

The Cost of Silence

by Rick Clark

South Florida. Late January. Warm breezes, palm trees gently waving their welcome.

I'd come conference that annually gathers college and university administrators. Big titles, big ideas. Decision makers, influencers gathered for the express purpose of changing conditions on campus for the good of our students and our campuses. In this crowd of over 200 I was among the youngest, lowest in title and tenure, and thankful for the opportunity to be there.

Day one brought together amazing student leaders who told incredible stories of hunger strikes, sit-ins, petitions and negotiations to raise awareness of the black student experience on campus. The room was captivated by their bravery, honesty, confidence, and deep conviction to speak truth to power.

But the sun set and came back up—it was a different day. Gone now were the students. The passion. The space had lost its energy. Long, rectangular tables, the occasional clinking of water pitchers on glasses as the audience members settled in for the morning topic. A boring title I translated as a good opportunity to get some work done."

I opened my iPad in hopes of taking care of a few emails. The woman to my left leaned over, put her perfectly manicured hand on my shoulder and whispered, "Good call," as she dug into her bright orange bag for her laptop.

I could not have replied to more than two messages when the speaker said something that jarred me to attention: "Where are my Afro-American mothers?" I furrowed my brow. Confused I scanned right and left while not lifting my head. I saw my poised neighbor's magenta polished nails stopped typing.

I took a deep breath and looked to the front. I hadn't really looked at him before, but now I focused on this man. In his late 50's, white, horn-rimmed glasses, slightly thinning salt and pepper hair, button down shirt and school-branded sweater vest.

His hands loosely gripped the lectern as he scanned the now completely still room without one bit of consciousness of why the room had gone quiet.

The soothing, refreshing South Florida breeze seemed hundreds of miles away. I sat in the pregnant SILENCE of the moment.

Had I missed something? Did I mishear? Was he?... making a point about something I'd not heard while answering emails?

"Where are my Afro-American mothers?"

DEAD. SILENCE.

Finally... his eyes settled on the two black women right in front of me.

Wait. What? Is he about to...?

And then his Midwestern intonation interrupted my thoughts.

"When Afro-American mothers come to MY orientation session, what do you ask me?"

And now he's looking directly at the two women in front of me, yet somehow I felt his words burning into me.

"What do you ask me?!"

Their heads moved in almost perfect unison down to their laps. He blindly forged ahead seemingly unaware of the deafening silence.

"Mothers of Afro-American daughters ask me, 'will there be a man at this university' worthy of my child?"

A chair pushed back hitting the table behind it. Laptops crunched closed one after another. People from around the room moved past my row, heads down, straight to the exit.

Then... a voice from the audience. "You need to stop!" Was that behind me? Or, in front? A man or a woman? I couldn't say. I couldn't think. I just hoped He would stop. I wanted to stand up. I wanted to tell him this was wrong. This was inappropriate.

But... do you interrupt a speaker at a conference? I'd never done that. I'd... never seen that done. I wanted someone from the organization or one of these high ranking officials to cut him off.

Nobody did. Nothing. And now more questions flooded my mind:

How could he talk like that?

How could he put anyone on the spot that way?

Finally, two of my African-American colleagues spoke up.

"Sir, what you've said is highly offensive." "What you've said... is... completely... unacceptable."

The speaker attempted to respond. "No, sir. I am not asking YOU to reply right now. YOU need to listen and SIT in the discomfort that we experienced...as you spoke."

Calm. Clear. Confident. Applause followed each. But somehow the clapping hands only hammered in my guilt and shame.

I had my chance. I could have said something. I could of stood in support when they spoke. I could have demonstrated my disapproval but... instead... I sat.

The room emptied and I stared at my interlaced fingers cupped on the table in front of me.

Folded hands. Inactive hands. Sitting. Frozen. Silent.

Voice of my black friends filled my mind. "I'm tired of having to teach white people." "We just want you to STAND with us. We want you to step in with us...and for us.

YOU have the ability to sit. To watch. To walk into rooms without being concerned about what you're wearing or how you talk or how to treat people when they approach you.

I slowly twisted my nicked ring that now felt like a weight on my white, privileged, entitled finger.

I HAD FAILED. As a friend. As a colleague. As a suppose-ed ally. As someone who claimed to be committed to diversity. I did not do what I expect of the students I admit each year to do. I did not DO what I tell my OWN kids OR the little boys and girls I coach to do.

I. HAD. FAILED.

I stumbled. Out of the room, out of the hotel doors.

The sky was dark, the clouds were moving quickly, a storm was mounting, and I was choking on my own unearned, undeserved privilege.

Jaywalking. I crossed the two lane street and onto the beach. My feet dug deeply into the sand.

I bent down. I took off my brown loafers and socks and cast them down by a trashcan. Someone could have them. Someone could throw them away. Somehow I'd be relieved if they were gone.

Walking passed the empty lifeguard stand the red flag flapped in the wind. I sat alone on the beach and watched the storm mount, staring and listening to the violent ocean. Above me the clouds grew darker as I replayed the scene in my mind.

Waves beating against the shore.

"You. Are Not an ally." One loud crash after another. "You're just as guilty as the speaker."

Each wave punched into my head the consequences of silence in the face of injustice. One after another they beat onto the shore and into my mind—comprehending the sin of my silence.

Finally, I rose and walked passed the red flag that continued to blow furiously.

I walked off the beach that day knowing that racism will continue. That injustices will continue. That the conditions are severe. I walked off the beach barefooted, but resolved in the future to speak up, to stand up, and to do my work differently in the future. Ready to truly be an ally.