

Jul 11

Shame and Necessity



While reflecting recently on the place writing should take in my life, I had revisited some of my older writings and rediscovered a creative nonfiction piece I had written as an assignment for a freelance writing class back in 2020. When I learned about this particular assignment, I immediately knew what story I wanted to tell for it. But I was unsure if I wanted to let this story out into the world and, if so, where to unleash it into the world, so the story has been sitting in my Dropbox, neglected but patiently awaiting its chance to have a moment in the sun.

I think this Pensées blog is the perfect place to finally share this story, and that the story will be a perfect way to inaugurate the blog's existence. Without further ado, then, I introduce "Shame and Necessity."

Shame and Necessity

The whole of the Oedipus Tyrannus, that dreadful machine, moves to the discovery of just one thing, that he did it [he killed his father Laius]. Do we understand the terror of that discovery only because we residually share magical beliefs in blood-guilt, or archaic notions of responsibility? Certainly not: we understand it because we know that in the story of one's life there is an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely by what one has intentionally done.

Authority—yes, that word captures something imposing and terrible. What one has done can haunt a person, to the point of possession, for the very fact that what one does says something about that person. The weight of that authority alone can paralyze a person. Indeed, if we are condemned to freedom (as Sartre put it), our very freedom only makes this authority over us that much more powerful. But where does the unfreedom of freedom leave us?

A man interrupted my reading: "Excuse me, do you have any change?"

I looked up from my book and replied, "Sorry, I don't have cash on me." Did I have cash on me? Maybe I did, maybe I didn't, but it's what I usually say to panhandlers regardless. Why not just say "No" to them? I'm afraid I'm not that assertive, so instead I try to avoid panhandlers when I can. I'll cross the street to avoid passing by them, and when I can't avoid them, I claim to be cashless. What does that say about me as an individual? One time, I was walking to a coffeeshop and someone asked me for something, without missing a beat, I told him I didn't have change on me and continued on my merry way. Only after the fact did I realize I had just brushed aside the entreaties of a petitioner seeking signatures for legal marijuana. Just as well: at least panhandling has a point to it.

As it happens, panhandling wasn't officially allowed in the city of Columbus, at least not when I was living there. But the destitute still needed to finance their living habits somehow, so they were permitted to sell a certain newspaper for \$1 an issue. Nobody actually read the newspaper (though apparently someone must've written for it): its sole *raison d'être* was to transform panhandling into a form of entrepreneurship. Begging for money is an undignified offense against the public, but begging for a living is just business as usual in the land of the free.

The man before me, at least, made no pretenses about selling a newspaper. Asking for money in a coffeeshop—there's something brazen about it, but I suppose people who have it rough don't get to go through life being genteel. In any event, he quickly moved on to someone else.

I hadn't realized how busy the coffeeshop had gotten. I was lucky enough to have grabbed a seat at one of the nicer couches by the entrance beforehand. It was a hot July afternoon at the Cup o' Joe in German Village, and the A/C still hadn't been fixed: at least a fan was blowing in my general direction. I was something of a regular at the coffeeshop, but in a month I'd be moving to Indiana for library school. In the meantime, I was idly passing time by reading philosophical books like *Shame and Necessity* by Bernard Williams (the book I was reading presently).

To be honest, I had conflicted feelings about library school. On the one hand, I had enjoyed working in a library for the past couple of years since graduating from Amherst. On the other hand, I felt like library school was a cop-out, that but for my infirmities as a human I should have been going to graduate school in philosophy. Fresh out of undergrad, I emailed one of my thesis advisors to let her know that I was considering applying to philosophy programs and to ask for a letter of recommendation. She replied that, though she did not doubt my intellectual abilities, she worried that grad school would wreak havoc on my mental health. At the time, I took it as a vote of no confidence, a pronouncement that me and my frail constitution could not handle the demands of academic life (especially the writing—I've long been plagued by writing difficulties). Thus discouraged, I resigned myself and forsook that dream as something unattainable, at least for the time being.

Even if graduate philosophy wasn't in the cards, I could still enjoy philosophy, so I flipped open my book and continued reading.

Shame need not be just a matter of being seen, but of being seen by an observer with a certain view. Indeed, the view taken by the observer need not itself be critical: people can be ashamed of being admired by the wrong audience in the wrong way. Equally, they need not be ashamed of being poorly viewed, if the view is that of an observer for whom they feel contempt.

A shout: the barista. "Get back here!" The man from earlier, darting for the door. No doubt about it—he stole from the tip jar. Without even thinking, I stood up. Grabbed the man by the collar, pulled him up to my face. He threw a weak punch. Barely brushed my cheek, but still made me let go. He ran out. The barista chased after him.

A girl about my age sat near me on the couch. "That was so scary." I must have muttered something about how surreal it all was. Indeed: what just happened? Did I really just try to stop a robbery by grabbing a man by his shirt? What possessed me to do that?

The barista returned, empty-handed and out of breath. The man got away.

A police officer also arrived on the scene to gather witness testimony. One of the customers asked what a person should do in a situation like this: should they actively try to stop the thief? The officer said no. Even if the suspect wasn't armed, "if an altercation broke out and he got hurt, then he could come back and sue you."

What had I done? How could I have been so foolishly confrontational? What if he had had a knife on him? What if I had injured him somehow? What compelled me to grab him?

"How could he sue?" my companion asked me. "Hobos don't have money." I briefly explained to her that there are lawyers who work *pro bono* for clients who cannot pay. Yes: if the man had gotten hurt, I would have been responsible. What kind of person does what I did here? What kind of person was I?

"I'm just so shaken by this," my companion confided to me. "I texted my boyfriend about what happened, but he hasn't replied yet." I suppose at some point she asked me what I was doing with my life, and she talked about going to Columbus State to become a kindergarten teacher.

Who was I to intervene? By what right did I have permission to grab a man by the shirt, especially a poor black man who probably has little going for him in this life? Just what was I enacting when I acted as I did?

The barista approached me. "We just wanted to thank you for what you did earlier." She presented me with a coupon for a free drink. "It's the least we can do."

"You were so brave," my companion cooed. Ah, yes, that: I had the *cojones*. Apparently, that anatomical fact itself serves to legitimize my violence. (And what about the other man's *cojones*? It took a temerity and fearlessness to steal from the tip jar, but we wouldn't call his actions brave. What does this double standard say about us and the praise we give ourselves?)

My companion then said she wanted to go home but was too afraid to walk home alone, so I agreed to walk her home. Thankfully, it wasn't far—it was a little incredible to think someone would be scared to walk down a street or two in broad daylight. Be that as it may, my companion thanked me for walking her home, and then I continued on home myself. My friend PJ was making pasta.

"You look a little frazzled. Did something happen?"

scrivenings

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