



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

Ali Salem

2008

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm here to thank you all for bringing me to this moment, this very moment that had been described before by the poet Rudyard Kipling, as The unforgotten moment. It is the moment that challenges us to fill, and hopefully helps us to forget all about the morbid ones that we have been suffering before. verily, it's the moment at which a person is hailed and healed, fulfilled and achieved, then the mind is full of thanks and the heart is pregnant with gratitude. Thank you very much indeed.

I dedicate this prize to my fellow liberal intellectuals in the Arab world and in the Middle East in general. That rich and wretched region accused of being specialized in troubling itself and exporting troubles to the rest of the world. I dedicate it to those courageous men and women who are, battling for freedom, Peace, and human rights. Of course I'm talking about the moral side of the prize, not the dollars.

I'm too, calling for all the Arab governments to create similar prizes, to convince intellectuals in our region that human courage is rewardable and awardable so that, they don't refuge to silence or surrender to despair. Call it the civil courage, moral courage, human courage but be careful not to give it to the cowards. Civil courage as far as I feel, is that soft emotion Pushing civilization forward. It's the sound of reason and the music of human souls. It's the only emotion that turns people into lovers. You can not defend life unless you fall in love with it. In a certain stage in the life of a youth he feels a strong tendency to be great, to do some thing courageous, something heroic. In that stage we must push him to think of life as a beautiful thing worthy of loving and living. Not only his personal life, but the life of all the others. To educate him that he will be courageous not when he kills himself and the others, but when he lives in peace with them. To tempt him to believe, that he will be courageous only when he declares his thoughts without fear.

The train of thoughts in our region must change its lane gently without changing its destination. All trains have terminals. It's our destiny and destination — we the Arabs — to meet all nations from all nationalities, races, sects, cults and religions at one final terminal. I'm still calling for the Arab governments to think of a new prize for civil courage at all levels, the country, the city, the village, even hamlets. I'm certain that some of them will think seriously of what I'm asking for. I just want them to rest assured that I have no ambition to take it, I already have it.

Ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Ali Salem, a peace activist from Egypt, A playwright, a dramatist, a columnist, and some times, a satirist. That happens only when I'm sad enough to create a satire. It's not easy to transfer your

sadness and anger unless they are carefully packed in laughter. Laughing is the most effective way to convey the truth. "A joke is a judgment, a playful judgment." It's a judgment issued by the collective subconscious of the people. I have an Egyptian joke about us and the others. Us, for many people, extremists in particular, means the good guys. Others, means the bad guys. But the Egyptians see this classification in a different way; let us know it through one of their recent jokes.

It was getting dark when a man was going home after working hard all the day. Suddenly he found himself surrounded by an angry mob, they were all out of their minds, screaming, shouting in madness, the man was terrified when he saw them brandishing daggers, holding machine guns, screaming at his face: stop.. Are you with us or with the others..? To whom do you belong.. To us, or to the others?

The man was terribly confused: with you or with the others? May I ask..

They cried threatening him: shut up.. Answer immediately and directly.. To whom do you belong.. To us, or to the others?

He tried to be slightly courageous: yes.. Yes.. Sure, but please allow me to know..

Shut up you fool.. Answer immediately ...

The man cried: with you..with you.. I belong to you, not to the others.

Before finishing his sentence he was killed. Hundred of bullets penetrated his body while they were shouting and singing: hay.. We are the others.. We are the others..

Now, let's spoil this joke by analyzing it, every laughter hide beneath, some layers, between which, you will find some Judgments, playful yet serious. One of them may be" when you are afraid don't lie to yourself or to the others. That will not save your life. This is exactly what one of our ancient proverbs says" if you are afraid, don't talk. And if you talk, don't be afraid" I have been trying all my life to follow this rule how ever; I admit that in many occasions, I failed to be afraid.

But is it actually an Egyptian Joke dealing with what is happening in our region? Were the Egyptians the first to say it?

While examining it, I discovered that the origin of it was English.

More than five hundred years ago, William Shakespeare created its origin in one of the beautiful scenes of his play Julius Caesar. The same situation, the same dramatic structure, the same characters, the same ingredients, it's the scene in which Cinna the poet was killed. After the assassination of Caesar, or exactly after the hellish speech of Antony, the furious masses stormed the streets seeking the conspirators. Then Cinna appears whispering" I dreamt tonight that I did feast with Caesar, and things unluckily charge my fantasy. I have no will to wander forth of doors, yet something leads me forth.

What is your name

Whither are you going?

Where you dwell?

Are you a married man or a bachelor?

Answer every man directly.

Ay, and briefly.

Ay, and wisely.

Ay, and truly you were best.

Cinna: What is my name? Whither am I going? Where do I dwell? Am I a married man or a bachelor? Then, to answer every man directly and briefly, wisely and truly; wisely I say, I am a bachelor.

That's as much as to say, they are fools that marry; you will bear me a bang for that I fear. Proceed directly.

Cinna: Directly, I am going to Caesar's funeral.

As a friend or an enemy?

Cinna: as a friend.

That matter is answered directly.

For your dwelling sir, truly.

Cinna: I dwell by the Capitol.

Your name sir, truly.

Cinna: Truly, my name is Cinna.

AHH, Tear him to pieces. He is a conspirator.

Cinna: I am Cinna the poet. I am Cinna the poet.

Tear him for his bad verses. Tear him for his bad verses.

Cinna: I am not Cinna the conspirator.

It is no matter, his name's Cinna; pluck his name out of his heart, and turn him going.

How could this scene fly across time and space till it landed on the Egyptians subconscious to create this joke? It's the power of art, the power of theater, Dictators and Extremists hate theatre because it vaccinates people against stupidity.

When people are injected with a big dose of stupidity and hatred, they will have only a burning desire to kill. They will kill their poets, thinkers and artists. Cinna was not killed because he was a conspirator, but because he was a poet.

Exactly six days ago, there was a meeting in the united nation, attended by all the Arab leaders and kings. Mr. Peres too, the Israeli President, attended the same session. It was under the title "The Culture of Peace." I hope, that they all have discovered or about to discover, that there is no Us and the Others. There is only Us. The tribe of the human race. The only tribe that lives on this earth,

Again and again, I'm here to thank you all, for bringing me to this unforgettable moment, thank you very much indeed.