Disobedience

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“Law never made men more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, privates and all, marching in admirable order over hills to the wars, against their wills, indeed, against their common sense and consciences. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? Or small movable forts, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power?

The mass of men serve the State thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such people command no more respect than men of straw, or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these are commonly considered good citizens.”

-- Henry David Thoreau (Civil Disobedience)

Many of the abominable problems in the world are the result of obedience. In our personal lives, in the media, we cry and moan and blame “our leaders” for the problems of the world. We shift responsibility to them. But are they solely responsible? What about the thousands and millions who are actually carrying out their orders? These people are the ones actually doing the terrible things that their leaders want done. These people have abandoned their conscience and have abandoned their responsibility.

Can such people be considered adult human beings at all; or are they still children, or dogs-- dutifully obeying their master-parent?
Think of the American soldiers currently in Iraq. In the end, it is not George Bush who is pulling the trigger or dropping the bombs or torturing the prisoners. He merely gives the orders- orders which no particular man or woman must follow. For while they might be discharged or put in prison for refusing an order, no one will be hurt or killed for doing so.

Isn't Thoreau correct? Aren't our true heroes the ones who disobey unjust laws? Aren't the true heroes the ones who follow their conscience? Here in America, it is our rebels who are our historical heroes- those who refused to support injustice: Martin Luther King, the heroes of the American revolution, John Brown, Malcolm X, Susan B. Anthony, Vietnam War resisters....

In the present, such people are always condemned. They are attacked, called unpatriotic, imprisoned, and vilified. Yet history is usually kind to such people, and harsh to the unjust. In the 1950s, Martin Luther King was vilified as a radical. Today, he is celebrated as a hero, while the authorities he resisted are now viewed as the worst kind of scum.

Thoreau, and later Gandhi and Martin Luther King, all believed that individual conscience was more just and powerful than law. All three encouraged people to break unjust laws; and to instead have respect for what is good, right, true, and just. Though all three men are now dead, their message is as important today as it was during their lifetime.

“Thoreau was a great writer, philosopher, poet, and a most practical man, that is, he taught nothing he was not prepared to practice in himself. He was one of the greatest and most moral men America has produced.”

--Mohandas Gandhi

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