

WILLIAM KUNSTLER: DISTURBING THE UNIVERSE (2009)

INFO / SUMMARY:

In *William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe*, directed by Emily and Sarah Kunstler, two daughters explore the journey of their father from middle-class family man to Civil Rights lawyer to “the most hated lawyer in America.” They strive to come to terms with his complicated legacy and its impact on them and their country.

QUOTES:

“We want people to come away asking what they can be courageous about in their own life, what they want to take a stand for. What personal risks they’re taking and what risks they should be taking...Everyone is capable of making those choices, but not only that they’re capable, but they have a moral obligation to take a stance in their own lives.” – Director Sarah Kunstler

“I realized I didn’t want to be like my dad...Dad taught us to stand up for injustice. But at some point he stopped standing for anything worth fighting for.” –Director Emily Kunstler

“The only absolute is Justice, not the Law.” –William Kunstler

“It’s very hard to look Bill Kunstler’s daughters in the eye and say I think Bill Kunstler was a hypocrite.” –Alan Dershowitz

TEXT:

Michelangelo’s “David” is an image that recurs in the film. Sarah Kunstler observes that David represents “the idea of the insurgent, the disempowered who is about to decide whether or not to challenge the big power...this moment that [William Kunstler] felt everybody faced. This moment of choice, whether or not to stand up and take action or to quietly blend into the crowd and do nothing.” (<http://www.revcom.us/a/183/roundtable-en.html>)

The text of David’s encounter with Goliath reads, “‘Then said David to the Philistine: ‘Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a javelin; but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast taunted’...David hastened, and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine. And David put his hand in his bag, and took thence a stone, and slung it, and smote the Philistine

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in his forehead; and the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell upon his face to the earth. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and smote the Philistine, and slew him; but there was no sword in the hand of David.” (I Samuel 17 45-50)

How is it significant that “there was no sword in the hand of David”? How does that relate to the story of William Kunstler—did he too use unconventional tools to succeed?

Michelangelo’s famous statue of David makes a young shepherd boy into what looks like a super-hero, towering and muscular. Film often treats a subject the same way by making both his/her flaws and accomplishments larger than life. How precise is the Kunstler daughters’ perception of their father, and Kunstler’s own perception of himself, as David? How does the comparison work? Where does it fall short?

ALTERNATE TEXT:

Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying: Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me.’ But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD (Jonah 1: 1-3).

When called upon to rescue the people of Nineveh from sin, the prophet Jonah turns his back on them and runs away. Abraham Joshua Heschel understands Jonah’s action as an indictment of all of us:

“Jonah is running to Tarshish, while Nineveh is tottering on the brink. Are we not all guilty of Jonah’s failure? We have been running to Tarshish when the call is to go to Nineveh.” (Heschel MGSA 292)

Having heard the call and acting on behalf of everyone accused to have sinned—is William Kunstler a modern day prophet? Do his actions answer Heschel’s accusations?

QUESTIONS:

- 1) The film shows William Kunstler to be a pretty solitary guy, overall, though he does find a certain amount of acceptance in minority, extremist cultures like the Black Panthers and the Native Americans rebelling at Wounded Knee. What do you make of Kunstler’s identification with these subgroups? Is he trying to belong? What does he seem to get out of his interactions with them?

The Black Panthers, for example, hold up a specific ideal of activist, warrior masculinity that’s pretty different from Kunstler’s own bourgeois, white-collar version. When Kunstler is called a self-hating Jew after helping the accused-assassin Nosair win his freedom, he retorts, “I love myself.” Does that ring true?

- 2) Kunstler’s Jewishness doesn’t seem to be vital to his life—we never see him practice, though he does occasionally eat a tongue sandwich on rye. Yet he marries two Jewish women in succession and, in pursuing justice and helping the poor, follows some of the most important tenets of his faith. What does his

relationship with his religion seem to be? What does the Jewish community think of him? Would you call *Disturbing the Universe* a Jewish documentary, and how do you think Kunstler would react to it being labeled that way?

- 3) The immigrants Dmitriy Salita and Hank Greenberg found success in America through sports they could play without talking, while Kunstler made his name as a public intellectual. Is Kunstler an example of the stereotypical “nebbish” that Aviva Kempner, director of *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg*, talked about wanting to counter with her film? In what way does he fit the bill and in what ways does he deviate from it?
- 4) Throughout the film Kunstler is seen through his daughters’ eyes, which means the viewer gets a very specific view of him. For instance, the title of the film is derived from T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in which the narrator asks, “Do I dare / Disturb the universe?” Why do you think the directors chose that quote to frame their biography of their father? What does it say about their take on him and what kind of man he is?

How would you title for a documentary about one of your parents?

LINKS:

Film site: <http://www.disturbingtheuniverse.com/>

Interview with the Kunstlers: <http://www.revcom.us/a/183/roundtable-en.html>

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: <http://www.bartleby.com/198/1.html>