

THE KEEPERS OF OUR SILENCE

By Michael Ventura

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Taboos come in all sizes. Big taboos: When I was a kid in the Italian neighborhoods of Brooklyn, to insult someone's mother meant a brutal fight - the kind of fight you don't see in nice neighborhoods, the kind no one interferes with until one of the combatants goes down and stays down. Little taboos: Until the Sixties, it was an insult to use someone's first name without asking or being given permission. Personal taboos: Cyrano de Bergerac would not tolerate the mention of his enormous nose. Taboos peculiar to one city: In Brooklyn again, when the Dodgers still were at Ebbets Field, if you rooted for the Yankees you kept it to yourself unless you wanted a brawl. Taboos, big or small, are always about having to respect somebody's (often irrational) boundaries - or else.

There are taboos shared within one family: My father did not feel free to speak of his grandmother's suicide until his father died. Taboos within intellectual elites: Try putting a serious metaphysical or spiritual slant on a "think-piece" (as we call them in the trade) written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or most big-name magazines - it won't be printed. Taboos in the corporate and legal worlds: If you're male, you had best wear suits of somber colors, or you're not likely to be taken seriously; if you're female, you must strike a very uneasy balance between the attractive and the prim, and even then you might not be taken seriously. Cultural taboos: In the Jim Crow days in the South, a black man who spoke with familiarity to a white woman might be beaten, driven out of town, or, all too often, lynched.

Unclassifiable taboos: In Afghanistan it is now a sin, punishable by beatings and imprisonment, to fly a kite. Sexual taboos: There are few communities on this planet where two men can walk down a street holding hands romantically without being harassed or even arrested; in Afghanistan (a great place for taboos these days) the Taliban would stone them to death. Gender taboos: How many American corporations (or institutions of any kind) promote women to the first ranks of power? National taboos: Until the Seventies, a divorced person could not run for major public office in America (if that taboo hadn't fallen, we would never have had Reagan or Gingrich); today no professed atheist would dare seek the presidency. And a new taboo, born of the breaking of old taboos (and it's about time): Even the most rabid bigot must avoid words like "nigger," "spic," or "kike," during, say, a job interview - and the most macho fool must avoid words like "broad."

Notice that nearly all of our taboos, big and small, public and intimate, involve silence - keeping one's silence, or paying for not keeping it. Yet keeping silent has its own price: for then silence begins to fill the heart - a heart swelling with restraint until it bursts in frustration, anger, even madness.

The taboos hardest on the soul are those which fester in our intimacies - taboos known only to the people involved, taboos that can make us feel alone even with those closest to us. One of the deep pains of marriage - or of brothers and sisters, parents and children, close friends - is that as we grow more intimate, certain silences often become more necessary. We discover taboo areas, both in ourselves and in the other, that cannot be transgressed without paying an awful price. If we speak of them, we may endanger the

relationship; but if we do not speak, if we do not violate the taboo, the relationship may become static and tense, until the silence takes on a life of its own. Such silences are corrosive. They eat at the innards of intimacy until, often, the silence itself causes the very rupture that we've tried to avoid by keeping silent.

You may measure how many taboos constrict you, how many you've surrendered to - at home, at parties, at work, with your lover or your family - by how much of yourself you must suppress. You may measure your life by what you cannot say, do, admit - cannot and must not, and for no better reason than that your actions or words would disrupt the established order. By this measure, most of us live within as strict and complex a system of taboos as the aborigines who gave us the word in the first place.

How fitting it is that the word "taboo" comes from a part of the world where cannibalism is said to be practiced to this day: the islands off eastern Australia. Until 1777, when Captain James Cook published an account of his voyage, the West steamed with taboos but had no word that precisely meant taboo. Cook introduced this useful word to us. Its instant popularity, quick assimilation into most European languages, and constant usage since, are testimony to how much of our lives the word describes. Before the word came to us, we'd ostracized, coerced, exiled, tormented, and murdered each other for myriad infractions (as we still do), but we never had a satisfying word for our reasons.

We needed cannibals to help us describe our behavior - so how "civilized" are we, really? How much "progress" have we made? We don't cook each other for dinner, at least not often - but we still stockpile weapons that can cook the entire world, we organize our national priorities around their "necessity," and it's a national political taboo to seriously cut spending for those planet-cookers. If that's "progress" or "human development," it's lost on me. In China it's taboo to be Christian, in Israel it's taboo to be a Muslim, in Syria it's taboo to be a Jew, in much of the United States it's still taboo to be an atheist, while in American academia it's taboo to be outspokenly religious, and in modern American fiction it's taboo to be deeply metaphysical. Our headlines are full of this stuff. So it's hardly surprising that a cannibal's word still describes us so well.

I'm not denying the necessity for limits (some rational, most not) simply in order to get on with the day - and to try to contain the constant, crazy, never-to-be-escaped longings that blossom in our sleep and distract or compel us while awake. Such longings are why even a comparatively tiny desert tribe like the ancient Hebrews needed commandments and laws against coveting each other's wives, stealing, killing, committing incest. That tribe hadn't seen violent, sexy movies, hadn't listened to rock & roll, hadn't been bombarded with ads featuring half-naked models, and hadn't watched too much TV. They didn't need to. For they were like us, and, like us, their hearts needed no help to instruct them on how to be very, very naughty. The taboo underlying all others is that we must not live by the dictates of our hearts, for the heart is dangerous to society, to family values, to order.

We've always been very clever, very resourceful, when it comes to sneaking around our taboos. The Aztecs killed virgins and called it religion. The Europeans enslaved blacks and called it economics. Americans tease each other sexually and call it fashion. And if we can't kill and screw and steal and betray to our heart's desire, and, in general, violate every taboo in sight - well, we can at least watch other people do it. Or read about it. Or listen to it. As we have done, since ancient times, through every form of art, and entertainment. I've said this before but it bears repeating: The appeal of taboos and our inability to escape our longing for transgression, are why so many people who

call themselves honest and law-abiding spend so much time with movies, operas, soaps, garish trials, novels, songs, Biblical tales, tribal myths, folk stories, Shakespeare - virtually all of which, both the great and the trivial, are about people who dare to violate taboos. It's a little unsettling, when you think of it: The very stuff we say we most object to is the fundamental material of culture.

That's one reason that fundamentalists of all religions are so hostile to the arts. But fundamentalists partake of taboos in the sneakiest fashion of all. If they obsess about eradicating homosexuality, that gives them permission to think obsessively about homosexuality (which of course means imagining homosexual acts) - without guilt! The Taliban of Afghanistan will ride around in jeeps toting guns, searching out any woman who dares show an inch of facial skin or who wears white socks (Taliban men consider white socks provocative), and when they find such a woman they'll jail and beat her because their so-called righteousness gives them permission to obsess about what's forbidden to their so-called morality. American gay-bashers do the same, for the same reason. It's the only way they can permit themselves to touch gay people - which they apparently want to do very badly, risking jail for it. Bashing lets them have their taboo cake and eat it too.

Taboos are a special paradox for Americans. However much we may long for tradition and order, our longings are subverted by the inescapable fact that our country was founded upon a break with tradition and a challenge to order - which is to say, the United States was founded upon the violation of taboos. Its very foundation was a violation, a revolution. Specifically, this country was founded upon the violation of Europe's most suffocating taboo: its feudal suppression of the voices and rights of the common people. We were the first nation on earth to write into law that any human being has the right to say anything, and that even the government is (theoretically) not allowed to silence you. From that moment on, the breaking of taboo after taboo was only a matter of time.

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