

The Power of Silence

By Marion Hironaka Cowee

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FORTY-FIYE DESKS in rows faced the blackboard as my high school government teacher, Mr. Field, stared at cute little Shirley Woo. As she returned to her seat, he said, "Ahh, when I come back in another life, I want to marry an Oriental!" Darling Shirley Woo with a small smile on her sweet face, docile and obedient! Was I supposed to feel complimented that he wanted one of us Orientals? I hated him so much, but in 1965 I didn't have the vocabulary to describe this abuse of power.

Returning to his lesson plan, he asked, "What does integration mean?" I quickly raised my hand and responded, "It's the opposite of segregation. It means the Negroes can live, work, and play with the whites." Mr. Field smiled approvingly. I continued, "But I think real integration is more than that. It's not just allowing Negroes to be with whites, but for both groups to have power."

MR. FIELD answered, "You were doing great until you stuck your foot in your mouth." His barbed tongue stung my face. I seethed with anger. I decided that I could no longer trust him and from that moment on, I never spoke again in his class.

This final outrage sent me over the edge, beyond the point of no return, headlong into a private little war, where no shots were fired, no bombs dropped. In that moment I flashed on the civil disobedience, the sit-ins, James Meredith and or Miss, and George Wallace on the 60'clock news. I imagined my mom who in 1942 as a high school senior was forced to go to Manzanar*. Maybe it was all the acts of prejudice I had experienced in my life up until then, I had perfect

clarity that the only weapon I had at my disposal was to refuse to participate in Mr. Field's 'discussion.' As he solicited comments from his students, I remained silent with a blank cold look on my face.

At the end of the semester, he handed out our report cards: I received an "A" on the academic side, and a "D" for citizenship. I was proud to have earned the "D" for my disobedience. Even in this situation where I felt I had no power, I learned that I did. My silence had spoken so loudly that he had to listen.

*Manzanar was one of many "relocation camps" that housed more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans and others of Japanese ancestry during World War II, suspending all of their constitutional rights. Though people of Japanese descent were perceived as a threat to America, it is notable that not one person was ever convicted of sabotage or any other act that endangered the United States.

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