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O Captain My Captain

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O Captain My Captain

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"One of my earliest memories involving empathy occurred when I was in seventh grade. Our English teacher had required us to read the book *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, about a group of British schoolboys trapped on a desert island together. I found the story to be deeply disturbing. The character of Jack, the cruel young boy who figures out the various weaknesses of his fellow castaways and takes advantage of them, was especially memorable. His was a kind of negative empathy – the ability to “get inside” others in order to find out their fears, and thereby gain control over them by threatening them with this knowledge."

The following was written as part of my current Philosophy 199 Research Writing course on Medical Humanities and Morality. One of the topics the students and I have discussed all semester is how one might be able to become more empathetic and understanding of other people's life situations through the use of literature, film, television programs and other such media. Personal narratives are another important way to gain empathetic knowledge.

O Captain My Captain

Tim Madigan

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.
- Walt Whitman, 1865

One of my earliest memories involving empathy occurred when I was in seventh grade. Our English teacher had required us to read the book *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, about a group of British schoolboys trapped on a desert island together. I found the story to be deeply disturbing. The character of Jack, the cruel young boy who figures out the various weaknesses of his fellow castaways and takes advantage of them, was

especially memorable. His was a kind of negative empathy – the ability to “get inside” others in order to find out their fears, and thereby gain control over them by threatening them with this knowledge.

All of the students in my class were children I had known since Kindergarten, with the exception of a transfer student who had just entered the school. Her name, I recall, was Dorothea, and it is clear to me now – as it wasn’t then – that that she must have had some sort of learning disability, and was perhaps mildly retarded. Many students in the class quickly started to make fun of her because of her difference. I am sorry to say that I joined in, partly due to my own feeling of “superiority” but also due to my desire to fit in, and not have the class turn against me as well for siding with her.

I can well remember the day when our English teacher (who seemed ancient to me at the time, although she must have been in her early 20s at best!) asked each of us what our favorite television program was. Most of us chose *All in the Family*, which was at that time the number one rated show, and noted for its sophisticated wit, something I’m sure none of us really understood (and it’s likely none of us actually watched it – we just knew it was the cool thing to say we most enjoyed). Dorothea, however, answered *Captain Kangaroo*. No doubt, unlike the rest of us, she was sincere in her choice. Immediately there was a burst of nasty laughter from the class. How could someone in the seventh grade still watch a *children’s* program? I led the catcalls, and probably added a few choice witticisms of my own to point out even more strongly how ridiculous Dorothea was. Much to our surprise, she burst into tears and ran out of the room. Our teacher ran after her, leaving the rest of us abandoned in our shock.

Shortly thereafter the teacher returned, alone, and chastised us for our cruelty. In particular, she singled me out and said, in a way that only I could really understand (since most of the other students hadn't really read the novel or been moved by it) "You are just like Jack." That hurt me more than I could say, as I had discussed with her in private the fact that the character of Jack had so disturbed me. I felt she was being unfair – I was by no means the cruelest child in the class, and I actually didn't really feel the deep revulsion towards Dorothea that others had expressed. In fact, in my own way I had felt sympathy for her, although I had never let her know this.

Dorothea left the school shortly thereafter, and I dare say she was soon forgotten by just about all the students. I myself have long since forgotten the name of that teacher, but I'll always be grateful to her for the lesson she taught me. She respected me enough to hit me where it hurt – she knew how upset I had been by the character Jack, and by comparing me to him she made me realize that I too possessed the power to hurt a vulnerable person, and that I had been willing to use that power to my own advantage. On innumerable occasions when my quick wit has raised a cruel comment in my mind, I've thought of Dorothea and that moment long ago, and allowed the comment to die unuttered. I still regret causing Dorothea to break into tears, but the lesson I learned long ago has become a permanent part of me.

Tim Madigan is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Classical Studies.