

# *The Peace in Silence*

A sermon by Reverend Nathan C. Walker offered on  
Sunday, March 22, 2009 inspired by the Persian Nowruz holiday and  
the play *Scorched* by Wajdi Mouawad

## Readings

**Rev. Nate Walker:** On the Sofre-ye Haft Sin, the Noruz ritual table, we place a playbill and two books that tell the stories of three women from three different cultures and time periods who are forever united by their silence. The first story is of Nawal, the main character in the play *Scorched* written by Wajdi Mouawad, currently being performed at the Wilma Theater. I can honestly say it is one of the most profound, disturbing and inspiring shows seen in my lifetime. It's only playing for one more week and they do offer half-price tickets. Without giving away the riveting plot, here's the story of the lead character.

**Dr. Val Sandberg:** As a teenager, Nawal becomes pregnant before marriage and is not only separated from her beloved, but her newborn son is stripped from her arms and sent to an orphanage. Her dying grandmother makes Nawal promise her to learn to read, to write and to speak in order to gain her independence, inspiring her on a quest to find her son. This quest takes place in the midst of the Lebanese civil war, which plagues her with violence, torture and trauma. It was not until she became a middle-aged woman did she discover who her son had become, evoking flashbacks of the torture she experienced during the war, leaving her mute for five years.

**Rev. Nate:** The second woman we honor this morning is the story of my professor's mother, Judith Neumann. As a fifth-grader, the Romanian government banned Jewish children from school. Shortly after this, Judith was deported to a Russian labor camp. For three years she stayed, sleeping in an oven, and was about to be sent to Auschwitz. Thankfully the war ended and she fled to America, gave birth to a girl, and remained silent about her experiences for 50 years. She never spoke of the harshness of her life in the war, about the resentment and anger out of which her life grew. For fifty years she was driven by her silence, until finally her daughter, my professor, insisted she tell her story, which she finally did<sup>1</sup>. It's told in the book *Learning from Our Lives*.

**Val:** In the acclaimed autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Maya Angelou describes how she was sexually abused and raped by her mother's boyfriend starting at the age of eight. He is found guilty during a trial, but escapes jail time and is murdered, probably by Maya's uncle. Maya feels guilty and withdraws from everyone but her brother. Maya Angelou's description of being raped can be a metaphor for the suffering of her race. Another metaphor, that of a bird struggling to escape its cage, is a central image throughout the work, which consists of a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression. The trauma of this abuse rendered Angelou mute for five years. During this period she began to read widely. Her love of reading coaxes Maya out of her five-year silence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Use of excerpts from chapter 6 *Ways Without Words: Learning from Silence and Story in Post-Holocaust Lives in Learning from Our Lives: Women, Research, and Autobiography in Education* edited by Anna Neumann and Penelope L. Peterson.

<sup>2</sup> The paragraph was compiled with excerpts from various book reviews and biographies including:  
<http://www.africanamericans.com/MayaAngelou.htm>

**Rev. Nate:** On this spring morning, as we celebrate the Persian New Year, we honor the women whose voices have been silenced by trauma, war and discrimination. In their name, we pray that *peace is possible*.

## **Choral Anthem**

*The Peace of Wild Things* ~ Joan Szymko

Lyrics by Wendell Berry

*When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

## **Sermon**

### Introduction

Silence. The absence of sound. The embrace of all that is quiet. The abstention from speaking. The avoidance of mentioning. A moment of silence, the state of standing still without words to pay respect for someone deceased. Silence can be a spiritual practice, a coping mechanism, an act of passive aggression, an act of ignorance; silence can be a gift, a weapon, an ointment that can heal a wound. On this spring equinox, it is silence that brings us together. Silence is both the gift and the burden we seek to balance as we turn to the lives of three women: a Persian Lebanese, a Romanian Jew, and an African American. Three women, three time periods, one commonality: silence.

### Nawal

Lebanon, just north of Israel, broke into Civil War during the year of my birth, 1975 and ended in 1990. During this 15-year period, there were an estimated 250,000 civilian fatalities. An additional 1 million people were wounded, and over half the population left with lifetime disabilities. For the lead character in the play, *Scorched*, Nawal was destined to live with the mental disabilities that resulted from trauma, torture and rape.

To speak of such tragedies, to recount such pain, is counter to the intent of the Noruz festival – a time for new beginnings, for laughter, for poetry – a time to celebrate life. And that is indeed our intent, to celebrate life while recognizing the fragility of it.

Nawal was but a fragile, innocent teen when she said to her love, “something is alive in my belly.” She couldn’t understand why her family, her culture would banish this unmarried couple from seeing one another, strip her of her newborn, and shame her with silence. The absence of her newborn was deafening, leading Nawal on an epoch search for the babe taken from her.

This quest was made possible because she left the village and learned to read, to write, to speak, which was the fulfillment of her grandmother's dying wish. Little did her grandmother know that Nawal would be trapped in the cross fire of civil war – trapped by the silence of a charred bus that she escaped before it was set fire with a dozen men, women and children still on it. She survived the war, but not until being imprisoned, tortured and raped.

After being released she immigrated to America to begin a new life. Nawal gave birth to twins and never told them of her horror. Her silence was not only a defense mechanism for her self but an act of love for her children – silence protect them from her past, granting them a future of innocence.

The silence was broken when Nawal testified at an international tribunal, where she confronts the man who tortured her. The results of that event, reliving that trauma, had a piercing effect on her – she was left mute for five years. The twins did not know why she refused to speak, they built resentments, feeling that her silent treatment was an act of abuse.

So the twins emotionally detached and were bound by their own anger. They were finally released from the resentments when upon their mother's death, her dying wish was made known: her will instructed them to discover the truth of her story, in turn their own birth story, which shattered their identities. At times the truth leaves them speechless, ultimately understanding that the silence they once perceived as a weapon was but a vulnerable gift of a mother's love.

How is it that silence can be both a coping mechanism in the midst of trauma and yet be perceived as an act of violence for those whom loose their loved ones to it. Silence can be healing for those who choose it and torture for those who are subject to the silence.

### Judith

My professor was haunted by her mother's silence, which was a direct result of her mother, Judith, having survived a Russian labor camp during World War II.

My professor writes, "If she hadn't spoken, perhaps it was for a good reason, that it might hurt too much, that she'd have to recall something horrible, that I would have to hear it and live with it and live also with knowing that for much of our life, together, I just hadn't asked, or that I hadn't asked in ways that would help her talk. But I was also frustrated and angry in realizing how her life had simply not entered into mine..."

My professor was compelled to ask, to sit her mother down and ask her to tell her story into a recording device. Over several sessions, Judith began to find her voice, recounting stories that should be left for the theatre, not accounts of real life. My professor asked her mother why after 50 years she did not tell her story, "Because I wanted you to think about good things when you were young," she said, "If I didn't have a good life, I wanted you to have a better one."

Imagine, silence offered as a gift. Imagine, silence received as the absence of a relationship. In lies the dilemma of the healing and harming power of silence.

## Maya

Maya Angelou, one of the prophetic women of our time, gave voice to the silence that she experienced as a child as depicted in her book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She says, "At fifteen life had taught me undeniably that surrender... was as honorable as resistance, especially if one had no choice." To surrender to silence can be as honorable as resisting abuse, fighting to be heard. Her silence was not only a product of rape, nor of the guilt she felt when her rapist was murdered, but because of the racism she experienced.

For example, her brother Bailey asked "Uncle Willie, why do the [white people] hate us so much?" Uncle Willie muttered, "They don't really hate us. They don't know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared." The fact is we are all mostly scared – the suffering of these three stories, these three women, were born of someone's fear.

## Born of Someone's Fear

Someone feared the stigma that would come from a child born out of wedlock and stripped Nawal from knowing her own son; Someone feared one's neighbor, which resulted in civil war; someone feared the Romanian Jew; someone's feared the Negroe – all this fear resulted in the violence that silenced someone special.

Like Nawal, Maya was mute for 5 years, and each found that education had set them free, the art of learning helped them find their voice. Nawal became a teacher of language, Maya a literary giant, aware now that their initial silence was but a temporary way to garner strength. Judith worked diligently so her daughter would have an education, a daughter who eventually became a professor at Columbia University – a mother's silence set her daughter free to achieve the American dream.

The women we honor today are but three of the millions of stories that will never be told, lost in the silence of the ages.

## Iranian New Year

This silence calls us today, on this Iranian New Year – a day to celebrate rebirth, an equinox holiday calling us to achieve a new kind of balance in all our relations.

That means, we must first, not remain silent to the historic conflicts we have with Iran. Nor should we remain silent about our participation in those conflicts. Our history is tumultuous, painful and complicated. As Maya once wrote, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, and if faced with courage, need not be lived again."

One way to face our past with courage is to first distinguish our respect for Persian culture between that of the unjust actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran... we must also distinguish between America's highest ideas and when we fall short of those principles, as seen in the torture we inflicted on the Muslim detainees in Guantánamo Bay.

Who knows what torturous silence will result from our country's actions or from the abuses of another country. I have come to believe that this horrific pattern can only be healed by our collective commitment to give voice to those who have been silenced.

In this spirit, the following poem by Maya Angelou is offered, entitled "Caged Bird."

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips [her] wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down [her] narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
[her] bars of rage  
[her] wings are clipped and  
[her] feet are tied  
so [s]he opens [her] throat to sing.

The cage bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and [her] tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn  
and [she] names the sky her own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
[her] shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
[her] wings are clipped and [her] feet are tied  
so [s]he opens [her] throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and [her] tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.