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atime to silent keep

BY JANE A. RUBETTA

I rushed through the day's Scripture readings, knowing the staggered wake-up calls for my family of five would eat into the dawn's quiet. In the harried setting that morning, with bathroom occupancy battles and last-minute lunches, tension took control. Finally, Ruthie slammed out the door and ran for the bus, the verbal warfare between us still radiating in the air.

Thankfully, I forgot the words exchanged that morning, even the subject of dispute, but the pain still burns my heart. I, the adult, let a child hook me into an argument and ugliness, and I bruised her soul in the process. Had I paid closer attention at sunrise, God would have flagged Proverbs 15:1. As it was, He lovingly reminded me later of the appropriate response: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

keep quiet in the presence of anger

Storm Central | "Who flipped the switch?" I asked my husband, Rich, as we cleaned up after our first teenage birthday party several years ago. On the day our daughter turned 13, the weather changed for the worse, with constant predictions of storms and flash flooding. We feel like weather watchers, armchair meteorologists, always dreading the next squall.

No doubt Ruthie feels the same. She and I are practically emotional clones, only she expresses her anger as I never dared to do as a child. And, like a gasoline spill, when she ignites, the anger spreads quickly, and I flare up as well. I know better, but I find it hard to control my tongue in such settings. James' comparison, "The tongue also is a fire" (James 3:6) is apt for this parent-child conflict. I get too involved, and as soon as my mouth opens, the heat and the damage intensify.

One morning, after a particularly difficult before-school scene with our firstborn, I wiped my eyes, smearing carefully applied mascara, and put my head down before God. "What am I supposed to do, Lord? How do I handle the arguments?"

I confessed my own hateful behavior and waited. And for one of the few times in my life, I heard an answer.

"Keep quiet in the presence of anger. Do not speak a word."

I raised my head, opening my eyes and nearly laughing. "Is this for real, Lord? Is this what you want me to do, or am I conjuring this up in my own mind?"

Knowing that my verbal involvement was like fighting fire with lighter fluid, I decided to give God a chance. And because silence is counter-cultural as well as alien to my nature, I knew the answer wasn't from my own mind. While I searched for a way to control my child, God desired that I learn to control myself.

Silence: The Best Policy | Silence brings perspective and context. I remember that Ruthie's days are as long as many adults', with little sleep in the face of enormous school projects, sports, and music practices. I remember that hormones surge and create chaos within and without. I remember what it's like to be in junior high, with a nearly adult body and schedules, yet still childlike emotional control. I remember friends who constantly evaluate your clothes and atti-

tude and even whether the food in your sack lunch is name-brand — friends who are as fickle as the wind.

Silence, I'm pleased to report, works like no other weapon has.

With silence in the face of emotional heat, no one gets caught in the crossfire. It's hard to lob verbal volleys when one of the sharpshooters holds her shot. Eventually, the first shooter, out of ammo, fires blanks, and the skirmish ends. When I'm silent but compassionate in response, the heat diminishes. Ruthie is left holding her anger, personally responsible for it with no one to blame. In the past, she could rightfully blame me for escalating the fighting.

Silent Benefits | I don't get it right all the time, but when I do, silence changes me because I'm forced to listen. With my mouth stilled, I can pay attention to my child, listening to any underlying messages, validating her as a human being with needs, problems, and legitimate complaints.

I can pay attention to the inner workings of my own soul, examining in silence the reasons I want to fight or to control the present situation or outcome. I recognize fear: my daughter will make mistakes or get hurt. Or I will lose her, she won't need me anymore, or she will make me look bad. If I truly want to move her

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toward independence, silence is the beginning of letting go.

One of the prominent benefits of my verbal cease-fire, is that it allows me to listen to God, to focus on Him. Stillness reminds me God is God, and I am not; it forces me to rely on Him rather than my own limited and wanting resources. "What do you want me to do here, Lord? What is a wise response? What is my child's real need?"

My silence changes my children as well. When the flash fire dwindles, they can feel their own feelings, because they haven't confused them with my anger or controlling.

Expert Analysis | Silence works for me because it's not one more good program, one more to-do list in an already overwhelming manual of parental instructions. Silence doesn't involve an intense start-up phase of learning a new language, assigning reasonable consequences (an oxymoron to children), or sticking stars on a chart. And the only time-out issued is for my mouth, which grants a reprieve for everyone involved.

Silence also has medical benefits. I read recently that listening lowers blood pressure. Angry people tend to have more heart problems than people who deal with their anger constructively.

According to experts, an angry response causes "flooding." The adrenaline flows, dumping cholesterol into the bloodstream, engaging

the "fight or flight" response. In anger seminars, experts recommend a verbal time-out to allow the flooding to subside.

So silence lowers internal pressure and lessens the likelihood of heart problems. Our natural defensiveness subsides, and with it the tension and the tendency to attack. Silence is also the pattern Jesus adopted in the face of those who would trap Him by His own words. "When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer" (Matthew 27:12). In response to Pilate, "Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge — to the great amazement of the governor" (Matthew 27:14).

Because my tendency is to words, my children may be amazed by my new, closed-mouth position. But even better is the effect of my silence as they wrestle with their own problems.

Amazing Results | Ruthie leaned over a table in my office, finishing up one of several final projects for the end of school. Frustrated with the art she produced, she moved to the computer to work on a story also due the next morning. Suddenly, she flounced up from the chair, screaming in frustration. "I cannot do this! I'm not going to finish these projects. My teachers are unfair. This is too much work."

By now she was sprawled in the easy chair, at an angle from the desk where I, too, tried to beat the clock on a pressing deadline. I watched. I wanted to jump in, protest, argue about such insane logic for an honors student in advanced courses — to remind her that she'd known about the projects for weeks.

Instead, I prayed. *What should I say, Lord?* The answer stayed the same: *Shhh. Be silent.*

"I can still graduate even if I flunk both these projects." Ruthie twisted her head toward me, and our eyes met.

I waited, listening, accepting my daughter, her fatigue, and her tirade.

"I'm just not going to turn these in."

A long pause. Then the leather creaked as she shoved herself out of the chair and returned to the art table.

She flashed me a smile. "Or, maybe not." ☀

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