

A DIFFERENT KIND OF COURAGE

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
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Each year in February, UCLA hosts the Danny Pearl Memorial Lecture, in honor of the journalist for the Wall Street Journal who was captured by Pakistani terrorists in 2002 and murdered. This year's lecturer was Bret Stephens, who writes about foreign affairs on the op-ed page of the Journal and won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 2013. I'm a regular reader of Stephens' columns — not because I always agree with him, but because I often don't. Even so, the precision of his analysis typically helps me clarify my own thinking.

In his lecture, Stephens addresses the obvious challenge posed to journalists and news organizations by Trump and his administration. Stephens observes that the president routinely describes reporting he dislikes as fake news, calls the press "the opposition party," ridicules news organizations he doesn't like as business failures, and calls for journalists to be fired. In some cases, Stephens says, the president responds to a claim of fact not by denying the fact, but by "saying that, as far as he is concerned, facts, as most people understand the term, don't matter: That they are indistinguishable from, and interchangeable with, opinion."

Stephens goes on to point out that this form of argument originates in Plato's Republic, where a man named Thrasymachus makes a similar argument about justice. In a debate with Socrates, Thrasymachus says that justice is nothing more than the advantage of whoever is stronger, and that injustice, "if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than justice." Substitute the words "truth" and "falsehood" for "justice" and "injustice," Stephens says, and you end up with Trump's view of the world. "If I had to sum it up in a single sentence," Stephens adds, "it would be this: *Truth is what you can get away with.*"

Later in his lecture, Stephens contrasts Trump's view of journalism with the kind of journalism practiced by Danny Pearl. "Danny was a writer who observed with all his senses," Stephens says. "He saw. He listened. He smelled. He bore down. He reflected."

Stephens recalls a passage written by Pearl in February, 2001, a year before his death, from the site of an earthquake disaster in the Indian town of Anjar. "He understood that what the reader had to know about Anjar wasn't a collection of statistics," Stephens says, "It was the visceral reality of a massive human tragedy." Danny Pearl described the tragedy in this way:

What is India's earthquake zone really like? It smells. It reeks. You can't imagine the odor of several hundred bodies decaying for five days as

search teams pick away at slabs of crumbled buildings in this town. Even if you've never smelled it before, the brain knows what it is, and orders you to get away. After a day, the nose gets stuffed up in self-defense. But the brain has registered the scent, and picks it up in innocent places: lip balm, sweet candy, stale breath, an airplane seat.

Perhaps now more than ever, we need people like Danny Pearl who can see, and hear, and smell what's actually happening — people who can bear down upon the truth and reflect upon what it means. An earthquake in a different form has shaken our body politic to its very core. We need to know how badly our democracy has been damaged, and whether it can recover, and how.

It's becoming more and more difficult to argue that American exceptionalism will protect us from the fate suffered by so many other democracies in the 20th Century. To the contrary, many people in our nation have revealed the same tendency to prefer more autocratic forms of governance in the face of uncertainty and fear. The recent influx of generals and plutocrats into key positions in the executive branch led one commentator to describe the takeover as a silent coup. Several cabinet members now head agencies they spent years and even decades trying to circumvent or even shut down. It's a worrisome series of developments, to say the least.

About a decade ago, University of Chicago philosopher Jonathan Lear published a book titled, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Lear is interested in what happens when a culture dies. He recalls a statement by a great Crow chieftain in the 1920's describing what had happened when the Crow people were pressured to give up their hunting way of life and enter a reservation near the end of the 19th century. "When the buffalo went away," the chief said, "the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."

In this case, Lear points out, the chief wasn't saying that his people had perished, which many of them had not, but that their culture was gone. They could no longer roam the land and hunt the buffalo. Whatever happened after the Crow people were pushed onto the reservation had no meaning to a people who understood themselves as wanderers and hunters. As far as they were concerned, after the buffalo went away, nothing more ever happened. As one Crow woman said, "I am trying to live a life I do not understand."

Given that our culture today is much more differentiated and diversified than that of the Crow people, we can usually imagine a future for ourselves if, for example, the company where we work shuts down, or the school we attend closes, or our best friend dies of cancer. But given the political, economic, and especially environmental terrain we have entered as a nation and as a global community, we're facing some of the same questions as the Crow did. We don't know how to imagine our future.

What if some of the dystopian scenarios for our nation and our world turn out to be true? What if the American experiment ultimately fails? What if climate change devastates the world economy? What if the grid goes down? What then?

Situations like these require what Lear calls radical hope. “What makes this hope radical,” he says, “is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.”

All religious hope, Lear observes, is of this form. It’s the hope that we will survive, or come through, or even overcome, even though we can’t say in advance exactly what this will amount to. To go forward in situations like these, Lear adds, takes a different kind of courage — not one that responds bravely to clear and present dangers, but rather one that resolutely sets its sights on a future good that cannot yet be seen.

The traditional religious term for this kind of courage is faith. As the Christian New Testament famously puts it, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” For my part, I like the idea of thinking of radical hope not as faith but as a different kind of courage. Faith suggests an activity of the mind, while courage conveys a conviction that extends to the heart, and hands, and feet. It indicates a readiness to set out in search of a future we have not yet seen.

To be sure, the future we seek will not appear magically out of thin air. It will come because we have been diligently doing the work that needs to be done in order to make it appear. It will come because we have taught our children, promoted our values, defended our democracy, and showed up at demonstrations. Good things happen because people persistently pave the way for them to happen, even if it takes years or generations.

Sometimes, however, unforeseen changes happen with almost unimaginable speed. Earlier this week, I came across a vivid example of this possibility. It’s found in a keynote presentation Stanford lecturer and clean energy advocate Tony Seba gave to a 2016 energy summit in Oslo. He begins by showing two photographs of Fifth Avenue in New York. The first, taken in the year 1900, shows the avenue literally filled with horses and carriages — many dozens of horses and carriages. There is one single car hidden somewhere in the photograph, Seba says to his audience. Can anyone see the car? No one can. Seba then points out the lone automobile, tucked in between two carriages.

The second photograph was taken 13 years later, in the year 1913. It shows Fifth Avenue filled with cars — many dozens of cars. There is one horse hidden somewhere in the photograph, Seba says. Can anyone see the horse? No one can. Seba then points out the lone horse and carriage, tucked in between two cars.

Seba claims that a similar disruption of energy and transportation is taking place today, impelled by advances in batteries, energy storage, electric vehicles, self-driving vehicles, and solar energy. He says that by 2030 — 13 years from now — all new vehicles will be electric and self-driving. Oil, coal, natural gas, and nuclear energy will be obsolete. Individual car ownership will be obsolete, as will 80% of all parking spaces. All

new energy will be provided by solar energy and wind power. Just as digital cameras swiftly disrupted film cameras, and web publishing swiftly disrupted print publishing, Seba concludes, clean energy will swiftly disrupt traditional forms of energy.

I certainly hope he's right. If he is, the disruption will come because hundreds of thousands of people — scientists, engineers, legislators, activists, consumers, and so on — recognized the truth about both the problems we face and the progress we might realize if people work together to make it possible.

In much the same way, I also hope that we can work together to disrupt the forces of autocracy. In order for this to happen, we must first recognize the truth about what is happening in our nation and our world.

Bret Stephens concludes the Danny Pearl Memorial Lecture by saying that, especially in times like these, everyone has an obligation to do what Danny Pearl did — to see what's in front of us. Whether we are reporters, columnists, or something else, we need to look not around the facts, or beyond them, or away from them, Stephens says, but “to look straight at them, to recognize and call them for what they are, nothing more or less. To see things as they are before we reinterpret them into what we'd like them to be.” We need to distinguish between truth and falsity, between facts and opinions, between evidence and wishes. We need to “hold fast to a set of intellectual standards and moral convictions that won't waver amid changes of political fashion or tides of unfavorable opinion.”

On this point, I agree completely with Stephens. You and I need to demonstrate the kind of courage that Danny Pearl showed. I would add that we also need to demonstrate a different kind of courage — not one that responds bravely to clear and present dangers, but rather one that resolutely sets its sights on a future good that cannot yet be seen.

In the old days, people sometimes showed their courage by heading off into uncharted regions, away from everybody else. A different kind of courage heads toward other people with the goal of strengthening the bonds of human connection. In the old days, people sometimes showed their courage by fighting with other people. A different kind of courage unites with others to strengthen the bonds of human community.

Autocrats can prevail only by dividing us among ourselves, setting one group against another, one faith against another, one party against another, and one person against another. Radical hope emerges from the conviction that the ties that bind us to each other as a human community will ultimately be stronger than the forces that would divide us. Though the evidence may suggest otherwise, our faith in the ultimate goodness that lies ahead remains unshaken.

As people of faith, our calling is to build human community, one person at a time. Sit down with someone you don't know. Protest with someone you just met. Take care of someone who's suffering. Help out someone who feels lonely alone.

Make amends. Make friends. Make dinner. Join hands. Join hearts. Join together. Take time. Take charge. Most of all, take courage.