

John Ondrasik Combats Antisemitism with Music at Cornell

by Randy O. Wayne

Traditionally, universities were characterized by the search for truth and teaching students the methods necessary to search for truth. As such, universities based on Judeo-Christian values and Enlightenment philosophy were jewels of Western civilization. However, if Plato were to visit the academy today, it is unlikely that he could fathom how far the academy has fallen. He would notice that on university campuses the Platonic virtues of wisdom and courage are rarely seen together in one person, especially when it comes to taking a public stand against antisemitism.

University campuses have transformed from the home of the witty and wise to the home of the witless and unwise. As Lawrence Summers noted, “where anti-Semitism and views that are profoundly anti-Israeli have traditionally been the primary preserve of poorly educated right-wing populists, profoundly anti-Israel views are increasingly finding support in progressive intellectual communities. Seri-

ous and thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent.¹

Since October 7, 2023, antisemitism, the world’s oldest hatred, has moved from the political fringe and is now uniquely tolerated on university campuses that tout belonging and inclusion. How can antisemitism and the embrace of U.S.-designated terror groups thrive on enlightened university campuses? Erin Molan reminds us that “[e]vil requires three things to thrive: one, weak leadership; two, useful idiots; and three, a silent majority,”² and this is possible because “we live in an era” according to Douglas Murray, “where things that are self-evidently true are denied by maniacs who are then flattered by cowards.”³

As demonstrated in the congressional testimonies of three university presidents, the university, bloated by Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion bureaucracies, responded to antisemitism with a wink and a nudge in a way that any other type of hatred would not be tolerated. With few exceptions, those who oppose antisemitism on univer-

sity campuses self-cancel, self-censor, and remain negligently silent—a silence that speaks all too loudly to those listening. Those who can speak rarely use the word antisemitism in a sentence without using the protective accessory word Islamophobia.⁴ However, Islamophobia, according to Andrew Cummins, is “[a] word created by fascists and used by cowards to manipulate morons.”⁵ On university campuses, bringing up the violence perpetuated by Jihadists is considered intolerant, and generally results in one being called an Islamophobe, putting an end to conversation.

Mayor Eric Adams courageously responded to the celebration of October 7, 2023 taking place in New York City by saying, “We are not all right when we see young girls pulled from their home and dragged through the streets. We are not all right when we see grandmothers being pulled away from their homes and children shot in front of their families. We are not all right when right here in the City of New York you have those who celebrate.”⁶ The remonstrance “we are not all right” particularly applied to university campuses where Plato’s philosopher kings are becoming radicalized.

After hearing Mayor Adams’ words, singer/songwriter John Ondrasik, also known in his musical career as the one-man band Five for Fighting, decided to use the power of music to speak up about the evil that occurred on October 7th and the celebrations of that evil on university campuses. John wrote “OK. We Are Not OK,” the third protest song John wrote in response to unanswered questions. I want to describe the path John took to writing “OK. We Are Not OK.”

Through his songs, John asks questions—big questions such as “What Kind of World do You Want?”⁷ and “Can One Man Change the World?” Such questioning throughout life is necessary to gain wisdom. As John sang in “One Hundred Years,”⁸

| *Half time goes by, suddenly you're wise*

As John’s wisdom grew, he cherished freedom more—realizing that the freedom Americans enjoy is rare in this world, often taken for granted, and are never free.⁹ John is one of the few musicians today willing to express such American values.¹⁰ While he wrote the song “Superman (It’s Not Easy)” to express how it felt for him not to be heard as a singer/songwriter,¹¹ the song speaks to everyone as it voices the struggles of everyman as well as Superman:

| *Wish that I could cry, fall upon my knees*

Following the terrorist attack on 9/11 and the heroic actions of the first responders who courageously ran into the World Trade Center buildings as others were running out, the American public instantly embraced “Superman,” and it became the anthem for first responders. In a moving tribute to honor the first responders from the New York City Fire and Police Departments, as well as their families and others who lost their lives in the attacks, John performed “Superman” at Madison Square Garden in the benefit Concert for New York City.¹² That was when John realized that music could transcend time and space.

Ten years later, John started writing songs he wished he never had to write. The first of these non-political protest songs

“Blood on My Hands”¹³ was written after the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan where the United States left behind American citizens and others.

And still Americans left to the Taliban, now how's that happening?

While President Biden called the withdrawal an “extraordinary success,” John came to believe that the withdrawal, which he thought should have been treated with the highest moral seriousness, was treated instead as a political exercise.¹⁴ In response, he wrote “Blood on My Hands,”¹⁵ which, in this censorious Orwellian America 2.0 world, was temporarily banned from YouTube.¹⁶

With “Blood on My Hands,” John called for accountability for all those left behind and those killed in the process as they clung to departing airplanes or were blown up by a suicide bomber. Since no accountability was forthcoming from the government, John used his music to speak truth to power, as musicians had been known to do for decades. However, this time, it was as if he was the only musician in the postmodern, oppressor-oppressed, virtue-signaling culture who could see himself singing “We are the World” following an evil and epic tragedy.

Consequently, John rolled up his sleeves and began working with evacuation groups to help rescue American citizens and mostly Muslim Afghans from the terror of the Taliban who were left behind by the U.S. government.

John was hoping that he would never have to write a song like “Blood on My Hands” again. But on February 24, 2022,

freedom was again threatened when Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine. John admired Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s response to the U.S. when we offered him a plane ticket out of Ukraine. Zelenskyy responded, “The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride,”¹⁷ all the time knowing that he and his family might not even make it through the weekend. John was inspired by Zelenskyy’s character and courage, which was something he had also seen in John McCain. John had already written a song entitled, “The Last Great American” about John McCain who, as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam from 1967-1973, refused to be released ahead of other captured brethren imprisoned longer just because he was an Admiral’s son. It is telling of the character of men that following the “extraordinarily successful evacuation” of Afghanistan, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani chose to flee his country.

John wrote “Can One Man Save the World?”¹⁸ about Volodymyr Zelenskyy:

*This superman Ukrainian...
Great-grandson of the holocaust
An eastern heart the west has lost...
But he's got everyone thinking*

In the song, John asks:

*Can one man save the world?
Will you take my hand?
Will you help me stand?
Can one embrace raise the oppressed?
Does freedom still have appetite?
Is there the will, the goods to fight?
Can a single flame light up the night?*

The answer?

“Am I alone in this?” he says...

The incredibly moving docu-music video, which was filmed in Ukraine, featured the Ukrainian Orchestra playing in the ruins of the Antonov Airport in front of the beloved Mriya, the world's largest cargo plane that was destroyed by Putin at the outset of the war.

"Can One Man Save the World" was another song in the genre John hoped he would not have to visit again. Then came October 7, 2023. It reminded him of September 11, 2001 except this time it seemed to be accompanied by a moral collapse in our universities. At UCLA, his alma mater, John spoke to the university administrators, trustees, and faculty:

I have one question one simple question ... and the question is this. If a barbaric terrorist group drove motorcycles, built hang gliders, and crossed the border and massacred 1,200 Muslims, raped Muslim women, and killed them at a concert for peace, beheaded Muslim babies, tortured Muslim children in front of their parents, killed them, filmed it, and uploaded it to Facebook for their families in the world to see and then that group took over 200 Muslim hostages: children, babies, grandmother, and as we speak we would still have over 100 Muslim hostages, including five Muslim-Americans. And then a group of students egged on by faculty ... formed an encampment to celebrate ... that terrorist group ... and started blocking Muslim students from moving across campus, started attacking Muslim students and sending them to the hospital ... Would you tolerate that?

In the silence, John told the Jewish students: "We stand with you shoulder to shoulder and we'll get through this together and we will come out the better side,"¹⁹ and he wrote "OK, We Are Not OK."²⁰

Following a recording of Mayor Adams' words, John sang:

*This is a time for choosing
This is a time to mourn
The moral man is losing
Forbidden, lost for long*

*I don't understand, I don't understand
How you can look yourself in the mirror...*

*Evils on the march, evils on the march
Time to face the test, yeah, hey, oh
Evils on the march, evils on the march
Need every good woman, every good man*

Again, John was one of the few musicians using the power of the arts to call out the evil that is Hamas. On April 13, 2024, John performed this song for the families of the hostages in Hostage Square in Tel Aviv.²¹ On October 28, the *Washington Post* published the first musical op-ed which was written by John and titled, "My 'Song for the Hostages': Do you know their names?"²²

When cowards clothe their voice, I will not betray you.

When evil takes your breath, I will take your stand.

When you feel you're lost and drowned ...

Hold On.

I will be your strength.

I will say your name.

I will know your name.

John wrote "Song for the Hostages" for every hostage and hostage family as well as to counter the voices of the media, the United Nations, universities, Congress, and the arts, all of which seemed driven by

Hamas’s propaganda and rarely acknowledge the hostages.

As with other Ivy League colleges, Cornell University saw the rise of pro-Hamas encampments in the spring of 2024, and by fall these protests devolved into the low art of vandalism²³ and the clanging sounds coming from the banging of pots and pans—more reminiscent of toddler rage than philosopher kings. One of the protesters added “not a threat but a promise” to a tweet that said, “Death to America, the root of all evil, the head of the snake.”²⁴

The protests based on the colonizing oppressor (Jews) and the colonized oppressed (Palestinians and LGBTQIA+) false dichotomy can be best characterized as “zeal without knowledge and sincerity without intelligence.” The descriptors “cognitive miserliness,” “willful blindness,” and “intellectual laziness” come to mind,²⁵ and one understands Martin Luther King Jr.’s admonition: “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”²⁶ This is especially true when protesters hide their faces behind masks (“cowards clothe their voice”)²⁷—appearing more like cowards than heroes.

On November 11, 2024, only days after Israeli soccer fans were attacked in Amsterdam,²⁸ and other antisemitic conduct took place around the globe, beautiful music came to Cornell. The Cornell Political Union and the Heterodox Academy Campus Community at Cornell University had the honor of hosting John, who gave a presentation entitled, “Combating Antisemitism through the Arts, on Campus, and Beyond.”²⁹ According to John, “Something’s

deeply wrong in the culture when people can’t come out and say that what happened on Oct. 7 was evil. No context. No buts.”³⁰ At Cornell, John gave a performance that demonstrated wisdom, courage, and moral clarity regarding October 7th—virtues that the Ivies have lost.

American universities get federal funds in part to ensure that America remains what Abraham Lincoln called “the last best hope on earth.” In order to fulfill this covenant between the Federal Government and the universities, there must be a revitalization of the adult virtues of wisdom and courage on university campuses. To do so, the infantilization that has become notorious in higher education—the coddling of student temper tantrums, the banishment of ideas, words, or people who give offense, and indulging every student or faculty whim—must end.

Wisdom requires acknowledging that truth exists, epistemic humility, questioning assumptions, searching far and wide for evidence, and performing a deep and reasoned analysis using critical thinking skills that align thought with reality—all of which are rejected as signs of Whiteness in the postmodern university.³¹ Courage is the ability to align one’s actions with one’s gained wisdom despite any fear; and integrity, which is the harmony of a well-lived life, results from the alignment of action and thought, courage, and wisdom.

When it comes to harmony between profession and life, Basil of Caesarea wrote,

A musician would not willingly consent that his lyre should be out of tune, nor a leader of a chorus that his chorus should not sing in the strictest pos-

sible harmony; but shall each individual person be at variance with himself, and shall he exhibit a life not at all in agreement with his words? But one will say, quoting Euripides, “the tongue has sworn, but the mind is unsworn,” and the appearance of being good will be his aim instead of being good. Yet this is the last extreme of injustice, if we are to hearken to the words of Plato—“to appear to be just without being so.”³²

On November 11, John brought harmony to Cornell in so many ways, and at a time when Cornell seems to have lost itself and is mired in a state of dissonance.

Jordan Peterson described a wise man as “someone who has consistently paid attention, informed himself and others as a consequence, told himself and others the truth, insofar as he was capable, and acted in accordance with that truth.”³³ John Ondrasik is a wise man, a son, a husband, and a dad.

At the close of John’s presentation of his musician-journalist journey, John played a video of Patricia Heaton that she sent from Jerusalem. Patricia, who is a cofounder along with Elizabeth Dorros of the October 7th Coalition,³⁴ hoped to be at Cornell to participate in the program but could not feasibly fly into “centrally isolated” Ithaca on the way from Jerusalem to NYC. Alex Shapero, Program Director of MyZuzah³⁵ finished the evening by telling the audience about the #MyZuzahYourZuzah movement and passing out mezuzahs, the protective container for prayer parchment hung on doorposts of Jewish homes.

John began his presentation at Cornell singing his song “Hope,” something that fuels wisdom and courage. I would like to end this essay with some of the lyrics:

When life’s got you down and you can’t make a sound...

You gotta have hope

You gotta have something

There’s always a reason to break

You gotta have hope

Cause nothing less

Will save the day

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