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A Few Words about Whistleblowers

by MELANNIE SVOBODA SND on OCTOBER 21, 2019.

This reflection is based primarily on two sources: 1) an article by Heidi Schlumpf in the *National Catholic Reporter* (Oct. 2, 2019) on Robert Ellsberg, the son of Daniel Ellsberg who “blew the whistle” on the Pentagon in 1971; and 2) an article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Oct. 13, 2019) by Tom Mueller, author of *Crisis of Conscience: Whistleblowing in the Age of Fraud*.

First, a definition. Whistleblowing (according to Ellsberg) is “truth-telling.” It is the reporting of fraud, criminal behavior, or other illicit activity. It is motivated not by personal gain, but by a sense of loyalty to a higher public good. The whistleblower often pays a high personal price for his/her reporting—being labeled a traitor or snitch, losing one’s job, or even being convicted of a crime. Daniel Ellsberg knew if he was convicted of espionage, he would probably be sentenced to 115 years in prison. Later it was also learned that the White House had a plan to “incapacitate” Daniel Ellsberg.

But let’s start at the beginning. As some of you may recall, in 1969 Daniel Ellsberg “blew the whistle” on the Pentagon and the Nixon and previous Administrations by photocopying thousands of pages of secret reports that showed the true story of the military build-up in Vietnam and revealed the lies being told to Congress and to the American people. At one point he invited his teenage son to help him with the copying. Why? Says the younger Ellsberg, “He wanted me to be a witness to what he was doing.”



Daniel Ellsberg with his daughter, Mary, and son Robert. (Photo from NCR article)

About Sister Melannie Svoboda, SND

Sister of Notre Dame, teacher, student, author, speaker, listener, friend, poet, farm girl.



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About Sunflower Seeds

Each Monday I’ll post a short reflection, a simple musing on some aspect of spirituality— the everyday kind of spirituality that



includes things like walking in the park, slicing an onion for the casserole, caring for a child, studying for an exam, reading a line from scripture, laughing at a joke, or mourning a significant loss.

Along the way I welcome your questions, comments and insights too. After all, we’re all in this life—this spiritual life—together!

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Daniel Ellsberg tried to give the papers to Congress, but no one wanted them. So he gave them to *The New York Times* which began publishing excerpts on June 13, 1971. The Nixon administration immediately got a court injunction to stop the *Times*. On June 18, *The Washington Post* began publishing excerpts. In a 6-3 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the news media and the First Amendment. The so-called “Pentagon Papers” led to the end of the war and the eventual resignation of President Nixon.

Other examples of whistleblowers abound. For his book, Tim Mueller interviewed over 200 of them: individuals who blew the whistle on the tobacco industry, the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, lead-laced water in Flint, Big Pharma, corner cutting at Boeing, etc. He writes, “Whistleblowing becomes necessary when organizations become more interested in silence and loyalty than in ethics or public welfare, or when government watchdogs have been muzzled or euthanized.”



Robert Ellsberg, editor for Orbis books, the publishing arm of Maryknoll. (Photo from NCR article)

Why is there an increase in whistleblowing? Mueller cites two factors: “institutional corruption and normalized fraud. If our private and public institutions were healthier, we wouldn’t require singular acts of courage to halt wrongdoing.”

Robert Ellsberg makes two other points worth mentioning here. First, he says, “Public servants take an oath of loyalty to the Constitutions, not to any individual leader.” And secondly, he

cites this question raised by his father (who is now 88): “Has more damage been done, more lives put at risk, because people revealed the truth, or by keeping secrets?” That’s a good question to ponder.

And, finally, Ellsberg summarizes his father’s legacy in these words: “All it takes is the power of one.”

Prayer: Loving God, give us a renewed appreciation of the truth and the power of one. Give us greater courage when we are asked to pay a price for our beliefs and ideals. And give us an expansive love, a love that cherishes and works for the common good of all. Amen.

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Is there anything in this reflection that touched you or moved you? Did any words or phrases stand out for you?

Can you cite any other examples of individuals who demonstrated "the power of one"?

PS: A BIG thank you for your prayers for last weekend's retreat at the Franciscan Spiritual Center in Aston, PA. And a special thank you to the 32 wonderful and inspiring individuals who participated. I'm also grateful to Sisters Angela, Julie, and Karen for their invaluable assistance!

Here is the song, "The Power of One," sung by the country music duo, Buffy Lawson and Kristy Osmunson. This first version has powerful images. The second version has the lyrics.





I invite you to respond below to the reflection and/or the song. My readers tell me how much they look forward to reading the responses each week!

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Kathleen Magiera October 21, 2019 at 5:30 am



Sr. Melanie,

Whistle blowers give me hope that one person can make a difference. A whistle blower really has to count the cost to himself or herself when they sound the alarm.

Thanks for sharing your thoughts in this timely manner. God bless.

Kathleen

REPLY

Ed Johnson October 21, 2019 at 8:03 am



Sister Melannie,
I've not previously seen "The Power of 1" video. Absolutely amazing! The images are so gripping. As for whistleblowers (many who might even be considered martyrs), thank goodness for the courage they possess, and the sacrifices they make, to help protect humanity. Thank you! Peace and Blessings,
Ed J

REPLY

Barb October 21, 2019 at 8:24 am



Great reflection! I learn so many thought provoking things reading these reflections. Thanks Sister Melannie!

REPLY

Marian carter October 21, 2019 at 8:59 am



Dear Sister:
For some reason i'am no longer getting your blog each Monday.
You you please resume it.
Thank You Marian Carter.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND October 21, 2019 at 10:47 am



Dear Marian, First, check your junk mail. Sometimes the blog might be in there. Or re-subscribe to my blog on the right side of the page. Why this happens, I don't know. But these two "tricks" often work. Let me know if they don't and I'll get someone to look into it. Thank you for reading my blog! Sr.
Melannie

REPLY

Sue October 21, 2019 at 10:28 am



I admire the ones who put their lives on the line for the truth.
Not everyone can or wants to do that. I feel God must have a special place in

Heaven for them. Ive got so much admiration for them. True heroes.

Thanks for this interesting article...

Blessings,

REPLY

Joan,osf October 21, 2019 at 11:57 am



Thanks, Melannie for a beautiful weekend and the Four Gifts of Autumn.

Joan

REPLY

Melanie October 21, 2019 at 12:32 pm



Sr. Melannie,

Very powerful reflection to remind us that we all need to be part of the positive change, to see the need in our churches, communities, neighborhoods.

Thank you for brightening every Monday with hope.

Blessings

REPLY

Cathy October 21, 2019 at 1:01 pm



I think we are all called to be whistleblowers of a certain type when we find ourselves in situations or conversations where an unjust status quo is accepted, joked about, or defended. These days I try to speak up even when it is uncomfortable for me. The challenge is to be civil and not back down when I am vilified or dismissed. I am not a hero like Daniel Ellsberg but I hold to the belief that I am part of the problem if I am silent.

REPLY

Julia Keegan October 21, 2019 at 4:03 pm



What a privilege it was to have you at the Franciscan Spiritual Center. Thank You for the PS in your blog about us. Love your blog.

REPLY

Mary Fran October 21, 2019 at 7:37 pm 

Thank you so much for this historically grounded and timely piece and for connecting it to the power of ONE. What about the question on the right to know the identity of A whistleblower ?

Mary Fran

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND October 22, 2019 at 7:28 am 

Mary Fran and readers, The Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989 (WPA) protects federal workers from retaliation or reprisals. (Some states also have whistleblower laws). In recent years, in the name of homeland security, this federal protection seems to be weakening. There's a short and clear explanation on all of this on the PBS News Hour entitled "Whistleblower Protection Explained" you might want to check. The "irony" in this case is that the President is mandated by law to protect this current whistleblower.

REPLY

Pam Gunn October 22, 2019 at 3:51 pm 

I so enjoy your blog each week..For some reason I am no longer receiving it. I have re subscribed but still do not get it.. if there is anything you can do to fix this issue I would appreciate it. Thank you..Pam

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND October 22, 2019 at 4:16 pm 

I'll look into it, Pam. I'm assuming you also checked your junk mail/spam folder. Thank you! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Pete October 23, 2019 at 7:33 am 

What else is our government keeping from us? Do we want to know? I've heard the "Power of One" before and liked the song but didn't realize the

significance(sic) of the words! Thanks Sr. Melanie Any retreat plans for Florida in the future?

REPLY

Cathy Peterson October 25, 2019 at 10:17 pm



I read a reflection by Sister Melanie in "Give Us This Day" and decided to check out her Sunflower Seeds blog. How fitting that the song "The Power of One" was included in the reading since today is also the funeral of Elijah Cummings. He certainly exhibited that message during his all too brief lifetime.

REPLY

Jean Canatsey October 29, 2019 at 9:32 am



Fifty five years ago, I had a two month old nursing baby and was in the hospital for a prolonged period of time. I managed to make arrangements for him to spend eight hours a day with me even though hospital policy prohibited it... "The Power of One". Fifteen years ago, one of our sons was being held in a county jail in southwestern FL. He complained that the facility did not allow the Eucharist to be brought into the area where Federal detainees were held. I relentlessly pestered those in charge for over two weeks until those men were able to receive communion - The Power of One.

I imagine that most of us have experienced "The Power of One" at some point in our lives and remembering that experience will empower us to repeat it.

REPLY

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