

## RESISTING REASONABLE ATROCITY

By David Schwartz

A former South African paramilitary commander looks across his dining room table into the interviewer's camera. He is in his early sixties, overweight, with short gray hair. He wears glasses and a polo shirt. It's late morning. He explains:

“We were at war. We believed that if the Blacks were organized they would rise up. They were trying to get weapons, and they would have used them on us. I had to do what I did to keep the country from descending into chaos. If we didn't get them, they'd be shooting at us a few years later. So we found suspects and took care of them. I did what I had to do to keep our country together and protect us.”

This is madness. He is talking about assassinating kids, a systematic program to find and kill kids: fourteen, fifteen year olds who had committed no crime.

But did you hear the reasons? Did you hear that the killings weren't an act of madness or passion or blind hatred. He had *reasons* to do what he did, hard-headed, straightforward, pragmatic reasons.

When I first realized it, a crawling horror seized me, because though the assassinations sicken me, the thought that they could be *reasonable* terrified me. I can imagine those same words coming from politicians and pundits and editorials here, today. And more: coming from my co-workers, my friends. From my own mouth.

That is the horror of what this commander had to say: that reasonable, well-meaning people could support reasonable, pragmatic assassination, or genocide, or ethnic cleansing. These acts are not the product of demagoguery, political trickery, or force—they are the product of bright, reasonable people making bright, reasonable arguments about how to best protect themselves.

This, more than anything else, convinces me of the need for a critical education that teaches how to recognize and resist the pernicious “commonsense” truths that lead us into calamity.

To resist, we need both to develop critical awareness and to trust our own voice. We need to develop the tools to recognize “commonsense” evil, and we need to find a voice to speak out against it.

But despite these imperatives, many forces stifle critical awareness. I saw it particularly in my work as a High School history teacher this year:

In the last period of the school day on a Tuesday afternoon in November, I was grading quizzes when a parent of one of my students dropped in unexpectedly.

“Your son’s a bright kid,” I said, “and you can see it when he participates in the conversations. He’s sharp, has good questions, good comments. But he’s not doing his work and you can see it in the grades.”

“Yeah, well,” said his father, a heavysset man in his 40s, “he thinks he’s smart. Like when he watches the news with me, he’s always asking me these questions, and I just want to say: ‘shut up! They’ll tell you in a minute.’ But he thinks he’s smarter than them.”

The father’s retort to his son was the direct opposite of what I try to teach in class. I tell my students: “ask questions, investigate, challenge sources, talk with your peers if you don’t agree with something.” But the message he got at home was “sit down and shut up.” That view assumes power and knowledge are the exclusive domain of authorities—politicians and pundits have it, but not us. It presupposes that the world is fixed and unchanging, out of our hands, and that things are fine the way they are now.

But we in our churches and communities must ask each other *exactly* the opposite questions. We must ask: In what ways is our world not as it ought to be? Do *you* think a situation is just? Why do you believe what you believe? Why don’t you think something sounds right? What do we need to know to understand each other more fully?

It is these habits of mind we seek to teach in our Sunday School and Adult Education classes, providing a supportive space for the development of the critical reason needed to unmask the “logical” arguments for oppression.

But a trained mind alone will not make a difference. It also takes the courage to speak. Speaking out is *hard* to do—I don’t even mean speeches before thousands, I mean it can be downright difficult in a group of three people to speak out and stand firm. It’s a skill that takes practice, and takes trust in one’s own power and agency—the belief that you *do* have something to offer and you *can* make a difference.

This faith in one’s voice is slowly built in a thousand tiny ways and continually eroded in a thousand ways. I’m thinking of a student I had in one of my ninth grade world history classes. The kids were all doing a mapping exercise—getting around the Roman Empire. (“If you walked from Rome to Carthage, how long would it take? What if you sailed?”) The room had a low buzz as they flipped through atlases and talked quietly with each other.

Two students were having some trouble with it, and a third student, a young woman, was moving back and forth between the other two, showing them where to find maps in the textbook, helping them find Carthage, Alexandria, Rome.

I watched them work together, and there was a moment of pause, where I almost came over to her just to say: “this is great! you’re doing a great job of helping these other folks,

I'm impressed." But I hesitated an instant too long, and she turned to me, and said, frustrated: "will you *please* be the teacher?"

That shook me: *was* I being a teacher?

But on reflection I realized that the student was socializing me to be a teacher just as much as I was socializing her to be a student. She was an active participant in setting up a classroom where I, as teacher, had the power and knowledge, and she, as a student, was an empty vessel waiting for me to drop the information in. Her idea of what teaching is kept her in a subservient, passive role, it kept her from developing her own agency and trusting her own power.

But in this situation I, too, did not speak—did not in that moment applaud her leadership and teaching skills. And I wonder: what was it that made me hesitate? Her plea that I "be the teacher" made me doubt myself for a moment, and I second-guessed what I was doing.

Intellectual understanding and critical thinking will make no concrete difference to the world without the moral courage and skills to speak out and stand up. We develop them over time, and the courage comes in part from practice. Our church community is such a community of practice. It is an environment where we can speak our minds and be taken seriously. In dialogue we can learn that we do indeed have something of great value to add to the conversation, and in our democratic process we can practice leadership.

But this is *hard* work, we shouldn't forget, and the strength to pursue it across all the years of our lives must spring from firm spiritual and ethical commitments.

I only remember one lecture from the "Introduction to Ethics" course I took in college. It was one of the very first classes of the semester, and the professor began with an overview of the day's argument.

"There are certain facts," she said, "that place an obligation on us as moral people—we can't just walk by, these facts demand action."

The classic example, of course, is the man on roller skates about to be hit by a train. (Oncoming trains seem to figure prominently in introductory ethics courses.) The fact that he's about to be pulverized by the oncoming locomotive places a demand on you: give the guy a shove so he rolls out of the way.

The fact of the world carries with it certain obligations for us as Unitarian Universalists. The religious worldview of Unitarian Universalism says that facts are not valueless. The common vocabulary of principles and purposes make this philosophical orientation clear. The interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part is not a mere fact—it places an ethical requirement on us. It makes concrete demands: recycle, carpool, vote for sustainable energy policies.

Nor is the inherent worth and dignity of every person an abstract fact: it too makes concrete demands on us as individuals: that we live our lives in a certain way, that our world be structured not to trample on that worth and dignity. Our religious conviction must flow through our politics, our social interactions, and our economic decisions

Our spiritual life is the ever-deepening root that bears fruit in our ever-expanding work for justice. The two depend on each other: spirituality without work for justice is hypocrisy; and without a spiritual root, our work for justice may burn brightly but all too briefly.

We've traveled far from that sunshine-filled dining room in South Africa, and the calm, rational argument for assassination. But the crawling horror of *reasonable* atrocities is never left far behind. Perhaps you've heard debate recently on the merits of torture (the *merits* of torture?). Perhaps you've heard those good, reasonable, common-sense arguments. We must keep ever vigilant against good people, with good, rational reasons trying to convince us of terrible things.

It takes work, and that means:

Develop your critical thinking skills: over dinner and after the Sunday service, in class and in conversation. Don't tune out if you disagree, understand *why* you disagree, and why the other people believe what they say. Cultivate a trust in your own voice: talk with others, debate, dialogue, listen and then listen again.

Our task is neither intellectual exercise, nor mere activism. It requires that we root ourselves firmly in our deepest moral and spiritual convictions.

Therefore, above all, attend diligently to your relationship with the Divine—the root which will give you strength for the journey and courage to speak. Pray, meditate, and sing. Walk in the sun, and rest.

In this way, may we journey together from unknowing into awareness, from silence into speech, from acceptance into action, sending down deep roots to the Divine and aligning our lives with our deepest values.