

Keeping Things Whole

Danny Licht

Things are changing at a rapid pace. Broadly speaking, the world today appears quite different from how it did yesterday, with six new rides and a sleek new look, and everyone is talking about it; tickets are sold out for the next month and a half. It seems to me that what has prompted these sudden alterations (though frankly I am no expert here) is that I have been reading a large book by Søren Kierkegaard,¹ which I both can't recommend enough and can't recommend at all, as I will try to explain to you. It is a book that leaves its readers nothing to hold onto, with no great plot and no clear theme. If some illuminated path runs through the book, then somehow I missed it, making the book less like an oracle, whose riddle might save me (if only I could crack it!), and more like architecture: a life-size building constructed and furnished by its generous author. I have spent the past

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1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge 2009).



several months living with this book, with its language and attitudes and parables before me, seducing me, submerging me completely. Now I can say, without hesitation, that I like the book, I do, but I can hardly say what I have learned from it.

Its power comes not from what it is—as a set of concepts, or a heavy object, or my plus-one to recent events—but from the way

that it has warped and mangled the very color of everything.

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On a breezy day in April, the campus bloomed with prospies and I was looking for a place to sit on the quad. I passed a group of them, all wide-eyed and beautiful, and I thought about when I was one of them, in a simpler time. “Oh!” someone cried. It was their docent, and she had our attention:

Another thing I want to tell you about Harper is that on the second floor you can find our Study Abroad offices, where you can learn all about our opportunities to study abroad in a ton of different countries. Most people do their Civilizations Core when they go abroad—that’s our history sequence—but last year I actually studied in Paris to fulfill my Biological Sciences requirement. So I was getting my bio requirement out of the way while I got to be in Paris, which is fun.

These closing words hit me sharply, and they have stayed on my mind since that afternoon. The docent did not say she liked Paris for this or that reason; she did not even admit that it was *she* who found it fun. No, the way she described her experience made it sound as though she had buckled up on a certain Six Flags roller coaster that goes by the name of Paris. Certainly, she did not intend for it to come across this way, but the language she used (the same as the University’s marketing department) nevertheless brings to mind an attitude towards programs that sees the very click of attendance as its ultimate aim. *Go to the University of Chicago, which is a good school. Study philosophy, which law schools love. Choose Paris, which is fun.* This type of outlook plops activities into objective categories, wherein the pursuit of individualized experience seems to become a kind of rebellion. The College and its courses have the potential to function as dynamic settings that promote an individual’s discovery of a unique situation within the world. By contrast, the theme-park mindset consumes Paris and its objects, preventing participants from experiencing them purely as “experiences”. I hope there is some meaningful difference between studying abroad and Study Abroad, and I wonder if it might be possible to advertise the latter without obscuring the former.

When we talk about personal experiences such as living in a foreign place, it can be difficult to convey the essence of actually being there to people who want to know about it. As a consequence, we often resort to tropes we have heard other people say, phrases like “It was fun!” and “I definitely don’t *regret* going.” These valuations hardly express any of the experiential value of actually going to a place, living there, and experimenting with a new way of life. They instead express exchange-value. They reduce experience to a quantity of social capital. I am afraid the epithets we stick onto certain experiences at some point start to reshape our ideas of the experiences themselves. These reductive valuations usher individual adventure underneath the glow of the epithet, which creates a special new form of adventure—one with an itinerary.

Should a lonely night present itself to a Paris participant, a feeling unfamiliar to the topic’s discourse, she might shudder with disbelief: “Am I in the right Paris?” Repeated expectations such as this one haunt many new college students, for example, who feel they have not received their promised fun or have not made lifelong friends in eight weeks. I remember feeling concerned last winter that I did not yet have a simultaneously broad and deep understanding of the world. *Does that happen in fifth week, or is it sixth?* When program participants and officials discuss their opportunities with the direct language of advertising, they develop myths that encourage future participants to believe that Paris equals fun, and to count on it, which leaves them little room for individual, subjective experience.

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Something about my encounter with the prospies reminded me of a conversation I had overheard a few months prior in a store downtown. “Sweetheart,” a mother explained, “shorts that short are *just* inappropriate.” Her daughter replied, “Did you see that thing online the other day that said the most active police of what women wear isn’t actually men but other *women*?” The mother delivered a punch line: “Really? Is that *true*?”

I wanted to laugh, except it was hardly funny. From where I stood, it seemed that the personal message the daughter wished to convey

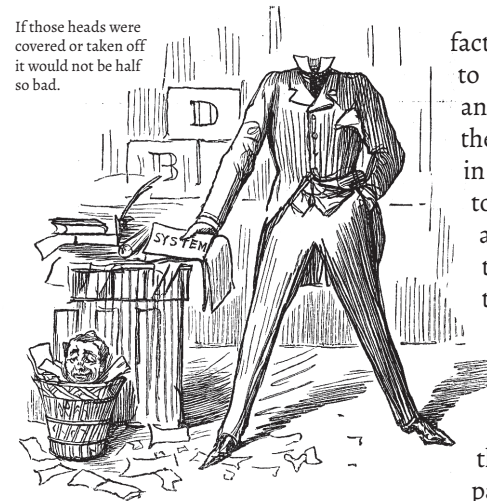
did not go through at all. Instead of empathy or understanding, the mother seemed to receive a neat little fact. “Anyway,” she went on, “why don’t you try on the top we picked out?”

It seemed that the fault of miscommunication fell on both ends. The daughter did not speak clearly of herself and her personal relationship with her mother, but instead of “women” and “what women wear,” as though these were categorical subjects of the world at large. Her mother received the message as it was delivered, an observation about this group called Women, and so her daughter’s expression of immediate, personal interest turned into a factoid—it was lost.

The communication of complex emotion finds itself among all other essentially personal matters, such as love, belief, and point of view, which cannot be expressed like a list of bands you like, a recipe for bouillabaisse, or a structural account of capitalism. We can convey those things with direct, systematic language that has little ambiguity. But how can you communicate, for example, what it means to love someone, or what it means to be a student? How can you help your mom understand that her judgment, regardless of intentions, stifles you? Certainly not with abstract language, as we have seen, but also not, I suspect, with direct or systematic language.

Imagine if the daughter had instead told her mom, “The male gaze you’ve inherited and push onto me is making me neurotic and limiting my ability to choose who I want to be!” I think her mother would have responded defensively, because her intention here was only to be helpful. Being aware of this intention likely encouraged her daughter to wrap her feelings with a safe, taut surface, which enabled her mother to skip above them with objective delight. Here the mother and daughter were not simply using different words; they were speaking different languages.

In a related way, the tour guide’s Paris-ergo-fun may have moved her followers to choose this school or that program, in the same way that Yelp rankings might move you to choose one restaurant over another, but the reduction of Paris to a few words says nothing at all about the experience as an individual process, or about the



fact that the work of going to school and living in another country is not in the decision to attend, but in the individual’s ability to understand herself as an individual and to take responsibility for the person she wants to become. Paris-which-is-fun surrounds the program with a brand of language that confers upon it a particular kind of value that has nothing at all to do with you or me. It is a way of speaking that hides individuals from the freedom of their possibilities. It is a way of living that is selected from a brochure.

I can still feel the wrath that Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* laid upon Los Angeles, my hometown, in 2011, like a biblical plague. I remember my parents’ friends, industry people, warning a crowd: “It’s unwatchable!” and “Don’t waste your time! We walked out of it last week, and so did the Spiegels!” Rex Reed of *The Observer* called it “138 minutes of the kind of pretentious twaddle that makes critics slobber and audiences snore.”² Kenneth Turan of *The Los Angeles Times* wrote,

*But the truth is, unless someone tells you that you are watching, for instance, what is supposed to be the formation of the universe or the day in the distant future when the sun becomes a white dwarf, there is no way to know exactly what you are seeing. It is, unfortunately, characteristic of this meditative and elliptical film that it is simply not possible for rank-and-file viewers to know as much about it as Malick does.*³

Such was my rebellion, then, to watch this terrible movie. And in

2. Rex Reed, “Evolution, In Real Time! Terrence Malick’s Ponderous ‘The Tree of Life’ Ponders the Meaning of Existence,” *The Observer*, 24 May 2011.

3. Kenneth Turan, “Movie review: ‘The Tree of Life,’” *The Los Angeles Times*, 26 May 2011.

many ways, its critics were right. The movie is quite unlike normal movies. Reed continues, “Is there a plot? Well, no. I mean, maybe. That is, sort of.” There is a plot, somewhere, maybe even two or three or five of them, but they are chopped up and rearranged and tucked among each other, transforming the experience of watching the film into a bewildering parade of visions: chaos, cosmos, dinosaurs, Brad Pitt, old trees, a walk through the desert. Throughout the film, the audience wonders why the hell this endless crawl into adulthood got interrupted by fragile pretty lights and huge cosmic bodies and prehistoric reptiles. Wikipedia attempts a synopsis:

*The film chronicles the origins and meaning of life by way of a middle-aged man’s childhood memories of his family living in 1950s Texas, interspersed with imagery of the origins and eventual demise of the universe and the inception of life on Earth.*⁴

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tree_of_Life_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tree_of_Life_(film))

Yes, this is what the movie is about, maybe, or maybe what it is, in a certain sense, but *The Tree of Life* has no essential plot, and the word “interspersed” makes the “imagery” sound like decoration, as though it were somehow less part of the movie than the scenes with the famous people. For me, the thrust of this movie lies not in its plots or its imagery or even in their relationship, but somewhere else entirely.

Somewhere in the middle of the movie, the neighborhood boys throw rocks and break windows and attach a frog to a rocket they send into the sky. One of them yells, “Did it go to the moon?” They are proud of this triumph, this blow to nature, and they look around wildly towards one another. But when the others are not looking, at least a few of them seem uneasy. With odd dignity, someone cries, “It was an *experiment!*” as though to justify the act, loudly, using this common language of science and existence. But for whom, and to whom, is he giving the explanation?

At the beginning of the film, the mother advises in voiceover, “The nuns taught us there are two ways through life: the way of nature, and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you’ll follow.” For the next couple of hours, Malick proves it. Here is nature, aggressive and desperate, and here is grace, loving and

gorgeous. What are we, the viewers, to do with all these moments, all this imagery? Is the film completely obvious? The mother is happy because she does not want; the father is spiteful and so he suffers. A very thorough exegesis of the film—one that connects its images and sounds to that original dichotomy, an altogether critical account that leaves no frame unmentioned and no whisper unconsidered—would nevertheless be a misguided attempt at understanding this highly unusual movie. Such an attempt might give its unfortunate reader (who would have likely turned to it after struggling for hours to understand, for the life of her, why the good jurors of Cannes could have possibly awarded this ridiculous, plotless film the superlative Palme d’Or, and the Rubensteins will be arriving within the hour!) the impression that she has, at last, a solid grasp on the movie.

The moments of the film work not as plot points but as sensations. A boy dies and his mother weeps; a father teaches his sons to fight; convicts pass by in chains. One scene shows a mother clipping laundry outside to dry. The sun casts her shadow on bedsheets; hose water moves over her pale, bare feet. In direct contrast to this serenity, her husband then scolds their son at dusk as they walk through the yard. He points to dead grass and asks why it is bare. “Grass won’t grow under the tree,” his son explains. “It does at Kimball’s,” their neighbor’s, the father replies.

As interpreters, we are bound to wonder how this strange montage up on the screen relates to its theme, but its theme is only its beginning. This wondering is shaped ineffectively. When we ask what the film “means,” we imply that the film is only as much as it has to tell us. We imply that there is an upper limit on the possibilities of experience, when what makes *The Tree of Life* at once groundbreaking and a masterpiece is that it is not contained within itself. It is a movie that understands at the deepest level its essential relationship to its audience. Its director seems to know that the viewer does not take a pause from existing when she walks into the movie theater. Movies tend to be chewed on briefly and digested with ease. This one, without a plot and all but inscrutable, refuses to go down so easily. The film’s ambiguous process of pain, wandering, loneliness and anxiety imitates the indeterminate form of life itself. It allows the viewer, in adopting these moments as her own, to adopt the

film's questions as her own: How will it end? What of this matters?

Were *The Tree of Life* edited in chronological order, in the shape of a plotline and without the imagery, it would yield a considerably different effect. Narrative, which is catharsis, can move us to release our latent desires; it can help us cope with living. But narrative cannot change our lives. When you learn a story, you are already familiar with its basic structure, because narrative runs with the grain of cultural mythology. It stays on the screen, or in the book, or in the mouth of a friend. "Life is complicated," we learn at the finale. "Okay, great. Now what's for lunch?" The meaning of the essentially personal cannot be expressed in plot points, and when we distribute narrative experience on stylish pamphlets, our readers will buy in or they will not, and they will return to their evenings exactly as they arrived.

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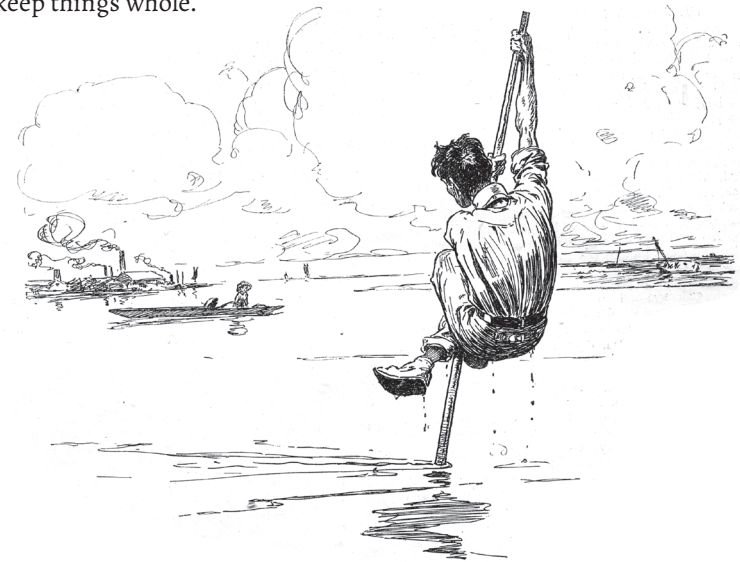
I went to Hebrew school twice a week for seven years, reluctantly, a preteen unbeliever. The other day, while I was making breakfast, cracking two brown eggs into hot, trembling oil, it hit me that I know nothing of Judaism and that I also believe in God. For all the years I spent learning about the Bible and its personalities, about the rites of Passover and the work and rest of God, I am not sure I ever wondered whether or not I believed in God, whether or not I was Jewish, and whether or not this might matter to me.

When I talk about "bar mitzvah," I talk about it in the sense of "before" or "after my bar mitzvah," or to refer to a specific kind of party. In fact, and amusingly to me, the phrase means "son of commandment" (I had to look this up). If I were to speak faithfully to the term, I would talk about "becoming" a bar mitzvah, a man of God's word, more than I would of "having" one or "going to" one. Instead, I speak faithfully to what took place: I had a bar mitzvah without ever becoming one, though I did look a lot like one and sound a lot like one, and if you gave me a minute to think, I could recite from memory eight or nine of the Ten Commandments. Then, after dinner, I could do the same with my Core requirements.

Now that I have decided I believe in God, I wonder what it would mean to know the commandments more intimately. "Knowing and knowing is not always the same thing," as Freud put it. I wonder how much my upbringing of bagels and lox and chanting the V'ahavta alongside my grandparents, which are things I once sincerely thought were the most Jewish imaginable, has to do with this enormous religion of Rabbi Heschel and Martha Nussbaum.

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There is a poem by Mark Strand that begins: "In a field / I am the absence / of field. / This is / always the case." I think Kierkegaard would have hated it. The speaker is there, at the synagogue, or he is there, at the movies, or he is there, at the other end of the Atlantic Ocean, trying out Paris, going everywhere everyone says to go. He tells his friends back home that, yes, it is fun, just look at these photos. They reply, together, "Yes, we know!" Even still, he has this nagging sensation that he can hardly admit, and it will not go away. He knows Paris is fun, and he sees Paris is fun, and he wants Paris is fun, but everywhere he turns, he finds he is missing. "We all have reasons / for moving," it ends, the darkest words I know. "I move / to keep things whole."



I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.