

The Pilot Light
Thomas J. Cottle*

Much of our lives, Robert Kegan has written, redound to making meaning of events, explaining them to others, and to ourselves. We are, perhaps, but the stories we tell, to others and ourselves. Not so incidentally, groups and cultures make meaning of events that individuals then internalize. Moreover, just as individuals seek to cope with stressful situations, so too do groups and cultures. Which means that in attempting to manage stressful or genuinely traumatic situations we turn not only to personally lived past experience, but to experiences of our groups and cultures, for they too have developed so-called coping strategies. They too, proffer definitions of trauma and methods of maintaining resilience,

Cultures control, even imprison people, and cause them to feel dependent on powerful figures and predominant ideologies. Cultures teach people that their readings of reality are wrong; the very stories they tell are distorted, paranoid even. Which results often, in individuals feeling themselves not terrorized necessarily, but surely that they are members of a subspecies. In response, some of these people, incorporating the trauma alive within the culture, actually replicate the trauma on themselves. Psychologists refer to this as self-sabotaging behavior; the rest of us remark how certain people tend to shoot themselves in the foot.

Who, I wonder, can fully appreciate my friend Marty's seemingly melodramatic interpretation of my own unrelenting ambition as a fear that without accomplishment I will be sent back? Who fully appreciates that a black man of a certain age might fear he could be sold into slavery, or lynched? Of course I can be fired for reasons having nothing to do with my religion. But a tiny pilot light of doubt, and fear, remain as part of my calculation of any such rebuke; it has never been completely extinguished.

The fact is, millions of people understand the idea of that pilot light. In my mind, true people of God, they genuinely understand all that I have written here. They include my friend Gil who asked me years ago for the date of the first night of Chanukah. Apologetically he explained that he often confuses the Jewish holidays with the American holidays. The pilot light burns softly, but still I imagine that Gil, who would be quick to teach me that the word "no" may simply mean no, would, should the time ever come, lift me out of the terror of helplessness.

Is it inappropriate to label people like Gil as the righteous ones, thereby evoking memory of those during the war who protected Jewish people they may never have known? Is it inappropriate, wrong even, for me to feel that atavistic fear when I read of men and women working sedulously to become "biblically qualified" presidential candidates, or actually competing to determine who among them has achieved the highest plane of certitude and hence earns the title, America's most genuine Christian? In some perverse way, is this the true *American Idol*? Is it pathological for me to feel it again when I witness on television athletes pointing to heaven when they succeed in sporting arenas, or praying during, athletic competitions? Is the culture telling me something, or selling me

something? After all, is it not in Matthew 6:5-6 where those who pray are instructed to do it not on the street but in one's own room, privately? Are they not instructed that the Father rewards those he finds praying in secret?

What some may not understand is that this pilot light of fear, continues to live in some people. Of course we regularly retreat to intellectual if not ideological conceptions of what our country represents. With smugness, admittedly, I not only quote Scripture, but am reminded that the words welcoming those journeying to our shores were composed by a Jew. But the thought only serves to lessen that fear, again, that Emma Lazarus' words notwithstanding, Marty and I might be sent back.

I withhold objection to public displays of religion, all the while wondering whether that which people choose to advertise will become yet another profane commodity. But do you see the pilot light lurking again in this statement? Can you understand that some like I actually wondered when hearing that President Reagan, Martin Luther King, Marvin Gaye, John Lennon had been shot, whether it was a Jew firing the gun? Can you know the humiliation that rises up in us at any mention of the name Madoff? Can you see that beyond the discussions on the separation of church and state there are people fearing that something in the culture has become dislodged?

And if the pilot light exists only in my imagination, am I being instructed that imagination exists free of human experience and the culture in which this experience is born? Anne Frank's diaries are the product of imagination, but only partly so. "We are what we have learned," the philosopher Michael Oakeshott wrote. Let us add, and what we continue to learn, and, for all I know, what our forbearers learned.

The pilot light refuses to fade. Should something happen, will there be a sufficient number of people to keep me safe? Will enough people eschew certitude in favor of insight, and perceive us all as equals, thereby making it possible for them to embrace Paul Ricoeur's lovely definition of justice, namely that we ought to treat equals equally? Will enough people recognize that homeland security comes in various forms, each with the power to extinguish for good a pilot light murmuring in more citizens than some would ever imagine, or even dare to discern?

*The author is professor of education at Boston University. His most recent books include: *Hardest Times The Trauma of Long-Term Unemployment*; *At Peril: Stories of Injustice*; and *When the Music Stopped: Discovering My Mother*.

Thomas J. Cottle
Professor of Education
Boston University
Two Sherborn Street
Boston, MA 02215
617-566-6426
email: tcottle@bu.edu

