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An advocate for women's rights, LGBT rights and freedom of speech, Shafak is an inspiring public speaker and twice a TED Global speaker. Shafak contributes to major publications around the world and she was awarded the medal of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 2017 she was chosen by Politico as one of the twelve people 'who will give you a much needed lift of the heart'. Shafak has judged numerous literary prizes, chaired the Wellcome Prize and is presently judging the Orwell Prize.
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HOW TO STAY SANE IN AN AGE OF DIVISION

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IT WAS MY FIRST DAY in Istanbul, a breezy evening in September, many moons ago now. Young, and aspiring to become a writer, I had moved to the city without knowing anyone, following an instinct I could neither identify nor betray, and rented a tiny flat in one of its most cramped, chaotic and cosmopolitan quarters, close to Taksim Square. From the teahouse across the narrow street I could hear the roll of backgammon dice over wooden board, the cries of seagulls darting and diving to snatch a sandwich from the hand of an unsuspecting passerby. But now it was late into the night, and

the teahouse was closed, the seagulls roosting on rooftops. There were no curtains or blinds on my windows and bathed in the pale light from a street lamp outside I sat on a cardboard box full of books and papers, listening to the sounds of the unsleeping city. I must have dozed off for I woke up to the clamour of shouting.

I looked out and there she was, walking down the street, limping furiously as she carried a shoe with a broken heel in one hand while doggedly keeping on the other shoe. Clad in a short skirt, a silk blouse. A tall transgender woman. I knew the neighbourhood was home to sexual minorities, this being one of the relatively liberal quarters of the city, although their lives and livelihoods were constantly overshadowed by social prejudice and systematic discrimination. With no other job opportunities available, many within the local transgender community were either sex workers walking the streets or employed in the bars, clubs and taverns that formed Istanbul's

night-time economy. In areas a stone's throw away undergoing rapid gentrification they had been driven out by police brutality but there was still a considerable close knit and proud community on my street, namely the *Street of Cauldron Makers*.

As she passed under my window, I could hear her talking to herself, and I was able to catch some of the words in her soliloquy. Someone – perhaps a lover, perhaps the whole city – had treated her badly, unfairly. She was sad, but more than that she was angry.

It started to rain, and the drops quickened,
drip drip drip.
A single heel echoed against the cobble-
stones, tap tap tap.

I watched her until she turned the corner at the end of the street. I had never before seen a woman so visibly broken, and yet stubbornly carrying on. I felt guilty for not opening the window and talking to her, asking if she was all

right. I also felt ashamed because my first reaction had been to retreat into the safety of my flat as though I feared her melancholy might be contagious. It remained etched in my brain, the similarities and the contrasts. Her loneliness, which I sensed was no different from my loneliness. Yet my timidity as opposed to her boldness. She had had enough of Istanbul, I hadn't even begun to discover it. But more importantly, she was a strong fighter, I was just an observer.

Many years have passed since then. I no longer live in Istanbul. But today, as I sit at my desk in London to write about our polarised and troubled world, I find myself remembering that moment, remembering her, and I find myself thinking about anger and loneliness and hurt.

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The pandemic. As the coronavirus swept round the globe killing hundreds of thousands,

putting millions out of work and shattering life as we knew it, board signs appeared randomly in public parks across London. ‘When all this is over, how do you want the world to be different?’ the signs asked. What *all this* meant was not explicit in the question; passersby were expected to work out for themselves what it implied – this sudden disruption of our daily routine, this sense of being caught in the swell of uncertainty and the fear of what is to come, this major global health crisis with long-term economic, social and possibly political consequences, this tunnel that we, as humanity, must go through without any easy guesses as to how or when it would end or whether another outbreak of a viral disease might happen again in the near future.

The boards were deliberately left blank so that underneath the question people could write their own answers, and many had. Of all the comments scribbled hastily there, one in particular stayed with me. Somebody had etched out in bold letters, ‘I want to be heard.’

When all this is over I want to live in a different world where I can be heard.

It was a personal cry. But, in many ways, it felt like a collective cry too.

‘Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels’ hierarchies?’ asked the poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Duino Elegies*, written and published in the earlier part of the twentieth century. It was a different time back then. Today, in the twenty-first century, in a deeply divided and increasingly tangled world, craving dignity and equality, overwhelmed by the speed of change and the acceleration of technology, our shared feeling is, ‘Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the humans’ hierarchies?’

People who have much to say, a distinctive story to tell, often do not do so because they fear their words will fall on deaf ears. They feel excluded from political power and, to a large extent, from political and civic participation.

Even if they were to shout their grievances from the rooftops of Westminster – or Brussels or Washington or New Delhi – they doubt it would have the slightest impact on public policy. Not only management and authority, power and wealth, but also data and knowledge are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few – and a growing number of citizens feel left out, not so much forgotten as never noticed in the first place. As their disillusionment deepens, so does distrust even in the most basic institutions. More than half of the people living in democracies today say their voice is ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ heard.* If this is the general mood in the relatively democratic countries, imagine how much higher that percentage would be in authoritarian regimes where there is no transparency and a single narrative is imposed from above, stifling any form of dissent. Added together, that is a lot of voiceless people. And the biggest irony is that all this is happening at

* Survey conducted by Dalia Research, Alliance of Democracies and Rasmussen Global, 2018.

a time when we as humans – regardless of race, gender, religion, class or ethnicity – are supposed to be more connected and empathetic and free than ever before, with far more opportunities at our disposal to express ourselves than our grandparents could have dreamed of, given the proliferation of both digital and media platforms. How is it possible then that in an era when social media was expected to give everyone an equal voice, so many continue to feel voiceless?

To be deprived of a voice means to be deprived of agency over our own lives. It also means to slowly but systematically become alienated from our own journeys, struggles and inner transformations, and begin to view even our most subjective experiences as though through someone else's eyes, an external gaze. 'There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you', wrote the poet, author and civil rights activist Maya Angelou. In the present circumstances, for a whole variety of reasons, a similar agony is experienced by

many across the globe, East and West, North and South.

Stories bring us together, untold stories keep us apart.

We are made of stories – those that have happened, those that are still happening at this moment in time and those that are shaped purely in our imagination through words, images, dreams and an endless sense of wonder about the world around us and how it works. Unvarnished truths, innermost reflections, fragments of memory, wounds unhealed. Not to be able to tell your story, to be silenced and shut out, therefore, is to be dehumanised. It strikes at your very existence; it makes you question your sanity, the validity of your version of events. It creates a profound, and existential anxiety in us.

In losing our voice something in us dies.

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The year I started primary school in Turkey, I had difficulty learning how to write. Part of the reason might have been due to my own introversion and my inability to adapt quickly to the new environment. But a larger part was because I was left-handed. Back then, left-handedness was socially and culturally considered to be a problem that could nevertheless be fixed with rigorous attention and discipline. Unfortunately, among those who shared this view was my classroom teacher. Every day, she would remind me, with a disappointed smile that was worse than if she'd simply yelled at me, to please stop using my 'bad hand' and switch to my 'good hand'. There was another student who seemed to be in the same boat as I was and for a while we shared a sense of camaraderie but somehow he managed to make the transition in the space of no more than a few weeks. I couldn't. If anything, I felt paralysed.

Meanwhile, with every incentive she could think of, the teacher goaded me to correct my behaviour. She promised me rewards

and, when that didn't help, she resorted to patriotism and civic responsibility, and then to religion. Did I not know that when you carried the Turkish flag on every national celebration day, you had to hold your right hand above your left hand? Did I not know that God the Almighty had placed two angels on the shoulders of each human being, two diligent scribes, whose sole aim was to note down our every move and every thought? The angel on the left shoulder kept a list of all our sins, including our darkest wishes, while the angel perched on the right shoulder recorded our virtues and honourable deeds. Wasn't it clear that by choosing the left hand to write I was associating myself with the wrong angel, siding with sin?

I was an early reader. As an only child, a lonely child, I was immensely curious about books and the mysteries they held, and at home, with a bit of help from my Grandma, I had been quietly picking up the patterns of language, deciphering their codes. But now at school, holding a pencil, jotting down words

into a notebook had become pure torment. If memory serves, in a classroom of about forty-five kids I must have been one of the last, if not the last, to learn how to write and earn the red velvet ribbon that the teacher would pin on the chest of every victorious student. I might never have developed the skill were it not for a singular letter in the Turkish alphabet.

It was called the soft g – a ‘g’ with a little squiggle on top, like this: ğ. Always it had to be preceded by a vowel, and even though it sometimes lengthened the sound of the vowel, it did not have a voice of its own. Every other letter made a distinctive sound, expressed itself loud and clear, except this one. The soft g did not talk. It did not complain or articulate opinions or demand anything. With its puzzling silence and slightly distracted manners it immediately stood out amid the gushing, garrulous letters. It must be a foreigner, I thought. An outsider. An alphabetical outcast. No word in my mother tongue started with it, which I found rather unfair. It was almost as if it was

invisible. If you encountered it in the middle of a word, you were supposed to pretend not to have seen it. Just move on and gently skip over it. So the soft g remained mute no matter what the text or context. Yet the more attention I paid to this mystifying letter the more I came to believe that it was trying to tell me something. Perhaps it did speak after all, in its own way, but no one was interested in hearing what it was saying. And somehow my seven-year-old brain associated this unwanted letter with my unwanted left hand. They were both unpopular in the classroom, that's how it felt. Maybe they could connect.

So in the evenings I set about practising drawing out the soft g, first with my left hand, my sinful hand, just for myself, and then with my right and respectable hand, for school the next day. I made up imaginary words that, defying the rules of grammar, began with the silent letter. To this end, I introduced slight changes in existing spellings – gorilla became ġorilla, graffiti became ġraffiti. I then

wrote them down, painstakingly, though I remembered to stick to the original spellings in the classroom. It worked. The teacher was pleased, I was finally making progress. Little by little, the one mute letter in the Turkish alphabet helped me to gain confidence and guided me through the rest of the writing system. In hindsight, I understand, it was me who was struggling to belong in school and I projected this sense of alienation on to an inanimate letter. But the experience, vivid and visceral as it was, taught me an important life lesson: when you feel alone don't look within, look out and look beyond for others who feel the same way, for there are always others, and if you can connect with them and with their story, you will be able to see everything in a new light.

Still today, as a novelist, I am not only drawn to stories but also to silences. My first instinct as a storyteller is to dig into 'the periphery' rather than 'the centre' and focus my attention on the marginalised, underserved, disenfranchised

and censored voices. Taboos too, including political, cultural, gender taboos. There is a part of me that wants to understand, at any moment in time, where in a society the silent letters are hidden.

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If wanting to be heard is one side of the coin, the other side is being willing to listen. The two are inextricably connected. When convinced that no one – especially those in places of power and privilege – is really paying attention to our protests and demands we will be less inclined to listen to others, particularly to people whose views differ from ours. Communication across the cultural and ideological spectrum will falter and, eventually, crumble. And when communication is broken, coexistence, inclusion and social harmony will also be damaged. In other words, if perpetuated and made routine, the feeling of being systematically unheard will slowly, gradually, seal our ears, and then seal our hearts. In retracting our willingness to

listen to others, we ensure that they, too, feel unheard. And the cycle continues, worsening every time it revolves.

The moment we stop listening to diverse opinions is also when we stop learning. Because the truth is we don't learn much from sameness and monotony. We usually learn from differences.

In life most of what we have come to understand throughout the years we have acquired by interacting with dissimilar, and often challenging views, and by encountering information, criticism and knowledge hitherto unfamiliar to us, and then processing these internally by growing insight from seeds of discussions, readings and observations.

The thing about groupthink or social media bubbles is that they aggressively feed and amplify repetition. And repetition, however familiar and comforting, will never challenge us mentally, emotionally or behaviourally.

Echoes simply reiterate what has already been said at some point in time, long gone. Like dead stars, they might seem to have a presence from a distance, but in truth, they are completely devoid of life and light. Echo chambers, therefore, severely limit the breadth and depth of the views we subject ourselves to, they ration knowledge. And, at the same time, they limit wisdom: wisdom, which connects the mind and the heart, activates emotional intelligence, expands empathy and understanding, allows us to reach beyond the lonely confines of our own minds and engage with the rest of humanity, to listen to them and learn from them. To leave one echo chamber for another is no solution either. We must strive to become intellectual nomads, keep moving, keep learning, resist confining ourselves in any cultural or mental ghetto, and spend more time not in select centres but at the margins, which is where real change always comes from.

If all my friends and acquaintances think like me, vote like me, speak like me, if I only read

the kind of books, newspapers and magazines that are in line with what I have read before, if I only follow online sites that sympathise with my preconceived verdicts, if I only watch videos or programmes that essentially validate my worldview, and if nearly all of my information comes from the same limited sources, day in, day out, it means that, deep within, I want to be surrounded with my mirror image 24/7. That is not only a suffocatingly claustrophobic setting, it is also a profoundly narcissistic existence.

But here's the thing: sometimes narcissism is not merely an individual trait, it is a collective one. The shared illusion that we are the centre of the world. This notion was examined in detail by various thinkers in the last century, especially Theodor Adorno and Erich Fromm. What these writers had in common was that they had witnessed, first hand, the rise of nationalism, jingoism, xenophobia and totalitarianism. Their warnings are apposite today. Central to group narcissism is an inflated belief

in the clear-cut distinctiveness and indisputable greatness of 'us' as opposed to 'them'. One unsurprising consequence of this conviction is an enduring resentment towards others. If I am convinced that my tribe is far better and worth more, I will first doubt, and then denigrate anyone who refuses to recognise our superiority.

In a world that is profoundly complex and challenging, group narcissism has become a compensation for our personal frustrations, flaws and failures. But above all, it provides a counterbalance to two troubling feelings: disillusionment and bewilderment.