

Things to Learn from Daniel Ellsberg

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I don't want any new monuments to individuals to replace any ripped down for racism or other offenses. Individuals are deeply flawed — every single one of them, and morality changes with the times. Whistleblowers are by definition less than divinely perfect, as their service is revealing the horrors of some institution they've been part of. But when you look around for individuals you'd like people to be learning from, there are some that soar to the top, and one of those is Dan Ellsberg. When I first met him, around 20 years ago, he was, and he has been ever since a fulltime advocate for peace and justice, no longer a new whistleblower and no longer in quite the spotlight he'd been in for releasing the Pentagon Papers. He has continued to be a whistleblower, releasing new information, and recounting endless quantities of facts and incidents. He and others have continued to reveal more about his earlier days, every scrap of which has only made him look wiser. But I met Daniel Ellsberg as a peace activist, one of the best there has ever been.

Courage

Dan Ellsberg risked life in prison. And then he went on risking punishments again and again. He took part in countless — I think he may actually have a count, but the word is appropriate — nonviolent protest actions that involved his arrest. He knew that information was not enough, that nonviolent action was needed as well, and that it could succeed. He inspired and encouraged and volunteered to take risks with new whistleblowers and new activists and new journalists.

Strategy

Ellsberg clearly devoted himself to anything that could be done, but not without constantly asking what would work best, what would have the greatest chance of success.

Humility

Not only did Ellsberg never retire. He also, to my knowledge, never showed the slightest negative impact of fame, never arrogance or contempt. When I hardly knew him, he would

call me up seeking insights and information on strategizing to influence Congress. This was when I lived in or near Washington, D.C., and did some work with some Congress Members, and I think that was largely the value sought in asking me questions. The point is that I know I was one of a great many people Dan was phoning and asking questions. The guy who knew more about the military industrial complex than anyone else, or at least anyone else willing to talk about it, mostly wanted to learn anything he didn't know.

Scholarship

A model of careful and diligent researching, reporting, and book authoring, Ellsberg can teach the importance of finding the truth in a complex web of half-truths and lies. Perhaps the impressiveness of his scholarship, combined with the passage of time, has contributed to various comments suggesting that some new whistleblower who has offended the establishment is “No Daniel Ellsberg” — an error that Dan himself has been quick to correct, siding with the truth tellers of the current moment, rather than with the disneyfication of his own memory.

Curiosity

What makes the information provided on war history, peace activism history, politics, and nuclear weapons in Ellsberg's writing and speaking so interesting is the questions he asked in order to find it. They are mostly not the questions that were being asked by major media outlets.

Independent Thinking

If you deal with a single topic area long enough, it becomes hard to run into a new opinion. Where you do run into new opinions, most often it's with someone who thinks for himself. Ellsberg's views on the gravest dangers we face, the gravest crimes of the past, and what we must do now are not those of anyone else I know, except for the great numbers of people who have listened to him.

Agreeable Disagreement

Most people, probably myself included, are hard to always get along with amicably even when jointly working toward the same end. With Ellsberg, he and I have literally done public debates on things we disagreed on (including elections) completely amicably. Why can't that be the norm? Why can't we disagree without harsh feelings? Why can't we seek to educate and learn from each other without striving to defeat or cancel one another?

Prioritization

Daniel Ellsberg is a moral thinker. He looks for the greatest evil and what can be done to alleviate it. His reluctance to speak, with me, of rejecting WWII, I think, comes out of his understanding of the extent of the Nazis' plans for mass murder in Eastern Europe. His opposition to U.S. nuclear policy comes from his knowledge of U.S. plans for mass murder in Europe and Asia far beyond the Nazis'. His focus on ICBMs comes, I think, from his having thought through what existing system creates the greatest risk of nuclear apocalypse. This is what we all need, whether or not we all focus on the same extreme evil. We need to prioritize and act.

Brevity

Only kidding! As everyone knows, you can neither stop Daniel Ellsberg when he has a microphone nor regret a single moment you failed to stop him. Perhaps death alone will silence him, but not as long as we have his books, his videos, and those he's influenced for the better.

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