

Voices from the Silence

The Women of WIB Frederick: speaking about their experiences in the vigil

“I felt increasing anger and grief as the war on Iraq seemed to be supported by many Americans, and I wanted to witness openly that I did not agree. Women I respected had begun a Frederick Women in Black group, and I joined them as often as I could manage. Now that I can be a more regular member of the vigil, my perspective has changed, in part due to Women in Black and in part to other spiritual practices in my life. Today I vigil no longer from anger, but out of a longing for a world which is active in seeking alternatives to war and all forms of violence.

Mostly I do like the silent vigil. It keeps my attention towards those who are seeing us rather than toward the others in the vigil. The temptation to chat is always with me, but chatting distracts me. I think it dilutes the message we are sharing with our signs and handouts. I do think that talking with passersby who have questions is good, and I like to wave and smile back when people wave and smile at us.” --Norma Chapman

“I was in the middle of a ten day silent retreat in the Berkshire Mountains when September 11th happened. The first newspaper I saw five days later had headlines three inches high: “BUSH SAYS ITS WAR”. As I digested the news, my heart sank. The spirit of vengeance had quickly trumped other ways of dealing with the crisis. At Quaker Meeting a year later, I learned about Women in black from Andrea Norouzi. I joined the vigils immediately feeling they offered a way to protest and mourn at the same time. I believed if I did nothing, I was complicit in the decision to use violence against the people of Afghanistan. Writing letters to the editor and phoning my congressmen were not enough when so many lives hung in the balance. By then the invasion of Iraq was imminent, which made it even more imperative to participate in some kind of action.

Several years have passed. I have stood on the street in all kinds of weather. At first I was very self-conscious about it. One night I was all by myself holding a sign that said, “Mourning violence.” As the cars rushed by I tried to clear my mind and focus on my breath. Suddenly the window in a black SUV went down and a woman yelled out, “We’re with you baby!” I hope she saw me smile! These days there are many more of us. We’ve all learned to let go of the negative comments we hear occasionally. All that matters to me now is being there. Being the conscience of the community.

For me the silence of the vigils is a beautiful time. I pray for all those who have died because others used violence against them. I ask for forgiveness. I ask that we all choose the path of nonviolence. In my silence is a space for the voices of the dead. I want to give them a place among the living, if only for that brief time.

There is still some educating of the public, which needs to be done regarding the efficacy of nonviolent responses to conflicts. Despite the well-known successes of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ghandi, the most profound misunderstanding surfaces from time to time in newspaper columns or comments of individuals—and that is the equating of nonviolence with appeasement or inaction. So WIB has an important educational role as well.”—Helen Vo-Dihn

“People laugh when I describe myself as a “geriactivist.” I joined WIB because I despair at the violence and injustice in our world and the direction that our leadership is taking. War doesn’t happen over night. Many decisions are made which lead us to war. We need the voice of every citizen holding our leaders accountable to make decisions that lead to peace.” -- Elaine Heiberg

“My son was born prematurely and jaundiced, but our panic was eased when we saw him basking peacefully under a healing light. When I stand in vigil with WIB, I invoke that image. I first lift up my inner conflicts to the healing Light of God’s love, then any broken relationships I may have; the struggles of those around me with the violence of poverty, addiction or disease; then my community, then the conflicts that divide the family of humanity. The vigil revives the prophetic call to peace and reconciliation.”
-- Nicky Cojocari

“The message, approach, and international connection of Women In Black are deeply meaningful to me in a time of deep mourning for escalating violence in our world. In August, 2005, I joined 750 women from 40 countries in Jerusalem to share hopes, visions and strategies for cooperation. Women from conflict areas all expressed appreciation for the international support of the network, saying it helped them not to feel alone and gave them courage. It helped gain visibility for their work, and provided them with greater safety and financial means to carry on. The vigils in Frederick are a symbolic way of reaching out my hand, opening my heart and hearing the voices of women around the world, yearning and working together for a more just, peaceful world.”
--Andrea Norouzi

“I feel comfort knowing that others (WIB) may feel, think and act the way I do, and that at times, I can be one with humanity.” -- Diana Malen

From the Oxford English dictionary:

Vigil: 1. a period of keeping awake during the time usually spent asleep, esp. to keep watch or pray. 2. • a stationary, peaceful demonstration in support of a particular cause, typically without speeches.

Right after 9 11, I was struggling for a way to find some shred of solace in my heart. In my mind, I kept hearing the words to a sacred chant I had learned the summer before: “Stay here and keep watch with me, watch and pray, watch and pray.” A paraphrase of the words Jesus said to his disciples in the garden of Gethemene. Jesus is saying really, “I am facing something I must do, that I’m finding more difficult than I can bear. I must do it myself, alone, at great agony and cost. The one thing *you* can do for me is be there with me. Stand watch and pray with me.” Standing watch was a difficult thing to do too, and the disciples keep falling asleep.

Vigil: keeping awake during the time usually spent asleep. I think of the Buddhist notion that to be truly present in the moment to the truth of “what is”, is to be awake, rather than in the state of non-awareness or sleep that we all usually walk around in.

To keep watch, pray. I once heard that the only thing that we can do for one another, really, is to give full attention, to witness to each other’s lives, truth, pain, death. It is what we do when we sit, just sit quietly with a friend in grief, or in joy.

All these threads weave together for me as I think about what it is Women in Black do, and how it speaks to my life. How it helps me use my voice authentically, especially in the silent vigil.

Standing in the vigils is an act of faith for me. It is my way of being present to, of witnessing to what all war and violence do to people. I think the vigils honor and make visible the face of grief so many are feeling in the community. It brings awareness and breaks down the denial about the impact of war, violence, injustice. I wonder what people do with that awareness when it comes to them. But that is course up to them.

For me, the mourning is an ancient, spiritual and feminine act of the heart, saying to the world: “see, really *see*, what is happening. There is another way, if we have the will for it.” But the silence says more than words can. It invites me to compassion, to mindfulness, to prayer, and to creative action. The vigil and the silence create a sacred space around the 4 corners of our town square that you can feel, and see others feel.

At the vigils, I am aware of my connection to all who have both experienced and created violence around the world and through the ages. The vigils connect me to those who work everywhere to create peace. We give each other courage and support here in Frederick, and in conflict zones too. We all need to feel we are not alone. It may take some courage to stand in public, but it takes huge courage to stand up to injustice and violence in places that are dangerous.

Over time, it's become clear to me that publicly taking a stand for nonviolence, peace and justice is my civic responsibility. It's responding to a deep calling within me to do this witness, and to do it faithfully. It is a way I express hope and faith that we humans *can* be peaceful.

Yes, we do have opinions about war, violence and justice and about actions we can take to help create peace. And we find ways, often, creative ways, to express those ideas and opinions in our vigils, our literature, and in other events we sponsor. We call for our leaders to be accountable for making decisions that plant the seeds of peace and justice, rather than those that lead to war and increased violence. We call for our fellow citizens to find their voice also.

But mostly we stand in silence, speaking our truth to power in simple ways that endeavor to "be peace". Persistently. —Beth Willis