

Palaima: Moral conscience is hard to find in the limelight

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Many years back I was blessed to review the late Joan Morrison's magnificent oral history of American culture in the 1960's "From Camelot to Kent State." Joan was a genius at discovering, preserving and communicating the essence of human experiences. She was what former NFL great Jim Brown called NBA superstar LeBron James. Asked on ESPN whether James had become an athlete with the same kind of social consciousness that Jim Brown has always had, Brown remarked "What about a human being with a social conscience?"

Brown's remark reminds us that when we are called upon to make choices in our lives, we had best remember that we are human beings. What we choose to do affects the lives of other human beings.

Joan's oral history makes clear that the widely acknowledged phrase "the banality of evil" has a companion. We apply banality of evil to those who are responsible for monstrously harmful and evil acts, but do not seem evil or cognizant of the harm they cause.

But there is also a "banality of goodness." Many students who protested during the late 60's did so with no real consequences. Even before the draft ended and the last American soldiers came home, student protesters, myself among them, went back to their normal lives. They did not work to see to it that wars like the Vietnam War would never occur again.

A major parade in Cleveland, Ohio on June 22 celebrated LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers winning the NBA championship. It brought Jim Brown back home. But 49 years before, on June 4, 1967, Brown mobilized a public summit in Cleveland not far from the Hough Avenue district where 50 years ago in July 1966 a race riot combusted into 240 fires and widespread looting. Four African-Americans were killed, thirty people critically injured and 275 arrested.

The summit drew in socially conscious black sports stars like Bill Russell and the young Lew Alcindor (later Kareem Abdul Jabbar). Along with Brown, they publicly examined Muhammed Ali in a kind of grand jury of his peers. They questioned him about his refusal, based on his Nation of Islam beliefs, to enter the United States Army during the Vietnam War.

Pressure was put on Brown and the other sports stars, even by major figures within Nation of Islam, to talk Ali out of his beliefs. Brown, however, felt that with Ali being stripped of his boxing title “and with the government coming at him with everything they had, that we as a body of prominent athletes could get to the truth and stand behind Ali and give him the necessary support.” In other words, there was plenty of moral courage to go around, enough to resist the compromisers who argued that Ali could join the army and be kept away from combat as a celebrity figure.

So much for moral conscience in the limelight. What about all of us who live less public lives?

For us, I recommend a reading of “The Man Who Said No” in Catherine Wolff’s “Not Less Than Everything.” On March 2, 1943, a nobody named Franz Jaegerstaetter from a small village in northwest Austria said no to Adolf Hitler.

Born out of wedlock, his father killed in World War I, only eight years of schooling, Jaegerstaetter had been a juvenile delinquent, fathering an illegitimate child of his own. By 1943, at age 35, he ran a small farm with his wife and their three children. He had become with his wife a

devout Roman Catholic. He knew that the German war of aggression had brought violence and death to innocent human beings. According to his reading of the New Testament, he resolved not to fight an “unnecessary, unjust and unholy” war in Hitler’s army.

Priests in the Catholic hierarchy gave him many ways of reasoning that active service in the Nazi army was not sinful, but his sworn duty. Any bad he might do, they said, would be “just following orders.” All other men called to serve from his village did so. Many died in combat. Jaegerstaetter refused and was beheaded in August 1943. His wife and children were treated as village outcasts by the war widows and other families because of his singular moral stance. And the war went on.

Facing a hard choice? Read and think about Jaegerstaetter and Muhammed Ali and about the seductive art of moral compromise.