

And Then – Silence



Laara Lindo

Is it but a mere half century ago that the war to end all wars waged across the globe, with the atrocity of its atomic bomb finale? Is it so few years ago that the United Nations was formed to maintain the Four Freedoms: Freedom of Speech, Freedom from Fear, Freedom from Want, and Freedom of Religion for all people of the planet? Is it so easy to so soon forget the unprecedented 20th-century human suffering and degradation brought about through the horrors of modern war?

What desolate disregard for the lessons of history has cut the chords of memory? Where in the deafening din of today are the valiant voices of the past? Do we so lightly disregard all of those whose patriotic courage led them to the trenches of the First World War? Do we so lightly disregard the plea of such war-experienced poets as the English soldier, novelist, and poet Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), as he questions and commands in his poem *Aftermath*:

Have you forgotten yet? ...
For the world's events have rumbled on since those
gagged days,
Like traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways:
And the haunting gap in your mind has filled with
thoughts that flow
Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you're a man
rerieved to go,
Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.
But the past is just the same and War's a bloody
game ...
Have you forgotten yet? ...
Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that
you'll never forget.

Is the patriotic fervor of sensitive and dedicated young men who were completely convinced that they were giving their lives to assure freedom and lasting peace so soon out of thought and mind, as though the sacrifice of their lives, which they willingly made, was completely in vain? The youthful British poet, Rupert Brooke (1887–1915), who became a symbol of all the gifted youth killed in war, speaks, prophetically, for numberless battalions of World War I soldiers:

If I should die, think only this of me:
There is a corner of some foreign shore
That is forever [my homeland].

Is there now an ironic twist to the title of the heart-wrenching, unforgettable story of the World War I trench-warfare soldiers agonizing experience as so tellingly re-

lated in Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*? Though the novel is still in print, and the movie returns and returns, is such a message not clearly enough heard to create change to the pattern of war?

Why are those passionate voices silent today? Does unenlightened leadership demand that compassion be lost in today's retelling of the age-old, persuasive justifications for war? Does Rudyard Kipling, in *Five War Epithets*, perhaps give a clue?:

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

Or Siegfried Sassoon in his poem with the double-entendre title, *Base Details*?:

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour. Poor young chap,
I'd say, I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die in bed.

Or is memory so quickly faded because of complete callousness at various levels of society: the desensitization created from childhood through war games at every level of innocent play, and from television and movies with their unlimited variety of themes centered on conflict, violence, and war? What is it that we are teaching our children? And is this the desensitizing means that make possible the decisions of leaders who condemn hundreds and thousands to death with the stroke of a pen, as Dylan Thomas (1914–1953) so memorably portrays in his poem *The Hand That Signed the Paper Felled a City*?:

The hand that signed the paper felled a city;
Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;
These five kings did a king to death.
The mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder,
The finger joints are cramped with chalk;
A goose's quill has put an end to murder
That put an end to talk.
The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,
And famine grew, and locusts came;
Great is the hand that holds dominion over
Man by a scribbled name.

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The five kings count the dead but do not soften
The crusted wound nor stroke the brow;
A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;
Hands have no tears to flow.

Not only the voices of the last century are lost in dead silence, but today, also, the culture-creating voices of the past, which could provide practical wisdom for those who have ears to hear, hearts to understand, and the courage to act upon balanced principle, are mere whispered echoes through the corridors of time.

Where, today, is the voice of Socrates?:

“Unless either philosophers become kings in their countries or those who are now called kings and rulers come to be sufficiently inspired with a genuine desire for wisdom; unless, that is to say, political power and philosophy meet together, while the many natures who now go their several ways in the one or the other direction are forcibly debarred from doing so, there can be no rest from troubles, my dear Glaucon, for states, nor yet, as I believe, for all mankind; nor can this commonwealth which we have imagined ever until then see the light of day and grow to its full stature. ... And whom do you mean by the genuine philosophers? Those whose passion is to see the truth.”

“Socrates,” exclaimed Glaucon, “after delivering yourself of such a pronouncement as that, you must expect a whole multitude of by no means contemptible assailants to fling off their coats, snatch up the handiest weapon, and make a rush at you, breathing fire and slaughter.”

And the voice of Socrates was silenced, over 2,400 years ago, but for the work of Plato as though it were yesterday.

Confucius, in China from 551 to 479 B.C., during the era of Chinese history known as the Period of the Warring States when social anarchy had become the order of the day, asked the question, How can we keep from destroying ourselves? His answer was: through the social values of ethics and altruism put into practice through right thinking and action. His humanist, practical, ethical philosophy positively influenced Chinese society for centuries. Why is that voice so silent today?

Jesus, some 400 years later, presented a simple guide for ethical and harmonious living, which included two timeless rules for thinking and conduct : Look within... and Do

unto others as you would have them do unto you, both of which wise adjurations were later repeated by Mohammed. Lost in endless theological and ideological trappings that came to be known as orthodoxy, legions of self-styled followers of these two great Teachers have waged ruthless and cruel inquisitions and holy wars over the centuries. The compassionate voices of the original messengers have been all but silenced in the continuing cacophony of creed, ritual, and endless self-righteous conflict, the voices of small islands of exception in attempting to live the principles being all too frequently subdued to mere whispers in the clang and din of a quarreling world.

And so, through the ages of a barbarism not yet over, through the Dark Ages, ever hovering, to the 20th century, in a centuries-long history recited by the naming of wars, came the century of war and the war to end all war. This, as the advancing decades of the century so dismally dramatized, was simply an ever-developing technological advancement in killing and destruction in a series of wars stretching from the beginning of recorded history. As George Barker (b. 1913) put it in his poem News of the World War II:

In the first year of the last disgrace
Peace, turning her face away,
Coughing in laurelled fires, weeping,
Drags out from her hatcheted heart
The sunset axe of the day.
And the closing lines of Barkers News of the World War III:
Now, now, this summer midnight, before the dawn
Shakes its bright gun in the sky, before
The serried battalions of lies
And organizations of hate
Entirely encompass us, buried;
Before the wolf and friend
Render us enemies. Before all this,
Lie one night in my arms and give me peace.

Yet, today, even the despondent and warning, cynical voices seem sentenced to silence by the relentless repetition of the cause and course of war war, incidentally (so it would seem by the casualness with which the truth of nuclear conflagration is brushed aside), potentially able to end the world. Panic, fear, and reaction take the place, for many, of introspective consideration in ferreting out the truth from conflicting points of view and putting the present into historic perspective. In a fear-creating crisis, the first question frequently becomes what to do in reaction instead of why is this so in an effort to choose the best possible line of action.

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Where are personal answers to the dilemma of right choice in consciousness and action to be found? Only when the dizzying overload of conflicting information and the numbing confusion of hectic media reports are silenced and mental turbulence quieted is it that, within the ensuing silence, synthesis of conflicting information and inspiration for right action can be effected. Within the silence, when silence allows the whispering of inspiration, the anxiety-ridden mind and tension-weary body find in the midst of troubled times a sense of peace and direction.

And to be heard within the silence, when thought and reflection turn one to the wisdom and experience of our vast heritage, are the many silent voices, like concerned friends of years and centuries gone by, that provide through their recorded thoughts their garnered wisdom and experience to enlighten the present. And add to these the many wise voices of the present, often condemned to silence by the reigning clangor against which they speak in opposition.

Many search the silence for answers to the painful questions about the facts of war. One such person was the poet Delmore Schwartz, who felt extreme guilt that as a woman she was not required to go to war but instead had been able to dedicate her life to poetry and to the true, the beautiful, and the good. She felt, in her guilt, that the fallen soldiers were her accusers, through their silence. As do many people who search for answers through examination of conscience, she concluded that There is no answer to the hopeless dead. War is senseless and robs youth and age alike of the human right of opportunity for peaceful, joyful living, and experience of the good, the beautiful, the true, and the fullness of life.

The many who suffer the loss of loved ones to senseless violence or war, search the silence for the voice of reason and enlightenment, as Theodore Roethke in his poem *The Lost Son*:

Voice, come out of the silence,
Say something. ...
Tell me:
Which is the way I take;
Out of what door do I go,
Where and to whom?



We are the history makers. History makers must bring the voices of the world's rich heritage out of the silence, for the present is understandable only in context of the past if the future is to be built in changed patterns. History makers must listen to wise and experienced voices of the present and those cries for nourishment for body and soul to be heard in the profound silence of the imploring eyes of the deprived and starving child. History makers must tune out war channels and turn war billions to reclamation of the planet. History makers must hear the new world voice, the unprecedented, globe-encircling cry: No war! No more war!

We are the history makers, for if not we, who? And if not now, when? The choices confronting us are simple: We can make the decision to return our planet Earth into a living system, using the billions formerly allotted to war to reclaim deserts and barren lands to feed the world. We can turn all our resources to creating abundance for all. Or we can make the decision that ours are just voices crying in the wilderness of war consciousness, in which case, our voices, too, will become lost in eternal silence.

Without the urgently-required care and nurturing of our entire planet and all its people, and with the worst scenario of atomic warfare, the voice of the planet itself could well fall silent, leaving the crashing of dead ocean waves on dead desert continents the only sound in an otherwise silent void.



Ah, Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Hearts Desire!

– *Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam*