

Malala Yousufzai & Anne Frank: Profiles in Courage

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I don't know many kids who absolutely dread vacation from school. Most kids, American and otherwise, start counting down the days long before the start of winter or summer break. I loved how Churchill High School had a countdown clock to the first day of school this summer on their brand new digital marquee on Tuckerman Road; I'm sure the Churchill students were just thrilled about that! But there was at least one 9th grader who was dreading her school's vacation. She went to school, not down the street, but about 7,000 miles east of Washington, D.C. Her name, at least her first name, has become known throughout the world, Malala. The name Malala in Pashtun means sad, melancholic. And throughout the world today, people are heartbroken over Malala's condition. You see she desperately wanted to go to school. In fact she wrote in her blog that she was in a "bad mood" on the day before her school vacation. *She wrote, "The principal announced the vacations but did not mention the date the school was to reopen."* Again, for many kids that might be the greatest news ever. But not for Malala. She continued: *"The girls were not too excited about vacations because they knew if the Taliban implemented their edict [banning girls' education] they would not be able to come to school again. I am of the view that the school will one day reopen but while leaving I looked at the building as if I would not come here again."*

A living testimonial to the age old phrase "the pen is mightier than the sword," Malala Yousufzai is a courageous 15 year old girl who had the courage and the eloquence to communicate to the larger world what she was experiencing in her world. The Swat region of Northwest Pakistan is a haven of Taliban extremism. Lately the Taliban has reduced to rubble 150 schools! Schools are their targets of destruction because they commit the egregious crime of educating girls. For the Taliban, educated girls are an encroachment of Western values. Moreover, girls who are so committed to learning that they smuggle their books beneath their burkas are the greatest threat to the Taliban. Better educated women and more globally educated Pakistanis would undoubtedly not tolerate the Taliban's subjugation of women, or its array of human rights abuses. Education, the Taliban understand very well, will spell their ultimate undoing.

But Malala wrote on her blog: "I don't mind if I have to sit on the floor at school, all I want is an education. And I'm afraid of no one." So, like millions of schoolchildren throughout the world, on Tuesday morning, Malala boarded the bus to go to school. Only on that particularly morning, a masked Taliban assassin also forcibly board the bus and aimed his gun at Malala's head. After suffering gunshot wounds to the head and neck, she is remarkably alive and recovering after an operation to remove a bullet from her spinal cord. If she survives, many people predicted that she would leave Pakistan, as the Taliban has committed to trying again should she live. But her parents defiantly responded that they will not leave. That they stand for something bigger than themselves; that they have a mission, an ideology to promote. Her father is the principle of a

girls' school, and he insists that his family will not be forced to leave their own country. Imagine the power of one teenage girl who the Taliban fears enough to try to assassinate.

As I read about Malala's story, I couldn't help but think about another diarist, who chronicled the brokenness of the world she witnessed, and through her writings has also been an agent of change and a voice for the oppressed. Remarkably, Anne Frank and Malala Yousufszai are the same age. Anne Frank was 15 when the Nazis broke into her hiding place and transported her to her eventual death in Auschwitz. They both wrote to tell their stories to the larger world, to sensitize the world to inconceivable injustice and suffering. And both are names that will remain in our consciousness for a very long time.

In January of 1943, Anne wrote: "*Terrible things are happening outside. At anytime of night and day, poor helpless people are being dragged out of their homes*" "*Families are torn apart...*

Much more recently Malala wrote:

The night was filled with the noise of artillery fire and I woke up three times...

Today is 15 January, the last day before the Taleban's edict comes into effect, and my friend was discussing homework as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened

Anne wrote,

"Our freedom was severely restricted by a series of anti-Jewish decrees: *Jews* were required to wear a yellow star; Jews were required to turn in their bicycles; Jews were forbidden to use trams; Jews were forbidden to ride in cars, even their own; Jews were required to do their shopping between 3:00 and 5:00 P.M.; Jews were required to frequent only Jewish-owned barbershops and beauty parlors; Jews were forbidden to be out on the streets between 8:00 P.M. and 6:00 A.M.; and on and on...

Malala wrote,

I had a terrible dream yesterday with military helicopters and the Taleban. I have had such dreams since the launch of the military operation in Swat. My mother made me breakfast and I went off to school. I was afraid going to school because the Taleban had issued an edict banning all girls from attending schools.

Only 11 students attended the class out of 27. The number decreased because of Taleban's edict...

On my way from school to home I heard a man saying 'I will kill you'. I hastened my pace and after a while I looked back if the man was still coming behind me. But to my utter relief he was talking on his mobile and must have been threatening someone else over the phone.

In our parasha this morning, we learn about the creating of man and woman in a way that I believe is profoundly revolutionary; and a view of gender that ought to give all of us pause. Prior to the creation of woman, man was called Adam, a strange being—only one of a kind—that

was created superior to the animals, but inferior to God. This solitary being experiences a sense of deep and profound loneliness and incompleteness. There was nothing, no one to share life with. But when woman is created, Adam also undergoes a transformation: He is no longer called Adam. When woman is created Adam is transformed as well...he becomes *Ish* and woman is *Isha*. They are two co-equal members of the same species. They are the only two created beings who could satisfy each other, because they occupied the same level of creation's taxonomy. We then learn that the *isha*, that woman is also referred to as an *ezer kenegdo*, a helpful counterpart to the *ish*, to the man; that somehow the woman would provide insights and wisdom and support that were different from man. That man and woman would not only keep each other company, but that at times they would stand opposite one another, and help one another to see things that alone they would not be able to see.

Malala and Anne are two women who exemplify this status of *ezer kenegdo*. Each expressed themselves with strength and conviction opposite societies that would have them silenced. Would Meip Geis not have recovered Anne's diary, the Nazis surely would have burned it. And would the BBC not have published Malala's blog, how many of us would be totally ignorant of some of the world's most vicious gender inequality. Thank God for both of them, and for the many other courageous voices in the world who defy orders, who refuse to submit or to be silent, and who skirt death in order to make their voices heard--in order to shed light on very dark places. "Look how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness," Anne Frank once wrote. We pray today that Malala's candle, though flickering and gasping for oxygen, not be extinguished and that she lives to continue to tell her people's story, to be a living emblem of the struggle for gender equality and the rejection of extremism. Hopefully this potent young woman will provide the momentum to defeat once and for all those who would silence her forever.

May God bless her and give her strength.