What We Have to Lose

Theodore Dalrymple

Whenever we learn of events of world-shaking significance, of catastrophes or massacres, we are inclined not only to feel ashamed (all too briefly) of our querulous preoccupation with our own minor tribulations but also to question the wider value of all our activities. I do not know whether people who are faced by death in a few seconds' time see their lives flash before them, as they are said to do, and pass final judgment upon them; but whenever I read something about the Khmer Rouge, for example, or the genocide in Rwanda, I reflect for a time upon my own life and dwell a little on the insignificance of my efforts, the selfishness of my concerns, the narrowness of my sympathies.

So it was when I first learned of the destruction of the two towers of the World Trade Center. I was settling down to write a book review: not of a great work, but of a competent, conscientious, slightly dull biography of a minor historical figure. Could any activity have been less important when set beside the horrible fate of thousands of people trapped in the then flaming—and soon collapsing—buildings? A book review, compared to the deaths of over 300 firemen killed in the course of their duty, to say nothing of the thousands of others? What was the point of finishing so laboriously insignificant a task as mine?

In my work as a doctor in a prison, I save a few lives a year. When I retire, I shall not in my whole career have saved as many lives as were lost in New York in those few terrible moments, even counting the time I spent in Africa, where it was only too easy to save human life by the simplest of medical means. As for my writing, it is hardly dust in the balance: my work amuses a few, enrages some, and is unknown to the vast majority of people in my immediate vicinity, let alone to wider circles. Impotence and futility are the two words that spring to mind.

Yet even as I think such self-regarding thoughts, an image recurs in my mind: that of the pianist Myra Hess playing Mozart in London's National Gallery even as the bombs were falling during the Second World War. I was born after the war ended, but the quiet heroism of those concerts and recitals, broadcast to the nation, was still a potent symbol during my childhood. It was all the more potent, of course, because Myra Hess was Jewish, and the enemy's anti-Semitism was central to its depraved view of the world; and because the music she played, one of the highest peaks of human achievement, emanated from the very same land as the enemy's leader, who represented the depths of barbarism.

No one asked, "What are these concerts for?" or "What is the point of playing Mozart when the world is ablaze?" No one thought, "How many divisions has Myra Hess?" or "What is the firepower of a Mozart rondo?" Everyone understood that these concerts, of no account in the material or military sense, were a defiant gesture of humanity and culture in the face of unprecedented brutality. They were what the war was about. They were a statement of the belief that nothing could or ever can vitiate the value of civilization; and no historical revisionism, however cynical, will ever subvert this noble message.

I recall as well a story told by the philosopher Sir Karl Popper, an Austrian refugee who made his home in Britain. Four cultivated men in Berlin, as they awaited their expected arrest by the Gestapo, spent their last night together—possibly their last night on earth—playing a Beethoven quartet. In the event, they were not arrested; but they too had expressed by their action their faith that civilization transcends barbarism, that notwithstanding the apparent inability of civilization at the time to resist the onslaught of the barbarians, civilization was still worth defending. Indeed, it is the only thing worth defending, because it is what gives, or should give, meaning to our lives.

Of course, civilization is not only an attachment to the highest peaks of human achievement. It relies for its maintenance upon an infinitely complex and delicate tissue of relations and activities, some humble and others grand. The man who sweeps the streets plays his part as surely as the great artist or thinker.

Civilization is the sum total of all those activities that allow men to transcend mere biological existence and reach for a richer mental, aesthetic, material, and spiritual life.

An attachment to high cultural achievement is thus a necessary but not sufficient condition of civilization—for it is said that concentration-camp commandants wept in the evening over Schubert lieder after a hard day's mass murder—and no one would call such men civilized. On the contrary, they were more like ancient barbarians who, having overrun and sacked a civilized city, lived in the ruins, because they were still far better than anything they could build themselves. The first requirement of civilization is that men should be willing to repress their basest instincts and appetites: failure to do which makes them, on account of their intelligence, far worse than mere beasts.

I grew up in secure and comfortable circumstances, give or take an emotional problem or two; but an awareness of the fragility of civilization was instilled early, though subliminally, by the presence in London during my childhood of large numbers of unreconstructed bomb sites that were like the gaps between the rotting teeth in an old man's mouth. Often I played in small urban wildernesses of weeds and rubble, and rather regretted their gradual disappearance; but even so, I could hardly fail to see, in the broken fragments of human artifacts and in the plasterwork with wallpaper still attached, the meaning of the destruction that had been wrought before I was born.

Then there were the bomb shelters, in which I passed a surprising number of childhood hours. They were ubiquitous in my little world: in the school playgrounds and the parks, for example. That entry to them was forbidden made them irresistibly attractive, of course. Their darkness and fungal dampness added to their attraction: they were pleasantly frightening; one never quite knew who or what one might find in them. Had I been inclined to smoke, instead of being instantly sickened by nicotine, that is where—like so many of my friends—I would have learned to do so. And many a first sexual exploration took place in those inauspicious surroundings.

Despite the uses to which we put them, however, we were always aware of the purpose for which they had been built. Somehow, the shades of those who had sheltered in them, not so very long before, were still present. The Blitz was within every adult's living memory: my mother's apartment building had been bombed, and she woke one morning with half of it gone, one of her rooms now open directly to the air. In my house, as in many other households, there was a multivolume pictorial history of the war, over which I pored for entire mornings or afternoons, until I knew every picture by heart. One of them was ever present in my mind when I entered a bomb shelter with my friends: that of two young children, both blind, in just such a shelter, their sightless eyes turned upward to the sound of the explosions above them, a heartrending look of incomprehension on their faces.

More than anything else, however, the fact that my mother was herself a refugee from Nazi Germany contributed to my awareness that security—the feeling that nothing could change seriously for the worse, and that the life that you had was invulnerable—was illusory and even dangerous. She showed us, my brother and me, photographs (some of them sepia) of her life in pre-Nazi Germany: a prosperously bourgeois existence of that time, from the look of it, with chauffeurs and large cars, patriarchs in winged collars conspicuously smoking cigars, women in feather boas, picnics by lakes, winter in the mountains, and so forth. There were photos of my grandfather, a doctor decorated for his military service during the Great War, in his military uniform, a loyal subject of the Kaiser. And then—suddenly—nothing: a prolonged pictorial silence, until my mother emerged into a new, less luxurious but more ordinary (because familiar), life.

She had left Germany when she was 17 and never saw her parents again. If it could happen to her, why not to me or indeed to anyone? I didn't believe it would, but then neither had she or anyone else. The world, or that little part of it that I inhabited, that appeared so stable, calm, solid, and dependable—dull even—had shakier foundations than most people most of the time were willing to suppose.

As soon as I was able, I began to travel. Boredom, curiosity, dissatisfaction, a taste for the exotic and for philosophical inquiry drove me. It seemed to me that comparison was the only way to know the value of things, including political arrangements. But travel is like good fortune in the famous remark of Louis Pasteur: it favors only the mind prepared. To an extent, one brings back from it only what one takes to it: and I chose my countries with unconscious care and thereby received many object lessons in the fragility of the human order, especially when it is undermined in the abstract name of justice. It is often much easier to bring about total disaster than modest improvement.

Many of the countries I visited—Iran, Afghanistan, Mozambique—soon descended into the most terrible chaos. Their peace had always been flawed, of course: as which is not? I learned that the passion to destroy, far from being "also" a constructive one, as the famous but foolish remark of the Russian anarchist Bakunin would have it, soon becomes autonomous, unattached to any other purpose but indulged in purely for the pleasure that destruction itself brings. I remember watching rioters in Panama, for example, smashing shop windows, allegedly in the name of freedom and democracy, but laughing as they did so, searching for new fields of glass to conquer. Many of the rioters were obviously bourgeois, the scions of privileged families, as have been the leaders of so many destructive movements in modern history. That same evening, I dined in an expensive restaurant and saw there a fellow diner whom I had observed a few hours before joyfully heaving a brick through a window. How much destruction did he think his country could bear before his own life might be affected, his own existence compromised?

As I watched the rioters at play, I remembered an episode from my childhood. My brother and I took a radio out onto the lawn and there smashed it into a thousand pieces with croquet mallets. With a pleasantly vengeful fury, as if performing a valuable task, we pursued every last component with our mallets until we had pulverized it into unrecognizability. The joy we felt was indescribable; but where it came from or what it meant, we knew not. Within our small souls, civilization struggled with barbarism: and had we suffered no retribution, I suspect that barbarism's temporary victory would have been more lasting.

But why did we feel the need to revolt in this fashion? At such a remove in time, I cannot reconstruct my own thoughts or feelings with any certainty: but I suspect that we rebelled against our own powerlessness and lack of freedom, which we felt as a wound, by comparison with what we saw as the omnipotence and complete freedom of action of the grown-ups in our lives. How we longed to grow up, so that we might be like them, free to do as we liked and give orders to others, as they gave orders to us! We never suspected that adulthood would bring its own frustrations, responsibilities, and restrictions: we looked forward to the time when our own whim would be law, when our egos would be free to soar wherever they chose. Until then, the best we could do was to rebel against a symbol of our subjection to others. If we could not be as adults were, we could at least destroy a little of the adults' world.

I saw the revolt against civilization and the restraints and frustrations it entails in many countries, but nowhere more starkly than in Liberia in the midst of the civil war there. I arrived in Monrovia when there was no longer any electricity or running water; no shops, no banks, no telephones, no post office; no schools, no transport, no clinics, no hospitals. Almost every building had been destroyed in whole or in part: and what had not been destroyed had been looted.

I inspected the remains of the public institutions. They had been destroyed with a thoroughness that could not have been the result of mere military conflict. Every last piece of equipment in the hospitals (which had long since been emptied of staff and patients) had been laboriously disassembled beyond hope of repair or use. Every wheel had been severed by metal cutters from every trolley, cut at the cost of what must have been a very considerable effort. It was as if a horde of people with terrible experiences of hospitals, doctors, and medicine had passed through to exact their revenge.

But this was not the explanation, because every other institution had undergone similar destruction. The books in the university library had been one and all—without exception—pulled from the shelves and piled into contemptuous heaps, many with pages torn from them or their spines deliberately broken. It

was the revenge of barbarians upon civilization, and of the powerless upon the powerful, or at least upon what they perceived as the source of their power. Ignorance revolted against knowledge, for the same reasons that my brother and I smashed the radio all those years before. Could there have been a clearer indication of hatred of the lower for the higher?

In fact there was—and not very far away, in a building called the Centennial Hall, where the inauguration ceremonies of the presidents of Liberia took place. The hall was empty now, except for the busts of former presidents, some of them overturned, around the walls—and a Steinway grand piano, probably the only instrument of its kind in the entire country, two-thirds of the way into the hall. The piano, however, was not intact: its legs had been sawed off (though they were by design removable) and the body of the piano laid on the ground, like a stranded whale. Around it were disposed not only the sawed-off legs, but little piles of human feces.

I had never seen a more graphic rejection of human refinement. I tried to imagine other possible meanings of the scene but could not. Of course, the piano represented a culture that was not fully Liberia's own and had not been assimilated fully by everyone in the country: but that the piano represented not just a particular culture but the very idea of civilization itself was obvious in the very coarseness of the gesture of contempt.

Appalled as I was by the scene in the Centennial Hall, I was yet more appalled by the reaction of two young British journalists, also visiting Monrovia, to whom I described it, assuming that they would want to see for themselves. But they could see nothing significant in the vandalizing of the piano—only an inanimate object, when all is said and done—in the context of a civil war in which scores of thousands of people had been killed and many more had been displaced from their homes. They saw no connection whatever between the impulse to destroy the piano and the impulse to kill, no connection between respect for human life and for the finer productions of human labor, no connection between civilization and the inhibition against the random killing of fellow beings, no connection between the book burnings in Nazi Germany and all the subsequent barbarities of that regime. Likewise, the fact that the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in China had destroyed thousands of pianos while also killing 1 million people conveyed no meaning or message to them.

If anything, they "understood" the destruction of the piano in the Centennial Hall and even sympathized with it. The "root cause" of Liberia's civil war, they said, had been the long dominance of an elite—in the same way, presumably, that poverty is often said to be the "root cause" of crime. The piano was an instrument, both musical and political, of that elite, and therefore its destruction was itself a step in the direction of democracy, an expression of the general will.

This way of thinking about culture and civilization—possible only for people who believe that the comforts and benefits they enjoy are immortal and indestructible—has become almost standard among the intelligentsia of Western societies. The word *civilization* itself now rarely appears in academic texts or in journalism without the use of ironical quotation marks, as if civilization were a mythical creature, like the Loch Ness monster or the Abominable Snowman, and to believe in it were a sign of philosophical naïveté. Brutal episodes, such as are all too frequent in history, are treated as demonstrations that civilization and culture are a sham, a mere mask for crassly material interests—as if there were any protection from man's permanent temptation to brutality except his striving after civilization and culture. At the same time, achievements are taken for granted, as always having been there, as if man's natural state were knowledge rather than ignorance, wealth rather than poverty, tranquillity rather than anarchy. It follows that nothing is worthy of, or requires, protection and preservation, because all that is good comes about as a free gift of Nature.

To paraphrase Burke, all that is necessary for barbarism to triumph is for civilized men to do nothing: but in fact for the past few decades, civilized men have done worse than nothing—they have actively thrown in their lot with the barbarians. They have denied the distinction between higher and lower, to the invariable advantage of the latter. They have denied the superiority of man's greatest cultural

achievements over the most ephemeral and vulgar of entertainments; they have denied that the scientific labors of brilliant men have resulted in an objective understanding of Nature, and, like Pilate, they have treated the question of truth as a jest; above all, they have denied that it matters how people conduct themselves in their personal lives, provided only that they consent to their own depravity. The ultimate object of the deconstructionism that has swept the academy like an epidemic has been civilization itself, as the narcissists within the academy try to find a theoretical justification for their own revolt against civilized restraint. And thus the obvious truth—that it is necessary to repress, either by law or by custom, the permanent possibility in human nature of brutality and barbarism—never finds its way into the press or other media of mass communication.

For the last decade, I have been observing close-up, from the vantage point of medical practice, the effects upon a large and susceptible population of the erosion of civilized standards of conduct brought about by the assault upon them by intellectuals. If Joseph Conrad were to search nowadays for the heart of darkness—the evil of human conduct untrammeled by the fear of legal sanction from without or of moral censure from within—he would have to look no further than an English city such as mine.

And how can I not be preoccupied with the search for the origins and ramifications of this evil when every working day I come upon stories like the one I heard today—the very day I write these words?

It concerns a young man aged 20, who still lived with his mother, and who had tried to kill himself. Not long before, his mother's current boyfriend, a habitual drunkard ten years her junior, had, in a fit of jealousy, attacked the mother in the young man's presence, grabbing her round the throat and strangling her. The young man tried to intervene, but the older man was not only six inches taller but much stronger. He knocked the young man to the ground and kicked him several times in the head. Then he dragged him outside and smashed his head on the ground until he was unconscious and blood ran from a deep wound.

The young man regained consciousness in the ambulance, but his mother insisted that he give no evidence to the police because, had he done so, her lover would have gone to jail: and she was most reluctant to give up a man who was, in his own words to the young man's 11-year-old sister, "a better f—k than your father." A little animal pleasure meant more to the mother than her son's life; and so he was confronted by the terrifying realization that, in the words of Joseph Conrad, he was born alone, he lived alone, and would die alone.

Who, in listening to such cases day after day and year after year, as I have, could fail to wonder what ideas and what social arrangements have favored the spread of conduct so vile that its contemplation produces almost physical nausea? How can one avoid driving oneself to distraction by considering who is more to blame, the man who behaves as I have described, or the woman who accepts such behavior for the sake of a moment's pleasure?

This brutality is now a mass phenomenon rather than a sign of individual psychopathology. Recently, I went to a soccer game in my city on behalf of a newspaper; the fans of the opposing teams had to be separated by hundreds of policemen, disposed in military fashion. The police allowed no contact whatever between the opposing factions, shepherding or corraling the visiting fans into their own area of the stadium with more security precautions than the most dangerous of criminals ever faces.

In the stadium, I sat next to a man, who appeared perfectly normal and decent, and his 11-year-old son, who seemed a well-behaved little boy. Suddenly, in the middle of the match, the father leaped up and, in unison with thousands of others, began to chant: "Who the f—k do you think you are? Who the f—k do you think you are?" while making, also in common with thousands of others, a threatening gesture in the direction of the opposing supporters that looked uncommonly like a fascist salute. Was this the example he wanted to set for his son? Apparently so. The frustrations of poverty could hardly explain his conduct: the cost of the tickets to the game could have fed a family more than adequately for a week.

After the game was over, I saw more clearly than ever that the thin blue line is no metaphor. Had it not been for the presence of the police (whose failures I have never hesitated to criticize), there would have been real violence and bloodshed, perhaps even death. The difference between an event that passed off peacefully and one that would end in mayhem, destruction, injury, and death was the presence of a relative handful of resolute men prepared to do their duty.

Despite the evidence of rising barbarism all around us, no betrayal is too trivial for the Quislings of civilization to consider worthwhile. Recently, at the airport, I noticed an advertisement for a firm of elegant and costly shirt- and tie-makers, headquartered in London's most expensive area. The model they chose to advertise their products was a shaven-headed, tattooed monster, with scars on his scalp from bar brawls—the human type that beats women, carries a knife, and throws punches at soccer games. The advertisement is not ironical, as academic cultural critics would pretend, but an abject capitulation to and flattery of the utmost coarseness and brutality. Savagery is all the rage.

If any good comes of the terrible events in New York, let it be this: that our intellectuals should realize that civilization is worth defending, and that the adversarial stance to tradition is not the beginning and end of wisdom and virtue. We have more to lose than they know.