

# I Am Charlie

“The threat or fear of violence should not become an excuse or justification for restricting freedom of speech.”

—Alan Dershowitz



When I was a child, my mother (and probably everyone’s mother) used to say, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” But that was a different time and a different place. Today we live under a constant cloud, raining fears down upon us. Now it is our right—indeed, our responsibility—to speak out when needed. Even in a publication such as this one that focuses on education rather than provocation, I am allowed my opinions. Where would we be without freedom of speech? Isn’t freedom of speech necessary for freedom of religion? How can one exist without the other? Without it, there would be no protests over wars and injustice, no overthrow of dictatorships, no improvement in the status of minorities. Freedom of speech is at the core of all liberties.

On January 7, 2015, the civilized world was rocked by the news of the slaughter of 12 people at the Paris headquarters of *Charlie Hebdo* in retaliation for publishing cartoons interpreted by some as being disrespectful to the Prophet Mohammed. In a related act of violence, other terrorists held hostages at a kosher supermarket, and more deaths followed. These acts of cowardice rekindled the worldwide outrage in response to 9/11, the 2005 London bombings, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, and unfortunately, far too many other incidents. Hundreds of thousands joined in unity in the streets of Paris, and the leaders of most of the major powers (though not ours, unfortunately) walked with the masses in solidarity.

We hematologists, oncologists, and nuclear medicine doctors interact scientifically with colleagues around the world. As soon as the news erupted, a stream of sympathetic e-mails expressing friendship, sadness, and outrage were sent to our colleagues in France. Messages of respect for the French came from countries around the world, including Arab governments. One of our colleagues reminded us that, even in the Middle Ages, court jesters were allowed to mock freely. Another sent the words of Mona Siddiqui, Professor of Islamic and Interreligious

Studies at the University of Edinburgh, who spoke out on BBC Radio 4’s January 8th “Thought for the Day” regarding the defense of free speech, without which, she stated, “you’ve lost the very soul of western freedoms.”

The irony of the despicable act in Paris is that instead of division and chaos, the world has been unified, and a magazine that most of us had never heard of has become an international symbol of freedom. The cartoons that would have been viewed by a few thousand people have now been seen by tens of millions. Unfortunately, these actions can only worsen the already rising anti-Islamic sentiments in France and elsewhere. It is important to note that while protests over the cartoons abound in the Islamic countries, many Islamic cartoonists have published graphics condemning the Paris murders; for example, picturing a flurry of pencils annihilating bullets.

We are living in threatening times. Years ago in one of these letters, I recalled a song from my adolescence titled “Merry Minuet” that was made popular by the Kingston Trio (you can find it on YouTube). It satirized the sad state of the world in those simpler days. Now we are concerned not only about attacks from external forces, both military and infectious, but about other sources of controversy, such as relationships with the police, the very Internet we are addicted to, and even the most iconic of icons, the Oscars.

These days, when I most deeply feel the ghost of earth’s future, I head to the atrium of our cancer center where we often have art exhibits. Currently, we are truly blessed by a not-to-be-missed display of dog photographs by William Wegman depicting his charming Weimaraners in various scenes, outfits, and poses. I am enraptured by them and am able, albeit briefly, to smile again.

Until next month . . .

Bruce D. Cheson, MD