

camore-lined main artery of the city — Rustaveli Avenue. Each night during the last week President Gamsakhurdia — an extraordinarily handsome and charismatic man, a poet and scholar, who has begun to show signs of intolerance, insecurity, even paranoia — has harangued the populace from the bunker in the government building just across the avenue where he is holed up with his family and his personal guard. His high pitched voice is projected over loudspeakers far into the night, night after night. Camped in ragged tents in front of the government building are scores of people from the provinces who have been bused into the city to support the president — most of them are passionate old men and women who look upon Zviad Gamsakhurdia as the savior who will restore the glory of the great Georgian Christian empire of the 13th century. They call themselves Zviadists after their hero, who seems to crave their idolatry. But they are a small minority. Most citizens of the city of Tbilisi have turned away from the president by now.

On this beautiful October afternoon you leave on foot from your hotel with a friend who has come to guide you to market. She is a young journalist, just out of college, who two years before had served as one of your translators on an earlier visit to Tbilisi. Small crowds are milling around on the avenue as the two of you thread your way through the picturesque, high-balconied streets..

Your conversation as you walk is about the difficulty facing journalists in Georgia in the absence of any tradition of press freedom.

An hour later, returning on foot, you find the avenue in front of the government house has been blocked off by a phalanx of large buses and armored vehicles. You have to detour back to the hotel down side streets. Your companion, sensing an impending crisis, starts taking photographs left and right. As the two of you approach the front lobby of the hotel you see that the small crowds of an

hour ago have swelled many-fold. A speaker with a megaphone is gathering a large opposition crowd just outside the line of buses protecting the government house.

You are distracted by a flurry of shouts and scurrying feet. Down the sidewalk toward you comes an old lady, clearly a passionate Zviadist, carrying a home-made icon — a plaster of paris cross upon which she has lovingly placed a photograph of the president, surrounded by tin foil and paste jewels. Oblivious to the fact that there are hundreds of angry opponents of the president — mostly students and intellectuals — in the street between her and the safety of the barricade of buses, the old woman is hurling curses left and right. Her defiant words are too much for a pack of the young men in the crowd, who run up to her and try to wrest away her icon. When she resists, they start hitting her and dragging her along the street. The mood in the street turns tense and ugly, like your worst fear of being caught in a subway station late at night when violence erupts.

All of this happens so quickly that you, the visiting American, stand there flat footed, tempted to hurry into the safety of the hotel but not willing to abandon the vulnerable young woman at your side. She, however, without a second thought, abandons her journalistic demeanor, shoves her camera at you and takes off running to the defense of the old woman, shielding the woman from the blows of the crowd of men, and leading her to the safety of the buses. As you stand there, still flatfooted, in front of the hotel, your young friend returns a moment later, trembling from adrenalin withdrawal, eyes brimming with tears of anger and wonder at her own audacity, saying over and over to herself, "I can't forgive that man Zviad for what he is making us do to each other!"

Later in the evening, beneath the windows of your hotel room, Rustaveli Avenue erupts for several hours into a frenzy of pushing and shoving and then machine gun fire and exploding

Molotov cocktails. Your windows like others along the avenue are shot to pieces as you hug the floor behind your bed. An uneasy ceasefire arrives with the dawn, but this is just a prelude to the bloody civil war that will fully erupt ten weeks later.

I have not been able to forget that camera being thrust into my hands by a young journalist whose humanity overcame her so-called professional training. I continue to be moved by that image of her, surrounded by a frenzied pack of young men — some of them her own friends — as she jumped forward, thoughtless of her own safety, to preserve the life of a probably demented old person whose politics she strongly disapproved of. Her act was not calculated. It was certainly not prudent. But it was unquestionably a moral act of great power.

Unfortunately, such moral courage is usually achieved only in hindsight, rarely in such a spontaneously decisive, selfless, and effective way. And here we must make a careful distinction. What I am calling moral clarity is not the same as moral certainty. We must learn to distinguish between clear-eyed, keenly reasoned convictions rooted in our sense of common humanity, and those comfortable, complacent feelings of self-righteousness that, as often as not, divide us from others.

This moral clarity, I believe, is something that can be cultivated. But it takes a deliberate stretching of ourselves toward others, an active, willful attempt to reach outside ourselves into the lives and needs of others.

Let me bring us back now to the present, to Brevard College in the early fall of 1993, to the opportunity we have together this year. This community is full of people who have such capacity to make such a decisive difference in the lives of others. They may be your resident director or RHA. They may be the person serving food to you at the cafeteria or a secretary. They may be your coach or your religion or geology professor. They may be you.