2006

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Recommended Citation

Patterson, Nancy (2006) "When Good People Do Nothing: The Sin of Silence," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1174>

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When Good People Do Nothing: The Sin of Silence

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She wasn't the kind of kid that warmed teachers' hearts. For one thing, she was often absent. Rumor had it that she lived in an abandoned house with a "bunch of other teenagers." I put that in quotes because I don't know what "a bunch" is, nor do I know if the rumor was true. But she came to school smelling as if she'd spent hours hermetically sealed inside a tobacco and marijuana chamber. Her eyes were often at half mast and she shuffled down the halls accompanied by her friends who "spoke" their membership in her group through their clothing and the odors they dispersed as they passed. She slouched at her desk, always scuffing it out of alignment with the other desks in her row. How much out of alignment depended on the teacher in each of the classrooms she deigned to visit on any given day.

But somewhere in the fog of a troubled family, a drug-born haze, and an uncertain future, she wrote poetry. And I happened to be a young idealist teaching a nine week elective course in creative writing. I was new to teaching and new to the community. I didn't know that Chrissy came from a family that had experienced troubles over several generations. I saw a good writer who was, yes, stoned, truant, defiant. But there was a voice there, and a sense of how words could flow together in ways that I'd never thought about before.

It was still early in the school year, around October, when I heard shouts in the hallway outside the office. It was my conference hour and I was headed for my mailbox. There was Chrissy and the principal battling it out. She had apparently skipped her morning classes and the principal had confronted her when he saw her at her locker. He goaded her. She swore at him. And he expelled her.

I saw Chrissy's tears of frustration and anger. And I stood silently as she threw her books down on the floor, walked slowly to the main exit, and punched the door open so hard it banged against the door stop. I didn't see her again for 10 years.

I asked the principal if there was anything I could do to get her back in school. He told me I had a kind heart but he couldn't let a student who used language like that return. She was bound to drop out anyway. He just hurried the process along a bit. And so I stayed silent. Chrissy had been goaded into her outburst, manipulated into saying words that in the 1970's would get her expelled. I thought about her, about the poems she had written, about the vivid images she created with her words, about the unique way she had of capturing a moment. But I stayed silent. I could have called Chrissy. I could have visited the house she lived in. I could have found her friends and sent a message through them to her. I could have at least told her that she had been manipulated. I could have sat down with her and read her poems. I could have told the school board. I could have convinced her to apologize and ask to return to school. I could have done a lot of things. I didn't.

And I found it entirely too easy to be silent.

The truth is that I may never have been able to help Chrissy. But my silence, my default decision to not advocate for her has always bothered me, perhaps because it represents the first in a series of silences. I knew there were better ways to teach high school English than the more traditional textbook driven approach I was using. I knew the writing I was assigning my students was not meaningful to them or me. But silence was easier than making waves. No one else was doing things differently. And, I found myself on uncertain ground too often as it was, as the adviser of the school newspaper. I landed myself in the principal's office when there were too many typos in the latest edition or if an article skirted

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too close to the edge of a controversial issue. I didn't have the courage to rock more than one boat. And as long as I maintained good classroom discipline, no one challenged me to teach differently.

That didn't happen until a number of years later when I was teaching at a middle school.

Lunch period had ended and I was complaining to no one in particular that I had to go and teach 8th graders about nouns. Suddenly a math teacher whirled around and said "Do you mean to tell me that my daughter is going to have to learn that crap when she gets to this building?" I was a bit startled, let me tell you. I wasn't used to be confronted by a math teacher about a cherished English domain—Grammar. Yet I knew that what I was teaching, and more importantly, the WAY I was teaching grammar was not effective. The math teacher's words churned in my head for weeks and weeks. I tried, first, to talk to her, to explain why it was important to teach grammar. But she, who was better informed than I, scoffed at my attempt, and reiterated her disgust that her daughter would be subjected to "that crap" in middle school. "You need to be better informed about your profession, Nancy."

She was right, but it wasn't easy to hear that.

I went from defensive to inquisitive. I had been taught in my English methods class in 1971 that grammar could be taught through the context of meaningful reading and writing, but for 15 years I had ignored that insight in order to fit in with the other teachers in my department. It had been a long time since I'd read Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's 1969 book *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. In it they quoted Ernest Hemingway who, when asked what it took to be a great writer replied, "in order to be a great writer a person must have a built-in shockproof crap detector" (p. 20). Postman and Weingartner concluded that this also needed to be an attribute of a great teacher.

I began crafting my own shockproof crap detector and using it.

In one big figurative swoop I cleared all the tired old approaches out of my head. I didn't throw my file folders of quizzes, tests, and worksheets away. Yet. But I suspected I would never go back to them.

I will not pretend it was easy to change. Or that my professional life was smooth and rewarding. I remember the day when I explained to another language arts teacher in my building that I assessed students on what they could do rather than on what they could not do. The other teacher slammed her hand down on the table and shouted "I don't do that!" punctuating each word with another slam of her hand on the table. And I remember being summoned before a group of high school teachers to defend how I taught grammar. And I remember a parent who asked that her son be transferred out of my class because I didn't give spelling lists and spelling tests. But my growing crap detector was telling me that I was on the right path. I continued reading and I started going to conferences so that I could ask questions and learn more.

At the same time that I found a new direction for my teaching, I also found my voice as a writer. Conferences and professional reading weren't taking me far enough fast enough. I went back to grad school. Shortly after that I began to get involved in on-line discussion groups. In my course work I was reading Freire, Derrida, Foucault, Shannon. And people were talking about these books on-line. Suddenly I had a larger audience and the opportunity to hone my thinking about theory, and research, not just in my graduate classes but with "real" people who thought about these writers for "real" reasons, not because they were jockeying for position in a graduate seminar. For me, the act of wrestling with my own ideas through writing for a specific audience of teachers taught me how to more coherently advocate for meaning-based classroom practices in my own district and beyond. I found my voice as an advocate.

And I found advocacy heroes.

Stephen Krashen is one. He diligently sends letters to editors all over the world advocating for libraries and effective literacy and bi-lingual education programs. When he reads about a policy in Taiwan, for example, that flies in the face of meaningful and respectful bi-lingual programs, he sends a letter to the editor of a Taiwan newspaper. And he then sends a copy of that letter to an on-line distribution list he moderates.

Gerry Bracey is another. He relentlessly hammers away at political spins on national education statistics, countering the easy, naïve, or ignorant interpretations with point by point, number by number counter-arguments that I admit I do not understand, but celebrate nonetheless.

And there is Susan Ohanian. Her website, www.susanohanian.org, received NCTE's 2003 George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language. It is rich in information, outrages, resources, news articles, and essays. And through it all rings Susan's unique feistiness and courage.

For years I had a banner that I made with my very first computer on my very first printer. It was taped above my blackboard and read "Evil flourishes when good people do nothing." My initial intention was that it remind my students that they have voices and they should not stand in silence when they see something unjust happening in their midst. I don't think the banner had much impact on my students. But it served as a reminder to me. I could not remain silent when politicians were chipping away at teachers' abilities to do their jobs well. I could not remain silent when a school district in my vicinity decided to base merit pay on student tests scores. I could not remain silent when a book was pulled from library shelves because an administrator got nervous over some naughty words.

I now look for ways to speak up. I write letters to politicians telling them that No Child Left Behind is misguided and doing more harm than good. I offer to speak for free in the buildings and districts that my graduate students teach in, to say the things they feel they cannot say. I send letters to the editor. I moderate a number of on-line discussion lists and send information about resistance to NCLB and standardized testing to other teachers and academics so that they do not feel like they are alone in the battle.

I don't expect to change the world by paying attention to it, by staying informed, by writing letters, by passing along information. I only expect to be heard. Silence may be easy, but in a participatory democracy, it is a sin.

I met Chrissy again about 10 years after she left school. She was haggard, addicted, and about to be evicted. I may not have been able to change the path her life took if I had been a better advocate for her that day when she was expelled. But I would at least be able to say that I tried. I do not want to be guilty of the sin of silence when I have it within my power to speak out, to write a letter, to encourage others, to pass along information. Evil flourishes when good people do nothing. And I want to be good people.

About the Author

Nancy Patterson is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at Grand Valley State University where she chairs the Reading/Language Arts Program. She taught high school and middle school English for almost 30 years and serves on the MCTE Executive Board.