

## Courage and Writing

*Shôn Ellerton, June 25, 2020*

*Taking up the courage to write about sensitive subjects may be daunting, but if we want to enjoy our freedom of speech for much longer, it may be time to do so.*



In the great words of Niccolò Machiavelli, ‘Everyone sees what you appear to be but few experience what you really are.’ These words should be remembered while reading any opinion piece. For example, within this era of over-sensitivity, it is not uncommon for someone to be called a white supremacist fascist for simply *disagreeing*, or worse, *being silent*, on a specific issue, yet, these statements are made without truly knowing the individual who forged them. On the more controversial of articles which I have published, I often add the disclaimer that those who expect a least-biased factual report of the topic presented may be disappointed. I also, on occasion, preface that I do not wish to waste valuable time on behalf of the reader if it is the only intention for the reader to express rebuke and dissatisfaction with the content. Some of the content I write may resonate well with the reader while some of it may not. To quote another great saying of recent times, this one by the Canadian psychologist, [Gad Saad](#), ‘There is an eighth deadly sin. The sin of human cowardice.’ It takes a great degree of courage to make oneself heard whether it be through speech, words, or action without the temptation to hide behind a veil of anonymity. This has always been the case throughout the annals of history whether it be challenging accepted dogma or simply mocking heads of state, for example, the royal family of Thailand or leaders of the Communist Party of China. Writing an article based on sensitive topics of the day is a balancing act and takes a degree of courage and stoicism to do so; or perhaps it is basic stupidity in the minds of those who prefer to feel safer below the parapet.

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This prompts the question. Why write about sensitive subjects at all? My answer to that lies in one of my favourite Aesop fables. The story of the mice and the cat where the mice are terrorised by the housecat pouncing on them at will without warning. So, the council of mice discuss what ought to be done about it. One suggests hanging a bell around the cat, the purpose to warn any of the mice if the cat is nearby. It was deemed a good idea and the motion was put forward for a bell to be hung around the cat’s neck. Unfortunately, the story ends there because no one had the courage to put the bell around the cat’s neck. The mice continued to be picked off one by one by the cat until there were no more mice left.

We take freedom of speech for granted and it is turning to dust right in front of our eyes. I remember vividly from my American school education, the famous phrase uttered by [Patrick Henry](#), a twice-elected governor of Virginia during the late 1700s, who said ‘Give me liberty or give me death!’ Quite a profound statement, indeed. We must not forget that one of the greatest freedoms is the freedom of speech, a freedom which is enshrined in various constitutions, charters and laws embedded in the legal frameworks throughout so many countries around the world, mostly of which, some form of democracy is practiced. I am not suggesting democracy is perfect, far from it, but it’s the best we’ve got. To quote Churchill, ‘Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.’ Due to the recent escalating attacks on Churchill’s personal views centred on racism, this iconic statement may have lost much in the way of credibility for many; however, the message remains the same regardless of his other divisive personal views.

Unfortunately, there are many countries in the world that do not practice democracy nor advocate freedom of speech, the biggest example being China. At this point, one could easily get embroiled in any number of stiff debates whether that is a good thing or not. For example, I have had many debates with a good friend of mine from Scotland who harbours the idea that communism has been a monumental achievement of success expounding on the fact that, in no way possible, would it have been possible to control the population of nearly

one-and-a-half billion people in China or the ability to build magnificent works of engineering in the Soviet Union such as the Trans-Siberian Railroad, the Moscow Metro or the enormous and rather sinister-looking [‘Seven Sisters’](#) baroque-gothic style buildings commissioned by Stalin. That’s all well and good until one learns that most of these works of engineering were constructed using prisoner labour, much of it being derived from political crimes. And what were considered political crimes? Merely to exercise free speech which the State does not agree with? I am not favourable at all to any society where free speech is suppressed or a society in which those that practice it are bullied by ‘over-privileged’ and self-centred mobs.

For those who live in a society where free speech is practiced, we must count ourselves to be privileged in living in it. There are many, what I call, ‘over-privileged’ people who live in such societies that want nothing better than for free speech to be quashed unless it fits in with their collective viewpoints. As for the term, ‘over-privileged’, and, perhaps, I am using the term too loosely, I need to explain something about the *blue dot effect*. I recall reading about an experiment to prove that humans can never be happy, or more accurately, that humans, however happy they are, will always find something, *anything*, that will make them unhappy. To explain simply, American college students were asked to identify, out of one thousand blue and purple dots displayed on a monitor shown one after the other, if they were blue. The colours were carefully chosen because, being the colours that they are, they are not *too* dissimilar in colour. For the first two hundred dots, there was an equal number of blue and purple dots; however, after that, the frequency of blue dots started to reduce in number as the experiment continued. The interesting thing here is that, regardless of the number of blue dots being reduced in frequency of showing up, the students started to mistake purple dots for blue dots at an increasing rate, so much so, that the end result was that the students were not far off from the original 50/50 split from the original first 200 dots displayed. As abstract as this sounds, the premise is that we become slowly accustomed to changing conditions around us making it necessary to accentuate or overcompensate events by adding something that is absent or vice versa. In the case of these experiments, the students were looking for something that was simply not there. This principle was shown to be tied to unhappiness in times where the overall environment has become a more peaceful and happier one. For example, my German grandparents were raised up in war-torn Berlin. Unhappiness meant not having any food to eat that day or having a loved one being shot down by a

rogue bullet. Unhappiness these days, for many, is simply being offended by a politically incorrect statement or by being bullied on social media, some of which have led to suicides, most of them by teenage girls. Therefore, I use the largely derogatory term of over-privileged because many of those who accuse others of being privileged have not considered the privilege that they themselves already enjoy. Moreover, should someone who identifies him or herself as being privileged and then takes the further step of suggesting to someone else that *they* are privileged is facetious to say the least. Another Aesop's fable illustrates this with the story of the Fox Without His Tail. In this story, a fox wanders into a man-trap and tries to set himself free, which, in doing so, leaves his bushy tail in the trap. Later, at the Council of Foxes, the fox without his tail tries to persuade the other foxes that having a tail is dangerous and that all foxes should have their tails removed. The idea was quickly abandoned and ridiculed when one of the foxes noticed that the fox delivering the notion did not have a tail himself.

These days, it is which group shouts loudest on social media and gets the most 'likes' that represents the collective viewpoint. They want nothing better than the silent majority to zip their mouths shut and swallow the proverbial [blue pill](#). Day by day, the rapidly accelerating erosion of free speech is now taking place in countries like the United States, Europe, and Australia, not through law, but rather by censorship and mob mentality.

For those who have reached wide audiences in the world of writing, there will be those who praise and those who condemn. It is an absolute. A writer must be courageous enough to accept criticism, particularly criticism of a constructive nature. Destructive, or trollish, criticism is rife in the circles of social media; however, the fact remains that if one is receiving it, it is a sure sign that the message will reach a wide audience. Those who condemn someone's writing but are unable to make a sensible or rational counter argument are not to be taken with any seriousness as this will only lead to a further escalation in emotional tit-for-tat angry little one-liners in social media posts. I often find myself trying to avoid the temptation not to get too embroiled in one-liner debates, but it is sometimes not an easy feat particularly if I hold a passion on the subject. The good news is that it is relatively easy to gauge if one is winning the debate or not. Once [straw-man arguments](#), [Kafkatraps](#), and comparisons being made to unsavoury characters are drawn by the detractor, the debate is effectively won. Some detractors will take the cowardly way out and try to

*remove* the material completely, an activity that major social media platforms have been too freely allowed to exercise.

If we are to maintain any degree of expression, writing, as well as creating art and composing music, is a good way to do so. Writing requires more deliberation than tweeting, creating one-liners or responding to someone else's post on Facebook or Twitter. It is also surprisingly difficult to be overly offensive or controversial when writing but alarmingly easy on one-liner posts and tweets. In some situations, there is every good reason not to write about a sensitive subject but for so many of us, provided one likes to write, let's take our heads out of the sand and start to take up some courage to write.