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# On Voices of Dissent

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Kay Mizell

Democracy equals justice for all; but does it? Are all people treated fairly at all times? If not, should the offended speak out? The issue is whether or not the individual has the right, or indeed the obligation, to question society.

I intend to convince you that although rules are essential to maintain order, the voice of dissent must be acknowledged. Whether the antagonist can heighten public awareness regarding alternatives in an issue, force change in obviously unjust situations, or expose covert wrongdoing, he has a right to be heard. Using several examples, I will show that an open mind and respect for criticism are the pathways to improvement on both public and personal levels.

People are multifaceted, but the majority want to be just. Must the laws always be complied with, or should they be tested? After all, they are compiled by the democratically elected representatives of the people. I would further define "laws," as there are two sets: one public, one private. The populace are told the difference between right and wrong concerning the former. The latter, which can and do produce intense emotional conflict, are often less tangible. When dealing with these we are, it is hoped, guided by our integrity. After all, no one can run from himself. I feel that if he has the courage of his convictions, the individual should follow the dictates of his conscience. If society can be magnanimous enough to listen, evaluate, and even amend its legislative errors when necessary, it will indeed be as tolerant as it wishes to appear.

However, the prudent are aware that it can be unwise to question the system. In "The Prince" Machiavelli writes, "...anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation..." Therefore, if the critic plans to speak out, the reasoning must be sound.

The contender may make his point in two ways. He can either break the law or work within it. This choice is, of course difficult, and dependent on character and circumstances. Generally, people who stay within the law gain more approval and support. However, someone who has tried all legal channels and achieved nothing must understandably attempt to justify illegal action. He could cite frustration and the dictates of his conscience. If the law breaking was a last desperate demonstration of the sincerity of the individual, much public sympathy could be gained. Nevertheless, the perpetrator must be prepared to pay the penalty for his transgression, however pure his motives.

Of course, it may be said by many that there is no acceptable excuse for defying the law. A leading proponent of this belief was Socrates. In Plato's "Crito," Socrates has been condemned to death for encouraging

critical thinking in the young people of Athens. He nobly accepts his fate. He now reasons that if the individual questions the law, anarchy will ensue, and society will disintegrate. He believes the judgment must be enacted, though many believe it to be morally wrong. His friend tries to persuade him to escape, others are willing to help. Socrates sits in his cell and justifies his decision to stay; and die. His unswerving belief in the integrity of the system convinces Crito that Socrates is correct. In spite of his devastating logic, it might seem paradoxical that someone so committed to the establishment would advocate critique of it. Should he not have considered that other innocent people may die because no one dares question the system? Questioning the system and appealing a decision do not necessarily result in the crumbling of law and order but create the possibility for improvement of it.

A superb illustration of soundly reasoned defiance of the law is Martin Luther King's illegal, peaceful demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. In a perfectly balanced society, such as Thomas Moore's "Utopia," there would be no such recalcitrance. Sadly, on planet Earth, the structure is often unbalanced. One such imbalance culminated in the birth of the Civil Rights movement in America, and King's imprisonment for demonstrating without a permit. King felt justified in breaking what he saw as an unjust law to protest other unjust laws. In his extremely powerful reply to a letter he received from a group of local clerics, he admonished them for advocating patience. This response is a classic example of the actions of the oppressed individual when he has realized that following the rules of the oppressor is futile.

Until a system based on "Utopia" can be established, many will continue to suffer the consequences of greed, prejudice, hatred and aggression. This suffering can be alleviated only when the individual's voice is heard.

Organized groups who have spoken out have indeed achieved much. Civil disobedience usually begins when one committed individual voices the opinion of many, who then rally round. There have been many instances in which discontent has ballooned into rebellion. The War of Independence freed Americans from what they considered to be unjust British rule. Women rallied around leaders such as Emily Pankhurst and Susan B. Anthony to gain suffrage. These groups questioned, acted, and won. Without strength of conviction, we might still believe the world to be flat.

Courage, as well as strength of conviction, is vital to those who question authority. The most courageous and charismatic individual is the martyr. Anyone willing to die for his cause will automatically attract a body of like-minded people. There have been countless martyrs

throughout the course of history. The most recent would-be martyr is Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress. This black South African was "detained" for 27 years, quietly, but effectively, showing his contempt for the system. He was undoubtedly aware that if he had been martyred, the black majority in South Africa would probably have exploded like the proverbial powder keg. However, the risks he took in his quiet protest were considerable. He could have been disposed of, mysteriously disappearing, as have others who advocated human rights. His release from "detention" is, in itself, a decisive victory. This is a case in which one strong and determined leader was effective in helping to increase international awareness regarding apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid, however, is not practiced; racism is, and this troublesome black man now receives worldwide recognition as a courageous humanitarian in his leadership in the resistance to racism.

Strength of conviction is also needed to oppose popular opinion. This is illustrated by citizens who cannot condone decisions made by their leaders in time of war. These are the conscientious objectors. No laws are being broken, but a policy of pacifism is being adhered to. They may be called cowards, but might it not take as much, possibly more, strength to stand up and say "no," than to quietly enlist and go to war? I feel it might. Machiavelli states in "The Prince" that "...one will discover that something which appears to be a virtue, if pursued, will end in his destruction; while some other thing which seems to be a vice, if pursued, will result in his safety and his well-being."

This quotation demonstrates the dilemma of the conscientious objector. The virtue of not killing another human being could result in the alienation of his friends and loved ones. The vice of killing will result in their approval. This must generate agonizing inner conflict. He may possibly be understood by some, tolerated by others. However, he risks persecution by those who refuse to even try and understand. In World War II, British publicans and shopkeepers served a white feather with the beer or provisions of someone who chose not to fight. This was a powerful and humiliating statement of public opinion. How does a conscientious objector voice his views and remain totally safe amongst those who rush forward in a mindless euphoria of patriotism to volunteer? It might be more perilous in some ways to object than to go to war and "kill or be killed." The most recent objector was deemed newsworthy because he refused, on grounds of conscience, to fight anyone over fossil fuel; even Iraq. He has been transferred to a noncombat unit in the United States Forces. Is he really a coward, or has he thought the issue through thoroughly?

My final argument involves a recent event in which, again, no laws of the land were broken. It is a disturbing example of the ethics and values of some members of society. In 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds after launch. An official inquiry established the direct mechanical cause. In short, a failed seal caused flames to leak and come into contact with the main fuel tank, which

then ignited. This resulted in the deaths of seven intelligent, brave, forward thinking people. Millions of dollars worth of publicly financed space hardware was also destroyed. However, during the inquiry, a small group of engineers employed by the manufacturer of the failed device voluntarily came forward. They exposed a tragic tale of poor management, risk taking, and appalling ethics by the executives of their company, and at NASA. Some officials had been made aware, as early as 1977, that the piece of equipment which failed on the Challenger was not suitable for its intended purpose. No effective adjustments were made. The possibility of finding a replacement part was not investigated because of financial considerations.

What drove these men to "blow the whistle?" They had nothing to gain and risked losing their reputations or even their jobs. It was obviously a moral dilemma. They had "inside information," and felt compelled to make it public to prevent another tragedy. Nothing illegal had been done, but morally they were all guilty. If these men had not come forward, how much of this damaging information would have been made available to the public? We may never know. This much detail was brought to light by the need of these few to purge themselves of a moral burden too heavy for their shoulders. It must be assumed, for the safety of future astronauts, that if these facts had not been exposed the negligent could have repeated their misdemeanors.

On consideration of the evidence, we must agree that dissent is vital. Society must police itself morally as well as legally. The examples used here cover legal and illegal responses based on conscientiously applied values in given situations. These thinkers are entitled to freedom of speech. If no one clashed with authority, it could become depraved. Winston Churchill, quoting a letter penned by Lord Acton in 1887, said "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." It would be unwise to completely forget this sentence.

In conclusion, as "Utopia" is so far removed from reality as to be ludicrous, enlightened criticism must be heard. If the masses allowed themselves to become placed and controlled, as Socrates would wish, they could become mere puppets for those who would gain and possibly abuse power. If all leaders were totally and unselfishly dedicated to public good, and utterly chaste, society would indeed be blessed. Unfortunately, human nature often involves large amounts of weakness and avarice. Therefore, vigilance is required; even towards those of authority. If we do not exercise it, we risk condoning the development of other situations in which Martin Luther King could be justified in condemning,

"...the appalling silence of the good people." (Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1963)