SMU Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics & Public Responsibility

Silence Speaks Louder Than Words

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"Where is your brother Abel?" God asked.

"I don't know," Cain replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Ivory Coast is my home. Rather, it was, until a violent civil war erupted in 2011. We often grow apathetic to the idea of war until its horrors knock on our doorsteps. That became our reality when armed militants executed our family friends ruthlessly. At some point, we knew we would be next. So, we had no choice but to run.

I was twelve when the violence began reshaping everything I knew. Gunfire replaced roosters as our morning alarm. The rhythmic pounding of cassava preparation gave way to the irregular percussion of distant explosions. Markets that once buzzed with haggling vendors went quiet marked by invisible danger signs only the initiated could read; a terrible and sort-of perilous tension in shoulders. Things changed so quickly; conversations stopped abruptly, attitudes of distrust engulfed a once-upon-a-united community, and positive eye contact became a complete rarity. Ivory Coast didn’t feel like hone anymore.

By fourteen, I learned an important lesson. Silence could mean two things: survival or complicity, & protection or betrayal. The difference between this wasn’t always clear until it was too late. I had witnessed neighbors become enemies overnight. I had watched the preexisting wonderful spirit of ubuntu (brotherhood) evaporate instantly. In that moment, I understood a critical life lesson, that what is left unsaid often matters, sometimes more, than what is said.

The Armor of Silence

Before we became targets ourselves, my parents sheltered two orphaned children from another tribe; the "wrong" tribe, according to the politics-incited madness that consumed our region. My mother simply set extra plates at dinner, as if this decision wouldn't put all of us at

risk. The children appeared at our table one evening, and my siblings and I exchanged worried and knowing glances. We knew what sheltering them meant.

When we asked our mother about the danger, her answer was simple: "Si bi ɲaŋ bi ti, bi kɛ́ bɛ́ si ɲa?" which translates to "If not us, then who?"

What strikes me now is not the weight of what she said, but the value of what they left unsaid. They didn't announce their decision to the neighborhood. They didn't seek validation from community leaders or praise for their moral superiority. My father was a colonel in the military; he had access to intelligence about which areas were being targeted, which roads were safe, which 'people' to avoid. He could have used that information purely for self-preservation. Instead, he allowed my mother to jeopardize our safety to protect the helpless.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, my parents understood something that has heavily influenced my thinking. That there are moments when the highest moral acts don't require publicity. Moments when speaking becomes performative and potentially deadly. They remained quiet when it counted, and while that dearly cost us eventually, it helped save the lives of two helpless kids.

One evening, militiamen came to our compound. They were hunting for "swines", as they referred to people from the blacklisted tribe. We had been forewarned to expect them, as they had caught wind of the children my mother let in. I remember the butterflies in my stomach as we waited for their arrival. And when they got there, I remember the metallic taste of fear coating my tongue. All of us were terrified, perhaps with the exception of dad; he was a colonel after all. I remember my father stepping forward in his uniform, unarmed, to face men carrying archaic machetes and rifles.

"These are my children," he said emotively. "You surely want to harm them? What have they done to you?"

The militiamen looked at my father, then at all of us cstanding behind him, then at each other. The moment was quite intense and honestly dramatic. Save for distant bangs, an odd silence seeped into the space. I thought the end-our end was near.

Then they left. Just turned and walked away. They never came back!

My father, a well-trained patriot who'd fought for his country extensively chose to reason with these… er… morally questionable men. He posed a simple yet deep question and let the ensuing silence do the rest. That pause, that uncomfortable space where no one spoke, gave their consciences room to operate. The armor of silence, well-calculated in deployment, kept us safe that night.

When Silence Betrays

But I also learned, painfully, that silence could kill.

As the violence spread, I noticed different kinds of silence emerging. There was the silence of neighbors who looked away when people were dragged from their homes. The silence of religious leaders who used religious pulpits to preach 'peace' without condemning violence. The silence of people who had information about planned attacks but said nothing.

Reflecting on these silences has solidified my understanding of human nature. Sadly, we rarely care until we find ourselves on the receiving end of tragedy.

At 16, I was being driven home from school in a military van when I saw militia members confronting Mr. Gaspard and three other men on their way to our school. Gaspard was Yao's dad. Yao and I were classmate's dad. Well, the next day, Yao never made it to school. Eventually, we came to learn that the dad never made it. In the ensuing days, I encountered lots

of sleepless nights. I still wonder why the driver of the military van did nothing. Perhaps it's because there was no clear danger in sight for the 'privileged,' right? I wish!

The Longest Silence

When a derangement lands upon a people, it tends to spread faster than wildfire and pandemics. The violence kept spreading and at some point, it became clear that even those privileged wouldn't be spared. My father's position as a colonel and his continued defiance to 'side' with the militia made him both a defender and a target. Our family's history of sheltering the "wrong people" hadn't gone unnoticed.

We had no choice but to flee.

We fled on roads lined with dead bodies. Corpses had become so commonplace they were treated like potholes to navigate around. Some were fresh, still bleeding into the red dirt. Others had been there for days, bloating in the heat, ignored by everyone who passed because no one could afford the doom-fated luxury of stopping to burry the dead.

As we journeyed away, I remember trying to look away trying to fight the uncomfortable lump that had significantly formed on my throat. Ivory Coast is… sorry, was my home. We had to flee. Neither belonging to the 'right' tribe nor our social privilege could save us any longer.

On the driver's seat sat the Colonel, my wonderful and brave father. He was escorting his family into Ghana for safety. We would become refugees at a sprawling temporary make-shift city with lots of tents and tarps. I still vividly recall feeling a strange mix of relief and horror. We had made it out. We were safe. But this place would be our new reality.

In the course of the journey, my father had been quite quiet. As mentioned before, he was a brave man who'd been taught to defend the country. He wasn't a fearful man, right? Well, maybe not. His silence through the journey meant the opposite of that. He'd been quiet, focused,

scanning the roads ahead. He'd barely spoken except to give us directions. Alas! He'd been saying goodbye the entire time without using the words.

"I have to go back," he said when we reached the camp. And for the first time, I saw a look that’s stuck with me since. The Colonel was afraid. "I swore an oath to fight for Cote D’ Ivoire."

I understood. Even at sixteen, despite my incredible fear and anger, I understood.

My father had spent his entire life answering "yes" to the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" He had sheltered orphans when it endangered us. He had stood unarmed before armed men. He had used his position not for personal gain but for protection of others. Now, when his country was being torn apart, he couldn't suddenly decide that his responsibility ended at the border of his own survival.

That was the last time I saw my father.

He died there. Fighting for Ivory Coast, for the country he couldn't abandon even to save himself. I don't know the exact circumstances; whether it was in battle, in an ambush, whether it was quick or slow. What I know is that his choice to go back was its own form of silence: the silence of sacrifice.

He could have totally fled with us. He could have used his military training to disappear across borders, to build a new life in exile, to prioritize his own family's safety above all else. Instead, he chose the silence of that comes with virtue, the terrible silence of a father who loves his children enough to leave them, who loves his country enough to die for it. Aah!

The Colonel silenced his own future to give voice to his convictions. He gave up his presence in our lives to maintain his presence in the fight for something larger than himself. The

war eventually ended and things are sort-of stable. I proudly bear the name of one of the men who made that possible.

Breaking the Silence

In the refugee camp in Ghana, a different kind of silence settled over us; the silence of trauma, of people who had seen too much and said too little. We moved through our days like ghosts, speaking only when necessary, carrying our stories inside like unexploded ordnance.

I maintained that silence for three years. I enrolled in school in the camp, learned new languages, tried to build something resembling a normal life. When people asked where I was from, I gave minimal answers. "Ivory Coast." "The civil war." Nothing more. I didn't talk about the bodies on the roads. I didn't talk about Yao's dad. I didn't talk about my father turning back at the border, about his death fighting for our country. The silence protected me from having to relive the memories, from having to explain the inexplicable.

When I was nineteen, I moved to the United States. I enrolled at a community college which granted me a second chance at life. America presented this wonderful glimpse of hope, until lately, brightened my existence dearly.

I enrolled at a Dallas-based community college and put my best foot forward in registering good grades. Life was good, until one day in a political science class, a casual comment about how "both sides" in the Ivorian conflict had committed atrocities. The language used was of equivalences, flattening the complexities of what had happened into a simple narrative of mutual violence.

Ah! That was quite intense.

I thought of my father, returning to fight in his colonel's uniform, dying for what he believed in. I thought of Yao, my childhood friend who's since disappeared from the face of the

earth. I thought of those bodies lining the roads we fled on, the silence that had allowed them to accumulate. I thought of my parents sheltering orphans, of my father standing unarmed before armed men.

I raised my hand.

"With respect," I said, "I think we need to be careful about that framing." I went on to share my heart concerning the matter, with the hope of enlightening and educating without condemning. It was not pleasant, but I believed it was necessary. I described what I had seen; the neighbors who turned away, the militias hunting for "swines," the roads of bodies everyone pretended not to see. I talked about the difference between systematic ethnic cleansing and desperate self-defense. I refused to remain silence.

When I finished, the professor nodded slowly, thanked me for my perspective, and to date I am still very cordial with the professor.

I am glad that I spoke up! While I had spent most of my post-war years in silence, they were necessary for survival, healing, and development. Being in America ignited a different light within me, that of hope, and with that light came the willingness to revisit past wounds and treat them correctly. The kind of light that allowed me to share my shine in a way that illuminated and enlightened people to be less ignorant. It is a light that we must all learn to carry around boldly, for the good of the world!

The shine of ethics

Ethics of silence aren't simple. We must be careful not to reduce them to rules that 'work' in every situation. Silence and speech must not be seen as opposites, for they are partners, each appropriate to different moments.

In staying silent after confronting militia men, my father demonstrated tactical wisdom that perhaps preserved our lives then. He demonstrated the understanding that sometimes, the most powerful thing we can do is to lead with our hearts and not our mouths. The human conscience needs space to operate.

In choosing to return to fight for Ivory Coast, honoring his oath, and eventually succumbing to the derangement the land was the fullest expression of the responsibility he believed in. He used more than mere words and to answer the seemingly simple question "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The challenge lies in distinguishing between kinds of silence. There's the strategic silence that protects and creates space. There's the silence born of trauma that needs safeguarding so we can heal. There's the complicit silence that enables harm through inaction. And there's the sacrificial silence that gives up one's own voice so others might survive.

Each requires different ethical judgments. Each depends on context; on who has power, who is vulnerable, what outcomes different choices will produce.

The Answer

I return to the question that began this essay: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Yes. The answer is yes. It has always been yes. It must always be yes. Especially given recent trends in global politics.

My mother asked in Bété: "Si bi ɲaŋ bi ti, bi ké bɛ́ si ɲa?"

That's the real question underlying all discussions of silence and speech. Not whether to speak or stay silent in some abstract sense, but whether we accept responsibility for each other. Once we answer yes to that fundamental question, everything else will fall into place. We will

learn to speak when speaking protects. To stay quiet when silence shields. From a place of empathy and care for our brothers, we learn how best to tell the difference.

The last image I have of my father is his back at the border between Ivory Coast and Ghana, turning back toward home in his dusty colonel's uniform. He said almost nothing in that moment. There were no grand speeches about duty or sacrifice. I am convinced he expected to be back soon cause had we known that was it, we'd have held on tighter to the goodbyes.

Colonel died fighting for what he believed in. That silence; a father choosing country over comfort, a colonel returning to fight when he could have fled, a man who always answered "yes" to the question of responsibility; speaks to me every day. It tells me that the highest form of voice isn't always words. Sometimes it's presence. Sometimes it's sacrifice. Sometimes it's the willingness to give up everything for what you believe in.

I carry my father's death like a stone. But I carry something else too: his example of what it means to be a keeper of brothers. The knowledge that sometimes keeping requires speaking up at great personal cost. And sometimes it requires the even greater cost of silence and sacrifice.

Si bi ɲaŋ bi ti, bi kɛ́ bɛ́ si ɲa? If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

In that question lies everything. In that responsibility lies our greatest strength. And in the wisdom to know when to speak and when to stay silent, when to break the quiet and when to let it do its sacred work, lies the answer to the oldest question ever asked.

Yes, I am my brother's keeper. And in that "yes" lives the burden and the blessing of a life lived in service of others, of truth, of the conviction that we are all responsible for one another.

That is the ethics of silence. Silence do speak louder. Always!