

When I was in the fourth grade, a boy named Joe Bryant moved to our town halfway through the school year, which is the absolute worst time to switch schools. The cliques are formed, you have your friends all in place, and along comes another kid and what are you going to do with him? So Joe Bryant was put in our class, Mrs. Conley's class, and Mrs. Conley asked me in front of everyone, to be Joe's friend, so I had to do it. I wasn't happy about it, because I already had a friend, Jeff Devers, who could drink an entire bottle of Coke without pausing, then belch the first phrase of the Declaration of Independence, *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal*, which earned him a large following. This was big stuff in the fourth grade.

But I liked Mrs. Conley, so I asked Joe Bryant to sit with me at lunch and at recess I played with him and discovered he was a lot of fun and by the end of the day I was glad Mrs. Conley had put us together. The next morning we began our school day as we always did, standing, our hands over our hearts, facing the flag, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. I glanced over and noticed Joe Bryant wasn't standing, didn't have his hand over his heart, and wasn't saying the Pledge of Allegiance, and the first thing I thought was, "Joe Bryant's a communist." I had heard Jeff Devers and Richard Nixon talk about communists, so I knew what to look for.

But communist or not, I really liked Joe and remember motioning for him to stand up, so he wouldn't be arrested. I had a vision of Charlie Morelock, our town's policeman, handcuffing Joe and dragging him from the classroom. I was gesturing for Joe to stand up, but he just looked at me, smiled, and remained seated. Mrs. Conley looked at him and did nothing. Everyone else was staring at him. You could hear The Pledge of Allegiance kind of fade, kind of fall off, so that by the last line, *with liberty and justice for all*, hardly anyone was saying it because we were all staring at Joe Bryant and waiting for him to be arrested. I was frantic with worry, because in front of the entire class the day before, Mrs. Conley had asked me to be his friend, which made me a communist sympathizer and a fellow traveler.

Jeff Devers asked Mrs. Conley what we were all wondering, "Why isn't Joe saying the Pledge of Allegiance?"

Mrs. Conley explained that Joe was a Jehovah's Witness and his religion didn't permit him to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Joe's parents had apparently worked this out in advance with Mrs. Conley, so Joe wasn't arrested. But we were in the fourth grade and mistrusted people who wouldn't pledge their allegiance to the flag and really didn't grasp *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal*, we didn't get that concept, so we sharpened our knives and went after Joe Bryant.

Every morning, we'd stand and say the Pledge of Allegiance, and every morning, Joe Bryant would sit at his desk, not saying a word, just smiling. The kid was a rock. No amount of mockery or scorn could move him. He'd get punched at recess, threatened by bullies, made fun of, and every morning, he'd just sit there. The rest of that year, I was torn. I really liked Joe Bryant. He was a nice guy and a lot of fun. He and his family lived on a farm south of Danville and I'd go play at his house and help him with his chores. I really liked him. But I lacked the capacity and courage to stand apart from my fourth grade peers. So here was Joe, a poster child for nonconformity, and here were the rest of us, following the crowd, lest we be thought weird like Joe.

We've been thinking about the great psychiatrist Abraham Maslow and his concept of self-actualization. Self-actualized people, or people with awakened souls, are those people who are full of life, who live at their full potential, and utmost creativity. Though we don't know everything about Jesus, we know enough of his story to suspect he was one of these people. Awakened-soul people have certain characteristics in common, one of which is *nonconformity*. They fit into society, but do not blindly comply with all its demands. When everyone is doing and being one thing, nonconformists are able to stand apart from the crowd and do and be something else. They're not obnoxious or belligerent about it. They're not different just to be different. Their nonconformity is rooted in a sincere conviction or belief that won't permit their cooperation in a widely-accepted practice.

When you encounter a nonconformist, don't dismiss them, and certainly don't ridicule them. These are often the people who because of their insight, creativity, and sensitivity have discovered a great truth before the rest of us. In the graveyards of history are buried many beliefs once accepted as gospel truth by all but one enlightened soul. Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, said that "When a true genius appears in this world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him."

*Be not conformed to the world, but be ye transformed.* This is the Apostle's Paul famous appeal to the first Christians in Rome. What if Paul had intended that as an endorsement of nonconformity?

After all, what is *the world*? What is *the world*?

Isn't the world the many ridiculing the one whose religion seems peculiar to us but especially dear to him?

Isn't the world the many, stuck in a tired and destructive pattern, condemning the one who has broken free?

Isn't the world the many, comfortably accustomed to darkness, mocking the one who brings light?

Isn't the world the slumbering, who scorn the awakened?

Isn't the world the confederacy of dunces, allied against the single genius?

This past week, I saw a picture on the Internet that absolutely haunted me. A man in Uganda had been burned to death for being a homosexual. A crowd of people was gathered around him, not one of whom came to his assistance.

That is the world. Be not conformed to that world, but be ye transformed by the power of God. Be awakened.