

Coda: what is in it for me?

It is a fair question, one you may well be wondering. Why have I written this book—what is in it for me? You might surmise a dozen motivations, anything from opportunism to sermonising. All I can do to keep your trust in the integrity of this project is to describe the fundamental drive that led me to it. While the context of the book's origins are detailed in the first two chapters, there is assuredly a perspective on the human condition that brought me to that context . . . that nudged me out onto the limb of public scrutiny.

Naturally, who we are is a culmination of everything we have experienced in our lifetimes. But there are times when we are going about our daily routines when we will encounter something quite distinct—an image, an idea, an experience—and though its significance it not at once identifiable, it settles and finds root just below the level of consciousness. It then keeps tapping us on the shoulder, demanding attention. In my own experience, all long before I'd even heard of Hezbollah, there were three such encounters that have defined my perspective. In order of increasing relevance to this current project, then, are those encounters.

Long ago, when reading a philosophical treatise by Michel de Montaigne, I came across an astute observation that I promptly underlined in the text.¹ Written over four hundred years earlier, the words read in their original French:

«Qu'il ne lui demande pas seulement compte des mots de sa leçon, mais du sens et de la substance, et qu'il juge du profit qu'il aura fait, non par le témoignage de sa mémoire, mais de sa vie.»

My own translation into English: “We should not ask of a student only the words of an educational lesson, but their sense and substance; we should judge the profit the lesson will have made not by the testimony of his memory, but of his life.”

I recognised in this sentiment my own reasoning that our efforts should somehow add up to more than having accomplished them. To view life as a checklist seemed to trivialise its potential at the least. Montaigne's words validated this notion in such a straightforward way. Our effect endures long after the spectacle of our individual selves has faded.

The second encounter that reinforced my perspective was also a passage I read. Several years after having read Montaigne and a host of other works in philosophy, literature and history, I came across the speech written in 1950 by American novelist William Faulkner in acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature. It was his challenge to the writer that captured my attention—that confirmed our responsibility to discover and to define some potential contribution to a life beyond the checklist.

For context, his reference to the “end of man” stems from the then prevailing American paranoia over alleged Communist and atomic bomb threats. He stated:

“I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal because he will endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help

¹ [Michel de Montaigne, *Essais—Livre premier*, \(1572\), chapitre XXVI](#)

man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.”²

These compelling words called to mind the third and last encounter—one that had occurred years before my reading Faulkner—that I offer in answer to the question of why I have written this book, the question of what is in it for me. I have written the book simply because it would be impossible not to write it.

There are some stories you never forget. One day over thirty years ago, my teacher told the class a story of a woman named Kitty Genovese, who was attacked in 1964 near her New York apartment.³ Her screams were heard by neighbours. At least 38 of them later admitted they had seen and/or heard her 35-minute struggle. Yet no one had come to the woman's aid. The one and only call to the police was too late: the woman, repeatedly stabbed, had bled to death. This was the story that was told to illustrate what is termed the “bystander effect” in psychology. In the presumption that someone else will take action, we excuse ourselves for doing nothing. We stand by, idle.

Although the precise details of the Genovese crime were quite possibly sensationalised for media impact, the phenomenon of the inactive bystander remains factual. That she might have been saved had someone cared enough to speak up was a haunting notion. “If only. . .” is a hard idea to live with.

The images of Lebanon under attack in July 2006 screamed that the rampage against the Lebanese people was simply wrong. I could not walk away and pretend I had not noticed. And I could not just silence the screams in order to forget. I needed to fathom how and why. The more I learned, the more I knew that it was time to meet William Faulkner's challenge. Merely to record the tragedies of that rampage would not suffice. The cause of these tragedies was the greater crime. In July 2006 it was humanity itself that screamed, and it is humanity that deserves to prevail.

² [William Faulkner's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1950.](#)

³ [“38 Citizens Did Nothing As Killer Stalked, Stabbed Woman,” *Lewiston Morning Tribune*, 28 March 1964.](#)