Lifting the Fog

Finding Freedom in Light of the Sociological Imagination

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Abstract: I have noticed that as time goes by, my inner urge to go against what society deems correct grows. It is almost as if I sense that there is something wrong with the way things are. How did I come to this conclusion of things not being quite right? I was not always like this; nor did I wake up one morning a changed person. This change occurred over a period of time and I do not believe that it is yet complete. The most dramatic of that change occurred after I achieved a degree of clarity. Prior to that, other issues in my life served as a fog clouding my perceptions. Though I could not clearly "see" it, I knew there was something not right. I could hear it, taste it, and feel it. Drawing on various readings selected from the anthology by Spencer E. Cahill (2004) as well as the ideas of the late sociologist Morrie Schwartz, among others, this essay explores the causes of the blinding fog and how I came to lift it. It also explores how I was able to better understand what I find wrong with our society as a result of achieving this clarity.

I have noticed that as time goes by, my inner urge to go against what society deems correct grows. It is almost as if I sense that there is something wrong with the way things are. It would be selfish for me to say that they seem wrong for just me; I think that they are wrong for the majority of us.

How did I come to this conclusion? I was not always like this; nor did I wake up one morning a changed person. This change occurred over a period of time and I do not believe that it is yet complete. The most dramatic of that change occurred after I achieved a degree of clarity. Prior to that, other issues in my life served as a fog clouding my perceptions. Though I could not clearly "see" it, I knew there was something not right. I could hear it, taste it, and feel it. I guess it relates to what Oliver Sacks said in his article on "Neurology and the Soul" (Cahill 2-6), when he introduced Heraclitus' concept of the stream. "I do not feel alive, psychologically alive, except insofar as a stream of feeling—perceiving, imagining, remembering reflecting, revising, recategorizing—runs through me. I am that stream—that stream is me" (Sacks 5). Somewhere along the same lines, I sensed that there was something wrong with the "stream's" flow. As if something was causing it to not be what it could have, or perhaps what it should have, been. There was once a time where I was oblivious to the im-

pediment in the flow of the "stream," and the "stream" itself for that matter. A time where I wanted very much to conform to the guidelines set by society.

During that time I was very much concerned with my **looking-glass self**. In the article, "The Self as Sentiment and Reflection," Charles Horton Cooley defines the looking-glass self as being a social self in the sense that "the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self—that is, any idea he appropriates—appears in a particular mind; and the kind of self-feeling one has determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind" (Cooley 25). The looking-glass self has three aspects: 1. How we imagine others view us; 2. How we imagine they judge us as a result of how we imagine they view us; and 3. How we feel about that judgment. It is also possible that as time and experience shape and change us, our looking-glass selves can change as well.

It mattered to me a great deal what I thought others thought of me. The fact that this was so important to me played a key role in providing the conditions that allowed the blinding fog to form and maintain itself. I wanted to do what was expected of me or what I perceived to be expected of me by my family, teachers and friends. Everyone feels that way at some point in his or her life. Whether the looking glass self is particular to the society we live in today, or a part of what Jerome Bruner (Cahill 71-5) calls "**human universals**"---the concept pretty much captures my experience here.

I was exemplifying the looking glass self by wanting to do everything in the order which was deemed "proper" by society: Go through grade school, then college, then a career, then marriage and a family. I think everyone shares those feelings as well at some point or another in their life. It is another sentiment thought to be universal among humans. With the universality of this sequence of events, coupled with my

humanity, I had my mind set on following that prescribed order, even if that meant not being myself, whoever myself was, whatever being myself meant.

I was not exactly sure why I wanted to do things that way until very recently, when I achieved the clarity I spoke of earlier. It not only allowed me to see more clearly that something is wrong with society, but it also helped me to see that something was wrong with me. I am still not exactly sure what all of the reasons for my wanting to conform to society were, even though I have a few ideas. One of these have to do with the realization that the course of my life was not merely a "natural" process, but one shaped and form by the culture I live in. And this realization does not apply to me, only, but to society at large. As Jerome Bruner put it, "The divide in human evolution was crossed when culture became the major factor in giving form to the minds of those living under its sway… culture (instead of nature) now became the world to which we had to adapt and the tool kit for doing so" (Bruner 8). It was after recently reading that particular passage in Bruner's article "Culture and Psychology" that gave me the idea that one of the reasons for how I was, was my childhood, especially my early childhood and my surrounding environment during that time period. "[H]uman beings do not terminate at their own skins; they are expressions of a culture" (Bruner 8-9).

I was not the product of the "socially defined" relationship. My parents were never married and they were separated not long after the completion of my first year in life. Despite my having half-siblings in far away Michigan, with whom I am today very close, my family in those early days included my mother, my grandmother, my two uncles, an aunt-in-law, and my cousin. That was my familial makeup for the first six years of my life. My father was in and out of it here and there---more often out than in. I was lacking and in need of my fa-

ther's guidance or that of a father figure for that matter. To compensate for that absence I had to substitute him with something. I found my substitutes in fictional characters and places. While a good portion of my values came from my mother and grandmother, another good chunk of them came from these fictional characters. One of the most prominent of those characters was Superman.

He was and always will be my absolute hands down favorite. With Superman being the moral foundation that he is I suppose I came to emulate and idolize him. Because there was really no father figure in my life until I was seven or eight years old, there were some lessons that went unlearned or were learned the hard way. There were also some learning tools and techniques that are described as normal that I did not have at my disposal due to my father's absence. One of those was the role taking that is commonly found in young children's developmental stages. Although somewhat similar, my role taking play days weren't like exactly like those mentioned by George Herbert Mead in "The Self as Social Structure": "playing with an imaginary companion… is a **play at something**. … The roles which the children assume are made the basis for training. When a child does assume a role he has in himself the stimuli which call out that particular response or group of responses" (Mead 32). I never played the role of father or father-like figure. Instead, I would play the role of Superman. It even reached to the point that when faced with certain situations I would ask myself: "What would Superman do?" And I would do just what I thought my hero would, well within my limitations of course. I knew perfectly well that Superman has his powers due to the radiation from our yellow sun, which is different than that of his native red sun. I also clearly knew that I could never have those powers because I am a native of this planet. However, superpowers aside, my moral standpoints nearly mirrored those of the man of steel. I think it is because of that that as a child I never really got myself into too much trouble, and I always tried to help people if I could. This "training" I think actually later proved to be somewhat harmful to me as I moved forward in life.

I actively continued along this path for the most part until I was about eleven years old. Many facets of my early socialization started to change when I was between the ages of ten and eleven. My grandmother, whom I was very close to, was diagnosed with lymphoma (cancer of the lymphatic system). My mother who was the one primarily taking care of my grandmother had become engaged and I was due to gain a stepbrother and stepsister. At fifty-six years old, my grandmother succumbed to the cancer during the summer of 1990. Her death caused a major shockwave with very long lasting tremors to occur through my childhood. The tremors may not have been as lengthy had I not exhibited **responsibility exclusion**. Arthur W. Frank speaks of responsibility exclusion in his piece, "The Social Contexts of Illness" (Cahill 247-256). He writes, "Illness excuses people from their normal responsibilities, but the cost of being excused is greater than it appears at first" (Frank 253). My responsibilities of being "just a kid" with a sick grandmother were excused and a new responsibility was bestowed upon me. I had to be strong for my family because everyone else was falling apart. I had to be the rock that everyone could lean on. For that reason I did not cry at my grandmother's funeral, and I comforted those who did. Later, I realized that this was not the best approach to that situation. According to Morrie Schwartz:

> Grieving, mourning, crying are natural emotions. … Grieving is an important part of living because experiencing loss is inevitable for everyone. … Therefore, you need to work out a way of handling

grief. The best way is to let yourself grieve freely and mourn losses. … Without this kind of release you're apt to be left with an inner pain that can affect your life in many ways. (Schwartz 29-30)

Although I managed to keep my emotions in check I had no problems in letting go of my faith. It was during this time that my belief in God began to falter. I took a closer look at things and the fog thinned a little bit when it came to religion. From that point on I began believing less and less in God as I saw the world growing into a darker and more hate-filled place. I could no longer believe that a god, such as the one I was raised to believe in according to the Bible, could allow the world to fall into the state that it is in. Without a doubt, my grandmother's death left within me a great void and an immense pain that would not begin to be healed for years to come. And while the fog did thin at one part it grew even thicker in others.

Four months after my grandmother's death, per her wishes that they be married that year, my mother and stepfather got married. And while I did gain a father figure and siblings whom I could grow up with, I in some ways lost my mother. My stepsiblings had a lot of issues stemming from their drug addicted biological mother, and they needed a lot of attention. I did too. It just was not as obvious. I suppose I played the role of "normal" kid to a tee. I had perfected the "normal" role during my youth through my years of pretending to be Superman, which also included his mild-mannered secret identity, Clark Kent. The way I portrayed my "normality" to my family was a form of presenting a **purpose-serving self**. The purpose-serving self is introduced in the excerpt from Erving Goffman's book, similarly titled "The Presentation of Self." He says that we portray ourselves in certain ways depending on the situation and the desired result.

[W]hen an individual appears before others, his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have. … Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. (Goffman 110)

I started my middle school years as a **social isolate**. Much of my first year in middle school was spent in isolation. This is not because I was an "individual with no real friends" as Peter and Patricia Adler (270) define it in their study, "Preadolescent Cliques, Friendships, and Identity." It was because I had chosen to be that way mostly as a result of my grandmother's illness and death from the previous year. I would never share my accomplishments with or seek help from my family. I became somewhat of an isolate on the home front as well as the issues with my stepsiblings grew worse and they became more attention needy. Their antics and the issues that they created within the family eventually resulted in our having to attend family therapy sessions, which I absolutely abhorred, but in which I did play my part. While I was at home I would go through the motions when necessary as well. I would **"do family"** as Nancy Naples said in her essay, "A Personal Story of Doing Family" (Cahill 204-215). I would assume the role expected of me while I was there. Naples states that her reason for "doing family" while with her biological family was because it acted as a "form of boundary maintenance—controlling who and what can enter for fear that the family constellation is so fragile any slight disruption will cause permanent

damage" (Naples 212). This situation seemed to apply to me as well.

As my middle school career progressed I did manage to re-assimilate myself with the friends I had had in elementary school. Many of the issues that emerged during my middle school years continued on through high school. By the time I started high school family therapy was a thing of the past. The issues with my stepsiblings still existed, though, as did my isolation from my family. However my social isolate days were well behind me as I had graduated to the **middle-level friendship circle**. This group is defined as being "the people who were considered non-popular, who didn't try to be cool or to be accepted by the cool people" (Adler 267-268). It was also in my freshman year in high school that I met my two best friends. They essentially became my new family, and in a lot of ways my real family. If I wasn't with one of them, then I was with the other, if not with both of them. Despite the fact that we don't speak nearly as often as we once did, the bond is still there. My sophomore year added a new dynamic: relationships, or perhaps it is better to say the lack thereof. Continual rejection and heartache was the social theme for me during that year. However that theme led to the emergence of something else, writing. I started writing poetry that year. The poems that I composed were not for some school assignment, but they were for me. Writing them served as a way to get out the things I was feeling and to be able to look at them and work my way through them. I found that during that time, writing actually helped me to deal with the matters of the heart and maintain my sanity. "Through writing, we change our relationship to trauma, for we gain confidence in ourselves and in our ability to handle life's difficulties" (DeSalvo 45).

Towards the end of high school, I really started to change. I took up interests in other cultures and ideas. Not so much to convert to them, more so to expand my knowledge and to be able to compare and contrast the different workings of things. I even participated in an international exchange program between my school and one in Mexico during my junior year. It was that experience that led me to a new discovery: love. I was truly in love for the very first time and I had found someone who felt the same for me. Now I thought I had been in love before, but I discovered that true love was not involved in those prior situations. When you are seventeen and truly in love for the very first time and involved in a very serious relationship, that relationship tends to take control of your life. It creates a whole new thickness to the fog, which blocks out a completely different spectrum of light. That is exactly what happened in my case. I found myself involved in a very serious long distance relationship for almost four years. This relationship accompanied me out of high school and into college.

Because I was in my first serious relationship and because I was completely devoted to it, everything I did was for that relationship, or so I thought. The truth is that I let that relationship control my life and it subsequently led to the failure of my first attempt at college. Not only that, but it caused me to dismiss and miss out on quite a few once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Instead of going to Northeastern University, I took the fall semester of 1997 off and decided to travel to Mexico to see my girlfriend. I then came back and started the spring semester at UMass Boston. That first semester was a full one with two science courses, a math course and good old English 101. I did poorly in all but one of those courses, which resulted in my being unable to renew the two scholarships I had been awarded from high school. All I could think about during the course of that semester was finishing so I could go back to Mexico, never mind the schoolwork! Somehow I failed to see that my doing well in school and earning a degree would provide secu-

rity to a future that we had many times dreamt of. My then-girlfriend however had seen this, had even brought it to my attention, and after a while, after an empty assurance that I could and would focus on my studies, saw that the only way that she could help me was by ending the relationship. She wanted me to do things for myself and to achieve the goals that I had spoken of and I never would have done so while still in the relationship.

I of course did not see it this way. I had construed it as being the end of the world. I overreacted and on many levels I shut down; almost as if someone else had taken over, or perhaps another self---a **multiple personality** was set in motion, if you may call it that. Not to be confused with the extreme cases of multiple personality disorder, where one is unaware of the things he or she does while under the control of a different personality, such as the cases portrayed in the documentary film *Multiple Personality: The Search for Deadly Memories* (HBO). However, Mead has pointed out that "A multiple personality is in a certain sense normal. … To a person who is somewhat unstable and in whom there is a line of cleavage, certain activities become impossible, and that set of activities may separate and evolve into another self" (Mead 34). This other self in me took five weeks off from work, and stayed inside the house the whole time. After the self-imposed exile I regained control and did something that in retrospect I realize I never should have done. I got involved in another relationship. It took me almost six years to discover why I did this, and one more year to discover its name.

That relationship lasted for a year. Shortly after that I got myself into another relationship, which lasted a month or so. Another relationship followed that, which ended up lasting almost five years. This is where the Superman "training" I mentioned earlier proved harmful. I fell back on helping others as a way to avoid dealing

with the reality of the pain that I had yet to earnestly address. I entered all of those relationships with the impression that the friends needed help, that they needed me to help them. It was true that they needed help, but the "needed me" part was not entirely true. I was really in no position to be trying to solve someone else's problems. It was not too long ago actually that I realized this. I also recently realized that I didn't really value myself for who I was and that I defined my worth in terms of my value to others or my perceived value to them. Through that I became saturated with feelings of failure and the feeling that I was letting everyone down by not meeting their expectations. As a result, "I lost it" as Peter N. Sterns put it in his article "The Historical Struggle for Self-Control in America" (Cahill 78-91). He simply defines the phrase "I lost it" as follows: "The 'it' may refer to our temper, our mastery over grief, or another currently expected inhibition" (Sterns 78). My mastery over the grief caused by everything going on had surpassed its limitations.

There was another side affect that arose. I was **codependent** and I had been so since the breakup with my first girlfriend. "Codependency is [generally] described as a psychospiritual 'condition' that allegedly causes people to 'lose touch with' themselves through their preoccupation with others, sometimes depicted as an 'addiction'" (Irvine 2000:142). Leslie Irvine, in her study, *Narratives of Self in Codependents Anonymous*, writes that these people who become codependent often have a feeling of failure and they usually will seek help after a serious relationship gone sour. "They come in search of answers to the question 'What happened?' but lurking beneath this is a deeper question: 'What's wrong with me?' (Irvine 142). Though I did not seek professional help, I did have those same questions burning within me especially after my first relationship ended.

In the midst of my codependency I also

became semi-suicidal. Maybe that is an exaggeration, but I definitely spent a lot of time depressed and thinking about what it would be like, were I not around. I was definitely in a lot of emotional and psychological pain. In retrospect I probably should have found professional help. DeSalvo is right when she writes that one should not substitute writing for seeking help when being in danger of self-harm" (DeSalvo 167). I have since leaned that the self-harm that I was committing was an effort "to alleviate [the] profound psychic pain" (DeSalvo 159) resulting from the termination of my first relationship. I think the only thing that kept me going was something that came out of that five-year relationship, the best things by far: my son and my daughter. Those are the two things that kept me going. They were my guiding light. They put a whole new perspective on life. And although I still did not really value myself and practiced "cutting" from time to time, the mere fact that my children were there kept me from going completely over the edge to the point of no return.

I would like to take a moment to reflect a little more on the end of that last relationship, mostly because it proved to be one of the major catalysts of my healing and self-realization process. Things had basically gone to hell. I think the only reason that it lasted as long as it did was because there were children involved. (That, by the way, is no reason to prolong a relationship. It only causes more problems, especially for the children.) After a month of being separated, my ex had become engaged and had informed me that she was taking my children to another state. For a Mr. Mom type father such as myself, that was a lot to handle. I did spend as much time as possible with my kids, before she left. And then one day she left and took them with her. My world had almost come to an end that day, but a very good friend helped to remind me that tomorrow was coming and that my kids still needed their father, even if I was 8 hours away.

Two weeks later my son was back with me and my daughter came the month following that. I spent the following six months as a single parent, while their mother seemingly dropped off the face of the earth. A lot changed for me from January to June of 2006 as the fog began to lift. I realized a few things and as a result made some changes. One of those changes was my relationship with my father. He had changed a few years back, but I was not very receptive to those changes. I suppose I still had a lot of anger within me. Morrie Schwartz advised, "'Forgive yourself before you die. Then forgive others.' … 'There is no point in keeping vengeance or stubbornness. These things … I so regret in my life. Pride. Vanity'" (quoted in Albom 164). Everything that happened or did not happen with my father was in the past. What really mattered was the present, so I called him one day last July and I have seen him at least once a week since then, usually on tuesdays.

I also began to understand my codependency and was able to overcome it. One of the people in Irvine's study said "All this time, because of codependency, I haven't been able to be myself. … I've learned who I really am, for the first time in my life" (Irvine 144). I related to that immediately when I recently read it, it nearly brought tears to my eyes. It brought me back to the previous year when I had all those revelations, the day that I began to clearly see through the fog that life's circumstances had put in place. And I came to an understanding very similar to this:

> We can sometimes experience a long-lived journey into despair and an intense inner psychic struggle. Our old ways of thinking and behaving seem empty and self-defeating. We move, perhaps, to the brink of self-extinction. But, because of some sudden and pro-

found insight, we turn back and reclaim the potential and possibilities of life. We are, in a sense, reborn into a new life. (DeSalvo 155-156)

The day of my "rebirth" was Valentine's Day, 2006. In retrospect it strikes me as being a bit ironic that on the day of love, I finally began to love myself. And once that happened the fog dissipated enough for me to see myself as an active member of society instead of someone just caught in the current. In a way this was very similar to the type of awakening that Dr. Sayer experienced towards the end of the film *Awakenings*. Because of the wake-up call that he received from Leonard, Dr. Sayer was able to open up and do what he felt was right as opposed to being oblivious to everything outside of his own bubble. From my awakening I was able to begin to truly embrace my thoughts and feelings of how I thought things should be, and what I saw as "wrong" with the way things are.

Two things helped me to see this. One of them was the concept, **special mental lenses**. Eviatar Zerubavel mentions this concept in his article "Islands of Meanings" (Cahill 16-21) when he writes, "Being a member of society entails 'seeing' the world through special mental lenses. It is these lenses, which we acquire only through socialization, that allow us to 'perceive things'" (Zerubavel 20). When I found myself socializing and participating in society I was able to acquire the special mental lenses, implant them, and use them to see even more clearly through the fog. It was from my perceptions that I was able to change the prescription of the special mental lenses previously acquired and see things in a different light and from different angles.

Oliver Sacks named the second concept that helped me to see the glitches in society. In his piece "Neurology and the Soul," Sacks quotes Goethe and introduces some-thing that one may call "organ knowledge exchange**."** His quote of Goethe states: " 'The Ancients said that the animals are taught through their organs; let me add to this, so are men, but they have the advantage of teaching their organs in return.' Through experience, education, art, and life, we teach our brains" (Sacks 5-6). When I was finally able to see through the fog of my depression and codependency I was able to exchange knowledge with my organs. I was able to reflect upon life experiences to determine what I felt was wrong with our society.

I see things such as greed and overstimulation. We saw first-hand in the documentary PBS film *Affluenza*, how this determination to own the "latest and greatest" ruins people. It causes things like chronic stress, bankruptcies, and fractured families. We are overstimulated by technology. We are in the postmodern era afflicted with what Kenneth J. Gergen calls "**social saturation**":

> Social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. For everything we "know to be true" about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an "authentic self" … recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all. (Gergen 413)

As I read that article by Gergen titled "The Dissolution of the Self,*"* I kept saying to myself "This is exactly what I have been sensing!" Another problem I have noticed is impatience. Morrie Schwartz similarly

comments on our current cultural gravitation towards immediate gratification. We expect things right then and there. When we are not able to have that desire fulfilled we become frustrated. "When I don't get it, I'm frustrated. But if I don't demand that it be there at this very moment, the frustration is reduced and the objective will still be achieved, though it takes a while" (Schwartz 18). After realizing some of these faults in society, I have been able to strive against them and fashion my life into something that is more functional for me.

Even though I have managed to fashion my life in such a way that I am on track to obtaining the type of life I want for myself, the fog is always there. It may not be of a zero visibility thickness, but it is still there. The molecules are still present and waiting for the right conditions in which to form themselves in such a way that blocks vision. Very recently, the fog made a very strong attempt to return. This time it once again was hidden behind the topic of my children. Their mother once again decided to move out of state with them. This time, however, I decided to fight against it and I lost. Now had this been pre-Valentine's day 2006, I very well could have relapsed. I think that it is safe to say that I may very well have gone over the edge and ceased to exist. I am here though because I was "reborn." I am stronger because of it and I will be ok. My determination to succeed is akin to that of Billy Elliot. In the film, *Billy Elliot*, Billy was determined to be a ballet dancer. Despite all of the resistance he encountered, he didn't let anything stop him. It is with that same style of determination that I absolutely refuse to allow that fog to settle again.

One way of keeping the fog at bay is expressing our feelings, especially the negative ones, such as frustration, complaints, or anger. They are very powerful and can consume us. They also all lead to stress, which serves as a distraction and invites that blinding fog. "If a lot of frustrations have been building up, you need to talk about them. … Have confidence in yourself and realize that eventually you will be better off because you have expressed your feelings" (Schwartz 24-25). What I, and all of us for that matter, have to do is continually adjust the mental lenses. By saying that I mean that we have to be observant of the environment which surrounds us and remain vigilant against those stimuli that cause the fog to set.

In another class I saw a film called *The Motorcycle Diaries*. In the film, Alberto Granado and his cousin Ernesto Guevara set out on a motorcycle, to see Latin America. Throughout the journey they see many of the injustices that have been perpetrated against the native and poor populations. Ernesto, especially, is deeply affected by what he perceives and wonders how it can be fixed. By the end of the journey Ernesto realizes that he has been changed by the experience and must take time to think about who he has become. He resurfaced a few years later as Ché Guevara, one of the leaders of the Cuban revolution. Though his methods may have been questionable, he had the best of intentions at heart. We must perceive the changes and adapt to or change them. To ignore our surroundings is to remove the lenses and let ourselves become enshrouded by the fog. To do that is to surrender our true freedom and allow ourselves to be mere parts of the machine that is society, parts which have no function other than to promote and advance the wills and desires of others. at the expense of our own willful action.

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