

ACTIVITY 51

Speaking Up against Injustice

Purpose: Analyze a spoken-word presentation about the consequences of silence in the face of unfairness and injustice and the power of choosing to speak up instead.

ADVISOR NOTES:

1. Re-crafting Exit Cards into an Opening Routine

If you had your advisees submit exit cards in Activity 50, you can incorporate them into your opening routine. For example, type up some of the recurring or thought-provoking comments and questions and then cut them into strips so each strip has one comment or question.

Then give one strip to each advisee and have them read them aloud in a **Wraparound** before discussing what they noticed. Visit facinghistory.org/advisory-media to learn about this teaching strategy. Alternatively, you could use this activity's first journal prompt for a "quote of the day" opening routine rather than the suggested journal reflection.

2. References to Activities 48–49

If you did not do Activity 48 or Activity 49, skip the second part of the journal prompt. Your advisees can respond to the first and third questions instead.

PROCEDURE:

1. Reflect on the Nature of Silence in the Decision-Making Process

- Ask advisees to respond in their journals to the following quotation from Martin Luther King Jr. Let them know that they will be sharing their responses with their peers. If your group would like some guidance, you can give them some questions like the ones suggested below to prompt their thinking:

"In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends." —Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

- What does King want people to consider about the power of language and silence?
- Which do you think is more powerful, the "words of enemies" or the "silence of friends"? What makes you say that?
- Invite advisees to share their ideas with a partner or in triads.

APPROXIMATE TIME:
30 minutes

MATERIALS:

VIDEO

The Danger of Silence
(see facinghistory.org/advisory-media)

READING

"The Danger of Silence"
Transcript

2. Watch and Discuss a Short Video about the Consequences of Silence

- Play the video **The Danger of Silence** (04:18) at facinghistory.org/advisory-media. This video features a TED@NYC presentation delivered by teacher, author, and activist Clint Smith. Then pass out the reading **"The Danger of Silence" Transcript**, which is available in 40 languages on TED's website if you have advisees who are English Language Learners. If you have time, show the video again while your advisees have the transcript in front of them.
- Ask advisees to underline one to three moments in the text that resonate with them. Perhaps the moment raises a question, sparks debate, connects to them personally, or helps shed light on a new understanding.
- Divide the advisory into small groups and use the **Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn** strategy to discuss Smith's presentation (visit facinghistory.org/advisory-media to learn about this teaching strategy).
- Then form a circle and ask advisees to think about how they would complete one of the following sentence starters, which they will share in a **Wraparound** and use to discuss Smith's TED Talk together (visit facinghistory.org/advisory-media to learn about this teaching strategy).
 - After watching and discussing "The Danger of Silence," I am thinking about . . .
 - After watching and discussing "The Danger of Silence," I wonder . . .
 - I used to think _____, but after watching and discussing "The Danger of Silence," now I think . . .



"The Danger of Silence" Transcript

Directions: As you listen to Clint Smith's TED Talk, underline two or three moments in the text that resonate with you for some reason. Perhaps the moments raise a question, spark debate, connect to you personally, or shed light on a new understanding about the ways we choose to respond when we witness an injustice.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in a 1968 speech where he reflects upon the civil rights movement, states, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends."

As a teacher, I've internalized this message. Every day, all around us, we see the consequences of silence manifest themselves in the form of discrimination, violence, genocide, and war. In the classroom, I challenge my students to explore the silences in their own lives through poetry. We work together to fill those spaces, to recognize them, to name them, to understand that they don't have to be sources of shame. In an effort to create a culture within my classroom where students feel safe sharing the intimacies of their own silences, I have four core principles posted on the board that sits in the front of my class, which every student signs at the beginning of the year: read critically, write consciously, speak clearly, tell your truth.

And I find myself thinking a lot about that last point, tell your truth. And I realized that if I was going to ask my students to speak up, I was going to have to tell my truth and be honest with them about the times where I failed to do so.

So I tell them that growing up, as a kid in a Catholic family in New Orleans, during Lent I was always taught that the most meaningful thing one could do was to give something up, sacrifice something you typically indulge in to prove to God you understand his sanctity. I've given up soda, McDonald's, french fries, french kisses, and everything in between. But one year, I gave up speaking. I figured the most valuable thing I could sacrifice was my own voice, but it was like I hadn't realized that I had given that up a long time ago. I spent so much of my life telling people the things they wanted to hear instead of the things they needed to, told myself I wasn't meant to be anyone's conscience because I still had to figure out being my own, so sometimes I just wouldn't say anything, appeasing ignorance with my silence, unaware that validation doesn't need words to endorse its existence. When Christian [a peer] was beat up for being gay, I put my hands in my pocket and walked with my head down as if I didn't even notice. I couldn't use my locker for weeks because the bolt on the lock reminded me of the one I had put on my lips when the homeless man on the corner looked at me

with eyes up merely searching for an affirmation that he was worth seeing. I was more concerned with touching the screen on my Apple than actually feeding him one. When the woman at the fundraising gala said, "I'm so proud of you. It must be so hard teaching those poor, unintelligent kids," I bit my lip, because apparently we needed her money more than my students needed their dignity.

We spend so much time listening to the things people are saying that we rarely pay attention to the things they don't. Silence is the residue of fear. It is feeling your flaws gut-wrench guillotine your tongue. It is the air retreating from your chest because it doesn't feel safe in your lungs. Silence is Rwandan genocide. Silence is Katrina. It is what you hear when there aren't enough body bags left. It is the sound after the noose is already tied. It is charring. It is chains. It is privilege. It is pain. There is no time to pick your battles when your battles have already picked you.

I will not let silence wrap itself around my indecision. I will tell Christian that he is a lion, a sanctuary of bravery and brilliance. I will ask that homeless man what his name is and how his day was, because sometimes all people want to be is human. I will tell that woman that my students can talk about transcendentalism like their last name was Thoreau, and just because you watched one episode of *The Wire* doesn't mean you know anything about my kids. So this year, instead of giving something up, I will live every day as if there were a microphone tucked under my tongue, a stage on the underside of my inhibition. Because who has to have a soapbox when all you've ever needed is your voice?¹

1 Clint Smith, "The Danger of Silence," TED@NYC Talk, July 2014, accessed June 27, 2018, https://www.ted.com/talks/clint_smith_the_danger_of_silence.