Ray Bradbury wrote the science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451* about a twenty-first century period of American culture that may never exist - if we are lucky and vigilant! The title of his book refers to the temperature at which book paper will combust almost instantaneously. In his 1950 novel, Bradbury wrote about the life of Fireman Guy Montag and his awakening to the changing culture around him. Following the end of World War II, Bradbury’s world was changing too, communications, television in peoples’ homes, and politics, including government investigations through the House Un-American Activities Committee to enforce behavioral “norms” on powerful people. Suspicions replaced benign indifference towards others, neighbors, and even friends. “Live and let live” and “tending one’s own garden” attitudes were replaced by an omnipresent government surveillance of the general populace and their movements and motives. A real fear was growing in the United States about how “others” might negatively impact the common good, and Bradbury foresaw possibilities for a great novel about how this might impact our future. Montag worried about his wife’s suicide attempts, his neighbor’s sudden disappearance, and the possibility of another war that might destroy American cities, like World War II destroyed much of Europe. He didn’t know who he could confide in about his fears.

In 2050 people were encouraged not to think about upsetting incidents and to listen to government approved entertainment that was “fun”, like music and certain broadcasts. Talking with others, walking alone or even observing nature was discouraged, because it might lead people to think unhappy or disturbing thoughts. All homes had been fireproofed by then, and the firemen were retrained to burn all the books, because they potentially contained subversive ideas which could depress the public happiness level. It wasn’t censoring particular books; all books and the people who read them were under government suspicion. Reading books was against the law!

Fireman Montag felt very alone after one particularly horrific house burning that he had been involved in, when an elderly woman died because she wouldn’t abandon her precious library. Montag searched for someone who could help him resolve his conflicted feelings of hopelessness; then he accidentally met Professor Faber. During their first meeting, the timid Faber remarked “I don’t talk *things*, sir. …”I talk the *meanings* of things. I sit here and *know* that I’m alive.”

Montag felt encouraged that the Professor might actually be able to help him reconcile his inner turmoil. After beginning to develop a trusted relationship, Montag confessed to Faber
that he had stolen a few books from the homes he had burned, and had actually read some of
them. He didn’t want to be a Fireman any more, but he didn’t know what to do next. Faber
explained that he was content to live his quiet life and didn’t want to participate in any plan
that would cause trouble, get him arrested or worse. To which Montag responds “That’s the
good part of dying; when you’ve nothing to lose, you run any risk you want.”

The Fire Chief suspects that Montag has been involved in subversive activities after receiving an
anonymous tip. Finally Faber takes Montag into his confidence and shows him his secret
laboratory. The Professor gives him an earbud device that he invented, so that he can help
Montag when he has to confront his Fire Chief at work. Faber can overhear conversations and
speak to him through the earbud as they try to develop a plan and protect Montag from being
arrested for reading books. After Montag asks for assurance from the professor that their plan
will work, Faber replies “You can’t guarantee things like that! After all when we had all the
books we needed, we still insisted on finding the highest cliff to jump off. ... The things you’re
looking for, Montag, are in the world, but the only way the average chap will ever see ninety-
ine percent of them is in a book. Don’t ask for guarantees. And don’t look to be saved in any
one thing, person, machine or library. Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die
knowing you were headed for shore.”

During their discussions Faber also tried to answer Montag’s query about how society evolved
into its current state, “They began by controlling books and, of course films, one way or
another, one group or another, political bias, religious prejudice, union pressures, there was
always a minority afraid of something, and a great majority afraid of the dark, afraid of the
future, afraid of the past, afraid of the present, afraid of themselves and shadows of
themselves.” So this novel contains the warning that we must be vigilant of the greater impacts
that can be accomplished by giving up small bits of our freedom and independence.

We must continue to evaluate not only the truth of the facts of the events happening around
us, but also the potential consequences. For example: How does a child process the fact that
there have been shootings in schools similar to their own, where children and teachers died.
They have a right to worry about their safety and ask how are their parents, the government
and police going to protect them? Can they reduce the number of available guns with
background checks, prevent most people from buying assault style rifles and large magazines of
bullets that rapidly fire volleys into crowds of people. Surely none of these types of guns or uses
were intended to be protected by the Second Amendment to the Constitution. How can we
expect children to do their best studying unless the school is a safe place. We must face the
reality of life in the world we live in regardless of whether we are adults congregating on public
transportation, working in multi-story office buildings or children obtaining an education. “We
the people” need to demand a safe work and play environment.
I don’t worry about immigrants overrunning our country and changing my way of life or usurping government laws, but I do support the rule of law and expect people to obey our laws. Change in government and all other phases of life is inevitable. We have a duty to make those changes equitable and just for the governed. If someone disagrees with the current laws, they should work to change them, not resort to a vigilante style of violent action. So like Professor Faber’s advice to Montag: “… don’t look to be saved in any one thing, person, machine or library. Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die knowing you were headed for shore.” We need to be involved in our laws and government, even if it is only to be informed about who and what we are voting for. Several statesmen have noted similar wisdom like Joseph Marie de Maistre, a nineteenth century philosopher and diplomat- “Every nation has the government it deserves”, and U.S. Senator Sam J. Ervin- “If men and women of capacity refuse to take part in politics and government, they condemn themselves, as well as the people, to the punishment of living under bad government.” So we must face ourselves in the mirror and decide what we can do to improve our government and the conditions that the least powerful citizens live in.

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