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The Voice of Silence

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The voice of silence

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

What is silence? Is it the mere absence of words or sound? Or is it a sound itself? Simon and Garfunkel in their early 1960s hit, "The Sound of Silence," focused on a meaning that seems to predominate in our society- that silence implies apathy, or a lack of communication. They sang: "Silence like a cancer grows. Hear my words that I might teach you, Take my arms that I might reach you. But my words like silent raindrops fell, and echoed in the wells of silence."

For Native peoples, silence historically was understood as a means to convey often profound understandings or revelations. For example, in Frank Waters' classic work, "The Man Who Killed the Deer," a brilliant novel about Pueblo life, there is a telling passage that reminded me of the power of silence and of the exquisite role that it once played in Native deliberations, reflecting a heightened degree of maturity. He said, "A Council meeting is one-half talk and one-half silence. The silence has more weight, more meanings, more intonations than the talk. It is angry, impatient, cheerful, but masked by calmness, patience, dignity. Thus the members move evenly together."

"And when the guttural Indian voice finally stops there is silence. A silence so heavy and profound that it squashes the kernel of truth out of his words, and leaves the meaningless husks mercilessly exposed. And still no man speaks. Each waits courteously for another. And the silence grows round the walls, handed from one to another, until all the silence is one silence, and that silence has the meaning of all. So the individuals vanish. It is all one heart. It is the soul of the tribe. A soul that is linked by that other silence with all the souls of all the tribal councils which have sat here in the memory of man."

FULL TEXT

As we enter the deep cold of winter (especially if you live in Minnesota!), it is a good time to pause and reflect. If the goal of life for a native person is maturity, as Vine Deloria once said, what are some of the steps we might take to help us achieve a measure of maturity before we attain elder status, assuming we make it to that exalted period in our lives?

A liberal education is often cited as a key pathway to maturity, especially if by liberal education we mean "fitness for the world," as J. H. Newman put it. Of course, educational standards throughout Indian country - since the boarding school period forward - and in the United States more broadly, have never been much to brag about. Education today is mired in a "teaching to the test" mentality that is certainly not conducive to true maturity, where it should be focused on nurturing the unique personality of every individual student.

A person who faithfully adheres to religious/spiritual traditions is also sometimes considered a more mature individual, although this assertion is more easily challenged than the educational dimension when one witnesses how constraining, discriminatory, and downright deadly many religious fundamentalists have been throughout history and still are today (e.g., Salem Witchcraft trials and executions in the 1600s; the cultural genocide imposed by federal law and carried out by federally-funded Christian missionaries in Indian country in the 19th and early 20th centuries; or the Taliban of Afghanistan who violently abuse the rights of Afghan women and have committed

genocidal acts against the Hazaras, a Shia Muslim ethnic group in the late 20th century.)

Being part of a strong family unit, preferably with an extended family network that emphasizes such values as generosity, compassion, respect, and love, is certainly a contributing factor in the development of a mature individual and a mature society, for that matter. And when such a family unit, however large or small, is wedded to a particular sacred place where one's native language (assuming it has survived) is relied on to transmit core values, conduct ceremonies, and produce the songs that link us with the spirits and our ancestors, this, too, surely contributes to a deeper maturity - at both the individual, family, clan and national level.

Language and orality are vital cogs in the development of our individual and collective identities. When we are singing songs, telling stories, or simply conversing with one another, we are developing skills, creating and negotiating relationships, and carrying on and exercising values that contribute to our maturity.

There is an even more impressive language force - silence - that contributes or could contribute, even more to our maturation. This is a dimension our ancestors relied on and trusted in far more than we do in our ever more helter-skelter lives.

But what is silence? Is it the mere absence of words or sound? Or is it a sound itself? Simon and Garfunkel in their early 1960s hit, "The Sound of Silence," focused on a meaning that seems to predominate in our society- that silence implies apathy, or a lack of communication. They sang: "Silence like a cancer grows. Hear my words that I might teach you, Take my arms that I might reach you. But my words like silent raindrops fell, and echoed in the wells of silence."

For Native peoples, silence historically was understood as a means to convey often profound understandings or revelations. For example, in Frank Waters' classic work, "The Man Who Killed the Deer," a brilliant novel about Pueblo life, there is a telling passage that reminded me of the power of silence and of the exquisite role that it once played in Native deliberations, reflecting a heightened degree of maturity. He said, "A Council meeting is one-half talk and one-half silence. The silence has more weight, more meanings, more intonations than the talk. It is angry, impatient, cheerful, but masked by calmness, patience, dignity. Thus the members move evenly together."

And in another passage he more grippingly described the silence that embraced the Council just after someone had spoken.

"And when the guttural Indian voice finally stops there is silence. A silence so heavy and profound that it squashes the kernel of truth out of his words, and leaves the meaningless husks mercilessly exposed. And still no man speaks. Each waits courteously for another. And the silence grows round the walls, handed from one to another, until all the silence is one silence, and that silence has the meaning of all. So the individuals vanish. It is all one heart. It is the soul of the tribe. A soul that is linked by that other silence with all the souls of all the tribal councils which have sat here in the memory of man."

Silence, then, is not so much a cancer, as it is enrichment, a unifier, a connector. Certainly, words and oral language are profoundly important, but I wonder whether it might behoove us to practice more moments in family, clan and government that draw from and rely upon silence as much, if not more, than words.

We see evidence of this in commemorative silences where after certain devastating tragedies, like Sept. 11, 2001, we are asked to collectively observe a "moment of silence." Such quiet pauses enable us to fuse our thoughts, however momentarily, in a way that aids in healing and deep reflection.

Reconnecting with the power of silence will not be easy, living as we do in one of the loudest, most boisterous societies in the world, a society where it is difficult to find a space that is not already inundated by noise. But as Waters' stunning language shows, silence is indeed a voice of deep profundity and has a power that if rigorously exercised could help us as Native nations and individuals to reclaim aspects of our sacred knowledges and histories that will more comfortably guide us forward.