



# Margaret J. Wheatley

## **Silence is the Problem**

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Eight hundred years ago, Catherine, a woman living in Sienna Italy who was later to become a saint, stated: "Speak the truth in a million voices. It is silence that kills." Her words haunt me today, as I notice how much silence there is, and how it is growing around the world. Here are just a few examples:

At an international peace conference in Croatia, participants were asked: What keeps you from speaking up for peace?

At an educator's conference in the U.S., a well-known champion of public education confronted his audience with three important issues that no one was talking about, behavior he dubbed as "our great silences."

In Europe, many people express remorse that their nations stayed silent as war in the Balkans escalated. Why didn't they act to prevent the atrocities and massacres of the Bosnian war? (The United Nations issued a formal apology two years ago for its failure to prevent the massacre in Srebrenitsa.[sp?])

In Africa, both Europe and the U.S. have expressed regret for not intervening in Rwanda to stop the slaughter of millions.

In a rural Kenyan village, a young African woman dying of AIDS wonders why America is so silent on the AIDS pandemic. She asks her sister who lives in Seattle: "Does anybody know that we're dying?"

Why is silence moving like a fog across the planet? Why is it growing in us as individuals, even as we learn of more and more issues that concern us? Why do we fail to raise our voice on behalf of things that trouble us, and then regret what we didn't do? As I've watched the silence grow in myself and others, I've noticed a few reasons for the silence, but none of these are entirely sufficient as explanations.

**We don't know how to talk to each other anymore.** Even in nations where there is a strong tradition of citizen participation, people have stopped talking to one another about the most troubling political issues. A Danish woman explained that political correctness made people fearful to engage in conversations about the influx of immigrants that is forcing Denmark to give up its homogenous culture and deal with diversity and inclusion. She explained that since reasonable people failed to talk about this issue, right wing splinter groups have developed, marketing fear-based, exclusionary solutions. As she described this behavior, it felt like an

accurate description of what's happened in many democratic societies. The silence of thoughtful people creates a vacuum filled by extremism.

**We're overwhelmed by the amount of suffering in the world.** It's impossible to notice what's going on in the world during this dark age without feeling overwhelmed and helpless. There are very few true solutions. Most solutions only result in more complex problems, and every act of compassion is countered by more acts of aggression and greed. The sheer number of problems, and their unending nature and global scale, has pushed many of us into silence. It is too much to bear, and so we choose numbness over involvement.

**People feel more powerless now than at any time in recent history.** Recently I was in a conversation with twenty-five people, ages 22 to 60, from fifteen different countries. I was saddened to hear that all but one of us shared the same experience --we do not feel represented by our governments, and we feel powerless to change this. Decisions are being made in our name that we absolutely disagree with. (Only one person in this conversation felt they were living in a country where democracy was gaining strength, and that was The Netherlands.) As one young leader from England now living in Holland remarked: "I see all these decisions being made by men in ties. I feel so f----- angry. I see the youth not being heard, getting pissed off and going to the streets in protest, and look at what happens to them!"

**We're afraid of what we might lose if we speak out.** A young Ecuadorian environmentalist working for her government described how she couldn't get support from local environmental organizations because they were afraid they might lose their government funds. The U.S. educator who named "our great silences" noted that educators fear the loss of funding or favors if they question current policies. In the sixties, this was called "being coopted," forfeiting one's integrity and principles in order to stay on the good side of those in power. Since then, cooptation seems to have become more more prevalent, just more subtle. We hesitate to challenge those who offer us employment, funds, or respectability. We want to see change, justice, peace, but delude ourselves into thinking these can occur with no cost to ourselves.

**We've convinced ourselves that what is happening elsewhere doesn't affect us.** Perhaps we're still denying our interconnectedness, believing that things happening far away do not threaten us. Or perhaps we're grasping for whatever personal benefits we can while we still have time, sensing that things are only getting worse.

I've had a personal experience with silence and giving voice. I became committed to being aware of my silence several years ago when I was working with a colleague from South Africa. It was just eighteen months after the elections that brought Mandela and black South Africans to power. My friend, like many white South Africans, was just then learning the details of apartheid, the system under which he, as a white, had prospered while millions had suffered so horribly. As more and more atrocities were revealed, his 27 year old son came to him one day and asked: "How could you not have known what was going on? How could you not know?" I was sitting in the comfort of a conference room in America when I heard this story. But the questions pierced right through me. I knew in that moment that I never wanted to be in the position of my friend, that I never wanted to be confronted by my own children or grandchildren.

Since then, I do not always speak up for all the issues and problems that disturb me. I give

voice to some and not for others. I can't pretend that I make rational choices, where I "choose my battles." Sometimes I am just too tired to care, sometimes I lack courage, sometimes I notice that others have picked up that cause and I don't have to. But at least I now notice when I remain silent, and am more conscious that silence is a choice I make. I'm learning that silence is not the absence of action, but another form of action. And I hold myself accountable for that.

The 18th century historian Edmund Burke said it clearly: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." I hope that I am doing what I can, although it may not be enough. And if my grandchildren one day come to me and ask, "Why didn't you do something" at least I will be able to tell them what I did.



**ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.**

Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored eight books. Her numerous articles may be downloaded free at her web site: [margaretwheatley.com](http://margaretwheatley.com). For more biographical information, see [margaretwheatley.com/bio](http://margaretwheatley.com/bio)