

A NOTE ON POWER

As a skinny guy only 70 inches tall I was never much of a horse physically but I did have enough pop to beat up my kid brothers, which I did until they got powerful and I went off to college just in time. In college I kept thinking that power had to do with bodies, and that girls were impressed with muscles, and that burliness led to success, and it took forever for me to realize that this was a lie, and that women were really after hearts they could trust; plus I started noticing that often the men and women who were most influential, most startling, most amazing – most powerful, really – were, by pretty much every definition of powerful, powerless.

They were skinny penniless guys like Christ and Gandhi, or cheerful brilliant cripples like Franklin Roosevelt and Flannery O'Connor, or stubborn dignified ladies like Rosa Parks and Ursula Le Guin, or unknown geeky guys with courage coming out of their ears like the guy who was carrying his grocery bags home one June day in Beijing in 1989 and suddenly had just about enough of army tanks rolling by to smash kids in Tiananmen Square, and he jumped into the street and made 18 tanks stop and he changed the world, didn't he? And aren't there a million acts of incredible power and poetry like that every day? Like the firefighters who ran up inside the World Trade Center towers instead of running down like by all sense and reason and logic they should have? And the teenage boys who patrol terrified but intent through the murk and blood of Baghdad for us? And the million business owners who scratch and kick and wrestle to stay in business because they know that if their companies fail, whole families and clans and towns will suffer?

I think about power all the time as a dad, too. In the old days, when my children were tiny and squirming and peeing on the floor like puppies, I was king, I made the rules, I thundered, I was the last word. But now that hormone hurricanes have swept through the house and my kids are suddenly supercilious teenagers, I have only the power to persuade, to suggest, to remonstrate, to hint, to remind. It took me a while to shift gears from boss to bemused, but I might suggest that we are all in the same boat, and whenever you think you are powerful you are pretty much not; or, in other words, what makes you powerful – money or position or brains – is only useful if you use it to elevate other people. Power is cool tool, but tools at rest are only sculptures, lovely and useless.

Listen, I am only reminding you of what you already know in your heart. You spent years finding a focusing your skills and talents and energies, and now you have a career, you're supporting a family, you employ a lot of people maybe, you give away gobs of cash for good causes, but sometimes deep down at night you wonder if there's some way to do more, to really change things, you know? To really hammer hunger and poverty and the shiver of fear that haunts families without insurance or next months' rent or much more in the pantry than pasta, to stitch a world where your kids won't be afraid of murderers in Afghani caves or fouled water or joblessness?

I don't know much, but I know that this country, for all its muddle and wrangles, is the most extraordinary national idea that ever was, and it's still possible that America will lead the way past mere power to a planetary peace that surpasseth understanding. No politician or poet will lead us there. It will be someone like you, who creates ideas, who articulates and defends and shares them in the public market, who mills ideas into food and education and healing for thousands of people, who understands that power only matters, finally, when it is a verb. It will be someone like you, who finally has just about enough of greed and lies crushing holy possibility, and jumps into history, and changes everything forever, and wouldn't that be cool?

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Brian Doyle, Editor

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