

Friends of Silence

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"Is there enough Silence for the Word to be heard?"

Dear Friends ~ In another corner of my life, I teach what I call *Baby's First Research Paper* classes to middle school students. Recently I guided two dozen tweens through a project creating timelines of the people and events that made possible an invention of their choosing. Their topics ranged from toasters and the Slinky, to water purifiers, baseball mitts, and seat belts. I soaked up pages of interesting factoids over the month (Did you know that astronauts have used Silly Putty to hold instruments down in zero gravity?), watching them morph from mere points on a line, into stories — or "biographies" — of things. I wouldn't categorize them as "*Entrepreneur Seizes Business Opportunity*" stories as much as "*Someone Recognizes Another Person's Need and Devises a Way to Meet the Need*" stories.

The idea for the first windshield wiper fits into the latter category. In 1902, Mary Anderson was riding in a streetcar during a winter storm. She was astonished that the driver "had to climb out of the car constantly to scrape off the sleet, snow, and rain," often along the narrow shoulder of a busy street. He also had to travel with his head sticking out the window in freezing temperatures. "When she got home," my student wrote, "she sketched a blade that could move automatically."



From Forenius, Shutterstock Images

"Necessity is the mother of invention," the old saying goes. I'm tempted to take out my editing pen and suggest we rework it to say, "Necessity is an auntie of invention. As is her sister, Kindness."

Our world is a story punctuated by subtle kindnesses; It is also kind for us to remind one another that this is true. And the power to envision new realities — to problem-solve and meet needs — is ours as much as it is anyone's. ~ Joy

In a time of drastic change one can be too preoccupied with what is ending or too obsessed with what seems to be beginning. In either case one loses touch with the present and with its obscure but dynamic possibilities. What really matters is openness, readiness, attention, courage to face risk. You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope. In such an event, courage is the authentic form taken by love.

~ Thomas Merton in *CONJECTURES OF A GUILTY BYSTANDER*

Power, used well, should be empowering, contagious, and creative. It should be collaborative, enabling, and protective. It should be self-critical, curious, and brave. It should know its own limits and be prepared to risk its own reputation. This kind of power asks questions to which it does not know the answers and listens because in listening is learning, and in learning is life.

~ Padraig O'Tuama in *IN THE SHELTER: FINDING A HOME IN THE WORLD*

But you can't spend your whole life hoping people will ask you the right questions. You must learn to love and answer the questions they already ask.

~ Elizabeth McCracken in *THE GIANT'S HOUSE*

I bow, hoping to become a person who does not settle for familiarity, but always takes on new challenges.

~ Monk Jeongmok, the 53rd prostration of the "108 Prostrations for Buddhists"

Before you know what kindness really is you must lose things,

feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness...

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes

and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,

only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say

It is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

~ Naomi Shihab Nye from "Kindness," in

WORDS UNDER THE WORDS: SELECTED POEMS

When my son asks me what happened to everyone else as Noah built his ark

I say...

*The water rises steady below them
but never overtakes them-*

*When they reach the mountaintop
they collapse breathless,
laying on the rain-soaked rock.*

*A child tugs at his parent's shirt.
Through the exhaustion
she barely opens her eyes enough
to see a miraculous prism of light
arc from the mountaintop
to the floodlands underneath.*

*That's when they see the ark
drifting below
its occupant so convinced
of his uprightness
that he lays claim
to all the promises of goodness.
The children begin to run and dance
as the mountaintop dries.*

*The women begin to look around,
assessing what can be used for
a celebratory feast-
a blessing that their worst isn't an end.*

*The daughter picks an olive branch,
gives it to the dove on her shoulder
and instructs it to fly,
offering it to the lonely man below,
inviting him to the feast.*

~ Michelle Scully from

"When my son asks me what happened to everyone else as Noah built his ark,"

on michelleescully.substack.com, January 2025

For things to reveal themselves to us,
we need to be ready to abandon our views about them.
~ Thich Nhat Hanh in *BEING PEACE*



More than the fuchsia funnels breaking out of the crabapple tree, more than the neighbor's almost obscene display of cherry limbs shoving their cotton candy-colored blossoms to the slate sky of Spring rains, it's the greening of the trees that really gets to me. When all the shock of white and taffy, the world's baubles and trinkets, leave the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath, the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin growing over whatever winter did to us, a return to the strange idea of continuous living despite the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then, I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I'll take it all.

~ Ada Limón, "Instructions on Not Giving Up," in *THE CARRYING*

[Art] is necessary so that we can be challenged out of our siloed ways of thinking and working, and by extension our understanding of how change occurs...

We can understand art as a process of bringing something into the world that was not there before, it can be an artifact but it can also be an idea. That process, Professor Elaine Scarry calls a fragment of world alteration, and so if we can alter the world in fragments, she says, "just think what can be imagined together, what might be possible in community: a total reinvention of the world."

~ Veronica Yates from "The Function of Art,"
on the Rights Studio online journal

...I am telling stories, not writing prescriptions.

~ Kathleen Norris in

ACEDIA & ME: A MARRIAGE, MONKS, AND A WRITER'S LIFE

What do you have when you don't have a shared name for a place? You have possibility.

~ Padraig O'Tuama in

IN THE SHELTER: FINDING A HOME IN THE WORLD

