

The Courage of Conviction

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November 8, 2009

Preface: The Trial of Susan B. Anthony

Narrator: In 1872, long before women had won the right to vote, Susan B. Anthony walked down to her local polling place and cast her ballot in the presidential election. Witnesses reported her seditious action, and she was duly arrested. Brought before Judge Hunt, she faced a \$500 fine and up to three years in prison. Standing in the dock, Susan wasn't allowed to say anything in her own defense. The judge even ordered the jury to find her guilty. Only at the end of the trial did he ask Ms. Anthony if she had anything to say before he passed sentence. This is how the scene unfolded ...

Judge Hunt: Miss Anthony, will you please stand up. Has the prisoner anything to say why sentence should not be pronounced?

Anthony: Yes, your honor. I have many things to say, for in telling the jury to find me guilty, you have trampled under foot everything this nation stands for. My natural rights, my political rights, my civil rights have all been ignored. Robbed of the privilege of citizenship, I and all of my sex are doomed to slavery.

Judge Hunt: I cannot listen to these arguments. Your lawyer has already made these points in court.

Anthony: May it please your honor, I am not arguing the question, but simply stating why sentence, cannot, in justice, be pronounced against me. Since the day of my arrest last November, this is the first time I have been allowed a word of defense against judge or jury.

Judge Hunt: The prisoner must be silent—the Court cannot allow you to speak on your own behalf. We insist you have been tried according to the established forms of law.

Anthony: Yes, your honor, but by forms of law all made by men, interpreted by men, administered by men, in favor of men and against women; and therefore, your honor's ordered verdict of guilty because I, a woman, was trying to vote, is unjust. Just as the slaves who got their freedom had to oppose unjust laws, so now must woman. I have voted, and I mean to do so again, at every possible opportunity.

Judge Hunt: The court orders you to stop now, Miss Anthony. It will not allow another word!

Anthony: When I was brought for trial, I hoped for

a broad and liberal interpretation of the Constitution of the United States and its recent amendments. I hoped you would declare all U.S. citizens equal and entitled to equal rights and privileges. But failing to get this justice, failing even to get a fair trial by a jury of my peers—I ask not for gentle treatment. Punish me to the full extent of the law!

Judge Hunt: The sentence of the court is that you pay a fine of \$100 and the costs of the prosecution.

Anthony: May it please your honor, I shall never pay a single dollar of your unjust penalty. I already owe my creditors \$10,000 for the cost of publishing my newspaper, *The Revolution*, whose sole purpose is to tell the women of America to rebel against unjust men like you with your unfair, man-made laws. I shall continue to liberate those of my sex, and not one penny of my money shall go to pay this unjust fine.

Judge Hunt: Madame, the court will not be satisfied until the fine is paid. We are adjourned.

Narrator: Susan never paid the fine, and Judge Hunt did not order her to jail because he feared she would appeal her case to the Supreme Court, which might have overruled his decision. Instead, Susan had 3,000 copies of the trial record produced and distributed. People who had never been concerned about women's rights before were so outraged by the behavior of Judge Hunt that donations flooded to her cause.

Reflections

Like the First Unitarian Society of Madison, the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee holds three weekend worship services, two on Sunday morning and one in the afternoon. However, their late service is held on Sunday rather than Saturday, so when I spoke there several weeks ago, Trina and I found ourselves with four empty hours to fill until the 5:00 service commenced. Ultimately, we chose to take in a movie.

Although I have never paid much attention to cooking shows and know next to nothing about French cuisine, I knew that the actress Meryl Streep had received excellent reviews for her performance in the film "Julie and Julia." That, then, is where we ended up and this funny, poignant film about Julia Child was well worth the price of admission.

Julia Child herself died in 2004 at age 92, but in life she was a presence. Her book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* has become a culinary classic and her immensely popular, long-running television show, "The French Chef," pioneered a whole new entertainment genre. Today there is even a cable channel devoted solely to food and cooking.

These are significant achievements, but what interests me most about Julia Child is her character. A tall, big-boned woman with a voice that readily lent itself to caricature, Child was a lady of fierce determination and unyielding conviction. She possessed a wonderful self-deprecating sense of humor, but when it came to her craft she was all business. Shortly after her death, Christopher Kimball, a friend and the long-time editor of *Cook's Illustrated* paid tribute to this remarkable woman.

At a critical juncture in food history, Kimball wrote, Julia Child arrived to "save us from ourselves."

We wanted instant gratification and Julia told us that good stock took time.... Yes, butter and cream could be reduced, but then the dish would not be worth eating.... She never took up the banner of "meals in minutes." She never offered a recipe for "lite" cheesecake. She never allowed her name to be used in the promotion of any commercial enterprise. Diets were anathema to Julia because they implied that food was harmful. She never wavered from her convictions and ... she defied us at every turn.... She was in a battle with the strongest and most dangerous of our cultural currents. Yet she held her head high, had no regrets, and dined thoughtfully off centuries past while the rest of us were grabbing a bite from the takeout window.

It would be easy to dismiss Julia Child as a "mere cook," but no matter what a person's trade or calling, it takes exceptional fortitude to swim against the strong current of popular opinion, to endure ridicule, to hold fast to one's principles in the face of either setbacks or success. This is what Julia Child did; it was who she was.

It's not an easy act to pull off, you know. A person of firm conviction can be dismissed as a fanatic or written off as a hopeless idealist. One might even be accused of placing a higher value on abstract principle than on the concrete welfare of people.

We are all familiar with ideological purists who simply cannot be persuaded to moderate their

views or alter their position. In recent decades, America's politics have been increasingly dominated by fierce partisanship, with lawmakers refusing to give an inch to their opponents. Barack Obama was elected, at least in part, because he promised a more nuanced, bipartisan approach to America's social and economic challenges. The polarization that has poisoned the legislative process in recent decades is no longer tolerable, Obama insisted. Ideology must yield to the collaborative process of developing pragmatic solutions to the nation's problems. Regrettably, little progress has yet been made toward this goal. Today the divide between Republicans and Democrats seems deeper than the Mariana Trench.

It has been said that "politics is the art of the possible," which suggests that a truly effective politician will adopt a flexible approach to policy making and apply his or her principles judiciously rather than dogmatically.

But here again, we run into difficulties. Just as the person of unyielding conviction is often perceived as an extremist or "true believer," the individual who seeks accommodation or who is willing to compromise risks being labeled a hypocrite, a waffler, or an opportunist.

So the question is, how much wiggle room do we permit ourselves? How do we keep faith with our ideals and maintain our integrity while working constructively with persons holding different values? That is Barack Obama's dilemma, and it is often ours as well.

It goes without saying that men and women of unyielding conviction have made a real difference in our world. The success of Susan B. Anthony's suffrage crusade owed much to her and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's refusal to make concessions. Similarly, Michael Servetus, the 16th century heretic whose controversial books were crucial to the development of the Unitarian movement in Eastern Europe, submitted to death rather than recant his views. Servetus not only laid the intellectual foundations for European Unitarianism, but his execution in Geneva, Switzerland in 1553 at the hands of the powerful Protestant reformer John Calvin generated storms of protest. Eventually, the persecution of Michael Servetus motivated other Protestants to adopt policies of greater religious tolerance.

John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of the United States once remarked, "Always vote for a principle, though you vote alone, and you may cherish the sweet reflection that your vote is never lost."

One of our most notable Unitarian forebears, Adams served this country in several capacities—as Secretary of State, Ambassador to four different European nations, as U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, and, after a single term as President, as an eight-term member of the House of Representatives.

In the end, it was as a member of Congress that Adams probably made his most enduring contribution because it was here that he fought tirelessly to end the slave trade. An advocate for both African and Native American interests, Adams' was often a lonely voice. But ultimately his position was vindicated and today ours is a much fairer country because of the courage with which he maintained his convictions.

Another man whose life ought to be lifted up this morning was born on November 5, 1855—just a few years after John Quincy Adams had left the scene. Eugene Victor Debs held public office only once; at 29 he was elected to the Indiana General Assembly and served only a single term. He was, however, the Socialist Party's candidate for president five times and was for many years one of this country's most influential and articulate labor leaders.

Despite his moderate midwestern roots, Debs became an uncompromising social reformer and a passionate opponent of militarism. His principled resistance to World War I forced our legal system to take a hard look at the U.S. Constitution and its guarantee of individual rights. This is how the story unfolds.

The year was 1918 and the conflict in Europe was still raging. Though initially skeptical about getting involved in this European affair, the American public pledged their allegiance once war had been declared and those who still resisted were put on the defensive. Thousands were prosecuted simply for drawing attention to the horrors of battle. Because of his prominence and outspokenness, the *Washington Post* declared Eugene Debs to be “a public menace. “The country will be better off with him behind bars,” the *Post* editorialized.

And so, after delivering a relatively mild anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio, Debs was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to ten years in prison. He was charged with violating the Federal Anti-Espionage Act, which made it a crime to impede the government's military recruitment efforts.

Eventually, the case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld the conviction. Writing for the majority, Oliver Wendell Holmes invoked the concept of “clear and present danger.”

Regardless of its intent, if his words had the effect of obstructing recruiting, the speaker was guilty of jeopardizing the nation's vital interests and compromising its safety.

And so Eugene Debs landed in federal prison. A man of great personal charm and disarming gentleness, he quickly won the respect and affection of inmates and prison officials alike. In May of 1920 the Socialist Party again nominated Debs, still behind bars, for president. Campaign buttons with his picture and the message—“For President – Vote Convict 9653”—were distributed. Prison authorities permitted Debs to send a 500-word message to voters once a week, and reporters were routinely allowed to interview the candidate. In the November election the socialist jailbird won almost a million votes.

Though unsuccessful, the campaign generated public sympathy for Debs, and the public began clamoring for the old radical's early release. Debs himself refused to ask for a pardon, saying that he had done nothing for which he wished to be pardoned. Nevertheless, Debs was freed in 1921 by the newly elected Warren G. Harding, who then immediately invited him to the White House for a personal interview. Greeting him at the door, the President said, “I have heard so damn much about you, Mr. Debs that I am now very glad to meet you personally.”

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For his part, Justice Holmes, who delivered the opinion that sent Debs to prison, soon began to have second thoughts. His fellow progressives were scandalized by the justice's stance on the First Amendment and thereafter Holmes became a passionate defender of free speech. “In the decades that followed,” Anthony Lewis observes,

... the Supreme Court steadily expanded its interpretation of First Amendment freedom, making this country more open to dissenting, even hateful speech, than any other. None of that gave Gene Debs himself any legal succor, but it should be reckoned as part of his legacy.

Convictions steadfastly held have made a big difference in our world, advancing the causes of religious toleration, racial and gender equality, civil liberties, and, yes, even classic continental cooking.

But a conviction can be just as troublesome as it is transformational. Evil, one commentator has said, does not always reflect a lack of virtue. Just as often it springs from the over-application of an otherwise desirable virtue or principle. It could be law and order, property rights, toleration, faith, or national sovereignty. Acting out of single-minded allegiance to that principle we can stymie collective efforts to arrive at workable solutions and do considerable damage to our relationships.

The trick, as I see it, is to realize that no value can be dealt with in isolation, apart from others that must be considered and balanced with it. The right to own property is important, but it does not absolve one of responsibility to one's neighbors and the larger community of living things. We treasure free speech, but not if it incites malcontents to harm the president.

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but global climate change may render it obsolete. The courage of conviction must always be accompanied by an open mind and an open heart.

And speaking of an open heart, there are also our loved ones to consider. To honor our family and our social, political and moral convictions can be difficult. For some, that isn't a problem. Eugene and Kate Debs were childless, and she warmly supported his activities. The same was true for Julia Child and her husband—a man of hearty appetite who whole-heartedly supported her passion. In order to pursue their goals unencumbered, neither Michael

Servetus nor Susan B. Anthony ever married.

On the other hand, as the doting mother of seven children, Elizabeth Cady Stanton often made them her first priority, which frustrated Susan B. Anthony:

Those of you who have talent to do honor to ... poor womanhood have all given yourselves over to baby-making and left poor brainless me to do battle alone. Such a body as I might be spared to rock cradles, but it is a crime for you and Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown Blackwell to be doing it!

2500 years ago Socrates said that the essence of justice is to give to each person their due—what they deserve and have a right to expect from us. Committed relationships carry certain obligations that either must be met or renegotiated. Such obligations must be carefully weighed against the work we hope to accomplish in the world.

In their classic book on successful negotiation entitled *Getting to Yes* Roger Fisher and William Ury offer some very cogent advice to reformers and high-minded activists: "Be soft on people, but hard on the problem." We are much more likely to produce positive, life-enhancing outcomes if we don't let our convictions override our sensitivity to living, breathing, suffering human beings.

It is when we over-invest in abstract principles and lose sight of our human solidarity that we miss the mark and fail to achieve the very ends that we seek. That is why the Dalai Lama repeatedly admonishes that if you must embrace any single principle, let it be compassion, let it be kindness, let it be charity. That was a virtue Debs, and John Quincy Adams and Elizabeth Cady Stanton all possessed, and we would do well to reaffirm it today.