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## DON'T GO THERE: THE QUESTION OF SILENCE

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I want to speak about silence as a sensibility, about understanding when to step back from the impulse to speak out—or scream out—in the name of the Almighty Principle of Honesty or the less virtuous principle to Tell All, about measuring a writer's or a person's motivation when they do choose to speak out, about how and why to effectively pull back toward taciturnity, if not tactical prudence, otherwise known as diplomacy, and still get your point or message or character or story across, though perhaps not before a bit of genre cross-dressing—sensibilities we might do well to consider, not so much as an agenda in a moral value system—although there's that, and no denying it—but as an esthetic challenge, as a matter of virtuosity.

Over the past several months, in discussing these issues with a few of my colleagues and compatriots who write nonfiction or fiction or both, we readily agreed that confession has a meritorious personal use as catharsis, but in our society confession also has become a source of banality, as well as industry, which has a predisposition to elevate such behavior into the spotlights and market it. Everything is for sale. Slept with your father? Terrific. Been stoned since you were six years old? Marvelous. Have a hankering for little boys and are considering joining the priesthood? Wow. Fascinating. Ruining everybody in your multi-national corporation? Genius! One might expect here a good old fashioned public shunning of the cheap, the ignorant, the vulgar, the venal, of heedless self-interest, but it becomes difficult to shun what you're indifferent to, jaded by, or profit from.

You've all heard the expression, often spoken dismissively or with distaste, That's more than I need to know. I don't particularly like the expression, because personally I think I need to know everything from A thru Z, alpha through omega, every eye-popping detail of Eros and every grim truth of Thanatos, though what I need to know and what I want or need to write are as qualitatively different as apples and oranges. Yet I would extrapolate from that and point to a trend in contemporary nonfiction, which carries as its trademark or badge of honor the impulse to tell us much more than we need to know, and it seems to me the motivation for the surplus of information in such work, when it is not entertainment or titillation, is more often than not vengeance, which I happen to think is a legitimate motivation in writing, when it constitutes a moral decision based on righteousness.

A personal decision however based on self-righteousness and sanctimony—not so fine. Living well isn't the best revenge; writing well, and ruthlessly, is the best revenge, but not when it's secondary to a writer's lack of self-awareness, because of hubris or narcissism or pettiness or blinding ambition. Then, the impulse toward revenge flips and becomes, paradoxically, self-indicting. And woe to the writer that makes such a mistake in judgement.

Because it's obvious to any audience, any reader, whether an author pens a mass email or a blog or a personal essay or memoir, when that author is spinning or exploiting

personal tragedy or crisis for the purpose of self-marketing or self-aggrandizement, or is wrapping herself or himself in the shrouds of victimhood to emerge not far down the road as a type of self-acclaimed hero. In that respect, my wife and I sometimes talk about what we call the Samantha syndrome.

Samantha is my wife's niece, the daughter of my wife's dead sister, and we adopted Samantha when she was 11 years old. She's now 21 but her M.O. hasn't changed. Her My Space site brags of shoplifting, daily drunkenness, and her sexual preference: orgies. Oh my God, Samantha will say, my life is so messed up, this is what makes me unique, and therefore worthy of your utmost attention and respect. I want entry level employment at the level of princess. But of course that's an adolescent perspective—she is certainly not unique because of the hardships and foul luck and pain she has endured, and to drape herself in the mantle of victimhood is just another working angle of a narcissistic pathology. (On the other hand, to explore the complexities and dimensions of one's own suffering—or angst or anger—is an essential exercise in developing one's own humanity and fulfills the Aristotelean mandate to Know thyself, a goal not available to the relentlessly immature and self-absorbed.)

As many of you know, when you teach or attend a nonfiction writing workshop, oftentimes you find yourself automatically thrown face first into other people's laundry baskets, an experience, you might agree, that's anthropologically fascinating and at times downright scary. I've had students I've had to call the cops on because their writing, as well as their behavior, was menacingly unstable; students writing with great anger about their parents who quickly managed to transfer that anger to me; and students who were as explicit about their sexual lives as the Forum column in Penthouse magazine.

Which brings us to an important question, and closer to the heart of the matter—what you write and how you write it and why you write it. It's just as apropos to examine society here as it is its journalistic or literary mirror. Beyond the self-made traps of insincerity and titillation, when are you revealing too much? Oftentimes it's impossible to know, or foresee the consequences, until you get a response from your audience, right? Back in the late 90s, when Robert Dole went on television to sell boner medicine, I certainly felt that this was a topic I did not need to be discussing with 12 year old Samantha, who naturally wanted to know what erectile dysfunction was and did she have it? Nor did I want to have impeachment-era arguments with her about whether or not blowjobs were sex.

But the tables turned on me in 1997, when I published a cover story for Harper's titled Missing Children: One Couple's Anguished Attempt to Conceive a Child. My brother, a physician in Virginia, stopped speaking to me because the article mentioned that my wife had had an abortion when she was sixteen, and it was my brother's opinion that this revelation, tied to the byline Shacochois, damaged his reputation and good standing in his community. And I could never have imagined all the hate mail that poured into the magazine for three years running, the most egregious vitriolic missives culled by the editors and used to heat up their Letters to the Editor column. Someone wrote that I should: Help poor and disadvantaged children. Do charity work. Make friends. Adopt a dog. Get a life. It's a lot more constructive than assuming the world revolves around you and your problems.

Another woman wrote: Thank you for another essay from a childless, lifeless

couple unable to conceive. This miserable account of a pair of neurotic, over-achieving yuppies just reinforces two stereotypes I thought we'd left behind in the 50s. The first is that no woman can make any meaning out of her life without bearing a child, and the other is that a woman who undergoes an abortion will endure forever a psyche damaged beyond the hope of repair. Why do some women seem to think that their only valid role is that of mother? This woman—meaning my wife—seems so desperate to become a mother that this desperation is itself enough to make us thankful that she cannot conceive.

Do I regret writing the piece? Of course not. The article appeared at the exact moment in American society when advances in artificial reproduction technology were converging with a boomer population of females who were ageing beyond their natural ability to have a child. The piece, a personal narrative, was a wake up call to couples who wanted to start families to get cracking, if they didn't want to find themselves stuck where my wife and I found ourselves, mired in sorrow. Do I regret my brother's response. Well, frankly, screw him. Do I regret exposing my wife to such ugliness? I very much regret that. Talk about Faustian bargains! Could I have fictionalized the same material and expected the same effect—that is, helping to encourage a dialogue in society about an issue with enormous implications and profound consequences? No, because it was a story that had immediate communal value which would have been diminished by the filter of art, which needs to simmer longer in the culture before it produces a lasting impact.

But perhaps sometimes in a nonfiction workshop what we need to tell a student is to fictionalize his or her experience because they have not evolved far enough beyond their sense of victimhood, of literal, tactile and cosmic unfairness, to ever elevate their stories beyond their blinding sense of, and typical admiration of, Self, the dismal morass of one-dimensional behavior where that personality and spirit seem, one hopes only temporarily, stuck. Fiction, at least, would render moot the illusion of honesty. But I'm trying to be honest, they cry in self-justification, and we have to tell them, Not really. There's an art to honesty which you have yet to master.

Over the years I've had too many arguments with too many fiction writers—novelists, to be precise; short story writers don't usually go there, because they already are stamped by novelists, and the market, with an inferiority complex-- about nonfiction, a genre I love and find magnificently creative and full of literary potential and achievement, which some of my fiction writing colleagues hold in contempt. It seems to me that writers who disdain nonfiction because they think it's a lesser form also display a tendency to underestimate the power and purpose and consequence of reality as it is transferred into prose and appears on a page, and overestimate its capacity to carry truth forward to a reader. And they often seem to overlook an essential cosmic irony—that the opposite of a lie is the truth, but the opposite of one profound truth might very well be another profound truth.

As for nonfiction writers themselves, their Achilles heel seems to center on the concept of honesty, a human trait which can operate as both virtue and myth. In this respect, let me suggest something you might take issue with, that the true essence of loyalty is not fidelity per se but silence. Just ask Paul Wolfowitz or David Addington. Or, conversely, take a look at that idiot Douglas Feith. Or just ask your own spouse if he or she has ever had an extra-marital affair and pray they have the good sense to not answer

your inopportune question.

Let me therefore introduce to you Stephen Chambers, a bad guy in my new novel partially modeled after my own father, who, like Chambers, was high up in the American government and, regrettably, a pedophile. Now, there are many reasons I will never write about my father and his destruction of our family in nonfiction, but one of the core reasons is esthetic. Fiction understands that the perp is often more intriguing, more compelling, more morally complex and conflicted than the victim. Anybody who watches *Law and Order* gets this. In first-person nonfiction, we gaze upon a victim and think justice. In fiction, our allegiance often falls on the other side of the divide: we gaze upon the perp and think dramatic tension, character development, art, and irresolution, which is the opposite of redemption. Redemption for bad guys is usually a con.

Anyway, I want to read a short passage about the pragmatic nature of Stephen Chambers' moral universe. The exact context takes too much explanation, but you'll recognize the political context, and the literary context, instantly. Here's the passage, and it echoes something Winston Churchill said during World War Two, that "sometimes the truth must be protected by a bodyguard of lies." : He lied to his daughter, as he would always lie to everyone, as protocol, as policy, as a matter of prudence, because not to lie placed lives in jeopardy, and to tell the truth exposed a weakness in character—to not lie was an act of vanity. End of quote.

Or, I would add, in some situations, to not keep silent is an act of vanity, or professional aggrandizement, or ratings and profit. I was reminded of this vice just last week when the NBC newscast, in memorializing the death of Tony Snow, showed a year-old newsclip of David Gregory, a broadcast journalist I would prefer to admire than loathe, interviewing Tony Snow after his cancer had returned and asking, "You're about to lose the one thing you've always said is most precious to you, the chance to watch your three young children grow up. How does that feel?" Excuse me, what? How does it feel to be dying and leaving a fatherless family behind??? What? Predictably Tony Snow's eyes misted up and although he tried to choke back his grief he could not speak. In this instance, Gregory's so-called journalistic instincts, which informed nobody and served nothing, were outrageous and repugnant. Where are the chemicals in his brain that nature put there in order to make us able to edit ourselves? He simply proved himself to be an emotional predator, and I'm sorry, but I can very easily imagine a reporter with this type of sensibility at Auschwitz, asking—You're about to be gassed by the Nazis: How does it feel?

Anyway, where do you go when you want to tell or explore personal experience that really can't withstand the merciless blast of light that comes with reality—of course you turn to fiction, although this choice wouldn't be true over the past 25 years or so, which have seen a radical reversal of this traditional course, with writers racing away from autobiographical fiction, which is the only type of fiction many of them can write, to jump on the memoir bandwagon.

But at least fiction renders moot the falsehood that honesty is always a virtue. In nonfiction honesty smacks of vanity to me when it comes nicely decorated with pretty ribbons of self-delusion and denial, when it's clear the author might have done a much more effective job, artistically, esthetically, psychologically, honestly, dealing with the fact of his or her trauma, by fictionalizing the material, and thus liberating the writer from

the crushing weight of Self and the illusion of honesty, in which honesty serves self, rather than community—the Me Society versus the We Society (thank you Michael Moore) that we often heard the presidential candidates braying about on during the primaries—in which honesty serves self rather than universal truth, and perhaps it's fair to ask what's the Faustian bargain being made here, and how does it apply to literature, and what's its impact on culture.

Those of us who teach fiction workshops often try to bolster our students courage by telling them, When you write, write as if everyone you know is dead. But I'm beginning to wonder if this is the worst possible advice to pass on to students in a nonfiction workshop. Maybe we should tell these students to write nonfiction as if everyone they know or have known is very much alive, and their feelings, their humanity, their lives, must be taken into account, for the sake of your own soul, and for the sake of the integrity of the work of literary art you are trying to create. This sensibility doesn't mean darkness must be cast aside for light, that villains are no longer villains, but it does mean you have to empathize with them—and if these terms aren't agreeable to you, for God's sake, write fiction.

Because the fact remains the pen is mightier than the sword and can just as readily kill or maim, not just politically, as we know all too well throughout history, but spiritually, emotionally, psychologically. How much pain can you absorb? And then, as a writer, how much pain can you articulate? Or cause? No matter how good you are with words, no matter how deft and accurate, there are going to be places—black holes in human existence—that are beyond your powers. War is Number One, and of course certain levels of atrocity. On the one hand they should be publicized, on the other they evade description—if only because description perpetuates the illusion that the atrocities have been “captured”, when in their larger reality they cannot be captured. In this way certain writing can be seen as really bad translation of an original text—and best not published. I'm reminded of a review in the Sunday's Times a few months back by Geoffrey Ward, who reviewed Drew Gilpin Faust's latest book, *The Republic of Suffering*, about death during the American Civil War. Ward refers to his great-great grandfather, a minister who served as chaplain for a Yankee regiment, who wrote long, detailed weekly letters to his parishioners back home in New York, until he discovered that words failed him in the aftermath of Gettysburg. “Sad scenes,” was all he managed to write home after he had officiated over the trench burials of 7000 dead. “I have no time, no strength nor heart to recall and narrate what I have seen.”

On the other hand, we're grateful for people who try. Because our stories must be told, yes? A journalism student at Berkeley, Megahnn Farnsworth, after covering gang rapes in Guatemala, changed her view of journalism's role and responsibility.

“A journalist's job is to ask questions. J-school emphasizes the need to get color, scenes, details. Articles are to be written in an authoritative, confident voice. And yet, what rules of engagement apply when a reporter is faced with a source as vulnerable and traumatized as this girl [who was raped]? Journalists, by definition, are people of privilege. We dip into the lives of our subjects and leave them. We ask perfect strangers to trust us with their most intimate, personal, embarrassing secrets. In return, they get their story told. To be in this line of work you must believe, almost religiously, that this is a fair trade.”

As an occasional war correspondent, I can tell you it's very hard to keep this faith,

I can tell you firsthand about a writer's Faustian bargains—when I left Haiti behind after 18 months in the field, left my Haitian friends behind, I was very much aware that their deaths offered me a living, their blood buys you a book. And they were keenly aware that this was the way it had to be, they were willing to sacrifice themselves in order that you would go forth and tell the world about their fate—but the bargain between the one who bears witness and the one who is oppressed is ethically and spiritually complex and oftentimes at its core is a type of mutual martyrdom. And then, sooner or later, whether you're a writer or a soldier, in telling, in striving to tell what happened during wartime, and observing how you're just not connecting with a listener, registering the stupidity—or less cynically, the inadequacy of their reaction, and your own inadequacy in trying to convey the experience—you clam up. You turn away. With trauma, with horror, there is no home left to return to, because home is no longer the place where people understand. Remember Hemingway's Nick Adams? You are always turning away, without ever actually turning towards. "About that which we cannot speak," said Wittgenstein, "we must pass over in silence."

But I would suggest too that when silence does finally turn toward something rather than turn away, it turns toward human dignity, a trait, a principle, our society approaches in a very schizophrenic way, celebrating it in the individual narrative while diluting it throughout the culture.

There's an oft-quoted proverb in the Bible's Book of Solomon; Solomon, you might know, repeatedly warned his son about the danger of reckless speech. The proverb reads: He who guards his mouth protects his life; he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.

I thought of this proverb reading Christopher Hitchens' essay, *A Death in the Family*, in last November's *Vanity Fair*. The essay is about Hitchens' reaction to the death of Mark Jennings Daily, a young soldier killed in Iraq—an All-American kid, born on the 4th of July, honors graduate from UCLA, a Democrat with reservations about the war who changed his mind after reading Hitchens' writings on the moral case for war in Iraq. Reading a newspaper article that referred to his profound influence on Mark Daily's decision to go to war, Hitchens says, "I don't exaggerate by much when I say that I froze. I certainly felt a very deep pang of cold dismay... Was it possible that I had helped persuade someone I had never met to place himself in the path of an IED?" Hitchens thought of William Butler Yeats, who was chilled to discover that the Irish rebels of 1916 had gone to their deaths quoting his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Yeats tried to cope with the disturbing idea, in his poem, "Man and the Echo":

Did that play of mine send out  
Certain men the English shot?...  
Could my spoken words have checked  
That whereby a house lay wrecked?

Hitchens clicks all the links on the article about Daily's death until he arrives at the young soldier's MySpace site, where his statement *Why I Joined* was posted. At the top of the page was a link to a passage from one of Hitchens' articles, in which, Hitchens writes as he encounters his own words, "I poured scorn on those who were neutral about the battle for Iraq... I don't remember ever feeling, in every allowable sense of the word, quite so hollow." Perhaps, Hitchens says at the end of his essay, perhaps he had advocated for the war more strongly than he realized.

Memo to Christopher Hitchens: The next time you feel like warmongering, remember Proverb 13.3, and give yourself permission to shut up.

Of course there are many battlefields, and the ones most readily accessible to every writer are the knife-fights and ambushes and grievous permanent injuries of the family, of domesticity. Which should certainly be written about, but how, and why? What I learned in my parents' house is that I can't be honest with you, can't be frank, can't be forthcoming, can't bear my breast, because you'll find a way to use what I say against me. This is what I learned from my family, and this is what every politician knows beyond a doubt. Well, fine. A perfect cradle for fiction writers (and liars), but a snakepit for those of us compelled to write nonfiction.

Time to ask: What is the social responsibility you have by choosing to write? In the 80s and 90s and even moreso in this new century the dynamic was and is Look at me, and too often the end result has been, You're no one to look at. You've wasted my time, not able to imagine that who you were talking to was more intelligent, more experienced, more historically aware, more imaginative than you. If you can't meet this head on, then what's going on is an adolescent celebration of Self, which indeed can be engaged in harmlessly, as long as the self being celebrated is not synonymous with victim. On the other hand, when you marry an adolescent sensibility to grave intent, the result is predictably disastrous.

Perhaps I should establish a dichotomy here between two very different types of confessional writing, the first pretty much innocuous and the second very much not.

I had a 23 year old student last year at Florida State, very intelligent, a strong young writer, and perhaps her youth had something to do with her as yet untempered sense of freedom and propriety, which she clearly was intent on exploring, testing, as many young students do in writing workshops. She handed into class a personal essay titled, Confessions of a Home-Wrecker, in which she chronicled an affair she had with her married, philandering 30-something boss at a local car dealership where she worked.

Let's call him Joe. In this essay you could find the line, spoken by the drunken author after a night in a bar with Joe, Come on, Joe, you know you want some of this 21 year old pussy. Yep, she was right. Joe did. A later passage describes in detail the author's technique in performing fellatio. Perhaps some of you winced or cringed or were offended when I read these lines. There are indeed taboos out there both collective and personal, but as a teacher, a writer, as a soul, you cannot allow yourself to be oppressed by what Philip Roth calls "the relentless intimacy of literature," and you must keep in mind the words of the Roman poet Terence: "Nothing human is alien to me." There are taboos out there: Do we let them into the classroom? Yes, but to teach art and craft, not to facilitate controversy, or to encourage sophomoric titillation, or to affect healing.

Unfortunately, the essay concludes with tearful remorse on the author's part and a promise to live up to the Christian values she absorbed growing up in the Pentecostal Church. What to do? Well, I would no more discourage her from writing sexually explicit material than I would Erica Jong or Philip Roth. But one does need to tell her the home she thought she had wrecked had already fallen down, and that the faith she received as a child had to be revisited by her as an adult and earn its way back into her moral universe...or not, but she could no longer depend on her upbringing for all the answers. She had been educated beyond her upbringing and needed to find a way to synthesize the

two worlds, the one of innocence and the one of experience. No doubt this young writer felt a sense of catharsis exposing her adulterous behavior, but I think most often in a writing workshop, when we say catharsis, what we really mean are growing pains.

On the other hand, here's the first line of a memoir called *Impossible Motherhood*, brought to my workshop at Bennington by my longtime friend and acclaimed memoirist, Irene Vilar.

"I have had fifteen abortions in the last twelve years and they were the best years of my life."

The line, the opening paragraph, the 20 or so pages of text that followed, as she will tell you, outraged me, on every level of consciousness, and I felt I had no choice but to condemn the manuscript the way she was writing it, seemingly unaware, and unconcerned, that she was, again and again and again, at the behest of a Janus-faced Pygmalion who was her professor and lover at Syracuse (and 30 years older than her), using abortion as birth control. Again and again and again. I wanted to silence her, not because I thought the subject was taboo and therefore indiscussible, or because I thought she would set the pro-choice movement back 50 years. Ultimately—I'll gladly contradict myself here—there are no taboos, there's only artful, or rather artless, articulation of what might otherwise be taboo. You choose to put yourself out there and let people judge you, but there was no way in hell anyone would judge Irene mercifully or sympathetically, the way she was writing the book.

I absolutely wanted to silence her, and in her final draft of the manuscript—which I'll tell you right now is enormously disturbing but also extraordinary and a type of blessing, the blessing of a profound and eloquent intelligence forcing itself to men a shattered self, a struggling individual who embodies both futility and hope, moral confusion and moral clarity, misshapen love and spiritual metamorphosis—in that brilliant final draft she quotes me—actually, misquotes me—as labelling the first draft she brought to class evil, and I believe, however inadvertently or unintentionally, it was in some respects.

How to account for such a colossal mistake by such an accomplished writer? In her own words, the struggle for upmost honesty, and the misguided sense of detail that struggle produced. She wrote in an email to me: Many abortions go unrecorded, unmentioned, except for adding them up. Should I describe more or will that be an overkill? I guess you know the answer to that.

Irene had fallen prey to sensationalism, a type of writing that echoes or mimics disaster capitalism—success through failure—and shock capitalism...and what's bad for the economy perhaps is also bad for the page. Although it's true that in literature and art we welcome a high level of emotional density, it's also true that there's a point at which emotional quantity crosses a threshold of effectiveness and becomes counterproductive, achieving a histrionic level of tawdry emotionality, and in nonfiction, this sort of emotional cascade sometimes seems like pornography, a market manipulation—exploitative or simply gratuitous—and in the classroom it invites a plunge into psychodrama and therapeutic consolation.

Writing what you know means paying attention to the details around you so you can elevate these details to universal generalizations, or metaphors that deliver the same impact of truth or wisdom, but you won't arrive at a universal generalization simply by reporting from the wonderful—or miserable—land of You. Instead what you are likely to

do is say too much about nothing, and in Irene's case, graphically describing abortion after abortion after abortion, with no insight into why she was doing this other than to stay with a spellbinding man she idolized, is way off track of any meaningful narrative she knew the book must deliver.

Straightforward, matter of fact prose infused with raw eloquence is beautiful and powerful when you enter the realm of victimization or injustice, with a clear artistic sense of when you're saying too much or saying too little. I'm thinking here of Donald Hall's memoir about the death of his wife, the poet Jane Kenyon. What's to be avoided at all costs is to appear self-serving, to present oneself as an author giddily wrapping himself or herself in a secret—incest, abortion, betrayal, unchecked greed, melodramatic suffering, extravagant self-pity—without shame. Not his or her own shame, necessarily—human shame. Without a sense of human shame, which is the corollary of a sense of human decency, the stakes change, and confront you with the difference between a book ripping your heart out, and a book making you sick to your stomach.

The key of course is paying attention, and the first place she needed to redirect her attention was toward her own accountability in the story. Accountability, in fact, is the true gateway to honesty, and isn't it horrifying that both the government and the mainstream press find little value in the act. So...yes, I slept with my father, but I was an adult and made that choice. So...yes, even though I was manipulated by a wretched man, I became addicted to abortion and its ritual was an essential part of my identity and sense of well-being.

As Irene looked closer at her life, her understanding of her situation began to flesh out on the page; she recognized that she came from a family riddled with addiction, brothers who were heroin addicts, et cetera, and she saw that perhaps her version of the family disease was the self-mutilation of compulsive abortions, and that her life in itself had metaphorical implications that said something about her sense of identity as a Puerto Rican. Connecting communal history to personal behavior is essential to understanding anything about yourself or others, isn't it? Those connections don't necessarily explain or absolve, they illuminate; they alter and readjust sensibilities, they expand consciousness and enlarge the self beyond solipsism.

Let me interject here with something apropos Barry Lopez told me in a discussion we had last winter about bearing witness: The minute somebody steps forward, Barry said, and thinks it's heroic to say and see everything—and it's the height of solipsism—the world is arbitrary in the moment as to who is the hero. If you speak as if your ethic, your criteria, were the only operative ones, then you marginalize everyone else in a conversation. If you've never taken it beyond yourself, Lopez argues, then the fact is you've never quite grown up, and are no use to society.

You can take those opinions apart from plenty of angles. Just please don't tell me, bottom line, that you could give a damn about being a use to society.

I think it's important that you know that I never gave Irene much advice about how to rewrite her abortion memoir. I simply said, in a very loud voice, that she needed to start over, to bring not only new rhetorical strategies to the narrative, but more mature sensibilities, because a mere hyper-honest catalogue of events had no possibility of ever lifting the manuscript out of the solipsistic pit where it existed. Her homework assignment was simply this: Live more. Get beyond it. Go back with fresh eyes. Life

itself had to carry Irene to a place where she finally understood how to tell her story.

And here, finally, after five years of struggle, are the first few lines of Chapter One in her finished book:

Shame runs back to the origins of my homeland. Just staring into maps of Latin America, looking for my island, I'm made to turn around in fear that someone may be watching.

FYI—the book has been rejected by 16 different publishers, although Irene recently told me that Harper's will excerpt it in the coming months. Here's a typical rejection, from an editor at FSG:

Just finished reading IV's Impossible Motherhood. I should say, I just picked myself off the floor from reading IM. God, what a punch to the gut the book is. And what a wild and powerful book it is. I should want to publish it, I know. But it's just too painful for me. I read it with fascination, but I also wanted to run from it. It just made me physically hurt. It made me feel physically trapped—even with its somewhat happy ending. I can't do it. It's too much for me, I'm afraid.

What this editor has just done, unknowingly, is succinctly articulate what's at the heart of the failings in American culture today: The world is too painful, don't make me look at it, I just want to run away, when the truth is, nothing should be too much for us except inauthenticity, the erosion of human dignity, or unmitigated insanity.

I want to return here to my discussion with Barry Lopez who, you probably know, has spent a lot of time among the traditional indigenous cultures of the far north, trying to learn what they have to teach us, trying to understand the role of the writer in society. It's a mistake to tell all the stories of all the people, Barry would advise you. The question of quantification is not useful. The distinction is between the inauthentic or authentic. When Barry asked the tribal elders in these traditional cultures, What do you mean by a storyteller? They answered, When the stories you tell help—and it has to do with your mature perspective on what in fact helps, and what diminishes that dynamic in a society or an individual. The question Is it helpful? is ultimately a community decision. Writing is an essential act of community, no matter that it is born and executed in isolation and self-exile. The point you have to come to is this: Am I alone after reading this story? With a great writer, you never touch bottom, and you never feel alone.

And when that community decision mutates into a corporate decision, the question Is it helpful? finds itself twisted and corrupted into the query, Is it profitable? "Corporate media," Bill Moyers said last month, "turns the debates about profound issues into a shouting match of polarized views promulgated by partisan apologists who trivialize democracy while refusing to speak the truth about how our country is being plundered...as journalism goes, so goes democracy...because the thing most necessary for freedom is the truth."

Barry Lopez offered me this analogy of migrating birds to help illuminate the writer's role in society.

He compared the migration habits of geese and cranes. Geese fly in a classic V formation, with an undisputed leader, everybody else following behind. If the leader somehow makes a mistake and fails, so does the flock.

Cranes, however, migrate in a pattern of a long undulating line, spread out on a horizontal axis, with no true leader, every bird simultaneously obligated to search for a thermal uplift that might make the labor of their journey easier, and when somebody in

the line encounters a thermal—and therefore, metaphorically, vision—everybody zeroes in and benefits. You probably can't find a better metaphor for an artist's or writer's or journalist's role in society than that.

As for silence, consider: Sometimes there is sin in silence. Sometimes grace. “There comes a time when silence is betrayal,” said Martin Luther King. But I'm also reminded of an essay James Alan McPherson published in the Atlantic 25 years ago, advocating a contract of silence between a pre-civil rights generation of African-American parents and their post-civil rights generation of children, a silence meant to free the new generation from the terrible baggage their parents were forced to haul through the brutal years of segregation.

Sometimes there is sin in silence—as when it countenances lies that harm, or refuses to save a life, or protects malfauteurs, or refrains from acknowledging another's humanity.

And sometimes there is grace: as when silence speaks for dignity, for honor, when it is meant to protect or shelter the innocent, or when it resists the impulse of the self or the community to be defined in any manner, and for any reason, that does not truly represent, high and low, our nature, lesser selves and better angels.

I'll end tonight by paraphrasing Anthony Shadid, the WP correspondent and author of *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in The Shadow of America's War*, an extraordinary book about the lives of Iraqis under siege and living in hell:

“The best journalism embraces nuance and celebrates it...But journalism is imperfect. The more we know as reporters, the more complicated the story becomes and, by nature of our profession, the less equipped we are to write about it with the justice and rigor it deserves...Perhaps we [must] simply surrender to the ambiguities and embrace them. Perhaps we simply tell stories.”

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