

SHOUT! Be loud and proud!

by Kat Avila

"Shut up!" Barney* spat out in response to my statement that we had to SHARE the office we were working in and that he better start learning what "share" meant. It didn't mean it was okay for him to act like he was the only one using the office. Blocking the doorway with his file boxes so I couldn't get in was one example.

"This is going to stop here and now!" I said in a voice from my past life as a teacher.

I marched into my boss's office, trying my best to remain composed, and I told her I could no longer work in the same office with Mr. Oink-Oink. My boss understood, having listened to my earlier complaints. He had hogged the computer and taken over my desk and telephone for lengths of time to make personal phone calls. He had removed things from my desk without my knowledge or permission. I had to step around empty envelopes and other trash that somehow had just missed the wastebasket. Once I found my bottle of water on his desk half empty.

The following Monday Mr. Macho was moved into another office, not so much because of my complaints, but because I work with highly confidential material. I still see him daily, but then again the world is full of Barneys telling women to shut up. Unfortunately, you can't stick the honorable family sword into the backs of every one of them.


And, it's not just men. It's women telling other women to keep their voices down. When a so-called friend told me to keep my voice down as we were having dinner outside, I got up and left. Scout's honor, I wasn't yelling. I suddenly understood why her best friend was the most timid, little mouse woman I had ever met.

Some of us have been earnestly taught how to be as quiet and nonthreatening as mice. Mice are easy to control and manipulate. In a book about virtuous behavior, a Latina recalled her mother's advice: "You must not talk in a loud voice or whine, but must speak softly and politely." I learned from my Japanese mother to be obedient and to not make waves.

What our mothers forgot to tell us was that there are occasions you have to fight back and stand up for yourself. If you're going to do it in a soft voice, you better be carrying a big stick.

I've always tried to play by the rules. I was a near mute in grade school and junior high. Invisibility was a virtue. As one familiar saying sternly warns, the nail that sticks up gets hit on the head. In reality, invisibility simply reinforced my low social value as a girl and as a member of a non-European minority.

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Kat Avila has an M.A. in Communication and has become quite the authority on how to talk back. Being of Japanese and Mexican ancestry, she has had lots of practice in California where ignorant people like to yell "Go back to where you came from!" and she wishes they would too. She has a website on Chicano/U.S. Latino theatre at www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia/, and she hopes that if you've read this far that you would drop her a line about all the shouting she's been doing. Her e-mail address is buscandocalifornia@yahoo.com.

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