

Conviction

I've searched for conviction, but I'm not sure where it lies. I've looked for it in the striving of the passionate, in the eyes of the nodding heads; I've listened for it carefully in the rising octaves of the storytellers and the whispers of those whose homes are shadows; but I never found it until I stopped looking. Maybe because conviction is something only seen in its absence. Or maybe because so many people have painted their passion and agreement the shade of belief that we thought it to be something chosen when it's something so much more.

It's not that I question the existence of conviction, though. I know it survives somewhere- somewhere on that string of years that is our collective past, thriving during an era when time connected men by their hearts instead of binding us at the ankles as it does now. But I cannot search that time if I am not willing to look beyond the hands of my own clock. Despite the impulse to say that conviction broods in the moment, I think now that it rather lives to be seen and studied at whatever time one's cause was strongest. Besides, I do not think time works as a series of knots on a line, but that all of that which has passed lives in some form with those who sincerely pursue anything, being that the states of mind that accompany pursuit have always been around- greed, conviction, passion and so on. Saying that, I firmly believe that somewhere in the mirror and the memories of men either dead or disappointed there survives a mindset that does not memorize ideology but considers it, that inside that very reflection the man of conviction will not see his own face but the face of his people.

Yet sadly, apathy prevails. And it does so because it blinds us, allowing we who nod and agree and opine without emotion to believe that we possess conviction simply because we are aware. But to be aware of your people's plight and not fully give oneself to its relief is indeed apathy in the worst way, a cancer camouflaged as self-preservation that is not sudden, not a calendar's square, but a process, a glacier carving through the soul, shedding belief into a pool of failure and ink. Apathy is the deafening of the old man who at first follows his loved ones' questions with infinite "huh's" and "pardon me's" until his empathy fades at the rate of his hearing and he no longer asks anyone to repeat themselves because he no longer cares what they had said. He has only to breathe and die, his heart stopping in that form of suicide reserved for aging dictators and traitors that have no more tales to tell; because a heart that beats for nothing always dies. And that is the apathetic cancer, remedied only when passion heats us. But for now, to simply perceive our flaws will suffice- because progress is victory to the far-sighted; and we will surely turn terminal if we continue to confuse agreement for belief and tattoos for conviction.

A thinker, a believer, a true leader, is not born in power, not in passion, but in conviction and sacrifice. The altar is then the beginning of leadership and not the end. Yet in the kingdom we inhabit, those of strength choose to spend their efforts walking the path of the prince- a path that is to fall and die eventually. Being that the end of the prince's means is personal gain, it is a path littered with the corpses not of the weak but of the selfish, whose eyes in death show the exact same amount of conviction that they had in life: none.

What is a prince but one who seeks to be king- not by service but by right, as if a

throne unearned is one gained. The prince believes that he deserves to rule, that he should rise based solely on his mere existence. He seeks applause before success and would sacrifice victory for power. To those men I say, he who believes he has the character to lead should have the wisdom to serve. Also, I ask, is anything short of victory for one's people success? The answer to that separates he who wants from he who has- the difference between agreement and conviction.

There are many men who have earned the land beneath their feet. They are nodding to these words, and it's not to them that this is intended towards. No, I speak to those who do possess virtue and strength but have not taken the time to define these words that we throw around-loyalty, respect, love- that maybe their efforts would be channeled towards the self-edification that is power and avoid the prince's fate, that their eyes may be keen for something besides which of his people's heads are most like steps. Because all of us, no matter our demons, will have experienced the exact same amount of opportunity by day's end; our eyes will have reflected the same razor wire's glint. We will have our escape in dreams and our callouses tattooed regardless of one's ability. But I think that maybe some men have forgotten that glint- or been blinded by it. Those are the princes. For though power in a personal sense is optional, power in leadership is ascribed, achieved only by merit, given, in time, to someone dripping in more sweat than blood, more blood than tears.

But blood is one those trigger words when it comes to this sort of talk, isn't it? It's one of those words like justice or peace that hits men either too hard or not hard enough. Most of us react to blood like vampires, lusting; others like a pampered aristocrat. But the perceptive leader views blood as a surgeon does- or a soldier or a priest: necessary at times, and as vital to life as it is to conviction. Because conviction is not the samurai's sword; it's why he carries it. It's not the Mexica's obsidian; it's the readiness with which he climbs the steps. Conviction is the fuel of salvation and the carrying of one's people's cross fully prepared to hang from it if need be. It is standing eye to eye with the demons of time and vice and weakness and staring into their pupils until they lose their hold.

The problem is that the sustenance of conviction is nothing swift. It is not found in the completion of a mission- which takes years or lifetimes- but in the beginning. But that which is easy is often not vital, nor valiant. And so as we stare, we tire. The years take tolls, and thousands of men once convinced of their own conviction have fallen into the oblivion of fear, and thus irrelevance. Maybe it was because of their fear's proximity that they fell, or because being accompanied by a constant audience of memories was too much to bear. Either way, those victims of apathy who left their people to wander are not testaments to conviction's death but rather symbols of its power and its necessity; for those demons who dwell in chemicals and clocks cannot kill men who, having given their lives to their purpose, are already dead.

Personally, I began my search for conviction, mistakenly, in the eyes of others. In the beginning I believed that that which existed around me was to be imitated. I learned quickly that I was wrong. So I began to look more closely at those around me, seeing in time that on top of each man's face was a mask, the stitching visible beneath the chin and behind the ears, an image sewn onto the real man. In the fashion then of the youngest soldiers and the oldest revolutionaries, I conformed, thinking that this is how things are: we pretend to be that which we ought.

I drank at the river of time that I saw the mass around. Creatures we seemed, so I

started walking in the direction that time flows, meeting along the way wanderers lost in a stitch.

Some of those whom you find traversing that path that each thinking man must walk will seem like-minded. With these you'll walk until trails separate those who seek comfort from those who seek change. Some will be entertaining but weak; some snakes; some will be strong but prideful, calling their feasting on their own people strength instead of the cannibalism it is; and some will be prey, victims by identity.

So I walked through times bad and worse, reasoned between options poor and fatal until I reached a place where the crowd thinned, where the grass became sand and the hills cliffs. I could see that river flowing into the ocean, and, as the silence turned to solitude, I stepped onto a shore made from the sand of a thousand hourglasses.

Strung along the beach like points of a constellation, I saw men sitting in the sand, each alone, spaced evenly down the coastline, visible in the flicker of their respective flames springing from the sand. Somehow, though, even from the distance, I could tell that these men were together. The unity was a presence.

They stared unrepentantly out past the water, to that place beyond the horizon where answers live. Which makes sense because they weren't abundant where we just came from- answers, that is. And as I watched the men live- in wisdom, strength, in conviction- I learned to filter from time that which is pure, heard for the first time the wisdom whispered by walls.

Then each night, as the temperatures fell to meet those of apathetic hearts and the sky turned those beautiful, irrelevant colors, the heads on the beach turn to watch that opening in the brush from which I had emerged- that passage from mass to man, from desire to conviction and a nodding head to a willing hand- hoping that they might see their people appear.

If glory is a reward, then conviction is it's path. And though pure conviction is not necessary for the completion of a task, it is crucial to the survival of the torch. But it can't be learned, only realized. Those who raise any flag above their own will only be able to measure their conviction by battles won, failures overcome, and the sting of their own cheek when their brother is slapped.

And so it is a road without rest, conviction. There will be no palm reception, no praise. But for a certain few, it is involuntary. While most pursue nothing and the rest pursue the prince's power, a few must pursue betterment- first for self and then for the following few; for a man is only his most effective if he declarative in speech, interrogative in thought, and exclamatory in action.