

untitled

By Ruth Ostrow

A friend of mine was asked recently to attend an exclusive dinner with an esteemed international speaker. Belonging to a minority group, the speaker travels the world promoting peace, understanding and dignity for his people.

Honoured to be invited, my friend said she became increasingly disturbed when over dinner the prominent person could be heard making generalisations about others. "Well, of course all blah-blahs are ... Well, you know what blahs are like..." culminating in what she perceived was a vocal and offensive slur against her own ethnic group.

She rang the next day. "I'm furious. I couldn't sleep all night," she said, before telling me what happened.

"I'm not angry at him. He's just an ignorant man. I'm furious at myself that I didn't speak up. I felt intimidated, as if - who am I to challenge a great man? Oh my God, how 'great' could he be? What's the matter with me? Why couldn't I find my voice?" she moaned in anguish.

I thought a lot about this conversation and how many times over the years I have not found my voice. I'm good with strangers. I would have confronted him with no problems. But I'm hopeless when it comes to those I love. Like many of us, I often find it hard to challenge friends who have crossed boundaries, or intimates who have taken advantage.

So many of us sit on things that disturb us, until months - maybe even years - later, up vomits some huge eruption that is out of proportion to what's happening at the time. It's the years of repressed: "I'm angry at you!" And it's as destructive as any volcano. As the adage goes: "A big mess is just a small mess that wasn't cleaned up at the time."

In the West, we're often brought up to be silent, well behave and subdued around stronger emotions. The fact is, this is not commonsense, or even in keeping with Christian values. Honesty is more of a virtue, and far more useful in preserving long-term peace.

How many divorces have come about from the accumulation of a thousand little neglects, not dealt with properly at the time? How many friendships have died from one party seeking validation at any cost and then suddenly feeling resentful?

My friend finally wrote the speaker an email. It wasn't the public dressing-down she wanted, but finding her voice and personal power was a healthy start.

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