

The Life You Save May Be Your Own

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When I worked as a Jesuit in my early years at Santa Clara University, I published an essay entitled “A *Ratio Studiorum* for the Postcolonialist’s Classroom.” I asserted that Ignatius, founder of that religious order, “saw education as a tool for social change, not merely as an opportunity for a value-free and objective exposure to Truth. . . . Education, much like the religious retreat described in his *Spiritual Exercises*, was to bring about a *metanoia*, a change of heart, in students.”¹ This internal development was then meant to motivate action in the world. As I continued, “if there is some historical truth in the charge that Jesuit schools in the past produced clever casuists who invested little of themselves in their arguments, it is clear in today’s multicultural world, a world of conflicting hermeneutic structures, that making debating points will not equip a graduate for *anyone’s* reality.”²

It was no surprise to me, therefore, that the first Jesuit Pope would proclaim something quite similar in his 2024 letter on the role of literature in formation, noting “the affinity between priest and poet.”³ No doubt influenced by Ignatius’s recommendation of a “composition of place” as the precursor for meditation, Francis recommends that one “immerse oneself in the living text in front of us, rather than to fixate on ideas and critical comments.”⁴ In other words, he recommends an adventure, a choice to enter an unfamiliar room, or to imagine a familiar room through someone else’s eyes, and in that process see—and interpret—it as something new. In such an analysis, reading is not a retreat; it is a more thoroughly observant engagement with the world.

The consequent encounter with other cultures over the centuries has freed the Church, according to the Pope, “from the temptation to a blinkered, fundamentalist self-referentiality that would consider a particular cultural-historical ‘grammar’ as capable of expressing the entire richness and depth of the Gospel.”⁵ We are each inescapably products of our age and experiences, it is true, but literature offers an instrument to seemingly pierce the membrane of self-referentiality and to actually imagine an *other’s* window onto reality. Quoting C. S. Lewis, Francis underscores that in reading literature, “I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see...I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”⁶ From his point of view, though, self-referentiality plagues the contemporary human condition.

Echoing T. S. Eliot, the Pope suggests that today's religious crisis is "a widespread emotional incapacity."⁷ Psychologists today have become quite alert to this incapacity, inventing tests such as the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), and Wong and Law's Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS). Pursuing this line of reasoning, Francis concludes that "the problem for faith today is not primarily that of believing more or believing less with regard to particular doctrines. Rather, it is the inability of so many of our contemporaries to be profoundly moved in the face of God, his creation and other human beings. . . . [necessitating a healing of contemporary] responsiveness."⁸

A similar analysis has been discussed in the secular media as "compassion fatigue" or vicarious traumatization. This is not simply a case of becoming numb to the pain of others; it is rather an exhaustion from constant exposure to suffering, leading then to a gradual (and perhaps implicitly self-defensive) inability to cope. On the other hand, in the Foreword to *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman famously contrasts an Orwellian society with that analyzed by Huxley:

What [George] Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What [Aldous] Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture. . . . In [Orwell's] 1984, Huxley added, "people are controlled by inflicting pain. In [Huxley's] *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure."⁹

So-called compassion fatigue, while certainly as familiar as the recurring need for sleep, can be, like sleep, either a symptom of healing or of illness.

If one spends most of the day working with people who are suffering, one's ego might instinctively snap back on occasion to recharge, or the work cannot continue the next day. On the other hand, seeking somewhat desperately to have fun (or, in a variation, accumulate stuff) seems juvenile, if not self-defeating. But prominent voices in America approach the latter with various degrees of righteous anger, ranging from Ayn Rand to Elon Musk to Joel Osteen. Ayn Rand, for example, laments:

the word “selfishness” is a synonym of evil; the image it conjures is of a murderous brute who tramples over piles of corpses to achieve his own ends . . . and pursues nothing but the gratification of the mindless whims of any immediate moment. Yet the exact meaning and dictionary definition of the word “selfishness” is: *concern with one’s own interests*.¹⁰

Her argument for “rational egoism” has the ring of honesty and even humility, for some. Proponents of the “Prosperity Gospel,” from Osteen to Creflo Dollar to Joyce Meyer, draw very large crowds of individuals who consider themselves Christians and seem to think that this religion is much the same thing as capitalism. Pity about all those poor people around Jesus; odd that he got so bent out of shape over those money changers.

In mid-July of 2025, Jennifer Szalai summarized what apparently has become a trend: the description of empathy as not just a bad thing, but a threat. Musk might consider it debilitating, in fact—and thus, the chainsaw must be wielded against USAID, etc.¹¹ “*Vae victis*,” as Tennyson wrote during the Industrial Revolution in Britain. “Nature, red in tooth and claw” must cull the breed, to strengthen it. Empathy be damned; succeeding generations will thank this one for a eugenics driven by AI. Bring it on.

And yet, somewhat oddly, Sara Konrath reports that “there’s lots of research showing that empathy has a genetic component, about half of empathy that a baby is born with is a genetic component.”¹² Even during Darwin’s time, Peter Kropotkin (in *Mutual Aid*) argued that cooperation is actually a positive component of evolutionary advance—it’s not all dog-eat-dog. Survival of the fittest is not just blood-thirsty competition. Konrath speaks of “mirror neurons,” which light up in imitation of actions they see someone else performing; in other words, “there’s this inherent physiological connection between people.”¹³ Her studies reaffirm the principle that reading fiction helps to increase empathy, as does the practice of interacting with and nurturing animals or vulnerable children, “because just the practice of interacting with another being who can’t really just tell us in words what they’re feeling, or what they need. . . helps us to tune in, and to imagine, and to respond.”¹⁴ She underscores that these examples suggest that the Other can be very different from oneself (and one thinks of the many anti-heroic narrators in contemporary media, e.g. *Dexter*). Her studies also found that “individualistic countries were more likely to be low in empathy.”¹⁵ Higher empathy countries “had higher rates of volunteering and helping strangers, but it wasn’t related to charitable giving”—thus, once again, the effects of actually interacting with another.¹⁶ Finally, her studies surprisingly found that “higher empathy countries had higher temperatures

on average. They were warmer.”¹⁷ A corollary finding was that narcissism is on the rise and, counterintuitively perhaps and depressingly so, “people are online who they are offline.”¹⁸

On that note, we might return to the Ignatian concept of the composition of place. One is encouraged to employ all the senses to put oneself imaginatively in the scriptural setting, quieting the world around one long enough to enter into silence and be somewhere else, communing with a transcendent. But this silence is never seen as an end in itself, but as a prelude to deeper engagement in the world in which one is living. This is what Ignatius means by finding God in all things. Building on this approach, Pope Francis offers the timely consolation that literature can stimulate “a great spiritual openness of hearing the Voice that speaks through many voices.”¹⁹

¹ Karen Fitts and Alan W. France, eds, *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 255–65, at 256.

² Fitts and France, *Left Margins*, 265.

³ Pope Francis, “Letter of His Holiness on the Role of Literature in Formation,” The Holy See, July 17, 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240717-lettera-ruolo-letteratura-formazione.html>, section 44.

⁴ Francis, “Letter,” section 20.

⁵ Francis, “Letter,” section 10.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 89; Francis, “Letter,” section 18.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 30.

⁸ Francis, “Letter,” section 22.

⁹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985), xvii.

¹⁰ Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York, NY: Signet, 1964), ix.

¹¹ Jennifer Szalai, “How Empathy Became a Threat,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/18/books/review/empathy-paul-bloom-joe-rigney-hannah-arendt-allie-beth-stuckey.html>.

¹² Sara Konrath, “Speaking of Psychology: The Decline of Empathy and the Rise of Narcissism,” American Psychological Association, APA.org, December 2019, <https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/empathy-narcissism>.

¹³ Konrath, “Speaking of Psychology.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Francis, “Letter,” section 41.