

COMFORTABLY NUMB

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I never studied abroad as a BC undergraduate, which was probably for the best, since I had vague designs of going to Australia (primarily to surf, of course). I felt honored to be invited to participate in the faculty seminar in Latin America, and decided to treat it as the study abroad experience I never had. Preparing for the

trip, I found myself asking more basic questions: what is the point of study abroad? How does it fit into the greater purpose of college? And what does all of this have to do with human rights? I wondered: beyond the facts and statistics and history of the dictatorships and their litany of human rights violations, what will I learn of great value that I can bring back to my students? It wasn't until weeks after I'd returned that I recalled a scene from the film *Calvary* that crystallized the most important thing I learned.



In the climactic scene, a priest, with a gun to his head, confesses to a victim of the Church's sexual abuse scandal. He confesses not to abuse, or sexual assault,

or rape—indeed, the priest is the sole virtuous soul in the small town that is the setting of the film—but to apathy. The victim, unable to wreak his vengeance on either the deceased perpetrator or the impersonal institution of the church, decides to focus his fury toward one of its innocent representatives. He asks the priest, “When you read about [the abuse scandal] in the papers, did you cry?” The priest thinks for a moment and says, “No.” “Why?” He shrugs, and mutters something like “It’s just somethin’ you read about it the papers. I was just...detached from it.” The priest—the person who is thought to be, and should be, the moral exemplar of the community—has become numb to the most heinous of acts; and ones perpetrated by the institution he loves and serves.

In some ways, he simply embodies the modern condition: inundated hourly by an onslaught of news—most of it negative, much of it grisly—it is natural to become numb to it all. The civil war in Syria, the European refugee crisis, culture wars over immigration, mass shootings, a terrorist attack here, a terrorist attack there... after awhile it all runs together with who got dumped on *The Bachelor* and the daily ritual of “Ugh...so what did he tweet today?” Swipe right, swipe left. Email. Text. Snap.

At one level, of course, such apathy is rational. The higher the numbers and the greater the distance, the harder it is to be moved by the suffering, the easier it is to scroll to the next story and get on with your day. And, besides, beyond perhaps donating to a relief agency, there's usually little we can do.

But if we shift from the macro to the micro—from the global to the local—we can ask what effect this over-exposure has on our everyday relationships. What habits of mind and heart does it cultivate? By growing numb to the suffering of the world, do we gradually, imperceptibly grow numb to the suffering of those around us—and even our very selves? Perhaps this instinct to turn away from suffering, to cling to comfort, to resist resistance—call it the “primordial avoidance”—is exacerbated by what the late political scientist Benjamin Barber termed the “infotainment telesector.” Perhaps this—the slightest shift in regard—is how we grow insensitive, calloused, closed, jaded. Perhaps this is how we become people incapable of being moved.

I. The Age of Neo-Illiberalism

Preparing to leave for a day of museums and tours recounting the atrocities of Chile's military dictatorship under Pinochet, a headline from that morning's New York Times caught my eye: “To Trump, Human Rights Concerns are Often a Barrier to Trade.”

Nowadays, it is hard not to hear the phrase “human rights” as hollow. Abroad and at home, the specter of illiberalism has descended. According to political scientist Larry Diamond, the world has been in a “democratic recession” since 2006. From Turkey to Russia, from the Philippines to the Netherlands, from France to the UK and, of course, the United States, the forces of populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism are, for the first time in seven decades, challenging the liberal international order. As Robin Niblett writes in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*,

the architects of the [liberal international order] sought to promote not just economic development and individual fulfillment but also world peace. The best hope for that, they contended, lay in free markets, individual rights, rule of law, and elected governments, which would be checked by independent judiciaries, free presses, and vibrant societies.

We are playing at trading the “West”—the post-World War II liberal system erected by the Allies to foster economic interdependence in order to prevent civilizational war, protect human rights, and foster prosperity—for “Westeros”—the fictional world of *Game of Thrones*, a Hobbesian state of nature riven by warring families and fiefdoms, tribes and warlords, where force and fraud are the cardinal virtues. According to this worldview, human rights are a luxury we cannot afford to care about. We must look out for #1. America first, humanity second.

Call it the age of “neo-illiberalism.”

Whether this phenomenon is a trend or a tectonic shift, only time will tell. But as Niblett warns, “liberal democracies cannot postpone difficult political decisions any longer. They need to fix themselves first if they are to sustain the liberal international order.” Conservative writer and former speechwriter for President George W. Bush David Frum is even darker: “We are living through the most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered.”

It is difficult to convey to students, who by this point are too young to have any memory of the day, just how different the country was before 9/11. I was a sophomore at BC that year, getting ready for class that day (a

philosophy course called *Romanticism and Idealism*, of all things). Before I left for class that day—before the towers fell—it’s safe to say that the dominant historical narrative was Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history.” At that time, the country was still flying high off of the “holiday from history” that characterized the 1990s. Between the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11, there just wasn’t much of world-historical consequence going on. Fukuyama’s thesis, put forth in a 1992 book, was that the end of the Cold War signaled the end of history: not in the literal sense that time would stop, of course, but that History understood as a contest between competing ideologies was effectively over. The combination of liberal democracy and capitalism had proved to be the most desirable and sustainable way to organize human life, and the remainder of history would be a gradual process of its global spread.

Short of nuclear war, it is difficult to imagine a more deadly blow to this thesis than 9/11. Indeed, after the twin towers fell and al Qaeda had been identified as responsible, the “return of history” was promptly proclaimed. Samuel Huntington’s alternative narrative, the “clash of civilizations,” was resurrected. According to Huntington, geopolitics can be understood through the analogy of plate tectonics: there are certain cultural plates forged through millennia that, over long stretches of time, will inevitably collide. The West was not Civilization, a star destined to draw all lesser satellites into its orbit, but just one civilization among many.

The events of the last two years have thrust us back into Huntington’s world. Or so conventional wisdom has it. But we would do well to remember the other half of Fukuyama’s story. As Paul Sagar suggests in a recent article in *Aeon*,

Rarely read but often denigrated, [*The End of History*] might be the most maligned, unfairly dismissed and misunderstood book of the post-war era. Which is unfortunate for at least one reason: Fukuyama might have done a better job of predicting the political turmoil that engulfed Western democracies in 2016 – from Brexit, to Trump, to the Italian Referendum – than anybody else.

Attention is typically focused on the title of Fukuyama’s book—“The End of History”—which he cribbed from Hegel. Little is devoted to the subtitle—“the Last Man”—which he took from Nietzsche. “The most universal sign of the modern age,” Nietzsche wrote, is that “man has lost dignity in his own eyes to an incredible extent.” Fukuyama elaborates the notion of the last man and the risks it poses:

The life of the last man is one of physical security and material plenty, precisely what Western politicians are fond of promising their electorates. Is this really what the human story has been ‘all about’ these past few millennia? Should we fear that we will be both happy and satisfied with our situation, no longer human beings but animals of the genus *homo sapiens*?

His concern was that, on the one hand, we might become a nation consumed by consumerism, cocooned in comfort, withdrawn from the realm of politics and detached from reality, unconcerned with any greater purpose for our lives or countries or species. Maximize pleasure, minimize pain, and whatever you do, don’t talk or think about religion and politics. Having abandoned God, Nietzsche wrote that the modern world subscribed to the “religion of comfortableness.” The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow was filled with hamburgers, Candy Crush, and porn. This is the end of history as secular eschaton of escapism and entertainment. Think *Wall-E*.

Writing this before the personal computer—before widespread internet access; before the smartphone; before Facebook; before the descent of digital disruption onto everyday life in the last decade—Fukuyama’s warning is prescient. And, when we look at what he has to say about another potential pathway, eerie:

Or is the danger that we will be happy on one level, but still dissatisfied with ourselves on another, and hence ready to drag the world back into history with all its wars, injustice, and revolution?”

This regression, Fukuyama thought, might transpire due to the return of an element modernity represses—of *megalothymia*, “a desire not just for respect and proportionate recognition, but a need to disproportionately dominate over others in ostentatious and spectacular ways.” His example of an individual possessed by *megalothymia* is eerier still. Sagar:

In describing the shallow celebrity culture, the essential emptiness, of the habitat of the last man, Fukuyama had a particular example in mind. He went to the same individual for illustration when looking for an archetype of *megalothymia* – who else but ‘a developer like Donald Trump’.

Hagar lays out the alternatives as Fukuyama saw them:

It was possible that the last men at the end of History might sink down into a brutish contentment with material comforts, rather like dogs lying around in the afternoon sun.... But they might well go the other way. There was every chance that the last men (and women) would be deeply discontented with their historically unprecedented ease and luxury, because it failed to feed *megalothymia*. If the last men went this way, they would become bored by what Fukuyama called ‘masterless slavery – the life of rational consumption’. The spread of egalitarian values that went along with secular democratic politics would open up spaces of severe resentment – especially, we might now postulate, among those who had lost their traditional places at the top of social hierarchies, and felt cheated of the recognition that they believed they were owed.

An unattributed quote has been circulating around the internet over the past year or so: “When you are accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.” The expansion of egalitarianism poses a perceived threat to the previously empowered—politically, economically, and culturally.

The collapse of confidence in international institutions and the sacredness of human rights flows from the collapse of confidence in national institutions, the decline of democratic norms, the cessation of civility, the deficit of decency, and the recession of the respect that all take root in one place: the primal experience of recognition. Recognition that pierces through all distinctions of race and religion, culture and class, ability and age, distinctions that express but do not exhaust our identity.

The identity politics and “intersectionality” of today’s far Left, and the ethno-nativism of Trumpism (I hesitate to call it today’s far Right out of a conviction that it is an ideologically inchoate beast that lurks about the fringes of our political spectrum) both miss this essential element. Trumpism is fueled by a *megalothymic* mélange of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia, not to mention a misguided economic protectionism. But the flip side of the quote above is this: “When you are accustomed to oppression, revenge feels like justice.” The rage that fuels the ascendant identity politics of the left is resentful and reactionary in its own way; hence the prevalence of online lynch mobs quick to tar and feather anyone who departs from intersectional orthodoxy. Helen Pluckrose nails it:

It is regrettable that intersectionality in practice so often manifests in restrictive ideological conformity, exclusionary tactics, hostility, tribalism and even racist abuse. It’s regrettable because liberalism could be benefitted by specialist attention to the ways in which specific groups within society are advantaged or disadvantaged. However, focus on group identity and experience should not come at the cost of respect for the whole world of human ideas and experience and every individual’s right to access and subscribe to any part of it. Until intersectionality respects diversity of ideas as well as of identity and supports every

individual's right to hold any of them regardless of their group identity, it cannot be said to represent anything except its own ideology.

Both the far Left and Trumpism traffic, in various ways, in what Martin Luther King, Jr. termed false senses of superiority and inferiority. Both are irrational; they seize upon arbitrary identity markers—race, class, nationality—to construct moral hierarchies. Both, in different ways, are illiberal. And both miss the universalist element, the standpoint from which human rights flow: the ground-root experience of recognition.

II. Them—Us--I

The most powerful part of the faculty seminar, for me, was our visit to Villa Grimaldi, a sprawling estate on the outskirts of the city, tucked into the lap of the Andes, that had been converted into a detention and torture facility immediately after the military coup. Our tour guide, Pedro—a tall, poised man with observant, piercing blue eyes—was not only highly knowledgeable, but a great storyteller. About 20 minutes into the tour, when we first came to the torture chambers, his diction shifted: “And this is where we spent most mornings.” His use of the second person pronoun continued for the next several minutes. I traded glances with some of my colleagues, knowing we were thinking the same thing: “Is he using that language for effect, or was he actually a prisoner here?”

Our suspicions were confirmed several tour stops later, when Pedro began to tell his story. How he'd been taken. How he'd been imprisoned and tortured. How he'd been moved from one facility to another, spending a full 16 months in the regime's detention system. How he'd been released, yet stuck in a zombie-like stupor for a long time afterward. How he'd learned, years later, that the reason the regime released people in such a condition was to strike fear into the population. And how, finally, he had come to the US, expressing his gratitude to the late Senator Ted Kennedy for his fierce opposition to human rights violations in Chile.

One of the most striking things about Pedro's story was the ambivalence he felt toward the United States. On the one hand, the CIA helped foment the coup that led to his imprisonment and torture. On the other, Ted Kennedy's valiant efforts enabled him to come to the US and put his life back together. America provided the kindling for the fire that burned him, and helped him heal from those very wounds. This ambivalence reflects a tension in America's self-identity: as nationalistic, self-aggrandizing empire, or as cosmopolitan champion of human rights. Or perhaps the reality is more complicated: the attempt to beat back left wing politics in Latin America through covert support of rightwing dictatorships could be seen as part of the geopolitical struggle against communism, a threat to human rights. In any case, Pedro's story complicated any simple picture of my country's relation to his.

But what was most striking was not just his story, but how we told it. There was no theoretical discussion about human rights, no political theory or policy analysis, no history lesson. There was only a singular story of suffering, relayed from one person to another.

III. Human Rights in the Classroom

There is a kind of eternal frustration bound up with teaching ethics. In Plato's dialogue, *Meno*, Socrates asks whether virtue can be taught (short answer: No.). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle insists that the

purpose of the inquiry is not to learn what virtue is, but to become good. The moral virtues cannot be transmitted through instruction, but must be acquired through habituation. Teaching ethics in a university classroom might then appear as a fool's errand. The challenge is to puncture the air of unreality that pervades an academic setting, to help students see how and why these matters—of virtue and vice, of justice and injustice, of human rights—matter, and are bound up with their own lives. The assumption is that that same air of unreality pervades our everyday lives, and that regular puncturing can make us more awake and aware and responsive to reality. The goal, in short, is to make it real.

Often, ethics as taught in a formal education setting revolves around “big moment” decisions: Teaching Kant: “The Nazis are at the door—is it ok to lie?” Teaching utilitarianism: “An out of control trolley will kill three people unless you flip a switch that causes one person to die—what's it gonna be?” Of course, such thought experiments can be useful for sparking discussions that help students reflect on their moral principles, intuitions, and reasoning. However, for most of us, for most of our lives, the Nazis never come, and we never find ourselves on a runaway train with the fates of innocents in our hands. The stuff of ethics, by and large, is the stuff of the everyday. But where do human rights and our everyday lives intersect?

Kant, widely regarded as the “father of human rights” for providing a rational, secular foundation for an absolute morality, never studied abroad. More precisely, Kant famously spent the overwhelming majority of his life in his hometown of Konigsburg. He was a creature of habit bound tightly to a mechanical schedule. The man responsible perhaps more than any other for constructing a cosmopolitan vision for the world lived a strikingly provincial life—at least on the outside.

Students in my classes generally aren't persuaded by Kant's arguments, yet they are rarely willing to abandon their virtually unanimous belief in human rights. Indeed, human rights are the political DNA of our culture, the marrow of the modern worldview, the lynchpin of liberalism. But “human rights violations” are things that happen to people in earlier periods of history, or on the other side of the world, in countries that most American probably couldn't find on a map. We take them—and the order that enshrines and protects them—for granted. And we do not value for we take for granted.

Kant is often berated for taking the emotions—and, ironically, the humanity—out of ethics. “His thoughts feel so cold!” But there was a particular emotion he thought had a special moral significance, a feeling with which we are all familiar: the feeling of respect. Respect for the moral law, for persons, for human dignity. For Kant, it is the feeling of uplift kindled in the breast by recognition of another's humanity, of their free and rational nature, as carriers and authors of the moral law. It is the feeling George Washington wrote about as a young man in his “rules of civility”: “Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience.” It is the fountainhead of moral poetry.

Perhaps Kant strikes us as “abstract” or “inhuman” because we so easily lose touch with this most concrete of human experiences. At bottom, Kant was just trying to clarify and justify our moral common sense. Perhaps the challenge in teaching ethics, then, is not so much to impart new ideas or information, but to foster in students the habit of reflecting on what, deep down, they already know: to *re*-cognize themselves and others, or more precisely, those aspects of ourselves and others from which we are typically distracted. As Lao Tzu puts it, “To attain knowledge, add things everyday. To attain wisdom, remove things every day.”

IV. The BC Bubble and the Hero's Journey

If there is a moral ideal as hallowed in the Western tradition as human rights, it would be the Christian ideal of neighborly love. We tend to interpret this as, at least, not hurting people and not taking their stuff, and at

most, being nice. We typically take the first part as the easy one. Of course we love ourselves! The challenge, we assume, is loving others. But as is usual with Jesus, things are not what they seem, and true wisdom is the opposite of conventional wisdom. The real challenge is loving ourselves, which is only possible through seeing ourselves as we truly are—as vulnerable, suffering, dependent, flawed, mortal, human. We tend to regard our “humanity” in abstract, or perhaps even biological, terms—as a class or species we belong to. But our recognition of our own humanity is actually an intimate affair, something spied far from the madding crowd.

Pope Francis expressed his understanding of this deep truth in his response to the question, “Who is Jorge Bergoglio?” His reply: “I am a sinner.” We tend to put saints and popes and heroes on pedestals, but they’re all flawed, too. In his study of the Argentinian dictatorship, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, Federico Finchelstein writes,

In contrast with many other Latin American countries, the Catholic Church was one of the main backers of the junta [in Argentina].... The basis for this alliance rested on a notion accepted by most Argentine bishops at the time: any condemnation of human rights violations was a threat to the homeland and God.... The intimacy between God and the military nation was emphasized at the time, and Pope Francis, who as Father Bergoglio was the most important Jesuit in the country, never spoke out against this.

Even the best of us are in constant danger of the primordial avoidance. Our egos block us both from a genuine encounter with the neighbor, and a genuine encounter with ourselves. When we pile on additional layers of culture, nationality, religion, class, etc., the wall thickens even more. What maintains superficial bonds with the few undermines deeper bonds with the many.

At Boston College, it is customary to refer to the “BC bubble.” Apparently, the bubble is now portable: I hear students, faculty, and administrators report that for many of the popular study abroad destinations, such as Spain, BC students tend to clump together and, on weekends, skip around to other cities, bringing, in effect, the comforting connections of home abroad. While it is natural to want to maintain connections to the familiar, we should ask what is lost by bringing too many buffers, too many life-preservers, too much of the familiar to cling to that it saps the power of the adventure.

The mythologist Joseph Campbell liked to talk about what he called the “Hero’s Journey.” He believed that at the heart of all great stories—myths, epics, fairy tales, fictions—was a universal pattern. This basic archetype, the “monomyth,” has a threefold structure: 1) departure, 2) initiation, 3) return. Departure is the call to adventure, where the hero is drawn or casts herself into the unknown, a dark underworld, a zone of great power and great danger. There she encounters challenges that evoke qualities of her character and unlock parts of herself she didn’t even know were there. The descent is disorienting, and she must resist the temptation to retreat back to the light-world of the surface. But if she persists, she meets a great trial that, if survived and completed, initiates her into a new order, gives her deep insight, new eyes, a fresh perspective on herself and where she came from. Only from the bottom of the ocean can she finally see the surface. This hard-won pearl in hand, she returns home, sharing her wisdom with the community. Without that plunge into the unfamiliar, she would not have really gone anywhere. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. As Campbell liked to say, “If you’re falling, dive.”

V. Study Near

This summer, America celebrates the 200th birthday of Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau did not study abroad. Somewhat like Kant, he spent most of his life confined to a small territory. He went to Harvard, just a few miles down the road from his home in Concord, Mass. But in a way, Thoreau did study abroad; he just didn't go very far. Thoreau's study abroad was a mere two miles from his hometown: a modest wooden cabin he built in the woods by Walden Pond. Though he didn't go far, he stayed a long time: two years. While commonly regarded as a founding father of American environmentalism, Thoreau was also a passionate advocate for what we today would call social justice. His time at Walden changed his perspective on Concord. Living on the fringes of town, he saw first-hand evidence of the marginalization of Concord's vulnerable residents, including Irish immigrants and Native Americans. And, of course, he made a sustained case for civil disobedience a few years later. It may be a stretch, but perhaps Thoreau intuited what Pope Francis would confidently declare a century and a half later: that environmental and social justice go hand in hand. His time in the near abroad revealed the imperfections of the near.

We have little trouble finding the familiar in the foreign. We are terrible at finding the foreign in the familiar. If travel is not at least a little bit scary and hard and humbling, it's not travel. It's tourism. The challenge is not making sense of the new place. It's not being a tourist at home. This was Thoreau's signature talent—to daily encounter his tiny territory as an exotic land rich with mystery, never fully known. Travel, rightly done, can teach us how to inhabit our homeland with reverence and awe.

If I were speaking with a student coming back from study abroad, I would ask them some of the following questions: Not where did they go, but *why*? Not what did you get out of it, but how did it *get* to you? *Who* got to you? What stories struck you? What demands do they make on your own? On your country's?

Ultimately, I suspect that human rights draw their power not from logical arguments, abstract moral principles, or international agreements—important though these are—but from the experiences of recognition, the memories that ravel about them, and the stories we spin from their ragged thread.