

# “Moral Excellence Like a Spear”

A Sermon Delivered at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts  
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on February 6, 2005

The question of evil is one that has perplexed humans forever. In our time the ponderings and the study continue. I have considered the theme myself in the pulpit, many have tested it, others have tried to describe it, and the great and the humble alike have given it form.

Philip Hallie is one of those who has studied evil. And then, in a book published in 1979, he studied goodness, not as an abstraction, a principle, but as a living reality, something we come to not by cerebration but by story, in the hearing of the tale, to which we respond from the depths of our beings with joyful tears of recognition: yes, this is goodness, so fine it pierces to the quick.

The name of his book is Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed, from the words of the books of Hebrew scripture. Its subtitle is, “The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There.” It tells the story of a Protestant pastor, Andre Trocme, his wife Magda, and the town they served preceding and during the Second World War, a town which in turn served as haven and gateway to safety for perhaps 2,500 Jewish refugees.

The exact number will never be known. There was no bureaucracy, and the extreme danger of the task demanded that discretion, secrecy, and what Hallie calls “efficacious silence” cloaked the events even as they happened. But Hallie says, “this much is certain: in the course of the first two years of the Occupation, Le Chambon became the safest place for Jews in Europe.” [129] And this protection continued and expanded until the village was liberated in September of 1944.

That it became so quickly so significant a haven was conditioned by the years that preceded the outbreak of hostilities. In some sense, the village had been conditioned to solidarity and resistance by the centuries that it had survived as a Protestant town in a Catholic country, creating an independent people with a history of keeping faith under fire and holding to their consciences. “It takes more for a Trocme to succeed than just a Trocme. It takes also a Le Chambon.” [73]

But the town nearest to Le Chambon was equally Protestant, and in the hills, and on the same railroad line, and the refugees did not flock there. The citizens of Le Chambon credit Trocme. Who was he?

A passionate man of peace, a zesty, huggy, energetic activist and a devoted, almost mystical Protestant pacifist, married to a woman of great warmth and caring and common sense whom he met and married while studying here in the States.

Tragedy and war had taught him, among other things, a profound love for the victim and the victimizer alike -- for all persons -- and an unyielding faith in the possibilities of redemption and in the Christian model of nonviolence. For his wife, who did not share his pious nature, compassion was not so divinely ordained; but she shared in it every bit as much out of the simple demands of human need. In 1934, after two ministries in poor, grim parishes, they came to Le Chambon, in part to be less in sight of the hierarchy of the Reformed Church of France, which officially forbid the preaching of nonviolence.

Le Chambon was a moderately impoverished backwater town up in the hills, unblessed with jobs or good weather except in the summer, when the tourists arrived. Concerned with the

town's anemic economy, Trocme sought a new industry, and found it in a project dear to his own interests; he founded a pacifist boarding school, Cevenol, to which children might come from throughout Europe.

In his sermons, too, Trocme was preaching a gospel that focused strongly on the story of the Good Samaritan and on Jesus' injunctions to non-violence in the Sermon on the Mount. In school and pulpit, pacifism was taught as the expression of the Jesus' message and model alike. Helping in the effort were Trocme's co-pastor and the head of the public school across the street.

By the late 30's, refugees from Hitler and from the growing anti-Semitic practices in central and eastern Europe began arriving in secluded towns in southern France, but especially in Le Chambon, where Cevenol provided teaching positions and schooling for the youngsters. With generally increased enrollment, the school began to occupy more and more of the boarding places and spare rooms around town.

Patterns had been formed, then, of solidarity and resistance, of belief in human welfare, of receptivity, of accommodating their town to new demands for space and caring. But the effort began in earnest only after June of 1940, the Fall of France, its partition, and the establishment of the puppet government in Vichy to rule unoccupied France in the South.

The opening moves were symbolic ones, but none the less important in the long run for that. There was first the matter of saluting the flag with the Fascist salute, as the government began requiring of all schoolchildren as a daily exercise starting in the fall of 1940. At Trocme's instigation, the directors of Cevenol and the public school across the street found a way that the salute could be voluntary. "In less than a month, the salute became a weekly ceremony. A few weeks after that it disappeared completely, on both sides of the street.

"Apparently the government was unaware that a few people had refused – at least symbolically – to give up their consciences to the chief of state. But the three thousand people of Le Chambon were fully aware of what had happened. Moreover, they saw that they could resist, that there was a possibility of resisting. For them it was like having a new, beautifully colored bird pointed out, a bird they had not seen before. But now that they saw it, they knew from their own experience that there was such a bird, and it could come back. The bird was the possibility of a person's saying no to indignity and tyranny, and in their recalcitrant Protestant hearts they cherished that bird." [91]

Symbolic acts of resistance would go on for a time, strengthening the villagers' sense of commonality and resolution, but with that first winter their involvement became much more than only symbolic. For there at the presbytery door was a hungry, shivering German Jewish woman seeking help. Magda Trocme said, "Naturally, come in, and come in." And the woman did, as hundreds did after her.

In response, the villagers managed to come up with needed clothes, despite their own poverty, and faked papers, despite their distaste for lying, and ration cards for food, and housing.

Before the winter was out, Trocme had traveled to Marseilles and met with a representative of the Quaker church and agreed to a plan to establish a Quaker-funded house in Le Chambon for Jewish refugee children. Upon Trocme's return, the Parish Council approved the plan and he established the House of the Rocks in a large stone building outside town under the direction of his nephew Daniel, later martyred.

Altogether six funded houses with various sponsors were established outside the village to serve refugee children. Nearer the center were about a dozen boarding houses that were also put to that use, and numerous private homes also served, especially on the scattered farms of the village's 2000 peasants, the wooded, rocky terrain outside town offering means of quick hiding.

From their hiding places, refugees were smuggled across the border to Switzerland and safety by the remarkable women of the rescue group Cimade.

At the center of this organization was the presbytery, the entry point to a world of safety and hope amid a world of hatred and slaughter. “Life was what the presbytery meant in Le Chambon, vivacious, generous life,” wrote Hallie. “Life -- for the weak and for the strong -- was the Trocme’s cause, and, at great cost to themselves and to others, that cause triumphed in Le Chambon.” [165]

The model of goodness was catching, and as conditions worsened as the war went on, unknown members of the occupation government would signal warnings of raids. More refugees were smuggled out by the Cimade. Trocme was jailed for a time but freed, then fled for a time when he learned the Gestapo had ordered him killed. Following D Day he returned, and three months later the town was liberated, and the remaining refugees were safe.

Well, that’s the story, they had all these kids and others to shelter, kids that other people wanted to torture and kill, and they protected them. Of course they did, wouldn’t anyone?

But many, many didn’t. Some collaborated and then there were others who just went along, people who wanted “above all... to avoid personal discomfort, friction and conspicuousness.... They were... perhaps in the majority in France in those days,” says Hallie who continues, “For Trocme, they were the ‘Qu’en dira-t-on?’ (‘What will they say?’) people, who perhaps thought of themselves as meek and humble Christians, but who were actually cowards who failed to dare, as Christ had dared, to live according to their consciences.” [89-90]

By contrast there were the Trocme and the other people of Le Chambon. And it was not just there; there were other havens. And it was not just Protestants, for elsewhere Catholics made the stand. And even in Le Chambon, it was not only the church-people, but the Darbyists, too; and not just the devout, but skeptics, too, like Magda herself; and not just the pacifists, for in their own way the soldiers of the underground, the Maguis, were part of the struggle, too, in a way Trocme disapproved but with which there was vital cooperation.

Why the contrast with the collaborators, with the Qu’en dira-t-on people? Again, as I will repeatedly in the moments that remain, I would like to turn to Hallie’s own words:

“It may appear that what happened in Le Chambon during the war years was almost too complex to be understood. In a sense, this is true. Looking at the story with an analytical eye, there were many factors at work before and during those years, forces that made the rescue efforts of the Chambonnais succeed. But if you are interested in understanding what happened in Le Chambon in a way similar to the way the Chambonnais themselves looked at what they did, then their actions become rather easy to understand. They become as easy to understand as Magda Trocme rushing in her frenetic way from the kitchen to the presbytery door, turning the doorknob, and opening the door for a refugee with ‘Naturally, come in, and come in.’”

“... If we would understand the goodness that happened in Le Chambon, we must see how easy it was for them to refuse to give up their consciences, to refuse to participate in hatred, betrayal and murder, and to help the desperate adults and the terrified children who knocked on the doors in Le Chambon....

“We fail to understand what happened in Le Chambon if we think that *for them* their actions were complex and difficult.” [283-4, 284]

But why, one may ask, why was it easy? For Hallie the answer involves us in something he calls life and death ethics, the ethics not of economics or sexuality or government but of life and death, at the heart of which lies (or is lacking) a sense of the preciousness, the priceless

of human life. “We can begin to understand the idea of the priceless-ness of human life,” he suggests, “if we explore the idea of the preciousness of a child’s life.

“When some of us look at children, especially when they are happy, we feel what Gerald Manley Hopkins was expressing in a poem called ‘Spring’ when he asked: ‘what is all this juice and all this joy?’ For us, children are the springtime, the creative burgeoning of human life. They are not only in that springtime; they are that springtime....

“And when they are tortured, when they are deliberately broken and killed, it is spring that is being attacked. It is as if the living center of human life were being dirtied and then smashed. An eyewitness...saw a mother and daughter at the head of a line going into the gas chambers of the concentration camp in Belzec, and he heard the child say, ‘Mother, it’s dark, it’s so dark, and I was being so good.’

“Insofar as one can realize what is happening and what is evil about that murder, one is realizing the priceless-ness of a child’s life. There are people who do not comprehend what it means to be evil under a life-and-death ethic. There are some cold people on this earth. But there were no such people in the parish of Andre Trocme. We may seek out, if we wish, the psychological, political, and even the economic causes of the differences between the cold ones and the Chambonnais, but as far as a life-and-death ethic is concerned, there is an unbridgeable difference between those who can torture and destroy children and those who can only save them.” [274-275]

Albert Camus said once that “Our task is to find the few principles that will calm the infinite anguish of free souls. We must mend what has been torn apart, make justice imaginable again in a world so obviously unjust, give happiness a meaning once more to peoples poisoned by the misery of the century.” For Hallie, those principles and that happiness are centered around the preciousness of life: “To realize the preciousness of life is to realize its value to all of us.

“Such a realization, such an imaginative perception of the connection between the preciousness of my life and the preciousness of other lives, is the vital center of life-and-death ethics. If we do not discern that connection, the ‘laws’ of ethics are empty patterns of sounds and shapes, without meaning or force. The moral leadership of Andre Trocme consisted in keeping this perception green in his own life and in the lives of the other Chambonnais.” [276-277]

And so may that perception stay green in ours, for what makes the story worth telling, and telling again, is the hope it opens in our lives, the possibility it raises for us. As Hallie writes,

“I, who share Trocme’s and the Chambonnais’ beliefs in the preciousness of human life, may never have the moral strength to be much like the Chambonnais or like Trocme; but I know what I want to have the power to be. I know that I want to have a door in the depths of my being, a door that is not locked against the faces of all other human beings. I know that I want to be able to say, from those depths, ‘Naturally, come in, and come in.’” [p. 287]

The title of the sermon is taken from the opening pages of Hallie’s book, used as a reading in the service. The reading:

There was once an art critic, I have been told, who had a sure way of identifying ancient Maltese art objects: he found himself crying before them. John Keats had a similar reaction to

excellence: the thought of his beloved Fanny Brawne, or of anything he associated with her, "goes through me like a spear," he said.

Of course, these are symptoms of an awareness of excellence. They are mere reactions, not rules that we ordinary people can use to separate excellent things from dross. But any doctor will tell you that symptoms are important. And just as pain can be a symptom of disease, painful joy can be a reliable reaction to excellence.

One afternoon I was reading some documents relating to Adolf Hitler's twelve-year empire. It was not the politics of these years that was at the center of my concern; it was the cruelty perpetrated in the death camps of Central Europe. For years I had been studying cruelty, the slow crushing and grinding of a human being by other human beings. I had studied the tortures white men inflicted upon native Indians and then upon blacks in the Americas, and now I was reading mainly about the torture experiments the Nazis conducted upon the bodies of small children in those death camps.

Across all these studies, the pattern of the strong crushing the weak kept repeating itself and repeating itself, so that when I was not bitterly angry, I was bored at the repetition of the patterns of persecution. When I was not desiring to be cruel with the cruel, I was a monster -- like, perhaps, many others around me -- who could look upon torture and death without a shudder, and who therefore looked upon life without a belief in its preciousness. My study of evil incarnate had become a prison whose bars were my bitterness toward the violent, and whose walls were my horrified indifference to slow murder. Between the bars and the walls I revolved like a madman. Reading about the damned I was damned myself, as damned as the murderers, and as damned as their victims. Somehow over the years I had dug myself into Hell, and I had forgotten redemption, had forgotten the possibility of escape.

On this particular day, I was reading in an anthology of documents from the Holocaust, and I came across a short article about a little village in the mountains of southern France. As usual, I was reading the pages with an effort at objectivity; I was trying to sort out the forms and elements of cruelty and of resistance to it in much the same way a veterinarian might sort out ill from healthy cattle. After all, I was doing this work not to torture myself but to understand the indignity and the dignity of man.

About halfway down the third page of the account of this village, I was annoyed by a strange sensation on my cheeks. The story was so simple and so factual that I had found it easy to concentrate upon *it*, not upon my own feelings. And so, still following the story, and thinking about how neatly some of it fit into the old patterns of persecution, I reached up to my cheek to wipe away a bit of dust, and I felt tears upon my fingertips. Not one or two drops; my whole cheek was wet.

"Oh," my sentinel mind told me, "you are losing your grasp on things again. Instead of learning about cruelty, you are becoming one more of its victims. You are doing it again." I was disgusted with myself for daring to intrude.

And so I closed the book and left my college office. When I came home, my operatic Italian wife and my turbulent children, as they have never failed to do, distracted me noisily. I hardly felt the spear that had gone through me. But that night when I lay on my back in bed with my eyes closed, I saw more clearly than ever the images that had made me weep. I saw the two clumsy khaki-colored buses of the Vichy French police pull into the village square. I saw the police captain facing the pastor of the village and warning him that if he did not give up the names of the Jews they had been sheltering in the village, he and his fellow pastor, as well as the families who had been caring for the Jews, would be arrested. I saw the pastor refuse to give up

these people who had been strangers in his village, even at the risk of his own destruction.

Then I saw the only Jew the police could find, sitting in an otherwise empty bus. I saw a thirteen-year-old boy, the son of the pastor, pass a piece of his precious chocolate through the window to the prisoner, while twenty gendarmes who were guarding the lone prisoner watched. And then I saw the villagers passing their little gifts through the window until there were gifts all around him -- most of them food in those hungry days during the German occupation of France.

Lying there in bed, I began to weep again. I thought, Why run away from what is excellent simply because it goes through you like a spear? Lying there, I knew that always a certain region of my mind contained an awareness of men and women in bloody white coats [committing unspeakable atrocities to] six- or seven- or eight-year-old Jewish children.... All of this I knew. But why not know joy? Why not leave room for comfort? Why add myself to the millions of victims? Why must life be for me that vision of ... children [being hideously brutalized]? Something had happened, had happened for years in that mountain village. Why should I be afraid of it?

To the dismay of my wife, I left the bed unable to say a word, dressed, crossed the dark campus on a starless night, and read again those few pages on the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. And to my surprise, again the spear, again the tears, again the frantic, painful pleasure that spills into the mind when a deep, deep need is being satisfied, or when a deep wound is starting to heal.