

“Lingering Shadow”
Jordan Decker
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English 102 Tuesday and Thursday 9:30 am

As the bell sounds its final ding the teacher walks to her designated place at the front of the classroom. Sixteen students reluctantly pause their conversations and prepare to be bombarded with facts, which they may or may not retain.

The teacher clears her throat and announces, “Clear your desks except for a piece of paper and a pen.”

Instantly moans of disgust erupt from the students.

“Swell, a pop quiz,” I think to myself.

“Question number one has seven parts. Please write “A” through “G” on your paper.”

“I bet we have to list one of the sets of works of mercy. What’s it going to be, Spiritual of Corporal?”

“Do you want “A” through “G” vertically or horizontally?”

“Why is there always that one kid that has to ask stupid questions?”

The teacher ignores the ridiculous question and proceeds with the task at hand. “List the seven Corporal Works of Mercy.”

“I knew it!”

I scan the room as my classmates begin to regurgitate the lessons from the previous week. Most of them are cheating. Two of my classmates are waiting on me to begin writing so they can cheat off me.

“Cheating on a Religion test. Nice.”

1. Corporal Works of Mercy

a. Feed the hungry.

b. Give drink to the thirsty.

“I made my sister a peanut butter and jelly sandwich yesterday and I poured her a glass of milk. Does that count for feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty? Probably. Two holy points for me!”

c. Clothe the naked.

“I really don’t run into a lot of naked people...”

d. Harbor the harborless

“My mom is not going to accept me bringing home strangers to harbor.”

d. Visit the Sick.

“I actually understand this one!”

e. Ransom the captive.

“This seems a little ridiculous. Aren’t they captive for a reason? The last thing we need is for all the criminals to be released.”

f. Bury the dead.

“Well isn’t that common sense?”

“For your next question, list three of the seven Spiritual Works of Mercy.”

2. Spiritual Works of Mercy

a. Instruct the ignorant.

“That seems like a bad idea. It’d be like the blind leading the blind. Or, I guess the ignorant teaching the ignorant.”

b. Counsel the doubtful.

“Exactly how do I do that? How do you convince someone of your beliefs when all the information you’ve been given doesn’t make any sense to you?”

c. Pray for the living and the dead.

“Amen.”

“Question number three! State the Church’s stance on same sex marriages and why.”

3. The church is against same sex marriages because the goal of marriage is procreation. Procreation cannot take place within a same sex marriage.

“I’ve never understood this. I thought God wanted us to accept all people. Plus, when you think about it, same sex couples could adopt an unwanted girl from China. They could be saving lives!”

“State the Greatest Commandment.”

4. Love your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul and love your neighbor as yourself.

“Well isn’t that ironic?”

“Final question. What is your opinion on what we have discussed so far?”

5. Does it matter?

“Alright class! Pass your papers to the front. Any questions?”

Hands shoot up from all corners of the room.

“She really set herself up with that.”

Someone speaks up in the front of class, “Can we go over what the meaning is to some of the Works of Mercy? Like, how they apply to us today? And maybe how we can work towards acting them out?”

The teacher’s reply is straight to the point.

“Well we could, but that would take up time we don’t have. It’s not really relative that you know the meaning. Just have them memorized to pass the diocesan test.”

“What a surprise. As long as we ace the diocese test.”

“I have a question!” comes a voice from somewhere in the back of the room.

“Why is the church’s stance on same sex marriage such a strong negative?”

“Well it’s in the Bible.”

“Classic Religion teacher response.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know right off the top of my head.”

“Well what about our answer to question four? About loving your neighbor as your self?”

At this point the teacher begins to appear flustered as she prepares her next and what she hopes her final answer to the incessant questions.

“The church doesn’t agree with same sex marriages because the goal can’t be procreation.”

I decide to throw my opinion into the circle at this point, “What about adoption? It may not be the same as procreation, but they would be taking care of unwanted children.

That seems pretty procreative to me.”

Noises of agreement reverberate around the room.

“Class! It’s just the way it is! If you have further questions about the matter, consult one of the priests.”

The story illustrated above is just one of many fruitless attempts to understand the wonder that is the Catholic Church. It’s how almost all of my Religion classes ended. Questions left unanswered and students left wondering. The best responses teachers were able to tell us were to either look in the Bible or consult a priest. Neither method was very practical because the Bible is huge and we only had two priests. So we accepted what we were told even if it meant having absolutely no idea what to do with the information. It seemed the only goal of Religion class was to prep us to pass the infamous diocesan test, which our high school has held the highest average scores for years. God forbid we lose that title. We continued to question without any success, many people often threatened to convert because nothing made any sense. However, despite the threats of conversion and the lack of true understanding, we were stuck following the confusing rules of our church. The teachers may not have been able to answer meaningful questions, but they knew how to sucker us into following the church forever, without us ever having the chance to think for ourselves or figure out what we wanted to believe in. They had instilled in us a fear. A fear of Hell.

Paulo Freire would shudder at the thought of my high school religion classes. Had he stepped foot into our holy classroom, the horror of what he witnessed would have undoubtedly filled the pages of his next essay. Walking into a religion class is walking into a landmine of broken minds. Anyone who dares enter becomes witness to inquisitive young minds forced to comply with their superiors’ demands, causing them to bury their own opinions and ideas. Should a trace of fresh thoughts escape the student’s lips, a

lifetime in Hell is casually, but pertinently mentioned. Minds are not allowed to question, unless they are delving into the thought of eternal damnation. Scare the students into their beliefs; it's the only way they'll learn.

Religion is a sensitive subject to analyze. Especially when realizing one small religion class reflects a diocese, that diocese reflects a nation, and that nation reflects the power that controls the world practice, namely Rome. However, religion class continued to pop into my mind as I read further into Freire's essay. In light of said essay, the Catholic Church and my religion class seemed to be handling their educational system in all the wrong ways, coinciding with every aspect of the banking concept Freire's essay says to avoid. For example,

“Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the banking concept of education...knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.” (244)

Freire is essentially saying that education is looked at as filling the ignorant students' minds with meaningless facts and never allowing an outlet for them to question and experience what they are being told. Religion class never allowed for questions. Perhaps I should rephrase, religion class never allowed for answers. Questions were brought up numerous times, as in the previously mentioned narrative, however, the answers to those questions were hardly ever acknowledged. To prevent further questions, a punishment of Hell would usually silence any debate. If we questioned, we could be right, and if we were right, then the system as we know it would begin to crumble. It's easier if the

students can just be manipulated into following what is already established. Freire puts this into perspective saying, “this concept is well suited for the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it” (247).

The teachers claim that if we simply memorize the rules, follow the procedures, and pray for our souls then we will begin to live a holy and complete life. They feel satisfied with themselves that they are giving us the key to living a meaningful life without even realizing that by the very process of “giving life” they are essentially taking it away. Freire states, “Only through communication can human life hold meaning.” (247) Ironically, the goal of the religion class seems to be to cram as much information into the young minds as possible without leaving anytime for those minds to process what they’ve memorized and communicate the possibilities they may discover.

A person’s unique opinions are pushed aside to make room for “acceptable beliefs.” Personal views and judgments are non-existent. However, the epidemic of oppressed minds forced to hide individual thoughts and ideas extends beyond religious education within a school. For most avid Catholics, religion is more than a school subject; it’s a way of life. Parents send their children to Catholic schools for more than a better education. They send their kids to these Catholic schools to create for them a social scriptorium in which to abide by. Appiah defines a social scriptorium as a narrative that forms an identity and plays a role in shaping a life plan. A social scriptorium causes an “individual’s life to depend deeply on something socially created and transmitted” (Appiah 72-73). Through this forced placement of a social scriptorium, the parents and teachers instill a way of life, which they themselves have deemed the correct path to

follow, within the children. Not only are these children oppressed in their religious education, they are oppressed in their daily life, and their ability to choose the daily life they may want to lead.

I can't even imagine the look on my grandmother's face if she were to read this essay. Grief, horror, and anger are just a few of the emotions that I'm sure would flash across her aged face. I've looked at my religious studies through the perspective of my grandmother and her generation, and what I found was tradition, fear of change, and certainness of authority. As devout Catholics, religion is taken extremely seriously by my grandmother's generation. In their eyes, it is their role to direct us, the youth and the future, toward the "right path", which is indisputably the exact same path their own lives follow. Had my grandmother and the rest of her generation had access to Kwame Anthony Appiah's essay, I'm sure we would have had yet another encumbrance weighing down on us through our education. Their goal, through Appiah's words, was to "shape our plans of life. Form collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts" (72). They were, in a sense, helping to form our identities. Mill articulates, "If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is best" (79). Since we "obviously" were too inexperienced and naïve to know what path our lives should take, it was their duty to "provide the assistance that enables people to develop lives worth living" (79). But what is that measured by? When is it safe to declare a person capable of making his or her own choices concerning their life? We weren't allowed to ask these questions. So we continued to attend church every Sunday. As we took our seats, proud smiles and nods of approval were shot our way. Whispers of "It's so sweet they get up and come to church" and "They're good kids"

could be heard from every corner of the room. In our heads, thoughts of “Why are we here again?” and “What? I’m here to avoid Hell” were just a few of the numerous inquiries racing through our minds. Had we been allowed to ask our questions, for example, why we couldn’t decide for ourselves if this was right for us, we may have called on Susan Griffin for support.

In Susan Griffin’s essay, “Our Secret”, she shows that our surroundings affect our individuality, positive or negative, akin to what Appiah demonstrates. Griffin states, “To tell a story, or to hear a story told, is not a simple transmission of information. Something else in the telling is given too, so that, once hearing what one has heard becomes a part of oneself”(326). Catholicism may not be a story told from one generation to the next, but it works in a similar way to what Griffin is describing. The rules, traditions, and ceremonies of the religion are so adamantly taught, that those who are “learning” have no choice but to conform. Any personal discoveries or wonderings are stifled by the ever-present fear of Hell, and are therefore buried under someone else’s beliefs. Griffin says it in this way, “the child is made to live out the unclaimed imagination of the parent” (328). No voice, no opinion. However, unlike Appiah, Griffin acknowledges the problem with this method of forming an individuality in that it is someone else’s individuality that is created. Similar to the “banking concept” of education, someone else’s ideas and life shape the outcome of another individual’s path. The personal sense of knowing is lost.

Eventually the oppressed minds may realize there is an error in what they are being told. Freire mentions that students may “discover through existential experience that their present way of life is irreconcilable with their vocation to become fully human” (246) and they attempt to ask questions to “engage themselves in the struggle for their

liberation” (246). This means that the absurdity of the contradictions of living a meaningful life by living someone else’s ideas and memorized habits will eventually be made apparent.

Perhaps the message I am trying to convey can be found at the heart of Griffins essay. It is inevitable that the path our lives take is influenced by our surroundings. “Had we been born to a different family, in a different time, to a different world, we would not be the same” (335). However, to truly grasp our sense of self, we must possess a knowing conscious and channel it to the world around us. We cannot allow hindrances like “banking education” and age old traditions, to burry our own understandings and ideas. We must use our surroundings to influence *our* choices and life paths and we must make these decisions consciously. However, it’s easier said than done. Personally, I may never have reached this conclusion without the help from Friere, Appiah, and Griffin. And even though I have now, I’ll still never have my questions answered and I’ll still go to church on Sunday. It’s like Griffin said, “They produced a doubt in me, a lingering shadow, the sense that perhaps I deserved whatever suffering befell me, and that shadow lingers” (324).

Works Cited

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "The Ethics of Individuality." Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2008. 56-83.
- Freire, Paulo. "The "Banking" Concept of Education." Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2008. 243-54.
- Griffin, Susan. "Our Secret." Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2008. 299-346.