Non-Fiction Summer Reading Bulkpack

AP English Language & Composition

Summer 2023

This summer's AP Lang packet, which you will be reading in addition to Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*, contains a collection of articles and excerpts – including a few from memoirs – from a variety of voices across a series of interlaced topics that are relevant to this course and, especially, to the America in which we live. You'll notice the writing styles, too; observing craft is an essential part of being a successful AP Lang student. Please import this packet into OneNote so you can annotate as you read. We look forward to hearing what and how these writings made you think. – Ms. Fuhr, Mrs. Pearsall, and Mr. Rosin

Table of Contents for this PDF (sequence: alphabetical by author's surname)

* Samuel Cohen, ed. (3rd edition). Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010.

Solitude and Leadership

If you want others to follow, learn to be alone with your thoughts

By William Deresiewicz (https://theamericanscholar.org/author/william-deresiewicz/) | March 1, 2010

AM Renault/Flickr

Listen to a narrated version of this essay:

The lecture below was delivered to the plebe class at the United States Military Academy at West Point in October 2009.

My title must seem like a contradiction. What can solitude have to do with leadership? Solitude means being alone, and leadership necessitates the presence of others—the people you're leading. When we think about leadership in American history we are likely to think of Washington, at the head of an army, or Lincoln, at the head of a nation, or King, at the head of a movement—people with multitudes behind them, looking to them for direction. And when we think of solitude, we are apt to think of Thoreau, a man alone in the woods, keeping a journal and communing with nature in silence.

Leadership is what you are here to learn—the qualities of character and mind that will make you fit to command a platoon, and beyond that, perhaps, a company, a battalion, or, if you leave the military, a corporation, a foundation, a department of government. *Solitude* is what you have the least of here, especially as plebes. You don't even have privacy, the opportunity simply to be physically alone, never mind solitude, the ability to be alone with your thoughts. And yet I submit to you that solitude is one of the most important necessities of true leadership. This lecture will be an attempt to explain why.

We need to begin by talking about what leadership really means. I just spent 10 years teaching at another institution that, like West Point, liked to talk a lot about leadership, Yale University. A school that some of you might have gone to had you not come here, that some of your friends might be going to. And if not Yale, then Harvard, Stanford, MIT, and so forth. These institutions, like West Point, also see their role as the training of leaders, constantly encourage their students, like West Point, to regard themselves as leaders among their peers and future leaders of society. Indeed, when we look around at the American elite, the people in charge of government, business, academia, and all our other major institutions—senators, judges, CEOs, college presidents, and so forth—we find that they come overwhelmingly either from the Ivy League and its peer institutions or from the service academies, especially West Point.

So I began to wonder, as I taught at Yale, what leadership really consists of. My students, like you, were energetic, accomplished, smart, and often ferociously ambitious, but was that enough to make them leaders? Most of them, as much as I liked and even admired them, certainly didn't seem to me like leaders. Does being a leader, I wondered, just mean being accomplished, being successful? Does getting straight As make you a leader? I didn't think so. Great heart surgeons or great novelists or great shortstops may be terrific at what they do, but that doesn't mean they're leaders. Leadership and aptitude, leadership and achievement, leadership and even excellence have to be different things, otherwise the concept of leadership has no meaning. And it seemed to me that that had to be especially true of the kind of excellence I saw in the students around me.

See, things have changed since I went to college in the '80s. Everything has gotten much more intense. You have to do much more now to get into a top school like Yale or West Point, and you have to start a lot earlier. We didn't begin thinking about college until we were juniors, and maybe we each did a couple of extracurriculars. But I know what it's like for you guys now. It's an endless series of hoops that you have to jump through, starting from way back, maybe as early as junior high school. Classes, standardized tests, extracurriculars in school, extracurriculars outside of school. Test prep courses, admissions coaches, private tutors. I sat on the Yale College admissions committee a couple of years ago. The first thing the admissions officer would do when presenting a case to the rest of the committee was read what they call the "brag" in admissions lingo, the list of the student's extracurriculars. Well, it turned out that a student who had six or seven extracurriculars was already in trouble. Because the students who got in—in addition to perfect grades and top scores—usually had 10 or 12.

So what I saw around me were great kids who had been trained to be world-class hoop jumpers. Any goal you set them, they could achieve. Any test you gave them, they could pass with flying colors. They were, as one of them put it herself, "excellent sheep." I had no doubt that they would continue to jump through hoops and ace tests and go on to Harvard Business School, or Michigan Law School, or Johns Hopkins Medical School, or Goldman Sachs, or McKinsey consulting, or whatever. And this approach would

indeed take them far in life. They would come back for their 25th reunion as a partner at White & Case, or an attending physician at Mass General, or an assistant secretary in the Department of State.

That is exactly what places like Yale mean when they talk about training leaders. Educating people who make a big name for themselves in the world, people with impressive titles, people the university can brag about. People who make it to the top. People who can climb the greasy pole of whatever hierarchy they decide to attach themselves to.

But I think there's something desperately wrong, and even dangerous, about that idea. To explain why, I want to spend a few minutes talking about a novel that many of you may have read, *Heart of Darkness*. If you haven't read it, you've probably seen *Apocalypse Now*, which is based on it. Marlow in the novel becomes Captain Willard, played by Martin Sheen. Kurtz in the novel becomes Colonel Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando. But the novel isn't about Vietnam; it's about colonialism in the Belgian Congo three generations before Vietnam. Marlow, not a military officer but a merchant marine, a civilian ship's captain, is sent by the company that's running the country under charter from the Belgian crown to sail deep upriver, up the Congo River, to retrieve a manager who's ensconced himself in the jungle and gone rogue, just like Colonel Kurtz does in the movie.

Now everyone knows that the novel is about imperialism and colonialism and race relations and the darkness that lies in the human heart, but it became clear to me at a certain point, as I taught the novel, that it is also about bureaucracy—what I called, a minute ago, hierarchy. The Company, after all, is just that: a company, with rules and procedures and ranks and people in power and people scrambling for power, just like any other bureaucracy. Just like a big law firm or a governmental department or, for that matter, a university. Just like—and here's why I'm telling you all this—just like the bureaucracy you are about to join. The word *bureaucracy* tends to have negative

connotations, but I say this in no way as a criticism, merely a description, that the U.S. Army is a bureaucracy and one of the largest and most famously bureaucratic bureaucracies in the world. After all, it was the Army that gave us, among other things, the indispensable bureaucratic acronym “snafu”: “situation normal: all fucked up”—or “all fouled up” in the cleaned-up version. That comes from the U.S. Army in World War II.

You need to know that when you get your commission, you’ll be joining a bureaucracy, and however long you stay in the Army, you’ll be operating within a bureaucracy. As different as the armed forces are in so many ways from every other institution in society, in that respect they are the same. And so you need to know how bureaucracies operate, what kind of behavior—what kind of character—they reward, and what kind they punish.

So, back to the novel. Marlow proceeds upriver by stages, just like Captain Willard does in the movie. First he gets to the Outer Station. Kurtz is at the Inner Station. In between is the Central Station, where Marlow spends the most time, and where we get our best look at bureaucracy in action and the kind of people who succeed in it. This is Marlow’s description of the manager of the Central Station, the big boss:

> He was commonplace in complexion, in features, in manners, and in voice. He was of middle size and of ordinary build. His eyes, of the usual blue, were perhaps remarkably cold. . . . Otherwise there was only an indefinable, faint expression of his lips, something stealthy—a smile—not a smile—I remember it, but I can't explain. . . . He was a common trader, from his youth up employed in these parts—nothing more. He was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even respect. He inspired uneasiness. That was it! Uneasiness. Not a definite mistrust—just uneasiness—nothing more. You have no idea how effective such a . . . a . . . faculty can be. He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even. . . . He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? . . . He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going—that's all. But he was great. He was great by this little thing that it was impossible to tell what could control such a man. He never gave that secret away. Perhaps there was nothing within him. Such a suspicion made one pause.

Note the adjectives: *commonplace*, *ordinary*, *usual*, *common*. There is nothing distinguished about this person. About the 10th time I read that passage, I realized it was a perfect description of the kind of person who tends to prosper in the bureaucratic environment. And the only reason I did is because it suddenly struck me that it was a perfect description of the head of the bureaucracy that *I* was part of, the chairman of my academic department—who had that exact same smile, like a shark, and that exact same ability to make you uneasy, like you were doing something wrong, only she wasn't ever going to tell you what. Like the manager—and I'm sorry to say this, but like so many people you will meet as you negotiate the bureaucracy of the Army or for that matter of whatever institution you end up giving your talents to after the Army, whether it's Microsoft or the World Bank or whatever—the head of my department had no genius for organizing or initiative or even order, no particular learning or intelligence, no distinguishing characteristics at all. Just the ability to keep the routine going, and beyond that, as Marlow says, her position had come to her—why?

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That's really the great mystery about bureaucracies. Why is it so often that the best people are stuck in the middle and the people who are running things—the leaders—are the mediocrities? Because excellence isn't usually what gets you up the greasy pole. What gets you up is a talent for maneuvering. Kissing up to the people above you, kicking down to the people below you. Pleasing your teachers, pleasing your superiors, picking a powerful mentor and riding his coattails until it's time to stab him in the back. Jumping through hoops. Getting along by going along. Being whatever other people want you to be, so that it finally comes to seem that, like the manager of the Central Station, you have nothing inside you at all. Not taking stupid risks like trying to change how things are done or question why they're done. Just keeping the routine going.

I tell you this to forewarn you, because I promise you that you will meet these people and you will find yourself in environments where what is rewarded above all is conformity. I tell you so you can decide to be a different kind of leader. And I tell you for one other reason. As I thought about these things and put all these pieces together—the kind of students I had, the kind of leadership they were being trained for, the kind of leaders I saw in my own institution—I realized that this is a national problem. We have a crisis of leadership in this country, in every institution. Not just in government. Look at what happened to American corporations in recent decades, as all the old dinosaurs like General Motors or TWA or U.S. Steel fell apart. Look at what happened to Wall Street in just the last couple of years.

Finally—and I know I'm on sensitive ground here—look at what happened during the first four years of the Iraq War. We were stuck. It wasn't the fault of the enlisted ranks or the noncoms or the junior officers. It was the fault of the senior leadership, whether military or civilian or both. We weren't just not winning, we weren't even changing direction.

We have a crisis of leadership in America because our overwhelming power and wealth, earned under earlier generations of leaders, made us complacent, and for too long we have been training leaders who only know how to keep the routine going. Who can answer questions, but don't know how to ask them. Who can fulfill goals, but don't know how to set them. Who think about *how* to get things done, but not whether they're worth doing in the first place. What we have now are the greatest technocrats the world has ever seen, people who have been trained to be incredibly good at one specific thing, but who have no interest in anything beyond their area of expertise. What we *don't* have are leaders.

What we don't have, in other words, are *thinkers*. People who can think for themselves. People who can formulate a new direction: for the country, for a corporation or a college, for the Army—a new way of doing things, a new way of looking at things. People, in other words, with *vision*.

Now some people would say, great. Tell this to the kids at Yale, but why bother telling it to the ones at West Point? Most people, when they think of this institution, assume that it's the last place anyone would want to talk about thinking creatively or cultivating independence of mind. It's the Army, after all. It's no accident that the word *regiment* is the root of the word *regimentation*. Surely you who have come here must be the ultimate conformists. Must be people who have bought in to the way things are and have no interest in changing it. Are not the kind of young people who think about the world, who ponder the big issues, who question authority. If you were, you would have gone to Amherst or Pomona. You're at West Point to be told what to do and how to think.

But you know that's not true. I know it, too; otherwise I would never have been invited to talk to you, and I'm even more convinced of it now that I've spent a few days on campus. To quote Colonel Scott Krawczyk, your course director, in a lecture he gave last year to English 102:

> From the very earliest days of this country, the model for our officers, which was built on the model of the citizenry and reflective of democratic ideals, was to be different. They were to be possessed of a democratic spirit marked by independent judgment, the freedom to measure action and to express disagreement, and the crucial responsibility never to tolerate tyranny.

All the more so now. Anyone who's been paying attention for the last few years understands that the changing nature of warfare means that officers, including junior officers, are required more than ever to be able to think independently, creatively, flexibly. To deploy a whole range of skills in a fluid and complex situation. Lieutenant colonels who are essentially functioning as provincial governors in Iraq, or captains who find themselves in charge of a remote town somewhere in Afghanistan. People who know how to do more than follow orders and execute routines.

Look at the most successful, most acclaimed, and perhaps the finest soldier of his generation, General David Petraeus. He's one of those rare people who rises through a bureaucracy for the right reasons. He is a thinker. He is an intellectual. In fact, *Prospect* magazine named him Public Intellectual of the Year in 2008—that's *in the world*. He has a Ph.D. from Princeton, but what makes him a thinker is not that he has a Ph.D. or that he went to Princeton or even that he taught at West Point. I can assure you from personal experience that there are a lot of highly educated people who don't know how to think at all.

No, what makes him a thinker—and a leader—is precisely that he is able to think things through for himself. And because he can, he has the confidence, the *courage*, to argue for his ideas even when they aren't popular. Even when they don't please his superiors. Courage: there is physical courage, which you all possess in abundance, and then there is another kind of courage, moral courage, the courage to stand up for what you believe.

It wasn't always easy for him. His path to where he is now was not a straight one. When he was running Mosul in 2003 as commander of the 101st Airborne and developing the strategy he would later formulate in the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* and then ultimately apply throughout Iraq, he pissed a lot of people off. He was way ahead of the leadership in Baghdad and Washington, and bureaucracies don't like that sort of thing. Here he was, just another two-star, and he was saying, implicitly but loudly, that the leadership was wrong about the way it was running the war. Indeed, he was not rewarded at first. He was put in charge of training the Iraqi army, which was considered a blow to his career, a dead-end job. But he stuck to his guns, and ultimately he was vindicated. Ironically, one of the central elements of his counterinsurgency strategy is precisely the idea that officers need to think flexibly, creatively, and independently.

That's the first half of the lecture: the idea that true leadership means being able to think for yourself and act on your convictions. But how do you learn to do that? How do you learn to think? Let's start with how you *don't* learn to think. A study by a team of researchers at Stanford came out a couple of months ago. The investigators wanted to figure out how today's college students were able to multitask so much more effectively than adults. How do they manage to do it, the researchers asked? The answer, they discovered—and this is by no means what they expected—is that they don't. The enhanced cognitive abilities the investigators expected to find, the mental faculties that enable people to multitask effectively, were simply not there. In other words, people do not multitask effectively. And here's the really surprising finding: the more people multitask, the worse they are, not just at other mental abilities, but at multitasking itself.

One thing that made the study different from others is that the researchers didn't test people's cognitive functions while they were multitasking. They separated the subject group into high multitaskers and low multitaskers and used a different set of tests to measure the kinds of cognitive abilities involved in multitasking. They found that in every case the high multitaskers scored worse. They were worse at distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information and ignoring the latter. In other words, they

were more distractible. They were worse at what you might call "mental filing": keeping information in the right conceptual boxes and being able to retrieve it quickly. In other words, their minds were more disorganized. And they were even worse at the very thing that defines multitasking itself: switching between tasks.

Multitasking, in short, is not only not thinking, it impairs your ability to think. *Thinking means concentrating on one thing long enough to develop an idea about it.* Not learning other people's ideas, or memorizing a body of information, however much those may sometimes be useful. Developing your own ideas. In short, thinking for yourself. You simply cannot do that in bursts of 20 seconds at a time, constantly interrupted by Facebook messages or Twitter tweets, or fiddling with your iPod, or watching something on YouTube.

I find for myself that my first thought is never my best thought. My first thought is always someone else's; it's always what I've already heard about the subject, always the conventional wisdom. It's only by concentrating, sticking to the question, being patient, letting all the parts of my mind come into play, that I arrive at an original idea. By giving my brain a chance to make associations, draw connections, take me by surprise. And often even that idea doesn't turn out to be very good. I need time to think about it, too, to make mistakes and recognize them, to make false starts and correct them, to outlast my impulses, to defeat my desire to declare the job done and move on to the next thing.

I used to have students who bragged to me about how fast they wrote their papers. I would tell them that the great German novelist Thomas Mann said that a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. The best writers write much more slowly than everyone else, and the better they are, the slower they write. James Joyce wrote *Ulysses*, the greatest novel of the 20th century, at the rate of about a hundred words a day—half the length of the selection I read you earlier from *Heart of Darkness*—for seven years. T. S. Eliot, one of the greatest poets our country has

ever produced, wrote about 150 pages of poetry over the course of his entire 25-year career. That's half a page a month. So it is with any other form of thought. You do your best thinking by slowing down and concentrating.

Now that's the third time I've used that word, *concentrating*. Concentrating, focusing. You can just as easily consider this lecture to be about concentration as about solitude. Think about what the word means. It means gathering yourself together into a single point rather than letting yourself be dispersed everywhere into a cloud of electronic and social input. It seems to me that Facebook and Twitter and YouTube—and just so you don't think this is a generational thing, TV and radio and magazines and even newspapers, too—are all ultimately just an elaborate excuse to run away from yourself. To avoid the difficult and troubling questions that being human throws in your way. Am I doing the right thing with my life? Do I believe the things I was taught as a child? What do the words I live by—words like *duty*, *honor*, and *country*—really mean? Am I happy?

You and the members of the other service academies are in a unique position among college students, especially today. Not only do you know that you're going to have a job when you graduate, you even know who your employer is going to be. But what happens after you fulfill your commitment to the Army? Unless you know who you are, how will you figure out what you want to do with the rest of your life? Unless you're able to listen to yourself, to that quiet voice inside that tells you what you really care about, what you really believe in—indeed, how those things might be evolving under the pressure of your experiences. Students everywhere else agonize over these questions, and while you may not be doing so now, you are only postponing them for a few years.

Maybe some of you *are* agonizing over them now. Not everyone who starts here decides to finish here. It's no wonder and no cause for shame. You are being put through the most demanding training anyone can ask of people your age, and you are committing yourself to work of awesome responsibility and mortal danger. The very rigor and regimentation to which you are quite properly subject here naturally has a tendency to

make you lose touch with the passion that brought you here in the first place. I saw exactly the same kind of thing at Yale. It's not that my students were robots. Quite the reverse. They were intensely idealistic, but the overwhelming weight of their practical responsibilities, all of those hoops they had to jump through, often made them lose sight of what those ideals were. Why they were doing it all in the first place.

So it's perfectly natural to have doubts, or questions, or even just difficulties. The question is, what do you do with them? Do you suppress them, do you distract yourself from them, do you pretend they don't exist? Or do you confront them directly, honestly, courageously? If you decide to do so, you will find that the answers to these dilemmas are not to be found on Twitter or Comedy Central or even in *The New York Times*. They can only be found within—without distractions, without peer pressure, in solitude.

But let me be clear that solitude doesn't always have to mean introspection. Let's go back to *Heart of Darkness*. It's the solitude of concentration that saves Marlow amidst the madness of the Central Station. When he gets there he finds out that the steamboat he's supposed to sail upriver has a giant hole in it, and no one is going to help him fix it. "I let him run on," he says, "this papier-mâché Mephistopheles"—he's talking not about the manager but his assistant, who's even worse, since he's still trying to kiss his way up the hierarchy, and who's been raving away at him. You can think of him as the Internet, the ever-present social buzz, chattering away at you 24/7:

> I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt. . . .
>
> It was a great comfort to turn from that chap to . . . the battered, twisted, ruined, tin-pot steamboat. . . . I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her. No influential friend would have served me better. She had given me a chance to come out a bit—to find out what I could do. No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work,—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know.

"The chance to find yourself." Now that phrase, "finding yourself," has acquired a bad reputation. It suggests an aimless liberal-arts college graduate—an English major, no doubt, someone who went to a place like Amherst or Pomona—who's too spoiled to get a job and spends his time staring off into space. But here's Marlow, a mariner, a ship's captain. A more practical, hardheaded person you could not find. And I should say that Marlow's creator, Conrad, spent 19 years as a merchant marine, eight of them as a ship's captain, before he became a writer, so this wasn't just some artist's idea of a sailor. Marlow believes in the need to find yourself just as much as anyone does, and the way to do it, he says, is work, solitary work. Concentration. Climbing on that steamboat and spending a few uninterrupted hours hammering it into shape. Or building a house, or cooking a meal, or even writing a college paper, if you really put yourself into it.

"Your own reality—for yourself, not for others." Thinking for yourself means finding yourself, finding your own reality. Here's the other problem with Facebook and Twitter and even *The New York Times*. When you expose yourself to those things, especially in the constant way that people do now—older people as well as younger people—you are continuously bombarding yourself with a stream of other people's thoughts. You are marinating yourself in the conventional wisdom. In other people's reality: for others, not

for yourself. You are creating a cacophony in which it is impossible to hear your own voice, whether it's yourself you're thinking about or anything else. That's what Emerson meant when he said that "he who should inspire and lead his race must be defended from travelling with the souls of other men, from living, breathing, reading, and writing in the daily, time-worn yoke of their opinions." Notice that he uses the word *lead*. Leadership means finding a new direction, not simply putting yourself at the front of the herd that's heading toward the cliff.

So why is reading books any better than reading tweets or wall posts? Well, sometimes it isn't. Sometimes, you need to put down your book, if only to think about what you're reading, what *you* think about what you're reading. But a book has two advantages over a tweet. First, the person who wrote it thought about it a lot more carefully. The book is the result of *his* solitude, *his* attempt to think for himself.

Second, most books are old. This is not a disadvantage: this is precisely what makes them valuable. They stand against the conventional wisdom of today simply because they're not *from* today. Even if they merely reflect the conventional wisdom of their own day, they say something different from what you hear all the time. But the great books, the ones you find on a syllabus, the ones people have continued to read, don't reflect the conventional wisdom of their day. They say things that have the permanent power to disrupt our habits of thought. They were revolutionary in their own time, and they are still revolutionary today. And when I say "revolutionary," I am deliberately evoking the American Revolution, because it was a result of precisely this kind of independent thinking. Without solitude—the solitude of Adams and Jefferson and Hamilton and Madison and Thomas Paine—there would be no America.

So solitude can mean introspection, it can mean the concentration of focused work, and it can mean sustained reading. All of these help you to know yourself better. But there's one more thing I'm going to include as a form of solitude, and it will seem counterintuitive: friendship. Of course friendship is the opposite of solitude; it means

being with other people. But I'm talking about one kind of friendship in particular, the deep friendship of intimate conversation. Long, uninterrupted talk with one other person. Not Skyping with three people and texting with two others at the same time while you hang out in a friend's room listening to music and studying. That's what Emerson meant when he said that "the soul environs itself with friends, that it may enter into a grander self-acquaintance or solitude."

Introspection means talking to yourself, and one of the best ways of talking to yourself is by talking to another person. One other person you can trust, one other person to whom you can unfold your soul. One other person you feel safe enough with to allow you to acknowledge things—to acknowledge things to yourself—that you otherwise can't. Doubts you aren't supposed to have, questions you aren't supposed to ask. Feelings or opinions that would get you laughed at by the group or reprimanded by the authorities.

This is what we call thinking out loud, discovering what you believe in the course of articulating it. But it takes just as much time and just as much patience as solitude in the strict sense. And our new electronic world has disrupted it just as violently. Instead of having one or two true friends that we can sit and talk to for three hours at a time, we have 968 "friends" that we never actually talk to; instead we just bounce one-line messages off them a hundred times a day. This is not friendship, this is distraction.

I know that none of this is easy for you. Even if you threw away your cell phones and unplugged your computers, the rigors of your training here keep you too busy to make solitude, in any of these forms, anything less than very difficult to find. But the highest reason you need to try is precisely because of what the job you are training *for* will demand of you.

You've probably heard about the hazing scandal at the U.S. naval base in Bahrain that was all over the news recently. Terrible, abusive stuff that involved an entire unit and was orchestrated, allegedly, by the head of the unit, a senior noncommissioned officer.

What are you going to do if you're confronted with a situation like that going on in *your* unit? Will you have the courage to do what's right? Will you even know what the right thing is? It's easy to read a code of conduct, not so easy to put it into practice, especially if you risk losing the loyalty of the people serving under you, or the trust of your peer officers, or the approval of your superiors. What if you're not the commanding officer, but you see your superiors condoning something you think is wrong?

How will you find the strength and wisdom to challenge an unwise order or question a wrongheaded policy? What will you do the first time you have to write a letter to the mother of a slain soldier? How will you find words of comfort that are more than just empty formulas?

These are truly formidable dilemmas, more so than most other people will ever have to face in their lives, let alone when they're 23. The time to start preparing yourself for them is now. And the way to do it is by thinking through these issues for yourself—morality, mortality, honor—so you will have the strength to deal with them when they arise. Waiting until you have to confront them in practice would be like waiting for your first firefight to learn how to shoot your weapon. Once the situation is upon you, it's too late. You have to be prepared in advance. You need to know, already, who you are and what you believe: not what the Army believes, not what your peers believe (that may be exactly the problem), but what *you* believe.

How can you know that unless you've taken counsel with yourself in solitude? I started by noting that solitude and leadership would seem to be contradictory things. But it seems to me that solitude is the very essence of leadership. The position of the leader is ultimately an intensely solitary, even intensely lonely one. However many people you may consult, you are the one who has to make the hard decisions. And at such moments, all you really have is yourself.

William Deresiewicz (https://theamericanscholar.org/author/william-deresiewicz/) is an essayist and critic. His book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life (http://pages.simonandschuster.com/excellentsheep)* is based in part on his essays "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education (http://theamericanscholar.org/the-disadvantages-of-an-elite-education/)" and "Solitude and Leadership (http://theamericanscholar.org/solitude-and-leadership/)." To read all the posts from his weekly blog, "All Points," click here (http://theamericanscholar.org/the-complete-all-points/). He is a contributing editor of the magazine.

Comments are closed for this post.

Total Eclipse

Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him.

By Annie Dillard

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A total solar eclipse in Svalbard, Longyearbyen, Norway, on March 20, 2015 (Jon Olav Nesvold / Stringer / Getty)

It had been like dying, that sliding down the mountain pass. It had been like the death of someone, irrational, that sliding down the mountain pass and into the region of dread. It was like slipping into fever, or falling down that hole in sleep from which you wake yourself whimpering. We had crossed the mountains that day, and now we were in a strange place—a hotel in central Washington, in a town near Yakima. The eclipse we had traveled here to see would occur early in the next morning.

I lay in bed. My husband, Gary, was reading beside me. I lay in bed and looked at the painting on the hotel room wall. It was a print of a detailed and lifelike painting of a smiling clown's head, made out of vegetables. It was a painting of the sort which you do not intend to look at, and which, alas, you never forget. Some tasteless fate presses it upon you; it becomes part of the complex interior junk you carry with you wherever you go. Two years have passed since the total eclipse of which I write. During those years I have forgotten, I assume, a great many things I wanted to remember—but I have not forgotten that clown painting or its lunatic setting in the old hotel. The clown was bald. Actually, he wore a clown's tight rubber wig, painted white; this stretched over the top of his skull, which was a cabbage. His hair was bunches of baby carrots. Inset in his white clown makeup, and in his cabbage skull, were his small and laughing human eyes. The clown's glance was like the glance of Rembrandt in some of the self-portraits: lively, knowing, deep, and loving. The crinkled shadows around his eyes were string beans. His eyebrows were parsley. Each of his ears was a broad bean. His thin, joyful lips were red chili peppers; between his lips were wet rows of human teeth and a suggestion of a real tongue. The clown print was framed in gilt and glassed.

To put ourselves in the path of the total eclipse, that day we had driven five hours inland from the Washington coast, where we lived. When we tried to cross the Cascades range, an avalanche had blocked the pass.

A slope's worth of snow blocked the road; traffic backed up. Had the avalanche buried any cars that morning? We could not learn. This highway was the only winter road over the mountains. We waited as highway crews bulldozed a passage through the avalanche. With two-by-fours and walls of plywood, they erected a one-way, roofed tunnel through the avalanche. We drove through the avalanche tunnel, crossed the pass, and descended several thousand feet into central Washington and the broad Yakima valley, about which we knew only that it was orchard country. As we lost altitude, the snows disappeared; our ears popped; the trees changed, and in the trees were strange birds. I watched the landscape innocently, like a fool, like a diver in the rapture of the deep who plays on the bottom while his air runs out.

The hotel lobby was a dark, derelict room, narrow as a corridor, and seemingly without air. We waited on a couch while the manager vanished upstairs to do something unknown to our room. Beside us on an overstuffed chair, absolutely motionless, was a platinum-blonde woman in her forties wearing a black silk dress and a strand of pearls. Her long legs were crossed; she supported her head on her fist. At the dim far end of the room, their backs toward

us, sat six bald old men in their shirtsleeves, around a loud television. Two of them seemed asleep. They were drunks. "Number six!" cried the man on television, "Number six!"

On the broad lobby desk, lighted and bubbling, was a ten-gallon aquarium containing one large fish; the fish tilted up and down in its water. Against the long opposite wall sang a live canary in its cage. Beneath the cage, among spilled millet seeds on the carpet, were a decorated child's sand bucket and matching sand shovel.

Now the alarm was set for 6. I lay awake remembering an article I had read downstairs in the lobby, in an engineering magazine. The article was about gold mining.

In South Africa, in India, and in South Dakota, the gold mines extend so deeply into the Earth's crust that they are hot. The rock walls burn the miners' hands. The companies have to air-condition the mines; if the air conditioners break, the miners die. The elevators in the mine shafts run very slowly, down, and up, so the miners' ears will not pop in their skulls. When the miners return to the surface, their faces are deathly pale.

Early the next morning we checked out. It was February 26, 1979, a Monday morning. We would drive out of town, find a hilltop, watch the eclipse, and then drive back over the mountains and home to the coast. How familiar things are here; how adept we are; how smoothly and professionally we check out! I had forgotten the clown's smiling head and the hotel lobby as if they had never existed. Gary put the car in gear and off we went, as off we have gone to a hundred other adventures.

It was dawn when we found a highway out of town and drove into the unfamiliar countryside. By the growing light we could see a band of cirrostratus clouds in the sky. Later the rising sun would clear these clouds before the eclipse began. We drove at random until we came to a range of unfenced hills. We pulled off the highway, bundled up, and climbed one of these hills.

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The hill was 500 feet high. Long winter-killed grass covered it, as high as our knees. We climbed and rested, sweating in the cold; we passed clumps of bundled people on the hillside who were setting up telescopes and fiddling with cameras. The top of the hill stuck up in the middle of the sky. We tightened our scarves and looked around.

East of us rose another hill like ours. Between the hills, far below, 13 was the highway which threaded south into the valley. This was the Yakima valley; I had never seen it before. It is justly famous for its beauty, like every planted valley. It extended south into the horizon, a distant dream of a valley, a Shangri-la. All its hundreds of low, golden slopes bore orchards. Among the orchards were towns, and roads, and plowed and fallow fields. Through the valley wandered a thin, shining river; from the river extended fine, frozen irrigation ditches. Distance blurred and blued the sight, so that the whole valley looked like a thickness or sediment at the bottom of the sky. Directly behind us was more sky, and empty lowlands blued by distance, and Mount Adams. Mount Adams was an enormous, snow-covered volcanic cone rising flat, like so much scenery.

Now the sun was up. We could not see it; but the sky behind the band of clouds was yellow, and, far down the valley, some hillside orchards had lighted up. More people were parking near the highway and climbing the hills. It was the West. All of us rugged individualists were wearing knit caps and blue nylon parkas. People were climbing the nearby hills and setting up shop in clumps among the dead grasses. It looked as though we had all gathered on hilltops to pray for the world on its last day. It looked as though we had all crawled out of spaceships and were preparing to assault the valley below. It looked as though we were scattered on hilltops at dawn to sacrifice virgins, make rain, set stone stelae in a ring. There was no place out of the wind. The straw grasses banged our legs.

Up in the sky where we stood the air was lusterless yellow. To the west the sky was blue. Now the sun cleared the clouds. We cast rough shadows on the blowing grass; freezing, we waved our arms. Near the sun, the sky was bright and colorless. There was nothing to see.

It began with no ado. It was odd that such a well-advertised public event should have no starting gun, no overture, no introductory speaker. I should have known right then that I was out of my depth. Without pause or preamble, silent as orbits, a piece of the sun went away. We looked at it through welders' goggles. A piece of the sun was missing; in its place we saw empty sky.

I had seen a partial eclipse in 1970. A partial eclipse is very interesting. It bears almost no relation to a total eclipse. Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him, or as flying in an airplane does to falling out of an airplane. Although the one experience precedes the other, it in no way prepares you for it. During a partial eclipse the sky does not darken—not even when 94 percent of the sun is hidden. Nor does the sun, seen colorless through protective devices, seem terribly strange. We have all seen a sliver of light in the sky; we have all seen the crescent moon by day. However, during a partial eclipse the air does indeed get cold, precisely as if someone were standing between you and the fire. And blackbirds do fly back to their roosts. I had seen a partial eclipse before, and here was another.

What you see in an eclipse is entirely different from what you know. It is especially different for those of us whose grasp of astronomy is so frail that, given a flashlight, a grapefruit, two oranges, and 15 years, we still could not figure out which way to set the clocks for daylight saving time. Usually it is a bit of a trick to keep your knowledge from blinding you. But during an eclipse it is easy. What you see is much more convincing than any wild-eyed theory you may know.

You may read that the moon has something to do with eclipses. I have never seen the moon yet. You do not see the moon. So near the sun, it is as completely invisible as the stars are by day. What you see before your eyes is the sun going through phases. It gets narrower and narrower, as the waning moon does, and, like the ordinary moon, it travels alone in the simple sky. The sky is of course background. It does not appear to eat the sun; it is far behind the sun. The sun simply shaves away; gradually, you see less sun and more sky.

The sky's blue was deepening, but there was no darkness. The sun was a wide crescent, like a segment of tangerine. The wind freshened and blew steadily over the hill. The eastern hill across the highway grew dusky and sharp. The towns and orchards in the valley to the south were dissolving into the blue light. Only the thin river held a trickle of sun.

Now the sky to the west deepened to indigo, a color never seen. A dark sky usually loses color. This was a saturated, deep indigo, up in the air. Stuck up into that unworldly sky was the cone of Mount Adams, and the alpenglow was upon it. The alpenglow is that red light of sunset which holds out on snowy mountaintops long after the valleys and tablelands are dimmed. "Look at Mount Adams," I said, and that was the last sane moment I remember.

I turned back to the sun. It was going. The sun was going, and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong; they were platinum. Their every detail of stem, head, and blade shone lightless and artificially distinct as an art photographer's platinum print. This color has never been seen on Earth. The hues were metallic; their finish was matte. The hillside was a 19th-century tinted photograph from which the tints had faded. All the people you see in the photograph, distinct and detailed as their faces look, are now dead. The sky was navy blue. My hands were silver. All the distant hills' grasses were finespun metal which the wind laid down. I was watching a faded color print of a movie filmed in the Middle Ages; I was standing in it, by some mistake. I was standing in a movie of hillside grasses filmed in the Middle Ages. I missed my own century, the people I knew, and the real light of day.

I looked at Gary. He was in the film. Everything was lost. He was a platinum print, a dead artist's version of life. I saw on his skull the darkness of night mixed with the colors of day. My mind was going out; my eyes were receding the way galaxies recede to the rim of space. Gary was light-years away, gesturing inside a circle of darkness, down the wrong end of a telescope. He smiled as if he saw me; the stringy crinkles around his eyes moved. The sight of him, familiar and wrong, was something I was remembering from centuries hence, from the other side of death: Yes, that is the way he used to look, when we were living. When it was our generation's turn to be alive. I could not hear him; the wind was too loud. Behind him the sun was going. We had all started down a chute of time. At first it was pleasant; now there was no stopping it. Gary was chuting away across space, moving and talking and catching

my eye, chuting down the long corridor of separation. The skin on his face moved like thin bronze plating that would peel.

The grass at our feet was wild barley. It was the wild einkorn wheat which grew on the hilly flanks of the Zagros Mountains, above the Euphrates valley, above the valley of the river we called River. We harvested the grass with stone sickles, I remember. We found the grasses on the hillsides; we built our shelter beside them and cut them down. That is how he used to look then, that one, moving and living and catching my eye, with the sky so dark behind him, and the wind blowing. God save our life.

From all the hills came screams. A piece of sky beside the crescent sun was detaching. It was a loosened circle of evening sky, suddenly lighted from the back. It was an abrupt black body out of nowhere; it was a flat disk; it was almost over the sun. That is when there were screams. At once this disk of sky slid over the sun like a lid. The sky snapped over the sun like a lens cover. The hatch in the brain slammed. Abruptly it was dark night, on the land and in the sky. In the night sky was a tiny ring of light. The hole where the sun belongs is very small. A thin ring of light marked its place. There was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs hushed. There was no world. We were the world's dead people rotating and orbiting around and around, embedded in the planet's crust, while the Earth rolled down. Our minds were light-years distant, forgetful of almost everything. Only an extraordinary act of will could recall to us our former, living selves and our contexts in matter and time. We had, it seems, loved the planet and loved our lives, but could no longer remember the way of them. We got the light wrong. In the sky was something that should not be there. In the black sky was a ring of light. It was a thin ring, an old, thin silver wedding band, an old, worn ring. It was an old wedding band in the sky, or a morsel of bone. There were stars. It was all over.

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It is now that the temptation is strongest to leave these regions. We have seen enough; let's go. Why burn our hands any more than we have to? But two years have passed; the price of gold has risen. I return to the same buried alluvial beds and pick through the strata again.

I saw, early in the morning, the sun diminish against a backdrop of sky. I saw a circular piece of that sky appear, suddenly detached, blackened, and backlighted; from nowhere it came and overlapped the sun. It did not look like the moon. It was enormous and black. If I had not read that it was the moon, I could have seen the sight a hundred times and never thought of the moon once. (If, however, I had not read that it was the moon—if, like most of the world's people throughout time, I had simply glanced up and seen this thing—then I doubtless would not have speculated much, but would have, like Emperor Louis of Bavaria in 840, simply died of fright on the spot.) It did not look like a dragon, although it looked more like a dragon than the moon. It looked like a lens cover, or the lid of a pot. It materialized out of thin air—black, and flat, and sliding, outlined in flame.

Seeing this black body was like seeing a mushroom cloud. The heart screeched. The meaning of the sight overwhelmed its fascination. It obliterated meaning itself. If you were to glance out one day and see a row of mushroom clouds rising on the horizon, you would know at once that what you were seeing, remarkable as it was, was intrinsically not worth remarking. No use running to tell anyone. Significant as it was, it did not matter a whit. For what is significance? It is significance for people. No people, no significance. This is all I have to tell you.

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil. Its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.

The world which lay under darkness and stillness following the closing of the lid was not the world we know. The event was over. Its devastation lay around about us. The clamoring mind and heart stilled, almost indifferent, certainly disembodied, frail, and exhausted. The hills were hushed, obliterated. Up in the sky, like a crater from some distant cataclysm, was a hollow ring.

You have seen photographs of the sun taken during a total eclipse. The corona fills the print. All of those photographs were taken through telescopes. The lenses of telescopes and cameras can no more cover the breadth and scale of the visual array than language can cover the breadth and simultaneity of internal experience. Lenses enlarge the sight, omit its context, and make of it a pretty and sensible picture, like something on a Christmas card. I assure you, if you send any shepherds a Christmas card on which is printed a three-by-three photograph of the angel of the Lord, the glory of the Lord, and a multitude of the heavenly host, they will not be sore afraid. More fearsome things can come in envelopes. More moving photographs than those of the sun's corona can appear in magazines. But I pray you will never see anything more awful in the sky.

You see the wide world swaddled in darkness; you see a vast breadth of hilly land, and an enormous, distant, blackened valley; you see towns' lights, a river's path, and blurred portions of your hat and scarf; you see your husband's face looking like an early black-and-white film; and you see a sprawl of black sky and blue sky together, with unfamiliar stars in it, some barely visible bands of cloud, and over there, a small white ring. The ring is as small as one goose in a flock of migrating geese—if you happen to notice a flock of migrating geese. It is one-360th part of the visible sky. The sun we see is less than half the diameter of a dime held at arm's length.

The Crab Nebula, in the constellation Taurus, looks, through binoculars, like a smoke ring. It is a star in the process of exploding. Light from its explosion first reached the Earth in 1054; it was a supernova then, and so bright it shone in the daytime. Now it is not so bright, but it is still exploding. It expands at the rate of 70 million miles a day. It is interesting to look through binoculars at something expanding 70 million miles a day. It does not budge. Its apparent size does not increase. Photographs of the Crab Nebula taken 15 years ago seem identical to photographs of it taken yesterday. Some lichens are similar. Botanists have measured some ordinary lichens twice, at 50-year intervals, without detecting any growth at all. And yet their cells divide; they live.

The small ring of light was like these things—like a ridiculous lichen up in the sky, like a perfectly still explosion 4,200 light-years away: It was interesting, and lovely, and in witless motion, and it had nothing to do with anything.

It had nothing to do with anything. The sun was too small, and too cold, and too far away, to keep the world alive. The white ring was not enough. It was feeble and worthless. It was as useless as a memory; it was as off-kilter and hollow and wretched as a memory.

When you try your hardest to recall someone's face, or the look of a place, you see in your mind's eye some vague and terrible sight such as this. It is dark; it is insubstantial; it is all wrong.

The white ring and the saturated darkness made the Earth and the sky look as they must look in the memories of the careless dead. What I saw, what I seemed to be standing in, was all the wrecked light that the memories of the dead could shed upon the living world. We had all died in our boots on the hilltops of Yakima, and were alone in eternity. Empty space stoppered our eyes and mouths; we cared for nothing. We remembered our living days wrong. With great effort we had remembered some sort of circular light in the sky—but only the outline. Oh, and then the orchard trees withered, the ground froze, the glaciers slid down the valleys and overlapped the towns. If there had ever been people on Earth, nobody knew it. The dead had forgotten those they had loved. The dead were parted one from the other and could no longer remember the faces and lands they had loved in the light. They seemed to stand on darkened hilltops, looking down.

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We teach our children one thing only, as we were taught: to wake up. We teach our children to look alive there, to join by words and activities the life of human culture on the planet's crust. As adults we are almost all adept at waking up. We have so mastered the transition we have forgotten we ever learned it. Yet it is a transition we make a hundred times a day, as, like so many will-less dolphins, we plunge and surface, lapse and emerge. We live half our waking lives and all of our sleeping lives in some private, useless, and insensible waters we never mention or recall. Useless, I say. Valueless, I might add—until someone hauls their wealth up to the surface and into the wide-awake city, in a form that people can use.

I do not know how we got to the restaurant. Like Roethke, "I take my waking slow." Gradually I seemed more or less alive, and already forgetful. It was now almost 9 in the morning. It was the day of a solar eclipse in central Washington, and a fine adventure for everyone. The sky was clear; there was a fresh breeze out of the north.

The restaurant was a roadside place with tables and booths. The other eclipse-watchers were there. From our booth we could see their cars' California license plates, their University of Washington parking stickers. Inside the restaurant we were all eating eggs or waffles; people were fairly shouting and exchanging enthusiasms, like fans after a World Series game. Did you see... ? Did you see... ? Then somebody said something which knocked me for a loop.

A college student, a boy in a blue parka who carried a Hasselblad, said to us, "Did you see that little white ring? It looked like a Life Saver. It looked like a Life Saver up in the sky."

And so it did. The boy spoke well. He was a walking alarm clock. I myself had at that time no access to such a word. He could write a sentence, and I could not. I grabbed that Life Saver and rode it to the surface. And I had to laugh. I had been dumbstruck on the Euphrates River, I had been dead and gone and grieving, all over the sight of something which, if you could claw your way up to that level, you would grant looked very much like a Life Saver. It was good to be back among people so clever; it was good to have all the world's words at the mind's disposal, so the mind could begin its task. All those things for which we have no words are lost. The mind—the culture—has two little tools, grammar and lexicon: a decorated sand bucket and a matching shovel. With these we bluster about the continents and do all the world's work. With these we try to save our very lives.

There are a few more things to tell from this level, the level of the restaurant. One is the old joke about breakfast. "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never." Wallace Stevens wrote that, and in the long run he was right. The mind wants to live forever, or to learn a very good reason why not. The mind wants the world to return its love, or its awareness; the mind wants to know all the world, and all eternity, and God. The mind's sidekick, however, will settle for two eggs over easy.

The dear, stupid body is as easily satisfied as a spaniel. And, incredibly, the simple spaniel can lure the brawling mind to its dish. It is everlastingly funny that the proud, metaphysically ambitious, clamoring mind will hush if you give it an egg.

Further: While the mind reels in deep space, while the mind grieves or fears or exults, the workaday senses, in ignorance or idiocy, like so many computer terminals printing out market prices while the world blows up, still transcribe their little data and transmit them to the warehouse in the skull. Later, under the tranquilizing influence of fried eggs, the mind can sort through this data. The restaurant was a halfway house, a decompression chamber. There I remembered a few things more.

The deepest, and most terrifying, was this: I have said that I heard screams. (I have since read that screaming, with hysteria, is a common reaction even to expected total eclipses.) People on all the hillsides, including, I think, myself, screamed when the black body of the moon detached from the sky and rolled over the sun. But something else was happening at that same instant, and it was this, I believe, which made us scream.

The second before the sun went out we saw a wall of dark shadow come speeding at us. We no sooner saw it than it was upon us, like thunder. It roared up the valley. It slammed our hill and knocked us out. It was the monstrous swift shadow cone of the moon. I have since read that this wave of shadow moves 1,800 miles an hour. Language can give no sense of this sort of speed—1,800 miles an hour. It was 195 miles wide. No end was in sight—you saw only the edge. It rolled at you across the land at 1,800 miles an hour, hauling darkness like plague behind it. Seeing it, and knowing it was coming straight for you, was like feeling a slug of anesthetic shoot up your arm. If you think very fast, you may have time to think, "Soon it will hit my brain." You can feel the deadness race up your arm; you can feel the appalling, inhuman speed of your own blood. We saw the wall of shadow coming, and screamed before it hit.

This was the universe about which we have read so much and never before felt: the universe as a clockwork of loose spheres flung at stupefying, unauthorized speeds. How could anything moving so fast not crash, not veer from its orbit amok like a car out of control on a turn?

Less than two minutes later, when the sun emerged, the trailing edge of the shadow cone sped away. It coursed down our hill and raced eastward over the plain, faster than the eye could believe; it swept over the plain and dropped over the planet's rim in a twinkling. It had clobbered us, and now it roared away. We blinked in the light. It was as though an enormous, loping god in the sky had reached down and slapped the Earth's face.

Something else, something more ordinary, came back to me along about the third cup of coffee. During the moments of totality, it was so dark that drivers on the highway below turned on their cars' headlights. We could see the highway's route as a strand of lights. It was bumper-to-bumper down there. It was 8:15 in the morning, Monday morning, and people were driving into Yakima to work. That it was as dark as night, and eerie as hell, an hour after dawn, apparently meant that in order to see to drive to work, people had to use their headlights. Four or five cars pulled off the road. The rest, in a line at least five miles long, drove to town. The highway ran between hills; the people could not have seen any of the eclipsed sun at all. Yakima will have another total eclipse in 2086. Perhaps, in 2086, businesses will give their employees an hour off.

From the restaurant we drove back to the coast. The highway crossing the Cascades range was open. We drove over the mountain like old pros. We joined our places on the planet's thin crust; it held. For the time being, we were home free.

Early that morning at 6, when we had checked out, the six bald men were sitting on folding chairs in the dim hotel lobby. The television was on. Most of them were awake. You might drown in your own spittle, God knows, at any time; you might wake up dead in a small hotel, a cabbage head watching TV while snows pile up in the passes, watching TV while the chili peppers smile and the moon passes over the sun and nothing changes and nothing is learned because you have lost your bucket and shovel and no longer care. What if you regain the surface and open your sack and find, instead of treasure, a beast which jumps at you? Or you may not come back at all. The winches may jam, the scaffolding buckle, the air conditioning collapse. You may glance up one day and see by your headlamp the canary keeled over in its cage. You may reach into a cranny for pearls and touch a moray eel. You yank on your rope; it is too late.

Apparently people share a sense of these hazards, for when the total eclipse ended, an odd thing happened.

When the sun appeared as a blinding bead on the ring's side, the eclipse was over. The black lens cover appeared again, back-lighted, and slid away. At once the yellow light made the sky blue again; the black lid dissolved and vanished. The real world began there. I remember now: We all hurried away. We were born and bored at a stroke. We rushed down the hill. We found our car; we saw the other people streaming down the hillsides; we joined the highway traffic and drove away.

We never looked back. It was a general vamoose, and an odd one, for when we left the hill, the sun was still partially eclipsed—a sight rare enough, and one which, in itself, we would probably have driven five hours to see. But enough is enough. One turns at last even from glory itself with a sigh of relief. From the depths of mystery, and even from the heights of splendor, we bounce back and hurry for the latitudes of home.

Holy Rage: Lessons from Standing Rock

by Louise Erdrich • December 22, 2016 • *The New Yorker*
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/holy-rage-lessons-from-standing-rock>

By staying on message and advancing through prayer and ceremony, Standing Rock's pipeline protesters, or water protectors, have offered the world a template for resistance. PHOTOGRAPH BY ROB WILSON

The snow-scoured hills and buttes of the Missouri Breaks are dotted with isolated houses, until the sudden appearance of the Oceti Sakowin encampment on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. The presence of so many people catches at the heart. Snow-dusted tepees, neon pup tents, dark-olive military tents, brightly painted metal campers, and round solid yurts shelter hundreds on the floodplain where the Cannonball River meets the Missouri. Flags of Native Nations whip in the cutting wind, each speaking of solidarity with the Standing Rock tribe's opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline, or D.A.P.L., owned by Energy Transfer Partners and Sunoco Logistics. This pipeline would pass beneath the Missouri River and imperil drinking water not only for the tribe but for farmers, ranchers, and townspeople all along the river's course.

Oceti Sakowin, or Seven Fires, refers to the seven divisions of the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota, people who are perhaps best known for their resistance to colonization (Little Big Horn, 1876), their suffering (Wounded Knee, 1890), and their activism (Wounded Knee, 1973). One of their most famous leaders, Sitting Bull, was murdered in the town

that is now their tribal headquarters, Fort Yates. Down the road from Fort Yates is the town of Cannonball, named for the large round stones polished by the whirlpool that marked the convergence of the two rivers, just outside the Oceti Sakowin camp. The round stones disappeared when the Army Corps of Engineers dammed the Missouri, in a giant project that lasted from 1948 to 1962. The result of that project, Lake Oahe, flooded Standing Rock's most life-giving land. The Lakota were forced onto the harshly exposed grazing uplands, and they haven't forgotten that, or much else. History is a living force in the Lakota way of life. Each of the great events in their common destiny includes the direct experience of ancestors, whose names live on in their descendants. It is impossible to speak of what is now happening at Standing Rock without taking into account the history, as well as the intense spirituality, that underlies Seven Fires resistance.

On December 3rd, veterans from all over the country began to arrive at Standing Rock. Jack Dalrymple, the governor of North Dakota, and the Army Corps of Engineers had called for the camp to be cleared of protesters, who from the beginning have preferred the term "water protectors," on the 5th. Vehicles were lined up for nearly a mile to get into the camp. It did not seem possible that many more people could fit onto the space, but somehow the camp seemed to morph to hold envoys from all over the globe. To name a few: Maori, Muslims, delegations of priests and ministers, people from more than ninety Native Nations, plus any number of Europeans, and various rock stars. The curious came, the bold, the devoted, not to mention the Water Wookie Warriors, whose pop-up camper had a "Star Wars" theme; passionate young Native people as well as seasoned elders joined the resistance camp. The arrival of veterans adept at winter survival and ready to join the fight against the pipeline was yet another influx.

A small group of veterans in various patterns of camouflage gathered before their first briefing, standing in the sun outside the tiny plywood and thermal-sheathed headquarters at the eastern edge of Oceti Sakowin. There had been rumors that supply stores in the area were not serving anti-D.A.P.L. customers, and that police were blocking or fining anyone who attempted to bring building supplies to Standing Rock. But, a few feet away, supplies were being unloaded and a barracks was quickly taking shape. A tall, rugged National Guardsman wearing a wool stocking hat and a tactical desert scarf talked to me before the briefing began.

"I have been on the front lines of other protests, but I'm here because of the brutality of this police response," he said. "They thought they were way out here and could do anything."

On October 7th, Dalrymple had requested backup for the Morton County police under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, which is normally used for natural disasters. Officers from twenty-four counties and sixteen cities in ten different states responded, bringing military-grade equipment, including Stingrays (cell-site simulators) and armored personnel carriers purchased under recent federal grants. On the night of November 20th, police weaponized water against the water protectors, causing seizures

and hypothermia. The next day, the county sheriff, Kyle Kirchmeier, said, at a press conference, "It was sprayed more as a mist, and we didn't want to get it directly on them, but we wanted to make sure to use it as a measure to help keep everybody safe."

As we waited at the camp, in warm sun, I asked veterans at what moment they had decided to meet here. Most of them talked first about online videos of riot-gear-clad police using water cannons in subfreezing weather, of masked police tear-gassing water protectors, of Native people being maced as they held their hands up, and of the use of attack dogs. The disturbing scenes initiated by the Morton County police and other police units were instrumental in activating increased support for Oceti Sakowin.

"I am here because of state violence on behalf of a corporation," Matthew, a genial, lightly dressed man, said. He'd put nineteen hundred and ninety miles on his modest sedan driving from Florida with a group of veterans. Some said that they regarded maintaining a clean water supply as a homeland-security issue, and corporate greed as the enemy. Other veterans talked about the oath they had taken to defend their country from "enemies, foreign and domestic."

Brandee Paisano, a cheerful, fit, and forthright Navy veteran from the Laguna Pueblo tribe, said that she was there to keep the oath she had taken on enlistment. "I signed up to be of service, foreign and domestic. As a Native woman, it's even more important for me to be strong and support my people." She was also there to uphold the Constitution, she said. Many of the veterans recited parts of the Constitution–the First Amendment was mentioned most often.

Native Americans serve in the military at a higher rate than any other ethnic group. More non-Native people probably get to know American Indians via the military than any other way, except perhaps living in a city. (Urban Natives constitute more than half of the over-all U.S. Native population.) People in the military quickly become bound by mutual need, if not extreme duress. These are lasting friendships.

A veteran sporting reflective sunglasses and an undercut man-bun hopped up on a tree stump and began explaining that the mission many of them had in mind—to link arms in front of the water protectors while wearing their uniforms, walk forward, and take whatever punishment the Morton County police cared to deal them—was probably not on the Standing Rock tribe's agenda.

"So if you hear a battle buddy talking about charging the fence, reel him in. This isn't our mission. We're here as an asset," he said. "And if you come across a ceremony or hear singing, take off your hat, lock it up, and stand there."

Later that day, tribal leaders held a meeting at Sitting Bull College. Two local veterans, Loreal Black Shawl and Brenda White Bull, took charge.

"The highest weapon of them all is prayer," White Bull said. She explained that her Lakota name meant "Compassionate Woman." Like so many Lakota, she was the

granddaughter of a Second World War code talker, one of the Native soldiers who, using their own language, communicated in a code that was never broken. “The world is watching. Our ancestors are watching,” she said. “We are fighting for the human race.”

David Archambault II, the tribal chair, who from the beginning has led the resistance to the D.A.P.L. pipelines, told the veterans, “What you are doing is precious to us. I can’t describe the feelings that move over me. It is *wakan*, sacred. You all are sacred.”

Along with many other members of the Standing Rock community, Archambault has steered the encampment in a nonviolent direction. The camp’s direct-action group, Red Warrior, has maintained a discipline and humility that still speaks powerfully to people all over the world. A recently published photo of a person from that night of November 20th, covered in ice and praying, illustrates the deep resolve that comes from a philosophy based on generosity of spirit.

Covered in ice, a water protector kneels in protest at the barrier by the Standing Rock encampment.
PHOTOGRAPH BY ROB WILSON

“People said, ‘I am ready to die for this,’ ” Archambault told the assembly. “But I want you to live. To be a good father, mother, uncle, sister, brother. I want you to live for my people.”

On the afternoon of December 4th, the Army Corps of Engineers made the stunning announcement that it had denied Energy Transfer Partners an easement to cross under

the Missouri River. In the end, though, the veterans did take on a lifesaving mission. In every way that they could, they helped secure the camp against what turned out to be a blizzard of unexpected intensity. The blizzard arrived on December 5th, and, in the deep cold that followed, veterans reinforced shelters and helped maintain a spirit of coöperation that enabled the thousands of new camp members to survive their experience on Standing Rock.

Besides frostbite, what did people take away from there? This was probably the first time many non-Native people had been on a reservation, or in the presence of Native ceremonies. That's a positive. The more people understand that Native Americans have their own religious rituals and objects of veneration—which to many non-Native people are simply features of the landscape—as well as cathedrals and churches, the better. Understanding the natural world as more than just a resource for energy, or a recreational opportunity, or even a food resource, gives moral weight to the effort to contain catastrophic climate change. Imagine if Energy Transfer Partners planned to drill underneath Jerusalem. Of course, the company wouldn't consider such a route. Yet it would be safer than drilling beneath the Missouri River.

Most visitors and supporters who came to Standing Rock encountered a portrait of sacred humility. As in any large decentralized gathering, there were conflicts, but the over-all unity was remarkable. Tara Cook, an African-American veteran from Charlotte, North Carolina, told the Bismarck *Tribune* that she planned on taking exactly that message home to use in organizing for Black Lives Matter. Other Americans, disheartened after the election, threw their hearts into chopping wood for the camp, and left with the sense that the next four years will require just the sort of toughness and resolve they had experienced at Standing Rock. Every time the water protectors showed the fortitude of staying on message and advancing through prayer and ceremony, they gave the rest of the world a template for resistance.

I am a grudge-holder, so, when leaders practiced radical forgiveness, there were times I had trouble living in the moment. In most prayers that I heard, the police, the sheriff, and the pipeline workers were included. The U.S. government was forgiven for all it had done to the Great Sioux Nation, and, later on, the military also. But there is something extremely compelling about surprise compassion. A friend of mine, Marian Moore, who spent time at the camp in support of the water protectors, told me that, one day, members of the Indigenous Youth Council took water up to the barricade that prevented access to pipeline construction. The young people offered the water to the police who stood on the other side. Two of the officers refused, but one took some water and spilled it onto his shirt, over his heart. Then, across the barricade, the police officer and the water protector bowed their heads and prayed, together.

Louise Erdrich has written seventeen novels, including "LaRose," the winner of a National Book Critics Circle Award, and "The Night Watchman," which comes out next year [N.B.: came out in 2020].

IDEAS

They Had It Coming

The parents indicted in the college-admissions scandal were responding to a changing America, with rage at being robbed of what they believed was rightfully theirs.

APRIL 4, 2019

Caitlin Flanagan
Staff writer at *The Atlantic* and author of *Girl Land*

Felicity Huffman leaves a federal courthouse on April 3. (GRETCHEN ERTL / REUTERS)

Updated at 5:23 p.m. ET on April 9, 2018.

Sweet Christ, vindication!

How long has it been? Years? No, decades. If hope is the thing with feathers, I was a plucked bird. Long ago, I surrendered myself to the fact that the horrible, horrible private-school parents of Los Angeles would get away with their nastiness forever. But even before the molting, never in my wildest imaginings had I dared to dream that the arc of the moral universe could describe a 90-degree angle

and smite down mine enemies with such a hammer fist of fire and fury that even I have had a moment of thinking, *Could this be a bit too much?*

Let's back up.

Thirty years ago, having tapped out of a Ph.D. program, I moved to Los Angeles (long story) and got hired at the top boys' school in the city, which would soon become co-educational. For the first four years, I taught English. Best job I've ever had. For the next three, I was a college counselor. Worst job I've ever had.

When I was a teacher, my job was a source of self-respect; I had joined a great tradition. I was a young woman from a certain kind of good but not moneyed family who could exchange her only salable talents—an abiding love of books and a fondness for teenagers—for a job. Poor, obscure, plain, and little, I would drive through the exotic air of early-morning Los Angeles to the school, which was on a street with a beautiful name, Coldwater Canyon, in a part of the city originally designated the Central Motion Picture District. It sat on a plot of land that in the 1920s composed part of the Hollywood Hills Country Club, an institution that has a Narnia-like aspect, in that not even the California historian Kevin Starr knew whether it ever really existed, or whether it was merely a fiction promoted by real-estate developers trying to entice new homeowners to the Edenic San Fernando Valley. Across from a round tower connecting the upper and lower campuses was Saint Saviour's, a chapel that the founders of the school built in 1914 as an exact replica of the one built in 1567 for the Rugby School in England, with pews facing the center aisle in the Tudor style. This combination of the possibly imaginary country club and the assumption behind the building of the chapel—get the set right, and you can make the whole production work—seemed to me like something from an Evelyn Waugh novel. But it also meant that—unlike Exeter or Choate—this school was a place where I could belong. There were no traditions, no expectation of familiarity with the Book of Common Prayer. All you needed to have was a piercing love of your subject and a willingness to enter into an apprenticeship with great teachers. I had those things.

[Read: What the scammers got right about college admissions]

This was before cellphones and laptops, and in the chalk-dusted eternity of a 42-minute class period, there was such a thrumming, adolescent need for stimulation that when I opened whatever book we were reading—all of them great, all of them chosen by teachers far more thoughtful and experienced than I—and began reading aloud, the stream of words was the only thing going, and many of the students couldn't help themselves from slipping into that stream and letting it carry them along.

> I met a traveller from an antique land,
>
> Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
>
> Stand in the desert …. Near them, on the sand,
>
> Half sunk a shattered visage lies

I did not come from a religious family, but we had a god, and the god was art, specifically literature. Taking a job teaching "Ozymandias" to a new generation was, for me, the equivalent of taking religious orders.

And so when a job opened in the college-counseling office, I should not have taken it. My god was art, not the SAT. In my excitement at this apparent promotion, I did not pause to consider that my beliefs about the new work at hand made me, at best, a heretic. I honestly believed—still believe—that hundreds of very good colleges in the country have reasonable admissions requirements; that if you've put in your best effort, a B is a good grade; and that expecting adolescents to do five hours of homework on top of meeting time-consuming athletic demands is, in all but exceptional cases, child abuse. Most of all, I believed that if you had money for college and a good high-school education under your belt, you were on third base headed for home plate with the ball soaring high over the bleachers.

I did not know—even after four years at the institution—that the school's impressive matriculation list was not the simple by-product of excellent teaching, but was in fact the end result of parental campaigns undertaken with the same level of whimsy with which the Japanese Navy bombed Pearl Harbor.

[Read: Why the college-admissions scandal is so absurd]

Every parent assumed that whatever alchemy of good genes and good credit had gotten his child a spot at the prep school was the same one that would land him a spot at a hyper-selective college. It was true that a quarter of the class went to the Ivy League, and another quarter to places such as Stanford, MIT, and Amherst. But that still left half the class, and I was the one who had to tell their parents that they were going to have to be flexible. Before each meeting, I prepared a list of good colleges that the kid had a strong chance of getting into, but these parents didn't want colleges their kids had a strong chance of getting into; they wanted colleges their kids didn't have a chance in hell of getting into. A successful first meeting often consisted of walking them back from the crack pipe of Harvard to the Adderall crash of Middlebury and then scheduling a follow-up meeting to douse them with the bong water of Denison.

The new job meant that I had signed myself up to be locked in a small office, appointment after appointment, with hugely powerful parents and their mortified children as I delivered news so grimly received that I began to think of myself less as an administrator than as an oncologist. Along the way they said such crass things, such rude things, such greedy things, and such borderline-racist things that I began to hate them. They, in turn, began to hate me. A college counselor at an elite prep school is supposed to be a combination of cheerleader, concierge, and talent agent, radically on the side of each case and applying steady pressure on the dream college to make it happen. At the very least, the counselor is not supposed to be an adversary.

I just about got an ulcer sitting in that office listening to rich people complaining bitterly about an "unfair" or a "rigged" system. Sometimes they would say things so outlandish that I would just stare at them, trying to beam into their mind the question, *Can you* hear *yourself?* That so many of them were (literal) limousine liberals lent the meetings an element of radical chic. They were down for the revolution, but there was no way *their* kid was going to settle for Lehigh.

Some of the parents—especially, in those days, the fathers—were such powerful professionals, and I (as you recall) was so poor, obscure, plain, and little that it was as if they were cracking open a cream puff with a panzer. This was before crying in the office was a thing, so I had to just sit there and take it. Then the admissions letters arrived from the colleges. If the kid got in, it was because he was a genius; if he didn't, it was because I screwed up. When a venture capitalist and his ageless

wife storm into your boss's office to get you fired because you failed to get their daughter (conscientious, but no atom splitter) into the prestigious school they wanted, you can really start to question whether it's worth the 36K.

Sometimes, in anger and frustration, the parents would blame me for the poor return on investment they were getting on their years of tuition payments. At that point, I was living in a rent-controlled apartment and paying $198 a month on a Civic with manual windows. I was in no position to evaluate their financial strategies. Worst of all, the helpless kid would be sitting right there, shrinking into the couch cushions as his parents all but said that his entire secondary education had been a giant waste of money. The parents would simmer down a bit, and the four of us would stew in misery. Nobody wanted to hear me read "Ozymandias."

[Alexandra Robbins: Kids are the victims of the elite-college obsession]

I will now add as a very truthful disclaimer that the horrible parents constituted at most 25 percent of the total, that the rest weren't just unobjectionable, but many—perhaps most—were lovely people who were so wise about parenting that when I had children of my own, I often remembered things they had told me. But that 25 percent was a lesson that a lifetime of reading novels hadn't yet taught me. In the classroom I was Jane Eyre, strong and tranquil in the truth of my gifts; in the college-counseling office, I was the nameless heroine of *Rebecca*, running up and down the servant stairs at the Hôtel d'Azur as Mrs. Van Hopper barked at me.

During those three years before the mast, I saw no evidence of any of the criminal activity that the current scandal has delivered. But I absolutely saw the raw materials that William Rick Singer would use to create his scam. The system, even 25 years ago, was full of holes.

The first was sports. Legacy admissions have often been called affirmative action for white people, but the rich-kid sports—water polo, tennis, swimming, gymnastics, volleyball, and even (God help us all) sailing and actual polo—are the true affirmative action for the rich. I first became acquainted with this fact when I was preparing for a meeting with the parents of a girl who was a strong but not dazzling student; the list her parents had submitted, however, consisted almost exclusively of Ivy League colleges. I brought her file in to my boss for guidance. She looked it over and then, noticing something in the section on extracurricular activities and tapping it decisively with her pen, said, "Oh, she'll get in—volleyball."

Volleyball? Yale was going to let her in—above half a dozen much more academically qualified and many much more interesting kids on my roster—because she played *volleyball*? I soon learned that the coaches of all these sports were allowed a certain number of recruits each year, and that so long as a kid met basic academic qualifications—which our kids easily did—the coaches got their way. I never heard an admissions person question a coach; "She's on the soccer list," the admissions person would say, and we'd move on to the next kid.

The second flaw in the system was an important change to the way testing is reported to the colleges. When I began the job, the SAT and the ACT offered extended-time testing to students with learning disabilities, provided that they had been diagnosed by a professional. However, an asterisk appeared next to extended-time scores, alerting the college that the student had taken the test without the usual time limit. But during my time at the school, this asterisk was found to violate the Americans With Disabilities Act, and the testing companies dropped it. Suddenly it was possible for everyone with enough money to get a diagnosis that would grant their kid two full days—instead of four hours—to take the SAT, and the colleges would never know. By 2006, according to *Slate*, "in places like Greenwich, Conn., and certain zip codes of New York City and Los Angeles, the percentage of untimed test-taking is said to be close to 50 percent." Taking a test under normal time limits in one of these neighborhoods is a sucker's game—you've voluntarily handicapped yourself.*

And, finally, there were large parts of the process over which no one entity had complete oversight. The kids were encouraged, but not required, to bring us their essays. Ditto the lists of extracurricular activities they were required to submit to the colleges. The holy trinity of documents—transcript, test scores, and teacher recommendations—never touches the kids' hands. But the veracity of everything else depends on a tremendous leap of good faith on the part of the admissions offices.

[Read: There is no way to prevent the next cheating scandal]

And it was through these broken saloon doors—the great power conferred on coaches, extended-time testing, and the ease with which an application can be crammed with false information—that Singer pushed unqualified students into colleges they wanted to attend. He told the parents to get their kids diagnosed with

learning disabilities, and then arranged for them to take the test alone in a room with a fake proctor—someone who was so skilled at taking these tests that he could (either by correcting the student's test before submitting it or by simply taking the thing himself) arrive at whatever score the client requested. ("I own two schools," Singer told a client about the testing sites, one in West Hollywood and the other in Houston, where his fake proctors could do their work.) He allowed coaches to monetize any extra spots on their recruitment lists by selling them to his clients. And he offered a service that he called "cleaning up" the transcript, which involved, at the very least, having his employees take online courses in the kids' name and then adding those A's to their record.

All this malfeasance has led to the creation of a 200-page affidavit, and a bevy of other court documents, that can best be described as a kind of posthumous Tom Wolfe novella, one with a wide cast of very rich people behaving in such despicable ways that it makes *The Bonfire of the Vanities* look like *The Pilgrim's Progress*. If you have not read the affidavit, and if you're in the mood for a novel of manners of the kind not attempted since the passing of the master, I recommend that you and your book club put it on the list for immediate consumption.

The one compliment the FBI paid the indicted parents is that it took college admissions as seriously as they did. The investigation included wiretaps, stakeouts, reviews of bank statements, travel records, cell-site data, emails, and interviews with cooperating witnesses—chief among them Singer, who seems not simply to have thrown his clients under a bus, but rather to have taken them to Port Authority and thrown them under an entire fleet.

How did his scam come to light? Let the reader be introduced to Morrie Tobin, upon whose character and doings much will depend. A 55-year-old stockbroker and father of six who lives in the elegant Los Angeles neighborhood of Hancock Park, he got pinched last spring for an SEC violation that allegedly defrauded clients of millions of dollars. Desperate to lighten his punishment, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, he offered an unrelated claim: There was a Yale soccer coach, Rudy Meredith, who accepted bribes to let kids into the university. Of all the things Tobin could have given up, this seems an especially cruel one—he had two daughters enrolled at Yale, one had graduated from the university, and a fourth had recently been accepted. At the very least, this revelation put their admissions in an unflattering light. The FBI had Tobin wear a wire to a private meeting with the

coach, during which Singer's name came up, and from there the full investigation —"Varsity Blues"—began.

[Read: College sports are affirmative action for rich white students]

Most of the families involved in the scandal lived in the California dreamscapes of a Nancy Myers movie: Newport Beach, Hillsborough, Laguna Beach, San Francisco, Del Mar, Ross. The out-of-staters are no slouches either. One family divides its time between Aspen and New York; another lives in Greenwich. Let's start there, in Greenwich, where not getting your kid into the right college is cause for seppuku. We are in the home of Gordon Caplan and his wife, Amy. Gordon was—until placed on "leave" post-indictment—the co-chairman of a New York–based global law firm, where he was a partner in the private-equity group. Amy is the heiress daughter of the late telecommunications magnate Richard Treibick. He also lived in Greenwich, summering in the Hamptons in a 32-acre spread in Sagaponack that included a seven-bedroom house on the dunes with a pool overlooking the ocean, which his family sold shortly after his death in 2014 for a reported $35 million. (Caplan has not commented publicly on the allegations contained in the filings, or entered a plea; he was scheduled to make his first court appearance on Wednesday.)

Gordon graduated from Cornell, but ended up pursuing his law degree at sweaty-browed Fordham, suggesting the combination of privilege and hustle that can really get a certain kind of guy ahead. He was the board chairman of the world's most quixotic nonprofit organization, Publicolor, which seeks to "improve education in youth by promoting an imaginative use of color in school buildings." In 2018—the year he was negotiating with Singer about his daughter's future—*The American Lawyer* magazine named him Dealmaker of the Year.

He seems to have had Cornell on his mind for his daughter, having dramatically upped his annual giving to the low six figures during her sophomore and junior years of high school. But her grades and scores were apparently too low for the traditional approach, and he and Singer began talking about a scheme. "What is the, what is the, the number?" he asks Singer, "at Cornell for instance."

"Hold on a second," Singer says, carefully bleeding his client one pint at a time. "The number on the testing is $75,000." (Singer seems to have operated on a sliding scale. He charged Caplan $75,000 for the testing scam, yet he charged

Felicity Huffman only $15,000. Perhaps *The American Lawyer* needs to cast a wider net when selecting its Dealmakers of the Year.)

"I can do anything and everything, if you guys are amenable to doing it," he tells Caplan, explaining the elaborate system he employed to falsify test scores: "I can guarantee her a score."

Caplan takes a few hours to digest this idea, and then has a second phone call with Singer. "This notion of effectively going in, flying out to L.A., sitting with your proctor, and taking the exam is pretty interesting."

"It's the homerun of homeruns," Singer tells him.

"So, how do I get this done with you?" Caplan asks. "What do I need to do?"

Singer gives an interesting answer: "I'm gonna talk to our psychologist, and we may have to send her to you, or you to her." Sure enough, per the criminal complaint, "On or about July 21, 2018, CAPLAN and his daughter flew to Los Angeles to meet with a psychologist in an effort to obtain the medical documentation required to receive extended time on the ACT exam."

This is the only section of the complaint that mentions the character of "our psychologist." There are more educational psychologists in Greenwich, Connecticut, than there are Labrador retrievers. Hotfoot it over to New Haven or Manhattan, and you have to beat them off with a stick. Why was Singer so certain that this particular psychologist would produce the documentation the student needed? The government is clearly continuing its investigation—student records have been subpoenaed from several private schools in Los Angeles, and it's not hard to imagine that more indictments, perhaps many more, are coming. "Our psychologist" might play a role in these investigations.

The problem with getting newly diagnosed with a learning disability in 11th or 12th grade is that the companies that own the tests know they're probably being manipulated, and will often deny the application for extended-time testing. Sure enough, the ACT denied the Caplan daughter's first request, and also her appeal. But then, a surprising bit of good news. "You were right," Caplan tells Singer; "it was like third time was the charm … Everybody was telling us there's no way, and then all of a sudden it comes in." But one of the delights of this novel is that the reader is often in possession of information the main characters lack. While Caplan

crows, we smirk: "The ACT ultimately granted CAPLAN'S daughter extended time on the exam at the request of law enforcement."

[John Fabian Witt: Elite colleges don't understand which business they're in]

The only obstacle Caplan has in executing his plan (other than the FBI, but that outfit is still months away from making itself known to him) is the old ball and chain. In the obdurate way of heiresses who grew up in the cleansing sea air of Sagaponack summers and not amid the hard-roll-with-butter realities of Fordham Law, she has her niceties. In July, when both Amy and Gordon get on speakerphone with Singer, the con man suggests having one of his operatives take an online class for their daughter as a means of bringing up her GPA. But "CAPLAN's spouse replied that she had a 'problem with that.'"

Caplan grabs the phone off the cradle, effectively taking Miss Scruples off the call.

"It's just you and me," he tells Singer. "Is that kosher?"

No, it's not kosher. Obviously.

"Absolutely," Singer says. "I do it all the time man."

By November, the Gordon/Amy situation had reached one of those marital impasses in which Partner A is going ahead with something Partner B thinks is messed up, but isn't willing to outright squash, because who knows? Maybe it will work. It's a high-risk/high-reward prospect for Partner A. "I'm taking [Amy] off of this," Caplan tells Singer at one point; [Amy] is very nervous about all this."

But the Dealmaker of the Year spent considerable time kicking the tires on this one. "Keep in mind I am a lawyer," Caplan said at one point, according to the affidavit. "So I'm sort of rules oriented." And, later, "I'm not worried about the moral issue here. I'm worried about the, if she's caught doing that, you know, she's finished."

Much of the discussion of this scandal has centered on the corruption in the college-admissions process. But think about the kinds of jobs that the indicted parents held. Four of them worked in private equity, a fifth in the field of "investments," others in real-estate development and the most senior management of huge corporations. Together, they have handled billions of dollars' worth of

assets within heavily regulated fields—yet look how easily and how eagerly they allegedly embrace a crooked scheme, as quoted in the court documents.

Here is Bill McGlashan, then a senior executive at a global private-equity fund, reacting to Singer's plan to get his son (who does not play football) admitted to USC via the football team: "That's just totally hilarious."

Here is Robert Zangrillo, the founder and CEO of a private investment firm, talking with one of Singer's employees who is planning to bring up his daughter's grades by taking online classes in her name: "Just makes [*sic*] sure it gets done as quickly as possible."

Here is John B. Wilson, the founder and CEO of a private-equity and real-estate-development firm, on getting his son into USC using a fake record of playing water polo: "Thanks again for making this happen!" And, "What are the options for the payment? Can we make it for consulting or whatever … so that I can pay it from the corporate account?" He can. "Awesome!"

Here is Douglas Hodge, the former CEO of a large investment-management company, learning from Singer that his son will be admitted to USC via a bribery scheme, and that it's time to send a check: "Fanstatic [*sic*]!! Will do."

The word *entitlement*—even in its full, splendid range of meanings—doesn't begin to cover the attitudes on display. Devin Sloane is the CEO of a Los Angeles company that deals in wastewater management. Through Singer, he allegedly bribed USC to get his son admitted as a water-polo player. But a guidance counselor at his school learned of the scheme and contacted USC—the boy did not play the sport; something was clearly awry. Singer smoothed it over, but the whole incident enraged Sloane: "The more I think about this, it is outrageous! They have no business or legal right considering all the students privacy issues to be calling and challenging/question [my son's] application," he wrote to Singer.

There are several instances of college counselors gumming up the works with their small-timers' insistence on ethical behavior. That someone as lowly, as contemptibly puny, as a guidance counselor should interfere with a rich person's desires is the cause of electric rage. For this reason, after having read the 200-page affidavit many times and trying to be as objective as possible, I had to conclude that the uncontested winners of Worst People (So Far) to Be Indicted are Lori Loughlin, an

actress, and her husband, Mossimo Giannulli, a designer. When a college counselor at their daughter's high school realized something was suspicious about her admission to USC and asked the girl about it, the parents roared onto campus in such a rage that they almost blew up the whole scam.

[Read: To stop college-admissions insanity, admit more students]

The couple paid $500,000 to get both of their daughters into USC on the preposterous claim that they rowed crew. Their daughter Olivia has become a particularly ridiculed character in the saga, because there are pre-indictment videos in which she describes both her lack of desire to attend college and how rarely she attended high school during her senior year. But I have sympathy for her. She knew higher education wasn't where she belonged, but her parents insisted that she go. Up until the scandal, the girl had a thriving cosmetics line, was a popular YouTuber, and was clearly making the best of what Hillary Clinton would call her God-given potential. Now she's a punch line, and Sephora has pulled her products off the shelves.

The court filings don't state when the parents began working with Singer, but they appear to have felt a sense of urgency on April 22, 2016, when they took part in a standard component of prep-school college counseling: the family meeting with a college counselor during spring of junior year. "We just met with [Olivia's] college counselor this am," Giannulli wrote in an email to Singer. "I'd like to maybe sit with you after your session with the girls as I have some concerns and want to fully understand the game plan … as it relates to [her] and getting her into a school other than ASU!"

Mentioning Arizona State University to the private-school parents of a freshman is the equivalent of throwing a flash-bang grenade; it won't kill anyone, but it will sure as hell get their attention. But mention it to the parents of a second-semester junior, and you're no longer issuing warnings. ASU is the unconditional surrender.

"If you want [U]SC," Singer replies, "I have the game plan ready to go into motion."

But the college counselor at the girls' high school had always doubted that the first girl rowed crew; when the second one got into the same school for the same reason, she realized that something suspicious was going on. She confronted the girl.

The counselor was acting honorably. Loughlin and Giannulli—if the affidavit is to be believed—were in the midst of a criminal operation. Yet instead of hanging his head in shame, Giannulli apparently roared onto the high-school campus apoplectic. Singer got a panicked email from his USC contact: "I just want to make sure that, you know, I don't want the … parents getting angry and creating any type of disturbance at the school … I just don't want anybody going into … [the daughter's high school] you know, yelling at counselors. That'll shut everything—that'll shut everything down."

It's hell on Earth for college counselors when people like this show up angry that their kid didn't get an acceptance from Williams. But to endure it because you've gotten in the way of a giant scam? Hideous.

One way or another, the counselor was impelled—I would imagine by some freaked out higher-up—to send the parents an email:

> I wanted to provide you with an update on the status of [your younger daughter's] admission offer to USC. First and foremost, they have no intention of rescinding [her] admission and were surprised to hear that was even a concern for you and your family. You can verify that with [the USC senior assistant director of admissions] … if you would like. I also shared with [the USC senior assistant director of admission] that you had visited this morning and affirmed for me that [your younger daughter] is truly a coxswain.

As Jerry Maguire said about being a sports agent, being a prep-school college counselor is an "up-at-dawn, pride-swallowing siege." But no work of fiction could prepare these employees for the fact that there are now L.A. private-school parents who are intent on maligning the guidance counselors who they have decided must have been in on the scheme. The president of one school sent this email to parents: "I want to emphasize that I have absolute confidence in the honesty of our deans, the accuracy of the information they provide to colleges and their focus on personal character in the guidance they provide our students." Honesty of the deans? It's the dishonesty of the parents that's the problem.

[Bobbi Dempsey: They bribed college coaches. I collected cans for cash.]

ver since the scandal became public, two opinions have been widely expressed. The first is that the schemes it revealed are not much different from the long-standing

E admissions preference for big donors, and the second is that these admissions gained on fraudulent grounds have harmed underprivileged students. These aren't quite right. As off-putting as most of us find the role that big-ticket fundraising plays in elite-college admissions, those monies go toward programs and facilities that will benefit a wide number of students—new dormitories, new libraries, enriched financial-aid funds are often the result of rich parents being tapped for gifts at admissions time. But the Singer scheme benefits no one at all except the individual students, and the people their parents paid off.

The argument that the scheme hurt disadvantaged applicants—or even just non-rich applicants who needed financial aid to attend these stratospherically expensive colleges—isn't right either. Elite colleges pay deep attention to the issue of enrollment management; the more elite the institution, the more likely it is to be racially and socioeconomically diverse. This is in part because attaining this kind of diversity has become a foundational goal of most admissions offices, and also because the elite colleges have the money to make it happen. In 2017, Harvard announced with great fanfare that it had enrolled its first class in which white students were in the minority.

When I was a prep-school college counselor 25 years ago, I thought that whatever madness was whirring through the minds of the parents was a blip of group insanity that would soon abate. It has only gotten more and more extreme. Anyone can understand a parent's disappointment if he had thought for 17 years that his child would go to Yale one day, only to learn that it's not in the cards. But what accounted for the intensity of emotion these parents expressed, their sense of a profound loss, of rage at being robbed of what they believed was rightfully theirs? They were experiencing the same response to a changing America that ultimately brought Donald Trump to office: white displacement and a revised social contract. The collapse of manufacturing jobs has been to poor whites what the elite college-admissions crunch has been to wealthy ones: a smaller and smaller slice of pie for people who were used to having the fattest piece of all.

In the recent past—the past in which this generation of parents grew up—a white student from a professional-class or wealthy family who attended either a private high school or a public one in a prosperous school district was all but assured admission at a "good" college. It wasn't necessarily going to be Harvard or Yale, but it certainly might be Bowdoin or Northwestern. That was the way the system

worked. But today, there's a squeeze on those kids. The very strong but not spectacular white student from a good high school is now trying to gain access to an ever-shrinking pool of available spots at the top places. He's not the inherently attractive prospect he once was.

These parents—many of them avowed Trump haters—are furious that what once belonged to them has been taken away, and they are driven mad with the need to reclaim it for their children. The changed admissions landscape at the elite colleges is the aspect of American life that doesn't feel right to them; it's the lost thing, the arcadia that disappeared so slowly they didn't even realize it was happening until it was gone. They can't believe it—they truly can't believe it—when they realize that even the colleges they had assumed would be their child's back-up, emergency plan probably won't accept them. They pay thousands and thousands of dollars for extended-time testing and private counselors; they scour lists of board members at colleges, looking for any possible connections; they pay for enhancing summer programs that only underscore their children's privilege. And—as poor whites did in the years leading up to 2016—they complain about it endlessly. At every parent coffee, silent auction, dinner party, Clippers game, book club, and wine tasting, someone is bitching about admissions. And some of these parents, it turns out, haven't just been bitching; some of them decided to go MAGA.

And so it was that at 5:59 on the morning of March 12 in the sacramentally beautiful section of the Hollywood Hills called Outpost Estates, all was quiet, save for the sounds of the natural world. In the mid-century modern house of a beloved actress—a champion of progressive values, as is her husband—and two lovely daughters, everyone slept. But at the strike of 6:00, there was the kind of unholy pounding at the door that must have sounded more like an earthquake than a visitor: FBI agents, guns drawn, there to apprehend … *Felicity Huffman*? Felicity "Congress is attempting to eviscerate women's health care. Like many women across America, I am outraged" Huffman? For the crime of … paying to get her daughter an extra 400 points on the SAT?

Down, down, down she went in the FBI car, in her handcuffs and athleisure, down below Outpost, down below Lake Hollywood, down below the Dolby Theatre where she had been so many times—in a beautiful gown, with her famous husband, William H. Macy, beside her—to watch the Academy Awards, once as a nominee. All the way down to—*my God!*—the downest place of all: Spring Street. *The federal*

courthouse! This was where Donald Trump was supposed to go, not Felicity Huffman. Cool your heels, defender of the downtrodden: There is no rushing through all this—the mug shot, the phone call, the hearing. And this can't even be grist for the mill of a new devotion to the plight of American mass incarceration. You're now Exhibit A of law enforcement finally treating rich, white Americans as unsparingly as it treats poor, black ones.

All she wanted was an even playing field for her rich, white daughter! All she wanted was a few hundred SAT points so the girl didn't get lost in the madness that has made college admissions so stressful, so insane, so broken, so unfair. "We're talking about Georgetown," Macy informed Singer about their hopes for their younger daughter. Fortunately for them, and for the younger daughter—and possibly for Georgetown itself—they had not employed him to work on this goal before the indictments were handed down. Fortunately for Macy (who seems to have taken a modified Parent B position), only Huffman has been indicted in the scheme.

Huffman, like all of the other indicted parents, was expressing an attitude I first encountered not in the great books, but in the Charlie Brown Christmas special, when Sally dictates her endless list of toys to Charlie. "All I want is what I have coming to me," she tells him; "all I want is my fair share."

** This story has been updated to clarify the nature of the accommodations provided for standardized testing.*

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

American Racism: We've Got So Very Far to Go

And the journey must continue step-by-step.

David French

June 7, 2020

Photograph by Brent Stirton/Getty Images.

Today let's dive into one of the toughest questions of our religious, cultural, and political lives. While we write and print millions of words about race in America, why is it still so hard to have a truly respectful, decent, and humble dialogue about perhaps the most complicated and contentious issue in American life? It's a huge topic, but let's start with what I believe is a true principle of human nature, a maxim called Miles's law: Where you stand depends on where you sit.

While originating as an explanation for behavior of people in bureaucracies, Miles's law has a much broader application. It speaks to the overwhelming influence of our own social, religious, and cultural experience over our viewpoint. Our different political

cultures not only live different lives, they speak different languages. They apply different definitions to the same words and phrases—and those definitions are not self-evident.

Take "systemic racism," for example. I daresay that only a vanishingly small number of Americans know that this is a term with an academic meaning that's not entirely obvious from the words themselves. Here's one definition—"structural" or "systemic" racism is:

> A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with "whiteness" and disadvantages associated with "color" to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist.

Yet millions of Americans read the accusation that America is beset with "systemic racism" and hear a simpler and more direct meaning of the term—you're saying our systems (and by implication the people in them) are racist. But that's completely contrary to their experience. They think, "How can it be that 'the system is racist' when I just left a corporate diversity training seminar, I work at an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer, my son's college professors are constantly telling him to 'check his privilege,' and no one I know is a bigot? It seems to me that the most powerful actors in 'the system' are saying the same things—don't be racist."

Then, when you go online or turn on the television, you're hardly persuaded to change your mind. If you're conservative, chances are your social media feed is full of images of rioting and looting. There are viral videos (including one the president retweeted Saturday) that declare "George Floyd was not a good person" and "the fact that he has been held up as a martyr sickens me." There is the constant

repetition of statistics about black-on-black crime, and posts and pieces arguing that police racism and brutality are overblown are shared across the length and breadth of social media.

Even a well-meaning person subject to this barrage of messaging is then apt to look at clear racist injustices—like the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, where the killer allegedly used a racial slur after he fired the fatal shot—and say, "Sure, there are racists still in this world, but they're not part of any 'system' I know." Moreover, compounding the problem, those voices who are most loudly condemning American racism are also the voices he or she trusts the least on other issues—such as abortion, religious liberty, economics, or health care. Something in the conservative mind and heart rebels, I can't join with *them*, can I?

We each like to think we're not unduly influenced by our immediate environment and culture. That's a phenomenon that affects other people, we believe. *I'm* the kind of person who has carefully considered both sides and has arrived at my positions through the force of reason and logic. Sure, I've got biases, but that only matters at the edges. The core of my beliefs are rooted in reason, conviction, and faith.

Maybe that describes you, but I now realize it didn't describe me. I freely confess that to some extent where I stood on American racial issues was dictated by where I sat my entire life. I always deplored racism—those values were instilled in me from birth—but I was also someone who recoiled at words like "systemic racism." I looked at the strides we'd made since slavery and Jim Crow and said, "Look how far we've come." I was less apt to say, "and look how much farther we have to go."

Then, where I sit changed, dramatically. I just didn't know it at the time. I went from being the father of two white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed kids to the father of three kids—one of them a beautiful little girl

from Ethiopia. When Naomi arrived, our experiences changed. Strange incidents started to happen.

There was the white woman who demanded that Naomi—the only black girl in our neighborhood pool—point out her parents, in spite of the fact that she was clearly wearing the colored bracelet showing she was permitted to swim.

There was the time a police officer approached her at a department store and questioned her about who she was with and what she was shopping for. That never happened to my oldest daughter.

There was the classmate who told Naomi that she couldn't come to our house for a play date because, "My dad says it's dangerous to go black people's neighborhoods."

I could go on, and—sure—some of the incidents could have a benign explanation, but as they multiplied, and it was clear that Naomi's experience was clearly different from her siblings, it became increasingly implausible that *all* the explanations were benign.

Then the Trump campaign happened, the alt-right rallied to his banner, and our lives truly changed. In October 2016, I wrote a piece describing what happened. It began like this:

> I distinctly remember the first time I saw a picture of my then-seven-year-old daughter's face in a gas chamber. It was the evening of September 17, 2015. I had just posted a short item to the Corner calling out notorious Trump ally Ann Coulter for aping the white-nationalist language and rhetoric of the so-called alt-right. Within minutes, the tweets came flooding in. My youngest daughter is African American, adopted from Ethiopia, and in alt-right circles that's an unforgivable sin. It's called "race-cucking" or "raising the enemy."
>
> I saw images of my daughter's face in gas chambers, with a smiling Trump in a Nazi uniform preparing to press a button

> and kill her. I saw her face photo-shopped into images of slaves. She was called a "niglet" and a "dindu." The alt-right unleashed on my wife, Nancy, claiming that she had slept with black men while I was deployed to Iraq, and that I loved to watch while she had sex with "black bucks." People sent her pornographic images of black men having sex with white women, with someone photoshopped to look like me, watching.

The attacks got worse and some became overtly threatening, including posting image after image of dead and dying African-Americans in the comments section of my wife's blog. Suddenly, my understanding that "we've come so far" in American race relations was replaced by the shocking, personal realization that "we've got so far to go."

All this was happening as I had already grown alarmed at the sheer vehemence of conservative defensiveness on matters of race. Before the backlash I received for opposing Trump, the piece that generated the most personal anger from conservatives was a 2012 essay in *Commentary* called "Conservatives and the Trayvon Martin Case" where I critiqued the conservative media's seeming rooting interest in George Zimmerman's innocence, and I critiqued George Zimmerman's decision to arm himself and pursue a teen whose only "crime" was walking to his father's girlfriend's house after dark. I did not judge Zimmerman guilty, but I did signal that conservatives should not reflexively defend the police:

> [C]onservatives should not be inclined to trust without question the actions of local law enforcement. There is no evidence that a single national conservative commentator knew the first thing about the competence or character of the individuals who made the initial decision not to charge Zimmerman. They don't know whether those local officials are wise, foolish, or free from racist taint. But they do know, or should know, that public officials (even public-safety officers) make mistakes even when they have the best of intentions, and they should also understand the

> need not only for constitutional constraints on police actions but also for public accountability.

This is when I began to learn about conservative political correctness. If politically correct progressives are often guilty of over-racializing American public discourse, and they are, politically correct conservatives commit the opposite sin—and they filter out or angrily reject all the information that contradicts their thesis.

For example, if you're a conservative, you're likely quite aware that the Obama Department of Justice decisively debunked the "hands-up, don't-shoot" narrative of the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri. You're less likely to remember that there was a second Ferguson report, one that found Ferguson's police department was focused on raising revenue more than increasing public safety, and it used its poor, disproportionately black citizens as virtual ATMs, raising money through traffic stops, citations, and even arrest warrants. It painted a shocking picture of abuse of power.

If you're a conservative, you may well be aware of the research cataloged by Heather Mac Donald rebutting claims of systemic racial bias in fatal police shootings. You may be less aware of the recent *New York Times* report indicating that African Americans make up 19 percent of the population of Minneapolis, 9 percent of the police force and an incredible 58 percent of subjects of police use of force.

But again, I hear the objection in my head, the sentiment of good friends and thoughtful people—"If racism is this bad, and if the experiences of black Americans are this negative, why don't I ever see it?"

Let's perform a thought experiment (I did this on our **Dispatch Live** event this week, so I apologize to readers who've already heard it.) Let's optimistically imagine that only one out of 10 white Americans is actually racist. Let's also recognize that—especially in educated quarters of white America—racism is condemned and stigmatized. If this is the reality, when will you ever hear racist sentiments in your

daily life? The vast majority of people you encounter aren't racist, and the minority who are will remain silent lest they lose social standing.

But imagine you're African American. That means 10 percent of the white people you encounter are going to hate you or think less of you because of the color of your skin. You don't know in advance who they are or how they'll react to you, but they'll be present enough to be at best a persistent source of pain and at worst a source of actual danger. So you know you'll be pulled over more, and in some of those encounters the officer will be strangely hostile. The store clerk sometimes follows you when you shop. A demeaning comment will taint an otherwise-benign conversation. Your white friends described in the paragraph above may never see these things, but it's an inescapable part of the fabric of your life.

This is how we live in a world where a white person can say of racism, "Where is it?" and a black person can say, "How can you not see?"

So now I sit in a different place. But where do I stand? I believe the following things to be true:

1. Slavery was legal and defended morally and (ultimately) militarily from 1619 to 1865.
2. After slavery, racial discrimination was lawful and defended morally (and often violently) from 1865 to 1964.
3. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not end illegal discrimination or racism, it mainly gave black Americans the legal tools to fight back against legal injustices.
4. It is unreasonable to believe that social structures and cultural attitudes that were constructed over a period of 345 years will disappear in 56.
5. Moreover, the consequences of 345 years of legal and cultural discrimination, are going to be dire, deep-seated, complex, and extraordinarily difficult to comprehensively ameliorate.

It's hard even to begin to describe all the ramifications of 345 years of legalized oppression and 56 years of contentious change, but we can say two things at once—yes, we have made great strides (and we should acknowledge that fact and remember the men and women who made it possible), but the central and salient consideration of American racial politics shouldn't center around pride in how far we've come, but in humble realization of how much farther we have to go.

Moreover, taking the next steps down that road will have to mean shedding our partisan baggage. It means acknowledging and understanding that the person who is wrong on abortion and health care may be right about police brutality. It means being less outraged at a knee on football turf than at a knee on a man's neck. And it means declaring that even though we may not agree on everything about race and American life, we can agree on some things, and we can unite where we agree.

For example, here's a thought—you don't have to be a critical race theorist, agree with arguments about implicit bias, or buy into the radical social platform of Black Lives Matter to reach consensus on some changes that can make a difference. I'll call this tweet, from my progressive friend at *Vox*, Jane Coaston, the "Coaston plan," and I endorse each prong:

Jane Coaston @cjane87

@germanrlopez 1. End qualified immunity. 2. Curtail the power of police unions And here's the toughest one: 3. We probably need fewer laws, in general.

June 2nd 2020

2,720 Retweets **8,338** Likes

A journey of a thousand miles continues step-by-step, and you don't have to agree on the entire travel plan to put the next foot forward.

Oh, and as we do it, be better than me. Remember, I had to change where I sat before I could change where I stood. If you first change where you stand, then the next generation will sit in a very different and better place.

One last thing …

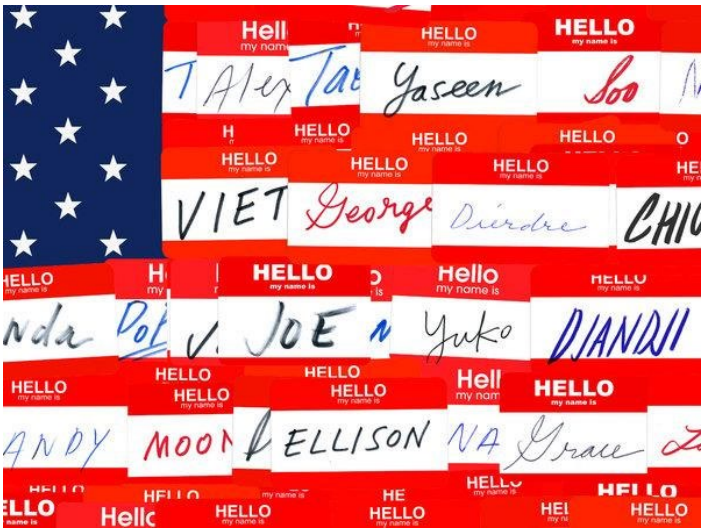
We've seen too many images of violence from this week's protests. We've seen police violence. We've seen riots. We haven't seen enough moments like the short clip below. It comes from one of my favorite cities (Memphis), it's my favorite hymn, and it touched my soul: https://youtu.be/VuAiET7BuuU.

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/09/opinion/sunday/immigrants-refugees-names-nguyen.html

America, Say My Name

By Viet Thanh Nguyen • March 9, 2019 • *The New York Times* online

Image Credit: Na Kim



LOS ANGELES — What's your name? Mine is Viet Thanh Nguyen, although I was born in Vietnam as Nguyen Thanh Viet. Whichever way you arrange my name, it is not a typical American name. Growing up in the United States, I was encouraged by generations of American tradition to believe that it was normal, desirable and practical to adopt an American first name, and even to change one's surname to an American one.

Of course, that raises the question — what exactly is an American name?

When my Vietnamese parents became American citizens, they took the pragmatic route and changed their names to Joseph and Linda. My adolescent self was shocked. Were these the same people who had told me, repeatedly, that I was "100 percent Vietnamese?"

They asked me if I wanted to change my name. There was good reason for me to change my name, for throughout my childhood my classmates had teased me by asking if my last name was Nam. As in "Viet Nam." Get it? The autocorrect function on the iPhone certainly thinks so, as I still sometimes get messages — from friends — addressed to Viet Nam.

I tried on various names. I did not want anything too typical, like my Catholic baptismal name, Joseph. Or Joe. Or Joey. I wanted something just a little bit different, like me. How about — Troy?

It didn't work. That name, or any of the other contenders, seemed alien to me. My parents' constant reminder that I was 100 percent Vietnamese had worked its magic. I felt some kind of psychic connection to Vietnam, the country where I was born but that I remembered not at all, having left at age 4. This psychic tie was ironic, because my fellow Vietnamese refugees in San Jose, Calif., of the 1980s — who never called

themselves Americans — would describe me as completely Americanized. A whitewash. A banana, yellow on the outside, white on the inside.

If I were indeed a banana, many other Americans probably just saw the yellow part and not the soft whiteness inside. The dilemma of being caught in between opposing cultures was hardly new and has not gone away, but it was still difficult for me and everyone else who has had to experience it.

I was hardly reassured when I went on a field trip to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey and a pleasant young white American soldier, dressed in Vietnamese garb and fluent in Vietnamese, translated my Vietnamese name into a kind of American equivalent: Bruce Smith.

The Smith part was a good translation, as Nguyen is the most common Vietnamese surname, inherited from a royal dynasty. In Australia, where many of the refugees went, Nguyen is among the most common surnames. I wonder if the Australians have figured out how to pronounce my name in all of its tonal beauty. In the United States, most Vietnamese-Americans, tired of explaining, simply tell other Americans to say the name as "Win," leading to many puns about win-win situations.

As for Bruce, I think George might have been more accurate. Viet is the name of the people, and George is the father of the country. Or maybe America itself should be my first name, after Amerigo Vespucci, the cartographer whose first name — Americus in Latin — has become a part of all our American identities.

Or maybe, instead of contorting myself through translation — which comes from the Latin word meaning to "carry across," as my parents carried me across the Pacific — I should simply be Viet.

That, in the end, was the choice I made. Not to change. Not to translate. Not, in this one instance, to adapt to America. It was true that I was born in Vietnam but made in America. Or remade. But even if I had already become an American by the time I took my oath of citizenship, I refused to take this step of changing my name.

Instead, I knew intuitively what I would one day know explicitly: that I would make Americans say my name. I felt, intuitively, that changing my name was a betrayal, as the act of translation itself carries within it the potential for betrayal, of getting things wrong, deliberately or otherwise. A betrayal of my parents, even if they had left it open to me to change my name; a betrayal of being Vietnamese, even if many Vietnamese people were ambivalent about me. A betrayal, ultimately, of me.

I render no judgment on people who change their names. We all make and remake our own selves. But neither should there be judgment on people who do not change their names, who insist on being themselves, even if their names induce dyslexia on the part of some Americans. My surname is consistently misspelled as Ngyuen or Nyugen — even in publications that publish me.

In Starbucks and other coffee shops, my first name is often misspelled by the barista as Biet or Diet. I have been tempted to adopt a Starbucks name, as my friend Thuy Vo Dang puts it, to make my life easier. Hers was Tina. Mine was Joe. I said it once to a barista and was instantly ashamed of myself.

Never did I do that again. I wanted everyone to hear the barista say my name. Publicly claiming a name is one small way to take what is private, what might be shameful or embarrassing, and change its meaning. We begin at some place like Starbucks, which is itself an unusual name, derived from a character in "Moby Dick," itself an unusual name. Starbucks and Moby Dick are a part of the American lexicon and mythology. So can all of our names, no matter their origins, be a part of this country. All we have to do is proudly and publicly assert them.

Recently I visited Phillips Exeter Academy, a once all-white institution founded in 1781 whose population is now about 20 percent Asian. In front of the entire student body, a student described how he dreaded introducing himself when he was growing up and made up nicknames for himself so that he would not have to explain his name's pronunciation. He asked me what I would say to people struggling to hold on to their names.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Yaseen," he said.

I told him that his name was beautiful, that his parents gave it to him out of love. I told him about the name I gave my son, Ellison, whom I named after the novelist Ralph Waldo Ellison, who was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson. I claimed for my son an American genealogy that was also an African-American genealogy that, through me and my son, would also be a Vietnamese-American genealogy. Ellison Nguyen, a name that compressed all of our painful, aspirational history as a country.

America, too, is a name. A name that citizens and residents of the United States have taken for themselves, a name that is mythical or maligned around the world, a name that causes endless frustration for all those other Americans, from North to South, from Canada to Chile, who are not a part of the United States. A complicated name, as all names are, if we trace them back far enough.

Yaseen. Ellison. Viet. Nguyen. All American names, if we want them to be. All of them a reminder that we change these United States of America one name at a time.

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A version of this article appears in print on March 10, 2019, on Page SR9 of the New York edition with the headline: America, Say My Name.

There's a lot I still don't know about America, about life, about what the future might bring. But I do know myself. My father, Fraser, taught me to work hard, laugh often, and keep my word. My mother, Marian, showed me how to think for myself and to use my voice. Together, in our cramped apartment on the South Side of Chicago, they helped me see the value in our story, in my story, in the larger story of our country. Even when it's not pretty or perfect. Even when it's more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.

—FROM THE PREFACE

Source: Obama, Michelle. *Becoming*. Crown, 2018.

1

I SPENT MUCH OF MY CHILDHOOD LISTENING TO THE sound of striving. It came in the form of bad music, or at least amateur music, coming up through the floorboards of my bedroom—the *plink plink plink* of students sitting downstairs at my great-aunt Robbie's piano, slowly and imperfectly learning their scales. My family lived in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, in a tidy brick bungalow that belonged to Robbie and her husband, Terry. My parents rented an apartment on the second floor, while Robbie and Terry lived on the first. Robbie was my mother's aunt and had been generous to her over many years, but to me she was kind of a terror. Prim and serious, she directed the choir at a local church and was also our community's resident piano teacher. She wore sensible heels and kept a pair of reading glasses on a chain around her neck. She had a sly smile but didn't appreciate sarcasm the way my mother did. I'd sometimes hear her chewing out her students for not having practiced enough or chewing out their parents for delivering them late to lessons.

"Good night!" she'd exclaim in the middle of the day, with the same blast of exasperation someone else might say, "Oh, for God's sake!" Few, it seemed, could live up to Robbie's standards.

The sound of people trying, however, became the soundtrack to our life. There was plinking in the afternoons, plinking in the evenings. Ladies from church sometimes came over to practice hymns, belting their piety through our walls. Under Robbie's rules, kids who took piano lessons were allowed to work on only one song at a time. From my room, I'd listen to them attempting, note by uncertain note, to win her approval, graduating from "Hot Cross Buns" to "Brahms's Lullaby," but only after many tries. The music was never annoying; it was just persistent. It crept up the stairwell that separated our space from Robbie's. It drifted through open windows in summertime, accompanying my thoughts as I played with my Barbies or built little kingdoms made out of blocks. The only respite came when my father got home from an early shift at the city's water treatment plant and put the Cubs game on TV, boosting the volume just enough to blot it all out.

This was the tail end of the 1960s on the South Side of Chicago. The Cubs weren't bad, but they weren't great, either. I'd sit on my dad's lap in his recliner and listen to him narrate how the Cubs were in the middle of a late-season swoon or why Billy Williams, who lived just around the corner from us on Constance Avenue, had such a sweet swing from the left side of the plate. Outside the ballparks, America was in the midst of a massive and uncertain shift. The Kennedys were dead. Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed standing on a balcony in Memphis, setting off riots across the country, including in Chicago. The 1968 Democratic National Convention turned bloody as police went after Vietnam War protesters with batons and tear gas in Grant Park, about nine miles north of where we lived. White families, meanwhile, were moving out of the city in droves, lured by the suburbs—the promise of better schools, more space, and probably more whiteness, too.

None of this really registered with me. I was just a kid, a girl with Barbies and blocks, with two parents and an older brother who slept each night with his head about three feet from mine. My family was my world, the center of everything. My mother taught me how to read early, walking me to the public library, sitting with me as I sounded out words on a page. My father went to work every day dressed in the blue uniform of a city laborer, but at night he showed us what it meant to love jazz and art.

As a boy, he'd taken classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, and in high school he'd painted and sculpted. He'd been a competitive swimmer and boxer in school, too, and as an adult was a fan of every televised sport, from professional golf to the NHL. He appreciated seeing strong people excel. When my brother, Craig, got interested in basketball, my father propped coins above the doorframe in our kitchen, encouraging him to leap for them.

Everything that mattered was within a five-block radius—my grandparents and cousins, the church on the corner where we were not quite regulars at Sunday school, the gas station where my mother sometimes sent me to pick up a pack of Newports, and the liquor store, which also sold Wonder bread, penny candy, and gallons of milk. On hot summer nights, Craig and I dozed off to the sound of cheers from the adult-league softball games going on at the nearby public park, where by day we climbed on the playground jungle gym and played tag with other kids.

Craig and I are not quite two years apart in age. He's got my father's soft eyes and optimistic spirit, my mother's implacability. The two of us have always been tight, in part thanks to an unwavering and somewhat inexplicable allegiance he seemed to feel for his baby sister right from the start. There's an early family photograph, a black and white of the four of us sitting on a couch, my mother smiling as she holds me on her lap, my father appearing serious and proud with Craig perched on his. We're dressed for church or maybe a wedding. I'm about eight months old, a pudge-faced, no-nonsense bruiser in diapers and an ironed white dress, looking ready to slide out of my mother's clutches, staring down the camera as if I might eat it. Next to me is Craig, gentlemanly in a little bow tie and suit jacket, bearing an earnest expression. He's two years old and already the portrait of brotherly vigilance and responsibility—his arm extended toward mine, his fingers wrapped protectively around my fat wrist.

At the time the photo was taken, we were living across the hall from my father's parents in Parkway Gardens, an affordable housing project on the South Side made up of modernist apartment buildings. It had been built in the 1950s and was designed as a co-op, meant to ease a post–World War II housing shortage for black working-class families. Later,

it would deteriorate under the grind of poverty and gang violence, becoming one of the city's more dangerous places to live. Long before this, though, when I was still a toddler, my parents—who had met as teenagers and married in their mid-twenties—accepted an offer to move a few miles south to Robbie and Terry's place in a nicer neighborhood.

On Euclid Avenue, we were two households living under one not very big roof. Judging from the layout, the second-floor space had probably been designed as an in-law apartment meant for one or two people, but four of us found a way to fit inside. My parents slept in the lone bedroom, while Craig and I shared a bigger area that I assume was intended to be the living room. Later, as we grew, my grandfather—Purnell Shields, my mother's father, who was an enthusiastic if not deeply skilled carpenter—brought over some cheap wooden paneling and built a makeshift partition to divide the room into two semiprivate spaces. He added a plastic accordion door to each space and created a little common play area in front where we could keep our toys and books.

I loved my room. It was just big enough for a twin bed and a narrow desk. I kept all my stuffed animals on the bed, painstakingly tucking them around my head each night as a form of ritual comfort. On his side of the wall, Craig lived a sort of mirror existence with his own bed pushed up against the paneling, parallel to mine. The partition between us was so flimsy that we could talk as we lay in bed at night, often tossing a balled sock back and forth through the ten-inch gap between the partition and the ceiling as we did.

Aunt Robbie, meanwhile, kept her part of the house like a mausoleum, the furniture swathed in protective plastic that felt cold and sticky on my bare legs when I dared sit on it. Her shelves were loaded with porcelain figurines we weren't allowed to touch. I'd let my hand hover over a set of sweet-faced glass poodles—a delicate-looking mother and three tiny puppies—and then pull it back, fearing Robbie's wrath. When lessons weren't happening, the first floor was deadly silent. The television was never on, the radio never played. I'm not even sure the two of them talked much down there. Robbie's husband's full name was William Victor Terry, but for some reason we called him only by his last name. Terry

was like a shadow, a distinguished-looking man who wore three-piece suits every day of the week and pretty much never said a word.

I came to think of upstairs and downstairs as two different universes, ruled over by competing sensibilities. Upstairs, we were noisy and unapologetically so. Craig and I threw balls and chased each other around the apartment. We sprayed Pledge furniture polish on the wood floor of the hallway so we could slide farther and faster in our socks, often crashing into the walls. We held brother-sister boxing matches in the kitchen, using the two sets of gloves my dad had given us for Christmas, along with personalized instructions on how to land a proper jab. At night, as a family, we played board games, told stories and jokes, and cranked Jackson 5 records on the stereo. When it got to be too much for Robbie down below, she'd emphatically flick the light switch in our shared stairwell, which also controlled the lightbulb in our upstairs hallway, off and on, again and again—her polite-ish way of telling us to pipe down.

Robbie and Terry were older. They grew up in a different era, with different concerns. They'd seen things our parents hadn't—things that Craig and I, in our raucous childishness, couldn't begin to guess. This was some version of what my mother would say if we got too wound up about the grouchiness downstairs. Even if we didn't know the context, we were instructed to remember that context existed. Everyone on earth, they'd tell us, was carrying around an unseen history, and that alone deserved some tolerance. Robbie, I'd learn many years later, had sued Northwestern University for discrimination, having registered for a choral music workshop there in 1943 and been denied a room in the women's dorm. She was instructed to stay instead in a rooming house in town—a place "for coloreds," she was told. Terry, meanwhile, had once been a Pullman porter on one of the overnight passenger rail lines running in and out of Chicago. It was a respectable if not well-paying profession, made up entirely of black men who kept their uniforms immaculate while also hauling luggage, serving meals, and generally tending to the needs of train passengers, including shining their shoes.

Years after his retirement, Terry still lived in a state of numbed formality—impeccably dressed, remotely servile, never asserting himself

in any way, at least that I would see. It was as if he'd surrendered a part of himself as a way of coping. I'd watch him mow our lawn in the high heat of summer in a pair of wing tips, suspenders, and a thin-brimmed fedora, the sleeves of his dress shirt carefully rolled up. He'd indulge himself by having exactly one cigarette a day and exactly one cocktail a month, and even then he wouldn't loosen up the way my father and mother would after having a highball or a Schlitz, which they did a few times a month. Some part of me wanted Terry to talk, to spill whatever secrets he carried. I imagined that he had all sorts of interesting stories about cities he'd visited and how rich people on trains behaved or maybe didn't. But we wouldn't hear any of it. For some reason, he'd never tell.

I WAS ABOUT FOUR when I decided I wanted to learn piano. Craig, who was in the first grade, was already making trips downstairs for weekly lessons on Robbie's upright and returning relatively unscathed. I figured I was ready. I was pretty convinced I already *had* learned piano, in fact, through straight-up osmosis—all those hours spent listening to other kids fumbling through their songs. The music was already in my head. I just wanted to go downstairs and demonstrate to my exacting great-aunt what a gifted girl I was, how it would take no effort at all for me to become her star student.

Robbie's piano sat in a small square room at the rear of the house, close to a window that overlooked the backyard. She kept a potted plant in one corner and a folding table where students could fill out music work sheets in the other. During lessons, she sat straight spined in an upholstered high-back armchair, tapping out the beat with one finger, her head cocked as she listened keenly for each mistake. Was I afraid of Robbie? Not exactly, but there was a scariness to her; she represented a rigid kind of authority I hadn't yet encountered elsewhere. She demanded excellence from every kid who sat on her piano bench. I saw her as someone to win over, or maybe to somehow conquer. With her, it always felt like there was something to prove.

At my first lesson, my legs dangled from the piano bench, too short to reach the floor. Robbie gave me my own elementary music workbook,

which I was thrilled about, and showed me how to position my hands properly over the keys.

"All right, pay attention," she said, scolding me before we'd even begun. "Find middle C."

When you're little, a piano can look like it has a thousand keys. You're staring at an expanse of black and white that stretches farther than two small arms can reach. Middle C, I soon learned, was the anchoring point. It was the territorial line between where the right hand and the left hand traveled, between the treble and the bass clefs. If you could lay your thumb on middle C, everything else automatically fell into place. The keys on Robbie's piano had a subtle unevenness of color and shape, places where bits of the ivory had broken off over time, leaving them looking like a set of bad teeth. Helpfully, the middle C key had a full corner missing, a wedge about the size of my fingernail, which got me centered every time.

It turned out I liked the piano. Sitting at it felt natural, like something I was meant to do. My family was loaded with musicians and music lovers, especially on my mother's side. I had an uncle who played in a professional band. Several of my aunts sang in church choirs. I had Robbie, who in addition to her choir and lessons directed something called the Operetta Workshop, a shoestring musical theater program for kids, which Craig and I attended every Saturday morning in the basement of her church. The musical center of my family, though, was my grandfather Shields, the carpenter, who was also Robbie's younger brother. He was a carefree, round-bellied man with an infectious laugh and a scraggly salt-and-pepper beard. When I was younger, he'd lived on the West Side of the city and Craig and I had referred to him as Westside. But he moved into our neighborhood the same year I started taking piano lessons, and we'd duly rechristened him Southside.

Southside had separated from my grandmother decades earlier, when my mother was in her teens. He lived with my aunt Carolyn, my mom's oldest sister, and my uncle Steve, her youngest brother, just two blocks from us in a cozy one-story house that he'd wired top to bottom for music, putting speakers in every room, including the bathroom. In the dining room, he built an elaborate cabinet system to hold his stereo

equipment, much of it scavenged at yard sales. He had two mismatched turntables plus a rickety old reel-to-reel tape player and shelves packed with records he'd collected over many years.

There was a lot about the world that Southside didn't trust. He was kind of a classic old-guy conspiracy theorist. He didn't trust dentists, which led to his having virtually no teeth. He didn't trust the police, and he didn't always trust white people, either, being the grandson of a Georgia slave and having spent his early childhood in Alabama during the time of Jim Crow before coming north to Chicago in the 1920s. When he had kids of his own, Southside had taken pains to keep them safe—scaring them with real and imagined stories about what might happen to black kids who crossed into the wrong neighborhood, lecturing them about avoiding the police.

Music seemed to be an antidote to his worries, a way to relax and crowd them out. When Southside had a payday for his carpentry work, he'd sometimes splurge and buy himself a new album. He threw regular parties for the family, forcing everyone to talk loudly over whatever he put on the stereo, because the music always dominated. We celebrated most major life events at Southside's house, which meant that over the years we unwrapped Christmas presents to Ella Fitzgerald and blew out birthday candles to Coltrane. According to my mother, as a younger man Southside had made a point of pumping jazz into his seven children, often waking everyone at sunrise by playing one of his records at full blast.

His love for music was infectious. Once Southside moved to our neighborhood, I'd pass whole afternoons at his house, pulling albums from the shelf at random and putting them on his stereo, each one its own immersing adventure. Even though I was small, he put no restrictions on what I could touch. He'd later buy me my first album, Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book*, which I'd keep at his house on a special shelf he designated for my favorite records. If I was hungry, he'd make me a milk shake or fry us a whole chicken while we listened to Aretha or Miles or Billie. To me, Southside was as big as heaven. And heaven, as I envisioned it, had to be a place full of jazz.

. . .

AT HOME, I continued to work on my own progress as a musician. Sitting at Robbie's upright piano, I was quick to pick up the scales—that osmosis thing was real—and I threw myself into filling out the sight-reading work sheets she gave me. Because we didn't have a piano of our own, I had to do my practicing downstairs on hers, waiting until nobody else was having a lesson, often dragging my mom with me to sit in the upholstered chair and listen to me play. I learned one song in the piano book and then another. I was probably no better than her other students, no less fumbling, but I was driven. To me, there was magic in the learning. I got a buzzy sort of satisfaction from it. For one thing, I'd picked up on the simple, encouraging correlation between how long I practiced and how much I achieved. And I sensed something in Robbie as well—too deeply buried to be outright pleasure, but still, a pulse of something lighter and happier coming from her when I made it through a song without messing up, when my right hand picked out a melody while my left touched down on a chord. I'd notice it out of the corner of my eye: Robbie's lips would unpurse themselves just slightly; her tapping finger would pick up a little bounce.

This, it turns out, was our honeymoon phase. It's possible that we might have continued this way, Robbie and I, had I been less curious and more reverent when it came to her piano method. But the lesson book was thick enough and my progress on the opening few songs slow enough that I got impatient and started peeking ahead—and not just a few pages ahead but deep into the book, checking out the titles of the more advanced songs and beginning, during my practice sessions, to fiddle around with playing them. When I proudly debuted one of my late-in-the-book songs for Robbie, she exploded, slapping down my achievement with a vicious "Good *night*!" I got chewed out the way I'd heard her chewing out plenty of students before me. All I'd done was try to learn more and faster, but Robbie viewed it as a crime approaching treason. She wasn't impressed, not even a little bit.

Nor was I chastened. I was the kind of kid who liked concrete answers

to my questions, who liked to reason things out to some logical if exhausting end. I was lawyerly and also veered toward dictatorial, as my brother, who often got ordered out of our shared play area, would attest. When I thought I had a good idea about something, I didn't like being told no. Which is how my great-aunt and I ended up in each other's faces, both of us hot and unyielding.

"How could you be mad at me for wanting to learn a new song?"

"You're not ready for it. That's not how you learn piano."

"But I *am* ready. I just played it."

"That's not how it's done."

"But *why*?"

Piano lessons became epic and trying, largely due to my refusal to follow the prescribed method and Robbie's refusal to see anything good in my freewheeling approach to her songbook. We went back and forth, week after week, as I remember it. I was stubborn and so was she. I had a point of view and she did, too. In between disputes, I continued to play the piano and she continued to listen, offering a stream of corrections. I gave her little credit for my improvement as a player. She gave me little credit for improving. But still, the lessons went on.

Upstairs, my parents and Craig found it all so very funny. They cracked up at the dinner table as I recounted my battles with Robbie, still seething as I ate my spaghetti and meatballs. Craig, for his part, had no issues with Robbie, being a cheerful kid and a by-the-book, marginally invested piano student. My parents expressed no sympathy for my woes and none for Robbie's, either. In general, they weren't ones to intervene in matters outside schooling, expecting early on that my brother and I should handle our own business. They seemed to view their job as mostly to listen and bolster us as needed inside the four walls of our home. And where another parent might have scolded a kid for being sassy with an elder as I had been, they also let that be. My mother had lived with Robbie on and off since she was about sixteen, following every arcane rule the woman laid down, and it's possible she was secretly happy to see Robbie's authority challenged. Looking back on it now, I think my parents appreciated my feistiness and I'm glad for it. It was a flame inside me they wanted to keep lit.

. . .

ONCE A YEAR, Robbie held a fancy recital so that her students could perform for a live audience. To this day, I'm not sure how she managed it, but she somehow got access to a practice hall at Roosevelt University in downtown Chicago, holding her recitals in a grand stone building on Michigan Avenue, right near where the Chicago Symphony Orchestra played. Just thinking about going there made me nervous. Our apartment on Euclid Avenue was about nine miles south of the Chicago Loop, which with its glittering skyscrapers and crowded sidewalks felt otherworldly to me. My family made trips into the heart of the city only a handful of times a year, to visit the Art Institute or see a play, the four of us traveling like astronauts in the capsule of my dad's Buick.

My father loved any excuse to drive. He was devoted to his car, a bronze-colored two-door Buick Electra 225, which he referred to with pride as "the Deuce and a Quarter." He kept it buffed and waxed and was religious about the maintenance schedule, taking it to Sears for tire rotations and oil changes the same way my mom carted us kids to the pediatrician for checkups. We loved the Deuce and a Quarter, too. It had smooth lines and narrow taillights that made it look cool and futuristic. It was roomy enough to feel like a house. I could practically stand up inside it, running my hands over the cloth-covered ceiling. This was back when wearing a seat belt was optional, so most of the time Craig and I just flopped around in the rear, draping our bodies over the front seat when we wanted to talk to our parents. Half the time I'd pull myself up on the headrest and jut my chin forward so that my face could be next to my dad's and we'd have the exact same view.

The car provided another form of closeness for my family, a chance to talk and travel at once. In the evenings after dinner, Craig and I would sometimes beg my dad to take us out for an aimless drive. As a treat on summer nights, we'd head to a drive-in theater southwest of our neighborhood to watch Planet of the Apes movies, parking the Buick at dusk and settling in for the show, my mother handing out a dinner of fried chicken and potato chips she'd brought from home, Craig and I eating

it on our laps in the backseat, careful to wipe our hands on our napkins and not the seat.

It would be years before I fully understood what driving the car meant to my father. As a kid, I could only sense it—the liberation he felt behind the wheel, the pleasure he took in having a smooth-running engine and perfectly balanced tires humming beneath him. He'd been in his thirties when a doctor informed him that the odd weakness he'd started to feel in one leg was just the beginning of a long and probably painful slide toward immobility, that odds were that someday, due to a mysterious unsheathing of neurons in his brain and spinal cord, he'd find himself unable to walk at all. I don't have the precise dates, but it seems that the Buick came into my father's life at roughly the same time that multiple sclerosis did. And though he never said it, the car had to provide some sort of sideways relief.

The diagnosis was not something he or my mother dwelled upon. We were decades, still, from a time when a simple Google search would bring up a head-spinning array of charts, statistics, and medical explainers that either gave or took away hope. I doubt he would have wanted to see them anyway. Although my father was raised in the church, he wouldn't have prayed for God to spare him. He wouldn't have looked for alternative treatments or a guru or some faulty gene to blame. In my family, we have a long-standing habit of blocking out bad news, of trying to forget about it almost the moment it arrives. Nobody knew how long my father had been feeling poorly before he first took himself to the doctor, but my guess is it had already been months if not years. He didn't like medical appointments. He wasn't interested in complaining. He was the sort of person who accepted what came and just kept moving forward.

I do know that on the day of my big piano recital, he was already walking with a slight limp, his left foot unable to catch up to his right. All my memories of my father include some manifestation of his disability, even if none of us were quite willing to call it that yet. What I knew at the time was that my dad moved a bit more slowly than other dads. I sometimes saw him pausing before walking up a flight of stairs, as if needing to think through the maneuver before actually attempting it. When we went shopping at the mall, he'd park himself on a bench, content to

watch the bags or sneak in a nap while the rest of the family roamed freely.

Riding downtown for the piano recital, I sat in the backseat of the Buick wearing a nice dress and patent leather shoes, my hair in pigtails, experiencing the first cold sweat of my life. I was anxious about performing, even though back at home in Robbie's apartment I'd practiced my song practically to death. Craig, too, was in a suit and prepared to play his own song. But the prospect of it wasn't bothering him. He was sound asleep, in fact, knocked out cold in the backseat, his mouth agape, his expression blissful and unworried. This was Craig. I'd spend a lifetime admiring him for his ease. He was playing by then in a Biddy Basketball league that had games every weekend and apparently had already tamed his nerves around performing.

My father would often pick a lot as close to our destination as possible, shelling out more money for parking to minimize how far he'd have to walk on his unsteady legs. That day, we found Roosevelt University with no trouble and made our way up to what seemed like an enormous, echoing hall where the recital would take place. I felt tiny inside it. The room had elegant floor-to-ceiling windows through which you could see the wide lawns of Grant Park and, beyond that, the white-capped swells of Lake Michigan. There were steel-gray chairs arranged in orderly rows, slowly filling with nervous kids and expectant parents. And at the front, on a raised stage, were the first two baby grand pianos I'd ever laid eyes on, their giant hardwood tops propped open like black bird wings. Robbie was there, too, bustling about in a floral-print dress like the belle of the ball—albeit a matronly belle—making sure all her students had arrived with sheet music in hand. She shushed the room to silence when it was time for the show to begin.

I don't recall who played in what order that day. I only know that when it was my turn, I got up from my seat and walked with my very best posture to the front of the room, mounting the stairs and finding my seat at one of the gleaming baby grands. The truth is I was ready. As much as I found Robbie to be snippy and inflexible, I'd also internalized her devotion to rigor. I knew my song so well I hardly had to think about it. I just had to start moving my hands.

And yet there was a problem, one I discovered in the split second it took to lift my little fingers to the keys. I was sitting at a perfect piano, it turned out, with its surfaces carefully dusted, its internal wires precisely tuned, its eighty-eight keys laid out in a flawless ribbon of black and white. The issue was that I wasn't used to flawless. In fact, I'd never once in my life encountered it. My experience of the piano came entirely from Robbie's squat little music room with its scraggly potted plant and view of our modest backyard. The only instrument I'd ever played was her less-than-perfect upright, with its honky-tonk patchwork of yellowed keys and its conveniently chipped middle C. To me, that's what a piano was—the same way my neighborhood was my neighborhood, my dad was my dad, my life was my life. It was all I knew.

Now, suddenly, I was aware of people watching me from their chairs as I stared hard at the high gloss of the piano keys, finding nothing there but sameness. I had no clue where to place my hands. With a tight throat and chugging heart, I looked out to the audience, trying not to telegraph my panic, searching for the safe harbor of my mother's face. Instead, I spotted a figure rising from the front row and slowly levitating in my direction. It was Robbie. We had brawled plenty by then, to the point where I viewed her a little bit like an enemy. But here in my moment of comeuppance, she arrived at my shoulder almost like an angel. Maybe she understood my shock. Maybe she knew that the disparities of the world had just quietly shown themselves to me for the first time. It's possible she needed simply to hurry things up. Either way, without a word, Robbie gently laid one finger on middle C so that I would know where to start. Then, turning back with the smallest smile of encouragement, she left me to play my song.

Source: Cofer, Judith Ortiz. "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María." *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology*, edited by Samuel Cohen, 3rd edition, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011, pp. 91-97.

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María

Judith Ortiz Cofer was born in Puerto Rico in 1952 and grew up there and in New Jersey. She is a poet, fiction writer, and autobiographer, and teaches literature and writing at the University of Georgia. In 2010, Cofer was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame. Much of her work, such as her novel The Line of the Sun *(1989) and* The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry *(1993), explores her experiences as a Puerto Rican émigré and a Latina. Her most recent book is* A Love Story Beginning in Spanish: Poems *(2005).*

A few notes from Ms. Fuhr, Mrs. Pearsall, and Mr. Rosin

These allusions would be recognizable to an older generation but may be new to you:

* ***West Side Story***, the enormously popular 1957 Broadway musical, transposed *Romeo and Juliet* into New York City, where the Montagues and Capulets become the gangs called the Jets and the Sharks. Tony (Romeo) of the Jets falls in love with Shark leader Bernardo's sister María (Juliet), and sings the song **"María"** about her. The play portrays Bernardo and María as being of Puerto Rican heritage. **Rita Moreno** (92) won an Oscar as Anita, María's friend and Bernardo's girlfriend, in the award-winning 1961 film version.
* **Marlo Thomas** (93) was the star and producer of the TV show *That Girl* (1966-71); her character was an early example of an unmarried female TV character with a job.
* ***Evita*** (95), also a huge hit musical (1978), portrayed the controversial, charismatic, beloved, powerful Eva Perón, first lady of Argentina in the 1940s-50s. **"Don't Cry for Me, Argentina"** is *Evita*'s most famous song.
* **"La Bamba"** (95) is a Mexican folk song made into a rock and roll standard by Ritchie Valens in 1958. It's one of very few American popular music hits that is sung in Spanish.

On a bus trip to London from Oxford University where I was earning some graduate credits one summer, a young man, obviously fresh from a pub, spotted me and as if struck by inspiration went down on his knees in the aisle. With both hands over his heart he broke into an Irish tenor's rendition of "María" from *West Side Story*. My politely amused fellow passengers gave his lovely voice the round of gentle applause it deserved. Though I was not quite as amused, I managed my version of an English smile: no show of teeth, no extreme contortions of the facial muscles — I was at this time of my life practicing reserve and cool. Oh, that British control, how I coveted it. But María had followed me to London,

reminding me of a prime fact of my life: you can leave the Island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you are a Latina, especially one like me who so obviously belongs to Rita Moreno's gene pool, the Island travels with you.

This is sometimes a very good thing — it may win you that extra minute of someone's attention. But with some people, the same things can make *you* an island — not so much a tropical paradise as an Alcatraz, a place nobody wants to visit. As a Puerto Rican girl growing up in the United States and wanting like most children to "belong," I resented the stereotype that my Hispanic appearance called forth from many people I met.

Our family lived in a large urban center in New Jersey during the sixties, where life was designed as a microcosm of my parents' casas on the island. We spoke in Spanish, we ate Puerto Rican food bought at the bodega, and we practiced strict Catholicism complete with Saturday confession and Sunday mass at a church where our parents were accommodated into a one-hour Spanish mass slot, performed by a Chinese priest trained as a missionary for Latin America.

As a girl I was kept under strict surveillance, since virtue and modesty were, by cultural equation, the same as family honor. As a teenager I was instructed on how to behave as a proper señorita. But it was a conflicting message girls got, since the Puerto Rican mothers also encouraged their daughters to look and act like women and to dress in clothes our Anglo friends and their mothers found too "mature" for our age. It was, and is, cultural, yet I often felt humiliated when I appeared at an American friend's party wearing a dress more suitable to a semiformal than to a playroom birthday celebration. At Puerto Rican festivities, neither the music nor the colors we wore could be too loud. I still experience a vague sense of letdown when I'm invited to a "party" and it turns out to be a marathon conversation in hushed tones rather than a fiesta with salsa, laughter, and dancing — the kind of celebration I remember from my childhood.

I remember Career Day in our high school, when teachers told us to come dressed as if for a job interview. It quickly became obvious that to the barrio girls, "dressing up" sometimes meant wearing ornate jewelry and clothing that would be more appropriate (by mainstream standards) for the company Christmas party than as daily office attire. That morning I had agonized in front of my closet, trying to figure out what a "career girl" would

wear because, essentially, except for Marlo Thomas on TV, I had no models on which to base my decision. I knew how to dress for school: at the Catholic school I attended we all wore uniforms; I knew how to dress for Sunday mass, and I knew what dresses to wear for parties at my relatives' homes. Though I do not recall the precise details of my Career Day outfit, it must have been a composite of the above choices. But I remember a comment my friend (an Italian-American) made in later years that coalesced my impressions of that day. She said that at the business school she was attending the Puerto Rican girls always stood out for wearing "everything at once." She meant, of course, too much jewelry, too many accessories. On that day at school, we were simply made the negative models by the nuns who were themselves not credible fashion experts to any of us. But it was painfully obvious to me that to the others, in their tailored skirts and silk blouses, we must have seemed "hopeless" and "vulgar." Though I now know that most adolescents feel out of step much of the time, I also know that for the Puerto Rican girls of my generation that sense was intensified. The way our teachers and classmates looked at us that day in school was just a taste of the culture clash that awaited us in the real world, where prospective employers and men on the street would often misinterpret our tight skirts and jingling bracelets as a come-on.

Mixed cultural signals have perpetuated certain stereotypes — for example, that of the Hispanic woman as the "Hot Tamale" or sexual firebrand. It is a one-dimensional view that the media have found easy to promote. In their special vocabulary, advertisers have designated "sizzling" and "smoldering" as the adjectives of choice for describing not only the foods but also the women of Latin America. From conversations in my house I recall hearing about the harassment that Puerto Rican women endured in factories where the "boss men" talked to them as if sexual innuendo was all they understood and, worse, often gave them the choice of submitting to advances or being fired.

It is custom, however, not chromosomes, that leads us to choose scarlet over pale pink. As young girls, we were influenced in our decisions about clothes and colors by the women — older sisters and mothers who had grown up on a tropical island where the natural environment was a riot of primary colors, where showing your skin was one way to keep cool as well as to look sexy. Most important of all, on the island, women perhaps felt

freer to dress and move more provocatively, since, in most cases, they were protected by the traditions, mores, and laws of a Spanish/Catholic system of morality and machismo whose main rule was: *You may look at my sister, but if you touch her I will kill you.* The extended family and church structure could provide a young woman with a circle of safety in her small pueblo on the island; if a man "wronged" a girl, everyone would close in to save her family honor.

This is what I have gleaned from my discussions as an adult with older Puerto Rican women. They have told me about dressing in their best party clothes on Saturday nights and going to the town's plaza to promenade with their girlfriends in front of the boys they liked. The males were thus given an opportunity to admire the women and to express their admiration in the form of *piropos:* erotically charged street poems they composed on the spot. I have been subjected to a few piropos while visiting the Island, and they can be outrageous, although custom dictates that they must never cross into obscenity. This ritual, as I understand it, also entails a show of studied indifference on the woman's part; if she is "decent," she must not acknowledge the man's impassioned words. So I do understand how things can be lost in translation. When a Puerto Rican girl dressed in her idea of what is attractive meets a man from the mainstream culture who has been trained to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal, a clash is likely to take place. The line I first heard based on this aspect of the myth happened when the boy who took me to my first formal dance leaned over to plant a sloppy overeager kiss painfully on my mouth, and when I didn't respond with sufficient passion said in a resentful tone: "I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early" — my first instance of being thought of as a fruit or vegetable — I was supposed to *ripen*, not just grow into womanhood like other girls.

It is surprising to some of my professional friends that some people, including those who should know better, still put others "in their place." Though rarer, these incidents are still commonplace in my life. It happened to me most recently during a stay at a very classy metropolitan hotel favored by young professional couples for their weddings. Late one evening after the theater, as I walked toward my room with my new colleague (a woman with whom I was coordinating an arts program), a middle-aged man in a tuxedo, a young girl in satin and lace on his arm, stepped

directly into our path. With his champagne glass extended toward me, he exclaimed, "Evita!"

Our way blocked, my companion and I listened as the man 10
half-recited, half-bellowed "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina." When he finished, the young girl said: "How about a round of applause for my daddy?" We complied, hoping this would bring the silly spectacle to a close. I was becoming aware that our little group was attracting the attention of the other guests. "Daddy" must have perceived this too, and he once more barred the way as we tried to walk past him. He began to shout-sing a ditty to the tune of "La Bamba" — except the lyrics were about a girl named María whose exploits all rhymed with her name and gonorrhea. The girl kept saying "Oh, Daddy" and looking at me with pleading eyes. She wanted me to laugh along with the others. My companion and I stood silently waiting for the man to end his offensive song. When he finished, I looked not at him but at his daughter. I advised her calmly never to ask her father what he had done in the army. Then I walked between them and to my room. My friend complimented me on my cool handling of the situation. I confessed to her that I really had wanted to push the jerk into the swimming pool. I knew that this same man — probably a corporate executive, well educated, even worldly by most standards — would not have been likely to regale a white woman with a dirty song in public. He would perhaps have checked his impulse by assuming that she could be somebody's wife or mother, or at least *somebody* who might take offense. But to him, I was just an Evita or a María: merely a character in his cartoon-populated universe.

Because of my education and my proficiency with the English language, I have acquired many mechanisms for dealing with the anger I experience. This was not true for my parents, nor is it true for the many Latin women working at menial jobs who must put up with stereotypes about our ethnic group such as: "They make good domestics." This is another facet of the myth of the Latin woman in the United States. Its origin is simple to deduce. Work as domestics, waitressing, and factory jobs are all that's available to women with little English and few skills. The myth of the Hispanic menial has been sustained by the same media phenomenon that made "Mammy" from *Gone with the Wind* America's idea of the black woman for generations: María, the housemaid or counter girl, is now indelibly etched into the national psyche. The big and the little screens have presented us with the picture of the

funny Hispanic maid, mispronouncing words and cooking up a spicy storm in a shiny California kitchen.

This media-engendered image of the Latina in the United States has been documented by feminist Hispanic scholars, who claim that such portrayals are partially responsible for the denial of opportunities for upward mobility among Latinas in the professions. I have a Chicana friend working on a Ph.D. in philosophy at a major university. She says her doctor still shakes his head in puzzled amazement at all the "big words" she uses. Since I do not wear my diplomas around my neck for all to see, I too have on occasion been sent to that "kitchen," where some think I obviously belong.

One such incident that has stayed with me, though I recognize it as a minor offense, happened on the day of my first public poetry reading. It took place in Miami in a boat-restaurant where we were having lunch before the event. I was nervous and excited as I walked in with my notebook in my hand. An older woman motioned me to her table. Thinking (foolish me) that she wanted me to autograph a copy of my brand-new slender volume of verse, I went over. She ordered a cup of coffee from me, assuming that I was the waitress. Easy enough to mistake my poems for menus, I suppose. I know that it wasn't an intentional act of cruelty, yet of all the good things that happened that day, I remember that scene most clearly, because it reminded me of what I had to overcome before anyone would take me seriously. In retrospect I understand that my anger gave my reading fire, that I have almost always taken doubts in my abilities as a challenge — and that the result is, most times, a feeling of satisfaction at having won a convert when I see the cold, appraising eyes warm to my words, the body language change, the smile that indicates that I have opened some avenue for communication. That day I read to that woman and her lowered eyes told me that she was embarrassed at her little faux pas, and when I willed her to look up at me, it was my victory, and she graciously allowed me to punish her with my full attention. We shook hands at the end of the reading, and I never saw her again. She has probably forgotten the whole thing but maybe not.

Yet I am one of the lucky ones. My parents made it possible for me to acquire a stronger footing in the mainstream culture by giving me the chance at an education. And books and art have saved me from the harsher forms of ethnic and racial prejudice

that many of my Hispanic *compañeras* have had to endure. I travel a lot around the United States, reading from my books of poetry and my novel, and the reception I most often receive is one of positive interest by people who want to know more about my culture. There are, however, thousands of Latinas without the privilege of an education or the entrée into society that I have. For them life is a struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina as whore, domestic, or criminal. We cannot change this by legislating the way people look at us. The transformation, as I see it, has to occur at a much more individual level. My personal goal in my public life is to try to replace the old pervasive stereotypes and myths about Latinas with a much more interesting set of realities. Every time I give a reading, I hope the stories I tell, the dreams and fears I examine in my work, can achieve some universal truth which will get my audience past the particulars of my skin color, my accent, or my clothes.

I once wrote a poem in which I called us Latinas "God's brown 15
daughters." This poem is really a prayer of sorts, offered upward, but also, through the human-to-human channel of art, outward. It is a prayer for communication, and for respect. In it, Latin women pray "in Spanish to an Anglo God / with a Jewish heritage," and they are "fervently hoping / that if not omnipotent, / at least He be bilingual."

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FEATURE

I Wanted to Know What White Men Thought About Their Privilege. So I Asked.

My college class asks what it means to be white in America — but interrogating that question as a black woman in the real world is much harder to do.

By Claudia Rankine

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In the early days of the run-up to the 2016 election, I was just beginning to prepare a class on whiteness to teach at Yale University, where I had been newly hired. Over the years, I had come to realize that I often did not share historical knowledge with the persons to whom I was speaking. “What’s redlining?” someone would ask. “George Washington freed his slaves?” someone else would inquire. But as I listened to Donald Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric during the campaign that spring, the class took on a new dimension. Would my students understand the long history that informed a comment like one Trump made when he announced his presidential candidacy? “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best,” he said. “They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” When I heard those words, I wanted my students to track immigration laws in the United States. Would they connect the treatment of the undocumented with the treatment of Irish, Italian and Asian people over the centuries?

In preparation, I needed to slowly unpack and understand how whiteness was created. How did the Naturalization Act of 1790, which restricted citizenship to “any alien, being a free white person,” develop over the years into our various immigration acts? What has it taken to cleave citizenship from “free white person”? What was the trajectory of the Ku Klux Klan after its formation at the end of the Civil War, and what was its relationship to the Black Codes, those laws subsequently passed in Southern states to restrict black people’s freedoms? Did the United States government bomb the black community in Tulsa, Okla., in 1921? How did Italians, Irish and Slavic peoples become white? Why do people believe abolitionists could not be racist?

I wanted my students to gain an awareness of a growing body of work by sociologists, theorists, historians and literary scholars in a field known as “whiteness studies,” the cornerstones of which include Toni Morrison’s “Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,” David Roediger’s “The Wages of Whiteness,” Matthew Frye Jacobson’s “Whiteness of a Different Color:

European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race," Richard Dyer's "White" and more recently Nell Irvin Painter's "The History of White People." Roediger, a historian, had explained the development of the field, one that my class would engage with, saying, "The 1980s and early '90s saw the publication of major works on white identity's intricacies and costs by James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, alongside new works by white writers and activists asking similar questions historically. Given the seeming novelty of such white writing and the urgency of understanding white support for Ronald Reagan, 'critical whiteness studies' gained media attention and a small foothold in universities." This area of study aimed to make visible a history of whiteness that through its association with "normalcy" and "universality" masked its omnipresent institutional power.

My class eventually became Constructions of Whiteness, and over the two years that I have taught it, many of my students (who have included just about every race, gender identity and sexual orientation) interviewed white people on campus or in their families about their understanding of American history and how it relates to whiteness. Some students simply wanted to know how others around them would define their own whiteness. Others were troubled by their own family members' racism and wanted to understand how and why certain prejudices formed. Still others wanted to show the impact of white expectations on their lives.

Perhaps this is why one day in New Haven, staring into the semicircle of oak trees in my backyard, I wondered what it would mean to ask random white men how they understood their privilege. I imagined myself — a middle-aged black woman — walking up to strangers and doing so. Would they react as the police captain in Plainfield, Ind., did when his female colleague told him during a diversity-training session that he benefited from "white male privilege"? He became angry and accused her of using a racialized slur against him. (She was placed on paid administrative leave, and a reprimand was placed permanently in her file.) Would I, too, be accused? Would I hear myself asking about white male privilege and then watch white man after white man walk away as if I were mute? Would they think I worked for Trevor Noah or Stephen Colbert and just forgot my camera crew? The running comment in our current political climate is that we all need to converse with people we don't normally speak to, and though my husband is white, I found myself falling into easy banter with all kinds of strangers except white men. They rarely sought me out to shoot the breeze, and I did not seek them out. Maybe it was time to engage, even if my fantasies of these encounters seemed outlandish. I wanted to try.

Weeks later, it occurred to me that I tend to be surrounded by white men I don't know when I'm traveling, caught in places that are essentially nowhere: in between, en route, up in the air. As I crisscrossed the United States, Europe and Africa giving talks about my work, I found myself considering these white men who passed hours with me in airport lounges, at gates, on planes. They seemed to me to make up the largest percentage of business travelers in the liminal spaces where we waited. That I was among them in airport lounges and in first-class cabins spoke in part to my own relative economic privilege, but the price of my ticket, of course, does not translate into social

capital. I was always aware that my value in our culture's eyes is determined by my skin color first and foremost. Maybe these other male travelers could answer my questions about white privilege. I felt certain that as a black woman, there had to be something I didn't understand.

Just recently, a friend who didn't get a job he applied for told me that as a white male, he was absorbing the problems of the world. He meant he was being punished for the sins of his forefathers. He wanted me to know he understood it was his burden to bear. I wanted to tell him that he needed to take a long view of the history of the workplace, given the imbalances that generations of hiring practices before him had created. But would that really make my friend feel any better? Did he understand that today, 65 percent of elected officials are white men, though they make up only 31 percent of the American population? White men have held almost all the power in this country for 400 years.

[The grief that white Americans can't share.]

I knew that my friend was trying to communicate his struggle to find a way to understand the complicated American structure that holds us both. I wanted to ask him if his expectation was a sign of his privilege but decided, given the loss of his job opportunity, that my role as a friend probably demanded other responses.

After a series of casual conversations with my white male travelers, would I come to understand white privilege any differently? They couldn't know what it's like to be me, though who I am is in part a response to who they are, and I didn't really believe I understood them, even as they determined so much of what was possible in my life and in the lives of others. But because I have only lived as me, a person who regularly has to negotiate conscious and unconscious dismissal, erasure, disrespect and abuse, I fell into this wondering silently. Always, I hesitated.

I hesitated when I stood in line for a flight across the country, and a white man stepped in front of me. He was with another white man. "Excuse me," I said. "I am in this line." He stepped behind me but not before saying to his flight mate, "You never know who they're letting into first class these days."

Was his statement a defensive move meant to cover his rudeness and embarrassment, or were we sharing a joke? Perhaps he, too, had heard the recent anecdote in which a black woman recalled a white woman's stepping in front of her at her gate. When the black woman told her she was in line, the white woman responded that it was the line for first class. Was the man's comment a sly reference? But he wasn't laughing, not even a little, not even a smile. Deadpan.

Later, when I discussed this moment with my therapist, she told me that she thought the man's statement was in response to his flight mate, not me. I didn't matter to him, she said; that's why he could step in front of me in the first place. His embarrassment, if it was embarrassment, had everything to do with how he was seen by the person who did matter: his white male companion. I was allowing myself to have too much presence in his imagination, she said. Should this be a comfort? Was my total invisibility preferable to a targeted insult?

During the flight, each time he removed or replaced something in his case overhead, he looked over at me. Each time, I looked up from my book to meet his gaze and smiled — I like to think I'm not humorless. I tried to imagine what my presence was doing to him. On some level, I thought, I must have dirtied up his narrative of white privilege securing white spaces. In my class, I had taught "Whiteness as Property," an article published in The Harvard Law Review in 1993, in which the author, Cheryl Harris, argues that "the set of assumptions, privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect." These are the assumptions of privilege and exclusion that have led many white Americans to call the police on black people trying to enter their own homes or vehicles. Racial profiling becomes another sanctioned method of segregating space. Harris goes on to explain how much white people rely on these benefits, so much so that their expectations inform the interpretations of our laws. "Stand your ground" laws, for example, mean whites can claim that fear made them kill an unarmed black person. Or voter-registration laws in certain states can function as de facto Jim Crow laws. "American law," Harris writes, "has recognized a property interest in whiteness."

On the plane, I wanted to enact a new narrative that included the whiteness of the man who had stepped in front of me. I felt his whiteness should be a component of what we both understood about him, even as his whiteness would not be the entirety of who he is. His unconscious understanding of whiteness meant the space I inhabited should have been only his. The old script would have left his whiteness unacknowledged in my consideration of his slight. But a rude man and a rude white man have different presumptions. Just as when a white person confronted by an actual black human being needs to negotiate stereotypes of blackness so that he can arrive at the person standing before him, I hoped to give the man the same courtesy but in the reverse. Seeing his whiteness meant I understood my presence as an unexpected demotion for him. It was too bad if he felt that way. Still, I wondered, what is this "stuckness" inside racial hierarchies that refuses the neutrality of the skies? I hoped to find a way to have this conversation.

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The phrase "white privilege" was popularized in 1988 by Peggy McIntosh, a Wellesley College professor who wanted to define "invisible systems conferring dominance on my group." McIntosh came to understand that she benefited from hierarchical assumptions and policies simply because she was white. I would have preferred if instead of "white privilege" she had used the term "white dominance," because "privilege" suggested hierarchical dominance was desired by all. Nonetheless, the phrase has stuck. The title of her essay "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" was a mouthful. McIntosh listed 46 ways white privilege is enacted. "Number 19: I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial"; "Number 20: I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race"; "Number 27: I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared"; "Number 36: If my day, week or year is going badly, I need

not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones." I'm not clear why McIntosh stopped at 46 except as a way of saying, "You get the picture." My students were able to add their own examples easily.

My students and I also studied the work of the white documentary filmmaker Whitney Dow. In the last couple of years, Dow has been part of Columbia University's Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (Incite), which gathered data on more than 850 people who identify as white or partly white and the communities in which they live. He filmed more than a hundred of their oral histories. This work, like McIntosh's, was another way of thinking about the ordinariness of white hierarchical thinking. I asked Dow what he learned in his conversations with white men. "They are struggling to construct a just narrative for themselves as new information comes in, and they are having to restructure and refashion their own narratives and coming up short," he said. "I include myself in that," he added after a moment. "We are seeing the deconstruction of the white-male archetype. The individual actor on the grand stage always had the support of a genocidal government, but this is not the narrative we grew up with. It's a challenge to adjust."

The interviews, collected in Incite's initial report, "Facing Whiteness," vary greatly in terms of knowledge of American history and experiences. One interviewee declares: "The first slave owner in America was a black man. How many people know that? The slaves that were brought to America were sold to the white man by blacks. So, I don't feel that we owe them any special privileges other than that anybody else has, any other race." While this interviewee denies any privilege, another has come to see how his whiteness enables his mobility in America: "I have to accept the reality that because I'm a man, I — whether I was aware of that or not at any specific time — probably had some sort of hand up in a situation." He added, "The longer I'm in law enforcement and the more aware I am of the world around me, the more I realize that being of Anglo-Saxon descent, being a man and being in a region of America that is somewhat rural, and because it's rural by default mostly white, means that I definitely get preference." This interviewee, who while recognizing his privilege, and who according to Whitney Dow had been "pretty ostracized because of his progressiveness" in the workplace, still indicates — through his use of words like "probably" and phrases like "because it's rural by default mostly white" — that he believes white privilege is in play in only certain circumstances. Full comprehension would include the understanding that white privilege comes with expectations of protection and preferences no matter where he lives in the country.

[How privilege became a provocation.]

How angry could I be at the white man on the plane, the one who glanced at me each time he stood up the way you look at a stone you had tripped on? I understood that the man's behavior was also his socialization. My own socialization had, in many ways, prepared me for him. I was not overwhelmed by our encounter because my blackness is "consent not to be a single being." This phrase, which finds its origins in the work of the West Indian writer Édouard Glissant but was reintroduced to me in the recent work of the poet and critical theorist Fred Moten, gestures toward

the fact that I can refuse the white man's stereotypes of blackness, even as he interacts with those stereotypes. What I wanted was to know what the white man saw or didn't see when he walked in front of me at the gate.

It's hard to exist and also accept my lack of existence. Frank Wilderson III, chair of African-American studies at the University of California, Irvine, borrows the sociological term "social death" to explain my there-but-not-there status in a historically anti-black society. The outrage — and if we are generous, the embarrassment — that occasioned the white passenger's comment were a reaction to the unseen taking up space; space itself is one of the understood privileges of whiteness.

I was waiting in another line for access to another plane in another city as another group of white men approached. When they realized they would have to get behind a dozen or so people already in line, they simply formed their own line next to us. I said to the white man standing in front of me, "Now, that is the height of white male privilege." He laughed and remained smiling all the way to his seat. He wished me a good flight. We had shared something. I don't know if it was the same thing for each of us — the same recognition of racialized privilege — but I could live with that polite form of unintelligibility.

I found the suited men who refused to fall in line exhilarating and amusing (as well as obnoxious). Watching them was like watching a spontaneous play about white male privilege in one act. I appreciated the drama. One or two of them chuckled at their own audacity. The gate agent did an interesting sort of check-in by merging the newly formed line with the actual line. The people in my line, almost all white and male themselves, were in turn quizzical and accepting.

After I watched this scene play out, I filed it away to use as an example in my class. How would my students read this moment? Some would no doubt be enraged by the white female gate agent who let it happen. I would ask why it was easier to be angry with her than with the group of men. Because she doesn't recognize or utilize her institutional power, someone would say. Based on past classes, I could assume the white male students would be quick to distance themselves from the men at the gate; white solidarity has no place in a class that sets out to make visible the default positions of whiteness.

As the professor, I felt this was a narrative that could help me gauge the level of recognition of white privilege in the class, because other white people were also inconvenienced by the actions of this group of men. The students wouldn't be distracted by society's abuse of minorities because everyone seemed inconvenienced. Some students, though, would want to see the moment as gendered, not racialized. I would ask them if they could imagine a group of black men pulling off this action without the white men in my line responding or the gate agent questioning the men even if they were within their rights.

As I became more and more frustrated with myself for avoiding asking my question, I wondered if presumed segregation in business or first class should have been Number 47 on McIntosh's list. Just do it, I told myself. Just ask a random white guy how he feels about his privilege.

I myself am overdetermined by my race. Is that avoidable? Is that a problem? Had I made the problem or was I given the problem? Photo illustration by Najeebah Al-Ghadban

On my next flight, I came close. I was a black woman in the company of mostly white men, in seats that allowed for both proximity and separate spaces. The flight attendant brought drinks to everyone around me but repeatedly forgot my orange juice. Telling myself orange juice is sugar and she might be doing my post-cancer body a favor, I just nodded when she apologized for the second time. The third time she walked by without the juice, the white man sitting next to me said to her: "This is incredible. You have brought me two drinks in the time you have forgotten to bring her one."

She returned immediately with the juice.

I thanked him. He said, "She isn't suited to her job." I didn't respond: "She didn't forget your drinks. She didn't forget you. You are seated next to no one in this no place." Instead, I said, "She just likes you more." He perhaps thought I was speaking about him in particular and blushed. Did he understand I was joking about white male privilege? It didn't seem so. The red crept up his neck into his cheeks, and he looked shy and pleased at the same time. He brought both hands up to his cheeks as if to hold in the heat of this embarrassing pleasure.

"Coming or going?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I'm returning from Johannesburg."

"Really?" he said. "I was just in Cape Town."

Hence your advocacy, I thought ungenerously. Why was that thought in my head? I myself am overdetermined by my race. Is that avoidable? Is that a problem? Had I made the problem or was I given the problem?

As I looked at the man in Seat 2B, I wondered if my historical positioning was turning his humanity into evidence of white male dominance. Are white men overly determined by their skin color in my eyes? Are they being forced, as my friend suggested, to absorb the problems of the world?

On the long flight, I didn't bring up white male privilege, jokes or otherwise, again. Instead we wandered around our recent memories of South Africa and discussed the resort where he stayed and the safari I took. I didn't bring up Soweto or the Apartheid Museum that I visited in Johannesburg or the lynching memorial in Montgomery, Ala., which the Apartheid Museum reminded me of. I wanted my fellow traveler to begin a conversation about his privilege this time. For once. I wanted him to think about his whiteness, especially because he had just left South Africa, a country that suffered, as James Baldwin said, "from the same delusion the Americans suffer from — it too thought it was a white country." But I imagined he felt the less said about race relations in the United States or South Africa, the more possible it was for us to be interlocutors. That was my fantasy, in any case.

Back home, when I mentioned these encounters to my white husband, he was amused. "They're just defensive," he said. "White fragility," he added, with a laugh. This white man who has spent the past 25 years in the world alongside me believes he understands and recognizes his own privilege. Certainly he knows the right terminology to use, even when these agreed-upon terms prevent us from stumbling into moments of real recognition. These phrases — white fragility, white defensiveness, white appropriation — have a habit of standing in for the complicated mess of a true conversation. At that moment, he wanted to discuss our current president instead. "That," he said, "is a clear case of indignation and rage in the face of privilege writ large. Real power. Real consequences." He was not wrong, of course, but he joined all the "woke" white men who set their privilege outside themselves — as in, I know better than to be ignorant or defensive about my own privilege. Never mind that that capacity to set himself outside the pattern of white male dominance *is* the privilege. There's no outrunning the kingdom, the power and the glory.

I finally got up my nerve to ask a stranger directly about white privilege as I was sitting next to him at the gate. He had initiated our conversation, because he was frustrated about yet another delay. We shared that frustration together. Eventually he asked what I did, and I told him that I write and teach. "Where do you teach?" he asked. "Yale," I answered. He told me his son wanted to go there but hadn't been accepted during the early-application process. "It's tough when you can't play the diversity card," he added.

Was he thinking out loud? Were the words just slipping out before he could catch them? Was this the innocence of white privilege? Was he yanking my chain? Was he snapping the white-privilege flag in my face? Should I have asked him why he had the expectation that his son should be admitted early, without delay, without pause, without waiting? Should I have asked how he knew a person of color "took" his son's seat and not another white son of one of these many white men sitting around us?

I was perhaps holding my breath. I decided to just breathe.

“The Asians are flooding the Ivy Leagues,” he added after a moment. Perhaps the clarification was intended to make it clear that he wasn’t speaking right now about black people and their forms of affirmative action. He had remembered something. He had recalled who was sitting next to him.

[50 years of affirmitive action: what went right and what it got wrong?]

Then I did it. I asked. “I’ve been thinking about white male privilege, and I wonder if you think about yours or your son’s?” It almost seemed to be a non sequitur, but he rolled with it.

“Not me,” he said. “I’ve worked hard for everything I have.”

What was it that Justice Brett Kavanaugh said at his Supreme Court confirmation hearing? “I got into Yale Law School. That’s the No. 1 law school in the country. I had no connections there. I got there by busting my tail in college.” He apparently believed this despite the fact that his grandfather went to Yale. I couldn’t tell by looking at this man I was sitting next to, but I wondered if he was an ethnic white rather than a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. The historian Matthew Frye Jacobson, in “Whiteness of a Different Color,” describes “the 20th century’s reconsolidating of the 19th century’s ‘Celts, Slavs, Hebrews and Mediterraneans.’ ” By the 1940s, according to David Roediger, “given patterns of intermarriage across ethnicity and Cold War imperatives,” whites stopped dividing hierarchically within whiteness and begin identifying as socially constructed Caucasians.

I said to the man, “What if I said I wasn’t referring to generations of economic wealth, to Mayflower wealth and connections?” I asked him if he gets flagged when he passes through T.S.A. “Not usually,” he said. “I have Global Entry.”

“So do I,” I said, “but I still get stopped.” The “randomness” of racial profiling is a phenomenon I could talk about forever, but I stopped myself that day. “Are you able to move in and out of public spaces without being questioned as to why you are there?” I asked. “Do people rush forward asking how they can help you?” I knew the answer to my question, but I asked it anyway, because I wanted to slow down a dynamic he benefited from.

He said he saw my point. I wanted to say, “It’s not my point, it’s your reality,” but the declarative nature of the sentence felt sharp on my tongue. I wanted to keep talking with this man, and I knew my race and gender meant he was wary of me and my questions — questions that might lead to the word “racist” or “sexist.” If only skin color didn’t have such predictive power.

I didn’t want our different historical positioning derailing our already strained chat. I wanted to learn something that surprised me about this stranger, something I couldn’t have known beforehand. Then it hit me. There wasn’t enough time to develop trust, but everyone likes a listener. “Coming or going?” is the traveler’s neutral, nonprying question. So now I asked him. He was heading home.

The word “home” turned him back to his son. He said his son’s best friend was Asian and had been admitted to Yale on early action or early decision or early admissions. Neither of us knew the terminology. I wondered how he comforted his son. Had he used “the diversity card” as he had with me? I didn’t want to discuss college-admissions policy anymore. I wanted our conversation to go down any other road, but I had somehow become a representative of Yale, not a stranger sitting next to another stranger.

I reminded myself that I was there only to listen. Just listen. The man was deeply earnest and obviously felt helpless about the uncertainty of his son’s future. But it couldn’t be too dismal if Yale was still an option. Don’t think, I reminded myself. Know what it is to parent. Know what it is to love. Know what it is to be white. Know what it is to expect what white people have always had. Know what it is to resent. Is that unfair? Resentment has no home here. Know what it is to be white. Is that ungenerous? I don’t know. Don’t think.

I didn’t ask this white man why he thought his son was any more entitled to a place at Yale than his son’s Asian friend. I didn’t want him to feel he needed to defend his son’s worth or his son’s intelligence to me. I wanted his son to thrive. I did. Were his son to arrive in my class, I would help him do his best. The more he achieved at Yale, the more pleased I would be for both of us. If his son told the class he got into Yale because many of his white teachers from kindergarten on exaggerated his intelligence, I would interrupt him, as I have done in the past, and say, “No, you got into Yale, and you have the capacity to understand that many factors contributed to your acceptance.”

College-admissions processes can’t be discussed in definitive ways; they’re full of gray areas, and those gray areas are often white-leaning, even as plenty of whites are denied entrance. We know that. I was suddenly reluctant to have a conversation about white-perceived spaces and entitlement or, God forbid, affirmative action, which would of course flood the space between us with black and brown people, me included. I said instead, “Wherever your son goes will work out, and in five years none of this will matter.” It was in this moment that I recognized my exhaustion. And then came the realization that we were, in fact, in the midst of a discussion about the perceived loss of white male privilege. Was I implicated in his loss? Did he think so?

Not long after this, I was on another flight and sitting next to a white man who felt as if he could already be a friend. Our conversation had the ease of kicking a ball around on a fall afternoon. Or it felt like stepping out the door in late spring when suddenly the temperature inside and out reads the same on your skin. Resistance falls away; your shoulders relax. I was, metaphorically, happily outdoors with this man, who was open and curious with a sense of humor. He spoke about his wife and son with palpable affection. And though he was with me on the plane, he was there with them as well. His father was an academic, his mother a great woman.

He asked who my favorite musician was, and I told him the Commodores because of one song, “Nightshift,” which is basically an elegy. He loved Bruce Springsteen, but “Nightshift” was also one of his favorite songs. We sang lyrics from “Nightshift” together: “I still can hear him say, ‘Aw, talk to me so you can see what’s going on.’ ” When he asked if I knew a certain song by Springsteen, I

admitted I didn't. I could only think of "American Skin (41 Shots)": "No secret, my friend, you can get killed just for living in your American skin." I knew those lyrics, but I didn't start singing them. I made a mental note to check out the Springsteen song he loved.

Eventually, he told me he had been working on diversity inside his company. "We still have a long way to go," he said. Then he repeated himself — "We still have a long way to go" — adding, "I don't see color." This is a statement for well-meaning white people whose privilege and blind desire catapult them into a time when little black children and little white children are judged not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." The phrase "I don't see color" pulled an emergency brake in my brain. Would you be bringing up diversity if you didn't see color? I wondered. Will you tell your wife you had a nice talk with a woman or a black woman? Help.

All I could think to say was, "Ain't I a black woman?" I asked the question slowly, as if testing the air quality. Did he get the riff on Sojourner Truth? Or did he think the ungrammatical construction was a sign of blackness? Or did he think I was mocking white people's understanding of black intelligence? "Aren't you a white man?" I then asked. "Can't you see that? Because if you can't see race, you can't see racism." I repeated that sentence, which I read not long before in Robin DiAngelo's "White Fragility."

"I get it," he said. His tone was solemn. "What other inane things have I said?"

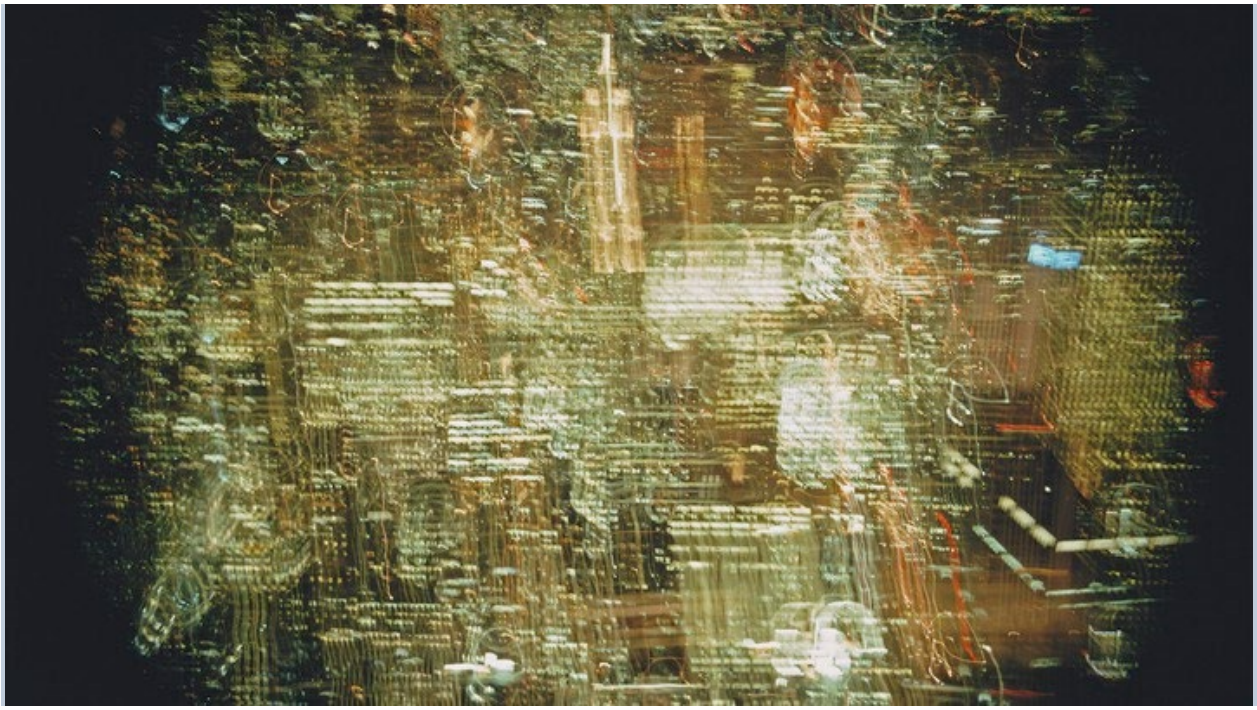
"Only that," I responded.

I had refused to let the reality he was insisting on be my reality. And I was pleased that I hadn't lubricated the moment, pleased I could say no to the silencing mechanisms of manners, pleased he didn't need to open up a vein of complaint. I was pleased he was not passively bullying. I was pleased he could carry the disturbance of my reality. And just like that, we broke open our conversation — random, ordinary, exhausting and full of a shared longing to exist in less segregated spaces.

The Case for Moving Back to Your Hometown

I thought of home as a waiting room, the place I had to be until I could go somewhere else. Then I left, and missed it terribly.

By RAINESFORD STAUFFER • MAY 6, 2021 • The Atlantic (click here for link to original)



ERNST HAAS / GETTY

"Bumfuck nowhere," "part of the country that needs to die off already," a "nowhere place": It was a jolt to hear how other people—well-intentioned friends or bosses or random strangers I met in passing—referred to the place I knew as home.

Home is writing these words at the long kitchen table that my grandfather built as a gift for my mother. It's the smell of my mom's lemon cake and coffee wafting through the house, the neighbors I used to see every year as a child at our street-wide chili potlucks on Halloween. That's how I think of it now. But for the majority of the time I spent growing up here, I thought of home as a waiting room, the place I had to be until I could go somewhere else.

There was a pull to "city life," which I couldn't have described: I envisioned it as every block being different, life being a revolving door of new people, new experiences, and new locations. I saw an allure in leaving, in embracing a rootlessness we associate with the in-betweenness of young adulthood. I saw moving somewhere new as a marker of a certain kind of success in growing up.

In high school, I wanted to leave so badly that in retrospect it's embarrassing—I imagined that my life would really begin once I was somewhere else. Yearning for belonging I believed could only be built elsewhere, I wondered whether new places would bring about new selves for me to try on.

I moved like I was lost and trying to find myself—as if good things came only from searching, as if looking for something was the only means of mattering. It never lasted long. I moved about an hour away from home to college, commuting back and forth to my job and sobbing in a McDonald's parking lot because I no longer belonged at home, certainly didn't belong on campus, and was adrift in the in-between. After my freshman year, I moved home (and the ability to do so was a privilege), trying to tune out comments on why I couldn't "handle" moving away by embracing precious moments, like coffee in the mornings with my mom and romps with the family dog.
I was humiliated, not just because I'd left school, but because I'd glaringly stumbled off the traditional path everyone I knew had taken: If you move away from home, you don't move back. That's not how young adults do it. We leave. We find our way.

But I didn't. I moved home on repeat. I moved for a job a few hours away, where I had an apartment with a gallery wall and made enough to pay rent even if I had no health insurance, finishing full-time school from the apartment floor while I worked—only to bounce back home when the organization I was working for encountered financial trouble, and my chronic illness flared up. When I moved to New York—and thought I was finally "making it out"—the perfect storm of illness, loneliness, and a harassment incident sent me careening back to my hometown, feeling flooded with solace, and guilt for feeling that way. Each time I left, I found myself aghast that what awaited me wasn't some new self or newfound capacity for adventure. It was homesickness. I thought I needed to prove that I could "make it" elsewhere. In reality, coming home was a relief.

* * *

The more I listened to how people described their homes, the more uncomfortable I became with the seemingly popular belief that metropolitan cities are just adventure grounds for people in their 20s. I felt disenchanted with the idea that going from a small town to a big city was a rite of passage. Even when people I knew moved back to their hometowns because the cost of living was lower or they needed to step in as caretakers, others talked about them as though they'd reached for the trapeze bar of young adulthood swinging you to the next thing and missed. It felt like "going back" got framed as quitting. Moving as a rite of passage, especially to certain places exalted as the centers of ultimate young-adult experience—big cities and college towns—didn't make sense the more I unpacked it.

Home is a privileged conversation. Young adults who face housing insecurity—which can involve homelessness, staying with friends or relatives, eviction and forced moves, or cost-of-housing burdens—are grappling with a lack of stability that can influence health, happiness, and security, and mean the losses of social identity and of self. Living out of cars or bouncing to and from friends' couches isn't just some trope of young adulthood that glorifies the "adventure" of being unattached. It happens because of situations including abuse, inability to pay rent or even find affordable housing, or moving to a city specifically for a job and getting laid off and being unable to find another. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, roughly 550,000 youth and young adults up to age 24 have experienced a "homelessness episode of longer than one week." It's one aspect of home and moving that rarely pops up in listicles about what houseplants are hard to kill or what neighborhoods have the most bars, as if that's all moving is about.

Among those young adults who have the privilege to change homes, not everyone moves for the same reasons, and not all of those reasons come with the absence of responsibilities and the addition of adventure. In 2010, almost a quarter of kids and young adults in the United States were first- or second-generation immigrants and, according to a 2014 study, often faced competing social responsibilities such as family or community obligations on top of the demands of work and school. This can make identity and a sense of home and belonging more layered.

Dalal Katsiaficas, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, told me that moving away from home has traditionally been one of the sociological markers of becoming an adult. But she pointed out that giving back to communities and being able to contribute to family in new ways is actually *part* of this coming-of-age component for young people, especially those from immigrant backgrounds.

So there's this push and pull, where fulfilling this Americanized ideal of being out on one's own and forging one's own life comes at the real cost of contributing to families and communities in tangible ways, Katsiaficas explained. "For so many young people that I've talked to, they've narrated that hyperindividualism as a real sense of loss," she said. Rarely, if ever, had I heard that sense of loss, or even homesickness, described as anything other than something we're supposed to grow out of.

* * *

Supposedly, as a young adult, you have more mobility and opportunity than you ever will, and if you're not taking advantage of that, you're missing out on the golden opportunity of this age: exploration. Rarely acknowledged is that you might need stability and commitment *alongside* exploration and adventure. Newness gives us a hit of dopamine, which fades as the novelty wears off. It's why our first times in a new place are overwhelming and exciting, whereas your once-wonderful-and-new neighborhood has likely lost that shiny luster going into year three of the same sights day after day and the same commute with the same coffee stop. It's not hard to see how the pleasure of new beginnings could become enticing. They also feel like visible markers that life is moving forward in some way.

Laney, 22, talked with me about novelty from her childhood bedroom—she returned there when her college campus closed during the pandemic, and has been working there since. (She is identified by her first name only so that she could speak openly about her personal life.) Talking about friends who, at the same time she transitioned into adulthood in her childhood home, transitioned to new graduate schools and new cities, she explained, "Especially in this coming-of-age story we write for ourselves, getting to that next chapter is so rooted in location." She knows there's lots of growth in her life but said that because she's in her childhood bedroom, it doesn't look like much change or growth at all. At the same time, "I know a lot of people who moved cities, who did the whole next chapter, are really unsatisfied right now and feel really empty," she added.

The idea of new beginnings is hardwired into a lot of marketing around what the "young-adult experience" is. From the jump, college gets presented as an opportunity for a young adult to make their own decisions, a presentation that often leaves out practicalities such as in-state versus out-of-state or private tuition, familial obligations that might prevent someone from moving far away, and the fact that not every young person wants or needs the same kind of postsecondary education. I remember being told, by people who did not know my circumstances, that college was "my shot" to start building a life for myself somewhere else. In some ways, the college decision, assuming there is one, is a sort of promised land—the promise being that you get to decide where you go from here.

Then it builds, with where you go next depending on what happens next, another notch of newness: where you get a job, whether you pursue more school, whether you *can* get a job, and whether you can afford the city in which said job is located.

Laney is the first person in her family to graduate from college, and if she moved out of her home state, she'd also be the first one in her family to do so. While her family will support whatever she decides, she said there's this tension within herself between "not wanting to miss out, but not understanding if what you're missing out on is even important to you."

* * *

Community is a human need we have. "But in the broader U.S. society, we tell emerging adults that they should learn to stand alone, and that can be really painful," Katsiaficas said. It's overlooked, she added, but "taking care of family or community, and in turn feeling taken care of by them, has real benefits." At its best, home can feel like being held. It's why the quips about moving back in with your parents, or being 30 and still having roommates, are less commentary on young-adult failure than they are commentary on how we sometimes prioritize going it alone above all else.

For students, only one side of the equation seems to get addressed: the big questions about where you're going to school, and where you're moving after graduation. The way those get amplified leaves little room for other, more ordinary, equally important questions: Where do you feel safe, and like you belong? Are you homesick for many places, like a hometown and a college town and maybe somewhere entirely different? Is it possible to have roots in multiple places?

Because moving is so ingrained in how we think about this time of life, even though not everyone can "achieve" that milestone, staying seems like it is rarely celebrated. With going-away parties to celebrate new adventures and graduation parties to mark the close of one chapter and the beginning of another, staying in one place can feel boring.

Sometimes, because of the way we romanticize starting over, settling in seems to automatically mean settling down. Melody Warnick, a journalist and the author of *This Is Where You Belong: Finding Home Wherever You Are*, thinks young people go through a "FOMO period," or fear-of-missing-out period, when they're newly graduated from school and it "feels like settling to stay in one place very long." "There's this sense that you want to experience lots of different things," Warnick told me. "And we kind of have this long history in American culture that to be upwardly mobile also means just to be mobile."

Entire industries are centered on that idea of mobility, or rootlessness, including subscription-based services that offer furniture rentals. Permanence—unbroken dishes that match, a nightstand that isn't just a pile of boxes, framed art hung on the walls—feels like a luxury if you don't know whether you're staying, or if your landlord will hike up your rent next year and you're off to the next spot.

Because traditional markers of stability, such as homeownership, feel out of reach for so many young adults, it's like we've catapulted in the opposite direction: Being always on the move ensures you'll see everything, and miss out on nothing. That's how I felt—I wanted to see it all. So why, in retrospect, did that mean ignoring what was right in front of me?

In our conversation, Warnick pointed out that there is a stigma in America against not only small towns, but staying in the same place at all. We tend to think of it as representing "the abandonment of our big dreams," Warnick said, a feeling of escape that some young people feel acutely. I felt called

out, and with good reason: I'd clung to the belief that life would really begin once I left wherever I was. It kept dreams I was too scared to say aloud at arm's length; it allowed me to imagine, and reimagine, the "best life" I'd finally find with a new zip code, conveniently forgetting that my real life was happening wherever I happened to be. I could participate, or I could wait. And for years, I waited.

If we're seeking reinvention or creating a new identity, moving somewhere we aren't known could make that easier. "But the new place isn't the thing that completely changes us as people," Warnick clarified. "It might change things about our circumstances. It might trigger some opportunities to change things about ourselves. But yeah, you have that moment of, like, 'Dang, I am still the same human and I brought all my baggage, and now I'm going to have to move again.'"

* * *

I am wired for coming home in the same way it is assumed we are wired for leaving. Any adventure that lures me out is no match for the ties that draw me home again. I come home in the way you'd fall asleep after a day spent in the heat of the sun—before you know it's happened, before you know you want to. Half the pang of growing up for me was realizing that I'd somehow have to create a sense of home wherever I went, that for all the effort I spent trying to leave, all I would ever want to do is figure out homecomings, ways of returning to the place where I feel the most like me.

We don't have to keep transitioning. It can be equally transformative to stay put for a bit, giving us the chance to know ourselves in the context of stability, rather than just the context of *pursuing* something. When we're home, we can take inventory of who we are. It's not quitting the adventure early to just want to settle in and stay for a while—nor is it dismissing the ideal of exploring to remember we can explore in all kinds of ways, in our communities, in how we build our homes, in how we feel about ourselves in different contexts. It can feel like coming home to ourselves.

This article has been adapted from Rainesford Stauffer's book An Ordinary Age: Finding Your Way in a World That Expects Exceptional.

Rainesford Stauffer is a writer based in Kentucky.

Source: Zauner, Michelle. *Crying in H Mart.* Knopf, 2021.

I

Crying in H Mart

Ever since my mom died, I cry in H Mart.

H Mart is a supermarket chain that specializes in Asian food. The *H* stands for han ah reum, a Korean phrase that roughly translates to "one arm full of groceries." H Mart is where parachute kids flock to find the brand of instant noodles that reminds them of home. It's where Korean families buy rice cakes to make tteokguk, the beef and rice cake soup that brings in the New Year. It's the only place where you can find a giant vat of peeled garlic, because it's the only place that truly understands how much garlic you'll need for the kind of food your people eat. H Mart is freedom from the single-aisle "ethnic" section in regular grocery stores. They don't prop Goya beans next to bottles of sriracha here. Instead, you'll likely find me crying by the banchan refrigerators, remembering the taste of my mom's soy-sauce eggs and cold radish soup. Or in the freezer section, holding a stack of dumpling skins, thinking of all the hours that Mom and I spent at the kitchen table folding minced pork and chives into the thin dough. Sobbing near the dry

goods, asking myself, Am I even Korean anymore if there's no one left to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy?

Growing up in America with a Caucasian father and a Korean mother, I relied on my mom for access to our Korean heritage. While she never actually taught me how to cook (Korean people tend to disavow measurements and supply only cryptic instructions along the lines of "add sesame oil until it tastes like Mom's"), she did raise me with a distinctly Korean appetite. This meant a reverence for good food and a predisposition to emotional eating. We were particular about everything: kimchi had to be perfectly sour, samgyupsal perfectly crisped; stews had to be piping hot or they might as well have been inedible. The concept of prepping meals for the week was a ludicrous affront to our lifestyle. We chased our cravings daily. If we wanted the kimchi stew for three weeks straight, we relished it until a new craving emerged. We ate in accordance with the seasons and holidays.

When spring arrived and the weather turned, we'd bring our camp stove outdoors and fry up strips of fresh pork belly on the deck. On my birthday, we ate miyeokguk—a hearty seaweed soup full of nutrients that women are encouraged to eat postpartum and that Koreans traditionally eat on their birthdays to celebrate their mothers.

FOOD WAS HOW my mother expressed her love. No matter how critical or cruel she could seem—constantly pushing me to meet her intractable expectations—I could always feel her affection radiating from the lunches she packed and the meals she prepared for me just the way I liked them. I can hardly speak Korean, but in H Mart it feels like I'm fluent. I fondle the produce and say the words aloud—chamoe melon, danmuji. I fill my shopping cart with every snack that has glossy packaging decorated with a famil-

iar cartoon. I think about the time Mom showed me how to fold the little plastic card that came inside bags of Jolly Pong, how to use it as a spoon to shovel caramel puffed rice into my mouth, and how it inevitably fell down my shirt and spread all over the car. I remember the snacks Mom told me she ate when she was a kid and how I tried to imagine her at my age. I wanted to like all the things she did, to embody her completely.

My grief comes in waves and is usually triggered by something arbitrary. I can tell you with a straight face what it was like watching my mom's hair fall out in the bathtub, or about the five weeks I spent sleeping in hospitals, but catch me at H Mart when some kid runs up double-fisting plastic sleeves of ppeongtwigi and I'll just lose it. Those little rice-cake Frisbees were my childhood, a happier time when Mom was there and we'd crunch away on the Styrofoam-like disks after school, splitting them like packing peanuts that dissolved like sugar on our tongues.

I'll cry when I see a Korean grandmother eating seafood noodles in the food court, discarding shrimp heads and mussel shells onto the lid of her daughter's tin rice bowl. Her gray hair frizzy, cheekbones protruding like the tops of two peaches, tattooed eyebrows rusting as the ink fades out. I'll wonder what my mom would have looked like in her seventies, if she'd have wound up with the same perm that every Korean grandma gets, as though it were a part of our race's evolution. I'll imagine our arms linked, her small frame leaning against mine as we take the escalator up to the food court. The two of us in all black, "New York style," she'd say, her image of New York still rooted in the era of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. She would carry the quilted-leather Chanel purse that she'd wanted her whole life, instead of the fake ones that she bought on the back streets of Itaewon. Her hands and face would be slightly sticky from QVC anti-aging creams. She'd wear some strange high-top sneaker wedges that I'd disagree with. "Michelle, in Korea, every

celebrity wears this one." She'd pluck the lint off my coat and pick on me—how my shoulders slumped, how I needed new shoes, how I should really start using that argan-oil treatment she bought me—but we'd be together.

If I'm being honest, there's a lot of anger. I'm angry at this old Korean woman I don't know, that she gets to live and my mother does not, like somehow this stranger's survival is at all related to my loss. That someone my mother's age could still have a mother. Why is she here slurping up spicy jjamppong noodles and my mom isn't? Other people must feel this way. Life is unfair, and sometimes it helps to irrationally blame someone for it.

Sometimes my grief feels as though I've been left alone in a room with no doors. Every time I remember that my mother is dead, it feels like I'm colliding with a wall that won't give. There's no escape, just a hard surface that I keep ramming into over and over, a reminder of the immutable reality that I will never see her again.

H MARTS are usually situated on the outskirts of the city and serve as a secondary center for strip malls of Asian storefronts and restaurants that are always better than the ones found closer to town. We're talking Korean restaurants that pack the table so full of banchan side dishes that you're forced to play a never-ending game of horizontal Jenga with twelve tiny plates of stir-fried anchovies, stuffed cucumbers, and pickled everything. This isn't like the sad Asian fusion joint by your work, where they serve bell peppers in their bibimbap and give you the stink eye when you ask for another round of wilted bean sprouts. This is the real deal.

You'll know that you're headed the right way because there will be signs to mark your path. As you go farther into your pilgrimage, the lettering on the awnings slowly begins to turn into symbols that you may or may not be able to read. This is when my

elementary-grade Korean skills are put to the test—how fast can I sound out the vowels in traffic? I spent more than six years going to Hangul Hakkyo every Friday, and this is all I have to show for it. I can read the signs for churches, for an optometrist's office, a bank. A couple more blocks in, and we're in the heart of it. Suddenly, it's another country. Everyone is Asian, a swarm of different dialects crisscross like invisible telephone wires, the only English words are HOT POT and LIQUORS, and they're all buried beneath an assortment of glyphs and graphemes, with an anime tiger or a hot dog dancing next to them.

Inside an H Mart complex, there will be some kind of food court, an appliance shop, and a pharmacy. Usually, there's a beauty counter where you can buy Korean makeup and skin-care products with snail mucin or caviar oil, or a face mask that vaguely boasts "placenta." (Whose placenta? Who knows?) There will usually be a pseudo-French bakery with weak coffee, bubble tea, and an array of glowing pastries that always look much better than they taste.

My local H Mart these days is in Elkins Park, a town northeast of Philadelphia. My routine is to drive in for lunch on the weekends, stock up on groceries for the week, and cook something for dinner with whatever fresh bounty inspires me. The H Mart in Elkins Park has two stories; the grocery is on the first floor and the food court is above it. Upstairs, there is an array of stalls serving different kinds of food. One is dedicated to sushi, one is strictly Chinese. Another is for traditional Korean jjigaes, bubbling soups served in traditional earthenware pots called ttukbaegis, which act as mini cauldrons to ensure that your soup is still bubbling a good ten minutes past arrival. There's a stall for Korean street food that serves up Korean ramen (basically just Shin Cup noodles with an egg cracked in); giant steamed dumplings full of pork and glass noodles housed in a thick, cakelike dough; and tteokbokki, chewy, bite-sized cylindrical rice cakes boiled in a stock with fish

cakes, red pepper, and gochujang, a sweet-and-spicy paste that's one of the three mother sauces used in pretty much all Korean dishes. Last, there's my personal favorite: Korean-Chinese fusion, which serves tangsuyuk—a glossy, sweet-and-sour orange pork—seafood noodle soup, fried rice, and black bean noodles.

The food court is the perfect place to people-watch while sucking down salty, fatty jjajangmyeon. I think about my family who lived in Korea, before most of them died, and how Korean-Chinese was always the first thing we'd eat when my mom and I arrived in Seoul after a fourteen-hour flight from America. Twenty minutes after my aunt would phone in our order, the apartment ringer would buzz "Für Elise" in MIDI, and up would come a helmeted man, fresh off his motorcycle, with a giant steel box. He'd slide open the metal door and deliver heaping bowls of noodles and deep-fried battered pork with its rich sauce on the side. The plastic wrap on top would be concave and sweating. We'd peel it off and dribble black, chunky goodness all over the noodles and pour the shiny, sticky, translucent orange sauce over the pork. We'd sit cross-legged on the cool marble floor, slurping and reaching over one another. My aunts and mom and grandmother would jabber on in Korean, and I would eat and listen, unable to comprehend, bothering my mom every so often, asking her to translate.

I wonder how many people at H Mart miss their families. How many are thinking of them as they bring their trays back from the different stalls. If they're eating to feel connected, to celebrate these people through food. Which ones weren't able to fly back home this year, or for the past ten years? Which ones are like me, missing the people who are gone from their lives forever?

At one table is a group of young Chinese students, alone without family at schools in America. They have banded together to take the bus forty-five minutes outside the city, into the suburbs of a foreign country for soup dumplings. At another table, there

are three generations of Korean women eating three different types of stew: daughter, mother, and grandmother dipping their spoons into one another's bowls, reaching over one another's trays, arms in one another's faces, pinching at their different banchan with chopsticks. None of them pay any heed or give a second thought to the concept of personal space.

There is a young white man and his family. They giggle together as they try to pronounce the menu. The son explains to his parents the different dishes they've ordered. Maybe he was stationed in Seoul for military service or taught English abroad. Maybe he's the only one in his family with a passport. Maybe this will be the moment his family decides it's time to travel and discover these things themselves.

There is an Asian guy blowing his girlfriend's mind, introducing her to a new world of flavors and textures. He shows her how to eat mul naengmyeon, a cold noodle soup that tastes better if you add vinegar and hot mustard first. He tells her how his parents came to this country, how he watched his mom make this dish at home. When she made it, she didn't add zucchini; she subbed radishes instead. An old man hobbles over to a neighboring table to order the chicken-and-ginseng porridge that he probably eats here every day. Bells go off for people to collect their orders. Behind the counters, women in visors work without stopping.

It's a beautiful, holy place. A cafeteria full of people from all over the world who have been displaced in a foreign country, each with a different history. Where did they come from and how far did they travel? Why are they all here? To find the galangal no American supermarket stocks to make the Indonesian curry that their father loves? To buy the rice cakes to celebrate Jesa and honor the anniversary of their loved one's passing? To satisfy a craving for tteokbokki on a rainy day, moved by a memory of some drunken, late-night snack under a pojangmacha tent in Myeong-dong?

We don't talk about it. There's never so much as a knowing look. We sit here in silence, eating our lunch. But I know we are all here for the same reason. We're all searching for a piece of home, or a piece of ourselves. We look for a taste of it in the food we order and the ingredients we buy. Then we separate. We bring the haul back to our dorm rooms or our suburban kitchens, and we re-create the dish that couldn't be made without our journey. What we're looking for isn't available at a Trader Joe's. H Mart is where your people gather under one odorous roof, full of faith that they'll find something they can't find anywhere else.

In the H Mart food court, I find myself again, searching for the first chapter of the story I want to tell about my mother. I am sitting next to a Korean mother and her son, who have unknowingly taken the table next to ol' waterworks. The kid dutifully gets their silverware from the counter and places it on paper napkins for both of them. He's eating fried rice and his mom has seolleongtang, ox-bone soup. He must be in his early twenties, but his mother is still instructing him on how to eat, just like my mom used to. "Dip the onion in the paste." "Don't add too much gochujang or it'll be too salty." "Why aren't you eating the mung beans?" Some days, the constant nagging would annoy me. Woman, let me eat in peace! But, most days, I knew it was the ultimate display of a Korean woman's tenderness, and I cherished that love. A love I'd do anything to have back.

The boy's mom places pieces of beef from her spoon onto his. He is quiet and looks tired and doesn't talk to her much. I want to tell him how much I miss my mother. How he should be kind to his mom, remember that life is fragile and she could be gone at any moment. Tell her to go to the doctor and make sure there isn't a small tumor growing inside her too.

Within five years, I lost both my aunt and my mother to cancer. So, when I go to H Mart, I'm not just on the hunt for cuttlefish

and three bunches of scallions for a buck; I'm searching for memories. I'm collecting the evidence that the Korean half of my identity didn't die when they did. H Mart is the bridge that guides me away from the memories that haunt me, of chemo head and skeletal bodies and logging milligrams of hydrocodone. It reminds me of who they were before, beautiful and full of life, wiggling Chang Gu honey-cracker rings on all ten of their fingers, showing me how to suck a Korean grape from its skin and spit out the seeds.