Dear Edward Snowden [1]

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Open Letter by J.p. Lawrence

What Does It Mean to Set Yourself on Fire?

Dear Edward Snowden:

For the past three years, I've wondered about you—not the man who lives in Russia and presumably burps and farts and scratches himself, but the increasingly symbolic *you*—Edward Snowden, NSA Whistle-blower and So-Called Traitor—the incorporeal being who can be found on countless video screens around the world, debating against an endless stream of old men.

I admire your willingness "to set yourself on fire," a phrase you often use. But I don't know if I would have done what you did under the same circumstances. Knowing this about myself is distressing. As I was growing up, many of my favorite novels involved a hero risking everything to reveal the truth about some Goliath, and I always imagined I could be that hero.

You, on the other hand, have actually become a real-life protagonist straight from classic dystopian fiction, and in doing so have recreated the debate at the center of such novels: Has the world gotten too big for individuals to matter?

You've had to answer this question over and over since your run in 2013, often in public debates.

I saw you last fall at a Bard College conference, your face beamed in on a towering video screen. "I never thought that I would be Big Brother," you joked. In fact, Big Brother's lawyer was your sparring partner that day: Robert Litt, general counsel for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

For Litt, the lesson of your disclosures was that the NSA needed to communicate to the people better. The heart of his argument is that the world is gray and complicated—so the world ought to be left to those with the education or proper classification to handle it.

Other older men often make the same argument in your debates. In your May 2016 video conversation with Geoffrey R. Stone—a law professor at the University of Chicago who's in favor of severely punishing you—he asked repeatedly on what authority you did what you did. "Everything's not plebiscite," Stone said. "When is it appropriate to make that decision, to override the decisions of all the elected branches of the government?"

In response, you told him it's a question you've struggled with. "Living in a free society involves risk," you said.

In the 2015 Dutch documentary *Terminal F: Chasing Edward Snowden*, Michael Hayden, former NSA director, echoes Stone's critique. Hayden tells the filmmakers:

> If you're asking me to delve into my deepest emotions, it was the arrogance of an individual who looked on the activity of a national security agency and believed that his legal and ethical judgment trumped the judgment of his coworkers, his leadership, the American president, the American Congress, and the court system.

What's striking about these arguments is how similar they are to those anticipated by authors of fictional classics like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World*. George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and other writers in this tradition raised disturbing questions about the value of the individual in a highly regimented, industrialized world. Even more uncanny, such books often end with the protagonist forced to debate a symbol of the system—usually an older man who tells the hero to leave thinking to the experts. Take O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> 'You are a slow learner, Winston,' said O'Brien gently.
>
> 'How can I help it?' he blubbered. 'How can I help seeing what is in front of my eyes? Two and two are four.'
>
> 'Sometimes, Winston. Sometimes they are five. Sometimes they are three. Sometimes they are all of them at once. You must try harder. It is not easy to become sane.'

Apparently for Litt, Stone, and Hayden, citizens only have the right to speak out if they have the proper security clearance to understand why two plus two equals five. In the absence of the correct clearance, the responsible action is to do nothing.

You argue that right and wrong are not that hard to tell apart and that what you did was a simple choice. At Bard, you said journalists always ask if you had some sort of epiphany or Freudian motive for leaking classified government documents. Everyone knows that line when they get there, you told us. "Whistle-blowers are elected by circumstance," you said. "It's about what you see and what you decide to do with it."

In Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, near the climax of that dystopian novel, Dr. Paul Proteus, a one-time insider, must decide whether to rebel or to surrender. At the moment he makes his decision, all the arguments by Kroner, the older male authority figure in the book, fall away:

> Here it was again, the most ancient of road forks, one that Paul had glimpsed before, in Kroner's study, months ago. The choice of one course or the other had nothing to do with machines, hierarchies, economics, love, age. It was a purely internal matter. Every child older than six knew the fork, and knew what the good guys did here, and what the bad guys did here.

By choosing to rebel, Proteus destroys any chance of a normal, comfortable life. He sets himself on fire, just as you say you have in defending your choice.

For people in the crowd like me, the idea of a complicated world is alluring. It takes us off the hook, allowing us to dodge questions we lack answers for. Dystopian novels are the domain of teenagers, perhaps because later on, life becomes too complex to revolt against and too comfortable to burn down. Instead, we can wait to read about heroes in books and newspapers. We never have to justify our choices. We're insulated from having to answer: *What gives you the right to do that*?

Life, after all, is not a novel. It's been reported that you've made hundreds of thousands of dollars in speaking fees, a fate that's hard to imagine for poor Winston or Dr. Proteus. The morality of whistle-blowing shouldn't be overly simplified or romanticized, as it most likely will be in Oliver Stone's upcoming movie *Snowden*.

That day at Bard, many in the crowd viewed you as a rock star, as a hero. But you said that's not how you see yourself:

> There's this whole traitor-hero thing, you're either one or both. I'm not a politician. I'm not a leader, and I don't want to be. I'm an engineer.

When you made your choice, you said, you expected to be arrested. Yet, you escaped, and now your digital self appears on screens all over the world. You've become a symbol of agency in a stifling modern world, but will there ever be a time when your life is about more than justifying a decision made years before? It's as if your story has become frozen in exile—which seems to be the price, in real life, for anyone who wants to be a hero.

Sincerely,

J.p. Lawrence

Publishing Information

- "Why Privacy Matters," [5] Edward Snowden, keynote speaker via satellite broadcast at Bard College conference, October 16, 2015.
- "Edward Snowden Live from Russia," [6] the University of Chicago Institute of Politics, May 12, 2016.
- *Terminal F: Chasing Edward Snowden* [7] (original title *Snowdens store flugt*), documentary directed by John Goetz and Poul-Erik Heilbuth, 2015.
- *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, originally published in 1949 (Secker and Warburg).
- *Player Piano* by Kurt Vonnegut, originally published in 1952 (Charles Scribner's Sons).
- "In Exile, Edward Snowden Rakes in Speaking Fees While Hoping for a Pardon" [8] by Michael Isikoff and Michael B. Kelley, *Yahoo News*, Auguest 11, 2016.

Art Information

- "Edward Snowden at Upper Canada College, World Affairs Conference 2015 [9]" © Roger Sheaffe; Creative

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