

*Chapter 20*

## On Dreams and Responsibilities

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

(Robert Kennedy)<sup>1</sup>

The twenty-first century confronts humanity with challenges of a scale and scope that seem to defy solution. There are the environmental problems: global warming, the erosion of the biosphere, the destruction of rain forests and the greatest extinction of species since civilization began. There is the growing inequality between rich and poor: in some parts of the world, affluence beyond the dreams of previous generations; in others, nations and entire regions wracked by poverty, illness, drought, homelessness, illiteracy and despair. Each day, 30,000 children die of preventable diseases. One hundred and five million of the world's children do not go to school. Forty million suffer from HIV/AIDS. Three hundred million farmers are unable to trade fairly because of trade barriers. Half the world lives in poverty. Americans spend more on cosmetics, and Europeans on ice-cream, than it would cost to provide schooling and sanitation for the two billion people who currently go without both.<sup>2</sup>

Then come the political problems: ethnic conflict, civil wars, successive waves of asylum-seekers, the proliferation of violence and international disorder. There is the danger posed by failed, failing and rogue states, and the sheer difficulty – after wars such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq – of building stable regimes, with the rule of law and respect for human rights, to take the place of failed dictatorships or tyrannies. Meanwhile terror, inspired by groups such as Al Qaeda, has become a global threat, undermining the security of every life in one country after another, encouraging the spread of religious extremism

and barbaric acts of violence against the innocent. Worst of all is the fear that these factors may come together in the form of weapons of mass destruction – chemical, biological or nuclear – reaching the hands of groups who have no compunction against mass murder in the name of God and the apocalypse. The Chinese curse – ‘May you live in interesting times’ – seems likely to ring true for the foreseeable future.

These problems are so vast, so interconnected and global, that they lie beyond the reach of nation states, even superpowers like the United States and the European Union. How then can you and I make a difference? Taken individually, we are no more than a grain of sand on the sea shore, a wave in the ocean, dust on the surface of infinity. Because we are confronted with these problems daily on our television screens, we are faced with constant cognitive dissonance. We want to help, but there is all too little any of us can do. Under such pressures, the mind turns inward, seeking satisfaction within the self, or fulfilment within the narrow circle of family or friends, or salvation within the closed community.

That inward turn is evident in almost all Western societies today. It takes radically different forms – from consumerism, to ‘spirituality’ and the exploration of the self, to aggressively anti-modern forms of religious practice and belief. These phenomena could not be less alike yet they have one thing in common: they are an attempt to create safe space, a shelter from the world outside, a haven in a heartless world. In Christopher Lasch’s poignant phrase, we seek ‘psychic survival in troubled times’.<sup>3</sup>

I have argued in this book for the opposite response. Now, of all times, we should be holding out the hand of friendship to strangers, help to those in need. Power entails responsibility, and the immense power generated by modern technology, medicine, instantaneous worldwide communication and the global economy will call for responsibility on the same scale. We can make a difference, and *only* we can make a difference. Without the unforced contributions of people of good will, politicians are powerless and international resolutions so many well-meaning words spent upon the air.

At the heart of this book has been a metaphor, coined in a hilltop village in north Israel in the sixteenth century by a Jewish mystic, in the aftermath of one of the great human tragedies of the Middle Ages, the Spanish Expulsion. Rabbi Isaac Luria framed a vision of hope in the midst of catastrophe. The divine light which initially flooded creation proved too strong. There was a ‘breaking of the vessels’, as a result of which fragments of God’s light lay hidden under the rubble and wreckage of disaster. It is our task, he said, to ‘heal’ or ‘mend’ the world by searching for those fragments and rescuing them, one by one. It was a lovely image, because it refused to accept the fractures of the world as incurable, but neither did it suppose that repair would be instantaneous, easy or dramatic.

Like the people I have written about, and like Loren Eiseley's story of the starfish, Lurianic kabbalah proposed a redemption of small steps. God does not ask us to save the world, entire and alone. On the contrary: the attempt to 'force the end' usually results in violence and disaster. Instead, God asks us to do what we can, when we can. We mend the world one life at a time, one act at a time, one day at a time. A single life, said the rabbis, is like a universe.<sup>4</sup> Change a life, and you begin to change the world. Every generous deed, each healing word, every embracing gesture brings redemption nearer. Each is a letter we write in the book of life.

We can make a difference. It must have seemed absurd at the time to think that the leader of a group of slaves, escaping to freedom across a barren wilderness more than 3,000 years ago, could deliver a message that would eventually transform the moral landscape of the West. In a later age, a handful of prophets kept the Jewish spirit alive at times of catastrophe and near-despair. An even smaller handful of survivors rebuilt Jewish life after the Holocaust, having come eyeball to eyeball with the angel of death. There is not one movement, not one shift in the world's conscience, that did not begin with a few individuals daring to think the not-yet-thought, speak the courageous word, do the different deed. The word 'impossible' did not exist in their vocabulary. It should not exist in ours.

Long ago, in the desert, Moses assembled the people and told them they were about to construct a sanctuary that would become the visible home of the divine presence in their midst. Then he made a strange remark:

When you take a census of the Israelites to determine their numbers, each one shall be counted by giving an atonement offering for his life. In this manner, they will not be stricken when they are counted. Everyone included in the census must give a half shekel . . . (Ex. 30:12-13)

Evidently, it was dangerous to count the Israelites. Why? Normally, when nations take a census, they do so because they believe that there is strength in numbers. The Jewish people have never found strength in numbers. Moses told them that they were 'among the smallest of all the nations' (Deut. 7:7). They still are. The American writer Milton Himmel-farb once remarked that the entire population of world Jewry is smaller than the statistical error in the Chinese census. How then was their strength to be measured? The biblical answer is surpassingly beautiful: ask people to give, then count their contributions. A people can be numerically small, yet its contributions may be vast.

Moses added one small detail: each, he said, should give *half* a shekel. By this, he was saying: never think that you need to do it all. Each of us

must be conscious that we can't complete the task: we need someone else to make the shekel whole. But neither is our contribution insignificant. We contribute our half, confident that others will join us, perhaps inspired by what we do. We can change the world, but we need partners, and the best way of finding them is to lead by personal example. Virtue is contagious. One good deed begets another. What is important is that we begin. I remember how, as a new student, I paid my first visit to the university library. Two dons had arrived at the entrance at the same time. One said to the other, 'After you.' The other replied, 'No, please, after you.' It was wonderfully polite, and could have gone on for ever. When it comes to suffering and injustice, however, we need not the 'After you' school of leadership, but 'After me'.

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All too often in recent years, the face religion has presented to the world has been unlovely: either strident and aggressive, or weak and vague. Yeats' lines come to mind:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.<sup>5</sup>

There is no need for this. Neither strategy offers a road map to redemption. Neither is adequate to heaven's call in our day. Against the fundamentalisms of hate, we must create a counter-fundamentalism of love – knowing, without hesitation or equivocation, that this is what God wants us to do: to heal his fractured world.

This has been a religious book, a Jewish book, and I make no apologies for either fact; but the truth is that each of us has a contribution to make, whether we are religious or secular, Jewish, Christian or Muslim, whether we represent the great non-Western traditions or more modern forms of spirituality. All I have aspired to do in this book is to articulate one voice in the conversation, knowing that no human voice can express the totality of wisdom, and there is none from which we cannot learn.

If the religious voice has one thing to say above all others it is that each of us counts. I am notoriously bad at names. I see familiar people and forget what they are called. So one line in the book of Psalms always inspires in me a certain awe. It says of God that 'he counts the number of the stars and calls them each by name' (Ps. 147:4). To call someone or something by a name is to endow it with significance for what it uniquely is. God *knows who we are*. The god of the Greek philosophers knew things in general, but not in particular: classes but not individuals, types but not persons. The dazzling assertion at the heart of the Hebrew Bible is that God 'turns his face toward us' (Num. 6:26), knowing, loving and

challenging each of us in our singularity. None of us is replaceable, substitutable, dispensable. There are deeds we can do that can be done by no one else. That vision is not unique to Judaism – and even if it were, I hope it can be shared by everyone, for no more powerful assertion has ever been made of the dignity of the individual and the potential majesty of a human life. There are some six billion people alive on earth as I write, but no power on earth can rob each one of us of our categorical value in the eyes of God.

In the Bible, when God revealed himself to Abraham, Jacob and Moses, he began simply by calling them by name. Their response – at once the most primal and profound – was simply to say *hineni*, ‘Here I am.’ Life is God’s question. We are his answer. It may be a good answer or a bad one, but it is the only answer there is. God does not need to know, or be assured by us, that he is God. He needs to know that we hear his call, that we are ready to rise to his challenge, and that we are willing to take into our own hands the responsibility with which he has entrusted us, empowered and given strength by that very trust itself.

This is a religious vision but you do not have to be religious to share it. There is a hassidic story about a disciple who once asked his teacher: ‘Rabbi, do you believe that God created everything for a purpose?’ ‘I do’, the rabbi replied. ‘In that case, rabbi, why did God create atheists?’ The rabbi paused and smiled. ‘God created atheists to remind us never to accept the existence of evil. Sometimes we who have faith have too much faith. We accept the evils of this world as the will of God. They are not the will of God, which is why God created atheists to cure us of this illusion.’

The religion in which I believe is a counterintuitive, morally revolutionary force. In the last chapter of his eloquent book, *The Rebel*, Albert Camus wrote:

Rebellion indefatigably confronts evil, from which it can only derive a new impetus. Man can master, in himself, everything that should be mastered. He should rectify in creation everything that can be rectified. And after he has done so, children will still die unjustly even in a perfect society. Even by his greatest effort, man can only propose to diminish, arithmetically, the sufferings of the world. But the injustice and the suffering of the world will remain and, no matter how limited they are, they will not cease to be an outrage . . . Confronted with this evil, confronted with death, man from the very depths of his soul cries out for justice.<sup>6</sup>

Those words might almost be a summary of this book, with one difference. What Camus saw as a revolt *against* God in the name of humanity, Judaism sees as a rebellion against the worst instincts of humanity in the name of God himself. His is the voice that never ceases to ask why the

world-that-is is not yet the world-that-ought-to-be. *Faith is the question.* Our deeds are the only adequate answer.

And what of those who are not religious, who question whether there is justice and a Judge? Blaise Pascal (1623–62), one of the most brilliant minds of the seventeenth century, had already invented probability theory before turning, at the age of 30, to religious pursuits. He is best known for the so-called ‘Pascal’s Wager’ in which he brought together his two loves, the mathematical calculation of risk and the life of faith.<sup>7</sup> Either God exists, he argued, or he does not. If we live irreligiously and then discover, when we die, that we were wrong, we face endless torment in hell. If we live religiously, then if God exists we will face an eternity of bliss when we die, and if he does not, we will merely cease to be. The low-risk strategy is to live religiously, for at least this spares us from the worst possible outcome.

I admire Pascal. His *Pensées* are one of the classics of religious literature, and of course his Wager is more positive and subtle than I have made it seem. But if I were to attempt my own wager, I would make it far more modest. I would say to the unbeliever: either God exists or he does not. If he does, we will be rewarded for the good we do. If he does not, we will still be rewarded, for there is no greater reward than the knowledge that you have healed some of the pain of this deeply fissured world, mitigated some of its injustice, cured even a fraction of its ills.

And that is the point. Happiness can never be obtained by being pursued. Like the coming of the Messiah in Jewish tradition, it is one of those things that only comes when you are not thinking about it. It comes from a life well lived, in pursuit of the good for its own sake. There is something deep within us that leads us to feel implicated in the fate of others. Is this sympathy, empathy, benevolence, compassion, conscience, duty, enlightened self-interest, the impartial spectator, what sociobiologists call reciprocal altruism or what I call the covenant of human solidarity? I don’t know, but it is close to the heart of what we are, of what it is to be human. Neither pleasure nor desire, success nor fame, wealth nor power, can remotely rival it as a source of satisfaction or self-respect.

Many people have said it. ‘Everyone can be great’, said Martin Luther King, ‘because everyone can serve.’ ‘Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile’, said Albert Einstein. ‘He who wishes to secure the good of others has already secured his own’, said Confucius. And Edmund Burke: ‘Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.’ And perhaps most beautifully, Isaiah, in words that Jews have read for almost 2,000 years on the ‘Sabbath of Consolation’ after the day we mourn the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem:

Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;  
but those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint. (Is. 40:30-1)

The paradox of altruism is that the hope we give others returns to us undiminished and enlarged. Perhaps faith is only created in the doing, happiness in the giving, and meaning in the courage to take risks for the sake of an ideal. All I know is that the greatest achievement in life is to have been, for one other person, even for one moment, an agent of hope.

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The greatest danger facing Western societies today is the sense of powerlessness, of a world running out of control, of problems too great to solve and hatreds too deep to cure. This is what Robert Kennedy alluded to just before he uttered the words that stand at the head of this chapter. He spoke about 'the danger of futility; the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills'.<sup>8</sup> The politics of despair is the worst kind there is. The sense of powerlessness is all too easily manipulated by those hungry for power. Fear can be quickly turned into anger, rage, violence, terror, xenophobia and paranoia in one direction, or capitulation and cowardice, defeatism and appeasement in the other. When Franklin D. Roosevelt said, 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself', he was uttering a truth that has not yet lost its salience in the twenty-first century.

The only antidote to fear is responsibility: the refusal to believe that there is nothing we can do, the decision never to take refuge in blaming others, making them the scapegoats for our frustrations and fears. It is easy to complain: to say it is someone else's fault. Courage is born the moment we decide not to complain but instead to make a personal protest against the evils of the world by doing good, however slight. An ethic of responsibility yields individuals of astonishing resilience – people able to survive any setback and face any future without fear. For the last fourteen years I have carried with me, in my diary, the words of an earlier Roosevelt (Theodore), which have given me strength in dark days:

It is not the critic who counts,  
Not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles,  
Or where the doer of deeds could actually have done them better.  
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,

Whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood,  
Who strives valiantly,  
Who errs and comes short again and again –  
Because there is no effort without error and shortcomings –  
But who does actually strive to do the deed,  
Who knows great enthusiasm, great devotion,  
Who spends himself in a worthy cause,  
Who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement  
And who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly –  
So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls  
Who know neither victory nor defeat.<sup>9</sup>

To know that God empowers us to take risks, forgives our failings, lifts us when we fall, and believes in us more than we believe in ourselves – that is one way, the best I know, to write, in the record of our days, a story worth leaving as our legacy to those who come after us, of whose future we are the guardians.

Every good act, every healing gesture, lights a candle of hope in a dark world. What would humanity be after the Holocaust were it not for the memory of those courageous few who saved lives, hid children, rescued those they could? There were times when the gift of a crust of bread – even a smile – gave a prisoner the will to live. A single message of support can tell threatened populations that they are not alone. One act of hospitality can redeem a lonely life on the brink of despair. A word of praise can give strength to someone losing the will to carry on. We never know, at the time, the ripple of consequences set in motion by the slightest act of kindness.

'A little light', said the Jewish mystics, 'drives away much darkness.' And when light is joined to light, mine to yours and yours to others, the dance of flames, each so small, yet together so intricately beautiful, begins to show that hope is not an illusion. Evil, injustice, oppression, cruelty do not have the final word. Perhaps it is true that 'from the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made'. But do we need to be straight to point upward? Do we need to be perfect to be good? All I can say is what I feel: that the people I have met who have lit candles in other people's lives have given me the strength to carry on. I confess: I have never had a crisis of faith in God, but there were times when I came close to losing faith in humanity. It was the sheer decency – what Yiddish calls *menschlichkeit* – of ordinary people who restored it. Every generous or gentle or courageous deed begets others, inspires others, initiates a transformation. A single act, performed for its own sake out of love, gives us – wrote Maimonides – a share in the world to come.<sup>10</sup>

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I have spent much of my life thinking about life, observing people, reading books, searching for teachers and exemplars, trying to distinguish between what ultimately matters and what merely seems to matter at the time. I make no claims to wisdom, but this I have learned:

- that each of us is here for a purpose;
- that discerning that purpose takes time and honesty, knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of the world, but it is there to be discovered. Each of us has a unique constellation of gifts, an unreplicated radius of influence, and within that radius, be it as small as a family or as large as a state, we can be a transformative presence;
- that where *what we want to do* meets *what needs to be done*, that is where God wants us to be;
- that even the smallest good deed can change someone's life;
- that it is not the honours we receive that matter, but the honour we give;
- that what counts is not how much wealth we make but how much of what we have, we share;
- that those who spend at least part of their lives in service of others are the most fulfilled and happiest people I know;
- that there is no greater gift we can give our children than to let them see us sacrifice something for the sake of an ideal;
- that religions reach their highest levels when they stop worrying about other people's souls and care, instead, for the needs of their bodies;
- that no religion that persecutes others is worthy of respect, nor one that condemns others, entitled to admiration;
- that we honour the world God created and called good by searching for and praising the good in others and the world;
- that nothing is gained by less-than-ethical conduct. We may gain in the short term but we will lose in the long, and it is the long term that counts;
- that moral health is no less important to the quality of a life than physical health;
- that a word of praise can give meaning to someone's life;
- that, putting others down, we diminish ourselves; lifting others, we lift ourselves;
- that the world is a book in which our life is a chapter, and the question is whether others, reading it, will be inspired;
- that each day is a question asked by God to us;
- that each situation in which we find ourselves did not happen by accident: we are here, now, in this place, among these people, in these circumstances, so that we can do the act or say the word that will heal one of the fractures of the world;

- that few are the days when we cannot make some difference to the lives of others;
- that virtue does not have to be conspicuous to win respect;
- that the best do good without thought of reward, understanding that to help others is a privilege even more than it is an opportunity;
- that cynicism diminishes those who practise it;
- that self-interest is simply uninteresting;
- that it is not the most wealthy or powerful or successful or self-important who make the greatest difference or engender the greatest love;
- that pain and loneliness are forms of energy that can be transformed if we turn them outward, using them to recognize and redeem someone else's pain or loneliness;
- that the people who are most missed are those who brought hope into our lives;
- that the ability to give to others is itself a gift;
- that we can make a difference, and it is *only* by making a difference that we redeem a life, lifting it from mere existence and endowing it with glory;
- that those who give to others are the closest we come to meeting the divine presence in this short life on earth;
- that the best way of *receiving* a blessing is to *be* a blessing;
- and that if we listen carefully enough – and listening is an art that requires long training and much humility – we will hear the voice of God in the human heart telling us that there is work to do and that he needs us.

'Good represents the reality of which God is the dream', wrote Iris Murdoch.<sup>11</sup> 'In dreams begin responsibilities', wrote W. B. Yeats.<sup>12</sup> Judaism is the guardian of an ancient but still compelling dream. To heal where others harm, mend where others destroy, to redeem evil by turning its negative energies to good: these are the mark of the ethics of responsibility, born in the radical faith that God calls on us to exercise our freedom by becoming his partners in the work of creation. That seems to me a life-affirming vision: the courage to take the risk of responsibility, becoming co-authors with God of the world that ought to be.

#### NOTES

- 1 Robert Kennedy, 'A Tiny Ripple of Hope', speech to the National Union of South African Students' Day of Affirmation, Cape Town, 7 June 1966, in Brian MacArthur (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 366–73.

- 2 See Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2002), and the literature cited there.
- 3 Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: William Norton, 1985).
- 4 *Mishneh, Sanhedrin* 4:5.
- 5 W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', in Norman Jeffares (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1984).
- 6 Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 267.
- 7 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 149–55.
- 8 Robert Kennedy, 'A Tiny Ripple of Hope', in *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches*, p. 371.
- 9 Theodore Roosevelt, 'Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, 23 April 1910', in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt, Memorial Edition* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1923–26), vol. 15, p. 354.
- 10 Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah, Makkot* 3:17.
- 11 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), p. 496.
- 12 W. B. Yeats, epigraph to *Responsibilities and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1916). The phrase was popularized by Delmore Schwartz, who took it as the title of his first book: *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1938).