

# Even if your Voice Shakes

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I try not to talk too much about my personal life on this blog but some of my existing patrons suggested that I make this post. I've ended up in a sort of rough situation recently and could use some help.

I work(ed) at a grocery store in Seattle until recently, which as you've probably been made aware is ground zero for the coronavirus outbreak in the United States. As of today (3/6/2020) there have been over fifty confirmed cases of coronavirus in King County alone, along with twelve deaths. [Bedford Labs](#) is estimating that the true number of infected is an order of magnitude higher and the community has been seeing cryptic transmission for the last six weeks.

So, I work(ed) at a fancy cheese counter. One of the things this fancy cheese counter has is an open-topped olive bar with food exposed to the air and utensils which are only washed once a day. It's also predominantly visited by an elderly demographic, the people most at risk of dying from COVID-19.

This seemed like a really dangerous combination of factors and I felt like something needed to happen to protect the health of our customers. Ethically speaking I felt rather gross about participating in the spread of a deadly virus by not doing anything.

I first asked the store manager on duty to close it, and was told that could not happen without permission from higher-ups in corporate and gave me a name to contact. I tried to convince this manager that this would take too long, to take a more proactive stance and that sometimes standing up for what was right meant doing something without asking permission first. He refused.

The Milgrim experiment was a psychological test performed in the 1950s to test obedience to authority figures. Researchers were curious after the end of the second world war as to why so many people just blindly went along with the Nazis, and so they performed a test to see where the limits of obedience to authority were located.

A test subject was told that they were responsible for delivering potentially deadly electric shocks to another test subject (actually an actor). The experimenter would order the subject to begin turning a knob which the test subject was told controlled these electric shocks. The actor would begin flailing and screaming and begging the subject to stop the experiment, while the experimenter would, first gently and then in increasingly commanding tones, order the subject to continue the experiment and keep turning up the knob.

They wanted to see at what point the subject would refuse, and discovered to their surprise and dismay, that there was no such limit. The subject would obey the experimenter and turn the knob all the way up until they had 'killed' the actor.

It was probably ten years ago that I learned about this experiment. I decided I never wanted to be the sort of person who would just blindly follow orders and turn that knob. I deeply internalized the notion of doing the right thing, of speaking the truth even if my voice trembled. I would not participate in getting people killed because I was too afraid to do something. Even if it was scary, I would do my best to stand up for what was right.

Waiting for weeks while the corporation sat on its hands and waffled on making a decision that might hurt their bottom line while our customer's health was on the line seemed to me to fall into that category of letting something bad happen because I was too afraid to try and do something. So I did something. I decided to close the olive bar despite being told not to. I felt that the order to keep it open was asking me to do something very unsafe which could potentially harm a lot of elderly customers. I couldn't in good conscience participate in that, it felt on some level like all my ethical training had been in preparation for this sort of situation.

After I closed the olive bar, the manager said that wasn't acceptable and reopened the olive bar himself. Following this, I called the number I'd been given for corporate and talked to the company's local food safety person. He said (predictably) that he couldn't make the decision himself but that he would pass the message up the chain of command. This is how responsibility is defused unto the point of nonexistence. No one is willing to take a stand, so it gets passed up the chain of command until it reaches someone detached enough not to care, and at that point, it was out of their hands. Just following orders. As of Tuesday, the olive bar remained open when I arrived for work. I still believe this is a clear health hazard to our customers and something still needs to be done about the olive bar and other self-serve stations.

On Thursday the county health department finally advised businesses to

“Consider temporarily limiting self-serve operations. Examples of such operations include; salad bars, buffets and dispensers. Replace utensils frequently (approximately hourly) during peak use hours for self-serve style operations.”

Of course, by then I had already been punished for my insubordination.

On Tuesday shortly after arriving for my shift, I was called into the manager's office for disciplinary measures and I invoked my Weingarten rights at which point I was suspended pending investigation and sent home. I contacted our store's union representative and he said he would get back to me. As far as I am aware the olive bar is still open today. I am afraid I am going to lose my job for trying to do the right thing and protect our customer's health.

Did I actually do the right thing here? I honestly couldn't tell you. There's certainly an

argument that could be made that I didn't fully think through the consequences of my actions or what effect they would have on me. There's also an argument that could be made that my defiance was rather pointless since the olive bar is *still open*, and if I was going to do something that crazy, I should have saved it for when I knew it would make a difference.

The problem is that barring near-omniscience you can't really know when that will be, all you can do is play your hand and let the cards fall where they may. Would I have still tried to do this knowing everything I do now? Probably not. Not because of the consequences to myself, but because it didn't end up working. The olive bar remains open so my act of defiance didn't accomplish what I set out to do. If it had resulted in the olive bar being closed, I think I would have done it despite the consequences. Maybe there was something else I could have done to force the issue more, I really don't know and hindsight is 2020. It's always easier to tell after it's too late to matter.

I was already running a Patreon donation drive, but after being suspended this is now potentially all that separates me from going homeless.

To encourage donations, if I meet my \$1400 funding goal on or before March 31st, everyone who is donating at least \$10 a month will receive a limited edition enamel pin. If you don't like Patreon but still want to help me out, send me a private message and I'll send you my paypal.me link.