

Say Nothing

by Julia Smillie

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A friend of mine works in a hospital while she studies to become a nurse. “I’m practicing not saying anything,” she told me recently. She says it’s something that nurses have to be particularly good at – listening to their patients and not feeling they have to come up with the right (or worse, the wrong) thing to say. She tells me of an interaction with a patient, a man once fit and healthy, still young and cognizant enough to be able to look in the mirror, assess his current condition and remark to her, with irony, “I’m some specimen, eh?” What, my friend wondered, could she say in response that wasn’t condescending or blatantly false or even downright inappropriate for someone in her position? So she said nothing. “And I think,” she said, “it was the right thing to say.”

I found her comments interesting because it’s something I’ve been working on myself lately: saying nothing. It does not come easily for me. I am the heir to a genetic propensity for offering up a forceful opinion, a quick interjection, a sharp barb. My whole life, value has been attached to one’s ability to contribute to a conversation, to incite people to argument or laughter. At our dinner table, we jockeyed with guests for custody of the next bon mot or sardonic observation. Conversation was an art and participation a rite of passage, a sport played for points and field time.

Then as I morphed into the awkwardness of early adulthood, I spent years worrying about saying the right thing or asserting myself appropriately or waiting for the right time to jump into a conversation. I had either forgotten – or, perhaps, never even known – that sometimes, the best thing to say is nothing at all. Not everything requires my input. Not every opinion needs aired. Not every comment made to me – not even every question bandied in my general direction – requires a response.

Only very recently, as an adult, have I come to appreciate the value of saying nothing. I’m even learning the value of listening, but the two should not necessarily be mistaken as interchangeable. I’m finding great value – and comfort, eventually – in not reacting to another person’s statement, in simply letting a comment go un-feted or even letting quiet carry its own weight.

In the ultimate of ironies, there are even well known quotes about saying nothing. Perhaps most notable is this popular quote, which has been attributed to a number of various people over the years: “It is better to say nothing and look a fool than to you’re your mouth and remove all doubt.” And one Charles Caleb Cotton said, “When you have nothing to say, say nothing.” Wise advice, too often overlooked. (Yet I can’t help but wonder if maybe this tack isn’t the very reason I have no earthly idea who Charles Caleb Cotton is.)

There was a time in my life when I said nothing because I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. It’s amazingly liberating to be rid of such a fear and instead to say nothing because it’s the best

contribution I can make. And like my friend, the nursing student, demonstrated, sometimes there just isn't anything to be said, no answer, no truth or comfort to be shared. There are just the words of someone else, their brief echo in the surroundings, the weight of them falling on your ears and then silence. A strong and meaningful silence.