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A Discovery of Humanity by Contemporary Writers

What is the purpose of storytelling? Besides keeping a reader entertained, besides preserving a historical account or sharing the knowledge... What is the goal of putting your thoughts onto paper?

My background is somewhat untraditional for the purpose of exploring the role of a contemporary author. I was growing up in post-Soviet Russia - a country that was insatiably rediscovering its own culture and its place in this world again. At school my literature curriculum was vast - it even included some Scandinavian, English folk and Greek mythology. Books by Victor Hugo were very important, because it was a French school, but my childhood favorites were the books by Astrid Lindgren, adventure novels by Robert Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling and Jules Verne. The boundaries of my knowledge of the western literature were set by Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Conan Doyle, Alexander Dumas and later more contemporary authors, such as George Orwell, Charles Bukowski, Hunter Thompson and Philip K. Dick. Most impactful to me, however, were the Russian classics: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Gogol, Chekhov, Mayakovsky. Perhaps my favourite twentieth century author amongst them still is Bulgakov.

Through centuries these authors were telling me their stories, fictional or real, and speaking to me, Learn from us. This is what happened. This is the world as we saw it. This is the world we dared to imagine. I kept wondering, how would they describe our contemporary world? This year I had an opportunity to familiarize myself with some of the outstanding authors of our contemporary time from United States and all over the world. This essay is my attempt to evaluate their voice, their message, and their legacy.

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I come from a country that was broken twice by its own population within recent one hundred years. I grew up knowing that freedom exists somewhere, that it tastes differently, that it

must be universal, and that perhaps one day I will be able to experience it. Due to my young age I had little knowledge that freedom does not mean the same for everyone, and that often the freedom of one means the suppression of others. When I first came to US, I immediately witnessed the hints of segregation. It was here implicitly, not frequently spoken of and swept under the rug. There were areas that I, as a white, was not recommended to visit. There were news in the media about theft, shootings, blacks-versus-police riots. I faced the unbreakable black and white stereotypes, which an educated majority from both sides were equally ashamed of. It soon became obvious that centuries of slavery left a cultural imprint on America so grave that it probably will take generations to completely eradicate the consequences. This legacy encompasses everyone, even those who had nothing to do with slavery. Like a raging illness deep inside, the sad historical memory randomly surfaces in a sudden spike of anger and violence.

In *Between the World and Me*, through the description of various episodes of his path to adolescence, Ta-Nehisi Coates raises the subjects of personal security, violence, education, cultural and racial issues while living in contemporary United States as as African-American. Coates' language is concise and efficient, thanks to his background as a journalist, yet intimate. The book is in fact a letter addressed to his son, as sincere as if it was immediately sealed and sent to him directly.

The tragedy of racism in America is that history cannot be erased and rewritten. What struck me most in this chapter was author's internal conflict. Even in the world where slavery and segregation were never experienced at large, as Coates recalls his life in France, he still could not shake off the old habits of Baltimore. The weight of the struggle of prior generations seems nearly impossible to shake off. Earlier in the book he explains to his son: "Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you." (p. 62) Coates illustrates it with an episode of an internal aggression accumulated in him resulting in a clash with a woman on NYC subway that nearly led to his arrest.

While others can afford the luxury of chasing their American Dream, others struggle to obtain a basic security of their own body. I found interesting how the word "body" in *Between the World and Me* becomes synonymous with the word "self." Coates underlines the preciousness and the natural beauty of the body. He emphasizes the obtained security of his own

body, the only real possession, a prism of a primal instinct through which his world and the "white world" are divided. Furthermore, it is a metaphor of the importance of black body, as the most valued "asset" at the foundation of the building of American nation.

Yet Coates's message to his son is, although he cannot save him from the brutalities of our times, the world outside the circle of violence does exist. And this world isn't either white or black. That I felt, was amongst the main motives of Coates' letter, beautifully described in *Chapter II,* where Coates predicts a future to his son different from his own.

> Your route will be different. It must be. You knew things at eleven that I did not know when I was twenty-five. When I was eleven my highest priority was the simple security of my body. My life was the immediate negotiation of violence—within my house and without. But already you have expectations, I see that in you. Survival and safety are not enough. Your hopes—your dreams, if you will—leave me with an array of warring emotions. I am so very proud of you—your openness, your ambition, your aggression, your intelligence. My job, in the little time we have left together, is to match that intelligence with wisdom. Part of that wisdom is understanding what you were given—a city where gay bars are unremarkable, a soccer team on which half the players speak some other language. What I am saying is that it does not all belong to you, that the beauty in you is not strictly yours and is largely the result of enjoying an abnormal amount of security in your black body. (p. 109)

Coates' letter to his son is a bridge between the two worlds and two generations. Coates shows us the source - where the anger, the aggression and even the defiant street looks come from. He wants his son to not to take his own security for granted, to use it wisely, because the previous generations fought for it hard. Most importantly, Coates is optimistic in his message, as any other parent is, towards the future of his son: the next generation ought to be a little wiser.

Another essay on racism, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time,* is inseparable from the historical context in which it was written. America was on fire in the early sixties. It was the time of a direct action against the status quo, including racial issues that were tearing the country apart. Civil rights movement fought to end racial discrimination once and for all. Amongst the themes of *The Fire Next Time* is the perspective of religious faith. Baldwin explores religion in America, himself in the religion, as well as the philosophical and political discoveries that followed. Having started as a heritage from the previous generation, his religious path eventually led him to a downfall of his existential "dungeon," as he calls it.

The book opens up with a letter to a James' young nephew, where he explains what it means to be born black in contemporary America. The letter is full of anger towards the "white world;" it predicts its reckoning; it relays the words of caution with somewhat revengeful tone. The letter closes with menacing words "We cannot be free until they are free..." The letter is not very pleasant to read. I believe, however, Baldwin included it on purpose. I think the letter represents the voice of an older generation; the kind of preachment young Baldwin might have once heard himself from his father. It is also the initial step of his internal evolution.

Baldwin moves on to the subject of Christianity. The essay opens up with the memories of his childhood and his path to Christianity in a joyful and naive way, as pure as the faith of a child can be. As he gets older he begins to question his beliefs, even though James does not fully understand nor does he want to accept them. This creates an internal conflict, followed by an external one, as author depicts his relationship with his religious father. The climax of this chapter is a confrontation with his father that followed young James inviting his Jewish friend to his house. The father is angered by James' closeness with a Jewish boy and hits him, which James recognized as not an exemplary act of a Christian.

Thus Baldwin draws an analogy to the hypocrisy of faith. He finds no salvation in it, and its teachings he cannot follow. Baldwin believes they are made up to put a curtain around one's eyes used to reduce unruly population into obedience and humility. Similar ideas were later expanded by Martin Luther King Jr. in his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, but this time Baldwin writes:

> It happened, as things do, imperceptibly, in many ways at once. I date it -- the slow crumbling of my faith, the pulverization of my fortress -- from the time, about a year after I had begun to preach, when I began to read again. I justified this desire by the fact that I was still in school, and I began, fatally, with Dostoevski. By this time, I was in a high school that was predominantly Jewish. This meant that I was surrounded by people who were, by definition, beyond any hope of salvation, who laughed at the tracts and leaflets I brought to school, and who pointed out that the Gospels had been written long after the death of Christ. This might not have been so distressing if it had not forced me to read the tracts and leaflets myself, for they were indeed, unless one believed their message already, impossible to believe. I remember feeling dimly that there was a kind of blackmail in it. People, I felt, ought to love the Lord because they loved Him, and not because they were afraid of going to Hell. (p. 16)

Baldwin uses powerful but contradicting imagery: a crumbling fortress, something ancient deteriorating, to illustrate the fragility of something that is perceived as very sturdy. In

his personal account there's an implicit contrast - young James apparently valued reading more than preaching. The fatal irony here is that in many Dostoevsky's works the subject was the sinful, wicked, destructive side of a man. Once Baldwin commited a sin of questioning his own faith he appears to have obtained the religious freedom.

He turns to his relationship with Elijah Muhammad and the proponents of Nation of Islam. Excited and impressed at first, he soon realizes that their movement is a political and ideological one, rather than spiritual. They draw a bold line between the white and the black world, and it cannot be crossed. Black Americans in Islam demand their own separate nation, and they have to win it from the whites. Putting this agenda under a thoughtful analysis (and actually discussing it with members of Nation of Islam) James comes to the realization that it is a rather unsustainable and idealistic plan, one he cannot identify with: "People always seem to band together in accordance to a principle that has nothing to do with love, a principle that releases them from personal responsibility." (p. 31). Unable to find the primary "black doctrine" in both religious and political agenda Baldwin opens up a myriad of existential questions:

> Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. (p. 34)

There's a lot of food for thought that Baldwin uncovers in just a few paragraphs near the end of *The Fire Next Time*. What is life without faith? What to believe in? Does faith inevitably leads to conflict and war? Do people (of any color) actually want to be equal? What is power? What do we consider a civilization? What is the path forward African-Americans should take to be the force to be reckoned with? Is Western world really that civilized as we want to think it is?

Unable to find the answers in the religion or politics, Baldwin hopes that a critical mass of conscious people "wakes up" to the same realization. The status quo then is to be shaken. His belief in the strength of "American Negro" and the love towards the people of America is endless. The future is neither black or white; it's something new, a clear new path in a wake of a new nation under humanistic values, he concludes: "We, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation -- if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women." (p. 39)

On a last note, *Between the World and Me* and *The Fire Next Time* explore the subject of racism in the contemporary America fifty years apart. Both Coates and Baldwin are the children

of their own time. While Baldwin's passionately argues whether we'll have a black president within next 40 years, Coates' voice is softer; he worries about day-to-day security and the role of the "hood" in his own upbringing. He talks about the modern status quo he's unable to change and only mourns his lost college friend. But in many other ways Baldwin and Coates are not that far from each other. Both agree on the role of black Americans in the building of the American dream. Black Americans deserve to reach for the American dream like men and women of any race. Like many of their contemporaries, both Coates and Baldwin believe in America without segregation. In Coates' America the segregation subdued, but not everyone was awakened as Baldwin hoped them to be. This is sad in a way, because it shows how short of a distance we really covered.

A powerful book named *The Fire This Time*, a series of essays and publications compiled and edited by Jesmyn Ward, is a tragic echo to Baldwin's work. Ward believes America took a leap forward in the seventies, but then rolled back tremendously.

One of the essays that stands out is *The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning* by Claudia Rankine. Rankine is a strong proponent of Black Lives Matter movement. Her essay discusses the established "normality" of brutality towards blacks. Originally published in the New York Times, the article contains a very graphic language; this excerpt is perhaps amongst the most "moderate." Although these events did not happen simultaneously, Rankine puts them in the same row in a single sentence, like a museum display, showcasing abuse and violence towards blacks throughout the American (both old and recent) history.

> We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here. Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police, or warehoused in prisons: Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained, or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against. When blacks become overwhelmed by our culture's disorder and protest (ultimately to our own detriment, because protest gives the police justification to militarize, as they did in Ferguson), the wrongheaded question that is asked is, What kind of savages are we? Rather than, What kind of country do we live in? (p. 31)

Similar to Coates, Rankine often uses the term "black body" as a symbol. Unlike Coates, though, Rankine's "black body" appears as an expression used in a newspaper heading, essentially meaning a "corpse." Rankine sets the "gore threshold" bar so high on purpose: she

has to get through to the reader and surpass the contemporary "normal background noise" of death coverage in the media. Rankine sees her mission is to show what really happens in the country right now. Her voice is addressed directly at the reader. Her text is also a call to action, but her voice is much stronger and hits much "closer to home" than Baldwin's. America cannot be a united nation as long as these events keep happening.

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Many Russian classics, such as Pushkin and Tolstoy, saw their ideal of the Russian national dream in a devotion to the service for the country. Others, such as Gogol and Griboedov, criticised the hypocrisy of these ideals. The government officials at service and the nobility alike lived a luxurious life, while the country people dragged their miserable existence, without having the slightest chance to change their lives. Furthermore, the Russian Revolution created a nation on idealistic socialist principles, which in fact was built on terror and oppression, depriving its people of even the basic rights.

The hypocrisy of the American dream is similar in a way that while it was widely accessible for the white Americans, the entire black population was left behind for centuries. Even more so, considering the fact that the wealth of the American nation was built on the backs of their dead and tortured black bodies.

Multitude of American authors took a stab at the American Dream uncovering this great lie behind it. The satire in F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic *The Great Gatsby* is aimed at the hollowness and accessibility of the American dream. Fitzgerald uses detailed imagery in his narrative so masterfully, that *The Great Gatsby* can be regarded as a chronicle of the 1920s. In almost every sentence really, Fitzgerald captures intonations, settings, and behaviors of the times, as seen through the eyes of the main protagonist Nick Carraway.

Fitzgerald mocks the shallow pursuit for pleasures and possessions by the nouveaux riches in the changing post-war United States, while underlining the hypocritical nature of their society. I think a great metaphor to this is a conversation that Nick Carraway has with one of the visitors, who is genuinely surprised that the books in Gatsby's library are not a butaforie, but are real books that have pages. In their various chats the main characters casually discuss their superiority, even the supremacy of their race. In reality however, every character in the novel has

a rotten core: almost every married person in the novel has a romance on the side; friendship, integrity, and fidelity are non-existent, as none of the Gatsby's friends attends his funeral. Even Gatsby's wealth, as we learn, is built on illegal bootlegging activities.

Nick seeks his own path to the American dream. He seems to be able to find it in the opulence and pleasures of the East, which he encounters plenty at the Gatsby's house. However, Gatsby's real background is not revealed immediately. Fitzgerald exposes it step by step, allowing the reader to discover it along with Nick. We soon learn that Gatsby's character is covered by the fluff of tasteless exciting cliches, representing what society expects a successful man to be. The mystification and admiration in the first half of the book are followed by the truth and disillusionment revealed later in the novel, i.e. we learn that Gatsby's evident wealth has criminal roots, nor his education is what is believed to be. Towards the end we're provided with a glimpse into Gatsby's past - his teen-age diary with a daily schedule seemingly aimed at self-improving. After his death, this sheet of paper only serves a reminder how his pure boyhood endeavours were shattered by the pursuit of the American dream.

Fitzgerald resolves the narrative as a closed composition. Losing faith in the Eastern way of life, Nick returns to his home in Wisconsin, where the cherished family values are still present:

> When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again. That's my Middle West—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name. (p. 189)

The Great Gatsby echoes with generations of other works of social satire, especially those exploring the substance and the tragedy of seeking a national or societal ideal, from both American (such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) and Russian classics (most notably works by Nikolai Gogol such as *The Nose* and *Dead Souls* and Alexander Griboedov *Woe from Wit*). A contemporary to *The Great Gatsby* novel *Heart of a Dog* by Mikhail Bulgakov

explores unattainability of the communist ideals in a satiric way, similar to how Fitzgerald mocks the destructive consumerism, as interpreted by many of his contemporaries. The accessibility, distortion and misunderstanding of the idea of a contemporary success and a following inevitable destruction of the soul are also explored, albeit at a more extreme level, in more recent *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, *99 Francs* by Frédéric Beigbeder and mirrored in a twenty-first century *Soulless: The Story a Fake Man* by Sergey Minaev.

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To a large extent the twentieth-century world, its empires, the wars and conflicts, the outpace-them-all mentality of the American Dream are the legacy of the era of colonialism, in which the ideas of domination and supremacy and took their roots. King Leopold's quest for Congo was among the last colonial undertakings of the twentieth century. Steamboat colonialism was accompanied by immense atrocities towards the native population. The price the locals paid for their encounter with the westerners was worse than enslavement. Locals were used as a dispensable workforce; many of them died or were dismembered at local construction sites, mines, farms, and quarries; others were plain killed in minor conflicts with colonists.

The destructive effect of colonialism is the main subject of the *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. The industrial revolution gifted an advancement so great that at the end of the 1800s many European countries could establish their dominance in the region without firing a single shot. Seemingly seeking commercial opportunities, their goals were followed by a military intervention. Of course, in Kenya the odds of a battle were obvious as the African tribal warriors, carrying bows and arrows, faced the artillery and the steamboats of the British.

Back in London, imperial colonisation was often perceived a noble cause, as if westerners were bringing prosperity, civilization, and enlightenment to the unknowing savages. Public arrogance was fueled by the press that glorified colonial "marches" through the "lesser" continents that promised new trade opportunities for their homeland. In many cases, the royally-appointed gentry was carrying the noble mission. Casualties and other bloody atrocities were underestimated or even kept secret, in tone with the stature of royal trustees.

Reality could not be further from that. The lack of a slightest tangible resistance and the absolute power corrupted the souls of everyone involved. Unabridged dominance effectively

caused the local administrative staff to develop a god complex. The locals were only regarded as savages, inferior to European colonialists. An awe of natives of the European technology, more than anything else, was regarded as an act of worship. This sort of relationship with the natives is present in abundance in Conrad's narrative. In fact, the novel was strongly criticized by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe for depicting local Africans as uncultured savages. I think, however, that Conrad only reflects voices and opinions of his contemporaries about the matter.

Conrad's "dark continent" is dark not because of the skin of its inhabitants, but because of the darkness of the soul Africa unbinded in his fellow Europeans. Conrad uses similar character device as Fitzgerald did in *The Great Gatsby*. In the character of Kurtz, a British trader, Conrad puts a metaphor to an entire history of British colonialism. First surrounded by gossips and legends, Kurtz's true nature is disclosed later in the book, as the narrator describes his devilish and ghostly appearance - an absolute corruption. Kurtz's station mirrors the horrors of the African colonization: enslaved natives in chains and collars; disfigured workers; fence of poles topped with their severed heads… And just like the press did, after Kurtz's death, the narrator finds it easier to hide the truth from Kurtz' wife about the life her husband was living in Africa. Conrad describes the miserable fall of Kurtz as an allegory of the decay of colonialism:

> A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart. Oh, he struggled! he struggled! The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now—images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously round his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression. My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas— these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments. Both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power. (p. 114)

Heart of Darkness is a rough manifest to the dying colonial dream of dominating the world.

A different angle on the post-colonial world is exposed in *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver - a thought-provoking book with a unique narrative style. Central to the novel is a tragic story of a family of an American missionary settling in Belgian Congo during its last remaining years prior to its independence. Kingsolver conveys the story from four daughters' individual viewpoints, each with their individual style and a unique worldview. It's interesting

how Kingsolver tied the fictional part of the novel to the Bible. Not only it reflects the religious worldview of the family, *Genesis* and *Exodus* provide us with a deeper understanding of the characters' inner motivation and their relation to the events that happened to them. Biblical analogies also expand the boundaries of the novel, enabling readers to formulate their own relation to the events in the book.

Similar to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the *Heart of Darkness*, one of the main subjects of this novel is a vast cultural incompatibility between the Western world and the African continent. While *Things Fall Apart* is narrated from the point of view of local people, *The Poisonwood Bible* describes Africa from an outsider's perspective. Through different eyes, both books discover the complexity of local culture with a similar amount of detail, and both reach the same goal in portraying the tragedy of destructive colonialism. The cultural complexity and distance are conveyed through many struggles the family faces while adapting to African life, where nothing seems to go the way they expect. However, where the narrator in *Heart of Darkness* sees Africa as a strictly hostile environment, Kingsolver's female characters, for the most part, find room for a compromise or, at very least, some understanding. They recognize the complexity of the problems they're facing, thus exposing other themes of the novel, such as traditionalism and resistance to change.

These themes are reflected in the conflict between the father, Nathan, and nearly every female member of the family. Nathan's character appears static. He hardly underwent any evolution, completely devoting his life to the missionary duties and attempts to control the village. The mother, Orleanna and her four daughters, however, had displayed a significant amount of agility. Adaptation and repentance were the essence of Leah's transformation. Her path is a metaphor of the post-colonial society. Initially Leah shows a great deal of loyalty towards her father, but in the end realizes his extremely limited point of view and does her very best to adapt to the life in Kilanga village, to fix her relationship with the local people, and to deal with all the complexity of their culture. Other daughters, Rachel and Adah, also make their peace, albeit in a more tragic way, with the life on the continent. In these characters, Kingsolver not only contrasts the monumental masculine traditionalism with the feminine vitality and, almost sacrificial, flexibility. This clash denotes the difference between the old world and the new world, cracked in middle of the twentieth century.

In the final chapter, Kingsolver draws the picture of a mother and her daughters finding their way through the woods, similar to a pack of animals, but the forest is now different.

> The village of Kilanga! Years ago, there was an American mission there. But no, the woman says. There is no such village. The road doesn't go past Bulungu. There is only a very thick jungle there, where the men go to make charcoal. She is quite sure. There has never been any village on the road past Bulungu. Having said all that needs to be said, the woman closes her eyes to rest. The others understand they must walk away. Walk away from this woman and the force of her will, but remember her as they move on toward other places. (p. 143)

This passage appears towards the end of the book when the family visits the place they lived in fifteen years ago as part of American mission in Congo, where the main events of the book took place. However, this time they are unable to locate it. Kingsolver manages to establish a surrealistic mood in the final chapter using a third-person perspective and indirect speech in the present tense - an interpretation of a dream-like, movie-like narrative. She conveys the speech from both sides while maintaining the voice of a passive witness, not being able to participate in a conversation. Such powerful, one-sided dialog structure underlines the spiritual strength of the woman, as well as the surreal feeling of this encounter. The village and the stories that happened here are now a distant memory, long-forgotten - or, perhaps, needed to be forgotten, as if they never existed.

From the Opium Wars in Asia to the European Scramble for Africa, the white world dealt enough damage to the rest of the Earth's population, which became undoubtedly clear in the post-colonial world. Kingsolver's forest is an allegory of the naturalist philosophy, where everything, the birth and the death, the people and the earth, are connected in a natural and perfect way. Kingsolver believes that some things are better to let be in their natural cycle of life.

The questions that *The Heart of Darkness* and *Poisonwood Bible* are raising are crucial to the humanity. What is considered civilized? Is it solely our perception, as the civilization that was blessed to reap the rewards of an industrial revolution in their full capacity? Our development gave us strength, but we are still weak. Insatiable are our childish pride and arrogance. Given the slightest advantage, how easy it is for us to fall into the trap of a primal feeling of supremacy? I think that Conrad, Kingsolver and many of their contemporaries wanted to believe that, as humans, we are capable of bigger desires. They managed to exhibit the "savageness" of colonialism and the immorality of the primal ways in the modern world so that hopefully we could learn from what have happened.

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As I mentioned earlier, most distinguished writers are often the voice and the conscience of their generation. These authors use their talent or storytelling to ignite the hearts and the minds of their contemporaries and generations to come. But their satire, their wit and their world views are not always welcome. Their talent can both be their gift and their curse. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* provides us with a glimpse into a writer's mind. The book depicts Joyce's own boyhood experiences, as well as an inner reflection of his metaphysical and physical being, that formed his literature talent.

One of the main features of the book is how Joyce masterfully uses the language itself to convey Stephen's inner world. The first chapter opens up with a plain childish vocabulary and is filled with all kinds of poems and playful songs that kids normally come up with. Stephen is portrayed as a sensitive and artistic boy, as he starts playing with words and harmonies using his imagination. The language and the vocabulary of the book evolves as the character ages. As Stephen enters the school, the narrative switches to a depiction of various conversations and encounters, interspersed with studies. Later in the book Stephen's experiences become more and more religious, as he devotes himself to god, following his family trails. As Stephen matures further, the language becomes more complex, profound, and rich. The narrative is open ended: the final chapter appears to be the beginning of a diary of an artist.

Although Joyce is using a third-person narrative, he manages to portrait a sensitive personality and detailed inner workings of Stephen's mind. Central to the story is Stephen's inner conflict and his misunderstanding with the society. He soon finds that his way of life and his inner philosophy are incompatible with the external world. This paradox drains the soul out of Stephen. By depicting this inner struggle, Joyce sets the scene for one the major themes of the book - obtaining identity and artistic consciousness through transformation.

I believe Stephen experience mirrors author's own creative path. According to Joyce, creativity stems from the struggle one has to overcome in search for inner harmony with self. Initially the protagonist is torn apart by a variety of attachments. A strong family bond ends up dragging Stephen down, until he is completely disillusioned with his father, who is unable to support the family and ends up drinking and reliving the past. Eventually Stephen leaves his

family behind. Stephen's strong faith brings him to an existential paradox, as he is unable to live by dogmatic Christian principles, torn apart by the sexual desires of the youth, every occurrence of which brings him an emotional pain. Only by breaking the bonds of faith he becomes able to appreciate the natural beauty. Finally, disillusioned in, what he believes is, the submissive nature of the Irish, Stephen obtains a political freedom and a strong belief in Irish independence and Irish identity. After encompassing this entire scope of transformations, Stephen enters his adulthood as a complete personality. The climax of the book in which the inner suffering and misunderstanding that Stephen leaves behind is contrasted with newly obtained inner freedom, beautifully depicts the moment of this transformation:

> Where was his boyhood now? Where was the soul that had hung back from her destiny, to brood alone upon the shame of her wounds and in her house of squalor and subterfuge to queen it in faded cerements and in wreaths that withered at the touch? Or where was he? He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the sea-harvest of shells and tangle and veiled grey sunlight and gayclad lightclad figures of children and girls and voices childish and girlish in the air. (Chapter 4, Section 3)

It appears that for Joyce the path to the truth lies through inner struggle and suffering. This theme resonated with me as it reminded me one of my favourite poems *Prophet* by Pushkin (1828), a beautiful declaration of his artistic mission:

> Tormented by a spiritual thirst,
> I stumbled through a gloomy waste,
> And there a six-winged seraph
> Appeared before me at the crossroad.
> With touch as light as slumber,
> He laid his fingers on my eyes,
> Which opened wide in prophecy
> Just as a startled eagle's might.
> Upon my ears his touch then fell,
> And they were filled with noise and clangs:
> I heard the heavens shift on high,
> The whispering of angels' wings,
> Sea monsters moving in the deep,
> The growing grapevines in the vales.
> And then he bent down towards my mouth,
> My sinful tongue he ripped right out-
> Its slander and its idle lies-
> And with his bloody hand inserted

Between my still and lifeless lips
A cunning serpent's forked tongue.
And with his sword he cleaved my breast
Removed my shaking heart,
And then he seized a blazing coal,
And placed it in my gaping breast.
Corpse-like I lay upon the sand
And then God's voice called out to me:
"Arise, O Prophet, watch and hark,
Fulfill all my commands:
Go forth now over land and sea,
And with your word ignite men's hearts.

Unlike Pushkin who used the references of biblical revelation, Joyce portraits an analogy to the legend of Daedalus' breaking the bonds of gravity, as an inspiration to Stephen's path. Joyce appears to disclaim Daedalus' downfall, however, as he ends the story open with an optimistic note. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was based on one of Joyce's earliest essays, which he completed in his early twenties. In some sense, it is not surprising that he expects a great artistic future for Stephen. Joyce cherishes his delicate perception and young artistic identity and hopes it works out for the best. Compared to the other authors we've looked at so far, who were seeking national or global identities and ideals, Joyce's attention is directed inwards at the role of an artist in the community.

* * *

I grew up in a country that was seeking its long lost roots. Unable to reconstruct them from the shards of what remained of the domestic culture, my nation started to look elsewhere. We suddenly found ourselves in the highly globalized world and for nearly ten years my contemporaries were blindly following the western idea of succeeding in life that can be described as "get rich fast against all odds." Luckily, my parents were good enough to make me understand that the hard work and education will inevitably pay off. But by looking at my troubled fellow countrymen uncovering some questionable and superficial traits, I soon realized I was a minority. To this day I keep asking myself if any of these glamorous images beaming at us from the satellite television and Hollywood DVDs were really applicable to us?

Perhaps the novel that impressed me most was *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia by* Mohsin Hamid as many of the events depicted in it rhymed very close with my experience of growing up in the post-Soviet Russia. The novel however delivers more than that. It offers the reader a unique opportunity - to live someone else's life for a brief moment. The delightful narrative is disguised as a self-help book. Every chapter briefly opens up with a set of business-coaching clichés, as if the book promised a life-changing revelation, but the author quickly transforms it into a story of a life of an unnamed character. Hamid maintains an ironic tone of a "how-to" book by addressing the reader directly in the second person as "you." The main character is in fact also "you." The purpose of this unique storytelling device is explained later in the book. Hamid believes that the writer and the reader are bound by an agreement: the writer will make up an imaginative life story and the reader will attempt to "live" it to his best ability.

Underneath the cover is the story of a struggle of an unnamed protagonist to become a successful entrepreneur in an unfriendly local environment, where he faces numerous obstacles such as poverty, bribery and corruption. Hamid tricks the reader to measure his success by the western standards, and by these standards these successes appear modest at most. The author thus explores familiar subjects of achieving the West-imposed idea of success in other countries, as well as the incompatibility of western traditions with what is hypocritically called the developing world.

Every word in the title of the book contains a hard irony. The author mocks a hypocritical modern term "rising" which often stands for poor and undeveloped economy - exactly the one in which "you" are destined to operate (the backdrop of the story is an unnamed country, presumably in the South Asia). Becoming "filthy rich" is also a stretch, as you in fact go bankrupt at the end. Finally, in no means it is a "how-to" story as it's a truly unique path that hardly resembles a straight shot for success, nor does it contain any real instructions to follow.

The onset of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* seems similar to the story of Jay Gatsby. But where Fitzgerald's character operates in a familiar and forgiving surroundings, the rise of Hamid's hero occurs in an unfriendly environment, even though it is his homeland. The protagonist and the characters around initially seek to distinguish themselves from the rest of the country, to create new riches, to build a new world. Or as one of the characters describes it: "it'll be like you've entered another country. Another continent. Like you've gone to Europe. Or North America." (p. 152) They eventually fail facing the odds; others learn to adopt or to look

elsewhere. In that sense, the outcome of the narrative is closer to Kingsolver and Coates, who believe in the organic, unemposed, native way, as opposed to abstract Western or "globalized" ideals of success. Hamid too believes in the different values. He thinks of Asia where people are not measured by the size of their bank account, artifacts of success or media glory.

Besides masterfully embracing the flimsiness of the imposed ideals in this unnamed country, Hamid also explores (and dares the reader to explore) the subjects of manhood and the importance of pure humanistic values which possess a very strong emotional charge. We closely witness many critical milestones of a man's life: his first love, closeness with a family, mother's death, relationship with a son, imminence of old age and death etc. In tone of a self-help book, Hamid briefly describes these moments, yet leaves room for reader's own interpretation - a purpose which is not disclosed until the very last chapter.

> We are all refugees from our childhoods. And so we turn, among other things, to stories. To write a story, to read a story, is to be a refugee from the state of refugees. Writers and readers seek a solution to the problem that time passes, that those who have gone are gone and those who will go, which is to say every one of us, will go. For there was a moment when anything was possible. And there will be a moment when nothing is possible. But in between we can create. (p. 199)

Ultimately, at the edge of the imaginary life the reader ought to distinguish missed opportunities from true lifelong regrets, just as the protagonist of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia,* albeit in a feeble age, was able to reunite with the love of his life, which leads to a graceful, like a feather, ending.

Hamid manages to depict a life story that is both beautifully tragic and complete. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* encompasses audacity, dream, love, the opportunities of youth and the infirmity of old age. The banality of getting "filthy rich" is shadowed by the majesty of the experiences that constitute the human life itself, invoking the dearest feelings from the very core of the reader's heart, signifying something indescribably important, something very human, cosmic and universal.

* * *

Amongst most unnatural ways of oppression that still exist in the modern world is gender discrimination. While the western world was relatively successful in eradicating at least the most

blatant manifestations of women oppression during the twentieth century, there are still places in the world where women are deprived of the most basic rights. As we've seen in previous examples, such oppression goes hand-in-hand with brutal religious traditionalism. Many writers and journalists use most powerful storytelling tools to draw the public attention to this problem. Amongst controversial ones is *The Patience Stone* by Atiq Rahimi.

Rahimi depicts a story of despair in war-torn Afghanistan. The story is set in a hideout house where a nameless woman is trapped with her immobile and unconscious husband. The author's main poetic instrument in the novel is sound, as Rahimi carefully measures every breath taken, every distant sound of gunfire, and every movement in the house.

> Her breathing becomes more and more rough. Panting. Short. Heavy.
> A cry.
> Moans.
> Once again, silence.
> Once again, stillness.
> Just breathing.
> Slow.
> And steady.
> A few breaths later.
> A stifled sigh suddenly interrupts this silence. (p. 117)

Rahimi manages to portrait a very still, claustrophobic atmosphere filled with fear, solitude and secrecy. There is very little that is left from "hearth and home" and the centerpiece of the house became a motionless man. The story unravels in a form of a monologue, as the unnamed wife starts to reveal her most kept secrets to her comatised husband, as she is convinced he cannot hear her, hense cannot react. Rahimi uncovers a profound emotional and romantic inner world of a woman, often resorting to an erotic imagery.

The unnamed heroine can be characterized as erratic and sometimes even irritating, exposing a deeply emotional person within. Her mood swings from grief to anger, as she starts to ponder the relationship with her husband, and the ways she was mistreated in their marriage. Her inner desires soon materialize in her tragically fated relationship with a local young man, although she is still "chained" to her husband. As the story progresses, she finds in her motionless husband both her curse and the sacred stone that absorbs all her secrets, possessing almost a religious meaning, -- a dark reality of the situation of the Afghani women that is best described by Rahimi near the cathartic ending of the novel.

> She rushes at the man, radiant, as if she holds the truth in her hands and is giving it to him. "Yes, my sang-e saboor… do you know the ninety-ninth, which is to say the last name of God? It's Al-Sabur, the Patient! Look at you; you are God. You exist, and do not move. You hear, and do not speak. You see, and cannot be seen! Like God, you are patient, immobile. And I am your messenger! Your prophet! I am your voice! Your gaze! Your hands! I reveal you! Al-Sabur!" She draws the green curtain completely aside. And in a single movement turns around, flings her arms wide as if addressing an audience, and cries, "Behold the Revelation, Al-Sabur!" Her hand designates the man, her man with the vacant gaze, looking out into the void. (p. 122)

The ending of *The Patience Stone* is somewhat open-ended, allowing the reader to interpret it in opposed ways, either as a liberation or as a manifest of a deeply rooted source of oppression. Rahimi's work puts into the focus a cultural and mental capacity for the feminism itself. How different, how sad is the role of this unnamed woman compared to the protagonists of *The Poisonwood Bible*, where Kingsolver heroines were able to embrace the change, to be the change. How distant is *The Patience Stone* from the flappers of *The Great Gatsby*, where Daisy was able to fiddle with marriage and personal preferences -- a relationship that is simply unfeasible in deeply religious societies, which are much more common in the world than one would imagine.

In contrast to *The Patience Stone*, a semi biographical novel *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, narrated in first-person by Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi, portraits a personal experience of embracing the womanhood, rising above societal bonds and pursuing a dream of becoming a physician. Although El Saadawi is allegedly the protagonist of the story based on her personal account, the context in which the story occurs is the real subject of the book. The author uses fragments of experiences during her own upbringing, her relationship with her parents, her pursuit of education, her encounters with male and female patients. These fragments are laid down as the main driving force uncovering the history of women in Egypt.

Memoirs of a Woman Doctor is an inspiring triumph of feminism and rationalism over a fulminating patriarchal orthodox society - an outstanding achievement considering the background. Most of the narrative is set in the nineteen-fifties. El Saadawi's heroine breaks stereotypical molds one by one, until eventually she finds the truth in science and in her own judgement.

> Science proved to me that women were like men and men like animals. A woman had a heart, a nervous system and a brain exactly like a man's, and an animal had a heart, a

> nervous system and a brain exactly like a human being's. There were no essential differences between them! A woman contained a man inside her and a man concealed a woman in his depths. A woman had male organs, some apparent and some hidden, and a man had female hormones in his blood. Human beings had truncated tails in the form of a few little vertebrae at the base of their spinal columns; and animals shed tears. I was delighted by this new world which placed men, women and the animals side by side, and by science which seemed a mighty, just and omniscient god; so I placed my trust in it and embraced its teachings. (291-297)

El Saadawi portraits a bright life full of passion for her female protagonist, foregrounded against the grim cultural backdrop. In a world where women are practically unable to leave the house without permission, she succeeds to disobey and live on her own. In a society where women are subdued by their families and husbands to a state of domestic servants she manages to find her true love and passion. In a country that is following strict religious laws she finds her salvation in the verity of science and sets herself up for a long-lasting and fulfilling career.

The *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* reminded me of a similar semi-biographical storybook of my favourite Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov. It even has a strikingly similar title - *A Young Doctor's Notebook*. During the climax of the Russian revolution of 1917, Bulgakov's medical practice led him to a small remote village, where he observed and recorded his numerous encounters with local folk, completely unaware of the revolution and the turmoils bursting in urban areas. Bulgakov was a known metropolite, and amongst his main discoveries was the still, traditional, illiterate, and in many cases barbarous rural ways of life of the local populace, against which he felt helpless. His dormitory and the library were his only beam of light in the darkness of the rural Russia. Similarly, the education was the beacon that led the main protagonist through her hardships in the *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor*. Amongst the main messages of the novel is the essential importance of educated, enlightened, rational worldview. Unlike the devout, erratic, and irrational heroine portrayed in *The Patience Stone*, Saadawi's character rises above her fate. These two books are similar in their setting but serve different purposes. If *The Patience Stone* emphasises the absurdity of fundamentalism by portraying a hopeless, needless sacrifice, the *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* is meant to inspire women across the world to pursue their dream.

* * *

Storytelling helps us to see the world from different perspectives, sometimes by using most surreal and extreme “brush strokes” that help highlight the idea. Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* is a story about a man who one morning woke up in a form of an insect. This simple premise yields nonetheless a thought-provoking novel, mainly due to its symbolism and numerous allegories which leave lot of room for interpretation.

Although metamorphosis is usually associated with a continuous and gradual transformation, Kafka puts his main character Gregor into his new shape starting right with the first sentence: "One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin." (Chapter I) Gregor's sudden transformation may seem irrational to the reader and hard-to-adjust for the protagonist himself, yet to the rest of the world, which is mainly limited to Gregor's family and co-workers, it seems rational enough to keep Gregor at home. Despite this nightmarish occurrence, everyone, including Gregor himself, continue (or rather try to) follow the normal rules of life. A satirical, pronouncedly serious tone of the narrative underlines this absurd situation and highlights the feeling of distance, helplessness and isolation, as Gregor's new appearance starts to drive the family away from him.

> One side of his body lifted itself, he lay at an angle in the doorway, one flank scraped on the white door and was painfully injured, leaving vile brown flecks on it, soon he was stuck fast and would not have been able to move at all by himself, the little legs along one side hung quivering in the air while those on the other side were pressed painfully against the ground. Then his father gave him a hefty shove from behind which released him from where he was held and sent him flying, and heavily bleeding, deep into his room. The door was slammed shut with the stick, then, finally, all was quiet. (Chapter I)

Kafka uses a very detailed depiction of all the intricacies of Gregor’s attempts to move, underlining the awkwardness and a disgust of his insect appearance. An accurate description of his position against the furniture and the walls establishes a very claustrophobic feeling. This reminds the reader how quickly Gregor’s world diminished to the size of the room. Kafka pays uses a lot words like “pain,” “body,” “bleeding” - and on the other side of the spectrum “rest,” “quiet,” “sleep.” It seems that Gregor is restless, constantly seeking peace and quiet; he is succumbing to his own estrangement imposed by the members of the family.

Hence the actual metamorphosis is not the change in Gregor's physical appearance, but the change in his relationship with the other members of the household. The psychological aspect of a sudden transformation is well-paced in the narrative. At first, Gregor's change allows him to look at his world with the "new eyes," literally. It also causes him to re-evaluate his own values

and achievements as well as his place in the society and at work, where he rapidly feels unwelcome. Exhausted by short scampers around the house and burst of restfulness he longs for peace and quiet in a secluded setting of his own room where he can only listen to the sounds outside. As he observes his family, he realises his dysfunctional existence became a burden. Gregor is surprised how quickly the family deteriorated without him providing anymore causes him a great deal of depression. Further along, the family seems to stop considering Gregor a member of a family, until finally they are relieved to get rid of him.

I will not go deeper into well-known Kafkaesque analysis of the relationship of Gregor with his father and his sister Grete, or Kafka's own perception of being "different" from his family (something perhaps any individual felt at some point of their life). What Kafka seems to be focusing on in *Metamorphosis* are the subjects of ostracism and neglect, a relationship between a "tagged" individual and the society. Perhaps, Kafka witnessed an emerging nationalism of the early twentieth century including the exposed tragic inability of civilisations to peacefully coexist, which echoes with the works on racism and colonialism we've looked at earlier in *The Fire Next Time, The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Heart of Darkness*. Just like the hero of *Between The World And Me*, the majority of Gregor's thoughts become more and more focused to the well-being of his body, sleep and rest, until his world reduces to the size of the room. Or perhaps, Kafka has put a hyperbolized vision of his own isolation into the portrait of Gregor. His solitude, his attempts to find a new place in the society, and a self-imposed depression are similar to the struggle of Stephen Daedalus in Joyce's novel, the path of the protagonist in Mohsin Hamid's book, and that of El Saadawi's heroine doctor as well in her Memoirs of a Female Doctor.

The transformation of Grete as well as the tragedy of a family becoming a hostage of a complicated illness has some similarities to the story of an unnamed woman in *The Patience Stone*. Grete is the only one who initially attempts to take care of Gregor, and despite his inability to talk to her, there is a mutual bond between them. As the sense of immobility and helplessness fills the household, she realises she cannot carry on much longer and eventually abandons him and thus becomes free.

Kafka's ideas of surreal transformation and the absurd satire were further expanded by many authors of the time, including one of my favorites, Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog* (1925). There Bulgakov used the metamorphosis of a dog turning into a man as an allegory to the

ambiguous attempts of a Soviet regime to radically transform human society. The purpose of a dog-man Sharikov is to mock these ideas and to irritate the reader. Kafka's purpose is different. Using surreal story of Gregor, he provided us with a first-person account of what it feels like to be neglected, estranged, and hated.

* * *

In my opinion, the countermeasures to oppression, racism, sexism and ignorance are, simply enough, education, open-minded world view, fair dedication to your craft, and a humanitarian unity. Perhaps New York is one of the finest examples, the essence of such "togetherness." New York is both globally unique and uniquely global. It is rightfully called "the melting pot" of our highly globalised multicultural world, a place where cultures and civilisations clash, collide, mix and melt together. My journey brought me here, onto the island of Manhattan, and eventually behind the walls of New York University. As an immigrant and a New Yorker, I too shared some of the city's hardships and triumphs which form the image of its average dweller.

The book about New York that caught my eye was *Forever* by Pete Hamill, mostly because of a combination in Hamill's background that included both journalism and fiction. With that in mind, *Forever* blends fantasy with the real history of the city. The narrative takes place on familiar streets of Manhattan. Besides that, I personally tend to connect with the books where an ordinary character is set to act in unusual or fantastic circumstances, such as a gift of eternal life given to the protagonist of *Forever*, Irish immigrant Cormac O'Connor.

Most of the action of *Forever* takes place in an exclusively diverse setting of the eighteenth-century New York. From there, Pete Hamill takes us on an epic journey through centuries along with Cormac who witnesses the events that shaped American history, such as a slave revolt, war of independence, the Civil War etc. Throughout the narrative, Cormac interacts with various groups of people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds, such as Irish immigrants, British colonists, local entrepreneurs, African slaves, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, to name just a few. Perhaps such diversity allows Connor, just as probably many other New Yorkers, to rise above the cultural differences and stereotypes, to rise above nations even, to believe only in themselves, their own mission and their own craft; as Hamill describes Cormac,

“He did not exactly think of himself as an American, but he was definitely a New Yorker. That meant that he embraced the city’s culture of work…” (p. 404)

Cormac is given a gift of eternal life, by an enslaved African shaman Kongo, so that Cormac can complete the mission of avenging the death of his parents. He is cursed to live forever only if he never leaves Manhattan and only if he "truly lives" his life, not just exists. This condition is used by the author to place the hero into a variety of historical events that took place in New York not only as a witness but as a participant. Careful attention to retrospective is understandable since Hamill, in his own words, believes that the past is inseparable from the present. New York was formed by an "alloy" of people from possibly every country in the world, an alloy "which is stronger than any individual metal by itself." This alloy formed the city and defined its character. It is the strength of this alloy that allowed New York to recover so quickly from the catastrophe of World Trade Centre attacks - and cataclysms alike.

In that sense, New York is as much a character as any other human character of the book. Its evolution defines its strength. Uncouth, shaped by chaos and greed in its beginnings, New York eventually becomes a "grown-up" metropolis that nonetheless keeps its rough charm underneath. New York can be portrayed as a grim, dirty city, but never such is the spirit of its inhabitants. Through hardship and struggle, New Yorkers rise and live up to their real capabilities, develop a core that forces to unleash a true inner power and a very special embrace-the-world mentality. This core is perhaps the greatest gift New York gives to its inhabitants, something I certainly can relate to, and something that will remain with me forever. No matter where my destiny takes me, I will always be a New Yorker.

* * *

Good storytelling enriches our lives. It makes us think different; it gives us a perspective; it transforms our language and our thoughts for better. After exploring these authors, I came to believe that most successful writers seek even a higher role of being the judge of human destinies. Through the centuries authors were the observers of their nation, its conscience, its last and only remaining voice, when there is nothing else left of it. I believe that the choir of these authors could become a “message in the bottle” from our contemporary world we consider globalized, or a warning to the generations that follow. There’s no one-size-fits-all dogma, no

uniform culture; it only dehumanizes us. We're connected in delicate ways, and we're unique. In order to survive as a human race we have to achieve a higher moral development in line with our tremendous technological and scientific advances. There should be no room for hate, prejudice, no arrogance, no tolerance for ignorance and selfish pride. The greatest writers and publicists of all times called out these human sins using nothing but the power of a written word. If we expect to live in a unified world in these turbulent times it is time we listen to what they have to say. Then finally we can recognize a human in ourselves and in others.

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