

Interrupting Silence, Because “Voices Carry”

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I've been listening to the song “Voices Carry” by Til Tuesday for over 20 years, and yet it did not strike me until this morning what an extraordinary feminist text it really is. A vulnerable-sounding female narrator bemoans the angry authority of a mysterious male figure. Even she does not understand his intentions, as she says:

In the dark I like to read his mind
But I'm frightened of the things I might find.
She feels that she loves him, but he keeps her locked in silence,
hushing her and telling her to keep it down. The song reaches a crescendo where she realizes the futility of the power dynamic in this relationship, and she cries out in anguish:

He wants me! But only part of the time!

He wants me! If he can keep me in line!”

You can taste the rising anger as she uses not her words, but repeats his in trying to free herself:

He said shut up! He said shut up!

Oh God can't you keep it down! Voices carry...

Oh hush...voices carry...”

She ends the song by finally expressing her own thoughts, her own feelings independent of this male authority, “I wish he would let me talk.”

Feminism is largely about interrupting the silence imposed on the female voice by the mysterious disembodied voice of patriarchy that wants us, “part of the time...if he can keep [us] in line.” Of course in the language of backlash, many men resent the implication that it is they that silence women's voices. Indeed, I have met many men who feel deeply threatened by that implication. But Patriarchy is a system, brothers and sisters...not an individual. It is a system that silences women and men to keep them from escaping firmly entrenched gender ideals, to keep them from achieving our potential as human beings by disallowing diversity and creativity in order to maintain itself and its economic determinism.

In the 1960's, Betty Friedan wrote about “the problem that has no name”, the ennui and unrest created by the power inequity experienced by the middle class suburban housewife. Her book “The Feminine Mystique” spoke into the silence and helped spark the second wave of feminism. The power of speaking as a means of crushing Patriarchy is continually reinforced by the number of books that have motivated, driven and fueled the feminist movement. My feminist awakening in the 1990's was spoken into being by people like Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth* and Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash*. I can scarcely forget seeing Susan Faludi speak at a local college, her petite frame enveloped in a conservative navy blue suit -- she hardly seemed like a lion until she opened her mouth and sent chills through the audience of young women with her silence-smashing roar.

Words are our power.

In her essay, "[Voice and Silence: A feminist model of autobiographical memory](#)", Robyn Fivush, a professor at Emory University, writes:

From the feminist concept of place, voice and silence must be seen as dynamic and relational. Voice and silence will emerge within the individual as a function of their historic and cultural place and their individual history of specific interactions with specific others. The way in which individuals develop voice or silence will have important implications for the development of an autobiographical life story. Experiences that are voiced provide a sense of validation; experiences are accepted as real and the individual's perspective on the experience is viewed as appropriate. Experiences that are silenced lead to a sense of existential despair; experiences are not heard or the individual's perspective on the experience is not accepted as appropriate. (8)

In fact, until we have voiced them into being, our experiences are hushed into non-existence.

The Til' Tuesday song says we fear what we might find in the male mind: " In the dark I like to read his mind. But I'm frightened of the things I might find."

But are we not also frightened of the things we might find in our own minds? What might happen if we all speak our demons into flesh and face them honestly? What might happen if we speak our feminist truth with all its ugly not-so-politically-correct subtexts and deal with what lies beneath? Do we really "wish he would let [us] talk" or are we secretly relieved that no one is interrupting our silence?

After all, aren't we complicit in our silencing when we do not even try to speak? Voices, after all, do carry.

In this issue of MP, we have endeavored to collect papers on subjects upon which there is typically silence. We are interrupting the silence in the hopes that our readers will take the challenge, and go speak their stories too.