

It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.

In leaking the classified material, he added, "I felt I accomplished something that would allow me to have a clear conscience."

I've wanted us to breathe ashes and smoke, / but we cannot. This, too, is atrocity.

Never ruin an apology with an excuse.

Doomsday and the Echo

A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep.

Even futile gestures matter if done with purpose or passion; meaning lies in motive, not result.

What is your history? Please don't leave / Without telling me.

We shall have to repent in this generation not so much for the evil deeds of the wicked people but for the appalling silence of the good people.

Prologue: A Poetics of Hiroshima, by William Heyen

Imperial Air Force pilot Sachio Ashida, unable
to fly over the burning city to report
to his superiors what had happened to it,
landed his plane, borrowed a bicycle,
and pedaled into it. He'd remember
a woman in front of her smoldering home,
a bucket on her arm. Inside the bucket
was a baby's head. The woman's daughter
had been killed when the bomb fell.

This is atrocity. You've just now descended
from a stanza wherein a baby's head –
were its eyes open or closed? – was carried
in a bucket by her mother.

An Imperial Air Force pilot stopped his bike
in front of what had been her home.
I've wanted us to breathe ashes and smoke,
but we cannot. This, too, is atrocity.

What's true for me is probably true for you:
I'm tired of trying to remember this.
Somewhere in Hiroshima the baby's head
is dreaming, wordlessly. No, it is not – this, too,
is atrocity. Ashida went on
to live a long life. He felt the swing and weight
of that bucket on his arm. No,
he did not. He did. He sometimes dreamed himself
pedaling backwards away
from that mother. I don't know whether
he did or not. Meanwhile,
we rave about the necessity of a jewel-center in every poem.
I've used a baby's head
in a bucket on her mother's arm. Whether
this is art, or in the hands of a master could be, or whether
art is atrocity, or not, I'm sick of being,
or trying to be, part of it, me
with my weak auxiliary verbs which vitiate
the jewel-center, me
with my passives, my compromised stanzaic integrity,
my use of the ambiguous "this"
which is atrocity. No, it is not. It is.

For years my old high school coach visited my home
with dahlias in a bucket,
big red-purple and blue-purple heads

my wife and I floated in bowls on our tables.
Have I no shame? This, too, this story
that evokes another, this narrative rhyme, this sweet
concatenation of metaphor,
is atrocity. Coach fought on Iwo Jima
for ten days before and ten days after
the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi.
He returned there fifty years later, brought me
a baby-food jar half-filled
with black sand from one volcanic blood-
soaked beach. He did. But at Marine reunions,
he couldn't locate any of his buddies
from his first outfit. No, he could not.
He once laid out on my desk aerial photos of runways
the Japanese used to "wreak havoc" – his words –
and said that hundreds of thousands of GIs would have died
if HST had not given the order.
As a participant in necessary atrocity, I agreed.
I still agree. But it doesn't matter if I agree –
what matters is whether poetry itself agrees. Incidentally,
Ashida was in training to become
a divine wind, a kamikaze.

1945. I was almost five. Col. Tibbets named
our *Enola Gay* for his mother.
The 6th of August. Our bomb, "Little Boy," mushroomed
with the force of 15 kilotons of TNT.
"A harnessing of the basic power of the universe," said HST,
as though the universe were our plowhorse.
In the woman's home, her daughter was beheaded.
I don't know if Ashida learned exactly how,
though we and the art of atrocity would like to know.
In any case, what could this mother do?
She lifted her daughter's head. She laid it
in the aforementioned jewel-center.
She was not thinking of the basic power of the universe.
Did she place oleander blossoms on her baby's face?
Did she enfold her daughter's head in silk, which rhymes with *bucket*,
and *sick*, and *volcanic*, and *wreak havoc*?...

(Buckets appear often, as a matter of fact,
in the literature of exile, for example
in Irina Ratushinskaya's prison memoir *Gray is the Color
of Hope* – coal buckets and slop buckets,
ersatz food placed in what were toilet buckets.
"Time to get up, woman. Empty your slop bucket."
Irina drags her bucket daily to the cesspit.

She doesn't know if she can ever become a mother.)

Ashida attained the highest black belt, went on
to coach the American Olympic judo team.
He did. I spoke with his daughter
at an event where I received a poetry prize,
a check for a thousand George Washingtons
and an etched glass compote
for a book on the Shoah. I said I once heard her father
lecture on Zen – the moon in the river,
River flowing by that is the world with its agonies
while Moon remains in one place,
steadfast despite atrocity.
I remember that she seemed at ease,
she who had known her father
as I could never.

While teaching at the University of Hawai'i,
I visited Pearl Harbor three times, launched out to the memorial
above the *Arizona*. Below us, the tomb
rusted away – a thousand sailors,
average age nineteen – for nature, too, is atrocity,
atoms transformed within it, even memory.
We tourists, some Japanese, watched minnows
nibble at our leis.
No, we did not. This was my dream:
I knelt at a rail under a Japanese officer with a sword,
but now there are too many stories for poetic safety,
for stanzaic integrity – woman and daughter,
Ashida at his lecture, my high school coach carrying heads
of dahlias grown from bulbs
he'd kept in burlap to overwinter in his cellar,
even persona Heyen at Pearl Harbor
above the rusting and decalcifying battleship that still breathed
bubbles of oil that still
iridesced the Pacific swells as jewel-centers iridesce
our most anthologized villanelles...

A bombing survivor said, "It's like when you burn
a fish on a grill."

I end my sixth line above with the word "home."
My first draft called it the woman's "house," but *home*
evokes satisfaction, *mmm*, a baby's
contentment at the breast, the atrocity
of irony, and *home* hears itself in *arm*, and *bomb*, and *blossom*,

and looks forward to *shame* and *tomb*.
I cannot not tell a lie.
Apparently, I am not so disgusted with atrocity
as I'd claimed to be – my atoms
do not cohere against detonation, but now time has come – listen
to the *mmm* in *time* and *come* – for closure,
as, out of the azure,

into the syntax of Hiroshima, “Little Boy” plunges –
I've centered this poem both to mushroom
and crumble its edges –
and “Fat Man,” 21 kilotons of TNT,
will devastate Nagasaki. What is your history? Please don't leave
without telling me. Believe me,
I'm grateful for your enabling complicity.
I know by now you've heard my elegiac é.
I hope your exiled mind has bucketed its breath.
I seek to compose intellectual melody.
I fuse my fear with the idea of the holy.
This is St. John's *cloud of unknowing* in me.
This is the Tao of affliction in me.
Don't try telling me my poetry is not both
beguiling and ugly.

“There was no escape except to the river,” a survivor said,
but the river thronged with bodies.
Black rain started falling, covering everything, the survivors said.

I have no faith except in the half-life of poetry.
I seek radiation's rhythmic sublime.
I have no faith except in atrocity.
I seek the nebulous ends of time.
This is the aria these cities have made of me.
I hope my centered lines retain their integrity.
I have no faith except in beauty.

1. Abacus Haunting Me

When the first Armenians came to Glendale, they weren't seeking opportunity or some vague conception of the "American Dream." They sought refuge from the atrocities perpetrated upon the Armenian people during and directly after World War I. They came here for the same reasons people seemingly always come to these shores: to escape the dangers, problems, and miseries that threatened them before, and to find new lives in a relatively safer harbor. But for Armenians, the dangers, problems, and miseries added up to something far more insidious than what other groups had faced: an attempt by the Ottoman Empire (now, essentially, what we call Turkey) to exterminate their people. They came here seeking refuge from genocide.

A huge number of countries officially/unambiguously recognize the Armenian Genocide. We do not.

In fairness, we've made our *un*official recognition of the genocide fairly obvious. Most of our states individually recognize it, and most of our leaders have individually recognized it before taking power. But once they take power, they typically move from explicit statements to hints and innuendos. Deviations into on-the-nose references tend to elicit recriminations from Turkey, which has little incentive to see the horrors of its past given an official label.

We have what can be charitably described as a complicated geopolitical and diplomatic partnership with Turkey. In simple terms, we need them, and they need us. Our relationship isn't one either can torch with little consequence; too many of our necessary interests are intertwined. Thus we enter into a complicated dance in which Turkey understands what we believe, and in which we understand that they don't wish to have the dishonor of recognition applied to their forefathers – any more so than we're all that eager to have people talk about our systematic destruction of Native American societies a couple of centuries ago.

Yet we teach our children about the Trail of Tears and the like. Over the years, we've grown admirably more direct in our educational messages: *We're a great country, but yes, we did these terrible things. We study them not to excuse or justify them, but in order to better recognize the factors that drove us to do them – and in order to avoid repeating our mistakes if those circumstances arise again.*

In some sense, we've treated the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks the same way. My high-school history education petered out (rather oddly) once we hit the 1950s, but your more-thorough education seems to handle our campaigns in Vietnam the same way. And as schools begin to grapple with our more recent endeavors in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, I wait to see whether they'll be presented in similar fashion.

While this information isn't treated the same way in every state – the perspective you're offered in Californian schools differs from what you might find elsewhere – I don't think it's a stretch to say that the majority of today's schoolchildren grow up with a far more nuanced view of their country, its policies, and its histories than their contemporaries did even sixty years ago. We've come a long way, and done so by taking a lot of hard looks in the mirror.

But for all our progress, we still rarely call the Armenian Genocide, well, that. We cajole and negotiate behind the scenes, trying to get Turkey to recognize it themselves, not wanting to get out in front of them...or, frankly, not wanting to end a valuable strategic relationship over a couple of words. Some marriages only survive because the spouses involved agree not to talk about their problems, and it strikes me that we have a similar relationship with Turkey right now: we both recognize what *could* be said, but neither side will say it.

I called Glendale home during my first year out of college, and spent time discussing history with several people in the city. In conversation after conversation, the same point recurred: those with power had sought to eradicate their culture. What struck me wasn't even that my counterparts unanimously felt that genocide had occurred, but that they felt the rest of the world had a moral responsibility to call what their ancestors had faced by its rightful name. By not doing so, the argument went, those who remained silent were complicit in the crime. You didn't have to fire a shot to contribute to evil.

At the same time, I could imagine people reading this passage and thinking: *So what?* Sure, the people I spoke with in Glendale may see recognition as a moral imperative, but does that make it so? And even if, after all our deliberations, we decide that yes, it *is* a moral imperative, is the greater good served by that recognition? Are our other interests worth jeopardizing so we can call a spade a spade?

Must we call the _____ what we believe it to be?

If the cost of honesty is high, is it fine to lie?

2. The Message Fades, But the Mess Prevails

William Heyen spends *A Poetics of Hiroshima* seemingly writing in circles. Certain things stick out horribly – the image of the baby’s head turns my stomach each time I read – but the poem, at first blush, just looks like a jumble. For some of you, it probably doesn’t even seem like poetry. We can sense its patterns, can understand that Heyen’s centering broken lines as a means of showing how we struggle to make sense of the senseless, and so on. On some level, though, the work just feels like a digressive paragraph that the writer, upon finishing, proceeded to chop into “poetry” by going back and hitting the Enter key a bunch of times in the middle of his sentences. That this is somewhat the point – that we don’t make chaos randomly, but as the consequence of ordered, sequential decisions that turn the expected into something new and broken – doesn’t change the fact that *Poetics* is a tough read.

T.S. Eliot closes *The Waste Land*, by referencing the “fragments shored against [his] ruins” – the chaos of the work he’s just written. That line always stuck out for me: a man trying to make sense of his world’s wreckage, tracing a line back through the catastrophe. If he can understand how we went wrong, how we lost what made us us, he – *we* – can work to recover. Until then, we’ll be stuck in this weird twilight zone, wandering through a world that doesn’t make sense anymore because we never learned how to reshape it.

That seems to be the message of much historical study: *This is worth learning because we can’t let it happen again, or Understand where you came from so you can understand how to move forward.* Yet Eliot wrote in an age defined by horrors previously unseen and inconceivable, and that seemed (in defiance of history’s tendency to circle back on itself) unrepeatable. It didn’t seem possible for us, as a world, to smash another generation to bits in trenches and barren fields. To do so would be to court global suicide.

Well, *of course* we put ourselves through that again. The humiliations, perceived or real, that the Germans suffered in the reconstruction years immediately following the conflict directly contributed to the new hostilities that flared two decades later. The victorious Allies never intended to let Germany forget its role in precipitating a war that nearly tore the globe apart, and reduced it to a shell of itself with a tragic excuse for an economy (cue the anecdotes about people pushing wheelbarrows of worthless currency). Its global ambitions were curtailed, its international voice silenced, and its internal affairs monitored.

A proud nation was forced to remember its crimes, and in remembering gave in to resentment, to a feeling of persecution and injustice, to a desire for revenge. That this wasn’t the Allies’ intent didn’t matter. Their decisions, so logical in a vacuum, gave rise to chaos when arranged in sequence. The message – *This can never happen again* – faded. Only the mess remained.

That desire for revenge wasn’t necessarily logical, but the tendency towards self-blindness and irrationality when confronted with evidence of one’s own wrongs remains worth noting. Heyen’s lines are broken not only because he does not have the words to describe what he’s trying to describe, but because we’re exceptionally bad at looking at things that shake our self-conceptions. It’s like looking through a telescope at Mercury; what you’re trying to see gets blotted out by the blazing sun.

So we look away from the baby’s head. It’s too tough to stomach.

There’s a reason Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s model begins with denial and anger.

3. All We Have is This Chance Called Memory

Today, cities certainly still suffer bombardments, sometimes to the point of utter destruction – look no further than the tragedy that’s swallowed Syria whole. But we haven’t really had another Hiroshima or Nagasaki, or a Dresden or Tokyo, for that matter. Not just us, but any other nation.

The technology for annihilating a city in one pitiless strike exists; it has existed for decades. We used it four times in half as many years. Yet we remain the only ones since the early 1940s who are willing to level an entire city with a single blow, killing however many civilians we can.

How do we square that history with our self-conception of our nation and our society as a fair and just place, one that is motivated by righteousness, one that ultimately wants to serve forces of goodness? How can we say, however bluntly or obliquely, with words or with actions, “We will kill to survive,” and then condemn other nations for committing atrocities – wrongs they similarly justify to themselves as necessary to ensure their own futures? How can we justify our misdeeds any more effectively than those aforementioned parties who would deny their own?

We avert our eyes from the baby’s head, because it’s hard to stomach, because seeing it forces us to fit it into a paradigm we built without it. We are compelled to justify it, somehow, some way.

Benjamin Franklin once urged others to never ruin an apology with an excuse. While it’s true that we’ve apologized for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for Dresden and Tokyo, we have always also taken pains to explain ourselves. It was not enough to simply apologize; we had to make clear to the world, and, more importantly, to our children, *why* we did these things.

Whether those explanations do, in fact, undercut our apologies remains up for debate, but that’s not really the main point I want to highlight. Instead, I want to call attention to the thing that Eliot and Heyen grappled with, the issue that confronts our historians and our diplomats today: **How** do we remember? **Why** should we remember? **Can** we remember?

At this point, the Hiroshima attack doesn’t just matter because it ended lives or helped end a war. It exists as something to be remembered, as something which irrevocably changed the courses of two nations forever. It announced to the world that Americans would stop at nothing to survive – that we would kill innocents by the hundreds of thousands in order to achieve victory and still see ourselves as standing on the side of good. If mass killing wasn’t the stated purpose of the attack, we certainly didn’t complain when it achieved that aim, particularly during the Cold War decades of tension and terror that followed. After all, for all the posturing and aggression the world has seen since the end of World War II, there’s a reason no nation has launched a direct attack on us since: out of all the nations that built an atomic, then nuclear, arsenal, we’re the only ones who ever used theirs against civilians. The world has never forgotten that we’re capable of ordering such a thing.

It would be easy – and require much less doublethink – to simply forget about Hiroshima, much like we’ve largely forgotten about Dresden. At a minimum, the history texts could emphasize a certain portrayal of the event: highlight the necessity of an extreme response to what certainly seemed like suicidal implacability on our foes’ part, for example. Argue that we were driven to do such a thing almost against our will.

Yet we often take a different tack. Many read and teach books about historical events like these that take multiple perspectives into consideration; it feels like the responsible thing to do. And we seem to learn, or at least try to learn, the lessons of the past. We keep building weapons, but now we avoid using them; we seem to have stepped past a line where we’d still be willing to level a city with a single blow. One gets the sense that if a nation was somehow foolish enough to engage us in unilateral state warfare, we would try to fight conventionally rather than simply turning their entire nation into a nuclear wasteland.

We get that sense, even though our history proves that we would do otherwise when pressed, that we will kill and kill and kill, because it's what our memories have made of us. We want to be something other than simply the continuation of what we have been.

Having annihilated cities and civilians, we produce poets like Heyen and give them voices, uncomfortable as it can be to listen to them.

Having suspended our normal moral standards long enough to leave innocent people burning alive, skin sloughing off their bodies, we seem hell-bent on ensuring that nobody – not ourselves, not anyone else – ever unbalances the scales of justice like that again.

This may strike some, particularly elsewhere, as a particularly vulgar form of hypocrisy. But I don't see it that way. For if Hiroshima is to matter long after all of us have shuffled off this mortal coil, it cannot be simply as an end, an end to lives, an end to the world wars, an end to whatever age it ended: it must be a beginning as well. It *must* be remembered.

And, in remembering it, we must change, because even if we're sickened by what we see, we feel the responsibility of memory.

4. Why Do You Stay Until You See Blood?

Oceania feels no such responsibilities. If anything, the Inner Party gives every indication that it's perversely uninterested in memory. That this isn't true, insofar as Winston recognizes it – that "I understand HOW; I do not understand WHY" bit matters – doesn't change the fact that Orwell's horrifying dystopia rests on a bed of willful ignorance.

I don't know how many of you have watched *Hot Fuzz*, a fairly sharp send-up of action movies that aren't nearly as intelligent. Without spoiling much of anything, the middle of the film finds Simon Pegg's protagonist, a by-the-book and hyper-efficient police officer, struggling to solve a series of interconnected murders. I say "struggling" because the film takes one particularly aggravating action-movie cliché – the person in charge who irrationally refuses to listen to the hero – and pushes it to ridiculous extremes. Time and again, people are killed; time and again, Pegg suggests they were murdered; time and again, the other police officers label the deaths accidental, ignore any proof to the contrary, and devote most of their time to mocking the protagonist and impeding his efforts to investigate. It's mentioned offhandedly that Pegg's predecessor cracked under similar pressure and suffered a nervous breakdown, and as the viewer, you feel that same creeping insanity as you watch a person who speaks truth to power crushed over and over by ignorant, implacable forces. They're so clearly wrong, and you crave the presence of an authority who can show them what's right...except they *are* the authority. To whom can you appeal when those who should shape your world go mad? How can you hang on to what you believe makes sense when everyone acts like you're crazy?

I'm pretty sure that *Hot Fuzz* isn't supposed to make its audience think of Oceania, but I couldn't help it. Pegg wears this flabbergasted expression when he's dealing with the obstructionists, like he's trying to find words in the language these people speak and coming up empty. It's the exact kind of expression that'd get him vaporized in *1984*. It's the face Winston Smith can't ever wear, or even be capable of making.

Winston doesn't just have to live with the lie. He has to live the lie, and live it so convincingly that everyone around him believes it's the truth. Not only does he have to take the things he knows are real and destroy them, he has replace them with fabrications; he becomes complicit in the destruction of sanity. A man who treasures memory is made to eradicate it for a living. And that's the choice the Party forces on its members: which parts of yourself will you kill to survive?

It's a bit misleading to write that we're entering an era in which the battle over what's real and what isn't, what can be trusted and what should be dismissed, what should be codified and normalized and what should be actively rejected, is reaching a fever pitch. In actuality, the fight over how we should perceive the present and remember the past – and there's definitely a relationship between the two – has continued in arenas around the country for decades. The skirmishes on cable networks over “alternative facts” logically follow from those being waged on the Internet (particularly on social media sites), in editorial boardrooms, in textbook adoption committees, and in houses of religion.

Contempt for the truth is particularly insidious and dangerous because it's been shown, time and again, how difficult it is to change someone's mind once he or she is set in his or her convictions. Success in social awareness campaigns or protest movements depends on reaching people who haven't yet made up their minds or who haven't “learned” enough yet to reach a decision. Once someone hears something that convinces them? Good luck moving them off that position. If a lie, intentionally crafted and loudly repeated, reaches an audience that's already primed to believe it, presenting evidence to the contrary becomes a largely futile gesture.

We, of course, don't like to think of ourselves as nearly so credulous. But the truth is that we are all primed to accept certain stances and reject others out of hand. If you're a sports fan, do you prefer commentary from those who have played the game or those who haven't? Do you prefer statistical analysis that removes the player's name from the equation, or do you prefer the “eye test” and an intimate knowledge of the player's personality and intentions? That this is a false dichotomy – that *both* the eye test and statistical knowledge play a vital role in understanding the action unfolding before us, and can in fact compensate for each method's respective blind spots – doesn't make it less prevalent. Watch sports coverage of virtually any stripe, and you will see these “camps” pitted against one another. Small wonder that most fans – almost always less knowledgeable than they themselves recognize – openly declare their allegiance to one school of thought or the other. Virtually every perspective they're exposed to compels them to do so. And why? Because those who possess final creative control over the coverage believe, self-sustainingly, that it's what their audiences crave. The end result is that the people who care most about what's being discussed are the likeliest to be misled in ways that lock them forever into an incomplete understanding of what they love and strongly believe.

Science, too, has taken body blows for a variety of reasons that have little to do with the spreading of information. Works like *Merchants of Doubt* focus on scientists who prized profit and access so greatly that they shared intentionally distorted findings with their audiences and the public at large. The result of this, of course, is that people lose faith in scientific studies – that they assume there must always be some sweeping, overarching agenda that leads scientists to twist the data for their own ends. (It's easy to make these assumptions, admittedly, when reading what industry-funded scientists who knew better once claimed about, say, the health benefits of tobacco consumption.)

But the problems go deeper than that. In a 2015 piece memorably entitled *Science Isn't Broken*, Christie Aschwanden examined all of the ways in which our structures were distorting scientists' incentives. The current system of tenure for university professors requires frequent publication of one's research and studies in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Yet the arbitrarily-determined standards journals use for accepting those studies has resulted in a wave of *p*-hacking as academics distort their own findings and desperately jockey for attention. (The peer-reviewed article issue is particularly important for those of you who will continue your studies at the collegiate level, as much of what you'll learn is published at that level; one of the reasons university education costs so much is that you get access to information you can't easily obtain elsewhere, as in the case of those journals – and you'd better hope that what you're paying for is genuine!)

That science *isn't* broken, but that our structures and incentive systems are, is of little comfort. We know how to improve sports coverage, political discussion, etc. But Atul Gawande's message in *Slow Ideas* rings true: the problem isn't that we have no idea how to fix these things, but that the appetite for making those difficult changes doesn't seem to be there. And the reason that appetite isn't present is because it's being falsely satiated.

In Chapter One, Winston returns home for his lunch break. He's hungry, but there's no food, so he drinks Victory Gin instead. The stuff is terrible, and he hates it, and it hurts him as it's going down. Once he's done swallowing, though, he's not quite as hungry. The pain is manageable.

We can recognize that we're hungry. But as long as we keep accepting cheap substitutes for the real thing, we won't be driven to change. And our slow ideas will continue dying on the vine.

So much ink has been spilled over whistle-blowers in the past decade: Thomas Drake, Bradley/Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden. Before them, it was Daniel Ellsberg with the Pentagon Papers, or Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite leveling with a nation on the news rather than repeat fabrication after fabrication. Individuals are asked to cover something up, to pretend it never happened, to replace the information with falsehoods, to lie and distort and misdirect and discredit. Eventually, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for bad ones, they stop. The truth spills out. True, it's ultimately set upon by those who hope to spin it and shape it for their own ends – but it's out.

The counter-attack to any release of classified information is that disclosure puts good people at risk – that ignorance isn't simply bliss, but that some degree of it is necessary in a populace if the larger society is to thrive. You *can't* know everything that's being done, and you *definitely* don't want your enemies to know. You're kept in the dark for your own good.

Honestly, I can see some truth in that statement. There is something to be said for shaping information before it's released, and the overwhelming information dumps seen in the past decade are more like a firehose shooting out of control. There's no context, no organization, no overarching perspective. It's really easy to misunderstand what you're reading. And I'm convinced that there were other ways to try to achieve the same ends.

It matters what we see when we look back, when we look forward, and when we look in the mirror. It matters if there are gaps, intentional or not, in our understanding. It matters if we deny our atrocities out of pride, or patriotism, or shame, or a feeling that they were, in fact, justified. It matters if we lie, or redact, or delete, or forget. It matters if we decide profit, power, or comfort matter more than enlightenment. It matters if we attach asterisks to our apologies.

And it matters if, having seen all that we've seen, we stay silent when it starts to happen again, when circumstances start to take familiar, terrifying shape.

It occurs to me, then, that perhaps the only thing that could be nearly as important as something like the Hiroshima attack is how we remember it, how we understand and define its causes and effects: what we're willing to say, and what we're willing to hear, and what we're willing to stand for, and what we're willing to change in the aftermath.

It occurs to me that perhaps the only thing nearly as important as Doomsday itself is the echo.

+ In the past, I've assigned an *Establishing a Philosophical Baseline* prompt that read "If the cost [of honesty] is high, it's OK to lie." I wanted my students to consider the statement on an individual level: *Should I lie to my family to keep them happy? If I make a mistake, should I push blame elsewhere? If my boyfriend or girlfriend will worry unnecessarily or lapse into paranoia unless I'm not totally honest about where I'm going or what I'm doing, should I be less than honest?*

I want to raise the stakes a bit. Take our complicated treatment of the Armenian Genocide, for example. It clearly matters to people, one way or the other, how we recognize these events. A label won't revive the dead, won't restore the damage done to a culture, but it still matters. Yet our relationship with the country that doesn't want us to recognize said events matters as well. Real damage and fallout would result if we pushed on this measure.

So I want you to consider this question on a more global, macro scale. Do countries have a responsibility to maintain their alliances, even at the expense of honesty and integrity? Must we be transparent with our allies, even if that transparency damages those alliances, because then at least those partnerships' foundations rest on a bedrock layer of truth? This isn't just a question of "if you're the head of state in America, do you officially tell the world that the Ottoman Empire – Turkey – is guilty of genocide if you believe them to be?", but of other matters as well.

+ Similarly, if we take people like Manning or Snowden at face value, they sincerely believed their actions were patriotic – that our country had gone astray, and that it could only be rescued through honesty. In their estimation, people were unwittingly participating in, encouraging, or abetting tragedy and atrocity through patriotism, through belief that our actions were good and our motives were pure. In pulling back the veil of secrecy, Snowden and Manning hoped to force its citizens to confront its actual deeds – not to rub their noses in all the bad things we've done, but to get them to have a more nuanced, realistic view of ourselves.

But both did so through indisputably criminal means. To our authorities, our diplomats, our military, our leadership, these people did not help us see ourselves more realistically: they damaged our self-perceptions by releasing a bunch of information free of context, injected confusion where it previously wasn't, and aided and abetted our enemies by doing so.

Two questions here: a) Is the release of information regarding our actual activities an aid to our enemies? B) Do we deserve to know the full extent of our nation's/government's/society's aims and activities? Would it be better to trust others to decide which information is appropriate for you to know?

+ How seriously do you take the problems of disbelief, miseducation, and misrepresentation identified above? What are the ramifications? How should one fight them?

+ Does a nation have a responsibility to remember its history accurately? Can we learn from histories we shape and share ourselves? Or do we depend on others' interpretations of our histories and cultures – parties with some distance and remove – to see them in a properly nuanced light?

+ Could you survive the way Winston does – living the secret inner life and the agonizingly fake outer one? Are you capable of forsaking things you care about, or convincing yourself to believe what you don't?

+ Is Franklin correct? Does an excuse, an explanation, a context, undermine an apology? Or is an apology without that context or explanation likelier to be misunderstood, rendering it even less appropriate?
