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Honors 226

Bennion and Steffen

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### Synthesis Final

Earlier this semester, my therapist mentioned something about my OCD. He said, "OCD is kinda selfish, y'know? Not that you are selfish... not at all. More that it pulls you inward and shuts everything else out." Another point in this semester, we were discussing abnormal psychology and the effects of stress on the body. My heart rate went up as my mind temporarily began to roll down a slippery slope of somatization, thinking over and over "What if I gave myself [insert psychological disorder here]?" It became very hard to concentrate on Professor Steffen and when I did, the descriptions of other mental disorders fueled my mental snowball. This, of course, was the obsessive part of my very annoying experience with mental illness. "Why did that happen? What if it keeps happening? Is something VERY wrong with me?" I related these thoughts to my mother over the phone on the way back to my apartment. "Sam," she said, "You are a compassionate person. Why are you being so hard on yourself?" This comment brought no relief yet, but the idea has stuck with me. Empathy and compassion are the vehicles through which we come out of ourselves and into the present or so my mindfulness app tells me. If this is so, could my mother be on to something? What part of being empathetic requires self-love and what part requires self-sacrifice.

This is a question I pondered deeply at the end of the semester as we discussed different cultural lenses and racial experiences. I often feel disempowered in these discussions, as if I am failing at something miserably and there's no way for me to fix it. Still, I went in determined to

prove something. To show that happiness and justice aren't opposed. That empathy and self-love can go together. Throughout the discussions, I could feel these ideals flow in and out of reach depending on the tide of the discussion. And yet, by the end I was no less angsty than before about racism and my role in perpetuating it. At this particular moment, I could not see the light and I did not believe that I could be both good and happy.

Such a moment cannot help but remind me of the famous intellectual we learned about. It's ironic because, although he made an incredible impression on me, I can neither remember his name nor find him in my notes. Nevertheless, I remember this man's plight: the realization that the attainment of his life's goal would leave him purposeless. To me, it seemed his great problem was in his stoic father who never showed him vulnerable love. As a result, he could see no softness in the world. Only facts. Through his story, we find a version of this hypothesis true: he ends up regaining his spirits through transcendental poetry. He broke the heavy chains of pure logic and realized the humanity in the world. I remember this transformation so vividly because it reflects my own experience with OCD. Being caught in moral dilemmas which suck the color out of the world, only to break free at the sight of something truly beautiful or truly transcendent. What does this have to do with racism in America? This intellectual did not believe he could be both good at his job of creating world peace and happy that he had achieved it. My dilemma is a little different. When contemplating race, I have felt that I could not be both good at addressing racism and happy in the sense of living a life that I loved. I could not be both empathetic and kind to myself. I would have to sacrifice one.

I wish I could promise a clear conclusion as to this matter; however I am as wishy washy about this subject now as Utah's weather is on whether fall is warm or cold. I can discuss what insight this class has offered regarding what empathy looks like. I did not expect psychology to

provide me more than a basic knowledge of mental illnesses and different treatments. To my surprise, it gave me a new way to understand myself and other people. I had always struggled to negotiate the idea that mental illness could be genetic with a Stoic ideal I had held on to since childhood: I am responsible for everything I think and feel. Early on I had been taught to think this way to help me overcome a phobia of vomiting, but this class suggested a new model: the psycho-bio-social model. I did not like the idea that my moods were not entirely up to me, but learning about the genetic nature of bipolar depression and schizophrenia led me to start imagining what people in those situations experience. It can't possibly feel like it's genetic. Certainly those with such mental illnesses experience them as their own thoughts and feelings and actions, yet we couldn't possibly expect someone who's hallucinating being attacked to simply think positive. Considering the experiences of such individuals along with my own COVID-induced sense of disconnect from others, I had to recognize my previous beliefs as shallow and even callous. In doing so, I opened myself to a new kind of imagination, where I could see myself in other peoples' shoes doing what they would do, though I would never, as myself, do these things. I learned how to imagine a circumstance out of my control driving me to an action I would not normally condone. When I step into this headspace, it feels like empathy.

From the letters portion of the class I learned almost the same lesson but on a more personal, thought-based level. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* does an incredible job capturing what it's collectively like to be human. In capturing that moment-to-moment experience of different characters, she also highlights what it means to be an entity separate from all others. At once I experienced kinship with Lily Briscoe and a vivid awareness of how different I am from her. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, yet they went through my head all the same. Her being was not my being, but the shape and quality of existing were one and the

same. So, through reading a book, I learned to imagine the internal experiences of individuals in the same way a psychology lecture taught me to acknowledge the external circumstances of others.

I will treasure these experiences. I will treasure the way that learning to understand other people has taught me to understand myself. When I first began writing my personal essay, I felt rather selfish. I wondered how I could write something all about me and not appear self-aggrandizing or self-absorbed. However, as I wrote it, I began to perceive another person. It was almost like I was writing the description of a self long neglected. A self that had been waiting to be heard. A self that might not have been recognized if I had not been given the opportunity to read others' personal essays. Of course, at the time I assumed that these essays were actual people. Now I understand them as fragments of people, dug up from the cobwebs of memory and emotion and served to me so that I would know what to do when I met a fragment of myself. Writing about myself gave me empathy for me. I understood my thoughts and mistakes in ways that self-criticism could not reach. There I was, standing in a rhetorical mirror. Could I deny it? Yet it was not everything. The mirror was broken. I assume I will need to write a lot more if I intend to mend it. Combine this with the fact that I am always changing, it seems this is an impossible task, yet it is one I would like to pursue. It reminds me of the essay "Loss of the Creature" in which the author laments how people no longer seek to live. Instead, they seek to experience an artificial kind of life. One that's processed and beaten into looking like something it's not. In the sense we're applying it here, essay writing seems to be a way to break out of our compulsion to idealize life. It's a way to regain the sense of newness and vitality that cannot be packaged and sold. It's a way to see one's true self.



In our final class, we had a couple of comments on “reading people.” My first impression was that this was a weird kind of manipulation, but as I thought, I recognized something beautiful in it. Essay writing has taught me to pick up and “read” the broken fragments of miscellaneous thoughts and feelings that I’ve carried around for far too long. If we could learn how to do this for the people we meet, how would our relationships change? If I could see the same chaotic joys, fears, delights and sorrows in others as I do in myself, what would I change about the way I relate with them? Maybe that’s the meaning of “love thy neighbor as thyself.”

That scripture seems to contain the answer to my question, doesn’t it. Certainly, this process of knowing myself has contributed to my ability to know other people, but I think a distinction must be made here. The love I have offered myself is not necessarily pleasurable or proud. Rather, it’s a tender and gentle acknowledgment of things previously unsaid. I wonder if that’s the way to love other people. Not flattery or indulgence, but a sober and comforting acceptance of everything that they are in this moment alone.

In my personal essay I contemplate this love through my father. In doing so, I could not help but contemplate the nature of God’s love. I still don’t understand it. But I believe this class has helped. I believe that learning to love others has helped me see how God loves me. I believe that it has helped me offer myself enough kindness. I don’t think it’s helped me know whether I can be both good and happy, but from the looks of it, love does not spring forth from a poisoned spring. That is to say, beating oneself into submission to a standard does not enable you to accept others as they are. So, while there’s no magical equation for self-love and self-sacrifice here, there’s certainly a case for the understanding and care we can offer to one another.

Thank y’all for an awesome semester. I hope the professors and TA’s have a Merry  
Christmas.