

“Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion and the beginning of morality.”
-Ian McEwan

Essays give us a record of someone else’s consciousness, and successful essayists inspire a sense of empathy in their readers.

Acquiring Empathy through Essays

By William Bradley

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I have several friends and relatives with whom I sometimes argue on social media. These are all decent people—loving parents, devoted spouses, supportive friends – but I suspect that many of them think I’m the most ridiculous bleeding heart they have ever met. I have been told more than once that my frequent Facebook or Twitter links to articles and opinion pieces concerned with issues like online misogyny, marriage equality, and racial profiling suggest that I’m obsessed with toeing a politically correct line in order to advertise my own sensitivity and enlightenment. I am, after all, a white heterosexual man. These aren’t my battles, so why do I seem to take these issues so personally? The glib answer—and the one I employ most often when people ask—is “decency,” but lately I have been wondering how and why my own sense of empathy has developed the way it has. The answer, I think, is related to my interest in essays.

I know, I know. I’ve probably lost you. Everyone hates essays. Those five-paragraph compositions we were forced to write in school with topics like “How I Spent My Summer Vacation” or “What Flag Day Means to Me.” And truthfully, I never had much use for them myself when I was younger (in high school, after reading *A Tale of Two Cities*, we were assigned to write an essay chronicling our own “last words” a la Sydney Carton’s “It’s a far, far better thing...”—I wrote a narrative about mowing the lawn, then burned the bottom of the last page to make it look like I had spontaneously combusted). Essays, we have been raised to believe, are dull, punishing things to read and to write.

It wasn’t until college that I learned to love the essay. Not those five-paragraph yawn-inducers, but the truly great personal essays by the likes of Michele de Montaigne, William Hazlitt, and Virginia Woolf. Of course I never had the experience of serving in Her Majesty’s Indian Imperial Police, but reading George Orwell’s experiences in his essays “Shooting an Elephant” and “A Hanging” gave me some idea of what doing so was like, and why imperialism is such a terrible

thing. I'll never be a young woman falling in and out of love with New York City in the middle of the twentieth century, but I have some idea of what such a young woman went through as a result of reading Joan Didion's "Goodbye to All That."

It's impossible for us to live the lives of others, of course, but essays give us a record of someone else's consciousness—the act of reading these essays and interacting with these minds on the page is the closest thing we have to telepathy in the real world. Part of the reason why I care so much about issues pertaining to racial justice is that reading James Baldwin's experiences and thoughts in "Notes of a Native Son" and "Stranger in the Village" made the issue vividly real. These issues were personal for Baldwin, and thus became personal for me as a result of reading Baldwin. It's likewise impossible to believe in homophobic caricatures of gay men's predatory sexuality after reading an account of growing up gay as sensitive and affecting as Bernard Cooper's "A Clack of Tiny Sparks." The idea that women who have abortions are by nature selfish or unreflective is belied by essays like Debra Marquart's "Some Things About That Day." Similarly, unlike some of my liberal humanist friends, I know from reading David Griffith's reflections on his Catholic faith in his essay collection *A Good War is Hard to Find* or Patrick Madden's discussions on his own Mormon faith in his collection *Quotidiana* that there is nothing inherently reactionary or intolerant about subscribing to a religious faith.

Successful essayists inspire a sense of empathy in their readers. We may not necessarily agree with the essayist, or even find her likeable, but we at least come to understand her thoughts and point-of-view in a deep and significant way; thus, we come to understand other people in general in a deep and significant way. Those who seemed foreign or "other" to us become familiar, as recognizable as our own reflections in the mirror. And the manufactured divisions perpetuated by pundits and politicians—black and white, red state and blue state, us and them—are revealed as the simple-minded fictions that they are. Of course, reading literature in general has a similar effect—careful readers usually end up examining their own lives after reading Leo Tolstoy's story "The Death of Ivan Ilych" or Tess Gallagher's poem "The Hug"—but what I like about essays is the way they immediately connect us to other people who have really lived in this world. A careless reader can cast aside Tolstoy's story as "merely made-up," but no one can deny that E.B. White really existed, and really contemplated time and mortality on the trip he described in his essay "Once More to the Lake."

I'm not naïve. I'm not trying to argue that we'd live in a utopia if everyone read essays. But I do think we'd be better off if we heeded the essayist's reminder that we can find common ground with other people, if we look hard enough. Michele de Montaigne, the 16th century writer and philosopher who gave this form its name, observed that "Every man has within himself the entirety of the human

condition.” Read an essay by the likes of Ira Sukrungruang, Eula Biss, Gayle Pemberton, or Jill Talbott every day or two, and you’ll find that idea easy to remember. If you’re anything like me, you might wind up becoming a more patient and compassionate person as a result.

William Bradley's work has appeared in a variety of magazines and journals including The Missouri Review, Creative Nonfiction, The Chronicle of Higher Education, and College English. Three of his essays have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and one, "The Bald and the Beautiful," was listed as a "Notable Essay of 2005" in that year's Best American Essays anthology. He lives in New York's North Country, where he teaches at St. Lawrence University and has recently finished revising his own essay collection. [Read his list of favorite print and online sources for essays.](#)