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Masterpiece

‘Freedom of Speech’ (1943) by Norman Rockwell

Ode to Civil Discourse

This iconic painting, from his Four Freedoms series, honors respect for speakers of all stripes.

by Bob Greene

Beneath the gray roof of an unassuming white building on Route 183 in Stockbridge, Mass., resides a certain painting. Its artist created it 75 years ago. Yet amid the strident shouts, random rudeness and ceaseless cacophony of our current-day United States, that painting, in the quiet within those walls, offers a lesson that can seem as urgent as a breaking-news bulletin.

The name of the painting is “Freedom of Speech.” The artist, Norman Rockwell, got the idea for it after listening to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s State of the Union address in 1941. In that speech Roosevelt spoke of “four essential human freedoms”: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, freedom from fear.

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Freedom of Speech’ (1943), by Norman Rockwell Photo: Freedom of Speech illustration © 1943 SEPS licensed by Curtis Licensing Indianapolis, IN. All rights reserved.

Rockwell poured his heart into creating his Four Freedoms paintings. He offered them to the U.S. government, in the hopes they would be helpful in raising spirits during World War II. The government turned him down flat. But when, early in 1943, the Saturday Evening Post—at the time America's largest-circulation magazine—published reproductions of the paintings in four consecutive issues, the nation's response was so emotional and so overwhelming that the government did an about-face, asked permission to put the originals on tour, and used them to sell more than $132 million in war bonds.

Of the four paintings, "Freedom of Speech" has long been my favorite. And there is a good chance that if Rockwell, who died in 1978, were alive today, it would not even occur to him to make it look the way it does.

If you've ever seen the painting, you know what I mean. The setting is a town meeting. One man, in work clothes, has risen from the audience to speak. There is nervousness, and courage, in his eyes; Rockwell makes it evident that the man is likely not accustomed to talking in public. Other citizens of the town, the men in coats and ties, are in the seats around him. Their eyes are focused upward, toward him. They are hearing him out; they are patiently letting him have his say.

His eyes, their eyes…that is the power of the painting. We, of course, have no idea what is on the man's mind, or whether the other townspeople agree with him or adamantly oppose him. But as he talks they are listening, giving him a chance. They know that their own turn, if they want it, will come. For now, they owe him their full and polite attention.

Such a simple concept. And it's one that sometimes seems to be disappearing in this era when angry words hurtle past each other like poison-tipped arrows. Today, when so much public discourse is not just brutal but also faceless, when the back-and-forth is increasingly digitally driven, with invective and mockery flying from screen to screen, dispatched by people with made-up names, there is a constant impulse to shout down, to belittle, to gang up on. A gentle voice has scant chance in the rising din. You look at the Rockwell painting, and you ask yourself if that man could expect to find a respectful hearing in our electronic versions of group colloquy.

You contemplate the tableau in "Freedom of Speech," and the meaning of those eyes hits you. Rockwell understood: Only when we look each other in the eye can we begin to solve our problems. It is easy to eviscerate someone whose eyes yours have never met; it is easy to harangue someone, to make him feel insignificant, if you don't have to see him. When Rockwell was distilling America's aspirations into his Four Freedoms paintings, there was no internet, there were no social media, television sets had not yet taken over the country's homes. He took it on faith that when men and women rose to speak, they would of necessity greet each others' gazes.

If you ever pass through Stockbridge, you can see the original Four Freedoms paintings in the Norman Rockwell Museum, the white building on Route 183. (The museum has just announced a traveling exhibition of the works scheduled to begin in 2018.) That man standing up in "Freedom of Speech"—what would be his fate today, in a world where the town meeting is not limited to any single town, where the meeting never stops, never sleeps, where the attendees are

routinely invisible and full of casual rage? Would the man be granted a courteous hearing? Or, depending on the point he was hoping to make, would he be hooted down, hounded and laughed at by an audience he couldn't see? Would he be silenced by strangers?

In the painting there is reverence in all those eyes. Not because of what the man is saying, but because of the sanctity of the act of saying it. It is reverence for an ideal that feels endangered today when, too often, the only eyes people see during their public debates are the ones reflecting off their computer screens as they type: their own two eyes, staring back.

—Mr. Greene is completing a new novel, "Yesterday Came Suddenly," about a United States with no internet.

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