefs were being called into question and my physical health was suffering, I would not be effective in helping my people. I knew I had to make a choice, and even though it was not easy to leave my friends and colleagues, I had to move on in order to bring

about much greater change.

I am now in an institution of higher education where my voice is no longer silenced, where I do not fear sanctions for speaking up, and where my perspective as a Latina is sought after, appreciated, and respected. In this place, I have found that I can touch many lives and influence policies that have a profound impact on *mi gente*. Although I may never make a difference in that school district, I hope I can make a difference on behalf of children everywhere. I have found a place where I can be whole again.

*A whole new approach is needed
If we are to break out of the
Deafening silence
That begins suffocating us
In the infancy of our lives
For we cannot give up a
Part of ourselves and
Still be whole.*

My path of reflection has led me home. 📖

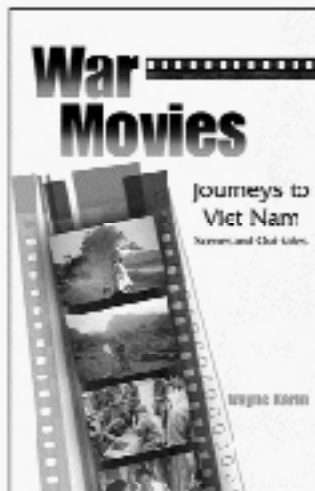
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