



“Alien Nation”

P. Heim

Riots, suicide, unemployment, social classes, and poverty all have one thing in common; they all either cause or result in the feeling of alienation. According to Karl Marx, alienation is the individual's sense of separation and estrangement from useful work, other people, and the self (Walton 6). There were times in high school when I felt like an outsider and had low self-esteem. So I began using sarcasm and humor as a defense mechanism similar to Matt Damon's character Will in the movie *Good Will Hunting*. It's important to look within ourselves, our backgrounds, and how we interact with others, in order to be able to produce answers/solutions to questions/problems that may arise.

To begin with, each and every person has many different façades, which can also be thought of as having a society within oneself. Today I'm a completely different person than I used to be in middle school. However, people who haven't talked to me since then still think of me as a stuck up, mean person as opposed to the insecure, sensitive person I am now. Since these people still view me this way, one side of me acts extra nice in front of them and keeps my sarcasm to a minimum in order to show them that I've changed. I act differently with my real friends, as do all kids, from the way I act with my parents and teachers. With my friends I'm much more open, I tell them things that parents shouldn't know, I curse, and I participate in activities that

normal teenagers do. I would never curse in front of my parents or most teachers because I would get in trouble.

The relationships I have with my mom and dad are very different. My dad and I have a lot of the same interests and similar senses of humor, whereas my mom and I butt heads every chance we get. I started alienating myself from her because I thought that if we fought about everything, why talk at all? I spend most of my time in my room so as to prevent possible fights. Then, she'll come in my room and ask me why I spend most of my time in there, thus creating another fight. I have no idea why we get on each other's nerves so easily. What's more is that it's to the point now where it's my first month of college and we barely talk because, when we do, it's just constant fighting. I don't bother calling home anymore because I don't need to get yelled at for the same stuff I've been getting yelled at for years. In addition, I noticed that it's been a long time since we've both said, "I love you" to one another. Honestly, I don't know what to do anymore because when we do sit down and try to talk things out, ironically we wind up arguing.

Years ago my attitude and defensive nature stemmed from the relationship with the owner of my dance studio. Throughout the twelve years I danced at her studio, she berated and criticized everything the dancers did and would yell every chance she got. After a while, I stopped crying and developed an attitude; my sarcasm was a defense mechanism so that I wouldn't break down and cry every day. Now I doubt myself with almost everything I do because I got used to years of criticism from my childhood. I use both sarcasm and humor to protect myself from getting hurt and I push people away before they can hurt me; consequently, these are the traits that connect all of my many "sides."

Similar to the way my defense mechanisms push people away, Matt Damon's character Will pushed people away in the

movie *Good Will Hunting*. He pushed them away with his intellect and humor so they didn't get too close and hurt him. As a youth, he was physically abused by his foster father and abandoned as a kid; therefore, he alienated people because he didn't trust anyone. He put up an intellectual wall and was in emotional denial. When Robin Williams' character repeats, "It's not your fault," he links Will's two sides together. Will is de-alienated from his emotional side, breaks down crying, and then leaves his comfortable, everyday life to venture out into the world to find himself.

As Robin Williams was able to de-alienate two of Matt Damon's selves, his character Hunter "Patch" Adams was also able to do the same for his roommate Mitch, in the movie *Patch Adams*. Mitch was only in touch with his intellectual side and felt that being a doctor was more about studying books and learning facts. He believed that patients don't need doctors to be their friends; they need them to be professional and helpful. Mitch really didn't approve of Patch's deviant behavior, such as when he would go to the hospital to cheer up the children and other patients. Patch took a more hands on approach, before he was actually permitted to, as only third year medical students are allowed to interact with patients. He practiced medicine in unconventional ways, such as asking patients what they would wish for and he would make it come true for them.

After making many unsuccessful attempts at getting his patient, an old woman, to eat, Mitch went to Patch for help. Mitch didn't know how to get her to eat because he couldn't force her. Earlier in the movie, Patch befriended this old woman and asked her what she had always wished for. In order to get her to eat, he didn't try just any conventional method. He filled a swimming pool with spaghetti, thus granting her lifelong wish. Mitch saw what Patch did for his patients—how he helped, how much he cared, and how happy he

made them. As a result of the newfound respect and appreciation Mitch had for Patch Adams as a person, friend, and medical student, his emotional self was de-alienated and thus, merged with his intellectual self.

In accordance with the aforementioned feeling of alienation throughout high school, the two kids from Columbine dealt with their feelings of estrangement in a completely different way. They were isolated from their classmates and were looked upon as outsiders. After shooting up the school, sociologists, psychologists, and people in general wondered what caused them to go to such extreme measures. They looked into their backgrounds and upbringings. It was brought up in class that because of their rich upbringing, maybe they felt they had power and authority.

Also, people have wondered how much violent cartoons and violence in the media have an effect on a child's perception of reality and their ideas of right and wrong. Concluding the Columbine incident, the students committed suicide. What is more, Emile Durkheim — who studied suicide specifically and what causes people to go through with it—discovered that single people, outcasts, and Protestants, who enjoy greater freedoms and are more distant from people, have a stronger sense of individualism; therefore, they may feel more isolated or alienated than those who have responsibilities to children or others.

From the standpoints of mental patients, Erving Goffman learned how they adapt to being alienated from friends and the small privileges that are removed. In order to maintain some sense of self-respect to compensate for their lost privileges, they create their own little "underground" communities by smuggling liquor or having relations with other inmates. For example, in the movie *Girl, Interrupted*, Winona Ryder's character snuck her boyfriend in and had relations. Also, another character that is basically bulimic snuck in chicken to binge

upon. They snuck around and did these things in order to maintain some dignity, pride, and privacy. Walton explains that alienation has become an accepted part of the human condition, only temporarily escaped in leisure, fantasy, mood-altering substances, otherworldly visions, or acts of rebellion (Walton 8).

Alienation also affects us worldwide with urbanization, which is a “global process and the hallmark in many ways of the modern world” (Walton 88). A deeper look into sociological problems reveals that people more often riot in urban areas and some individuals prefer welfare rather than working. For example, the most memorable riot of the late 1960s is the “Watts” riot of Los Angeles. Anthony Oberschall uncovered this riot, not as the “criminal riff-raff theory,” but rather as a result of frustrations with living conditions. It was almost 60% adults who participated and were part of the lower class and not strictly youths or just those considered “scum.” I asked myself why people felt this way—alienated.

Moreover, “the contemporary urban landscape is dominated by the mature corporate city. Metropolitan regions are now segregated by class, ethnicity, age, and economic functions” (Walton 115). Especially since slum dwellers live in a more dangerous and isolated environment, according to Walton they have the same desire for security and self-respect, as do members of the larger society (Walton 116). Critics such as William H. Whyte, Jr., feel that middle class suburbanites are subject to status anxiety, conformity, and cultural degradation, whereas the opposition feels they are church going and neighborly, with a family-centered life-style and leisure time (Walton 115).

For the most part, I agree with both points of view because I grew up in middle class suburbia where we go to church, have some leisure time, parents have their responsibilities, although not quite as “Leave it to Beaver” as described, and there’s a

family-centered life-style; yet we all have our own lives. As a white female in the suburbs, I did not have difficulty growing up. I live in a good neighborhood and I don’t have to worry much about crime and uprisings due to, for instance, unfair working conditions. Both of my parents have stable jobs; as a result, we don’t have serious worries about unemployment, which could lead to moving to a smaller house where we may be embarrassed to have people over, thus becoming isolated.

Another reason the lower class, the homeless, and the poor may feel alienated from society is because their literacy levels are low. In my English class “Literacies of Power,” we have been learning about cultural literacy and the literacy problem all over the world. Even in America there is not enough education, especially among the minorities. Literacy doesn’t just mean being able to read and write; it also entails being able to communicate effectively and interact with others in society and different social settings. Isolation will stem from the lack of not knowing how to communicate with others.

In order to obtain a good paying job to become successful, one needs to be literate. However, due to the fact that there is under-education in America, there is an increase in school dropouts. As a result, there are problems that develop for school dropouts and illiterate people. Basically, the only work they can be hired for are hard, monotonous, low paying jobs. Along with going on welfare, feelings of embarrassment may arise because they need assistance. If people are embarrassed and ashamed, they may begin to isolate themselves from their friends and other extended family members, just like the middle class family Walton spoke about in *Sociology and Critical Inquiry* (1993). After the father lost his job, the family was unable to afford their nice home any longer. Due to their lack of money, the family was forced to move into a much smaller apartment.

They were now earning a much lower income than their middle class friends. Finally, embarrassed about their apartment and their more modest life-style, they slowly isolated themselves from their friends and family.

Many people face certain struggles with literacy and success. Yet it seems that in some countries, women have it harder than men. For example, in Afghanistan, it was actually illegal for women to become educated and literate under the Taliban regime. One story I learned was about how if the women, who were holding secret classes to educate young girls and other women, were found out they could've been beaten or worse. The men have the upper hand, all of the power, education, and success whereas the women have no freedom. Moreover, even some men in America don't like a woman to be more intelligent or successful than them because it makes them feel inferior. Also, the women of Afghanistan were not allowed to wear nail polish because, if they did, their fingernails would be pulled off. They also have to cover their faces and every part of their body. Essentially what has happened is that their freedom has been stripped away, thus alienating them from their own individuality.

Principally, literacy opens doors and opportunities for people to have a successful, happy life. "Above all in their work, people seek self-esteem" (Walton 150). However, if one is not literate, there are much less opportunities, poorer living conditions, less self-esteem, and a greater possibility for an alienated, isolated life-style. Literacy also contributes to social order; those who are more literate compose the upper and middle level classes whereas the lower class consists of those who are poorer, less educated, and unable to communicate as effectively and interact as well within society. Two nations, the rich and the poor, have such different life-styles; for that reason, the gap is widening and they're

becoming even more alienated from each other.

Although I didn't endure much alienation within my community, Walton shows how the "new poor" of America, those for whom a life of jobless poverty is a completely alienating experience, and whose road to homelessness is long (1993: 129), dealt with the hardships of finding a home and becoming isolated from the life-style they once knew; furthermore, feelings of fear and isolation are prominent. Even though I was not alienated within my neighborhood and town, I was one of many high school students who felt estranged at times because of how people treated me.

Similarly, the movie *Powder* is about a child named Jeremy "Powder" Reed, who was born into the world with abnormalities and estranged from others, due to the way he was treated. He was albino and after his father was informed of his son's problems, he rejected him; consequently, Powder spent his life with his grandparents. After his grandfather's death, he was taken out of his home and placed into an uncomfortable, new world from which he had been isolated his whole life. Powder was a very well-read person and had a general understanding through his readings of how the world worked. However, he had never experienced normal, every day things that people take for granted. For example, he had never shaken anyone's hand and he doesn't understand how people can kill deer for pleasure. After the mean police officer shot the deer, Powder was able to let the officer feel what the deer was going through as it was slowly dying, when he grabbed both of them at the same time. Due to Powder's ability to de-alienate the cop's compassionate self, his views were changed on hunting and hurting things in general.

Basically, Powder lived a very sheltered life and had been protected from the harshness of reality. He knew that people would not accept him but he had never

been confronted with this problem until he was taken from his home. Everywhere he went people just stared at him. Boys gave him a hard time, bullied him around, and made fun of him just because he looked different. Many people can relate to this, including myself. When I was growing up, I had a bucktooth. A few kids made fun of me and one boy even called me "Revaeb," which is the word beaver spelled backwards. I was very insecure about my teeth and it hurt my feelings. However, my situation was very different from Powder's. After I got my braces removed, my teeth were straight; Powder's albino condition was permanent. People treated him like he was some sort of phantom and referred to him as "boy."

While Powder was sitting with the red haired girl at the picnic table, he made an important, insightful statement about the human race. He said that we all have a feeling of being separate and separated from everything. Furthermore, we were taught that we are disconnected from everything. He explained that we're not and that there's no need to hide, or lie, to use sarcasm, and no need to confuse the truth. I already know that I use sarcasm as a defense mechanism so as not to be hurt by others. When I don't want people to see that I'm weak, I use sarcasm to cover up what I'm feeling. Arguing with my parents, for example, is when I usually use it; I hate letting my parents see me cry because I don't want them to think they're getting to me or that I'm just an immature, over-emotional baby. Also, every time I get yelled at by my father and do cry, he'll yell at me for crying, which makes me frustrated and cry even more. I generally understand why people feel the need to put on certain façades; however, I don't think it's bad to show vulnerability sometimes.

Similarly, I wondered why almost everybody feels the need to hide, lie, use sarcasm, and confuse the truth. I came to the conclusion that people don't like to be ex-

posed and uncovered. Then they feel vulnerable and are afraid of being taken advantage of and possibly being hurt. Most people don't like the world to know that they're insecure or vulnerable; they want to appear to be in control. For example, Powder explained to the bully who took his hat, that he was repeating what his father had said to him right before he beat him badly. The bully did not like his inner thoughts and feelings, especially painful ones, being brought out into the open and exposed. After getting a glimpse into the bully's abusive background, we are able to see and understand why he pushes people around and puts on a tough outer shell; he feels he has achieved a sense of power and control. If he maintains a tough façade, he feels that people won't be able to take advantage of him and push him around the way his father did.

According to the instructional video *Voices* that was shown in class, self-image develops from birth and contributes to how we behave and feel. Our self-esteem, discriminations we face, stereotypes, and judgments that are passed on us also contribute to how we behave. Many people feel like outsiders because of their race or disabilities they may have. Personally, I've grown up in a town where the majority of the population is Caucasian; I didn't have to deal with racial discrimination. However, I am filed under certain stereotypes, which may cause some people to treat me differently. For example, I could be labeled as a blonde bimbo, an immature teenager who thinks she knows everything, and/or a spoiled, little white girl. As a result of these stereotypes, I act in certain ways so as to thwart these labels. One side of me acts more mature in front of adults and I pride myself on being smart so as to get rid of the "blonde bimbo" stereotype.

Even my parents treat me differently because I am the oldest child and I'm also a girl. They expect me to be an example for my younger brother, therefore they criticize

some things I do or say. Also, my brother has ADHD and I don't, so they place more emphasis on me doing well in school on my own; on the contrary, because of my brother's disorder, my parents help him much more than they helped me. Although at times I get mad because I have to do more things on my own, I realize I'm lucky to have others feel that I'm capable of doing so and doing a good job.

On the other hand, it's more difficult for my brother. People underestimate him just because he can't sit still and pay attention. They interpret this as his not being able to and not wanting to learn. However, he is a very smart kid but he can't focus for a long period of time. My brother used to go to church every week and participate in Sunday school. Due to his Attention Deficit Disorder, he was unable to sit still and appeared to be uninterested in the material. One very narrow-minded woman who happened to be the teacher of the class would send my brother out into the hallway when she couldn't "control" him. This made me very angry because she was not only penalizing him for his disability but also isolating him from the class and alienating him from learning.

People are able to "unlearn" the way they see themselves and how they see others, however. My former best friend used to be a model and I always knew she thought she was better than I. Even though I'm smarter, funnier, and a better dancer, I still felt inferior. Wherever we went, I felt like everybody was looking at her and I was just some fat, little blob by her side. She had always been really mean to other people but rarely to me. I realized that she had changed dramatically and was no longer the girl I used to know. Friends shouldn't make one feel inferior; they should love and accept one as a whole. It took twelve years of friendship with her to figure out that our relationship was not healthy. Finally, I had enough of feeling like I was not as good as her and decided that the friendship

was no longer worth it.

Although the relationship with my former best friend was unhealthy, in the end I learned more about myself. "What people really need is a self-validation, and once people can admit that they're O.K., even though I have shortcomings, everybody has shortcomings, but once they can admit that, all right I've got these, but I'm really O.K., somehow, they get miraculously better" (quoted in Bellah et al. 99). I've come to appreciate both my strengths and weaknesses and I'm no longer isolated from a more confident "self." Overall, I agree with the idea that we are like "layers of an onion" and I believe that we shouldn't be judged based on superficial facets such as ethnic backgrounds, appearances, and disabilities. However, this is inevitable and cannot be avoided because people will always be afraid of the unknown.

Another instructional video titled *Affluenza* that was shown in class explores how and why people have become so materialistic. Americans have the "disease of consumerism," otherwise known as *Affluenza*. When people are discontent, they feel the need to acquire material objects in order to compensate for feeling less inside. Consequently, we fill our lives with these things yet we are still left with an empty feeling. It is said that, psychologically, we feel the need to have more material goods because we compare ourselves to others and determine our self-worth. For example, we seek self-esteem in the clothes we wear and the cars we drive. When others compliment us on our material goods and the latest and trendiest stuff we own, we feel better about ourselves.

This greed and materialism that drives us, puts a strain on families. I, myself, fall under the category of being materialistic. I think all kids at one time or another have tried to make their parents feel guilty about not buying them everything they want, thus making them seem "deprived." Some believe that commercials try to de-alienate

“ugly, fat, and stupid people;” however, I feel that they do the exact opposite. For example, I know that Victoria’s Secret commercials do not boost my self-esteem. They don’t make me cry either but they certainly do not de-alienate me from the beautiful people. Basically, people acquire material possessions so they don’t feel isolated, left out, or behind the times.

According to Alexis de Tocqueville (as quoted in *Habits of the Heart*), “Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself” (Bellah et al. 37). However, when people create their own little societies, they wind up “forgetting their ancestors” and isolating themselves from their contemporaries. Furthermore, if people work so hard to support themselves, they alienate themselves from others and thus fail to link everyone together within the greater society.

A way to ward off isolation and alienation within society is to get involved within one’s community. Tocqueville explains a classic vision of a town and what it should continually work for, which is a community consisting of self-reliant individuals within self-reliant families who remember and respect their ancestors and descendants and take pride in long-standing traditions. He then goes on to explain how citizens, within the New England Township, initially involved themselves in local civic associations due to individual self-interest. Due to their involvement, they attained knowledge that provided them with an understanding of their public responsibility, which, in turn, transcended their initial motives of self-interest. When people are concerned about their own communities, work to make it a better place, and care for their fellow citizens who are in need, they eliminate potential feelings of alienation and isolation with society and their contem-

poraries.

When reading *Habits of the Heart*, I completely related to Joe Gorman when he said, “So now I’ve become more separate from my family. I think that’s needed. The way I’ve done it, I pick my time to get together with them. But it’s important that we be by ourselves, too” (Bellah et al. 12). Now that I’m off at college, I do not see my family as much as I used to. Our time apart has been beneficial because I needed to get out on my own and make decisions and choices for myself, in order to become my own person. Such decisions I am faced with now are my political affiliations, my views concerning church, and possible future career choices.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, my parents expressed how it’s important to attend church regularly and they would also have many conversations about how Democrats are clearly the wrong party to support. Now that I’m old enough to make my own decisions, I’ve come to the conclusion that I do agree with my parents when I choose to support the Republican Party. Even though growing up listening to them discuss politics probably had something to do with my choice, they did not impose their beliefs upon me. Furthermore, I’ve decided not to attend church every week. I believe that just because I don’t go every week doesn’t mean I don’t believe in God or the Methodist religion.

Another decision I’ve made is that I want to become an English teacher. My parents never forced me to go into the family practice because, besides the fact that we don’t have one, they always encouraged me to just do my best, do what makes me happy, and what will also provide me with a good income. For the most part, my ideas were shaped by my parents; yet, since I have gotten in touch with the adult side of me, I’ve been living my own life. It is best summed up with the idea that “leaving home in a sense involves a kind of second birth in which we give birth to ourselves”

(Bellah et al. 65).

The idea that “the danger is that one will, in sharing too completely with another, ‘lose oneself’” (Bellah et al. 92) is something that hits home for me. My boyfriend and I have been together for one year and four months now. However, about six months into the relationship, we had stopped hanging out with other people and, at the time, I didn’t realize how unhealthy this was. My boyfriend was able to see this and I just couldn’t because I had lost myself completely. We both no longer hung out with our friends but I was the one who always wanted to hang out, which led “to losing precisely the self that was loved” (Bellah et al. 92). Similar to Nan Pfautz, in *Habits of the Heart*, I was losing my boyfriend just like she was losing her husband.

It took a painful breakup and time apart for me to understand what went wrong. I realized that I had lost a part of myself, a part that used to want to hang out with friends and go out and do other things. Since then, I’ve gotten in touch with my old self, the self that he originally fell in love with; hence, our relationship is much better and healthier. I definitely agree that “having an independent self is a necessary precondition to joining fully in a relationship” (Bellah, 93). However, I believe that having an independent self *during* a relationship is just as important as having one *before* one enters a relationship.

Although losing myself in our relationship contributed to our time apart, the fact that my boyfriend never told me what he was feeling also caused problems. During Nan Pfautz’s explanation about how if there was a “lack of communication, I think it would be the end” (Bellah et al. 101), I wholeheartedly understood what she meant. As a result of my boyfriend’s never telling me what was bothering him, it came as a surprise when he finally sat me down and explained why he felt we needed a break. Just as I learned that I had lost a part of myself in our relationship, he realized

that he had been alienating me from what he was thinking and how he was feeling. After talking things out for many hours and taking some much needed time apart, we now have a much healthier relationship. We still spend a lot of time with each other; however, we make time for our friends, family, and others. Furthermore, when something bothers either one of us, we communicate with one another.

It wasn’t until I read *Habits of the Heart* that I fully understood the importance of communication. Now that the semester is almost over, I realize that I have continued to alienate myself from my mother. I always thought that by not talking to each other, our problems would just go away; however, I know now that in the long run it will only make our relationship worse. It is through communicating with one another that our relationship will slowly get better and be able to withstand minor arguments. Along with communication, my time away from home has been beneficial.

Last night, December 9th, I called my mom and we talked for over an hour. I told her about college life, about this paper, about what I was thinking, about how I was feeling, and about how I came to realize that I had been wrong about our relationship all these years. Furthermore, that with more communication, understanding, time, and patience with one another, our relationship will grow to become one enriched with both love and respect. We had spent an hour on the phone, not arguing over insignificant things and not trying to make the other one mad. We actually had a real conversation and when it was time for both of us to go, we said, “I love you.”

REFERENCES

- Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (1996). *Habits of the Heart: Individu-*

alism and Commitment in American Life.
Los Angeles: University of California
Press.

Knoblauch, C. H. (1990). "Literacy and the Politics of Education," in Andrea A. Lunsford, Helene Moglen, and James Slevin, eds., *The Right to Literacy*, New York: Modern Language Association.

Walton, John (1993). *Sociology and Critical Inquiry: The Work, Tradition, and Purpose.* Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Films:

"Affluenza," [videorecording] / producers, John de Graaf, Vivia Boe; writer, John de Graaf; a co-production of KCTS Television and Oregon Public Broadcasting. Published: Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, c1997. Description: 1 videocassette (56 min.); sd., col. with b&w sequences; 1/2 in. + 1 teacher's guide (36 p.; 20 cm.). Issued also in classroom version (29/27 min.). VHS.

"Good Will Hunting," Starring: Robin Williams, Matt Damon, et al. Director: Gus Van Sant. Studio: Miramax Home Entertainment. Theatrical Release Date: December 5, 1997. Video Release Date: January 11, 2000, 126 minutes, ASIN: 6304938756.

"Patch Adams," Starring: Robin Williams, et al., Director: Tom Shadyac. Studio: Universal Studios. Theatrical Release Date: December 25, 1998. Video Release Date: December 26, 2001, 120 minutes, ASIN: B0000214F2.

"Powder," Starring: Mary Steenburgen, Sean Patrick Flanery, et al. Director: Victor Salva. Studio: Hollywood Pictures. Theatrical Release Date: October 27, 1995, Video Release Date: July 29, 1997, 111 minutes, ASIN: 6304011431.

"Voices," [videorecording] / writers/co-producers, Joy Kadolph Aden ... [et al.]; directed by Michael Ellis; produced by the Office of Instructional Services, Colorado State University. Published: Ft. Collins, CO: The Office, c1991. Description: 1 videocassette (35 min.); sd., col.; 1/2 in. + 1 discussion guide. Participants from diverse cultural backgrounds discuss how their self images developed, how they are perceived in our society, and how self image and image of others combine to impact relationships. Trains and teaches about intercultural relationships. VHS.