MY DAY OF SILENCE

Saying nothing can be the hardest way to speak out.

By Scott C. Brown

On the morning of April 9 I walked into my office. Instead of my usual gregarious greeting to my coworkers, I briefly smiled and quickly went back to my cubicle, where to my relief my other office mates were absent. Everything seemed normal. My desk was in its usual state of functional disarray. The picture of our daughter Maddie riding our rottweiler was still taped to my monitor. My small collection of Masai artifacts was still crowded on top of my bookshelf. Even I looked the same, except for the brightly colored “Day of Silence” sticker affixed to my shirt.

To participate in the Day of Silence, one simply has to remain silent and pass out cards with the above inscription to people with whom one interacts. The Day of Silence was designed as a way to combat homophobia and heterosexism. Overall, as a political and educational intervention it is quite effective. But this story isn’t about how I educated others on this issue. It is about how the Day of Silence educated me about myself.

Frankly, I would never have thought I needed to be educated anymore about these topics. I fancy myself to be an unquestioned ally to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community. I have spent years doing advocacy work on LGBT issues on several campuses, and many of my closest friends and colleagues are in this community. I have spent a considerable time studying gay and lesbian identity development and the history of the gay and lesbian political movement, and exploring cultural-climate issues faced by oppressed groups. I am even the education chair for the Allies Project, a group dedicated to support of the LGBT community.

For me to participate in the Day of Silence should not have been a big deal. But it was. That morning I stayed hunched over in my cubicle, trying not to make any contact with folks that went to the fax machine or mailroom. The prospect of being silent made me painfully self-aware, and I wasn’t sure why. I felt an unspecified dread. I even refrained from going to the bathroom to minimize interactions. During the morning, my sister-in-law called about a possible job opening. Despite my pledge to be silent at work, I talked to her without thinking of deferring the conversation until the next day. “This is a special circumstance,” I thought. I went ahead and qualified “silence”

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for face-to-face interactions only. While some people like to plunge right into a cold pool, it appeared that I needed to pace back and forth on the deck before easing into the water.

Later in the morning, in a soft and clipped voice, I told our administrative assistant I was going to a professional development session sponsored by my department and would return around one o'clock. Speaking in this particular voice had seemed to ease my tension about not giving her one of the bright pink "Day of Silence" cards that poked conspicuously out of my shirt pocket. If I gave her one of the cards, I reasoned, it might alter the affable nature of our relationship. I decided I'd better not risk it.

Before the session began I needed to pick up my daughter while my wife went to a doctor's appointment. Maddie and I arrived at the session much earlier than the expected starting time. As we shared our lunch, a number of housekeepers came over, making a fuss over Maddie and asking me lots of amiable questions about her. I decided that these people had come over to compliment and play with Maddie and that I didn't want to burden them with my silence. I would have needed to tell them who I was and why I was doing this. Sure, the card said it all, but I was certain I had to say more. And more was too much. I decided I didn't want to start my Day of Silence on such a tentative foundation. The time was 12:10 PM.

On my way to the session, I ran into a friend. I wanted to tell her about a job opportunity I thought she would be perfect for. Since this was such an important circumstance, I didn't think I could start my Day of Silence then. So before telling her the news, I told her I was supposed to be silent, fully aware of the irony of the statement.

Once the session began, I finally started my Day of Silence. I could ease into the pool with this group: student affairs folks would certainly understand my concerns about facilitating healthy identity development and creating positive environments for learning. I finally passed out my cards, and after the obligatory comments ("This must be really hard for you" and "A way to get Scott to shut up!") I began the day in earnest. When each new visitor came into the room, others stopped the discussion and quickly explained what I was doing. At this point, one of my beloved professors offered the only serious remark I encountered the whole day. She said, "This is serving its purpose, since we are talking about it right now." Actually, it wasn't talked about, just briefly acknowledged. But it didn't matter. I wanted to shrink up and disappear. Even in such an accommodating environment, I couldn't stand the feeling of being so painfully different.

I snuck out of the meeting early, dropped Maddie off, and went back to work. Since I had officially begun my Day of Silence, I quickly gave the two office administrative assistants "Day of Silence" cards and tried to communicate with smiles, gestures, and nods to questions. One of the women asked, "Should I take a message if someone calls for you today?" I shook my head, but whispered in my self-sanctioned "silence voice," "No I will take my calls." Luckily, I only had to sit in my office for forty-five minutes before going to class. At this point I thought that my day would be over because, of course, I would speak in class. But I decided that because this particular class is centered on the production and dissemination of knowledge as a political act, my silence would be understood, or at least appreciated. Just before class, I e-mailed my professor and advised her that I would be participating in the Day of Silence. I felt I had scored a small victory because I didn't ask her for permission.

As I walked into class, she said, "I got your note." In my tentative and vulnerable state, I didn't know if that was okay with her. What she thought of what I was doing suddenly became very important. Rationally, I knew that as an act of advocacy, this was one way of drawing attention to the issue: a bloodless disruption in the spirit of nonviolent protest. But I just felt guilty for throwing a wrench into a finely planned seminar class. I also realized that I had no idea how I would get
through a two-and-one-half hour seminar class, remaining completely silent.

In class, time seemed to come to a standstill. It was like sitting on a block of ice. And while time stopped, my mind raced: Who pays for my silence? I originally thought of this question with respect to what I was losing. Academically, I did not fully understand a number of issues, and because I could not engage in a dialogue, the ideas remained fallow and undeveloped, an educational moment lost. But I then realized that my classmates paid for my silence, too. They lost out on my insights and analyses, which may have furthered this particular discussion in meaningful ways.

In the midst of these thoughts, I began to realize that although this was the fourteenth week of an eight-person doctoral seminar class, not one person noticed I hadn’t spoken. In a class in which I am usually one of the most vocal, nobody remarked on the fact that I wasn’t speaking. My disruption failed to disrupt. In this regard my “statement” felt like it had meant nothing, and I simply felt deflated.

After class, I immediately bolted to depart for North Carolina for the weekend. By leaving campus at 4:30 P.M., I missed the official 7 P.M. rally to break the silence. But maybe that was just as well. Perhaps the rally would have just allowed me to focus outside of myself, let myself off the hook, and feel an unearned sense of accomplishment.

Instead of feeling like a smug white heterosexual male who deserved a pat on the back, I sat in silence in the car. When it really came down to it, I had not risen to the occasion. I found myself acting like I hadn’t meant to make a statement. I found myself wanting to get through the day quietly and quickly. I found myself not wanting to be seen as a problem. I found myself apologetic and withdrawing from people rather than confronting them. I found myself looking for any opportunity to negotiate my silence. I found myself strategizing ways to minimize my own and others’ discomfort. I found myself not wanting to endanger the privileges of inclusion I had always enjoyed. I knew I was doing this the whole time. And while I didn’t feel good about it, I did it anyway. I was a coward.

Looking back, I knew I could never glibly appropriate someone else’s suffering. I knew I could never fully understand the experience of a person who had been historically, socially, and legally silenced. But in my own arrogance, I had intended to use my silence to provide others with answers. Instead, my silence had raised questions for me. In issues of social justice, we often challenge ourselves to walk the walk and not merely talk the talk. But I realized I had been languishing in the liminal space in between: speaking far miles, but walking in place.