

The Cold Culture Of Silence (Part Two)

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"Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears." — I Samuel 3:9

Last month, we looked at the curse of broken homes. We noted the magnitude of problems fractured families spawn, as well as the vast emotional and economic costs they entail. To break up a marriage is to damage much more than just the couple who divorce, for a single-parent family puts children at risk, disrupts the extended family, and weakens society at large. The victims of divorce and of fornication are everywhere. Some costs pay down quickly; others last a lifetime. Some are obvious; others are hidden. Jennifer Morse ("Parents or Prisons," *Policy Review*, August/September 2003, p. 49) concludes that the choices adults make "regarding family structure have significant spillover effects on other people. We can no longer deny that such admittedly very personal decisions have an impact on people other than the individuals who chose."

In suggesting a solution, Morse does not chide divorced parents for irresponsibility or reprove single mothers for immorality. What is done is done. Nor does she urge expanding welfare budgets, a proven non-winner. Rather, *she issues a call to break silence and to speak out, to educate young people, alerting them to the risks inherent in single parenthood.* The facts are before us, Morse stresses: Study after study bears witness to the certainty that fractured families hurt everyone in a plethora of ways. This "accurate information is a necessary educational tool in reversing the culture of despair around the institution of marriage." Her remarkably insightful conclusion deserves extended quotation:

A young woman needs to know that the decision to have a child by herself is a decision that exposes her and her child to a lifetime of elevated risks: of poverty, of lower education, of depression, and of prison. . . . We are not doing the young person any favors by acting as if we are ignorant of the likely consequences of her choices. The time-honored American ethos of "live and let live" has metamorphosed into a categorical imperative to keep our mouths shut.

For years we have heard that single parenthood is an alternative lifestyle choice that doesn't affect anyone but the person who chooses it. We have been instructed that society should loosen the stigma against it in order to promote individual freedom of choice. . . . There are no better or worse forms of family, we are told. There are no "broken families," only "different families."

The premise behind this official posture of neutrality is false. The decision to become a single parent or to disrupt an existing family does affect people outside the immediate household. . . . We need to create a vocabulary for lovingly, but firmly and without apology, telling young people what we know. Surely, telling the truth is no infringement on anyone's liberty. Young people need to have accurate information about the choices they face. For their own sake—and ours.

An "imperative to keep our mouths shut" is a demand that we keep silent. Yet, perhaps we can recognize the folly of this "imperative" through an illustration from nature. Geerat Jermeij, a

professor of Geology at the University of California at Davis, wondered about the dissimilarity of noise levels around a tide pool in tropical Fiji and around a tide pool in cold Washington State ("Listening to a Tidepool: Curiosity and the Unfamiliar," *The American Scholar*, Summer 1998, p. 29). It takes energy, he realized, to sound off, and in cold climes animals lack the spare energy to make noise. Of the tide pool in Washington State, Jermeij concludes: "The tidepool was silent because it was cold."

Global Warming or Cooling?

Contrary to pop science, the globe is not warming but "waxing cold," and in the world's loveless, lonely chill, people do not expend the energy to speak. On the street, they do not make the effort to say, "Hello," or "Good morning." In silence, individuals move about their own little cocoon, too uncaring to take the risk of speaking, lest they offend someone. The atmosphere of toleration that we all breathe today is a frosty one, and it has generated a culture of silence. "Don't ask, don't tell." Do not reprove your children—your voice might stunt their development as individuals. Mute your opinions, lest you rub someone the wrong way. "We don't talk about politics or religion at this table. People get upset." Silence renders relationships shallow.

The ubiquitous "I'm okay, you're okay" religion, where all is relative and nothing is sure, has produced a culture of the verbally unwilling. People are disinclined to speak out against evil, even if they may be personally persuaded that "it isn't for them." The age of individualism, when people can live out their preferences, give free reign to their impulses, and act out their "orientations," inclines us to adopt a ho-hum stance toward moral issues. A certain "I don't care, as long as it doesn't bother me" attitude pervades the atmosphere—a quiet apathy. This, the silence of indifference, is malignant. People are silent because their love has grown cold.

People of this "Me Generation" remain silent until they become *personally* inconvenienced. How quick they are to honk their automobile's horn should you delay them ever so little! Yet, seldom do they become exercised over *moral* issues. Ms. Morse understands that, and though some will not heed, we still have a responsibility to develop "a vocabulary for lovingly . . . telling young people what we know." This is love, that we be neither silent nor nonchalant. Solomon says it best in Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7-8:

To everything there is a season,
A time for every purpose under heaven: . . .
A time to keep silence,
And a time to speak;
A time to love,
And a time to hate. . . .

This is the season to speak in love (Ephesians 4:15). Soon enough the night will fall, when none can work (John 9:4). Now is the time to develop that vocabulary, that language, which will powerfully warn people, especially the young, of the consequences of their actions. God Himself warns, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23).

God is not taciturn, does not remain silent, but "in various times and in different ways" (Hebrews 1:1) speaks, never taking action "unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7).

Speaking is His habit, and He expects the same behavior of us His children. Thus, Amos, enthralled with God's message to him, exclaims in the next verse, "The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?"

Amos was driven to speak, as was the prophet Isaiah also; he shuns silence, opting instead for the loud voice. He writes in Isaiah 58:1: "Cry aloud, spare not; lift up your voice like a trumpet; tell My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins."

To use Morse's terminology, we need to speak up, telling young people that:

- » "children attach to the rest of the human race through their first relationships with their parents";
- » "disrupting those foundational relationships has a major negative impact on children as well as on the people around them"; and
- » "the primary determinant of a person's life chances is whether he grew up in a household with his own father."

The Obligation to Speak Out

We need to speak, not just about marriage, but about everything: family, substance abuse, violence, the correct worship of God, abortion, euthanasia, financial irresponsibility—about life. Though few will listen, we need to speak all the same. God tells us through the prophet Ezekiel that He will require the blood of the heedless sinner at the hand of the silent watchman (see Ezekiel 33:1-11). Silence is not golden, but leads to the hopeless coldness of the grave.

This does *not* mean God's people should deploy themselves to every corner of every intersection of every metropolis in America—with megaphone raised to mouth. This is a common sight in Los Angeles, where self-appointed preachers shout out some erroneous version of the gospel in Spanish—and sometimes even in English! No, but we have responsibilities to sound off all the same.

To speak out effectively, we first must *know* God's way of life in depth. Being "ready to give an answer" (I Peter 3:15) when asked requires more than "book learnin'." It means knowing how to frame our answers in a way people can grasp, succinctly and precisely. Helpful answers, like "apples of gold in settings of silver" (Proverbs 25:11), need to be at the tips of our tongues, "on the coffee table," as it were, for anyone who wishes to hear or read.

Even more importantly, we need to make sure we *live* God's way, not just know it. *The living witness of God's way is the effective witness.* That is how we fulfill our roles as watchmen to the corrupt "Me Generation" around us. Actions do speak louder than words.

I Samuel 3 tells a story that should be instructive to all of us. God calls out in the night to the boy Samuel. Finally, he answers, "Speak, for your servant hears" (I Samuel 3:10). True to form, God does speak: "Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle" (verse 11). God then tells Samuel that He would judge the house of Eli, for he had not restrained his sons from "making themselves vile" (verse 13). In the morning, a curious Eli asks Samuel about his conversation with God. "Then Samuel told him everything, and hid nothing from him" (verse 18).

The boy was ready to speak and unafraid to reveal the truth. We too must be ready and unafraid to be useful instruments in God's hands and perhaps "save a soul from death" (James 5:20).