

BOSTON COLLEGE

A MEMOIR

LEV GOLINKIN

A BACKPACK,
A BEAR,
and EIGHT CRATES
of VODKA



"[A] hilarious and heartbreaking story of a Jewish family's escape from oppression . . . whose drama, hope and heartache Mr. Golinkin captures brilliantly."
—The New York Times

FIRST YEAR ACADEMIC CONVOCATION
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WHY READ A BOOK?

We can learn what is in any book on Huffpost.com or Amazon, hear what others think on Twitter, listen to a TedTalk if we want to learn from cutting-edge thinkers. So why sit with a thick paper tome when it's far easier to get our information and entertainment in other forms?

One answer is precisely because it is easier, and noisier, to learn and be entertained via digital and truncated means. Technology keeps us connected, linked, always visible, always able to see and be seen. Sometimes this connection, this being linked, on, and seen is valuable, worthwhile and even politically efficacious. Sometimes.

But if all we ever do is check status updates, skim articles, and read summaries of other peoples' ideas while listening to music and texting our friends, something valuable gets lost. That something goes by many names: concentration, solitude, space for reflection, intimacy, and authenticity. Reading a book, we hope you'll learn at Boston College if you don't already know and believe already, brings with it unique form of pleasure and thinking.

Reading can take us out of the smallness of our own perception, our own little lives, the limited boundaries of what we have experienced. We can glimpse into the perspectives and even empathize with people whose lives are vastly different than our own. Beyond teaching empathy, reading takes us briefly out of the noisy, overwhelming chaos that is our daily life and gives us something else, which William Dereseiwicz describes well:

"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." [1]

Cultivating habits of thought. That's what coming to BC is offering you. Some habits can and should be digital, connected, and even multi-tasked. But sometimes we all need the habit of opening a good book, diving in, and leaving the din of our contemporary moment, temporarily, behind.



WHY READ LEV GOLINKIN'S A BACKPACK, A BEAR, AND EIGHT CRATES OF VODKA?

As a member of the class of 2021, each of you will have the opportunity to read *A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka* and to welcome author Lev Golinkin to Boston College to discuss his work.

Lev Golinkin spent his early childhood in Kharkov, Ukraine the late 1980s in the Soviet Union. Born into a Jewish family, Lev experienced anti-Semitism and oppression under the Communist Regime. In the Fall of 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Lev's parents heard that the United States would soon close the borders and no longer permit Soviet Jews to emigrate. This book chronicles how this looming deadline prompted Lev's parents to begin their immigration process, and the journey that brought Lev, his parents, his sister, Lina, and his grandmother first to Austria and then on to the United States.

As Lev shares his story in the book, we, as readers, have the chance to encounter the people who accompanied them on their journey and to hear about the struggles and hopes his family experienced along their way. As he notes in the foreword to the book, "...this is not only my story: the narrative takes place in the context of a massive refugee movement and includes accounts of numerous individuals..." (p. ix).

In reading *A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka*, it is our hope that the stories Lev shares, his own and those of the people he encounters, will give you

¹From a lecture by William Dereseiwicz to the plebe class at the United States Military Academy at West Point, October 2009

insight into the importance of accompanying others on their journey and striving to be men and women for others. Since 2004, Conversations in the First Year has engaged members of the incoming class in an intellectual and reflective dialogue with a common text. This practice embodies the richness of the Catholic intellectual tradition at Boston College, which calls us to examine our faith and experience in conversation with other thinkers. We are thrilled to introduce you to the first of many thoughtful, inspirational, and profound conversation partners you will have the opportunity to engage with during your time at Boston College.

As you begin reading about Lev's journey from Ukraine to the Heights, we invite you to reflect upon this prayer which Lev shares as part of his story:

A Future Not Our Own

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of
saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.*

No statement says all that could be said.

*No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession
brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.*

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

*This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one
day will grow. We water the seeds already planted
knowing that they hold future promise.*

We lay foundations that will need further development.

*We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.*

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of
liberation in realizing this.*

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's
grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the
difference between the master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not
messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.*

In memory of Oscar Romero (1917–1980)
by Bishop Ken Untener



A WAY TO APPROACH THE TEXT

As members of the Class of 2021, it is our hope that some of your first, meaningful conversations at BC will include this book, which emphasizes that each of us has a story to share and that each of our stories is shaped by the important people and the significant events in our lives. In sharing our own stories and hearing the stories of others, we are invited to consider our relationship with God, our relationship with others and the world around us, and our relationship with ourselves.

This invitation will continue to be extended throughout your time at Boston College – in classrooms, residence halls, athletic arenas, through service and social justice programs, and in liturgies, prayer services, retreats, and faith-sharing opportunities. This ongoing invitation to the process of student formation is an essential component of a Jesuit education and at Boston College we emphasize three particular dimensions in student formation – intellectual, social, and spiritual. The prominence of formation in Jesuit education can be traced back to the values that St. Ignatius Loyola and his companions embraced in founding the first Jesuit schools to educate men and women for and with others.

MEN AND WOMEN FOR OTHERS

This phrase, which embodies the Jesuit ideal for students, faculty, staff, and administrators at Boston College comes from a July 1973 presentation at the *Tenth International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe* by Father Pedro Arrupe, S.J., who was the Superior General of the Society of Jesus - the Jesuits – at the time. This address was delivered on the Feast of St. Ignatius (July 31) to a predominantly male audience of Jesuit alumni, but Arrupe's language has been broadened to include "men and women" and was an exhortation to social justice for all involved in Jesuit education:

Today our prime educational objective must be to form men-and-women-for-others; men and women who will live not for themselves but for God and his Christ - for the God-man who lived and died for all the world; men and women who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors; men and women completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce.

<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/men-for-others.html>

This ideal of living a life in service to others is one of the fundamental values of the Jesuits and can be traced back to their founder, Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

The most distinctive influence on Jesuit education, however, came not from the curriculum nor from a methodology, but from the spirituality Jesuits had learned from the Exercises. They had experienced God educating their souls (“like a schoolmaster,” Ignatius had said): teaching them to discern the lights and shadows in the details of their own lives; trusting them to use their freedom wisely; re-orienting their lives by widening their awareness of grace at work in all created things and in the diversity of human culture; and impelling them to use their talents for the glory of God.

Here was a powerful model of the educational process, of how far reaching its outcomes could be, and especially of the relationship Jesuits could have with their own students, whatever the subject. So, they insisted that students master the material in the curriculum but they also used the material of the curriculum as a means to encourage each student’s growth as a human being. They engaged them as individuals and helped them see others as individuals uniquely valued by God. They widened students’ appreciation of all the ways God could be found at work in the world, encouraged their freedom, and inspired them by the example of their own lives. They taught them how to discern the meaning of their experiences and make decisions about their lives. They challenged them to use their gifts to help others, especially those most in need.

It is worth repeating how deeply the idea of “helping others” was built into the Jesuit concept of education from the very beginning. The early Jesuits knew from their own experience how profound a conversion of heart could occur when one personally meets pain and suffering, economic and social marginalization, and human loneliness and isolation. Serving the destitute, the imprisoned, those on the edges of society, was an integral part of the mission of Jesus and clearly one of the priorities he had given to his followers (consider the picture of the last judgment in Matthew 25:31-46: “I was hungry and you gave me food”). Part of the Jesuits’ pastoral strategy of preaching and teaching the gospel, therefore, was to place those who had heard the word into immediate contact with those who desperately needed the works of mercy that the word of God demanded: those abandoned to die in public hospitals, the imprisoned, prostitutes, and the homeless. Bringing the respectable and the economically well-off into contact with people they might never have met created a climate of social reform. Jesuits brought these attitudes into their schools. To be educated was to be educated for a just society, for the service not just of oneself or one’s family or class but of the entire community.

(From The Red Book, 2009, p.p. 33-37)

To cultivate this formation, St. Ignatius and his companions translated their distinctive spirituality into an educational vision by describing it as a three-

part process. It begins with paying attention to experience, moves to reflecting on the meaning of experience, and ends in deciding how to act moving forward. Jesuit education, then, can be described in terms of three key movements: Be attentive, be reflective, be loving.

Being attentive is largely about us and how God is working in us through our experience. Being reflective moves our gaze outward, measuring our experience against the accumulated wisdom of the world. Being loving requires that we look even more closely at the world around us. It asks the question: How are we going to act in this world? In part, this is a question about what we are going to do with the knowledge and self-understanding and freedom that we have appropriated by reflection. How shall we act in ways that are consistent with this new self and what it knows and values? (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

But we can't move very far in the direction of answering this question without discovering that it is not only a question about how our lives can be authentic. It is also a question about our relationship to the world around us and what the world needs us to do. We are not solitary creatures. From the womb, we live in relationships with others, grow up in cultural, social, and political institutions that others have created for us. To be human is to find our place in these relationships and these institutions, to take responsibility for them, to contribute to nurturing and improving them, to give something back.

So, for Jesuit education, it is not enough to live authentically in the world. We have to participate in the transformation of the world (the Hebrew phrase tikkun olam conveys the same idea, of mending or repairing the world). For more than four hundred years, it has been said that Jesuit education educated “the whole person.” Today, we live with an increasingly global sense of what it means to be human. A person can't be considered “whole” without an educated solidarity with other human beings in their hopes and fears and especially in their needs. We can't pay attention to our experience and reflect on it without realizing how our own lives are connected with the dreams of all those with whom we share the journey of human existence, and therefore with the economic, political, and social realities that support or frustrate their dreams. This is why Jesuit education is so often said to produce “men and women for others” (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

This ideal striving to live our lives for others remains an integral part of Jesuit education today, in particular at Boston College:

“The motto ‘men and women for others’ has transformed the drive I have in my life and what I want to accomplish out of it. And with my Arrupe experience, I feel like my life is committed to a lot of people in a lot of ways and I feel very passionately about that.”

Carson Truesdale, BC '17 – 2017 St. Ignatius Award winner



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

As you prepare to read about Lev's journey and the people he encountered along the way – from the Soviet Union to Austria to the United States to Boston College and back – we hope you will consider your own journey and the people and experiences that have been formative to your story. The following are questions you might consider as you read *A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka*:

The ideals of Jesuit education call us to live more than authentically, but for Lev as a child in the Soviet Union, living authentically was not an option. As he witnessed his sister's dream of a vocation in medicine denied to her because grades were not based on merit (p. 24) and his father's experience of being forced to recuse himself from presenting at a conference because he was Jewish (p. 25), he saw that individuals were not respected for being themselves in Soviet culture at the time. "Adapt and endure, and those who had allowed themselves to be paralyzed by lamenting over pogroms, anti-Semitism in school, anti-Semitism at work, beatings in the yard, complacent teachers, friction, tides, gravity, and other unalterable factors were ground underfoot." (pp. 25-26)

Have there been times where the pressures of society have not encouraged you to live your most authentic life? How have you responded? Have you been able to overcome those pressures?

The oppression impacted Lev, where he was persecuted with beatings by classmates and neglect by teachers in school and made to feel different, set apart, because he was Jewish. Even his best childhood friend, Oleg, spurns him because he is Jewish, taunting him with slurs of being *zhid*, convincing Lev that he embodied the ugliness associated with that word. "How can you get angry at someone for speaking the truth?" Lev asks.

He describes the impetus for the family's immigration when he writes, "...we didn't want to embrace an identity; we needed to cast off a stigma."

Are there times when others have made you feel unworthy? Have you witnessed others who have been marginalized? Are there times when through your words and actions you have made others feel stigmatized?

While the Golinkins emigrated to the U.S. over 25 years ago, there are still many immigrants and refugees in our world today who seek hope and peace in a new land.

In his address to members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See in January 2017, Pope Francis spoke about the importance of recognizing the dignity of immigrants and refugees in our world today:

“With regard to migrants, displaced persons and refugees, a common commitment is needed, one focused on offering them a dignified welcome. This would involve respecting the right of ‘every human being... to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there,’ [John XXIII, Encyclical Letter, Pacem in Terris (April 11, 1963), 25] while at the same time ensuring that migrants can be integrated into the societies in which they are received without the latter sensing that their security, cultural identity and political-social stability are threatened...

Above all, the current crisis should not be reduced to a simple matter of numbers. Migrants are persons, with their own names, stories and families. There can never be true peace as long as a single human being is violated in his or her personal identity and reduced to a mere statistic or an object of economic calculation.”

(Quoted from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/january/documents/papa-francesco_20170109_corpo-diplomatico.html)

What has your journey to Boston College been? Who are the people you have encountered on their journeys? How have their stories impacted you?

As the Golinkins begin their immigration journey, they travel with two other families. Describing the interrogation by the tamozhniki, Lev describes the Kantlers as focusing on themselves while the Zhislins waited for the Golinkins, despite their own fears. *“The Zhislins had known us for less than a week. They could have been licking their wounds on the bus...Instead, Yura and Igor remained in the hallway during the entire search, chomping at the bit for the chance to get us out of there, and to this day, the fact that they came back for us remains the bravest, most insane thing anyone has done for me.”* (pp. 95-96).

Who are the people who have shown solidarity with you in times of trouble? For whom have you shown bravery and care in difficult times?

The title of the book reveals the material items that Lev’s family carried, but they also brought with them hope for peace and dignity:

“The best part of emigration was hope. Everything was temporary, nothing was certain, and there was always that blessed chance that tomorrow something would happen and I would come across a place, a situation, a fairy godmother, a genie, something capable of generating a poof! that would cure me.” (p. 239)

And they brought with them the fear and worthlessness:

Despite the miles traveled and the hopes realized, Lev did not find that peace. “but a couple of years after we moved to East Windsor, sometime around middle school, I realized that emigration was over and the poof! never came. I woke up and was still a zhid, and this time there was no new place to disappear to. We were no longer trapped in Russia; we were no longer refugees in Austria. For the first time in a long time we didn’t have to run, and all I wanted to do was keep running.” (p. 239)

Their immigration story includes both challenges and hopes. What challenges and hopes have been part of your story? What new ones do you anticipate as your story continues at Boston College?

Lev’s image of himself did not begin to change until his experiences with the Appalachia Volunteers program (“Appa”) and the Arrupe International Immersion Program at Boston College. Lev describes his experience of these programs as one of mutual dignity, recognizing the good within the people whom he met and the good within himself.

“To be able to sit down with another human being and let them hold my soul for a moment, to hold it and return it, and to do so without judging, or controlling, or hating, and to do the same to them -- that was the gift of Appalachia.” p. 274

During your time at Boston College you will have the opportunity to offer service and experience solidarity with others through programs like Appa, and many others through Campus Ministry, the Volunteer and Service Learning Center, the BC Neighborhood Center, PULSE, and many more. Each of these programs invites students to think about where their passions lie and how offering service and accompanying others – on campus, throughout the city of Boston, across the United States, and around the world – can help us be our best selves.

Lev’s experience of solidarity and care in the relationships he fostered at Boston College created the opportunity for him to share his story with Alicia and Professor Kilcoyne as conversation partners. These conversations helped Lev begin to recognize his self-worth and realize that he needed to retrace his steps and re-engage with people like Otto Binder and Peter in order to find peace.

What “experiences of mutual dignity” have you encountered in your life so far? Who are the people who have been conversation partners with you along your journey and how have they helped you to recognize the good within yourself and others? How might you seek out conversation partners you will seek out during your time at BC to help you consider your relationship with God, your relationship with others and the world around you, and your relationship with yourself?



CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

As you enter Boston College, you must consider how we live in the 21st century and how the world is growing rapidly and changing in unforeseen ways. In the midst of this globalized and technologically driven world, we ask you to critically evaluate all that has come before us. To enter into the University core curriculum is to enter into a foundation of knowledge and experiences that will better equip each of you to synthesize and adapt to the ever-changing world that you are part of each day. Being able to read attentively, write articulately, and think critically are important building blocks within your academic journey here at Boston College.

To fully embrace your Jesuit, Catholic education, you also need to consider how you will grow in your own understanding of faith. There are many conversation partners, including the Jesuit community, faculty, staff, and administrators, who are here to be your companions in contemplative action and reflective conversation as you search for truths in your life and the world around you.

Boston College hopes that each student will deepen their individual faith over the course of their years here. There are a number of sacred places within our community where you can go to contemplate and recognize God in all things.

**We would encourage you to seek out
these sacred places on our campus:**

www.bc.edu/prayermap



PATIENT TRUST

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

*We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.*

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

*We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.*

*And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.*

*And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.*

*Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.*

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.
excerpted from Hearts on Fire

As you enter into your first year of college, it is important to examine the decisions that you make while here at BC. Taking time to reflect upon your motivations, your desires, and your fears will give you a better perspective on your life—where you came from, where you are presently, and where you are heading. Boston College hopes to partner with you during this journey through the careful discernment of the intellectual, spiritual, and social components that affect you during your undergraduate journey.



Go Set the World Aflame!



**CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIRST YEAR:
A PROGRAM OF THE OFFICE OF FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE**



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