



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Introduction by John Micklethwait,
Editor-in-Chief of Bloomberg News

Yassmin Barrios and
Claudia Paz y Paz

2015

Why me?

I suspect many of my predecessors have had the same reaction. My job as your keynote speaker tonight is not to talk about the remarkable stories of Yassmin Barrios and Claudia Paz y Paz the two esteemed winners. Louis has the fortunate job of doing that. My job is to discuss civil courage - and this medal "for steadfast resistance to evil at great personal risk," the description that Solzhenitsyn gave it when the prize was set up.

When you come to look at it, civil courage is an awkward unsettling idea - in good ways and bad ways.

To begin with, it is awkward to define. The purpose is to honour valour outside war; before this prize was announced, there was no word for civil courage. So what is it? As one of my predecessors said, we all know what it is when we see it but can't describe it. We can point to Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks; we can point to those who have been honoured posthumously - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Giovanni Falcone and Raoul Wallenberg. But what did they have in common? Until this prize, here was no word for the virtue that all these people exemplify.

Why me, I still ask?

I am intrigued by how many of my predecessors have been journalists. I would commend anyone to read Bill Keller's speech. I think we are chosen because we occasionally seem to know about faraway places. It is also true that, at our best, journalists can indeed display civil courage - witness Solzenitsyn and Anna Politkovskaya. The Train family know that courage at first hand. So the fourth estate can rise to that level. But not often. A journalist tends to be a voyeur, a sensationalist - a teenage boy pressing his grubby face against the window pane, behind which he probably hopes to see a lady getting undressed. (Or that at least was what I felt called to do. It went wrong at *The Economist*.)

But seriously, we live in a society that likes to stand back and watch. Civil courage is not voyeuristic. It is not sensational. It is mostly not at all glamorous. It often does not fit the 24 hour news cycle. It does not have a convenient narrative, or even a convenient sounds. With military valour, you can hear the martial musical score: you march towards the sound of gunfire, the drums are rolling. Combat inspires poetry

and song. The star spangled banner is still standing. It is so easily identifiable that you can even satirise it. (My favourite war poem is by an English comedian, Spike Milligan: The boy stood on the burning deck/Whence all but he had fled/The twit!). But my point is that you can satirise it because we all know what it is. Military courage involves brotherhood, the rush of blood, la gloire.

Civil courage is different, not just harder to define but often awkwardly mundane. It involves writing lengthy factual reports like "Guatemala never again," filling petitions, checking medical records, sometimes just sitting there. What could be more mundane than where you sit in the bus? The library can be the battlefield, the typewriter the sword. It comes with staggering acts of bravery. The great personal risk is often of torture and death. Who would not rather die on the battlefield than in some torturer's den. But so much of that heroism is in private, behind closed doors, away in a gulag, behind the bamboo curtain. A prisoner of conscience is one whose greatest battle can actually be in that conscience. It stands out in religious people, including the founder of Christianity. There are very few cavalry charges and tank battles. Sometimes people do not even really understand what a civil warrior is fighting for. You can tell the individual stories - you could make an incredible film about what our two honorees did in Guatemala - but each story is different, there is usually not a common narrative. It is hard to draw the lesson.

And this is where the greatest awkwardness and sense of discomfort comes - and where it truly challenges our voyeur society. Yes civil courage is hard to define, possibly even annoyingly vague; yes it draws on the mundane. But its proximity to normality means we are all capable of it. There are so many things that we can all do - and yet, unlike these two brave women, we don't.

Most of us do not feel guilty about not having stormed an enemy fortress in a faraway land. But civil courage is much closer. There are refugees that could be fought for, injustices that could be exposed on our doorstep, minorities who could be protected. There are things that we could all volunteer for, hypocrisies that we all walk past. Think of the prisoners in this country who go to lengthy sentences, with barely any form of defence. We are without excuses. For we all know that those little battles are what helps build the core of the society that we live in - the freedoms that we enjoy.

For those of us who are liberals - and I mean that in the pure English use of that word - this poses real problems. And they are often being slowly curtailed. Why do we, who inherited those freedoms, not scream more? I look at John Stuart Mill and the Victorian founders of liberalism and they took their creed so preciously that they refused to open the mail of terrorists who moved to London: they would rather that people risked getting killed in bomb throwing incidents than privacy be impinged. You may disagree with that stance, but it involved a form of courage.

I love the line: "If everyone says, the devil take the hindmost, the devil soon works his way to the head of the line." I think we all occasionally let the devil queue-barge.

And that brings it all back to my very first question: why me? For the correct response to listening to the stories of Yassmin and Claudia - and the really awkward question for all of us is not "why me." But "why not me?"