



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Introduction by Bill Keller

Dr. Denis Mukwege

2013

It's a privilege to share this evening with all of you, and a particular pleasure to become acquainted firsthand with the Train Foundation, which prior to this year's ceremony I have known only by reputation. As you might have guessed from Ambassador Menzies' introduction, the Train family and I share an affinity for Russia, tempered by a deep disenchantment with many of the men who have ruled it. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who knew a few things about evil and resistance, is identified as the founding patron of this organization. As I'm sure you all know, John Train's daughter and a trustee of the foundation is Musa Klebnikov, whose husband, Paul Klebnikov, was murdered in Russia nine years ago, apparently in retribution for his practice of investigative journalism. It would not be hard to pick a Civil Courage winner every year from that great and sad country – though so far only the fearless Anna Politkovskaya has had that honor. She was a recipient in 2005, the year before she received the Russian equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting: a bullet to the head.

My role tonight is not to talk at length about our honoree, but I wanted to point out that Denis Mukwege is no stranger to The New York Times. At least two of my good friends at The Times — Nick Kristof and Jeffrey Gettleman — have visited Dr. Mukwege at his hospital in Bukavu on more than one occasion, and can testify to his remarkable accomplishments, as a tireless surgeon, as the guiding spirit of one of Africa's most admirable medical ventures, and as a campaigner for the most elementary of human rights. Journalists are not as jaded as we pretend to be. When I told Jeffrey Gettleman, our East Africa correspondent, that I'd be speaking here tonight, he sent me the following message:

"Dr. Mukwege is very serious, committed and a bit haunted by what he has seen, which is the vicious result of Congo's mayhem stumbling into his hospital on a daily basis. He's done life-saving operations on little girls and women who have been raped and butchered, only to have the same victims come trudging back in a few years later, raped again ... I happened to be in Bukavu when he returned from exile this January (after an assassination attempt), and thousands of people lined up along the busted roads to welcome him back, cheering out, "Le Docteur!" Some guys even printed posters of him and taped them to the windshields of their trucks. Congo is desperate for heroes, and Mukwege has become one, albeit a reluctant one."

Well, Congo is not the only place in need of heroes these days. So before I go a little off message, I want to congratulate Dr. Mukwege for reminding us what compassion looks like, when it is not just a sentiment but a commitment.

I also salute those in the audience who, through their generosity and effort, draw attention to brave figures like Dr. Mukwege, so that others might be inspired to follow his example.

Over the years I've attended more than a few awards dinners, and I fully appreciate the value in celebrating champions of conscience. I also see a danger in these events. The danger is that some of us leave with a feeling of self-congratulation, of self-satisfaction. We bask in the heroism of brave individuals and feel that some of it has rubbed off on us, when what we ought to feel in the presence of a man like Dr. Mukwege is quite the opposite — discomfort, humility, even shame that by comparison we do so little. By the time the wine has worn off and tonight's meal has been digested, we will have returned to our comfortable lives, until the next awards dinner.

I don't mean to be a scold, and I know some of you give generously of your money and time. I'm certainly not proposing that we all sell our belongings, dress in sackcloth and devote our lives to good works in dangerous places. But I'd like to use my few allotted minutes tonight to ponder how — beyond this nice gathering — we can best honor the service of someone like Dr. Mukwege.

Perhaps we can start by contemplating what this award is meant to honor: "Steadfast resistance to evil at great personal risk." What do we mean by "resistance?" What do we mean by "evil?" The home page of the Train Foundation says: "We know it when we see it." I didn't find that line entirely satisfactory when the Supreme Court used it to describe obscenity, and I don't think that's quite enough said on the subject of evil.

The first thing I would say is that evil does not reside exclusively in those corners of the developing world where we tend to find the recipients of these prizes. True, Congo and Pakistan and Cuba and Zimbabwe, to cite a few of the places whose brave troublemakers have been feted at these dinners, have been inflicted with more than their share of brutality and oppression. And I suspect what some of us take away from events like this is gratitude that we live in a country comparatively prosperous and free.

But evil is not always so stark, or so remote. Is it not evil that in this most fortunate of countries children go hungry, sick people go untreated, and lives can still be stunted by prejudice? The particular evil that Dr. Mukwege combats is sexual violence used to subjugate women, but the Congo has no monopoly on that. Look no further than last Sunday's Times Op-Ed page, where my colleague Nick Kristof describes harrowing cases of sex trafficking — not in some remote, Third-World hell, but in Tennessee.

And Solzhenitsyn would tell you that evil is even closer than Tennessee. "If only it were all so simple!" he wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*. "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

By all means, we should be attentive to evil in all its manifestations, and wherever it occurs. But the evil closer to home may be the evil most within our own power to resist.

And what do we mean by resistance? I have profound admiration for the roster of Civil Courage award recipients, individuals who have resisted by refusing to be silenced, refusing to be intimidated, by standing their ground. By my reckoning half of those who have received this award since it was first bestowed in the year 2000 belong to my tribe — journalists — journalists who practiced their truth-telling in countries where truth leads to imprisonment and torture.

But "resistance" cannot depend entirely on individual heroes. There are simply not enough Denis Mukweges to resist all the evils at large in the world. Last week the Nobel Committee surprised many people and disappointed some by failing to give its annual Peace Prize to a brave individual — in this case a dauntless Pakistani schoolgirl who has become a global champion of education for girls. Instead the Nobel for Peace went to ... a committee, The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. A committee is a faceless thing. It does not lend itself to colorful narrative, or moving photo ops — and yet, sometimes it takes a committee to effectively confront evil.

And, yes, sometimes resisting evil is the moral responsibility of states, states with armies. When the British intervened in Sierra Leone, or the French in Mali, or NATO in Bosnia — in each case with the purpose of stopping a slaughter of innocents — they were resisting evil. Of course we should debate where such interventions are justified — why Mali but not Rwanda, why Bosnia but not Syria — but I hope you'll agree as a general proposition that facing evil sometimes requires more than individual courage, and more than soft power.

So far the Civil Courage award has gone exclusively to people whose struggles against injustice were non-violent, and that is fine. But as another exemplar of civil courage liked to say, "The attacks of the wild beast cannot be averted with only bare hands." That was Nelson Mandela — who temporarily embraced armed struggle, and abandoned it not as a matter of principle but because in the South African context it was not very effective. Just to be clear, I'm not proposing to rewrite the charter of the Civil Courage prize. I'm just pointing out that there are many species of evil, and many legitimate means of resisting it.

So I've been wondering what can we do that would be a fitting tribute to Dr. Mukwege? I have two answers, neither of them terribly profound.

The first thing we can do is pay attention. I imagine pretty much everyone here follows the news — and asking me if that's a good thing is like asking a barber whether you need a haircut. But we live in a time of short-attention spans, of faith-based politics, ill-informed polemic and celebrity distractions. I wrote recently that there is an isolationist mood in this country. I meant not just the fatigue brought on by our long slogs in Afghanistan and Iraq — aversion to war is a perfectly healthy instinct — but a broader reluctance to engage, to assert responsibility, to be bothered. Isolationism is more than war-weariness, and more pernicious than that: it is a lack of confidence, an assumption that when we venture into the world we will get it wrong, we will make it worse. It is amoral, insisting that what happens in the world is none of our business unless it threatens us directly. It is inward-looking, and ungenerous. Especially in times like these, when so many people are inclined to pull back from the world, preoccupied with our own problems, it is more important than ever to stay informed, stay engaged, to speak up — to our neighbors and our children, not just at award banquets but every day. Our patron Solzhenitsyn again: "In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations."

The second thing we can do is show up where we are needed. I'm sure many of you already do this, but if ever there was an occasion to say it, this dinner is that occasion. Put in a call to Habitat for Humanity, and help build affordable housing. Go online to the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation website, where you will find a long list of hospitals that would love to have a few hours of your time each week. It's not the same as treating rape victims, but it seems to me a rather splendid way to pay homage to Dr. Mukwege.

Very few of us will be called upon to practice "Steadfast resistance to evil at great personal risk." But perhaps we can all manage "Occasional resistance to misfortune at a little personal inconvenience." To quote once more — not from Solzhenitsyn but from the Train Foundation website: "If everyone says, "the devil take the hindmost," the devil soon works his way to the head of the line."

Thank you.