

*The day I was with him, in the morning, Marcel came across a young man standing in the hallway. The kid was keeping a straight face. But he was clearly upset. It turned out he'd been asked to leave his class. As Marcel turned to deal with him, he asked me to turn off the recorder, so I did.*

*They talked for a minute. Marcel took the kid to his office, sat him down, told him to wait. And we walked away. He didn't want to use the student's name. But he explained what was going on.*

*Apparently, the students were given an incentive for being on time. And it was food. Cookies. It was cookies. And this student, along with everyone who'd gotten to class on time that day, was allowed to go up and take a cookie. But this particular student was dealing with a difficult and maybe dangerous situation at his house. So he hadn't gone home the night before. And because of that, he hadn't eaten.*

*So when he went up to take his cookie, he took two. The teacher told him to put one back. Not wanting to reveal his situation to the rest of the class, he didn't say anything. He just refused. He told Marcel he was just so hungry. That's why he'd been kicked out.*

*Marcel had a box of cereal in his office. And I walked with him as he zipped down to the cafeteria. They were out of regular milk...*

*...Back in Marcel's office, the student sat quietly, staring down, and ate a plastic bowl filled with Honey Nut Cheerios and chocolate milk. Then he got up, politely washed the bowl and spoon, said thank you to Marcel, and the two went back to his classroom.*

*You see situations like this all the time at Harper, situations that could so easily unravel. And without thinking anything of it, they get addressed because someone is there and makes the effort to figure out what's going on. It's stuff that'll never show up in a school budget. But it can be the difference between a kid going back to class or getting suspended.*

## ***From This Soil We'll Grow Together***

*It's what you want and who you are that have always been two very different things.*

*To accomplish great things, we must not only act but also dream, not only plan, but also believe.*

*The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little.*

*Ah, a man's reach should exceed his grasp – or what's a heaven for?*

*There are no great men, only great challenges that ordinary men are forced by circumstances to meet.*

*We're not primarily put on this earth to see through one another, but to see one another through.*

*If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten we belong to each other.*

*"When you look in the mirror, what do you see?" Crystal Smith asks.*

*"The good Devonte," he replies.*

*Then Crystal reminds him: "Don't forget he's in there."*

*Crystal Smith: And so it was very hard for me. And I said, "OK, son. I love you. And take care of yourself."*

*And he said, "I love you, too, Ma."*

*And I hung up.*

*That's that.*

Before you begin writing this blog, take out a piece of scratch paper and a pen. On the paper, write your answer to the following:

*Define your culture; define yourself culturally. What does it mean to be \_\_\_\_\_? What does it mean to be you? Who helped you get here? Who shaped you? Why are you **you**?*

When you're done, you may continue reading.

## Prologue: Excerpt from *War*, Luigi Pirandello

“Nonsense,” he repeated, trying to cover his mouth with his hand so as to hide the two missing front teeth. “Nonsense. Do we give life to our own children for our own benefit?”

The other travelers stared at him in distress. The one who had had his son at the front since the first day of the war sighed: “You are right. Our children do not belong to us, they belong to the country...”

“Bosh,” retorted the fat traveler. “Do we think of the country when we give life to our children? Our sons are born because...well, because they must be born, and when they come to life they take our own life with them. This is the truth. We belong to them but they never belong to us. And when they reach twenty they are exactly what we were at their age. We, too, had a father and mother, but there were so many other things as well...girls, cigarettes, illusions, new ties...and the Country, of course, whose call we would have answered – when we were twenty – even if father and mother had said no. Now, at our age, the love of our Country is still great, of course, but stronger than it is the love of our children. Is there any one of us here who wouldn’t gladly take his son’s place at the front if he could?”

There was a silence all round, everybody nodding as to approve.

“Why then,” continued the fat man, “should we consider the feelings of our children when they are twenty? Isn’t it natural that at their age they should consider the love for their Country (I am speaking of decent boys, of course) even greater than the love for us? Isn’t it natural that it should be so, as after all they must look upon us as upon old boys who cannot move any more and must sit at home? If Country is a natural necessity like bread of which each of us must eat in order not to die of hunger, somebody must go to defend it. And our sons go, when they are twenty, and they don’t want tears, because if they die, they die inflamed and happy (I am speaking, of course, of decent boys). Now, if one dies young and happy, without having the ugly sides of life, the boredom of it, the pettiness, the bitterness of disillusion...what more can we ask for him? Everyone should stop crying; everyone should laugh, as I do...or at least thank God – as I do – because my son, before dying, sent me a message saying that he was dying satisfied at having ended his life in the best way he could have wished. That is why, as you see, I do not even wear mourning...”

He shook his light fawn coat as to show it; his livid lip over his missing teeth was trembling, his eyes were watery and motionless, and soon after he ended with a shrill laugh which might well have been a sob.

“Quite so...quite so...” agreed the others.

# 1. Every Road Leads to an End

As some of you already know, I'm a big fan of the *Star Trek* franchise. I'm a bit young for *The Original Series*; Kirk and Spock's adventures are campy fun, with an emphasis on the campy, and I rarely found myself absorbed in their episodes as a kid. But *The Next Generation*, self-serious as it could be at times, hit my sweet spot. I loved its vision of a unified future: Wise captains who commanded all-powerful starships, vessels that could annihilate planets, yet who still opted for dialogue, diplomacy, and peace in almost all situations – upholding the ideals of a Federation of different worlds who worked together despite their differences? I was sold.

And I wasn't the only one. *The Next Generation* debuted in 1987, which meant it came of age at the very tail end of the Cold War before maturing during America's steady evolution into an unchecked hyperpower. During the show's earliest seasons, anxieties over whether the world could ever back away from the dangerous precipice of mutually-destructive nuclear war were commonplace. *Star Trek's* Federation was meant to be a hopeful counterpoint to those fears: a unified body composed of distinctly different cultures who joined forces in order to serve the greater good. The Federation testifies to the idea that people aren't that dissimilar at heart, and that parties who oppose or disagree with each other can find common ground if cooler heads and rational minds are given the time and space to work. For a kid who sincerely (and simplistically) believed that almost all of the world's problems would go away if we'd just stop fighting over our differences, *The Next Generation* was reassuring. To watch it was to feel like all of the smart people on the screen were turning to me and saying, "Hey, you've got the right idea!"

Appealing though that vision may be, it's firmly rooted in a late-'80s/early-'90s mindset. Watch it today, and it's difficult to not find it at least a little naïve, nor to notice that the writers glossed over plenty of issues, both in our present real world and in the future space they'd built, that demanded more attention. Consider: In order to join the Federation, a potential member world or species must first break the light-speed barrier ("warp speed") without outside assistance – typically without any awareness that alien life exists elsewhere in the universe. Imagine the sheer amount of resources a race would have to pour into such an endeavor, how much political capital would need to be spent on a venture with no guarantee of success. Then imagine how proud they would feel, to have achieved the impossible on their own. Then examine the conflicts that periodically flare in various European Union nations – Great Britain, Greece, and so on – over how much sway the larger EU alliance should have over each country's domestic affairs. Watch *Star Trek* and ask yourself: would all of these proud, highly-achieving species really want to toss their unique accomplishments, perspectives, and goals into the alliance's cultural blender/melting pot? On *The Next Generation*, the answer was something along the lines of *Of course! These are enlightened cultures and worlds. They've left behind more petty needs and anxieties in their push towards the stars, and they'd have no problem unifying for a common purpose.* But that isn't necessarily reflective of the world we live in now, let alone the one we'll occupy hundreds of years from now. Culture, tradition, identity, ways of life: these are not easy things to alter, overhaul, or even share.

When *Deep Space Nine*, the third Trek series, hit the airwaves in 1993, it was chastised for offering a darker vision of the Federation than *The Original Series* and *The Next Generation*, the two series that preceded it. "Darker" is, of course, a relative term: DS9 could be challenging, as episodes like *In the Pale Moonlight* ably demonstrated, but the risks you were allowed to take on television in the 1990s pale in comparison to what critically acclaimed dramas like *The Wire* in the 2000s, the recently-departed *Breaking Bad*, or *The Walking Dead* can attempt. Still, the show deserves credit for taking a frank look at the utopian future TOS and TNG offered up and saying, "Really? Are you sure that's what you'd want?"

On DS9, the human problems and frailties the other series had largely banished were allowed to resurface, and the show shed light on issues its predecessors had glossed over. In TOS and TNG, humans basically ran the whole Federation, but corruption wasn't a problem. Nor was rivalry, or greed, or any of the other things that have traditionally plagued human governments. And for all the lip service paid to the value of diversity, the Federation served as the kind of melting pot in which none of the metals remain much different from one another post-melting; you could be distinct, but only up to a certain point.

*Deep Space Nine* reversed this: while the "melting process" led to some blending and meshing of cultural perspectives, the "metals" still formed layers that didn't always mix harmoniously. Humans, it turns out, hadn't conquered all of their fears, nor their ability to harbor prejudices, and the show examined the consequences of not leaving such things behind. It also showed other races who were willing to snipe at the Federation for essentially gobbling up everything in its path and turning it into itself.

When I watched the show as a kid, Federation membership seemed awesome. But when I rewatch it as a young adult, I've realized that only seemed true because the Federation's dominant cultural and ethical touchstones largely mirrored my own. (I can't imagine I would've been nearly as big a fan if the Federation had been, say, openly fascist.)

In *Making Islands Where No Islands Should Go*, I wrote about Sebastopol, the place in Northern California where I grew up. Right around the time I headed off to college, I started to get a sense of how my hometown, for all of its bizarre quirks and character, had given rise to its own sort of **monoculture** – and how that monoculture, in turn, had both shaped me and sort of robbed me of anything more distinct.

There was, and still is, an accepted attitude in the town towards *x*, *y*, and *z*, and I hadn't realized how rare it was to encounter serious deviation from those ideals until I went to live in a place where people didn't think the same way. There's a proper way to dress in my town, a correct way to speak...frankly, an expected way to vote. Even those who behave differently fit into the monoculture, in their own weird way, because it takes their existence into account: *We have room for these specific people to disagree because we expect that from them; it's their way.* (Think about the regular groups of protesters on the four corners of Main Street: same idea.) If someone else chose a different route – if a homeowner in town started behaving, and especially voting, like one of the farmers from our borders – it would've been noticed.

I imagine that the small-town monoculture doesn't necessarily sound appealing to you; some of you probably feel Arcadia has one of its own. But frankly speaking, *The Next Generation's* Federation was mostly stable, and my hometown was peaceful and suffered very little in the way of crime. *Deep Space Nine's* version of the Federation, on the other hand, gets bashed nearly to death in successive wars against opponents it cannot find common cause with until the damage has been done. While I could see DS9's point – that even something created and promoted with good intentions, like the Federation, can be subverted or broken if it isn't maintained correctly – it was also hard to come away from the show without thinking that differences, when allowed to flourish, inevitably bring chaos to systems that otherwise would've been stable.

In other words, if you want things to "work," *The Next Generation's* model seems likelier to succeed. But if things "work," you may end up losing the very qualities that made you...well, you...the qualities that, when exercised freely, sent you hurtling towards the stars, faster than the light could chase you.

## 2. When They Left, They Left Me in Pieces

As a community, Occidental College's student body was much closer to DS9's version of the Federation, where people squabbled and proudly maintained their separate cultural personas, than TNG's version. At the College, individuals took great interest in examining their cultural backgrounds, their heritage and legacies, and the forces and factors that helped shape them. This, obviously, wasn't something I was accustomed to; nothing was really examined in my hometown because nothing really seemed to change from year to year. But in the world outside my town's limits, social movements had sought changes, disaffected or disenfranchised groups had sought power, and people who felt they weren't being given fair shots at their rightful place in the sun started agitating for them. People, in short, turned out to feel very strongly about things I'd previously ignored or never realized mattered.

It took time for me to appreciate those feelings, to genuinely respect them instead of merely politely tolerating them. It wasn't an easy transition. I'm proud to say that I wasn't raised to be racist, sexist, classist, etc.; I rolled out of my little town with precious few "\_\_\_phobias" (you can fill in the blank as you like). I usually had no problem with people's beliefs when they differed from my own. My approach was more *laissez-faire*, in that I wasn't particularly interested in challenging others' beliefs, and I wasn't particularly interested in having mine challenged. Similarity interested me more than difference.

Unfortunately for collegiate me, many people in my new community found difference more interesting, and felt the need to discuss such things perpetually. I've never been more aware of my "whiteness" – let alone my "white maleness" – than when I was forced to acknowledge and examine such labels, unconsciously accepted and perpetuated or not. Absurd as it probably sounds to you, I never particularly thought of myself as white; I wasn't exactly filling in the appropriate Ethnicity bubble on my state-test Scantrons each year with an intense desire to reflect on what it meant to be Caucasian. I befriended white people almost exclusively, but not consciously. In fact, I did so sort of by default. Over eighty percent of the students at my school were Caucasian, and I'd guess the percentage of whites in our faculty was even higher. I was surrounded by people who looked and spoke as I did. And since I was never confronted with difference, I never bothered carving out a specific, personal cultural or ethnic identity. I mimicked what I saw, without realizing I was doing so, simply because I never encountered alternatives to The Way Everyone Thought About Things.

So at first, I was irritated by the attitudes I faced at Occidental. *Why does everyone want to talk about this stuff? Why can't we just get together when we agree and leave each other alone when we disagree?* I wanted to get back to playing Madden and Mario Kart with the other kids in my dorm, not discuss issues of power as they related to skin tone, or gender, or language...especially because mine were not discussed fondly.

But I eventually realized that my particular upbringing had left me with a lot to learn, and that my irritation with the topics at hand had at least a little to do with my embarrassment over my own ignorance. So I began adapting to the new world in which I found myself. In order to avoid tripping over my feet (rhetoric-wise, at least) and causing misunderstandings, I tried to get a sense of peoples' concerns, values, and goals. In other words, I started trying to understand people not just as they existed themselves, but as they existed in a bunch of larger frameworks: *How do they fit into the College? Into their families? Into youth/pop culture? Into their ethnic heritage?*

And what I found surprised me: those frameworks, and the questions they were forcing me to ask, could actually be pretty interesting when you looked at them the right way. What the heck *did* it mean to be white? How was I benefitting from my gender, my lack of accent, my aggressively-average-

for-an-American height? How did my Northern Californian perspective mesh with the worldview of my South Carolinian classmate (who also happened to be female and African-American)?

I began to realize, unsettlingly, that as much as I loved my hometown, and as strongly as I felt connected to it – especially after leaving it to come here! – I didn't have a framework. I didn't have the same sorts of things to call my own. I was the middle child and only son of divorced parents who taught me one language and raised me outside of church. We celebrated Easter, the Fourth of July, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, and our birthdays, but in very secular fashion, and never in any sort of distinct way. A holiday meant cake and/or presents and/or explosions in the sky, and nothing more. We didn't have a television until I was six, we never had cable, and I wasn't exactly driven to keep up with fashion and pop culture. And here I was, surrounded by people who seemed to have all of these things – strong ethnic ties, a thumb on the pulse of the trendy and stylish, a devout faith they shared with generations of their families, a proud sense of culture. I felt like someone carrying an empty wallet; I had no conversational currency because I couldn't figure out what was mine.

It's very easy to say that you hope you "find yourself" when you're going to college, or whenever you're facing some sort of major life transition. But the actual process of doing so made me deeply uncomfortable. I kept struggling to answer the simple question I asked you at the beginning of this post: *Define your culture; define yourself culturally.* I would laugh it off – I joked about not having a culture all the time while I was a college student – but it really bothered me at the time.

There's this special sort of anxiety that we amplify ourselves, this hyper-sensitivity to the ways in which we do not fit in, even when the things we notice about ourselves are largely invisible to outsiders. It's probably worse for those who, like me, deeply crave acceptance from the whole. The similarities (what David Foster Wallace would probably call *the water*) wash over you without your noticing, and every dissimilarity – someone's eyes widening at the mere mention of divorce, the quiet embarrassment of not knowing which fork to hold at the restaurant I'd saved up to take a girl to – scrapes like a knife. Religion, or my lack thereof, scraped worst; now I felt like I was lacking a heck of a lot more. I envied the people who could speak other languages, who knew tales passed down through generations, who knew how to dress and dance according to traditions I'd never encountered – people who didn't just have a sense of place, but could feel like they belonged to something.

I felt far from my place, and I felt like I didn't belong – like some lost thing no one knew how to claim.

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The questions I asked in the beginning – *What does it mean to be \_\_\_\_\_?* – were meant to be challenging as all-get-out. I think it's important, however, to ask them, and to take the time to not only answer them, but to understand how – and why – other people answer them as well.

In *Immigrant Misappropriations*, Jay Caspian Kang makes a fantastic point when he describes the weird sensation of realizing he's fooled himself into feeling cultural kinship with someone who doesn't deserve the feeling, mostly because of the language we use and the terminology we've adopted when we grapple with issues of race or culture. We adopt and apply labels to ourselves and other people without fully understanding what they mean, why they were designed, or even who made them in the first place. We use words that reduce without realizing they're reductive, and we regularly conflate that which has no reason to lose its uniqueness.

Language, if you can't already tell, is something of a passion of mine. I'm particularly curious about how we use language to achieve specific ends – not just knowing which synonym is superior, but recognizing the consequences of using either one. I listen to the language we use in car commercials and political campaigns, in personal statements and in opinion columns. One person's "immigrant" is another's "alien," and while the emotionless Word thesaurus can say those are synonyms, no thinking person considers them truly interchangeable. (Put the adjective "illegal" before either of those terms and the difference becomes even clearer. AM talk radio thrives on this stuff.)

That's one of the reasons why I think we need to think about the labels we use and the identities we adopt. The terms we use to describe ourselves – "Asian," "Hispanic/Latino," "white" – they're not "just words." They help dictate and define the spaces we navigate, the opportunities we receive, and the actions we're willing to take.

In *Doomsday and the Echo*, I talked about the Hiroshima attacks, and how years after the fact we still struggle to come to terms with what we chose to do as a society. I even posited that such a struggle, in some ways, defines us just as well as the actions we took. It's a question I used *1984* and *Never Let Me Go* to raise as well: *How do we justify what we do to other people?*

*Comrade, I did not want to kill you. If you jumped in here again, I would not do it, if you would be sensible too. But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called forth its appropriate response. It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late. Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony – Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy? If we threw away these rifles and this uniform you could be my brother just like Kat and Albert. Take twenty years of my life, comrade, and stand up – take more, for I do not know what I can even attempt to do with it now.*

### 3. Half Awake and Almost Dead

The Hiroshima attacks essentially capped the second World War. A few years back, I taught a unit on a book concerning the first one – the Great War, the War to End All Wars (whoops). It was called *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by Erich Maria Remarque, and its subject was Paul Baumer, an eighteen-year-old German soldier who's fighting during the last year of the conflict. (We don't often get narratives from the defeated, and almost didn't get this one – Hitler promptly banned it, sensing it could cast Germany in a negative light and/or damage national morale. It never ceases to amaze how terrified those who wield such power can be of letters, words, and pages.)

What you have to understand about Paul – and the reason I'm bringing him up here, and why I included that extended excerpt at the beginning of this week's post – is that he's not exactly gung-ho about fighting. He will kill, he would die, to save his nation, his traditions, his way of life. But why? We see him fight, but we never see him do so enthusiastically or heroically. Paul isn't Beowulf, who sought out glory, fame, and renown while serving his king and country. He isn't even Macbeth, whose tragedy was based in part on a real-life coup motivated by the ineptitude of the ruler he replaced. Those individuals sought something. Paul is just swept along by the war, by something so much larger than himself that it almost defies understanding.

Read *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and you'll see Kurt Vonnegut treat his main character, Billy Pilgrim, in the same fashion. Billy is not driven into the conflict by a desire to avenge his enemies' vicious wrongdoings. He has no illusions of heroism, no bloodlust to satiate, no reason to fight save that men of his era were supposed to fight. But he certainly didn't initiate the conflict; he certainly can't accelerate it; he certainly can't finish it. Part of the function of the weirder, more humorous material in *Five* – Billy's abduction by the Tralfamadorians, his "coming unstuck in time" and subsequent "time travel" – is meant to underscore the character's fundamental haplessness and helplessness. There's no difference between what the Tralfamadorians do to him and what his own government asks of him; he's befuddled all the same.

That Billy survives the war, the firebombing, everything, while many others died is not due to his skill or worth. He survives because...well, there doesn't seem to be a reason. Paul, in his flashback, thinks about how one can't start thinking about the arbitrary nature of war – how if his friend had moved his leg three inches, a bullet never would have torn through his bones and shattered him – because it can drive a man to madness. War's very nature is arbitrary; people do not die according to their skill levels, their family ties, their kindness to strangers, but because they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. A bullet is so small, and yet...

Could Paul or Billy contribute to the war effort meaningfully – i.e., can anything, *anything* that either does possibly end the conflict? Of course not. And that realization, that the literal matters of life-and-death you face every day are also really just some kind of complicated Kabuki dance, is so horrifying that most people who fight never bring themselves to face it. But Paul, to his credit, does. And he realizes that he's only fighting because his country makes him – because his associations have fatally entangled him in a conflict he never would've started on his own. Society at large somehow arrived at a precipice and then charged over it, and in doing so surrendered the individual decision-making powers of its citizens. Peace is not an option. The nation needs his parts, so it snatches him out of his everyday life, gives him no say in his day-to-day actions or routines (he must quietly and mindlessly do as he is commanded – distinct identities and independent choices are frowned upon), and anonymizes him until no one notices or remembers him at all. The only way he can cope is to form desperate friendships of

circumstance, with the shared experiences of the other soldiers serving to bond them fast together. And these bonds form even though they never would have befriended each other had they not all been thrown together and kept in the same place by some greater power that isn't concerned with any of them on an individual level, and that won't blink an eye if any of them end up maimed or dead in the course of defending and sustaining it. It's all very Ishiguro; in many senses, it's also all very Orwellian, even though Remarque predates both.

At one point in the middle of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul is briefly allowed to depart from the lines and return home. When we get to his time on leave, the jarring sense of displacement we get isn't just a matter of shifting from wartime to peacetime. It's our protagonist's realization that he isn't who he's always believed he is: he is German, except he's "German." Other Germans, those who are older and therefore don't have to fight, have nothing in common with him anymore; they're all very excited and gung-ho about the fighting, but mostly because they're completely ignorant of – or willingly blind to – the conflict's realities. Paul's experiences on the battlefield have overwhelmed his upbringing and reprogrammed him into someone, something, new. To his surprise, he realizes he surrendered his heritage when he put on the uniform of the country that gave him that heritage. It's completely paradoxical and counterintuitive, yet it's also completely believable in the context of the story.

And when we later Paul in the hole with the man he stabbed, desperately remorseful and traumatized, there are so, so many layers to the scene that it's almost overwhelming to analyze. In the hole, the world outside no longer matters; bullets scream and shrapnel flies, so you stay low and wait, and wait, and wait. And in that waiting space, the barriers that would separate people fall away, lying meaninglessly in the mud. Paul is fighting to save his country, only he comes to realize that he can fight, and fight, and fight – that he can kill dozens, hundreds, thousands of young Frenchmen – and it will have literally no impact on his country's survival.

Paul, and later Billy, comes to understand that he can do one of the most terrible and important things a human can do – take another human life – and the universe will continue on without so much as a hiccup.

When you peel away the huge, almost galactic-scale consequences – *We're defending ourselves from extermination! We're preserving a way of life from eradication! We're holding our nation together!* – the truth is, you're left with a million one-on-one battles, all these small wars and skirmishes. And in that diminished light, the issue remains: *What does killing you accomplish? Is that accomplishment, in fact, worth your annihilation?*

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*All Quiet on the Western Front*, like Luigi Pirandello's *War* (which preceded it by a decade), dares to ask these incredibly uncomfortable questions about what it means to fight for something, to risk death for the sake of a flag, to take lives in order to enable your people to keep speaking its language and living its way. Both ultimately ask about the cost, the very human cost, of conflict. And both ask whether that cost is worth bearing.

In both stories, the authors demonstrate an incredible respect for those who stand apart from their characters. Remarque doesn't demonize the French, nor does he lionize the Germans. Pirandello doesn't even show the fighting: the war in his story's title refers just as strongly to the conflicts in his characters' tortured emotions than it does to any action on a battlefield.

And both authors talk about love of country – what country and culture mean, really. They challenge our assumptions of what it means to believe you must be *x* or do *y* in order to belong, of what it should cost to belong, and of whether our desire to stay distinct – to maintain our cultures and traditions – is worth that cost anymore.

In my more recent years, I've come to see much more of my country than I had when I first left home for Southern California. I've learned more about it; I think I understand it better now, and understand my relationship with it better as well. I appreciate my place here; I recognize that I'm lucky to live here. But I also recognize my cultural blind spot – I've basically never left the country, so it feels weird to bust out the patriotism without much in the way of a frame of reference – and I *also* recognize that I've really never been asked to pay anything for my place in it. (I don't think taxation counts.) I've gotten to belong to this country that, on the whole, is a pretty amazing place, and has definitely treated me well, without any real cost. I get to belong for free. Others who are equally or more deserving haven't been, and still aren't, nearly as lucky.

Should we be trying to grow together in this shared soil? Or should we carve out our own spaces and guard them for our families?

How should I feel about my nation? My culture? My flag? Do I truly have the ability to understand those things as they are? Can I recognize my relationship to, and place within, each?

Should I be grateful that my nation is so distinct from so many others, that we live so differently from so much of the rest of the world?

Should I be glad that so many differences and rivalries and grudges separate so many countries in the modern age – that so many have fought so successfully to preserve their unique cultural values, perspectives, memories, and traditions? Is there still value, particularly in our increasingly interwoven world, to standing apart and being unique?

Or should I mourn the fact that we're still fighting over our differences, and that close to a century past Paul Baumer's fictional death, we still haven't figured out how to answer the questions his life raised?

***Datta***

***Dayadhvam***

***Damyata***

What would you give to protect your heritage – the things your grandparents and parents spent your lifetime handing you, hoping you'd preserve them and pass them along to your children?

What would you give for a peaceful world, a fair and just world, in which to raise those same children?

Which would you pay more for?

For all of human history, we've been willing to pay more for the first than the second.

And Remarque and Vonnegut dare to ask whether we've been paying the wrong price all along.

## 4. The Witness Just Wants to Talk to You

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is an angry book whose anger won't register on most of its readers today. It is about the compromises we tolerate and atrocities we excuse, and about the reasons why we tolerate and excuse them. It is about essential human goodness, and how easy it is to forget it exists, and how necessary its preservation remains. It raises questions about hope, confusion, exploitation, grief, and love that connect it with all of our earlier works. It is about our past, our present, and our future; it is about the questions we must face before we may decide what kind of people we wish to be and what kind of world we wish to build.

It is also a novel about aliens who kidnap humans for their zoos.

Billy Pilgrim is the book's central figure. But he isn't a hero, and that's not by accident. In old stories, the myths, the archetypal hero's journeys, a character would go out and come back. They would achieve something greater, become something more. Even when they failed, there was a point to it all. Gilgamesh loses the plant, but gains transcendent wisdom about the purpose of his life. Dante loses his place in the world, but...well, same.

Starting with *King Lear*, I've taken great pains to give you books that subvert these archetypes. *Lear* ends the way a tragedy is supposed to end, except it doesn't. The realization Gilgamesh reaches upon glimpsing Uruk's walls eludes Lear; he dies insane and broken, his daughter's husk filling his arms. For its first fifty pages, *Childhood's End* treats the Overlords' true identity like a secret worth dying to learn. Then it's revealed...until the book's end, when that, too, is established as deception. And our hero, Jan Rodricks, returns to play a lonely, broken piano in the ashes of our world. *1984* gives you the dystopian hero who overcomes the odds and defeats the corrupt, nightmarish government apparatus strangling his world in order to usher in a newer, freer, kinder, and more enlightened age for humanity. Wait, scratch that. It ends with the humiliation, torture, and absolute destruction of its central protagonist. *Brave New World* gives us the ideological climax we yearn for, only for it not to matter one whit in the end; John achieves no grail and certainly does not return. And Ishiguro essentially inverts the hero's journey for poor Kathy H.

Why, one wonders, must the curriculum bend in such a direction?

Well, we're still using archetypes to tell our stories. The problem is that we live in times when the old ways don't work so well. The way we understood the world before doesn't fit the world we live in. Sebastopol's monoculture, *The Next Generation's* political assumptions, the hero's journey – they've all served their purposes. But they don't serve every purpose, and they don't explain everything. And we haven't done an adequate job of coming up with contemporary alternatives for cases where they fall short. (Hence Vonnegut's presentation of the Tralfamadorians' storytelling methods – so different, and yet somehow better-suited for our more-fractious but still-beautiful world.)

Kurt Vonnegut, a prisoner of war in the most hellish conflict the world has ever endured, emerged from beneath Dresden to watch it burn at our hands – the hands of his ostensible rescuers. Which archetypes could he fall back on to make sense of what he'd witnessed? He wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* trying to make sense of it, and never could. All he finds are simpler truths: the necessity of mourning loss (saying "So it goes" isn't the right response for a human being), or of preserving kindness in a world that so easily turns us bitter, or in making sure that the progress we claim as our own doesn't force us backwards into barbarism instead.

And at the end of the day, when Vonnegut ends with the bird's "meaningless" question, we're left to ask ourselves: *Why have we done this? What do we want? What is the point? Who are we allowed to be anymore?*

That urge – to define oneself, on one's own terms – is an old one. Sometimes, we are lucky enough, like Siddhartha or Beowulf, to understand ourselves and how we relate to the world. Sometimes – like Macbeth, or like Tom Hansen – we're not. And sometimes – like Tommy Creo, Winston Smith, or Kathy H. – forces larger than ourselves swallow us up and damage our ability to reach that understanding.

That urge is why we remember those who precede us, why we honor our ancestors, why we try to learn lessons from what they left behind. It's hard to boldly go where no one has gone before, a la *Star Trek*, when you don't understand where anyone before you has gone.

It's why we jealously guard our cultural spaces and way of life; it's why so many feel so anxious about nebulous things like cultural dilution or contamination, and why so many of these anxieties are expressed in pretty racist ways. (It's tough to work towards forming a Federation when so many awful bumper stickers exist.)

And as society grows simultaneously more and less partitioned, as technology both grants unprecedented access into our lives and damages our ability to relate, as old ways of life, old needs, and old beliefs come into conflict with the needs of an ascending generation in search of a history all its own, the same old question still remains:

*Who are you?*

*And what are you doing here?*

## 5. *Maps, "Melissa Victoria"*

*There was a boy, once, when you were in tenth grade.  
He told you he thought Poe was the only author  
who ever really got it right. You'd like to think that, given more time,  
you would have been good friends.*

*He once showed you a map of the town where he lived,  
but you couldn't get a feel for it, couldn't find yourself in the  
mathematics of the street names, and you never knew his birthday.*

*These days, when your travels take you to airports  
close to his hometown, you wonder if he remembers your name.  
And sometimes, though you will not know it, he will think of you.*

*Know this. He will not use the same words you do. You are both  
abstract figures in the other's mind,  
indistinct imprints from another time and someday,  
you may forget him. You are already forgetting him.  
It's been years – you used to know his middle name.  
He used to have lines of your poetry running through his veins,  
carried on blood cells which have long since been replaced  
you wake one morning to realize you don't remember  
the color of his eyes and you're thinking:  
how strange are the intersections of human lives.*

*That the man beside you on the sidewalk could be going  
home to dinner or out to work. To a birthday party  
or a chicken wing-eating contest or the hospital. You  
are headed to dance class, the weight of three essays and  
a school musical heavy on your small shoulders. But to him you are just  
a green hat and a blue coat, hurrying past.  
When he passes your studio, he will not see it.  
You will not notice his office door.*

*It is strange to remember that you have not always read  
your best friend's favorite book. Cannot understand  
why yellow balloons can make her cry, but the song  
she used to jam out to in eighth grade when she was feeling angst-y  
just reminds you of the year when too many people died.*

*We are all on different maps, of the same world –  
the legends of our histories overlaying the topography with  
the colors of our auras, invisible bookmarks littering landscapes,  
doorways, crosswalks, gardens. Memories of  
first kisses, starlit wishes, broken bones. A residue  
of feelings you never felt settled thick on every sidewalk.*

*Trembling over radio waves, tucked inside every spine in the library,  
pages falling open to dog-eared landmarks from someone else's journey  
and it hits you, that you will never be the protagonist  
in anyone else's story. We are all on different maps,  
big as the world you once thought you could understand –  
you're only just beginning to realize you can't.  
Can't feel beyond the limits of your senses and geometry.*

*And though it always seemed the answer was just beyond the horizon,  
you're finding, no matter how high your ladder can reach  
you can never see more than half the world at once.*

*And one day, at a bus stop in an unfamiliar city, you realize  
his eyes are the color of every pair you've ever forgotten, his smile  
the smile of every jogger who's waved you good morning,  
courageously reaching from their map into yours.  
And no matter what kind of day you're having,  
no matter how much your feet hurt,  
you smile back every day.*

*Because we are always strangers to every journey we do not take,  
only taught to navigate in footsteps and spoonfuls, the legends  
of our histories are veils of color we cannot breach.  
We are all on different maps. And the truth is,  
we never walk alone. But in the end, the only story we live  
is our own.*

## 6. On the Impossible Past

By now, you've all heard the stories: my great-grandmother at the metaphorical gates, my junior-year self beating his head against the proverbial brick wall, my student from my third year here fighting to surmount the insurmountable. And you know how each ends: my great-grandmother entered the country, I got into a good college, and my student passed my class.

Certain strands connect each to each, chief among them the fact that someone in power bent the rules in order to benefit someone who struggled – someone to whom they were in no way indebted. Yet saying those in power weren't indebted to those they helped misses the point somewhat. None of those in need encountered those who could help them in a vacuum, nor did they encounter them once. In every case, the person bending the rules did so out of compassion that was earned, inasmuch as compassion can be earned, over the course of many failures and many second attempts. That judge had seen my ancestor fail, and fail, and fail again; my teacher had seen me fail, and fail, and fail again; I had seen my student fail, and fail, and fail again. And all three saw their desperate strivers continue striving anyway – *even past the point at which hope should have run out*. Even when each person's hope for success couldn't possibly have been rational, each person continued doing the right thing. In the end, they reaped the benefits of their perseverance; if they didn't deserve those opportunities for their skills, they seemed to merit them on the basis of their resilience, integrity, and resolve.

Those stories are in the back of my head every time I begin a semester with the sixth Foundation Question: **How do you face that which you cannot defeat?** They're there when I teach about Gilgamesh fighting to overcome death; about Macbeth facing Macduff; about Beowulf and his dragon; about Winston Smith screaming in Room (D)101; about the victims of the Hiroshima attacks.

And in one sense, the tales about my grandmother, my math test, and my student give me the ability to answer that question. When I faced something I couldn't defeat, I faced it with something approaching dignity; I stayed true to myself, to my precedents, even though I had no reason to expect to benefit from that course. (I can't begin to tell you how glad I am I made the right call as a junior.)

But at the same time, those stories **don't** help me answer the Foundation Question. I specifically tell my students that there's a precondition to #6: **cannot means cannot**. It doesn't mean "hold out hope and keep believing and you might surprise yourself"; it doesn't mean "keep trying and you might get lucky"; it doesn't mean "if you do the right thing, someone will help you." It means: *You will lose. How will you approach the moment when you finally do?*

We all hate this question! We write stories with loopholes and twists and *lues ex machinas*, in large part because, as fascinating as we find the kinds of moments and scenarios where everything seems all desperate and hopeless, we don't want to actually witness those moments, let alone their logical outcomes. We prefer instead to hold out hope that something, somehow, will save us.

The woman will gain access to America.

The students will not fail.

But wouldn't most judges prevent my great-grandmother from entering the country? Wouldn't most teachers have kept those students' grades where they were? Shouldn't they make those calls? (The rules are in place for a reason...and those people are in place partly to ensure those rules are followed.)

If we're being honest, *none* of the figures in my stories **earned** their second (or more) chances. You can easily see how each could have done the exact same things only to fail in the end, particularly if

the authority figures who bent the rules in each case chose to uphold them instead. All three of us were lucky enough to have done what we did in the company of people who were willing to help us.

Those stories make me think of human connection, and collision, and the weird ways our interactions determine the courses our lives take.

The first blog I assigned last fall, *Floating Down the River*, concerned itself with friendship. In it, I mentioned that my oldest, most important friendship started almost by accident. As I've gotten older, I've discovered that's not all that unusual – that many good relationships rise from fairly mundane or even coincidental beginnings. What matters most, it seems, is not the origin story, but the hundreds of quiet sequences that follow.

Since then, we've spent months examining what people want, how people connect, and how those two things play off each other. We watched Tom Hansen flail around as he lost his "dream girl," convinced he would never recover unless he recovered her, unaware of how poorly he understood what he was looking for until he started re-examining himself. We read *War* quietly, studying the parents of World-War-I-era soldiers as they grappled with the difficult question of how to react properly – emotionally, psychologically, rationally – to what the war could cost them, and how their connections with specific individuals complicated their reactions. We discovered Winston Smith, sad, lonely, and wretched, only to see him find purpose, however fleetingly, in his bond with the bold, kinetic Julia – just as we see Kathy H., equally doomed but not nearly as unhappy, navigate the treacherous, precarious psychological spaces of her bonds with Ruth and Tommy. We watched Dante Alighieri's, Jake Sisko's, Carl Fredrickson's, and Tommy Creo's journeys through loss, fear, and faith, their worlds shattered by death only to have them restored through love. Siddhartha and Macbeth each lose everything, but only Siddhartha recovers, for he learns to find value in helping others. Gilgamesh and Lear lose what matters most, but only Gilgamesh finds anything in the ashes. Beowulf dies defending a people who may not even be worth saving. And all of these works, along with 90% of our short pieces from both semesters, advance powerful messages about connection, experience, memory, and morality – the ways we shape each other by passing through each others' lives, by sticking around, and by leaving.

*Maps* says, "how strange are the intersections of human lives," and I can't help feeling like most of our coursework – especially *Slaughterhouse-Five* – delivers the same message. But in neither case is "strange" a bad thing, connotation aside; it's more like "fascinating," or "improbable." *Maps* is so titled because, in the parlance of Melissa Victoria, its Internet-psuedonymed author (I have no idea what her actual name is, so I'm just going to use her Tumblr handle), we're all on different ones set in the same place – leading different lives, chasing different things, brushing past and through one another on our different journeys towards different glories. Paulo Coelho's alchemist says, "All things are one." In her own way, Victoria's saying the same thing when she talks about smiling at joggers, when she states that we never walk alone.

It's recognizing this that's hard; it may even be more accurate to say that remembering this is the tough part. Victoria's dance class and essays are the things we focus on at the expense of seeing everything else – the "scrapers" I mentioned earlier.

The secret gift that judge and my teacher shared was their ability to cut through all of that and see the people standing before them as human beings. They could have stopped paying attention to us, processed us without emotional investment, just done their jobs. Instead, they recognized what we wanted to do, where we wanted to go, and what stood in our way. Then they knocked our obstacles aside, opened the doors, and pushed us through.

All three of us reached for things beyond our means, beyond our grasp. What we didn't realize was that we could've reached them – could reach them – if someone else took the time to let us stand on their shoulders.

I certainly don't want to be the person who tells the girl who can go to Oz – provided we give her the chance – to stop dreaming and live a realistic existence instead.

I can't guarantee that I can recognize everything I need to recognize. I can't always tell when someone needs my help, or when someone could accomplish great things if they only had someone to open one more door for them.

But the stories I've told you make a passionate argument for the triumph of faith in other people – for taking a chance on others, for opening those doors.

And I've always felt like I owed it to those who opened them for me to hold them ajar for others.

You never know when one of them will return the favor.

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Vonnegut, like Orwell, Huxley, and Ishiguro before him, is fascinated by humanity's relationship with exploitation and empowerment. And in all four novels, human beings get hurt when people are incentivized to disregard each others' essential humanity. Viewed in concert, the novels this semester argue that we all lose when we justify preying on each other in order to get ahead, or even when we simply reduce each other into anything other than complex human beings – and that when human beings behave monstrously towards each other, it is almost always because their environment encourages them to act that way.

We have to reach out to each other, even when it hurts. We have to sustain a society that knows how to follow laws, just as we must – as individuals – understand when to disregard them. We need to recognize when defiance covers for hunger, and when simple solutions – chocolate milk, worn-out chess pieces – can keep someone going.

Sometimes, it doesn't take a lot.

Sometimes, it takes everything.

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The story I've lived has been a good one. It's been mine, and I've worked really hard to live it my way.

But I couldn't have done it alone.

I'm thankful for everyone who helped me understand who I saw when I looked in the mirror, who scribbled in the margins of my life; even if they didn't write much, or even if they didn't believe they were writing anything important, their work has made all the difference.

Their words have meant everything to me.

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- + Is there value in staying culturally distinct from one another? Is it important for us to maintain our unique cultural traditions in the face of pressure to assimilate to whatever societal norms are present? Or should we really be trying to find something like a common culture – a set of values that as many people as possible can share? Which direction should we be heading in as we move through the century that will belong to you: towards greater melting-pot unity, or towards greater distinctiveness of identity?
  - + Are we paying too high a cost in blood, lives, youth, and resources for the things we hold dear? The right amount? Even too little, benefitting from the spoils of others' sacrifices without offering the same?
  - + When you see the American flag, or when you think of "America," how do you define it? What ties us together in our nation as Americans? Are we as "united" as a country bearing our name should be? Is this a good or bad thing?
  - + How do you define yourself "culturally"? Is it based on racial makeup, religious identification, youth, preferences, groups, language – or something else? What is your "culture," and what makes you you?
  - + How similar are you, culturally speaking, to your relatives? How many of your parents' values do you plan to keep for yourself, or for your own children? And what's worth preserving from your culture?
  - + In each of the stories I told you, people bent the rules in order to benefit people who needed them. Were they correct to do so? Were they justified in doing so? Would you have done the same?
  - + The return of an old question: When your morals and the rules come into conflict, which should you follow? Should you follow a law you believe is immoral? How can you tell whether a rule deserves subversion, opposition, or bending? Which circumstances cause your behavior to shift and your morals to gain flexibility?
  - + Who's scribbled in your margins, so to speak – shared advice that shaped you, offered support they weren't required to, gave you chances and opportunities to be better? Who were your alchemists, teaching you the Language of the World? Who's come into your life and either left you better or helped you make yourself better? How much of your life has been determined by luck...and how much of your own "luck" was actually the result of your actions and choices?
  - + Consider the relationships and connections you've formed in your life. How many of them could've been missed, or simply faded, a la *Maps*? How many of them have surprisingly endured?

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Blog Title: "That's No Way to Get to Heaven," Guster, *Easy Wonderful*

Section Title #1: "Death with Dignity," Sufjan Stevens, *Carrie & Lowell*

Section Title #2: "Deadwater," Wet, *Deadwater*

Section Title #3: "Hearts Like Ours," The Naked and Famous, *On Rolling Waves*

Section Title #4: "The Knock," Hop Along, *Painted Shut*

Section Title #6: "On the Impossible Past," The Menzingers, *On the Impossible Past*

Quotes on the First Page: *Harper High School*, Name Taken, Anatole France, Thomas Merton, Robert Browning, William Halsey, Peter de Vries, Mother Teresa

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