Constructive Dissent

By Anne Reynolds

Viewing a Chagall painting is like stepping into another universe. Lovers float over sleepy villages, giant birds perch on barns, clocks sprout wings and smiling horses dance with purple fiddlers. Chagall’s pictorial world is romantic, vibrant, exotic, visionary, fantastic, and above all, joyful. During his lifetime, Marc Chagall saw poverty, persecution, revolution, world wars, and genocide. Still, a love of life shines through his art. His work becomes even more precious when one learns how close the world came to losing him at mid career.

In 1941, Marc Chagall was already a famous artist. He was also a Jew known for the Jewish themes in his paintings. Like thousands of other Jews, he found himself trapped in Southern France as the Nazis began rounding up Jews and placing them in internment camps. Chagall was arrested and detained by Nazi sympathizers in Marseille. He was released after Hiram Bingham IV, the United States Vice Consul in Marseille, pleaded his case. Soon after, Bingham issued a visa to Chagall even though the artist lacked the requisite documents and did not meet the official U. S. immigration criteria of the time. Bingham helped to hide Chagall and his wife until they secured safe passage to the United States. After his escape, Chagall painted, sculpted, and produced stain glass windows for another 44 years. Bingham and Chagall remained lifelong friends.

Between 1940 and 1941, Hiram Bingham IV was personally responsible for issuing between 2,500 and 5,000 visas, both legal and illegal, to desperate refugees in Marseille. He secretly worked with the French Underground to smuggle refugees out of France. At great risk to himself, he sheltered Jews and Anti-Nazi activists in his own home. If needed, he paid their expenses out of his personal funds. At the time, the U.S. State Department actively discouraged diplomats from helping refugees. Bingham was one of the few who defied his superiors.

Not long after he helped Chagall escape, the State Department figured out what Bingham was doing. They abruptly transferred him to a less desirable post in Lisbon and then to an even less desirable post in Buenos Aires. There, he further rankled his superiors by calling attention to the growing number of Nazi war criminals finding safe havens in South America. In 1945, Bingham was passed over for promotion. Disillusioned, he resigned the State Department.

It took over 60 years for the State Department to recognize Bingham’s heroism. Finally, On June 27, 2002, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, in conjunction with the American Foreign Service Professionals Association, issued a special posthumous Constructive Dissent award to Hiram Bingham IV.

An award for constructive dissent is a fitting tribute for someone who risked so much in the name of compassion and morality. The award could have been dreamed up specifically for Bingham, but happily it was not. The American Foreign Service
Association has given out annual Constructive Dissent Awards to Foreign Service personnel for over 40 years. It is the only U.S. government group to do so. According to the American Foreign Service Association, these awards “publicly recognize individuals who have demonstrated the intellectual courage to challenge the system from within, to question the status quo and take a stand, no matter the sensitivity of the issue or the consequences of their actions.” It is both admirable and remarkable that the American Foreign Service Association has the courage to reward dissent in the entrenched bureaucracy of a U. S. government agency.

Businesses would do well to follow the Foreign Service Association’s lead. Organizations develop rigid systems with norms, policies, protocols, rules and habits that tend to reinforce themselves. Blind obedience becomes the default position. Organizations traditionally punish all deviations from the norm. However, deviance can be positive when guided by conscience and virtue. Individuals who deviate from organizational norms in favor of human virtue need to encouraged and emulated rather than silenced and marginalized. Every corporation, agency, government entity, school, club, and institution should present an annual award for Constructive Dissent.

Promoting virtuous behavior can actually pay off for businesses and organizations. In his book, Positive Leadership: Strategies for Extraordinary Performance, Kim Cameron outlines how empirical evidence shows that rewarding virtuousness is good for business. Cameron often uses the phrase, “positive deviance,” but he could easily have called it constructive dissent.

There are many virtues demonstrated by the players in the story of Hiram Bingham IV. Bingham himself embodies courage and conscience. Chagall personifies optimism and originality. The American Foreign Service Association exemplifies wisdom and creativity. The Association itself deviates from the norm by rewarding those who deviate from the norm.

Hiram Bingham IV never lived to see his own vindication. He retired quietly to his family farm, seldom talking about his days in Marseille. He spent his final years tinkering, playing music and painting. Many of his paintings are bright, modern pieces depicting mythical and fanciful scenes. Bingham’s artistic style shows the obvious influence of the great Marc Chagall.