

A few years ago, I paid my civic dues and enrolled in American Heritage. I had to; every freshman had to. We would be civically incomplete if we did not learn to appreciate the great founding principles that gave birth to our nation. And so I went to class three times a week, and they told me a story that went like this: Once upon a time, there were some men and women who were taxed without representation. The king levied unfair taxes against them and otherwise annoyed them. Some of them were mad. Some of them dumped tea into the harbor. And some of them did something nobody had really done before: Instead of working within the system and petitioning grievances through the proper channels, they decided to go outside the system utterly, rejecting the old form of government and creating a new nation.

In my class, we called these people Founders, and we called them that with misty eyes. We said they were inspired, just, holy, ordained by God. We celebrated them for their rationality—for their courage to look squarely at a circular argument and call it that. We were glad they had stopped at nothing, glad they had gone to war for their convictions, glad they had killed for truth and right. What did these revolutionaries have? Why, they had integrity. And what was integrity? The willingness to defy social context and assumptions in the name of truth. The willingness to break the rules of the old system if they didn't make sense.

Do you wonder what people called these men in the 18<sup>th</sup> century? Because they called them rebels, you know. They were possessed, extravagant, sacrilegious, sanctioned by the devil. They were not rational, they were blasphemous; they defied the doctrine of the divine right of kings; they were secular philosophers! Because they would stop at nothing, they were treasonists and murderers. Their integrity was insanity. Defiance! Total refusal to work within the system and total disrespect for authority!

Now, at one of the most traditional universities in America, we call these revolutionaries leaders, and we think every incoming freshman should be forced to learn something from them. And what should they learn, I wonder? I suppose they should learn rationality, integrity, willingness to judge a system by principles, by rules other than its own. I suppose that they should learn that a founding only exists in retrospect. At first, every founding is a rebellion.

How very interesting. How very interesting because:

- Shortly after winning the Revolutionary War, the men at the Constitutional Convention fell for their own brand of circular practicality, and denied women and slaves equal rights. And why not? No one dared to assume that equality should include everyone.
- During World War I, American suffragettes fought for the right to vote. Woodrow Wilson was fighting a war for democracy overseas, and couldn't be bothered. Not only could he not be bothered, he did not believe women had the brains, the temperaments, the *right* to vote. American women noticed the irony: a war for democracy without a democracy at home? So they stood at the gates of the White House with signs. One said, "We shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments." Woodrow Wilson said that, and so it is appropriate that the suffragettes added the following: "20,000,000 American women are not self-governed. Take the beam out of

your own eye.” But Wilson didn’t. Instead, he had the women arrested and incarcerated for obstructing traffic.

- A Palestinian man straps a bomb to his chest and blows himself up. We call him a terrorist. Maybe. But we took his land from him, and he has no standing army to legitimize his violence. This is worse than taxation without representation. But we do not like his brand of treason. His killing is not conviction.
- A few months ago, Jeff Nielsen wrote an editorial to the Salt Lake Tribune that disagreed with the Church’s political position on homosexuality. The Philosophy Department promptly fired him. He should have worked within the system. He should not have gone public. He shouldn’t have disagreed with authority. We at BYU encourage the fight against circular thinking until someone criticizes our own circles. Divine Right of Kings.

It appears that we can tolerate, at most, one system-defying, rational, ethical act in our history. As soon as it happens, we institutionalize it. The old radicalism becomes the new conservatism, and the old virtues are the new vices. So Thomas Payne can revolt, but not Abby Hoffman; Joseph Smith can question, but a BYU student cannot; William Lloyd Garrison can shout at slavery, but Fair Trade is a joke. Treason becomes the hand that waves the flag.

We talk about repeating history. We worry about it; we hope we won’t. But we will if we don’t realize that ethics is always uncomfortable in the present—until we learn to look at arguments for their content and not for their context. Maybe we look back on Revolutionary America and see one thousand chances for a brave person to walk through a cultural vacuum and shout: everyone is wrong and our conventions control us! We do not look back and see a tight cocoon of social expectations, rewards, and wrapped with circular justifications that trapped people in a world of pleasant facts. But that is what it was, and that is what it is. The fact is that an 18<sup>th</sup> century American would have gone to school and heard a prestigious professor speak on political obedience, not revolution. He would have learned that monarchy, not equality, was the way to do politics. If he disagreed? Well that would really be too bad, because he would be almost alone. He would want a good grade, and he would want to get into graduate school (or whatever the equivalent) and so he would have sat really still and pretended to agree. His classmates, wanting similar rewards, would sit, stupid-smiling, and laugh at everything the teacher said, stepping over each other like animals in order to be the first to fawn. It is no different now. Our professors can say almost anything. They can say, “We have no obligation to people outside the United States,” or, “the State has no responsibility to the poor” and our consciences will not even flutter. Nobody asks what classrooms, wards, neighborhoods, nations should be like. We know what they are, and we are glad to survive and get what we can. At best we lead double-spaced lives with one-inch margins.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century student will never think philosophically—or ethically. Why would he? It would only keep him from succeeding socially, financially, and academically; it will only get him dirty looks, dogmatic snarls, and a corner in the asylum. We become ethical when we look around, when we see connections between ideas and people and systems. So we praise the people who look around and then praise ourselves for looking down—down at our tasks and down on those who are looking around. William Blake suggested that a genius is always above the prison of history. Franny, of *Franny and Zooey* fame, wonders in the middle of a nervous breakdown why there is never even a “polite little perfunctory implication that knowledge should

lead to wisdom, and that if it doesn't, it's just a disgusting waste of time!" Are we above the prison-house of history? And are we wise? We are not wise, we are successful. Liked. Applauded. Well-behaved.

We love the revolutionary as long as he is tucked safely in the folds of history. In the present, we have no love for truth; we love social opinion. For example: I am at a class party when my professor looks at me and says, "Let me guess. You're a vegetarian." When I answer yes, he runs to his closet with glee and pulls out a shirt. On it, a bunch of animals are bursting out of a stuffed pot. The caption says: "For every animal you don't eat, I'll eat three." My teacher thinks this is hilarious, nudging me and crowing with triumph. I think this is supremely odd: If I said I was ethically opposed to slavery, would he have run to his room and pulled out a slave? Is that not funny anymore *only* because we have decided—unimaginatively, passively decided (had it decided *for us*)—that slavery is wrong? If so, we are not ethical; we have merely accepted a social norm that *happens* to be. We do not look at arguments for their content, but for how much they grate against our social context. If I had been at a class party in antebellum America, would it have been witty to make fun of abolitionist radicals and polite for me to laugh when my teacher made fun of them through me? Do we always hate the revolutionary in her revolutionary moment?

I am not trying to glamorize myself. I do not believe that I am the first vegetarian or that I am especially revolutionary or ingenious for being so. I am merely wondering if social context will always demand that revolutionaries defer—that they act nicely at parties, sit quietly in classes, and suffocate their opinions so that everyone else can breathe easy. I am wondering if we will ever evaluate an argument according to its content and apply it in context, or if we would always rather wait for a few brave people to change world opinion and then agree with them when it is no longer dangerous to do so.

We admire Gandhi for his inflexibility. We applaud him for sticking it to those British rogues, we chill when we see his followers clubbed for their beliefs. When his wife won't clean the commune toilet, we roll our eyes. She just can't hack a revolution. But what if Gandhi were our roommate, our sibling, our Sunday School student? "You are too extreme," we would say. "The imperfections and injustices that incite you are facts of life. They are tests of your faith. Your leaders are imperfect but they need your patience and your obedience. People over politics, old Gandhi-friend." If that didn't work, we would manipulate him: "If you want to go to grad school, you will have to stop interrupting our class to insist that Indians are equal. We are talking about commas right now. Please be polite." Or we would get him with a fallacy: "Indians are not equal because God did not intend them to be equal; we don't know why (He is so mysterious) but we just have to accept it." Or with nationalism: "If you are a good British citizen, you will not support these rebels who hate our economic success and freedom." With social fear: "You think Indians are equal citizens? What are you, a liberal? And where did you learn those opinions? College?" With practicality: "Maybe you want the Indians to be free, but economics and politics don't work like that. It is too complicated. Besides, the Indians are better off working for the British than they are starving in the streets."

And have we forgotten what it must have been like for Gandhi? Are we so seduced by history that we think people received him with rejoicing? Hardly. When Gandhi said that Untouchables were equal people, he went against the Hindu religion, Indian culture, and caste

economics, not to mention all the circular arguments that reinforce all of them. Don't you think that someone must have called him unfaithful? How dare he use reasonable, ethical arguments to question scripture? Don't you think that Brahman men rushed in with conservative economic arguments, trying to secure their piece of the pie? Don't you think that sniveling professors and sycophant students laughed at Gandhi while they discussed the proper placement of a comma? Don't you think that people told him to relax and work within the system? And don't you think that the Untouchables themselves, so intent on getting even lean scraps from the status quo table, were horrified by the thought of their own equality? Yes, they probably worked harder than anyone to reinforce their own misery. After all, social prisons need no keys. Ask a cashier on the bottom rung of a corporate ladder if he is happy. He will probably say he isn't. Ask him if it is because of his bosses. Yes, it will be because of his bosses. Ask him if we should get rid of his bosses and make him an equal in the corporation, and, horrified, he will say no, absolutely not. He can't be equal! He is just a cashier! He will protest with those words because he will believe utterly in his inequality.

So we live in a context, and we live according to status and status quos. There will always be reasons not to act, not to revolt, not to change, not to even be upset. If we disagree, we will not only be reformers, we will be interrupters. If we forget that history always happens in a context, and that contexts always offer social rewards for obedience, we will repeat history again and again and again. Repeat it delightedly.

So what if we have made so much progress? So what if we do not own slaves, if we have a democracy, if we raised emission standards? This means almost nothing. We have changed the circumstance but we have not changed ourselves, and so we are hard pressed to call ourselves ethical. Most of us did nothing at all. If we believe in anything, we believe in context—in whatever it tells us to believe in.

One bright morning, a man or woman woke up and looked at the facts. The facts said that women and slaves were not equal, or that kings ruled by divine decree. The man or the woman said the facts were no good. The man and the woman had neighbors, and those neighbors, context-creatures, shamed the man or woman for disbelieving the facts. The neighbors gave the man or woman reasons for why things had to be the way they were. The man and the woman sent them back, marked "fallacy." The man and woman were ridiculed, fired, mocked, exiled, gossiped about. Most of their friends wanted to be liked and earn money and go to grad school and they believed the neighbors—believed them with the smugness of the majority. Eventually, by miracle, persistence, or fury, the man or woman won, and a lot of people changed their minds. Their old neighbors came scuttling back, praising the new theory as they came. Circumstances changed: women could vote, slaves could be citizens, and nations could rule themselves. Then some ecstatic neighbor institutionalizes the revolution: school children are taught that democracy is obvious and fascism is evil, colleges hold women's conferences, and English professors in Alabama teach African American Lit. Everyone—the kids in the elementary, the women at the conferences, the students in the Afro-American Lit—think they are righteous because they believe in democracy, women's rights, race equality. They despise the British kings, the anti-suffrage Senators, the average slave-holder. Then they get in their trucks, eat their hamburgers, buy their sweatshop clothes, work for corporations. And the old arguments return as they justify themselves according to religion, economics, authority, tradition, practicality. They are not

righteous, they are inheritors of righteousness. They are mainly passive, receiving their goodness from a more diffuse king—the everywhere-authority of the status quo.

If righteousness means securing an ethical outcome, then they are somewhat righteous, because someone somewhere toppled kings and slavery and sexism. (And if we can just get a Democratic majority, then we will feed the poor and be righteous for that, too!) But even in terms of ethical outcomes, they are not fully righteous because they have no sense of context. Sure, there is no slavery in their country, but slavery in another does not disconcert them at all. Even poverty—a milder version of slavery—hardly hurts. Ethics is always something taken care of or to be taken care of; it rarely if ever occurs in the present tense.

Worse still, however, is the fact that they have not been spiritually transformed at all. They didn't do the fighting, they didn't do the thinking, they didn't evaluate the status quo. Thus, even if the circumstances are right the people are not, because they have never learned to look around, to want something better, and to act bravely to achieve it. They celebrate what for them have become past, context-less ethics and deplore the practice of ethics in the present. Ethics should produce ethical circumstances, but it should also transform individuals by requiring them to think—not according to rules, but according to principles. Unfortunately, most institutions become almost immediately conventional; in other words, they divorce the meaning of the thing from the doing of the thing and require practices without principles. The Word of Wisdom, for instance, becomes conventional: we are righteous because we don't drink, not because we want to be healthy. And what does it even mean that we don't drink? Nobody can really say, they only know that it qualifies them as righteous and acceptable. The Word of Wisdom has lost its wisdom because we no longer connect it with a principle. The Lord announces the principle behind the Word of Wisdom in the last verse of D&C 89: we should be moderate and healthy and wise so that we can understand the mysteries of God. Tacitly, the whole passage suggests that we should not do anything to our bodies that keeps it from uniting with our spirits. It also suggests that we should not indulge in anything that cause us or others harm, and that we should learn faith and happiness through moderation. This makes fixating on the alcoholic rule almost absurd. If we use any of the above principles as our goal in following the Word of Wisdom, we have to ask ourselves a lot of difficult questions: Am I really more righteous because I don't drink? Have I understood the mysteries of God because I haven't? Would one cup of wine really keep me from feeling the Spirit? If it would (and it might not), aren't there hundreds of other things that would keep me from the Spirit just as much? If, for example, not getting enough sleep makes it just as hard to feel the Spirit as drinking alcohol, then am I as righteous as I thought? Am I doing everything I can to notice my spirit, my body, and other people? It seems like really following the Word of Wisdom would cause us to moderate any extreme that caused harm or kept us from feeling the Spirit. If that is true, would meat be included in that list? Chocolate? Lack of exercise?

I am not suggesting that we hate ourselves for our imperfections; I am merely using an example to insist that righteousness that isn't based in a principle is not righteousness but convention—and conventions cannot transform us, save us, or help us to recognize truth. In fact, we use conventions—if only subconsciously—as a way to lie to ourselves about our own righteousness, to escape the tasks of love, judgment, and the responsibility of living righteously and deliberately in a historical and social context. If we are living according to a convention, we

never have to ask if we are transforming ourselves, or wonder what the purpose of our obedience is. We must merely ask whether or not we have completed an assignment. This has very dangerous implications, as we can see with the Pharisees and Christ, because conventions will harden, secure, and flatter us so much that we will revile the person who reminds us that we are living for a reason. Our classrooms and our families and our Sunday Schools have almost all fallen into convention, but we march on, task-oriented, toward nowhere.

We live, for the most part, under the “sacred canopy of the status quo.” If we do not learn to live deliberately—to give a hard look to our institutions and assumptions and to commend people who look—we will repeat history again and again. We will live in a social prison without keys, and we will reinforce survival—unimaginative, task-oriented, animal survival. We need to live looking around, deciding whether our institutions are doing what we designed them to do. Are our schools and wards and families places where we learn how to transform ourselves, where we are free to apply the lessons of history in the present, where we are rewarded for thinking and not for merely obeying, where we are righteous for a purpose, where we can be creative and thoughtful and human and form communities? If not, we are not righteous; we are merely offering ourselves, bright-eyed, to the sociological machine. We should learn to be ethical in the present tense.