

Radicalism Without Revolution

“Radical” is a scary word, but radicals are (fundamentally) just very consistent people. If they believe in a principle, they believe that it applies to the very root (“radix” – a Latin term) of things. If they believe in non-aggression as a social norm, for instance, they think the value of non-aggression holds true for everyone – including the police officers and bureaucrats and military members whom we normally excuse from this rule.

But a radical mindset is not the same as a revolutionary mindset. This thought occurred to me as I was reminiscing about something most people don’t associate with revolution: high school.

I had a conservative, religious high school experience. And there was much that I have to criticize about it: authoritarian ideas and policies, bad epistemology that left people dependent on dogma, and dogma that taught some harmful ideas about self-worth, human life, and morality. I believe radically in individual freedom and in truth that can be discovered rather than merely received – so naturally I’m critical of these parts of my school. And for reasons I won’t get into here, I’m critical of just about any school as such.

If I was a revolutionary I’d want no more to do with my school and the people in it. Revolutionaries tend to see an inconsistency in a system and respond with the impulse to tear down the whole thing. But, at least in this case, I am no revolutionary.

There is much that I love about that old school. I’ll have good memories for years to come of my fun and dedicated teachers, of theatre, of quiz bowl, of school events, of school trips, of my wonderful guidance counselor, of our boisterous school chef and his lunches, of our music together. Looking back, there is a great deal of good to love in that school that lives alongside things that need to change.

There are many good people and many good things intermixed in the problematic systems of our world. And if you are a radical for the good, you have some responsibility to protect that good even while you dismantle the bad. True radicalism often does not allow for the easy option of revolution and wholesale condemnation.