

Speak

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Speech has power. Words do not fade. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed.
—Abraham Heschel

Ancient Witness: Acts 18:8b-11

Over 20 years ago I was urging some friends to come out with me to Washington, D.C. to protest against the Iraq war, a war many of us thought was unjust and immoral. “But I feel like I’m just hitting my head against a brick wall,” they said.

Sometimes, perhaps most of the time, it feels that way—that speaking out accomplishes little. But speaking is important. I grant you, it’s not everyone’s style. It’s perhaps not for everyone, but it needs to be done by someone. It is essential. As the great Rabbi Abraham Heschel said,

Speech has power. Words do not fade. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed.

I was raised not to value speaking very much. “Actions speak louder than words,” is what my stepfather always said. But I’ve come to believe that it’s not action *or* words. It’s action *and* words. Speech is indispensable. It is important to proclaim.

That’s one way to think about worship. It’s when we come together to proclaim God’s word. It is a public witness, a proclamation of what is important, ultimate, in our lives. We bear witness with our bodies and minds in our speaking and singing and praying.

Of course action is important—good deeds—works of compassion, kindness, generosity and justice. But as Heschel said, it “starts out as a sound.” It begins with an intention, a thought, a word. John’s gospel begins: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being.” (1:1-3)

This mirrors the creation story in Genesis where creation flows out of the Divine word. God speaks and there is light.. sky... water... land... plants... animals... stars... It may take centuries, eons, but “speech has power,” to use Heschel’s phrase.

I know, sometimes it seems futile. Hitting our heads against a wall. We “cast our bread upon the water.” It seems like that—futile, foolish, waste. You lay yourself out there. But the ancient teacher says, “It *will* come back to you.” Maybe not today, tomorrow, next year or this lifetime. But it will make a difference. (Ecclesiastes 11:1-2)

I like this story: “Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” a coal mouse asked a wild dove. “Nothing more than nothing.” “In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story. I sat on a branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow... Since I didn’t have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly

3,741,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you say—the branch broke off.”

The dove, since Noah’s time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for awhile and finally said to herself: “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come about in this world.”

Our speech, our words, our witness might seem so insignificant, so futile—nothing more than nothing, like hitting our head against the wall, a mere snowflake.

But without the words there is no action.
Without the sound there is no deed.
Without the speech there is no transformation.

Writer Stephen Carter recounted when in the summer of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson sent his right-hand man to visit Fannie Lou Hamer of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. It was a high-stakes trip, because Hamer and her flock were challenging the state’s all-white slate of delegates to the Democratic National Convention. Johnson feared an ugly floor fight and hoped that Hubert Humphrey could convince Hamer to back down.

The future vice president opened the negotiations by asking what she wanted. “The beginning of a New Kingdom, right here on earth,” replied Hamer.

The stunned Humphrey pleaded with Hamer. Couldn’t she see that her stance would hurt the Democrats? (Sound familiar?) “Fannie Lou Hamer, who survived beating and torture in a Mississippi jail for insisting on her constitutional rights was unimpressed,” noted Carter. “Hamer sought justice. Humphrey sought political victory (with justice as a possible, but not certain, side effect).” Hamer concluded: “I’m gonna pray to Jesus for you.”

They wanted her silent—not to speak. They thought it futile, counter-productive, in fact. Yet I would contend that it is precisely because she and others spoke that the world changed. It couldn’t have happened without her, without Rosa Parks, without Martin Luther King, Jr., without so many who have gone unnoticed in our history books, mere snowflakes in the eyes of the world. And in 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, and the registrations of African Americans in Mississippi went from 9% to over 60%.

“The world of politics tends to be the world of the short run, the compromise that lets you win in the here and now,” said Carter. “Prophets rarely win in the short run. But, thank God, prophets are rarely the kind of people who focus on the short run. They tend to care about the long run—eternity.”

Speech has power. Much more than the world recognizes. The world recognizes the power of force, of violence, of wealth, of coercion. The power of God, on the other hand, is much more like words, like snowflakes, falling upon our hearts, a power that is eternal. Relentless. As the prophet, Isaiah, wrote: “Grass withers. Flowers fade. But the *word* of God stands forever.” (40:1)

In the 1950’s and 60’s, Dr. Benjamin Spock was a much loved and trusted celebrity, kind of like the Oprah of his day. A pediatrician and best selling author. In his autobiography, he recounted

that one day he had been called to a meeting at the White House to be told how well the Vietnam war was going, and he saw six women standing in the snow with placards, alone, chanting. It troubled his conscience and his dreams for some time. If these women were brave enough to protest, he asked himself, why aren't I? It was because of them that he would eventually find his courage to take his own stand. And that, in turn, changed the minds of millions, and quite possibly, ended the war sooner. When he came out against the war in 1968, some saw it as a major turning point in American public opinion.

And so these six women standing in the snow, with placards, might have been viewed as an exercise in futility—humiliating—amounting to nothing more than nothing. And yet it was an event that might have helped change the course of history.

Now, in our nation, the freedom to speak out and to congregate is enshrined as the First Amendment of our Constitution. We have not always lived up to those high values as a country, as we witnessed here in Ohio students at Kent State gunned down 55 years ago for protesting and speaking out against the Viet Nam war. Through the years we've had to fight to claim and protect this cherished right to speak.

Last week, the League of Women Voters, a venerable, nonpartisan organization, issued a statement in response to deploying the National Guard against largely peaceful protestors in Los Angeles in the face of violent and repressive police action. The statement says,

This administration is assaulting concerned Americans to silence voices of dissent. The President's overreach signals a larger crackdown on protests across the country meant to intimidate us from speaking out

The President declared the protests as rebellion against the United States, a characterization he uses as his basis for overstepping his presidential powers to subvert the First Amendment right to association and protest.

A functioning democracy must ensure that we the people can hold our government accountable without fear of violence from the government.

And on Thursday, during a press conference, the Secretary of Homeland Security Noem said that “we”—federally controlled troops—will “liberate” Los Angeles from the “socialists” and “burdensome leadership” of the governor and mayor. Now, a federal takeover would be obviously and wildly illegal and unjustifiable. At that point, Senator Padilla of California identified himself and tried to ask questions. He spoke up. He was pushed out of the room, forced to the ground and handcuffed.

And yesterday, estimates from 5 to 11 million people peacefully demonstrated in over 2,000 cities and town across the United States, speaking out against the authoritarian actions of the President and his allies in congress and saying that the President is not a king, but serves the people and the Constitution.

In the Book of Acts, Paul and his friends were traveling around speaking about the Jesus Way, as they understood it, a path of love, justice and inclusiveness. They faced fierce opposition and angry mobs, accusing him of disobeying the laws of the emperor. Today, they might be accused of being “un-American” or unpatriotic. They might be villainized and accused of rebellion. So

as they were facing these threats, Paul has this vision in which God speaks to him: “Do not be afraid. Speak! Do not be silent!”

He is asked to exercise the power of speech. That the way of Jesus is the way of God—compassion, unity with all—outcasts and outsiders, siding with the poor, the sick, the forgotten, the weak. Speaking truth to power, challenging the system, challenging injustice, challenging the power of wealth and greed—mammon—that would dominate, oppress and exploit those with lesser means, challenging the Empire and a religion that supports the status quo, and calling forth a “New Kingdom, right here on earth.”

I’ll end with a story told by Pete Seeger, the folk singer, at a small peace demonstration in New York City in the 50’s. He said there was a young Quaker carrying a sign. A passerby scoffed: “Do you really think you’re going to change the world by standing here at midnight with that sign?” “I suppose not,” said the young man. “But I’m going to make sure this world doesn’t change me.”

Speech has power. Words do not fade. What starts as a sound ends in a deed.

That’s why we’re here.

We are called to speak ourselves into a new way of being.

To speak *love* into existence.

To speak *justice* into existence.

To speak *a new world* into existence.

May it be so.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)