

Silence Is Beholden



Kathy Simons (WTSLA Chapter President), Photo © John Livzey, 2017

Pakistani female-education activist Malala Yousafzai said, “When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.” She would know. When she spoke up for her right to an education she paid an extremely dear price. She was shot in an attempt to quell her activism, to silence her. Of course, it didn’t work. And her voice was heard around the world. But what she knew and what we all must also know and support is that there is an even greater price to silence. It’s a price that many of us have already paid through action and inaction, on a small and sometimes grand scale, and individually and collectively, but we have all paid that price in one way or another. And I would love to say that we should all just stop, send back the bill, and bring justice to the world through our collective listening! Well, that would be great, but the world ain’t like that. So, what do we do?

Society is like an ocean liner. It doesn’t change course quickly. So, I never expect people to transform overnight. But recent events in society have brought these thoughts to light and seem to be propelling change at quicker rate. We are at a unique moment in time. From politics to entertainment to transportation, we are undergoing a profound period of self-examination. And that’s a great thing. So, again, while it is very easy to say, “Speak up, always, ever, and fight any and every injustice!” Well, life is never that simple. And I don’t expect it to be. So, what I’d like to talk to you about is not the extremely courageous lone voice that found extraordinary courage in a challenging situation. Fortunately, that voice sometimes gets the recognition it deserves. I want to talk to you about the *silence*.

Silence may be golden in some situations. Early each weekend morning it’s worth more than gold. But I’m talking about a different kind of silence, a much more self-aware silence, one that also generates a feeling of unease or discomfort during an event or a situation. A silence when you know that something around you is not right, but you don’t feel safe to speak up. It’s hard. The strength in numbers can also be prohibitive. And when the crowd is silent, it’s much easier to keep your head down and avoid conflict. I totally understand. We’ve all done it. But maybe recent events are a wake-up call giving us a new opportunity, an opportunity to look to each other for even greater support. Because, after all, isn’t that why we joined WTS-LA?

Eleven bold women founded WTS because they got tired of being silent, tired of the silence around them. They were tired of seeing others advance ahead of them whether they were more qualified or not. They were tired of being thought of as lesser. So, they found a very unique way to speak up. And it worked. Though, obviously, workplace equality has not been “solved,” I think every one of those 11 women are damn proud of the effect WTS has had on the transportation industry and beyond. They should be. We owe them all a debt of gratitude for speaking up. But more importantly, to truly honor their effort, we need

to use WTS-LA to even greater effect in terms of providing a safe place for even the quietest voice to be heard.

When one voice is raised and another joins it, power becomes action. WTS-LA is that action in transportation. It has changed the transportation industry forever and for better. WTS-LA is that supportive community that *adds* voices to lone dissent. The chapter empowers women and men to make the industry fairer and more equitable. And one important way we do that is through listening, by finding that one voice that's speaking up about something of import and giving it support and a safe platform for airing. WTS-LA is *your* sounding board. It's your group. It's your strength in numbers. Use it. And if you see that silence around you in a different context, use WTS-LA as a model to help end that silence and create another equally sensitive and supportive group. Make WTS-LA a model for ending the silence.

When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful. Malala, we hear you. And through WTS-LA, we promise to help others learn to hear as well.

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