

Standing Up

"...because a wink and a nod in the face of injustice have become a habit of mind for us."

Alice McDermott- Regis College commencement address. *The Boston Globe*, May 16, 2002

"a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity."

T. S. Eliot's essay on Joyce in "Ulysses, Order and Myth."

Sometimes the only audience is you. Alone with your soul, and your God if you have one.

It was Aristotle who said, "the defining characteristic of humankind is our ability to understand the difference between the just and the unjust." The Alice McDermott quote above assumes this is so otherwise the "wink and nod" line would not work, and it does. There is a natural instinct to lie low, to mind ones own business, to be polite in polite company, to defer to authority and to stay out of the line of fire. Sometimes we cannot. Sometimes we find ourselves in the belly of the beast.

You are in a business meeting, and an important client tells a nasty anti-semitic story. Your colleagues know you are Jewish even though you don't look it. Or perhaps you are at a dinner party, and someone makes a crude joke about Lesbians. Only your hostess knows your eldest daughter is a lesbian and that you consider her partner of 24 years a daughter, if not in law than in fact.

Let's make it less dramatic. You are present in the meeting and at the dinner party and do not fit either of these profiles, but are embarrassed and bothered by what you have heard. Either way you have arrived at a line in the sand, a moment of truth. What do you say or do? What do you not say or not do? There are risks, and there are rewards, no matter what you do.

You cause a scene, make a passionate speech and stomp out of the room in righteous anger. The risks are you anger the client and lose the business, make a fool of yourself in everyone's eyes, including your own, embarrass your colleagues or your hostess who will never want to lay eyes on you again, be accused of overreacting- making a mountain out of a molehill, lose an opportunity to change the way someone thinks, or even worse, reaffirm the speakers' hostile attitudes towards Jews and lesbians. The rewards will be you feel better having spoken your mind, you may be considered a hero by others in the room, the speakers may feel awkward and guilty about their comments, and less inclined to make them again.

You remain cool, polite but firm, and attempt to engage the speakers in a dialogue. The risks are they still get upset and an argument results in awkwardness all around (similar to the scenario above), despite your good intentions, you lose self-control (also similar to the above), or it turns out that others in the room agree with the speakers' comments. The rewards may be a reasonable, even illuminating discussion, or the speakers apologize

and compliment your courage and tact, the relationship with the client is actually strengthened, and the hostess is thrilled with her memorable dinner party.

Or you dodge the bullet, laugh nervously, and try to lightly change the subject. The risks are the subjects come up a second and third time, as though silence was tacit encouragement, your relationship with the client is changed forever, you never want to see the hostess again and you hate yourself afterwards for being a coward. The rewards are the business meeting goes according to plan, as does the dinner party and your colleagues and your hostess breathe a sigh of relief and appreciate that you did not make a scene.

How many readers have been in a similar kind of situation? Quite a few is my guess and since I do fit these profiles and am both a Jew and a father of a lesbian, I have had variations of these experiences and, alas, have responded at different times in all three ways. So I know how much time one spends after the fact rewriting those responses because in the heat of the moment, clear thinking and eloquence are often in short supply. The term risk reward analysis does not apply. Of the three scenarios above, it is the third, the one of silence that I find most troubling. The opportunity to be silent is ever present.

An employee who had been a high ranking official with the federal government for almost 20 years comes to see you with the following story. A special bill has passed the Congress that provides a generous supplementary pension for a small, special class of federal employees, certain high level administrators and judges. Conditions are quite

narrow and there is a small window in time for this person to qualify. You are asked to allow the employee to 'work' at a federal agency at the same time as working for you. This is a subterfuge and no one is to know about the arrangement except for a few officials, and now of course, you. You agreed but have wondered at your culpability ever since.

A non-profit organization has self-insured its health insurance plan for many years. The plan covers several thousand people and the administrative charges are a major revenue source for the organization. Something has gone wrong, very wrong and the plan is almost \$2.5 million in the hole. There is no way that the organization can cover the deficit. It means bankruptcy, huge dislocation for those covered, even lawsuits, and a big embarrassment. In addition, without the plan, there is little rationale for the organization to even exist. The Executive Director has told no one including the outside auditors about the issue but during an informal review of the financials, the Chair of the Board finds out. "We, and you, have a problem," he says. "I don't think so," is the response. "My friends in the state legislature will bail us out." "Why would they do that?" he asks. "Because too many people will be hurt, and they owe me." The Board Chair shook his head in disbelief, but that is what happened. Pulling in all of kinds of 'chits', and making the case the public interest was being served, a special authorization made its way through the legislature, and was signed by the Governor. The insurance fund was made whole. No one, outside of the direct participants, had a clue what had happened. You are that Board Chair, and never said a word to anyone.

Sometimes the sounds of silence can be deafening.

I am with a friend, a very wealthy man with a large foundation, and we are discussing his deep concern about the rise of anti-semitism in Europe. In his view the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is being used as fuel for the resurgence of right-wing political activities, for renewal of ancient hatreds that lie just below the surface of too many cultures. My friend is not alone in these views, and as we are discussing what his Foundation can do about it he makes this comment. *“Do you think in the 30s, there were people in Europe like us, gathered around some table worrying about the growing danger of Nazism. Why didn’t they act? How could they have been silent? I don’t want to be like that, sit on the sidelines, and be responsible for history repeating itself.”*

As this man understands, T. S. Elliot’s “continuous parallel” runs not just between today and antiquity, but between today and yesterday, and tomorrow. His fears and nightmares are about Quisling, Schindler's List, desperate partisans in the mountains, the stomp of boots in the middle of the night, and silence.

Worlds apart, far from speculations are those who live in the midst of the nightmare of poverty, injustice, war and terror, and find the courage to stand up and act.

Pedro Anaya, a 24 year old Mexican-American, chose as his hero Cesar Chavez, the great labor leader who symbolizes the immigrant labor movement’s struggle for justice and fair wages. Pedro formed an organization that fights bias, bigotry and racism and works on

behalf of very poor people for access to housing and education. *“What inspires me is this amazing opportunity to make people’s lives better. It is a blessing.”*

Ernest Guevarra, a 24 year-old Philippine physician, has devoted himself to the disadvantaged and volunteers at a clinic to treat victims of human rights violations. After protesting government torturing of Muslims, Guevarra was jailed. Despite threats of violence, he continues to work as physician to thousands of displaced villagers in the midst of a war zone. Ernest is motivated to work *“with people who have risen up to control their lives and chart a better future – that is my happiness.”*

Oona Chatterjee, a 29 year old Yale Law graduate, works in Bushwick, a desperately poor section of Brooklyn, to help victimized garment workers receive fair wages from illegal sweat shop owners and to organize for a better life for themselves and their children. Oona struggles with the *“stark contradictions in this country between extreme wealth and... serious human rights violations in the conditions people work under. Making the world make sense out of those contradictions- that’s what moves me.”*

Mohamed Pa-Momo Fofanah from Sierre Leone is a 30 year-old lawyer who devotes his life to protecting the rights of children caught in poverty and civil chaos. To Mohamed, the sight of seven-year-olds carrying guns was the final image that motivated him to become an advocate for children who live in extreme risk. *“Dealing with poverty, cruelty, and death can be depressing but children have values and virtues suppressed by war and*

given the opportunity they do wonders. In children there is hope and to see them smile.....”

Christian Mukosa, a 28 year old lawyer from the Congo, where a decade long civil war has created the worst kind of chaos and anarchy, represents impoverished victims of torture and human rights abuse. He does this at great personal risk. *“In my country, people go to jail because they have no lawyer. For me to help them, it gives me great pleasure. And besides, if I don’t do it, who will?”*

Pedro Anaya, Ernest Guevarra, Oona Chatterjee, Mohamed Pa-Momo Fofanah and Christian Mukosa are the 2003 Reebok Human Rights Awards recipients.

And we, where are we, where are you, where am I?

In denial, when we choose not to believe what is front of our eyes?

In a place of fear, when we cower in front of bullies and are silent in the face of wrongdoing?

In a comfort and selfish zone, where we do not want to disturb our sinecures of comfort?

Or standing up and being counted.

And we, where are we, where are you, where am I?