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## Small Talk

James Berndt  
*Carnegie Mellon University*

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Small Talk

A Collection of Personal Essays

By James Berndt

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## Small Talk

Once, I asked one of my friends how his day was going. He told me he was exhausted from his studies and he was barely able to stumble into the room. I told him he should try jumping into a frozen lake, like many people in Minnesota do for fun in the middle of frigid winters, but fell asleep before I finished my suggestion.

Small talk is rarely taken seriously. In fact, the title given implies that its message isn't important: it is insignificant to our lives. However, small things can be very important. After all, the bubonic plague, caused by a bacterium, wiped out a third of Europe's population in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It would be very difficult to find a person who didn't think the bubonic plague was important

Small talk allows us to entertain others and impart information at the same time. In these conversations, we use anecdotes, history, and literature to explore various topics with the hopes of discovering interesting knowledge.

In ancient Greece, small talk was even used in order to discover the truth. In the form of argument called dialectic, two people, who held different views of a particular topic, would engage in a dialogue that ultimately brought them closer to the truth. A good example of this form of argument is found in Plato's *Apology*, that recounts Socrates' defense against the charge that he corrupted the youth of Athens. Socrates makes his arguments by engaging in dialogues with his accusers and judges and even though Socrates failed to convince the judges to find him innocent of the charges, the dialogues are still used by philosophers today as an example of this form of argument.

Of course, small talk is no longer used to advance our knowledge. As Oscar Wilde wrote "life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about." Society traded dialogues for long

papers as the preferred way to debate academic concepts and small talk was confined to casual encounters. But that doesn't prevent it from being used to get closer to the truth.

About a year ago, I had an interesting discussion with one of my friends about rhetoric in his common room. My friend was of the opinion that argument should always be logically constructed, while I was of the opinion that an argument should, to some extent, appeal to the emotions of the audience. My friend argued that we could only determine the objective truth value of an argument if we only considered the logic behind it. In other words, my friend believed that it was possible and necessary to determine the truth value of the argument “cats are good” through the use of logic. I, on the other hand, argued that there is always an emotional component to an argument and it is impossible to analyze an argument's credibility based solely on logic. In other words, the argument “cats are good” will rouse emotions that will ultimately help the audience come to a conclusion about cats. The word “good” will, in most cases, give the audience a pleasurable feeling that will lead it to conclude that cats must also be pleasurable. My friend and I made these academic arguments as a form of entertainment while we sat in a room littered with beer bottles and pizza boxes.

I didn't intend to make the conversation about an academic topic. It just happened, as most conversations do. Much like a river, a conversation has a natural flow to it. Both participants decide where to take the conversation, taking the most interesting route they can find. A good conversation meanders from one topic to the next, holding the participants interest for a long time. Most of the time, conversations begin and end in very mundane places, but the beginnings and ends are not important. It is the path or the journey that catches everyone's attention.

Writing works in the same way. The only difference between writing and small talk is

that the writer is alone. There is no dialogue; there is no partner. A writer is stuck with his thoughts and has to come to the truth by himself. He must do research, perhaps by having conversations with other people. A writer may also take his work to a workshop to get the opinions of other writers. But ultimately, a writer can only rely on his own mind. As Roger Rosenblatt wrote “writing is a lonely enterprise.”

Robert Frost explained the idea of small talk the best when he wrote “I talk in order to understand.” We talk, we write, in order to understand the world around us better. We want to understand why we are here and why we should, as the bard wrote, “endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” We participate in small talk so that we can understand our existence; so that we can justify our existence to ourselves. At least that is what I tell myself before I go to bed every night.

## Inessential Knowledge

While I was at a bookstore, an interesting book caught my eye: *All Facts Considered: The Essential Library of Inessential Knowledge*. The book, which was compiled by Kee Malesky, contains the answers to all sorts of questions. When I read the title of this book, I was intrigued by the idea of "inessential knowledge." I bought the book so I could see what Malesky thought was "inessential" about the knowledge that she catalogue in her book.

I have a hard time believing that there is such a thing as inessential knowledge. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, one of the definitions of essential is an object that is "of the utmost importance." Thus the phrase "inessential knowledge" refers to knowledge that is trivial or not important. But I don't think that there is such knowledge for, as a society, we value all types of knowledge. Be it simple trivia (who was granted honorary citizenship in the United States?) or scientific fact (how does an atomic bomb work), it is always possible to find a function for a piece of knowledge.

Despite the title of her book, Kee Malesky seems to agree with me. In the introduction she points out that the facts from her book are "facts that [she likes] or [finds] useful, interesting, amazing, or worth sharing." In other words, Malesky believes that the facts in her book are useful and important or at least interesting.

The only reason that some knowledge seems unimportant is because we don't care about it. In junior and senior high school, I thoroughly enjoyed history class.. I learned about so many interesting events: such as the American Revolution and the Second World War. Even though none of them were relevant to my life, I was still very interested in them. My classmates, however, weren't. I remember hearing my peers ask the same question over and over again during those history courses: "why is this information important to me?"

I never really tried to find the answer to this question; I simply tried to learn as much as I could. Sometimes, I didn't even care if there was an application for the knowledge. During my junior year in high school, I took pre-calculus, which is a course that taught us how to solve advanced equations through the use of algebra. I remember sitting under fluorescent lights in a windowless room while Mr. Jubba, who had a limp caused by an unfortunate accident with a tiger, solved new equations on the board. Occasionally, Jordon, a tall boy with white hair, would start the following exchange:

“Why do we need to know this?”

“Jordon, you need to FOCUS.”

Later on, I learned that FOCUS was actually an acronym. While I was volunteering at a concession stand, my faculty supervisor told me exactly what it meant while we waited for the popcorn to pop.

“Jim,” she said, “FOCUS is what teachers say to students who annoy them. It means 'Fuck Off 'Cuz yoU Suck.'”

It was the first, but not the last, time I ever heard a teacher swear.

I am conflicted by the use of FOCUS. On the one hand, I have the utmost respect for teachers in public schools. They take a difficult job, a job with no monetary awards, and do what very few people can do: change lives by giving people knowledge. They, intentionally or unintentionally, shape the lives of their students by showing them what is in the world. I can honestly say that I would not be where I am today if Mrs. Peichel, my English teacher during my senior year of high school, did not challenge me to write a short story. So when a student asks a stupid question, I often think that the teacher is justified in his use of FOCUS.



On the other hand, teachers need to recognize the fact that they have a lot of power. Teachers have the ability to reward and punish, compliment and insult each student they teach. As the poet Taylor Mali wrote, teachers can “make a C+ feel like a Congressional medal of honor, and an A- feel like a slap in the face.” However, a lot of teachers are ignorant of the power they possess. They don't seem to realize that they can turn students away from the subject they represent.

In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Mrs. Ruckert, my art teacher, assigned us an interesting project. She encouraged us to create monsters and to draw them in their natural habitat. When I began my project, I was intent on creating a friendly monster that could exist in any environment. It had gills so it could go underwater and wings so it could fly. It even had eyes that could register images in complete darkness.

After a few days of work, Mrs. Ruckert waddled by my desk and peered through her thick glasses at my friendly monster. She did not like what she saw.

“*That* isn't a monster,” she screeched at me, “that thing couldn't scare a five-year old on Halloween. You have to start over.”

The next monster I made was a small dragon, that could breath fire and slip through ventilation systems. Its only purpose was to kill Mrs. Ruckert. I knew I wasn't destined to become an artist.

Personally, I never asked the question “why are we learning this?” I never wondered why I was being taught about the history of the world or equilateral triangles, I just accepted that fact. Perhaps ignorance does not lie in the lack of knowledge, but in a particular attitude. It appears that I was ignorant in my youth, even though I did not resist my education. Even though I never asked the question “why are we learning this?” I never knew the answer to that question.

Sometimes, I would try to justify knowledge: with history, I told myself that we are doomed to repeat it if we do not learn from it, with math, I told myself, could be used in science, and science could be used to invent new things. I never worked to seek out the answer to that question, which, it seems, has led me to some sort of ignorance.

When I learn something new, I always imagine that I will find a use for it one day. Whether I use that information on a test or in a casual conversation with a friend, I am confident that every piece of knowledge that I absorb will be useful. Occasionally, I even imagine myself being asked a question while at gunpoint. The assailant will ask me a trivial question (Who was the first scientist to explain why the sky is blue?) and I will buy my freedom with the answer (John Tyndall). One day, I am sure that knowledge will actually save my life.

Ignorance is a deadly state of mind. Once, a man who was on the verge of bankruptcy, attempted to rob the first store he encountered. He couldn't afford to purchase a gun, so he painted a flare gun black and entered a store without much thought. It turned out that the store he was trying to rob was a gun store. Furthermore, he attempted to rob it during a NRA meeting while two cops sat outside in a squad car. He sustained 36 gunshot wounds and died a few minutes after entering the store.

Perhaps ignorance is simply an awareness of knowledge. The man wasn't aware that he was robbing a gun store. He wasn't aware that there was an NRA meeting in progress. He wasn't aware that two cops were sitting outside of the store. He just acted without awareness, which leads me to believe that he was an ignorant man. It seems that a man who knows nothing is ignorant and a man who knows he knows nothing is wise.

I have spent the majority of my life running dispelling any ignorance that I may have. I firmly believe that ignorance is one of the greatest sins and a man can sustain and, as such, he

should try his hardest to avoid it. Whenever I answer a question incorrectly, I am forced to endure embarrassment that comes with ignorance.

When I was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, I made an effort to do things the "right" way. It took me a lot longer than most of the other children to finish an assignment, but I was sure I was doing it right. Over time, I became frustrated. Other students were able to finish their work in a timely matter while I lagged behind everyone else. One day in early February, I decided to take a risk I was just going to do the assignment. Our class had to write a story about Groundhog's Day, so I wrote a story about a groundhog named Bob, who dreamed of starting a bed and breakfast. When Groundhog's Day arrive, walked outside and discovered that there was no shadow. He spent the next six weeks building the bed and breakfast. When he finally completed it, he invited his friends over for a pot of coffee. Writing that story was the most fun I had that year.

There is a difference between knowledge and creativity. Knowledge simply is; a fact is just a fact. In its base form, knowledge is not very interesting. For example, the facts "chickens cannot fly" and "hawks can fly" are true, but aren't very interesting, at least in the way they are presented. However, if some creativity is used, both of these facts will become interesting: "a hawk will always defeat a chicken in battle because the hawk is capable of flight while the chicken is not." In this example, the reader is presented with both facts, but those facts interact with each other to form some sort of thesis or conclusion. Creativity is ultimately what makes something interesting.

## Agreements

I signed my first contract in the 6th grade. My homeroom teacher, Mr. Gonzalez, decided that we were old enough to enter a simple agreement. On the first day of school, the man walked into the classroom in his khaki shorts and t-shirt and announced each of us would sign a contract that would "obligate" us to behave. He walked up and down each row of desks and handed out contracts to each student, after he handed one to me, I discovered it to be a list of rules: be respectful, be courteous, raise your hand to ask a question, etc. Even though I knew these rules by heart, this contract changed everything: the rules were written down and I had to agree with them by signing my name on a piece of paper. The rules were now significant.

Of course, the concept of an agreement existed long before Mr. Gonzalez. Different kinds of agreements, such as contracts, have existed since ancient times. Agreements have been used for a variety of different purposes, the formation of a government through a social contract, a legal agreement through a legal contract, or an agreement between man and God through a covenant, just to list a few. We even make casual agreements with our friends, family, and associates through promises and favors. It is impossible to go through life without making some kind of agreement.

From the minute our mothers decide to keep us, we are subject to an agreement. A mother agrees to carry a pregnancy to term and the child agrees to live. The child could be raised, given up for adoption, left in the wilderness to die, or even thrown into a furnace, but none of these things can change the fact that the mother allowed a baby to grow in her womb. Every person on this planet exists because of this agreement.

God can also be figured into this equation. According to the Bible, everyone who is alive today is not only a descendent of Adam and Eve, but also of Noah. The first covenant that God

made with man was made through Noah. After 40 days and nights of rain, God led Noah to dry land and promised that he would never wipe out humanity again. God created the rainbow as the sign of this covenant and told us to remember Him whenever we see it.

Contracts, it seem, protect the interests of both parties. One summer, I worked at a summer camp. When I read the contract, I realized that there were a lot of clauses in it that protected my rights. I had the right to a safe workspace, the right to rest once a week, and the right to take sick days. The contract guaranteed that no one could take advantage of me.

Two years ago, one of my friends participated in an event call "30 Hour Famine." As a participant, she promised several people that she would fast for 30 hours in solidarity with the poor and hungry in exchange for pledge money. She collected around \$100 to participate in this event and she followed through even though she already had the money. She had promised she would participate, and she was a woman of her word. The fact that we keep many of our promises is very interesting to me, especially if we endure hardship as a result. My friend could have easily broken her fast and no one would have blamed her. But she didn't, she went the whole 30 hours without eating a single bite of food despite the pain of hunger. The fact that people like her exist comforts me.

While the power of an agreement can be used for good, it can also be used for evil. September 11th is a great example of how an agreement can be destructive. Several religious extremists agreed to hijack planes and fly them into landmarks that symbolize America. The agreement caused the direct deaths of thousands of people, and indirectly affected the lives of millions of people. September 11th proves that agreements have the power to topple buildings and start wars.

The most powerful contracts are those that are written down. The Constitution of the United States is a prime example of a powerful contract: it has been the subject of numerous debates over the last three centuries. While the ink on the Constitution was still drying, Washington was able to use the power it granted him to quell the Whiskey Rebellion in the 1790s. Later on, the Constitution would lead to the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, and countless other controversies. It's funny how an agreement written on a sheet of paper that could be burned in twenty seconds shaped the history of a nation.

The people of ancient Greece, on the other hand, did not write down their social contract: they simply knew it existed. When Socrates was sentenced to death by hemlock for corrupting the youth, he was given the opportunity to live the rest of his life in exile. Socrates, however, refused to flee for a few reasons, one of which was his agreement to live under the "social contract" of Athens. By practicing his philosophy in Athens, Socrates knew the risks he was taking and was willing to suffer the consequences.

Most of us don't have the luxury that Socrates had. We have to be mindful of our actions as we have to suffer the consequences: we cannot choose to run away from the social contract that governs the way our society functions. The only way to avoid this social contract is to leave the society that enforces it. If we do that, we sentence ourselves to a life of solitude in the wilderness that few can tolerate.

To some, exile is worse than death. I have to admit, I find it quite intimidating: the idea of being forced out of the United States never to return sends shivers up my spine. But then again, I also considered leaving the country for a short amount of time. I considered becoming an expatriate once. During the presidential election of 2008, the country was dangerously close to electing John McCain and Sarah Palin into office. I wasn't worried about John McCain: he

seemed like a respectable figure. It was Sarah Palin who scared me: I had no clue what that woman would do if McCain died in office. I was convinced that the world would end, at least for the United States. I was sure that any respect that America still held in the international community would immediately vanish. So, I vowed that If McCain was elected president, I would leave the country. Thankfully, Obama was elected instead.

Looking back at that election, I've come to the conclusion that the idea of a political expatriate is a paradox. How is it possible for a person to love his country so much that he is willing to leave it if he thinks it is headed in the wrong direction? If that person truly loved his country, wouldn't he stay and fix it? Wouldn't he try to show those in power the error in their ways? As Edward Abbey once wrote "a patriot must be ready to defend his country against his government." So, shouldn't political expatriates stay in their country? Now that I've grown more attached to this country, I think I'll stay here, for better or worse.

## On the Future

I spend way too much time thinking about my future. Whether it is about my career or my weekend plans, I use a considerable amount of time making plans and contingency plans for my life. To me, it is easier to think about the future than it is to think about the present: for everything in my imagined future happens the way I want it to. Unlike the past or the present, the future is completely in my mind. It doesn't rely on the physics of the real world or depend on the actions of others. It is a construct in my mind that no one else can change. As a result, I tend to get lost in the futures I construct to the point where I am convinced that it will come true.

When I was in high school, I was convinced that I would become a computer programmer. I had fantasies about working for a computer game company. Through the use of numbers and code, I would create the foundations for many worlds and stories. I would become a god; with a few minutes at a keyboard I could change the physics of an entire world, the outcome of an entire story, the challenge to any encounter. I could be a gamer's best friend or worst nightmare if I felt like it. I knew that all of this would come true and that, eventually, I would land a job at a video game company and would probably end up living in California. It wasn't a question of if, but when.

However, reality had different plans. The first math class I took in college convinced me that Computer Science was not meant for me. I was not meant to use numbers or memorize code and that future faded from my mind. I, instead, majored in Creative and Professional writing. I traded my calculator for a pen and started creating worlds in a different manner. I can honestly say that my high school self would be surprised to see where I am today; I didn't end up in the future that he worked so hard for: I didn't major in computer science, I am not going to get a job at a video game company and, chances are, I won't end up living in California.



Some may argue that I didn't possess the will power to make my future come true, however I don't think that is the case. After taking a single college level math class, I discovered that I wasn't very good at math. My mind couldn't make the connections necessary to understand the theories of advanced mathematics. I didn't even care about the grade I received in that class; I just wanted to pass so I could move on with my life. I don't have any regrets about my change of plans, and I don't think I ever will. It seems to me that there is a difference between our perceived futures and our obtainable futures. Take, for instance, the dream that thousands of high school athletes have: to make it the "big leagues." It is not possible for all of them to make it: there are only a few hundred positions available. In order to become a professional athlete, a student must first make it into a university where they will get noticed by talent scout. Unless they are really good, the chances that the talent scout will notice them are slim to none. As a result, the majority of athletes will have to abandon the future that they saw for themselves and take up a different one.

After thinking about the story above, I have come to the conclusion that the main obstacle that we encounter on our way to the future would have to be other people. Other people have the same dreams we do: they want the same things we do. But there are limited number of futures to be had, and everyone is trying to get the same ones. But what most people don't get is that the best way to get to the future is not to compete with other people for it, but rather to get other people to want the same future you do. The more people you persuade to act, the bigger impact you will have on the future. It may be easier to act alone, but the act of an individual is a lot weaker than the act of a community.

A few weeks ago, I planned a surprise birthday party for one of my friends. I called mutual friends and convinced them to get in on this ambush. I put some in charge of finding her

(which is harder than it sounds as she always works in different places), while I put others in charge of decorating the cake. I even convinced some voice majors to come with us so our singing would be better. After everyone rehearsed the birthday song, we left to find her. The scouting party determined that she was in a computer cluster, so we rushed there and sang the song. She was so happy that so many people cared about her enough to put that much effort into finding her and decorating a cake for her. Her life became slightly better because of our collective action.

If I didn't get all of our friends together, the surprise wouldn't have had the same effect. If it was just me, the cake wouldn't have been decorated, the singing would have been bad, and I would have spent the majority of the night trying to find her and she would've had a different impression from the whole ordeal if I was alone. However, other people did participate, and the night went according to plan. We were able to make our imagined future come true because we had the manpower to do it. I believe that this is because we weren't competing, but working together; we weren't trying to sabotage each other, because we all wanted the same thing: we wanted our friend to be happy. It is true that she would have been happy if any of us surprised her that night, but she was a lot happier because we all did in unison. Our cooperation amplified our effect on our friend's future.

Of course, my surprise party was not the first time that anyone cooperated to ensure a specific end. If the cooperation of ten or twenty people can make a single person's life better, imagine what the cooperation of an entire nation can do. The United States comes together for a similar kind of cooperation every four years. Millions of people come together to vote for the one person that will make policy and act on our behalf. The president is given power by the people of the United States and, as a result, can alter the very course of the future, for better or

worse. In the past, a president has started wars, implemented social and economic policies (both foreign and domestic), aided and chastised foreign powers, always to some effect. He isn't just some crazy guy who is telling people what to do: he is given these powers by the people, and because of that, people listen to him.

I would like to note, however, that the scale of cooperation doesn't always matter. I think that the thing that changes the world the most is not what happens when large groups of people come together and act for a common cause, but rather what happens when two people come together and decide to spend their lives together. Sure, it may not seem as significant in the grand scheme of things; the power of two people is not that much greater than the power of one, at least at first glance. But these two people can come together and decide to have a child. And that child could change the world. Just think of all of the great leaders in history. They were all the result of two people getting together to have a child. Even if love isn't involved, even if it is forced, the addition of one person, one agent into this world, who may grow up to persuade millions of people to act, will have just as great of an impact on the world as any one person who is already in the world.

## In the Middle of the Night

My life becomes worse a night. I feel like I'm alone: no one is there for me, no one cares if I live or die. Once the sun goes down, my existence loses meaning. Even if everything is going well, even if there is nothing for me to worry about, the moon will rise and every blessing becomes a curse. It doesn't matter what is going right or wrong in my life: the world ends when the sun sets. As darkness encapsulates the world, my mind becomes filled with sorrow: there is no way for me to complete all of my assignments, I will not get into grad school, I will not get a job, I will not find the love of my life. I probably won't make it to my apartment door.

At night, destiny becomes fate: there is nothing I can do to change what is going to happen to me. I am no longer a hero, but a victim. When stars show themselves, I can't help but lose the fight that everyone eventually loses. As a species, humans are not meant to inhabit a world that is filled with darkness.

Just imagine being outside at night. You can't see very far. Your sense of hearing is amplified: every noise you hear is louder. Whenever you see something, you look at it twice. In urban settings you are wary of alleys, for any number of criminals could be waiting in the darkness. In rural settings, you are scared of forests and bushes, for any number of monsters could lie within them. Your heart races. If you are walking, you speed up. You know you can't fight what you can't see. If you can't find somewhere to hide, or something to defend yourself with, you will quickly fall victim to whatever predator lies in the darkness.

But none of this is the night's fault. There is no demon lurking the shadows that causes fear. There is no chemical in the darkness that makes us lose hope. It is all within our minds. At night we are our own worst enemy, whether we imagine a monster in the darkness, or think

that there is no hope in our lives. In the end, we need to realize that if we have enough courage, we will survive to see the sun rise once again.

During my time in Pittsburgh, I would walk home in the middle of the night. At the time, I didn't think I had a choice. I had classes during the day and the only time I could hang out with my friends was at night. So, I would stay at my friend's place until the early hours of the morning and walk home while it was dark. The first few times I walked home, I feared for my life. I didn't know what dangers lay in the streets of Pittsburgh at 2:00 AM. I thought that I would be mugged, shot, or, God forbid, fall down some hole I couldn't see. But as time went on my fears became insignificant. Experience taught me that nothing was going to happen to me. Night didn't seem too bad.

One night, when I was walking home, I heard a noise in a bush. My heart started to race once again: all of the fears that I thought I conquered returned with a vengeance. I jumped away from the bush and yelped. I knew my time had come; I was going to meet the fate that I've been tempting for so long. I commanded my legs to run, but they wouldn't move because I was paralyzed with fear. All I could do was stare at the bush and meet whatever fate came out of it. It was going to bad: someone would find my eviscerated corpse on this sidewalk the next day because of the creature that lurked the bush. After a few seconds of pure terror, a cat wiggled its way out of the bush and looked at me.

Stephen King once wrote "monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside of us, and sometimes, they win." I think that King has a point: the monsters that we are most susceptible to are the ones we imagine. Ever since I was a kid, I was told that there are no monsters under my bed or outside my window, but my mind told me otherwise. Even when I outgrew those monsters, they were just replaced by more grown up ones: the fear of a witch

outside my window was replaced by the fear of a pointless life; the fear of a mountain lion under my bed was replaced by the fear of ending up alone. And sometimes, as both a kid and adult, I lose battles against my fears and I am forced to surrender to them.

I know I'm not the only one who has exhibited this fear when walking around at night. On one occasion, I was walking home when I encountered a drunk, shoeless girl running away from some imagined terror. When I looked in her eyes, I could see that she was truly afraid. The scent of cheap vodka could not cover up the fact that she had succumbed to her fears.

Darkness is often used as a metaphor for other things we are afraid of such as death. The first such metaphor I can think of comes from Psalm 23:4 : "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; they rod and thy staff they comfort me." In this verse, "valley of the shadow of death" represents everything that we might fear in life: everything, from death to financial ruin, is covered by this metaphor. The speaker, David, knows he has nothing to be afraid of because God will always be with him; God is present to protect the speaker from anything that can hurt him. As long as God remains present, no harm will be done.

Humanity can reason fears away. Just think of how a parent interacts with a child. If the child afraid of something, the parent will reason with the child. For example, if a child thinks that monsters hide in the dark, the parent will go investigate every place a monster could hide. He will check the closet, under the bed, behind the curtains, until the child is content that there is no location to hide. After the parent doesn't find anything, he will tell the child that there are no monsters in the room. Thanks to the parent, it is safe to go to sleep.

If it is possible for a parent to reason with a child, it should be possible for an adult to reason with himself. There are, after all, many reasons why one should not be afraid of the dark:

creatures of the night are afraid of us, there is nothing in the dark, monsters, such as vampires and werewolves don't exist. While these are all good reasons to ignore our primal fear of the dark, there is one reason that is superior: the world doesn't really change that much at night. The only difference between night and day is the lighting. Surely, as a species, we can adapt to an aesthetic changes without panicking. It should be possible to conquer any instinct that we possess, any fear that nags at us, we recognize that the world is a consistent place, even when the sun sets.

Plato once used the analogy of a cave to describe what happens to our world when we obtain knowledge. At the beginning of our lives, we know very little about the universe and, as a result, our "world" is very small. Plato describes this smallness as being chained in a cave while we watch shadows on the wall. The shadows are the world to the person who is chained down, for that is all he knows. If someone unchains him, he can get up and explore the cave. It is possible for him to find the source of the shadow, which, in this analogy, comes in the form of shapes passing in front of a fire. The person can even leave the cave and discover what the world outside is like. In essence, our "world" expands as we learn more about the universe.

In Plato's analogy, darkness seems to represent ignorance. A person spends the majority of his life in darkness. Darkness is something to flee from, and we can do this by learning more and more about our universe. Sure, it is possible for a person to break from the chains of ignorance by himself, but most of the time, we need help. How are we supposed to know that there is more to life than shadows on a wall if no one tells us that there is more? While we possess a great deal of agency, we sometimes need a little help to get out of the cave.

On a different hike home, I encountered a crying girl. Two of her friends rushed to her side and asked her what was wrong. She thought the world was ending because her boyfriend

was cheating on her. Her friends told her that wasn't the case: her boyfriend was not cheating on her. Her friend told her she was just being paranoid and she stopped crying as I walked away from the scene. Her friends kept the darkness at bay while she recovered her sense. She was being led out of her cave by her friends, who were showing her the bigger picture.

Our ability to look out for others allows us to keep the darkness at bay. Sure, it is possible for a person to get through a personal tragedy by himself. However, if he has friends to rely on, friends who he can share his burdens with, it becomes a lot easier for him to get through the darkness in his life.

I know, from personal experience, how hard it is to get through a personal tragedy alone. A few weeks ago I was rejected by a young woman who I had a crush on for quite some time. She told me, under the stars, how she only saw me as a friend and that she didn't think she would ever see me as anything more. She then went into her dorm and left me with nothing more than my thoughts and a 30 minute hike home at 1:00 AM. That night, it wasn't noises that scared me, but questions about my future: did I say something that scared her away? Would I be alone forever? Would I ever be more than a "friend" to someone? As I walked home that night, I couldn't see anything positive about this experience. Even though these questions had nothing to do with the darkness, I felt a lot worse about the whole situation because of the lack of light. There was no hope that night, only fear.

Of course, I was able to make it past this experience thanks to my friends. In the following weeks, I remember how my friends cheered me up: they played games with me, shared similar stories of rejection with me and told me that there is always hope. They told me that I had value, which is something I was never able to see. In the end, I was able to conquer the darkness in my life because my friends were willing to help me through it.



Light is always there to counter the darkness. Even in our weakest, or darkest, moments, it is always possible to see the light. The American historian Charles Beard once wrote “when it is dark enough, you can see the stars,” which I think holds true. In the darkness, it becomes easier to see the light, no matter how small or faint it is. I might just be an optimist, but I like to think that there is always something to hope for, something to keep us from surrendering our lives to our deepest fears. I don’t even think that it is possible to be in complete darkness.

## Scared of God

When I was a sophomore in high school, I read a sermon titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." This sermon, which was written in 1741 by Jonathan Edwards, outlines the idea that God could send unbelievers to hell at any moment because they are naturally prone to fall into the depths of hell because of the weight of their sin. I remember a particularly vivid image of God holding me over hell like I might hold an insect over a fire: to God we are just vermin.

When I first read this sermon, I thought that the ideology that it spewed was an artifact of the past. We no longer have a vengeful and spiteful God, but a loving and nurturing God. The 250 year old rants of a minister bent on scarring people into believing were surely obsolete. I was convinced that we became a lot more civilized; surely we no longer convert people at the end of a gun.

The environment I was raised in taught me differently. I was told that Christ died for everyone's sins and we are supposed to follow the golden rules: love your God with all of your heart and soul and mind and treat your neighbor as you would yourself. I thought that the couple thousand years between Christ's death and my life was enough for all Christians to realize that the hearts and minds of God's people should be won with his love, not his wrath. After all, most people believe that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

But then I learned about the way that other people communicated with and worshiped God. Recently I attended a meeting where we were discussing how we could bring people closer to God. After the discussion, we prayed for those on campus. During the prayer, someone made the request that God withhold His judgment of those who don't know him; she prayed that He would protect non-believers from Satan and allow us the opportunity to bring them to the right path. I burst out laughing in the middle of a prayer because I thought it was a joke: it sounded

so archaic and obsolete, I didn't think that there was any way she could be serious. But of course, I was wrong and she's given me weird looks ever since.

Since I left the refuge of my home church, I've learned over and over again that my view of Christianity isn't the dominant one. I've had many experiences similar to the one above and even though I feel outnumbered, I still think that it is wrong to be scared of God.

The Westboro Baptist Church demonstrates the belief in a wrathful God. The members of this congregation make it a point to go to the funerals of soldiers and protest America's tolerance of the homosexual community. They argue that 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are all a result of this tolerance. They also argue that everyone who does not condemn homosexuals will be sent into hell. Even though Westboro Baptist Church condemns a particular "sin," they use the same fearful rhetoric that Edwards used on that summer night all those years ago.

Some even go as far as to bring God's "judgment" to Earth. Recently, a church in Florida decided it would be a good idea to host a "Burn a Koran" day, where people could come and burn a copy of the Muslim holy book. The church's pastor, Terry Jones, argued that they were doing this in condemnation of Islam. Jones didn't think that anyone was doing anything to address the real causes of 9/11, and decided to take matters into their own hands by burning a book that 1.8 billion people devoutly read. Burning this Islamic holy book symbolically condemns over a billion people to the depths of hell because of their beliefs.

Both of these groups, who threaten damnation, are taking things too far. In these cases, it appears fear and hate are interchangeable. I don't know what they expect their audience to do. Do they expect them to convert, to repent for their wicked ways? If so, would Westboro Baptist

Church accept “reformed” homosexuals into their community, or would Reverend Jones welcome converted Muslims with open arms? Do these groups believe in redemption?

The thing that bothers me the most about fear-based rhetoric is the idea that people are supposed to accept God's love because the alternative is much worse. If people believe in God because they are afraid of going to hell, they are not believing in him for the right reasons. They came to God for protection, for salvation, not to make the world a better place, not to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth. I am not even sure if a belief because of fear can be called faith.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines faith as “Confidence, reliance, trust (in the ability, goodness, etc., of a person; in the efficacy or worth of a thing; or in the truth of a statement or doctrine)”. How can you be confident in something that you fear? How can you trust someone who hates you? How can you rely on someone who has judged you unworthy? Moreover, would anyone want to believe in a god who supports those who persecute him? Can such a god even be considered good?

I always thought that scripture told me not to be afraid of God. In the Gospel according to Luke, the angel Gabriel went to Nazareth to announce Christ's birth to Mary. After she was informed that God had chosen her, she was frightened. But Gabriel comforted her by saying: "do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God." God was blessing Mary by giving her the opportunity to serve. Even though God didn't give her a choice in the matter, He didn't scare Mary into carrying this child, nor did He threaten her with eternal damnation if she didn't. He just told her not to be afraid.

But I suppose in this particular case Mary had found favor with God; God saw something in Mary that he didn't see in anyone else. God gave Mary the opportunity to serve him, and she took it. She was willing to follow God, which is something that a lot of people have a hard time

doing. Even some Christians, who have been blessed with God's gifts, don't actively follow Him.

When I was younger, I attended a "mega church" service. I entered the sanctuary and was amazed by its design: it reminded me of a movie theater. At the front of the sanctuary, there were two screens, which were used to show the pastor's notes on the scripture. Instead of pews, there were chairs, which were padded and comfortable. The chairs even had cup holders, which gave me a place to put the gourmet hot chocolate that I purchased in the lobby. It was clear to me that these people worshiped God in a unique way.

From the service itself, I only remember the sermon. The pastor preached as if the Bible was big soap opera. The pastor taught from Genesis 16, which is the story of how Sarah, who desperately wanted a child, encouraged Abraham to sleep with her maidservant, Hagar. Abraham did just that, and Hagar became pregnant. The pregnancy caused Hagar to despise Sarah. Sarah, who was jealous of Hagar, mistreated her causing her to run away. The sermon ended on that note.

The "mega church" was focused on trivial things. Everything about the church was trivial: the comfortable chairs, the big screens, the entertaining sermon. At one point, the pastor even compared scripture to *The Desperate Housewives*, which turned the Bible into a cheap romance. While the pastor could have used the passage to show his congregation that God will act in His own time and way, he chose not to. Instead, he decided it was more important to entertain his flock.

A church that doesn't actively pursue Christ is not a church worth going to, at least in my opinion. A congregation that is comfortable is not doing God's work. While a person should not be scared into believing or doing something, he should also know that faith is a commitment.

When a person confesses his faith, he is not signing up for satellite television. He is making a commitment to God. He can't pick and choose his beliefs, like he might pick and choose which channels he wants to pay for. No, he has to believe in the whole package: he has to believe that God created the world in some way, he has to believe that Christ came to Earth and died for our sins, and, most importantly, he has to believe that Christ challenges us to follow him, to pursue the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Sure it is true that scripture promises eternal life once a person confesses his belief in Christ, but doesn't mean he can live in idle life. If a person believes in Christ, he is also challenged to live a Christian life.

Maybe my expectations are too high. On the one hand, I believe Christians should not use fearful rhetoric to convert non-believers. On the other hand, I believe that Christians should constantly challenge themselves; they should try to become better people.

By threatening people, aren't they are being scared into believing in God and by offering them a reward, aren't they being bribed into believing in Him. Either way, it seems that they are choosing not to believe in God because they want to, but because their lives will be improved once they do believe in him, be it salvation from damnation or the gift of eternal life. The point of faith is to believe no matter the gain. One should not believe because someone scared or bribed him into believing it, but he should ascribe to a particular faith only if he's studied it and agrees with it. He should only believe if he thinks it is the right thing to do.

Maybe Edwards was right. Maybe we are all sinners in the hands of an angry God. Look at it from God's perspective: on the one hand, there are people who are using God's name as an excuse to scare people with hateful rhetoric. On the other hand, there is a different group of people who are complacent because of the things that God has done for them. From my

perspective, it looks like no one is getting the real message. If I were Him, I would be angry. I would be tempted to let everyone fall into a fiery chasm.

## Rain or Shine

I remember being fascinated by rain when I was a child; I could sit on the porch for hours, just watching the rain. The idea that it could be sunny one day and rainy the next always intrigued me. To this day, the first thing I do when I wake up is look out the window and see what the weather is like. The weather is one thing that we all have in common: we are all affected by it and, as a consequence, we all have something to say about it.

Weather is the one topic that you can talk to anyone about; no matter how well you know a person, it is always possible to sustain a conversation about the weather with them. Be it rain, snow, storm, or sunshine, you will always be able to get at least a three sentence conversation out of the topic:

"So, how about this weather?"

"It's nice out."

"I agree."

Oscar Wilde once said "conversation about the weather is the last refuge for the unimaginative," but it is almost always the first thing I talk about. In most cases, it leads to conversations about past experiences: when it snows, I talk about snow days; when it rains, I talk about ridiculous storms. The only days I don't have anything to talk about are "nice days," as they are too normal to talk about.

To me, talking about "nice weather" is like talking about peace: we have to talk around both of these topics. With peace, we tend to talk about what we would do if we had it. It is more about how the world would become a better place, how we could use our resources to help instead of hinder. We never talk about peace itself, just what would happen because of it.



With "nice weather," we talk about what we do during it. We talk about the times that we went cycling in spring, swimming in summer, or hiking in autumn, but we never talk about the weather itself because perfect weather is unremarkable. But we like good weather for that exact reason: it is unremarkable. It sits in the background and lets us experience an adventure without any additional hardship.

The weather, of course, means more to some than it does to others. Growing up in a rural area, I am aware of this fact: farmers need to know a lot more about the climate in order to make a decent living. Farmers need to plant crops right when the ground thaws so they can avoid the first frost in the fall. If there is a drought, farmers need to irrigate their crops so they don't wither. The lives of thousands of people are affected if a farmer plants his crop even a day too early or too late. In essence, the farmer is a slave to the weather.

We have, however, worked to make the weather a slave to the farmer. In ancient times, weather was viewed as a divine thing: only gods could control it. It was one of the many reasons why people prayed to the gods. Jews prayed to Yahweh, Lord of All; the Greeks to Zeus, God of the Heavens; the Mayans to Chaac, God of the Rain. Sacrifices would be made to their gods to ensure a good harvest. The Mayans, for example, sacrificed people by throwing them into wells. Apparently, each person was supposed to find his way to the realm of the gods and escort Chaac, the Mayan God of Rain, back to the mortal realm. Whatever god they worshipped, ancient people did everything they could to persuade their god to give them better weather.

Of course people still pray to gods in an attempt to change weather, especially in times of dire weather. When I was in middle school, I remember being stuck in the middle of tornado weather. I looked out of the window and saw a wisp from a cloud that was just 50 feet above us.

I prayed to God: I prayed that we would make it out of the storm alive, that my father's driving skills would allow us to outrun it. After a few minutes, we made it out of the roughest part of the storm. It seemed to me that God had answered my prayers.

Later on, people tried to predict the weather by more practical means. In 1818, the *Farmer's Almanac* was founded after a couple years of disastrous weather. The *Farmer's Almanac* released predictions for the next year's weather based on several factors: tidal action, planetary position, and sunspots just to name a few. The predictions made in the *Almanac* are 85% accurate to this day.

When I was twelve years old, my grandfather gave me a *Farmer's Almanac* for Christmas. I excitedly flipped through the pages, trying to figure out the weather for the next year. It told me it would snow in January and February and rain in March and April. May would bring nice weather, and the summer would bring storms. First frost would come September, which was a bit disconcerting as harvest wasn't finished until October. The Almanac predicted snow in November, with December bringing much more. From what I remember, the predictions seemed rather accurate.

The *Farmer's Almanac* only predicts the weather from month to month, not day to day. For the latter, we rely on the weatherman. Every night, we can turn to our favorite local channel to profit from the wisdom of meteorologist. We listen to his prophecies with the hopes that we can put on the right clothes the next morning. However, it is more complicated than that.

The fact is we still can't predict the weather with 100% accuracy. I've gone to school wearing a winter coat in 60 degree weather and a t-shirt when it was snowing all because the weatherman can't predict the weather accurately. As I grow older, I find it harder and harder to

trust the weatherman. When he predicts something dangerous like a storm or a blizzard, I am still skeptical about its likelihood.

Once, I ignored a weatherman when he predicted a storm. In the past, he had been wrong, so why would he be right now? But I suffered because of this miscalculation. I left my apartment and the sky opened a brought forth an impenetrable wall of water. I was drenched as I walked a block in the pouring rain because I didn't trust the weatherman.

Weather can also be used in art and literature to evoke a particular emotional response. In the movie *Road to Perdition*, the protagonist, Michael Sullivan, sets out to get revenge for the death of his family. In the middle of the night, during a rain storm, the mob boss who ordered the hit on Sullivan's family goes out to his car along with his body guards. Sullivan opens fire and kills all of them with a Thompson submachine gun. He then approaches the bodies and looks down at them as he stands under a street light in the rain to confirm his kills.

The rain in *Road to Perdition*, changed the atmosphere of the scene: it created a sense of dread and sadness as the audience realized that Michael Sullivan couldn't redeem himself; he couldn't escape the life of violence that he lived. Sullivan only knew one way to solve his problems, and that was with a bullet.

But rain doesn't always represent sadness or dread: it can also represent hope and redemption. Rain always reminds me of baptism: it reminds me of our ability to redeem ourselves -- of renewal. Plants need rain: there is very little life in a desert, where rain is non-existent.

Rain gives the world an opportunity to heal, even if it doesn't deserve it. When I think of rain, I think of Great Flood as described in Genesis. God decided that the world needed a second beginning, so he made it rain for 40 days and nights, flooding the world and cleansing it of its

evil. God gave the world an opportunity to heal and even permitted some of its inhabitants to survive, even though they didn't deserve it.

I think this is where the idea of baptism comes from. Even though this idea has evolved since the Flood, the idea behind remains the same: water can cleanse us, both physically and spiritually. In churches, people are anointed with water as a symbol of spiritual cleansing. Their sin is washed away and they may start their lives in the church.

I like walking through the rain. It make me feel like I am starting over. Especially after a day of failure: bad test grades, late assignment, more work. The rain makes me forget about my short comings; the rain gives me a second chance. To me, the rain is a baptism from God himself: only there are no words from a preacher, or affirmations from witnesses. There is only water falling from the sky and the promise of rebirth.

## Foxholes

During World War II, the United States Army a technique that allowed a soldier to quickly construct a personal fortification. This defensive fighting position (also known as a foxhole) enabled a soldier to fight standing up with only his head and shoulders exposed to enemy fire. Foxholes were even designed to nullify enemy grenades; grenades could be kicked into little holes called sumps in order to dampen the explosion. A foxhole can be created in about 20 minutes. The speed of construction makes them an ideal defense against counter attacks. After an important objective is taken, just dig a hole and wait.

But none of this matters if a soldier cannot take the objective. Imagine a battalion is ordered to take a hill from the enemy. How should they accomplish this objective? Should they build fortifications at the bottom of the hill and wait for the enemy to attack? Or should they charge and take the hill from the enemy?

The first idea seems better than the second. There would be fewer casualties as the battalion would be in a defensive position. Yet, the objective would not be accomplished. Eventually, the battalion will have to go up that hill to achieve their objective. There will always be a risk of casualties.

Life is a lot like war. People put themselves into positions where they have to act or react. They take risks, they see the enemy coming, and they do what they can to live through it all.

Recently, a friend of mine applied for a job. In order to do this, he had submit a cover letter and resume. He was then notified that he was selected for an interview. He prepared himself: he put on a suit and walked himself through several different interview questions. He arrived at the interview five minutes early. Then it began. The interviewer came out and

introduced herself. They both sat down. Questions were asked. Answers were given. When the dust settled, there was no clear victor. They said goodbye and parted ways. Two days later he received an email that informed in that he did not get the job.

My friend took a risk. He gave it his best shot and then prepared himself for both possibilities. He dug himself into a mental foxhole and waited for the interviewer's response. He walked away from the whole experience intact because he was able to put himself in a defensive position: he did not blame himself for losing the battle and came away from it knowing more than he did when he went in.

We are put into situations like the one above every day. Some are very short skirmishes (like deciding what movie to see) and some are very long term conflict (such as relationships). It is the long term conflicts that occupy our minds most of the time and, because of them, we are often on the defensive.

We spend a lot of time waiting for someone to make a decision and we protect ourselves from those decisions by taking shelter in a mental foxhole. During my senior year of high school, I applied for several different universities and I could have ended up in any of three states: Minnesota, Illinois, or Pennsylvania. I tried to make plans depending on which university I got accepted into. I tried to make plans before I got the acceptance letters: I planned my major, what classes I would take, even what dorm room I would stay in if I had a choice. But in the end, I couldn't make any of these decisions until I got the acceptance letters. I was waiting in a foxhole to react to whatever decision the universities made.

Foxholes are meant to be temporary fortifications. They are not meant to be lived in, like a bunker or a house, they are meant to give you temporary shelter from the enemy fire. A foxhole can't protect you from rain or snow, which will cause health problems such as trench

foot and frost bite. Even if a foxhole is enhanced, the hole will eventually be reclaimed by nature. The soldier cannot stay in the foxhole forever. In life, a foxhole is something a person stays in during a time of stress. If that person finds himself furnishing his foxhole with La-Z Boy Chairs and toaster ovens, then he might want to think about finding a new place to stay.

Sadly, a lot of people try to make a foxhole a permanent residence. A few months ago, a friend of mine became extremely depressed. He would not leave his apartment and spent the majority of his time on his computer. Slowly, his grades started to suffer. Eventually he had to take a leave of absence, even though he was a semester away from graduating. My friend was under so much stress, that he was unable to leave his foxhole.

I think too many people live in foxholes. They live secure lives, content with their mediocrity. They don't strive for more: they don't want to see the greater world, they are afraid of losing what they have even if they can get more. They live in foxholes for their entire lives. Some don't even look to see what is out there, they only sit and wait for things to happen to them. I don't know how people can live this way: it is a boring and lonely way to live your life.

I stayed in a foxhole once. It was an experience that I would prefer not to relive. For about a year, I had a crush on a girl and I stood by and waited for a sign that she felt the same way. I dug myself a foxhole, and waited for movement that would never come. As I waited in that foxhole, I felt alone and hopeless. I rightly thought that there was no chance she would take an interest in me: how could she know about my feelings if I didn't share them? The only way that I could end the pain that I was putting myself through would be by leaving my foxhole and take the risk of being hurt by this girl.

Then, one day, I decided to go over the top. I gathered enough courage to ask her out. I charged toward my objective, hoping that I wouldn't get shot on the way. It was worth leaving

my foxhole for her; it was worth getting shot for her. She told me she wasn't interested with words that felt just as bad as a hail of gunfire. I don't regret my actions.

The same applies to the rest of the world. People shouldn't spend ridiculous amounts of time waiting for something to happen. It is not possible to spend a whole life on the defensive. No one can spend their lives in a foxhole. The foxhole was designed to be used and abandoned, not to be a permanent residence. Eventually it is necessary to risk leaving the foxhole no matter what the consequences may be.



## The Culinary Arts

George Bernard Shaw once said that “there is no sincerer love than the love of food,” and I believe he is right. As a people, we not only love food, we use food to show that we love. The easiest way to show someone that we care is to cook him a meal. Food is involved in every aspect of our lives. At weddings, we expect a well prepared meal. At funerals, we expect to see a table full of hors d'oeuvres. At birthdays, we expect see a cake decorated with candles. Every event a person might experience in life, from bar mitzvahs to retirement parties, uses food as a way to celebrate important moments in life.

In ancient times, food was used to welcome guests into a home. It was customary to welcome strangers into your home and to offer them a meal. Even if their guests were going staying for a few hours, it was always important to offer them a good meal. After all, your guest may be someone important.

In scripture, food was used to celebrate everything. The parable of the Prodigal Son is the story of two brothers and a father who have very different views of the world. The younger brother, who wants to go out on his own and live his life, asks his father for his share of the inheritance. His father grants the request and his son goes on his way. The son squanders his wealth and is forced to work as a servant in a far away land, where he often goes hungry. After much thought, the son decides to return home. As the son approaches his father's, the father runs out to greet him. He embraces his son, who he thought was lost, and orders a calf to be slaughtered and prepared as a meal. The father is celebrating the return of his lost son by preparing a feast in his honor.

Even though food often accompanies celebration, it can also be viewed as an art and a business. Auguste Escoffier was a French chef that modernized the culinary arts and, subsequently, brought them into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He was responsible for the organization of kitchens through the brigade de cuisine system, which divided the kitchen into sections each of which is run by a chef de partie. The change in system made the culinary arts more disciplined and introduced an efficiency that allowed kitchens to serve better food to more people. Escoffier revolutionized the culinary arts, making it a worthy profession.

Escoffier is not only known for innovative management techniques, but also for his simple dishes. Much of Escoffier's work is based on another French chef named Antoine Careme, who was known for his opulent style. Escoffier, however, worked to simplify the style to bring it into the modern kitchen. One dish he invented, which is called Peach Melba, consists of nothing more than a peach and a scoop of vanilla ice cream, topped with a raspberry sauce. The dish became so popular, that January 13<sup>th</sup> became "National Peach Melba Day" in the United States.

To others, food is a way to show that you care. I came to this realization during my first year of college, when I noticed everyone around me was receiving baked goods from their relatives on a regular basis. Some would receive cookies from grandparents while others would receive muffins from aunts or cupcakes from uncles. Occasionally I would receive a cookie or a muffin from one of my friends as a demonstration of his family's culinary skill. However, none of the baked goods that I tried, no matter how gourmet or exotic they were, ever tasted as good as the cake that my father makes at home. I would testify this fact to my friends: I would tell them "wait until my father sends me cupcakes; then you will know what true cupcakes should

taste like!” The opportunity to share my father's cupcakes with those around me was all I really wanted.

When I think of my father's cake, I am overcome with a great sense of nostalgia. At the time, this nostalgia became homesickness as the autumn months floated by. I knew there was only one way to cure it: I needed to taste my father's cake and I wanted to share it with my friends. I waited for my parents to send me something, but they never did. I thought that they didn't care: after all, everyone in my dorm received food from their parents and I was the only one who hadn't. Eventually, I decided to take matters into my own hand: I called my father and asked him to send me some cupcakes so I could demonstrate the superiority of our family's baking skills. He said that he would send me a package and I was ecstatic. The day that the package arrived I knew that I would finally be vindicated. I picked up the box and rushed back to my dorm. I ripped it open and was quickly overcome with an interesting combination of determination and disappointment, as all it contained was a laminated recipe and a note that read: “Have fun!”

I should have expected this from my father. After all, he wasn't the kind of person who would just give me something, especially now that I was at college. I was an adult now and it was up to me to uphold my family's honor: it was up to me to learn my family's craft. Sure, he could have sent me a box full of cookies and muffins, but that would only have shown that *he* was a good baker. By sending me the recipe, he gave me the power to show other that I care through the production of pastries. Today I am thankful that he sent me the recipe.

The weekend after I got the recipe, I went out and bought all of the ingredients, pans, and equipment I needed in order to bake the cake. I was determined to finally taste it and cure my homesickness. I read the directions carefully: one false move, and I would ruin the cake. The

sugar butter had to be smooth. Every single lump in the batter had to disappear. Everything had to be perfect if I was going to uphold my family's honor. When I took the cake out of the oven, I could tell that I succeeded: it looked and smelled exactly the same as I remembered it. I shared the cake with my friends and they all agreed: it was a fine dessert.

There is a Chinese proverb that says "if you give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." The proverb not only applies to fishing, but to all skills that can be taught. Sure, my father could have baked me a cake. But he taught me to bake instead, and that was a lot more valuable. He gave me a skill that will be valuable in many different aspects of my life. If he sent me cupcakes instead of a recipe, I would have never developed the baking skills that I have now. But he sent me the recipe instead, and because he did that, I am now able to bake a variety of different cakes. Because of him, I was able to show others that I cared.

While food is a very practical gift to give, it can also be a very symbolic one. For example, Communion is a gift of food (as the recipient is given wine and bread), but it is a symbol of something much greater (the recipient's acceptance of Christ as savior and, subsequently, Christ's forgiveness). Whenever I participate in Communion, I marvel at what each piece of bread and each drop of wine represents: this simple food and beverage mean a lot to those who consume them.

However, we never remember just the food. We remember what the food meant to us, or what was going on around the food. We may remember the delicious cake, the dry chicken, or the undercooked lobster, but we remember those within the context of what was going on around the table. We remember the delicious cake at Jane's party, the dry chicken from the overpriced restaurant, or Joe's first attempt at cooking lobster. It seems to me that food is humble: even

though we need it to live, it almost never takes the center stage in our minds. The act of eating is never more important than the things that go on around us, no matter how good or bad it is.

When we eat with friends, we converse with our friends. When we eat alone, we read a book or watch television as we finish our meal.

Sometimes, however, cooking doesn't need to have the extra meaning that we often give to it. Since we need food in order to live, a lot of our meals just boil down to that fact: we will die if we do not have food. Thus, we feed ourselves to guarantee our survival: our only goal is to make sure we live to see the next meal. To some, that is enough meaning, for they don't have access to vast amounts of food. In third world countries, it is not possible to stop by a convenience store on your way home to grab a gallon of milk, or go to a grocery store to buy supplies for a dinner party. In impoverished parts of the world, food is seen for what it truly is: a substance necessary for life.

I have adopted baking as a means to serve those around me. I hope that every slice of cake that I give out shows that I care. Over the course of my college career, I've learned a lot about baking. I learned how to modify one cake recipe into four different ones. A chocolate cake recipe became a vanilla cake recipe, which was followed by a marble cake and cinnamon cake recipes. I learned that baking soda is used when the cake has a strong sweet flavor (such as chocolate), while baking powder is used when the cake has a more subtle flavor (such as vanilla). But no matter what I learned about baking, I never forgot why I was doing this: I was trying to make better lives by making better cake. I've served variety of people over the years and every single person who enjoyed a piece of cakes was thankful for the treat. I like to think that every single piece of cake that I gave out made someone's life slightly better.

## Damaged Goods

Recently, I decided to make breakfast for my friends on Saturday mornings and went to the grocery store to pick up eggs, milk, bacon, and cheese. The latter three ingredients are the easiest things to pick out: all I needed to do was check their expiration dates. The eggs, however, needed to be examined. I opened a carton and did what my mother taught me to do: I examined each egg. I found a batch of flawless eggs: they were all white, and none of them were cracked. On this particular day, the examination was meaningless as I dropped the carton in the parking lot, ruining four eggs in the process.

Sometimes I feel sorry for the eggs that don't get picked. Occasionally, I open a carton to find a nearly perfect batch of eggs: the shells flawless except for one egg that is corrupted by a crack, or one egg that has an odd discoloration in its otherwise perfect shell. I shake my head and put the carton back: it's a damn shame. The perfection of the group was damaged by one unlucky egg. The egg didn't come out of the chicken with a crack, it was just the victim of unfortunate circumstances: it was in the wrong spot when the truck hit a speed bump or pushed too hard into the refrigerated shelf.

Unlike eggs, people have the ability to discriminate. While an egg cannot decide who else is in their carton, a person can choose their friends.

During the summer before fourth grade, my family moved from California and I found myself friendless in Minnesota. I tried to make new friends, but no one would give me a shot. I was taboo: a new, shy kid from the west coast was an outsider and my peers let me know just that. My social life became as frigid as the Minnesotan winters. I was damaged goods.

At this time, I started to notice how my parents shopped. I noticed how my mother looked in the carton of eggs before she proceeded to the checkout counter and the way my father

thoroughly examined Christmas trees before cutting down the perfect one. I was never proud of my parents for their discrimination: I felt for the abandoned eggs and trees, doomed to be kept alone because they weren't perfect. I knew what it was like to be damaged and I had no intention of spreading that feeling to others.

One May, I went shopping with my father for a mother's day gift. We stopped at a nursery for some flowers, and my father gave me the opportunity to pick out one of the plants. After 30 minutes of searching, I found some African Violets in the back of the nursery, almost out of sight. It was clear that the plant wasn't healthy: some of the leaves were wilted while others were half eaten by snails or aphids. My father asked me if I was sure I wanted to get that particular plant. I nodded, determined to rescue the African Violet from that hellhole of a nursery. My father shook his head, but purchased the ailing plant.

Later that week, I gave the plant to my mother. She was thrilled to receive such a gift, but then again most mothers are thrilled to receive any kind of gift on Mother's Day. She took the plant and placed it by the window. She watered it every week and, eventually, the Violet recovered and bloomed. It was the most beautiful flower I've ever seen.

I find that I am very sympathetic to plants and animals that have gone through a tough time. In fact, all of the animals that my family has adopted over the years could be seen as damaged. My cat, Pucci, has a kink in her tail and screams whenever anyone touches her. My dog, Captain, has an odd looking tumor on his right front paw. Even my parakeet, Petey, had a flaw: he was a mean bird who would bite anyone who would get too close to his cage.

Of course, animals and plants are not the only ones to have flaws. People can be mean. They can look weird. They can scream when someone touches them. People can have all of

these flaws, but that doesn't mean that they deserve to be set aside for someone that is better. No one deserves to be left out in the cold as I was in that Minnesotan elementary school.

Discrimination, at least among people, was a lot worse in ancient Greece. In Sparta, boys were judged at birth by an elder. If they were flawless, they would grow up to serve in the Spartan army. If they possessed any flaws, they would be left in the wilderness to die. The elders treated infants like eggs: they picked the best ones to serve in the Spartan army and left the rest rot in the wilderness.

As a society, we are a bit beyond this mentality. When I was in high school, I participated in my church's youth group. We would serve the community by running food drives and cleaning up the highway. But I think the most significant part of our youth group was our willingness to accept anyone into it. When I think of my time in the youth group, I remember Eric, a boy who had Down's Syndrome. While it was difficult to converse with him, it was clear to everyone in the group that Eric wanted to serve. We included him in our activities: he helped clean up the highway, he collected cans for the food drive. He was an equal in the youth group.

But there is still work to be done. After all, we are all damaged in some way. I am damaged because I have a hard time taking risks. At social events, I find myself in the corner by myself, unwilling to put myself in the spotlight. When it comes to my work, I feel inadequate. I find that I am unwilling to share my inner thoughts because I don't think they are valuable, I don't think they are worth sharing. My damage comes from the fear of being ridiculed.

Perhaps the key to fixing the damage lies in our ability to make friends. When I walk around Pittsburgh, I see people who are damaged and alone. They may be drinking a cup of coffee, or sitting in the park reading a book. They may be programming in a computer cluster, or drafting a new building in a studio. And, occasionally, I see a person sitting on a bench, staring



into oblivion while he waits for something to happen. Perhaps the damage is an illusion that is dispelled once a friendship is made.

## On Punctuation

### **punc·tu·a·tion**

Pronunciation: \,pəŋk-çə- 'wā-shən\

Function: *noun*

Date: circa 1539

**1** : the act of [punctuating](#) : the state of being punctuated

**2** : the act or practice of inserting standardized marks or signs in written matter to clarify the meaning and separate structural units; *also* : a system of punctuation

**3** : something that contrasts or accentuates

I used punctuation for the first time in grade school. When my first grade teacher, Mrs. Sponseler, taught me how to spell words, she also expected me to know how to use them in a sentence and introduced me to the period as the most reliable way to end a sentence.

“Okay class,” Mrs. Sponseler said, as she wobbled to the white board, her curly red hair bouncing with her movements.

“Today we’re going to learn about the period.” She picked up a marker and placed a dot on the board.

“Does anyone know what a period is used for?”

My classmates looked at each other in silence. Surely someone knew what the function of the dot. No one raised their hand.

“Well,” Mrs. Sponseler continued, “it is used to end a thought.” She wrote the sentence “Spot is a dog” without the period.

“This thought is not finished,” she said, as she placed the dot in its correct spot, “but now it is.”

After that introduction, I started to craft brilliant sentences such as “I am a cat” and “I ran home.” I knew each sentence had to end and placed the period in its correct spot. It had no other

purpose: it did not change the meaning or the content of a particular sentence, it just ensured one sentence was separate from the next.

Ancient writers needed to separate their thoughts just as much as first grade students. In ancient Greece, punctuation was developed to aid a public speaker in reading a document aloud: a colon like mark signified where the speaker was supposed to pause. The punctuation mark was also used by playwrights to add drama to a scene. Plays, like Oedipus were riddled with these marks so different actors could play the same parts consistently.

During the middle ages, monks introduced some forms of punctuation into scripture, to ensure that the scripture was read correctly. Scribes would indent scripture in certain areas (creating paragraph like structures) in order to create separate passages. Scribes also introduced capital letters, as well as some forms of punctuation, in order to signify the beginning and the end of a thought. However, punctuation was still far from standardized as Bibles were copied by hand. Punctuation was a tradition passed down from generation to generation in secluded monasteries, not an industrial standard.

Everything changed with the introduction of the printing press. Documents that were reproduced by hand in monasteries could now be reproduced en masse by machine. The printing press was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century and made it possible to produce a large number of documents. Even though it was a novelty at its birth, primarily used by nobility, the printing press would ultimately be used to educate the public. As more and more people gained access to documents, it became necessary to standardize punctuation in order to show the reader how to read a particular document. Punctuation, or at least the way we use it today, was first standardized in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century by Aldus Pius Manutius and his grandson. Manutius used the same punctuation marks in everything he printed (such as

periods, commas, and the semi colon). By introducing standardized punctuation, Manutius revolutionized the way that we view language.

As technology advanced, we changed the way we used punctuation. Particular ways of using punctuation have changed as different devices were introduced to the world. When the typewriter was introduced, people were discouraged from using punctuation because typewriter tape was expensive. Documents of the typewriter age would scarcely use punctuation for this reason. It was a waste of money to end a thought. With the introduction of the computer, people were given more freedom to use various types of punctuation. It seems that we are now entering an era where excessive punctuation is allowed. Now that we are transferring into the digital age, limitless amounts of information can be stored digitally: the digital age frees us from the cost of typewriter tape.

With great punctuation comes great responsibility. Now that we are allowed to use punctuation as liberally as we want, we have to make sure that we don't use it too much. Many writers use commas indiscriminately, without a thought to how, or why, they use them. The comma, which is primarily used to separate different parts of sentences, can be rather annoying if it is used excessively. Punctuation can also be used to create very long sentences. It is the responsibility of the writer to make sure that his sentences don't sprawl on forever.

The Chicago Manual of Style argues that the placement commas doesn't matter as much as word order. In other words, asides created by commas, such as this one, should not be used very often as it could easily confuse the reader. However, asides can clarify a writer's thoughts and ultimately help the reader understand what the writer is trying to say. Word order does matter, but so does punctuation as it gives the reader a hierarchy to follow.

I have seen sentences that don't end: they are extended by various forms of punctuation (such as commas, semicolons, and colons); some people even create a paragraph that consists of one sentence that lasts four or five lines by using every punctuation mark that they can think of (and the occasional aside, which may or may not help the reader understand the subject at hand), even though some readers may find it abhorrent to extend the life of a sentence beyond its natural end.

People who extend sentences in this manner usually rely on a form of punctuation that repulse some writers: the semicolon. I learned in a style class that semicolons are used much like the period: they separate different, yet closely related thoughts. In my personal experience, I find that semicolons can be used to maintain the pace of prose; a semicolon does not force the reader to stop like a period would, but encourages the reader to continue. However, there are some out there who believe that semicolons have no redeeming qualities. Kurt Vonnegut once said that the semicolons "are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college." I yield to Vonnegut on one point: I didn't know how to use a semicolon before college.

Punctuation can also change the meaning of a sentence. In third grade, my two friends, Jeff and Tyler, and I were supposed to be working on a group project. We were put in the back corner of the room next to the classroom computer. On the keyboard, a bright red "Panic!" key glued under the "Home" key. That bright red key always caught my eye, as did the exclamation mark at the end of the command. At the time, exclamation marks meant that something was going to be fun. To me, the exclamation mark signified excitement and adventure. So, being bored with the project at hand, I pressed the "Panic!" button and told my friends that we should do exactly that. We all started to flail our arms about in the air screaming about some invisible

catastrophe. The “Panic!” button made the world end and we needed to make sure that everyone knew it. Mrs. Warwick, our teacher, was not impressed by our imagined disasters, and gave us all detentions. She did not see our panic as a result of an active imagination, but as a class disruption. Thinking back on that day, I have come to the conclusion that Mrs. Warwick didn't understand the importance of the exclamation mark in our young minds.

This story illustrates a crucial idea: that punctuation does play a significant role in our interpretation of a sentence. The period implies normalcy or professionalism while the exclamation mark signifies extreme situations. When we read "thank you!" with an exclamation mark, we believe that the writer is really grateful while "thank you." with a period implies courtesy and respect.

Punctuation implies a significance most people ignore. During the summer after my sophomore year at college, one of my coworkers got engaged to her boyfriend (who she knew for less than a year). The proposal was delivered to her in the form of a puzzle over the course of the summer at about two pieces a week. When the puzzle was completed, the question “will you marry me?” became visible at the bottom of a picture of the couple kissing. After seeing this picture, I felt the need to be a smart ass and pointed out the complete lack of an exclamation point.

“If he was *really* excited to marry you, he would have written "Marry me!". Clearly, this isn't the guy for you.”

She responded with a blank stare.

Perhaps the meaning of punctuation is left up to the reader. Even if the writer intends to use a certain form of punctuation to imply a particular concept or meaning, it is left up to the reader can interpret it in many different ways.

Take the question in the previous story: “will you marry me?” At first glance, it seems that there are three possible answers: yes, no, and maybe. However, if you add punctuation to each of these answers (e.g. Yes!, Yes., Yes?, etc.) the possible answers multiply, as do the meanings behind each answer. In this particular case, the punctuation gives the statement meaning. It is the difference between “no.” which could mean “I can’t marry you because I don’t love you” and “no!” which could mean “why would I marry you! You cheated on me five times in the past month!”. Punctuation, it seems, increases the complexity of language by allowing us to modify the way a sentence is read; punctuation changes the story behind each statement.

The other day, I encountered the irony mark while I was reading an old book. The irony mark, which was first proposed by Alcanter de Brahm in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, is used to identify statements that are supposed to be recognized as ironic or sarcastic (⸮). At first, I thought that it might be a good idea for more people to use this mark. After all, sarcasm is sometimes hard to understand in written form, so perhaps we need a mark to identify a sarcastic or ironic sentence. However, upon further reflection, it seems that the purpose of irony would be undermined if we started to use it consistently. Just imagine *A Modest Proposal* riddled with irony marks. I think that this form of punctuation might be intrusive: to be told at the end of every sentence “this is sarcasm/irony” would take the wit out of the piece.

I also encountered some other forms of punctuation that were proposed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such marks include the doubt point (⸮), the authority point (†), the love point (♥) and, my personal favorite, the indignation point (‡). I think that it would be a very interesting world if these forms of punctuation became standardized. Academic papers would be riddled with authority points, while love letters would take advantage of the love point. Angry letters would utilize the indignation point while philosophical papers would thoughtfully use the doubt point.

The written world would be an entirely different place if these forms of punctuation were standardized. I am even tempted to use these different forms of punctuation in poetry: it might help convey particular emotions that might, otherwise, go unnoticed by the reader.

However, these new forms of punctuation would distract the reader from the content of the sentence. In the example above, it doesn't matter how the sentence ends: he is still asking the subject to marry him. I've read many book, many stories, and I cannot think of a single one that would drastically change if these new forms punctuation were added to them. Sure, it might seem odd if every sentence in a mystery novel ended in a doubt point, but the story would remain the same.

The idea that punctuation has a greater meaning is not limited to linguistics. Punctuation can also be used as a symbol for something greater, like a religious concept. In 1964, a comedian named Gracie Allen died of a heart attack. Her husband and partner, George Burns, was looking through her desk after her death when he found an envelope addressed to him. He opened it and found that there was a short one sentence note inside.

“George, never place a period where God places a comma.”

Some attribute this note to the idea that there is an afterlife: what seems like the end of something to our mortal minds is not the end to a grand creator. The end of our life is not a period, but a comma. It's not just a comma for those who die, but for those who remain alive. A person may grieve the loss of a loved one, but it is not the end for him. He still has a life to live, and even though it will be interrupted, his life will continue on.

Another interpretation of this quote was embraced by the United Church of Christ. Over the years, I have heard this quote many times in many different sermons. Pastors use this quote in an attempt to explain God's radical love. God does not condemn us with a period, but accepts



us with a comma. He may challenge us to follow Christ, but when we inevitably fail and come back to ask for forgiveness, he always says "I'm disappointed in you, but I love you anyway."

It seems that death is the ultimate punctuation mark; it ends all thoughts that a person may write. An Julie Burchill once wrote "tears are sometimes an inappropriate response to death. When a life has been lived completely honestly, completely successfully, or just completely, the correct response to death's perfect punctuation mark is a smile." So, maybe we should think of punctuation less as a writing device and more of an abstract concept: punctuation ends something. The perfect punctuation is death: there is an end and everyone will eventually get there. Death is a scary concept to many people, but I find it comforting. In a way, punctuation accents the beauty of the thing it ends: without death, life becomes pointless. I don't know if there is life after death, but I do know that every great story has to come to an end, and every life is a great story to the one who experiences it.

Punctuation has the potential to change the meaning of the thought it ends. It stands guard, protecting the writer from endless thoughts that have the potential to go on for ages. Punctuation ensures that every sentence has a meaning, that every life has a meaning. I am honored and comforted by the fact that each of my sentences will end with some form of punctuation, be it an exclamation mark, question mark, or period.

## Catching Flies

"A spoonful of honey will catch more flies than a gallon of vinegar." -Benjamin Franklin

When I was a freshman in college, my room became infested with fruit flies. Being a bright young man I did what any sensible person would do: called my mother to ask her how to get rid of them. She told me to put vinegar in a cup along with a drop of dish soap. The strong stench of vinegar would attract flies and the dish soap would ensure their doom: the flies would drown to death because they could no longer land on the vinegar. Since I knew how powerful the wisdom of my mother was, I did as she told me and discovered that it was all true. After a week, my cup of vinegar had dozens of dead flies floating in it, thus solving my pest problem. Sure my room smelled of stale vinegar for the rest of the year, but I took comfort with the fact that all of the fruit flies were dead.

But we know that Ben Franklin wasn't talking about flies: he was talking about people. The whole point of the proverb wasn't to teach people how to catch flies, but how to make friends. We are supposed to offer honey in our friendship, not vinegar; we are supposed to be kind, not rude. In other words, friendship should be built upon rewards, not punishments.

However, if the analogy holds, isn't Franklin wrong? It seems that flies are attracted to the strong smelling vinegar over the sweet tasting honey and taste doesn't matter if flies are only attracted to the vinegar. Sure, they may prefer the honey, but they don't know it exists if there is vinegar in the vicinity. The item with the strongest stench presents the most persuasive argument to the fly. The honey doesn't even stand a chance because of the overwhelming smell of vinegar. So, it does not a matter of which one flies prefer, but rather which one flies detect.

People act the same way. It is human nature to pay attention to big and loud things while ignoring the small and the quiet. Just try yelling "Hey you!" in a room with a lot of people in it.

They will all look at you for a few seconds before they go back to their business because it is in their interest to notice you: you might be there to kill one of them, or to give one of them a million dollars. Either way, they analyze the situation and determine if there could be dire consequences if they don't act.

Think of it from the perspective of a thief. If a thief enters a residence with the intent to steal something, where does he go first? He might go to the living room to see if there is a plasma screen television, or to the bedroom to see if there is a jewelry box, but he probably wouldn't think twice about the collectable garden gnome he encountered at the front door, or the coffee table in the living room that FDR used during his administration. Even if it turns out that the plasma screen television is broken, or the jewelry is all fake, the thief still expects both of those things to have value. The thief won't steal things that don't look valuable, but will go after things that have obvious value.

People act like thieves in social situations. They don't analyze every detail to determine who would become the most valuable friend, but rather look for the obvious signs. They look at people who are loud rather than quiet; those who are popular rather than unpopular; those who speak their mind rather than mind their speech. Even though it is possible to have a very meaningful conversation with someone who is quiet, or find a very loyal friend in someone who is on the fringes of a group, most people won't make an effort to engage that friendship.

Sometimes, it is good to get noticed. Take the Viceroy and Monarch Butterflies. They look almost exactly the same: they are both orange and black with spots of white. Their physiology, however is extremely different: only the Monarch Butterfly is poisonous. The patterns of both butterflies look very similar and only experts, who have studied both butterflies, are able to differentiate between the two. Even birds can't differentiate between the two and, as

such, it will avoid both species of butterfly. The Viceroy Butterfly saves itself by disguising itself as a Monarch.

Disguises, it seems, are clever ways to get people to notice you. One night, I went to a bar with one of my friends. After we ordered a couple drinks, we had an interesting conversation about how to pick up women. He was of the opinion that a person had to disguise his intentions: the best way to pick up a woman was to tease her and make her think you're not interested. I, on the other hand, was of the opinion that a man should be honest about his feelings: it's better to be nice to the woman and let her know how you feel. At this point in the conversation, a woman from my friend's class walked into the bar. I proposed a wager: if he could arouse this woman's interest using his method, I would foot the bill, but if he couldn't, he would have to. He agreed to the wager and approached his classmate. Two minutes later, he came back to our table with her and I was checking my wallet to make sure I had enough cash. Later he informed me that he basically told her that he didn't like her very much. I figure that he is either lying to me, or I don't understand women at all.

Now that I think about it, it is socially acceptable, in most cases, to do whatever it takes in order to get a girl to notice you. Just think of elementary school. There is always a boy who likes a girl. The boy, however, will refuse to tell the girl this. Instead, he will harass her. He will poke her, tease her, push her in the mud, all because he wants this girl to notice him. He will make her life hell because he has feelings for her. It is true that in most cases, the girl will never speak to the boy again, but she will remember him for the rest of her life; she noticed him.

It is hard for men to express their emotions because society tells them that it is a sign of weakness. When men cry, they are told to suck it up and "be a man." There is no room for all of those "emotions" in a man's mind; they are a vulnerability that has to be removed. But they can't

be removed because emotions are part of the human experience and can't be removed; they can only be set aside until the man figures out how to deal with them. Subsequently, men are put in a difficult situation where they have to express emotion, but don't know how to. All they can do is stand there and take it.

Thus, when the prospect of dating comes to the mind of a man, he has two options: 1) he could learn how to express his emotions to his target or 2) he could tease his target until she (or he) understands what is going on.

Personally, I'm a proponent of the "tell her how you feel" method. However, I haven't been very successful with this method. I recently asked a woman out and I thought my intentions were clear. We went on a walk and talked about a variety of topics: how our classes were going, what we did in high school, the nature of righteousness, vampires (you know, regular date stuff). After the date was over, however, I found out that she didn't even think that we were going on a date. I wasn't even able to express my true intentions to her when I asked her out.

Even with this experience, I am still reluctant to attempt the second option: tease/insult her until she understands how I feel. However, it seems to work for some people. As in the story involving my friend, some women believe that men express affection in this manner. Who knows, maybe it works. Maybe a healthy relationship starts with teasing, but I worry that men who tease and insult are more likely to be abusive.

I have a hard time seeing the difference between teasing and insults and emotional abuse. While I think it is okay to occasionally tease a love one, I don't think that it is okay for teasing to be the only way to express feeling toward another. Teasing cannot be the foundation of a healthy relationship. It is not possible to love someone if you can't say it or to care for someone if you

can't demonstrate it. All you can do is point out their flaws and tell them that they are worthless.

That's abuse. It is not fair to either partner if they both can't express how they feel to the other.

Perhaps teasing can be a start, but eventually a man will have to learn how to express his

emotions to the person he loves.

## Lost

When I was a kid, I got lost in a toy store. It was my friend's birthday and I was supposed to find a suitable gift for him. I wasn't supposed to get lost.

Some children panic when they lose sight of their parents, but I remained calm. I wandered around on my own accord, contemplating what toy I should get for my friend. I decided that he would like a Lego airplane, which is something that could entertain a child for hours on end. After about 10 or 15 minutes of wandering, I heard my mother yell at me. I turned to look at her and saw that she was really upset: she thought someone kidnapped me. She firmly grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the store. I was grounded for a week.

The Oxford English Dictionary has five entries under the word "lost." However, it was the second entry that caught my attention: "of which someone has been deprived; not retained in possession; no longer to be found. Also, of a person or animal: Having gone astray, having lost his or its way." According to this definition, someone can be considered lost under two conditions: either no one else knows where he is, or he doesn't know where he is. However, I think there is more to "being lost" than this definition suggests.

Being lost, at least unintentionally lost, can have interesting psychological consequences. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver spends the whole book lost. In his last voyage, Gulliver visits the land of the Houyhnhnms, who are horses that can reason. Gulliver comes to the conclusion that the Houyhnhnms are superior to the Yahoo, who are humans, and wishes to live among them. The Houyhnhnms, however, believe that Gulliver, who is a human, will corrupt their society. As such, they force him into exile where he is rescued. When he is returned home, he spends the majority of his time talking to the horses in his stable. It seems that Gulliver lost his sanity.

But what does it mean to be lost? Was Gulliver truly lost in the physical sense? Being lost implies that you have somewhere to be. It implies that you are trying to arrive at a destination. If a person is trying to make it to New York, but doesn't recognize his surroundings, he might pull up to a gas station and ask the clerk how to get to New York. If that person was not trying to make it to New York, he might, instead, ask "where can I get something good to eat?" or "is there anything fun to do around here?" In the first case, there is a sense of urgency: the person needs to be somewhere at a specific time. In the latter case, the person is simply curious and wants to explore his surroundings: he wants to discover something new.

At some point in life, everyone will become lost. In fact, we are born that way, at least in the most literal sense. My earliest memories consist of discovering new rooms: from my bedroom, I discovered the hallway, then the bathroom. After that, I moved on to the kitchen, the dining room, the living room, and the office until I finally had the house mapped out in my mind. As I grew older, my world expanded from my house to the outside world, where I discovered the neighborhood, the park, and my friends' houses. Eventually, I learned where the school was and walked there and back every day. At first, I was lost in new settings, but I eventually found my way.

I wonder if it is possible to be lost and know exactly where you are. In *The Odyssey*, Oedipus is considered lost to his family. Yet, Oedipus himself seems to know exactly where he is: he knows how to get home, but the gods intervene every time he tries to do so. In *The Odyssey*, Oedipus is not lost, he is just unable to get home. Even though Oedipus could not make it home, I am not sure if he would consider himself "lost."

Being lost is just a matter of perspective. A few years ago, my sister, Marie, had to drive me to a camp in northern Minnesota. I knew where it was, but she looked up directions to make



sure she didn't get lost. After a few hours of driving, Marie missed an exit. "We're lost!" she cried, predicting that we were doomed to wander northern Minnesota forever. Little did she know, she accidentally took a short cut. We arrived at the camp a few minutes later.

Some people need to know exactly where they are. Whenever my family goes on road trips, I am always designated as the navigator. If we go into a city, I am in charge of finding a way through it. I serve as a GPS for my father: he expects me to update him with the name of a cross street we should pass every 30 seconds. If I wasn't able to call out the street name, he would pull over, take the map from me, and plot a course himself. Under my father's tutelage, I quickly learned how to effectively use a map.

Even though I respect my father's need to arrive at a destination, I find that I do not share that need. My father needs to plan a trip out, down to the last detail: he needs to know how much money he is going to spend on gas, where we are going to stop for food, and how much time we are going to spend driving. I, on the other hand, prefer to play it by ear. While I would make an outline for a road trip, I would not be tied down to a schedule. If I saw restaurant that claimed to serve the best pancakes in the world, I would stop and eat there to determine if they, in fact, do have the best pancakes in the world. My father, on the other hand, would ignore the sign and keep on going. My father would miss out on the experience of eating the best pancakes in the world because he wants to make it to his destination.

I find that I have an interesting aversion to Odysseus. Perhaps this is because I have no destination. I am not attached to a place, to a home, like Odysseus is. But then again, I don't have a wife or kids. I am not attached to any community. I can go anywhere I want to. I have no responsibilities.

Maybe my aversion to Odysseus can be traced to our motivations for traveling. For the person who is traveling, the journey is about the destination, as it was for Odysseus. The only reason Odysseus is traveling is so that he can see his wife and son again. But for the observer, it is about the journey. When a person arrives at their destination and is greeted by their friends and family, they want to hear about the journey. The reader of *The Odyssey* does not care about Ithaca as he already knows that is Odysseus' destination. He would rather hear about how Odysseus tricked the cyclops, or his discoveries in the underworld.

In his essay "Walking," Henry David Thoreau explores the art of walking. He argues that we should not go walking, we should go sauntering. The word saunter originates from the middle age and was used to refer to pilgrims, who wandered through the country side, while on their way to Sainte Terre. Because of its origin, the word saunter implies some sort of religious experience; a saunter is meant to help us grow as a person: we are supposed to think about the world while we experience it. We have to be ready to leave our lives behind when we go on a saunter. As Thoreau explains in his essay: "if you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again; if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk."

I want to go on a cross country saunter. I want to take a trip and leave my world behind. I want make a camp under the stars and contemplate philosophical ideas, without having to be somewhere. I want to find a meadow in a forest that has never been seen by human eyes. I want to be lost in the wilderness. I want to do all of this and come back to civilization, with a good story to tell.