

"STAND UP FOR WHAT'S RIGHT UNTIL IT STOPS BEING RIGHT"

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Lenny Bernstein, history's greatest conductor, MS (master of sound), is dead; but his fellow-Jew Wm. Safire, MW (master of words), lives on & today in his "On Language" column has the master sentence (all words monosyllabic but one) I've lifted to be the title of this Thinksheet.

1 Damascene & Samurai swords are famous for combining toughness with flexibility. The double trait is rare in human beings, more rare in men than in women (whose nature-nurture assignments call louder for it).

2 Historical instances of this truth crowd in on me. Why did one personage fail to stand up for what was right, & another continue to stand for something when it stopped being right? I invite your memory for what personal reflections of pride & shame you may draw therefrom: who in history was like you (1) in taking a courageous stand for what was right or (2) failing to do so, (3) in changing position when the right became wrong or (3) failing to do so?

3 Daily reading of my diary of a half century ago brings surprises. A half century ago today I was two months from ordination & thus ineligible for the military chaplaincy. The surprise? My memory is that I sat out World War II because, not many days after Pearl Harbor, I could not pass the eye test for the Navy chaplaincy: I thought Hitler would self-destruct, so I wasn't interested enough to get involved. My diary, however, tells a different story. In a Southern graduate school of 450 men, many of them graduates of military academies & of college ROTC, I was the first one to register for the draft. I was that anti-Axis! Why didn't I remember vigorously standing up for what was right & right to the end, viz the military destruction of Fascism? Certainly not because of pacifism: I've never been a pacifist. In my parental home I was taught to "stand up for what you think is right & take the consequences." That was a family virtue, so I've never thought of it as a personal virtue. My father lost some elections by speaking out for what he thought was right, & we Americans all would like to have state & Federal executives & legislators who would do the same, instead of letting reelection be the one consequence to control personal & political behavior....Reminds me of Bill Webber's definition of a Christian as one who "professes Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior & takes the consequences."

4 Bill Safire's maxim:

(1) Distinguishes courage from foolhardiness, uncritical presumption.

(2) Does not touch on what never stops being right. While almost everything extended far enough becomes sin, a small category of sin is the failure to extend some things far enough.

(3) Has a scorpion tail that rears up & bites you. An old bromide says if you don't stand for something you'll fall for anything. But has what you are now standing for stopped being right? Continuous critical reason should be applied to oneself (self-examination) & the (ever? never?) changing situation.

(4) Intrigues us into asking, What are the criteria for knowing when something has stopped being right?

(5) When something has stopped being right, is there something else you should stand up for in its place? "New occasions teach new duties...."

(6) What obligation(s) do I have, when I conclude something has stopped being right, to those who were standing up with me for it?

5 What that you used to stand up for has, in your opinion, stopped being right (a) in your personal life? (b) in church life? (c) in religious & political doctrine? (d) in American culture? (e) on the world scene? This is one angle on "How my mind has changed," to use the title of a CHRISTIAN CENTURY series.

Prominent on my list of what's stopped being right is **the sacredness (inviolability) of human physical life** regardless of human & biospheric consequences. Values, virtues, & sanctions shaped before the flow of human flesh became biocidal should now yield to new values, virtues, & sanctions--eg, on conception control, birth control (ie abortion), triagevis-a-vis the terminally ill, euthanasia, & suicide.