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Silence vs. Spirit: The Merit of Speaking Out

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Third Place: 2016 Common Reading Program Essay Contest

Silence vs. Spirit: The Merit of Speaking Out

Martin Niemöller's poem "First they came..." chronicles the crippling fear and tension between action and inaction with which Nazi Germany was plagued almost a century ago. The poem's relevance to Malala Yousafzai's story and its mention in Chapter 11 of her book, *I Am Malala*, demonstrates the poem's timelessness and applicability to worldwide current events.

Reading "First they came..." gave me a feeling of hopelessness and despair, a common effect of works crafted during the Second World War. More than that, however, I felt a sense of urgency – a call to action. The poem encourages readers to speak out against injustices done to others, even if they are not directly affected, and warns that if readers stay silent, there will be "no one left" to fight for them (12).

During World War II, a plethora of groups, both ethnic and social, were targeted for their beliefs. As the scope of victims expanded, some (like the speaker of "First they came...") chose to remain silent and hope for the best. Unfortunately, as the poem details, this approach cost many their lives. Similarly, the Taliban's attacks on women's rights and education in modern day Afghanistan and Pakistan enraged many, yet many remained silent for fear of retaliation. And as the masses cowered, the enemy grew stronger uninhibited. People who thought they were safe, like women who wore their burqas and prayed according to proper laws of religion, turned out not to be as the Taliban grew more and more coercive. Their silence did them no good in the end, as they were still flogged in the streets and murdered by suicide bombers.

Luckily, Malala and her father, Ziauddin, choose to learn from the mistakes of speaker of "First they came...". Enraged by the Taliban's restraints on women's education, Malala knows she

cannot stay silent. Instead of hushing her because she was a child – and female, at that – her father encourages her to stand up for what she believes in. As new opportunities to express the need for women’s education arise, Malala dives in head first, when to most others such action is unthinkable.

Malala participates in interviews and even a bit of reality television to get her cause noticed. She does what she knows is right, even in the face of danger. And as she grows more popular and well-known, the country grows dangerous, and death threats begin streaming in.

Though these threatening letters and events strike fear in Ziauddin’s heart, he remains strong and urges his daughter to do the same. Malala is courageous and claims, “Nobody can stop death; it doesn’t matter if it comes from a Talib or cancer. So I should do whatever I want to do” (224). And she does.

Malala watches other schools get blown up and shut down, and though she is not yet affected, she still speaks out, unlike the speaker in “First they came...”. She refuses to wait until it’s too late, even though her family and community warn her to stop before she is killed. And when disaster finally does strike Malala and her school is forced to close for all female students, she is comforted by the fact that she has done and will continue to do everything in her power to end the discrimination.

Malala is eventually shot for her outspokenness and advocacy of female education rights. But because of her popularity and fame as an activist, she is able to receive the proper healthcare which saves her life. Had she never spoken out, she may not have been shot. But with no rights, no freedom, and no education, she would have been better off dead.

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The central messages of “First they came...” and *I Am Malala* are, as we say in physics, opposite but equal. The former warns silence in the face of injustice leads to self-destruction, while the latter insists we help ourselves by standing up for others, even when opposed by danger and obstacles on every front. According to Malala, “If you want to achieve a goal, there will be hurdles in your way, but you must continue” (295). When faced with the decision to remain silent or speak out, taking action is the difference between life and death.