Reflections on the concept of civil courage

I feel honoured and slightly embarrassed to speak on this topic in the presence of people who know infinitely more about the subject, in theory and practice, than I do. However, the concept of civil courage is one which has interested me personally for more than forty years. It began in 1970, when I took part in an international youth seminar in India, to celebrate the centenary of Mahatma Gandhi’s birth. There, I became acquainted with Gandhi’s concept of Satyagraha, or civil disobedience. It impressed me deeply.

Civil disobedience and civil courage are closely related. Civil disobedience is an act of defiance, a refusal to bow to an unjust law or an unjust political system. Civil courage is the state of mind which makes this kind of act possible.

If you look up "civil" in Roget’s Thesaurus, some of the associated words are "well-bred", "courteous", "kind", "considerate" and, of course, civilized. This gives us a clue to a key aspect of civil courage – a reluctance to use violence. I deliberately use the word "reluctance" rather than "refusal", since I think there are situations in this tragic world where violence and even killing may be "the lesser evil" (the pacifist Gandhi would not agree with me here). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and Protestant minister who more than anyone else has inspired these reflections, was hung by the Nazis for taking part in a conspiracy to murder Hitler. Bonhoeffer was a Christian, and by all accounts a kind, considerate and civilized man. To take part in an assassination plot must have gone against his deepest convictions. It is said that he was persuaded to take part only after having been shown photos of Nazi atrocities. Presumably, he drew the conclusion that to combat radical evil, tyrannicide could be justified.

But "civil" is also related to civic, a word which in turn is related to the Latin word civitas, from which stem the English words city and citizen. In Roget, both "civil" and "civic" are associated with "national", which is one of seven sub-headings under "Humankind". The others are: humankind, anthropology, person, social group/society, nation and human.

Can it be summed up better? Civil courage: daring to stand up for yourself as a person, as a citizen and as a member of society. As a human being. For humankind.

The civilly courageous person is not an anarchist or a nihilist. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, in Resistance and Submission, the collection of his letters from prison, about the strong wish of the civilly courageous person to stay within the law, or to return to that state as soon as possible. He or she cares about society and respects its rules, but puts the spirit of the law above the letter. Astrid Lindgren, the Swedish writer of children’s books, put it succinctly in The Brothers Lionheart: "There are things which you must do, even if they are dangerous, because if you don’t you are not a human being, but just a little shit”.

The Brothers Lionheart is essentially a story about courage. Courage is only needed where risk is involved. Let me tell you a story. A year or so ago, I was obliged, in my professional capacity, to reply publicly to a Jesuit friend who, in an editorial in a Swedish Catholic magazine, criticized the Swedish minister for international development. The minister had said that Swedish cooperation with Uganda could be affected if the Ugandan parliament passed a law
authorizing imprisonment and, in extreme cases, executions of homosexuals. My friend did not approve of the law, but argued that one must take history into account and allow Ugandan culture to evolve at its own pace. I, on the other hand, insisted that the right to life was a basic human right, a principle which could not be treated as a cultural issue.

Subsequently, another Catholic friend complimented me on my "courage" in publishing this critical reply. I was flabbergasted. For, of course, writing what I wrote took no courage at all. I do hold the views I expressed, but I could just as easily have been a dead fish, floating belly-up down the mainstream of a politically correct Swedish discourse. Everyone I identified with would have applauded had they read the article. I risked absolutely nothing.

So, civil courage involves risking something. It could be life. It could be freedom. It could be your right to publish if you are a writer. It could be your position and/or your livelihood. It could be alienation from a community with which you identify, which you feel part of and love. It could be your family. Sartre writes, I think in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, about the stark choice faced by the young man who feels he should join the French resistance movement, but who must then desert his aged mother. How could Aung San Sui Kyi stand not seeing her boys for so long, or her husband when he was dying of cancer?

Civil courage means risking alienation, or isolation. There is pain. But there is also hope. The civilly courageous person takes that risk precisely because she cares about her community and believes in its future. Defying an unjust law or an unjust system can be an expression of a deeper loyalty, a more fundamental commitment.

One interesting question is this: does it matter what you stand up for? Is the positive content, the purpose, of the act important? Most us would, I think, be inclined to answer yes. So would I. We regards as civilly courageous those who stand up for freedom, justice, human rights, values which we consider the basis of our societies. But this is tricky. Who evaluates the moral content of an action? How do we regard a Muslim woman who insists on breaking French law by wearing a veil?

Having absolute, cognitive certainty that you are in the right is of course impossible. There is no Archimedean point from which we can observe the world and take our bearings. We are in the midst of it. It is we who invest the world with meaning. Words like "freedom" and justice" can be abused. Some of the world’s worst dictatorships call themselves "democratic".

So, we have no choice but to look within ourselves. Religious thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas or Cardinal John Henry Newman, and many non-religious ones too (for instance the Italian writer Umberto Eco) would say that conscience is the right guide. There are political parallels. The American political philosopher Michael Walzer writes that the only justification for a humanitarian military intervention – a breach of the sovereignty principle enshrined in the UN Charter- is when a government behaves in a way which is a "shock to the conscience of humanity". Dietrich Bonhoeffer goes one step further. He claims that even conscience can lead you astray. He makes the interesting point that a bad conscience is better than a deceived conscience. But nevertheless you must use your judgment to the best of your ability, act, "engage with history" and take responsibility for what you do.
One of the aspects of religion is to provide moral guidance. And religion has often provided the psychological strength to defend Right against Might. It was certainly so in Bonhoeffer's case. It was his trust in God and in divine grace that sustained him in prison. Dag Hammarskjöld, too, found the strength to withstand the enormous political pressures of his office as UN Secretary-General in his deep belief and trust in God. "Spiritual maturity” was for him the key requirement in a political leader.

When we in the West speak of civil courage, we usually refer to activists who stand up for values we recognize against dictatorships in other parts of the world. But can we also appreciate civil courage in people who hold, express and fight for values very different from our own? In a pluralistic, democratic society this is something we must learn to do. The French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire is famous for his saying: "I may hate your views, but I am willing to lay down my life for your right to express them.” One of the very few things my father and I agreed on when I was in my teens, was that Bishop Bo Giertz in Gothenburg, who fought tooth and nail against women’s ordination in the Swedish Church, was civilly courageous. I at least – I am less sure about my father – did certainly not agree with Bishop Giertz’ views. But both of us could respect his non-opportunism.

How far this essentially liberal approach can carry us, and how it can be applied in today’s multicultural societies, is a huge question which far transcends the scope of these reflections.

So I content myself with summing up: the civilly courageous person is

not an opportunist
not a fanatic
not an anarchist or nihilist
not a passive observer or critic of society.

He or she is a free, responsible, compassionate, moral human being, prepared to take risks in engaging with history.

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