

THE KEEPERS OF YOUR SILENCE – Part II

By Michael Ventura

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America declared her independence by breaking an ancient silence -- an ancient taboo. At the time, Europe was a continent of state-enforced religions, where royalty's word was all and all other words could be crushed by law. (Taboo is always a matter of enforced silence.) The United States was the first political entity in human history to postulate verbal freedom for everyone. All our other freedoms depend upon verbal freedom; no matter how badly and how often we've failed that ideal, it still remains our ideal.

Once we broke Europe's verbal taboos, it was only a matter of time before other traditional taboos fell too. As the writer Albert Murray has put it, Americans could not afford piety in their new homeland: "You can't be over-respectful of established forms; you're trying to get through the wilderness of Kentucky." Thus, from the moment the Puritans landed, our famous Puritanism faced an inherent contradiction. How could we domesticate the wilderness of this continent; how could peasants and rejects and "commoners" form a strong and viable nation; how could we develop all the new social forms and technologies necessary to blend all the disparate peoples who came (and who continue to come) here -- how could we accomplish this enormous collective project without violating those same Puritan taboos which are so ingrained, to this day, in our national character?

It can't be over-emphasized that America's fundamental stance against both the taboos of Europe and the taboos of our own Puritans, was our insistence upon freedom of speech. America led the attack against silence. And it is through that freedom, the freedom to break the silence, that we've destroyed so many other taboos. Especially during the last 40 years, we've broken the silence that surrounded ancient taboos of enormous significance. Incest, child abuse, wife-battering, homosexuality, and some (by no means all) forms of racial and gender oppression, are not merely spoken of, and spoken against, they're shouted from the rooftops. Issues that 40 years ago could not be spoken in polite company are now debated in Congress -- and whatever the intentions of, for instance, the gay-baiting clamor now in Congress, the very discussion of the issue gives it more legitimacy than the so-called "Christian" right realizes.

Congressional hysteria aside, many breathe easier because of the inevitable result of the extraordinarily free speech of recent decades. In certain sections of our large cities, for the first time in modern history gay people can live openly and without fear. The feminist movement has made previously forbidden or hidden behaviors both speakable and doable. The National Organization for Women can rail against the Promise Keepers all they want (and they have some good reasons), but when you get a million working-class guys crying and hugging in public, the stoic mask of the American male has definitely cracked. And I'm old enough to remember when it was shocking for women to speak about wanting a career. Now, virtually all affluent young women are expected to want a career.

Fifty years ago, not one important world or national leader was black. Now there are more people of color in positions of influence than ever; and the only world leader with genuine moral authority, Nelson Mandela, is a black African. Bad marriages can be dissolved without social stigma. Children born out of wedlock are not damned as

"bastards" for something that wasn't their fault. A movie star like Jodie Foster can have her child out of wedlock without naming the father, and her career isn't damaged in the slightest -- no one even considers that possibility. (Stars in "the golden age" of Hollywood had "morality clauses" in their contracts; if their taboo behaviors came to public notice, they could be, and often were, fired by their studios.) And those of us who've experienced incest and abuse have finally found a voice, and through our voices we've achieved a certain amount of liberation from shame and pain.

These boons are rooted in our decidedly un-Puritan freedom of speech. No taboo is safe when people have the right to speak.

In the process, though, we've lost the sanctity of silence. We've lost the sense of dark but sacred power inherent in sex, in nature, even in crime. Perhaps that is the price of our new freedoms.

It's also true that by breaking the silence we've thrown ourselves into a state of confusion. The old taboos formed part of society's structure. Without them, that structure has undeniably weakened. We are faced with shoring up the weakened parts, inventing new ways of being together that have pattern and order -- for we cannot live without some pattern and order -- but aren't so restrictive. Without sexual taboos, for instance, what are the social boundaries between men and women? When are they breached? What is offensive? Nobody's sure. Everybody's making mistakes. This is so excruciating that many are nostalgic for some of the old taboos. But once a taboo is broken, then for good or ill it's very hard, perhaps impossible, to reinstate it. Taboos, once destroyed, have returned now and again in modern history; but not often, and, when they have, it hasn't been with anything approximating their original force.

But there is another, subtler confusion: yes, taboos have fallen, but many taboos, equally important, remain. And, both as individuals and as a society, we're strained enough, confused enough, by the results of doing away with so many taboos in so short a time, that maybe we're not terribly eager for our remaining taboos to fall. We may sincerely desire that, but maybe we're tired, fed up, scared. Many people would rather our taboos remain intact for a couple of generations while we get our act together again, and perhaps they have a point. But the price of taboo remains what it's always been: silence and constriction.

What do we see when we pass each other on the street, but many faces molded by the price paid for keeping the silences of the taboos that remain -- spirits confined within their own, and their society's, silences? Even this brief excursion into our public and intimate strictures is enough to demonstrate that we are still a primitive race, hounded by fear and prejudice, with taboos looming in every direction -- no matter how much we brag and/or bitch that modern life is liberating us from all the old boundaries. The word "taboo" still says much more about us than most prefer to admit.

After all, high school is the public institution Americans have most in common, and any high school in the country is a monument to the virulence, terror, and pervasiveness of taboos. Not only do the various colors of skin generally stay to themselves, but the slightest variations in dress, slang, and musical taste can determine a person's isolation or popularity, acceptance or rejection, by any number of cliques. And these are the people who'll be making the rules in 20 or 30 years. We're not done with taboos.

What is the keeper of your silence? The answer to that question is your own guide to your personal taboos. How must you confine yourself in order to get through your day at the job, or to be acceptable in your social circle? The answer to that is your map of

your society's taboos. What makes you most afraid to speak? What desire, what word, what possibility freezes and fevers you at the same time, making any sincere communication out of the question? What makes you vanish into your secret? That's your taboo, baby. You're still in the room, maybe even still smiling, still talking, but not really -- what's really happened is that you've vanished down some hole in yourself, and you'll stay there until you're sure the threat to your taboo is gone and it's safe to come out again. If, that is, you've ever come out in the first place. Some never have.

What utterance, what hint, what insinuation, can quiet a room of family or friends? What makes people change the subject? What makes for guilty laughter? What makes those at a dinner party dismiss a remark as though it wasn't said, or dismiss a person as though he or she wasn't really there? We've all seen conversations suddenly go dead, and just as suddenly divert around a particular person or subject, leaving them behind in the dead space, because something has been said or implied that skirts a silently shared taboo. If that happens to you often, don't kid yourself that you're living in a "free" society. Because you're only as free as your freedom from taboos -- not on some grand abstract level, but in your day-to-day life.

Which is to say: You're only as free as your courage to break your taboos -- to break the silence. The law says you can do it, but the law is on paper. As much as that helps, still, paper can't cover your back. You're on your own, with your taboo and with your courage, or lack of it.

It is probably inherent in the human condition that there are no "last" taboos. Or perhaps it just feels that way because we have such a long way to go. But at least we can know where to look: right in front of our eyes, in the recesses of our speechlessness, in the depths of our silences. And there is nothing for it but to confront the keepers of our silence. Either that, or to submit to being lost, as most of us silently are, without admitting it to each other or to ourselves -- lost in a maze of taboos.

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