

Providence College

DigitalCommons@Providence

Common Reading Essay Contest Winners

Common Reading Program

2016

Silence vs. Speaking: An Investigation of I Am Malala

Alyssa Parsons

Providence College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/cr_essays



Part of the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#)

Parsons, Alyssa, "Silence vs. Speaking: An Investigation of I Am Malala" (2016). *Common Reading Essay Contest Winners*. 9.

https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/cr_essays/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Common Reading Program at DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Common Reading Essay Contest Winners by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact dps@providence.edu.

Second Place: 2016 Common Reading Program Essay Contest

Silence vs. Speaking: An Investigation of *I Am Malala*

The riveting story, *I Am Malala*, written by Pakistani-born female education activist Malala Yousafzai, discusses the tension created between silence and speaking. The tension revealed in this work is similar to that created in the World War II poem, "First they came..." by Martin Niemöller. Niemöller discusses the choice to keep silent in order to keep himself safe in Nazi Germany but realizes no one is left to speak up for him when his time comes. Although humans, by nature, live to protect themselves and those they love from harm, Malala explains that in order to make the world a better place for future generations and save it from more harm, it is important to break the tension and speak up for what is right.

Prior to reading Chapter 11 of *I Am Malala*, I knew the poem "First they came..." by Martin Niemöller. The poem indicates that silence is often fueled by fear, and that fear is often fueled by innate selfishness. I read this poem first as a middle schooler without much background on World War II or the extent to which the Holocaust affected the world. However, even with little background, I knew the poem's central message: to speak up for what is right. Written as a first-person narrative, Niemöller's poem appears as a confession to the audience in regret of not speaking up when he had the chance. The speaker in Niemöller's poem decides that it is better to keep silent when Hitler sends the Nazis to kill the socialists, trade unionists, and Jews, solely because he is not a member of those groups. Each time the speaker decides not to speak up, he is choosing to ostracize himself more and more from society and humanity. This poem is placed in Malala's story to show what happens on the opposing side, those who keep quiet. Even in Malala's story, she claims to disagree with the speaker. The repetition of the words "I" and "speak" indicate the tension between silence and speaking. Each time the words are repeated, it

Alyssa Parsons
Class of 2020

is as though they are being echoed in the speaker's head, haunting him. The speaker dying at the end of the poem reveals the failure that came with keeping silent. Niemöller encourages his audience to "speak," not hold their tongues like the speaker did in his poem, leaving "no one left to speak" for him. The words "I" and "speak" are an indirect way of Niemöller speaking up for what he believes in by writing the poem. He and Malala are one-in-the-same in that aspect.

Although Niemöller's poem and Malala's story take place in two different settings during two different time periods, the central message is the same: speak. The speaker in Niemöller's poem fears Hitler, the Nazis, and rejection from society; Malala lives in a world in fear of the Taliban. However, Malala rises above her fear and speaks out, knowing she is putting her life in danger. She openly speaks about the wrongs of the Taliban and eliminating female education. She writes blogs about her life under Taliban rule for the BBC under a pseudonym. Most heroically, she takes responsibility for her actions when the Taliban attacked her bus on the way home from school in search of her. "Who is Malala?" they demanded, and surely enough, without hesitation, she proudly claimed to be herself with no blame given to others or regret for her actions. Even though she suffered critical gunshot wounds to her head, and it was a miracle she survived, she continued her work as a female education activist after her recovery. Unfortunately, Malala and her family had to leave Pakistan because the Taliban promised to kill her if they ever saw her there again. However, Malala still works to raise money and awareness for female education from her new home in Birmingham, England. Even though it is no longer safe for her there, Malala dreams of returning home to Swat to see her friends, loved ones, and the hometown she had to leave behind.

Speaking up takes courage, but it is a chain reaction. Someone, like Malala, had to take the initiative to speak up first to inspire others to do the same.