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E110 Essay 2

Striving Towards Self-Creation

My senior year of high school, I learned about Buddhism and the idea of *anatta*, or the "non-self." According to Buddhist philosophy, human beings are merely the combination of experiences so unique and varied that they become inimitable. We do not have souls, we are not eternal. In fact, we are ephemeral. We change with every person we meet and place we visit. In a way, learning this was validating. For so long I pondered the authenticity of my actions, fearing that I would betray some deeper part of myself. I became consumed with a fear of falsehood. Who would I be in another time, in a different place? I worry that my upbringing, and specifically my desire to please my family, has too much control over my present ideals and political beliefs. I must continually strive to self-create by discerning my own opinions from my family members and paying careful attention to the books and sources I let influence me.

On the surface, Westover is the antithesis of *anatta*: here is a woman who transcends the limitations of her parents' influence. Clearly there is something inherent and untouchable within mankind. After all, what else could account for the disparity within the Westover family. Tara describes the divide in her siblings as "The three with doctorates, and the four without high school diplomas" (326). It's interesting to think about the reason for that difference. Was it merely a difference of intelligence? Effort? What would allow seven children to react to the same stimulus so differently. I do not believe that Tara's education was a complete departure from her upbringing. Paradoxically, it seems like the childhood that inhibited her siblings was a catalyst to Tara's intellectual curiosity. The papers she worked hardest on, such as her research paper on bipolar parents and her thesis on family obligation, show the marks of her family. While Tara would probably be just as smart with a different family and a more normal childhood, I do not think her interests would be the same. She needs so badly to make sense of her life, and her only options were to succumb to her father's false narratives or understand the world through learning about it.

While I hesitate to seek situational similarities between myself and Tara, I find it much easier to empathize with the emotions she describes throughout *Educated*. Like Tara, I have

spent a lot of time thinking about self-creation: “I had come to believe that the ability to evaluate many ideas, many histories, many points of view, was at the heart of what it means to self-create” (Westover 304). I have always been worried about the sincerity of my thoughts and beliefs, and that has driven me to a love of history because it allows me to develop a more well-rounded worldview. While I do not have Tara’s familial problems, I often worry that I only believe in certain things because I was raised to believe in them.

I have spent eighteen years questioning my authenticity. I am politically active, a vocal liberal, and I like to think my values are my own. Yet I cannot ignore my background: my family car has a Bernie Sanders bumper sticker and the tv in my living room is perpetually locked on MSNBC. My base instinct is to dismiss conservatism. I am old enough now to analyze my reasoning, to seek a higher truth than the one my parents tell me. However, a part of me will always wonder. My mom said she never truly felt like an adult until she came back from college and began to argue with her dad about politics. I laughed and then started to worry. While so many young people dissent from their parents, I have always fallen in line with mine.

I can distinctly remember being eight years old the first time I questioned my parents. I sat across from my classmate Becca Miller, in passionate defense of the democratic party. Neither of us understood what we were talking about. The matter was not left and right, Republican or Democrat. It was my parents' belief versus her's. "Well, your mom and dad kill babies." I was shocked. Spoken so matter-of-factly, my friend and fellow second grader accused my parents of murder. I went home that afternoon and learned the word "abortion," appreciating, for the first time, the complexity of belief.

I cannot forget the feeling in my stomach after Becca's accusation. My parents were "baby killers." More horrifically, my parents were baby killers and I hadn't even known. I felt completely ignorant—exposed for entering a debate without understanding my own side. After several years of thought, I have reached similar conclusions to my parents. However, I am confident that my belief is not beholden to theirs'. While I have grown considerably since grade school, I still worry that every conversation or class discussion will reveal a comparative lack of knowledge. This fear has led me to seek out my own ideas, to learn from the opinions of others without simply repeating them.

Knowledge of the past is a sort of liberation: it keeps that constant fear at bay. I discovered my passion for history my eighth-grade year, primarily because it taught me about foreign ideas and allowed me to see those ideas in action. It was also an opportunity to evaluate my own ideas. My parents overshadowed my understanding of the present. In the past, I was blissfully alone. Junior year I learned about the progressive movement, finding icons in the likes of Clarence Darrow and Eugene V. Debs. I was inspired to take part in my present by the people who took part in theirs'. Around this time, I became friends with other girls who spent afternoons in the history room, discussing politics with our favorite professor. Amongst those future politicians, I felt the pressure to stay informed and add nuance to our conversations. I felt, in many ways, like Tara Westover learning about feminism for the first time. I no longer got my news from around the dinner table, was no longer reliant on my parents to be informed.

While I rarely find myself in opposition to my parents, I am also less convinced of their infallibility. As a child, I idolized my father. He was always so sure of who he was and what he thought. I have since learned that someone's tone has no bearing on their accuracy, and while I love my dad, I do not believe him blindly. I was not like Tara Westover, whose sole source of knowledge was her father. My parents encouraged me to think and learn for myself, so the only barrier I faced was my own idealization. My older brother, Mikey, continues to challenge this idea of growth. For years, he and my parents have argued tirelessly about politics. Every conversation I have with him plays out like *déjà vu*: He rages against immigration or the catastrophic effects of "cultural marxism" on American politics. However, his most compelling argument is that I disagree with him because of my loyalty to mom and dad. I hope this is not true, but I think a part of me will always worry that it is.

No belief is entirely original. Someone influenced everyone at one time or another. Yet his accusation terrifies me. It supposes that he is more free than I am, that he is smarter or superior because he can look past my parents' "brainwashing" and see the truth. I know that Mikey is just another person, like myself or Tara Westover, simply striving towards self-creation. His allegations sting, but they come from a desire to grow. The greatest difference between myself and Mikey is our response to the fear of conformity. His desire to be different

drove him to new ideas, but its cost was far more sinister. Rather than repeat my father, he regurgitates ideas from conservative thinkers like Jordan Peterson and considers himself enlightened.

The media we consume has a profound effect on the way we view the world. In his book, *The Hunger for Memory*, Richard Rodriguez explains, "I lacked a point of view when I read. Rather, I read in order to acquire a point of view" (68). Reading informs our perspective, but it can also become a source of self-coercion. Rodriguez's statement is proof that books alone can not shape us: sometimes the person they create is simply imitation. I experienced this when I read *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn my junior year. I was mesmerized by his discussion of class struggle and the plight of workers. However, I realized that a lot of my knowledge of the late 19th century was limited to his book. I "lacked a point of view" as I let myself become enchanted by his work, never questioning the ideas put forth. I was eight years old again, repeating the words of somebody else. My exposure to Howard Zinn mirrors Mikey's relationship with Jordan Peterson. Both of us were looking for another person to tell us what to think. We found new people to inform our opinions, without caring to shape them ourselves.

Learning about the world gives us that point of view—it makes us powerful. We are, as Buddhists believe, a conglomerate of influences. Parents, teachers, authors: everyone we know has the capacity to change us. I had no say in my family or the culture I was raised in. However, I can confidently say that I am reaching for a more well-rounded world view. Like Tara, and Mikey, and Richard Rodriguez, I am evaluating the people and ideas I want to embody. I used to fear the concept of *anatta* because I found it limiting. Since then, I have come to appreciate the beauty of becoming rather than discovering who you are. The prospect of self-creation is intimidating, but I take comfort in the fact that I have some choice in who I am.

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References

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