

The following talk was given at the Northlake Unitarian Universalist Church on March 25, 2007 by Carol Ashley.

The references are to the song, The Sounds Of Silence by Paul Simon sung by Carol Ashley and Jim Pilon, with help on drums from Mark Dibeh during the service and an excerpt on Houses from the book “The Prophet” by Kahil Gibran, which was read before the sermon.

The Importance of the Non-dominant Voice And Why We Ignore it at our Own Peril

And the sign said “The words of the prophet are written on the subway walls, and tenement halls and whisper in the sounds of silence.

Those words are from the song you heard earlier, “The Sounds of Silence” written by Paul Simon. He wrote that song in 1963. I was fascinated to find out that it was originally inspired by the assassination of John F. Kennedy—it took another couple of years before Paul Simon recorded it with Art Garfunkel and it was released in 1965.

It doesn't surprise me that something like an assassination of a president would be the inspiration for a song like the Sounds of Silence because those kinds of catastrophic events have the effect of landing us on our feet or waking us up—somehow something of a more immediate reality breaks through and profoundly disturbs us into awareness. That's important because it's only when our comfort level is so disturbed that we can't ignore it or deny it, or distract it away that we are really willing to change. As the passage from the Prophet I just read reminds us often “the lust for comfort murders the passion of the soul and then walks grinning in the funeral.”

See, I think what Kalil Gibran, and Paul Simon are both talking about is that if we're not careful, the things we use to comfort ourselves or distract ourselves with can become a wall that prevents needed feedback about ourselves from getting through. And we need that feedback to keep healthy. That's the function that the non-dominant voices in our culture provide.

If you study the way systems work, and, I am a systems thinker being a family therapist, then what you see is that systems function by a process of feedback, which gives the system information about itself that it then uses to get itself back in balance. Events like 911, like the events of the 1960s act like messages that break through the dominant cultural values that we usually surround ourselves with that buffer us from parts of our reality that threaten to overwhelm or disturb us. If we protect ourselves too much from the feedback that would help us confront ourselves we become like the people in Paul Simon's song—who never dare disturb the sounds of silence.

So what do I mean by the “dominant” culture. Well, the dominant culture isn’t a body of people as much as it’s a body of laws, rules, and norms that the majority of people in a culture endorse as representing them, and they’re handed down to us through dominant cultural myths or the stories we tell ourselves. For instance, one of our dominant cultural myths says that as Americans we are all entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness because we are all created equal. Dominant cultural values aren’t bad, in fact, we need them to be able to go about our everyday lives, to be able to live in a community but they can become fossilized and rigid unless we stay open to alternative viewpoints.

Speaking of the founding fathers (or the founding fossils as the case may be), if you want a good example of a non-dominant/alternative viewpoint about one of our cherished dominant cultural myths, namely, the American Revolution, go see the movie *Amazing Grace*. It’s a beautiful example of a viewpoint that challenges the belief that you have to have a violent revolution to change things. I don’t want to give away the movie so I won’t say anything more about it just go see it.

Our cultural myths often tell us there’s only one way to accomplish something. And we’re influenced to uphold cultural values if we think they work for most of the people, most of the time. It’s reassuring to think that most people in the culture are getting their basic needs met and that they have the means to be somewhat represented as a member of the culture, which allows them to participate in changing things that don’t serve us anymore.

Maybe in a perfect world that’s true. In this one, unfortunately, the people who don’t see themselves reflected in the mainstream cultural values often are also excluded from the means by which they would be able to be heard by the majority. In our culture the means for this has been traditionally through the mainstream media. That’s where that feedback I was talking about comes in—the dissenting voices in a culture are the ones that question the dominant cultural myths that inform us of who we are, what we value, and what we can expect of different roles in the culture like what it means to be a woman or a man, a parent, an employee, a child, an authority figure or an American. The important thing to remember here I think is that cultures have developmental stages just like people do. Cultures, if they’re healthy have to keep growing and changing.

Which brings me back to the lyrics from the *Sounds of Silence* that I opened with “the words of the prophet are written on the subway walls and tenement halls.” I thought about those words and said to myself, who writes graffiti? Well, teenagers do—and not just any teenagers. These days we call them gang members. In earlier days they were called hoodlums. I think the words written on the walls of subways and tenement halls are the words of people who are on the outside of society who don’t see themselves reflected in the mainstream culture.

Developmentally teenagers are in a stage where they naturally question the dominant cultural values and roles they see because they are trying to separate from their parents. This leaves them being really good barometers of what’s going on in the culture—They notice everything and they look at it with a very critical eye—yes maybe too critical but

that goes with the territory until they can see with a more balanced viewpoint. Nonetheless, because healthy teenagers tend to walk on the outskirts of the accepted values of the culture, and like to experiment with other viewpoints, at least for a while, they are astute observers of culture and often give us feedback about it that we could benefit from if we weren't so disturbed by them. I think this is one of the reasons teenagers disturb us.

Many teenagers are also acutely aware of the problems with trying to participate in a culture that doesn't hear them and like the poor they often feel shut out by forces over which they have no control, which can leave them feeling defeated. And why wouldn't they?—most of what teens value becomes a commodity that is usurped by the dominant culture, repackaged, and sold back to them and us as a product—every unique act of creativity becomes another opportunity for a predatory market to make more money by replicating it ad nauseum from the popular music that is promoted on mainstream radio stations to the fashions that make trends out of our youths' efforts to establish their independence. If the very messages we need to hear in order to help us find our balance again are made into the next trend then we don't hear the message—it becomes assimilated into the mainstream culture before people have the time to contemplate the meaning of what they hear or see or feel.

People, this is another way that power structures silence us—by usurping and assimilating independent creative ideas and funneling them into places in the culture where they become homogenized, especially in the mainstream media. People wonder why so many teenagers are suicidal these days—I think this is one of the reasons—having your creative accomplishments stolen by a corporate culture that commodifies them (meaning makes them into sellable products) is a form of violence—it's a violation of the trust that teens invest in adults to respect their sacred territory—it's the same thing with artists who trust that their unique contributions will be treated with respect. When I turn on my radio and hear the umpteenth band that sounds just like the last five I heard this station play—I've got McMusic instead of art. It's exactly the same thing as genetically engineered food. Bob Dylan said a few years back that if he was trying to get his music on the air now, it would never happen—think about that—we would never have had the feedback of a Bob Dylan. Well the ingeniousness of Bob Dylan is also lost on a culture that idolizes him as person but never listens to what he was trying to say. And that includes never playing the more obscure songs he wrote not just the ones everyone hears all the time, which also dulls the meaning of the lyrics over time.

So now the argument is that the Internet is the answer to this—right? Well I want to tell you about the reality for most of my clients. My clients are on Medicaid, which means they get \$339.00 a month to cover their cost of living including food, and they get a medical coupon, which covers medical, dental, and mental health services, and they can get food stamps if they apply for them. Part of the 339.00 goes for section 8 housing which can be up to 100.00 a month depending on where they live. Most of my clients will opt for cable TV if they can afford that. Also, more than half of my clients never finished high school. They don't feel comfortable with technology if they even have access to a computer. They can go to the library and use the computer there. Many of

my clients have problems with social skills, which results in feeling uncomfortable in public.

I'd say the number one problem of most of my clients is that because they have mental health problems or because they are poor, or both is that people often think they aren't intelligent. Many people think that people who have mental illnesses are retarded, and they get treated that way. Which brings up the issue of how the mentally retarded are often treated in our culture. This also applies to people who are homeless. The homeless also have to contend with not having access to showers regularly to help with their hygiene. So they also don't feel comfortable in public. If you think that people already feel negatively about you, number one, you're not going to feel comfortable going into public places and, number two, you are not going to feel comfortable going up to a librarian to ask them to help you figure out how to get on line. So 90 percent of my clients do not have access on a regular basis to the Internet. No one is talking about this in our culture. "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls"—the places where the poor, the uneducated, and the people who feel shut out of this culture reside.

We do have alternative radio, and public TV. I don't know about you, but I think public TV has already been taken hostage by the government who has planted subliminal messages in the Roy Orbison concert they keep showing over and over again and it's a form of mind control they're using along with reruns of Celtic Woman to get us to submit! Thank God we do have Amy Goodman who hosts Democracy Now so we can still get a truly alternative view of the news. And if you can afford satellite TV you can get a number of viewpoints from other cultures. So all is not lost, again, if you have money.

However, if you are still spending a lot of time listening to and watching mainstream media then you may be exposed to another way non-dominant voices are silenced which is through creating stereotypes that instill fear of marginalized people in the dominant culture. This is especially true of mainstream news. If we aren't already lulled to sleep by distraction, or comfort, or by the "neon gods" that numb us to reality then the feedback we would otherwise get can be silenced by corporations who own the networks enabling them to control the content of what we hear and see. Then we're especially at risk of hearing nothing but dominant cultural myths one of which is to convince us that we need to somehow control those dangerous, irrational, subversive, over-emotional, "crazy" people out there.

If this sounds familiar, this was the picture that was painted of black activists in the 1960s. This was generalized to other people later when they started protesting the Vietnam War. Then they were treated as subversive and dangerous too. But the Black Panthers were especially painted as dangerous despite the fact or maybe because of the fact that they had established a meal program for poor children in the inner cities.

What the Black Panthers were doing was putting into practice one of Gandhi's pillars of non-violent resistance which we don't hear too much about these days—that is, if you

want to become independent of the dominant cultural forces that silence you by threatening to cut you off economically, you need to develop your own cultural means to sustain yourself. It's really hard to control people when they don't have to depend on you anymore—this is a lesson the United States is about to experience big time in South America right now as they wake up to the fact that they don't have to depend on the United States and we can see the fear this is creating in the power structure in the United States. When the Black Panthers started really becoming successful the mainstream media at the time started invoking the image of dangerous out-of-control uppity negroes. If you're following the way Chavez has been characterized by people in the White House, we can see this being attempted again before our very eyes.

However, what gives me hope now is that this time around, the dominant stories in the media about these things are starting to change. I'm hopeful when I start seeing stories on the front page of the Seattle Times, for instance, that finally tell the truth about how social services have been going down hill for years so that we now have veterans hospitals that look like something out of a Third World country. And speaking of that, there is a connection between how we treat people in Third World countries and how we treat our own disenfranchised population. This is really important because when people feel that they have nothing to offer or contribute to the bigger culture they are more vulnerable to influences that would fill in the gap. This is where many of the poor are in our culture. And this is important for people who are concerned about war—because where people are poor they can't afford education and training, and where people feel no sense of structure in their lives due to poor family structure because parents are working two jobs or are struggling with so many of the other complicated issues associated with poverty, guess where they turn to get their need for structure and educational and training opportunities met? Yep, you guessed it they'll turn to the government and especially the military.

Now folks, teenagers are especially vulnerable to this because of the fact that they are looking for ways to separate. If you've read anything about Cindy Sheehan, the mother of the soldier who was killed in Iraq who is now actively protesting the war, you know that her son was aggressively recruited while he was in high school. Well her son wasn't destitute or African American. He was simply trying to establish his independence like so many teenagers do, by embracing the opposite values of his parents, and his parents were against the war.

Now I keep coming back to family relationships because in our culture the small aspects of what make up our interactions get overlooked. It's the small things that we tend to devalue and that get little notice from us a lot of the time. I see this a lot in my practice as a family therapist. For instance, we are systematically conditioned in our culture to devalue the small actions that over time add up to the more noticeable, important actions that we value. Like producing great achievements—that gets a lot of attention in our culture. But great achievements are usually the result of doing a lot of small repetitive actions over time that build on each other. This isn't sexy we are told—what's sexy is the big celebrity-type achievements that get a lot of paparazzi coverage in the press.

But because of the dominant cultural myth that's come down to us that devalues being in a process, we often devalue the individual process of noticing changes through time, especially the feelings we're having. The step-by-step process of learning to delay gratification and tolerate the frustration involved in learning to accept our limits as human beings is the basis for learning what the psychologist John Bradshaw calls healthy shame. Healthy shame is the basis of empathy—it lets us know when we've overstepped our boundaries by reminding us of how others feel. Developing healthy shame is about noticing the small human vulnerabilities we all have that connect us and I think it also involves being outraged when those vulnerabilities are devalued by making us feel ashamed of our humanness. This is what toxic shame does, it makes us feel ashamed of being human.

This toxic shaming has come down to us through our cultural myths and it functions to keep us in our narrowly defined roles. Contrary to popular belief, this is not a male viewpoint that I'm talking about here. It's true that because men have benefited from the power structure throughout history that most of our dominant cultural myths have become genderized but I've been studying this for a long time and I think it's more accurate to say the power structure is narcissistic because if you take the gender out of it both men and women are hurt by this power structure that uses and commodifies people. As, my husband, Jim, said to me recently it's an equal opportunity oppressor.

Let me give you an example of this; when Cindy Sheehan decided to speak out against the war in Iraq she was demonized by people in Washington D.C, people in the military, and by the mainstream media. If you remember, because she decided to move outside of the traditional role of culturally accepted military mother she was characterized in the mainstream media as “hysterical” “over-emotional” “irrational” and “ my favorite “crazy.” It's the Black Panthers all over again—only now it's a white woman. Michael Dyson, an African American scholar and black minister said in a speech last year—“who could have known that God would've sent us a black activist in the clothing of a feckless white woman who because of that disguise could accomplish what countless black activists have failed to do for years.” He's referring to the fact that Cindy Sheehan was able to get as far as she did because she was accepted at first by the White House and got an audience with the president when she was acting out the acceptable role of a military mother. He attributes this to the fact that she was also white, but white in this case also means acting out the dominant cultural role assigned to her. When she moved into the role of an activist she was treated with the same disdain and shaming behavior to discredit her that most African American activists are very familiar with.

And now, here's the equal opportunity oppressor I was talking about--the same words that are used to devalue and shame women and minorities who don't act in accordance with the dominant cultural roles are now also being applied to white men who are perceived to act outside of their defined roles. I'm thinking of Howard Dean—he was mercilessly attacked and shamed by conservatives and the mainstream media as being “over-emotional”, “out-of-control” and almost “hysterical” because he passionately expressed his political views. And most recently this was also used to characterize Lt Watada, the soldier who refused to go back to fight in Iraq, because he was acting more

like a woman --translated as a “sissy” than a soldier. The people in power especially tried to shame him with that one, which is the way men in our culture are always shamed—if you’re a man who values relationships over being a lone cowboy the traditional shaming technique is to imply that you’re a homosexual. The interesting thing is—it didn’t work. It didn’t silence Lt. Watada. This is important too, because this shows that the gay rights movement is powerful, it is changing things-- because the idea of gayness is no longer such a threat anymore; that is, it can’t be used as a way to shame men as much as it used to be.

Lt Watada is also an adult whose parents are standing by him. And he does not feel ashamed that he needs his parents. He and his parents aren’t buying the dominant cultural American myth that he should be ashamed of this—this is big folks—this is an Asian American family --their tradition is all about saving face but their tradition is also about valuing family—it’s only American families that are traditionally nuclear that’s not to be confused with “nuclear”—everywhere else on the planet, people have maintained the value of the importance of the extended family. And they aren’t buying it that it’s not important just because America says it’s not. And I’m happy to say that a number of veterans coming back from Iraq who’ve had first hand experience over there are finally not buying that either! The non-dominant voice is starting to be heard because it’s common sense folks --it’s our horse sense talking. And the conservatives thought they owned the common voice—the common voice belongs to everybody! And that’s what Unitarianism is all about. We should be leaders in this because we know this—this is who we are! We’re the ones who make room for everybody’s beliefs—we can bring people together because we’re the ones embracing our humanness.

Things have changed a lot since the 1960s. And I think they’ve changed because parenting has changed. And what’s changed the most is that many more men are now getting involved in parenting—and not just the once-in-a while kind. One of the most hopeful experiences I’ve ever had as a family therapist has been working with men who are committed to parenting. It gives me hope because when men are invested in their children I think there’s less likelihood that they’d be willing to let them die in a pointless war, and they’d be more likely to protest like Lt. Watada’s parent’s are. When men are that invested in their children they move into the role of a mother too and there is no shame in that! If we want peace we need to do everything we can to promote family time not just for people with money, and here’s my plug for the social justice committee, we need to promote family time for the poor—Take Back Your Time is great if you can afford to work less hours but what are we gonna do about poor families that don’t have the option of spending more time with their kids?

Bonding with children in the family system is the basis of teaching empathy, it is the foundation of emotional intelligence, it’s the foundation of healthy shame. It’s what connects us as human beings and it’s the foundation of building communities. This is true if you are a parent or if you’re an adult who’s childless like me who loves children because they’re our future. The non-dominant voices in our culture are telling us this in countless ways but they’re really all saying the same thing—our relationships are what count, families are what count, community is what counts and that is not a message that

one set of people own, it belongs to us all as human beings—the day of the lone guru is over, the day of the lone cowboy is over, patriarchy is over, it's over and they know it, we know it—that ship is going down but a new stage of humanity is taking its place. It's inevitable, it's developmental it's not revolutionary, it's evolutionary (to quote a recent musical) and it's coming—we just have to keep the faith and keep speaking out.