

## On Identity Politics

To come here and discover that ... in actual fact we weren't wanted, has been a very shattering blow.

—Michael X, BBC interview, 1970

GIVE IT TIME—a little sprinkle of time—and everything that ever was will pass into its perfect opposite: lives go out, purposes fade, the sane go mad, what once charmed will irritate. Entangled inside the intuitive kitten-paw hierarchies that entangle our children (little bruises in elementary school and literally brutalizing by middle school), the “identity-characteristics” I had stumbled into so unthinkingly as a newborn in the delivery room, eager to have a go at life, would by the middle years of my adolescence crystalize into something of a discovery, harden into something of an enclosure. “It won’t *play*,” I can still hear Margo Channing’s voice declaring conclusively from the other side of the room, rejecting out of hand another character’s suggestion that they all call it a night in *All About Eve*, and no other sentence better captures how my body and mannerisms and habits of speech fared for me as I carried them out into the world as a child, and offered up my identity to others—: *none of it played*.

Of course “hierarchy” is at the center of this, is the locomotive of this story, but there are a few quick points of interest we must stop at along the way. The first is disfigurement. In all narcissistic societies when a human being becomes disfigured enough, they become non-entities as they pass through the world, invited to attach by no one. Imagine a number line. A state of perfect indifference to another being’s existence (the images that come to mind now are of a camera

zoomed in on a couple having an argument as the extras mill about in the background, or else a journalist late to a meeting hurrying past a homeless woman) might be thought of as the neutral zero along an x-axis that extends all the way to the right as “putting the other being first,” “putting the other being’s needs before your needs,” “putting the other being’s good fate before your good fate,” ripening all the way into love.

Indifference is the absence of love, and dehumanization is love’s inverse. What we have to remember here is that a little bit of self-interest will accompany us through our whole entire journey across this number line—the self-interest that we were all born with, by virtue of the fact that our experience of being alive is segregated from everyone else’s.

To follow this x-axis all the way to the left would be to pass through indifference first, the neutral zero, where self-interest naturally wins out against the background actors who we walk past on our way to an important meeting, or else the seven billion people who we in America tend to remember only as abstractions (“In this photo essay from Reuters, photographers capture ‘playgrounds’ built among landfills and junkyards, and children swimming in polluted...”), and who we love in name only. Physical distance is one way that a human being can become disfigured, literally impossible to see, but it is not the only way. A second category of disfigurement might be traced back to how an individual in question has “chosen to live his or her life”—my father, for instance, will be forever disfigured in my eyes for how he treated my mother when I was a child. Features of the world as diverse as imprisonment, religious excommunication, political polarization, and the bumper sticker “*Fairness isn’t giving my money to lazy people*” can all be traced back to this second category.

And a third category of disfigurement can be traced back to how we were born.

The central feature of every narcissistic society is hierarchy. In a hypothetical animal society in which every last herring is undifferentiable from any other herring, every last

herring is protected with undifferentiated urgency by every other herring as a matter of due course—all the dignity a herring will ever need in the eyes of another herring ripens into full fruition the moment it is born.

It's quite the opposite here on land.

Hierarchy gets its teeth into us early in America, starting with the way young children intuitively gravitate toward certain identity-characteristics (certain faces and voices and body-types, all passed through the norms of gender—this is the stuff of Disney doe eyes) and magnifying exponentially during our teenage years before reaching an orgiastic pitch in young adulthood, during which the reflexive separation of all other human beings into “*aspirational*” and “*not quite aspirational*” on the basis of a grab bag of identity-characteristics, both physical and non-physical (this is how we come to admire certain strangers and public figures—never forget: our feelings about the superiority of others are entangled inside our feelings about the inferiority of others), becomes at once a mode of life and a source of ever-present malaise. Segregation—cultural, racial, ideological, and above all to keep the disfigured and bad-fated as far away as possible from the sun-kissed—settles across the land.

From the lowly individual these preferences naturally reproduce themselves into the country at large over the course of generations, reinforced by tribalism, and mediated by intertribal power advantages that stretch out for centuries—traceable back to the bloodiest succession of dice rolls in the history of the world. Into this flame-colored hellscape children of all races, genders, physical abilities, and identity-characteristics are born, and well—it's been a fucking doozy, hasn't it? For some of us a sense of the world's openness to us accompanies us wherever we go, the number line lurches toward love and attachment as a matter of routine, beginning with the smiles and high fives that attach to us as children and deepening into the recognition that we can enter into whatever commercial establishments or civic arrangements we want to as adults, we can live where we want to live, we can work where

we want to work, we can play how we want to play. Our experience of being alive is identified with freedom.

And for others of us?

The world of other people is a logjam of rejections and suspicions—doors that close for us the moment we step off the bus, branching footpaths that bloom into dead ends, the number line stagnates at neutral zero wherever we go, dipping toward dehumanization as a matter of routine—only our families and pure-hearted strangers take any notice of us. You'd laugh if I told you the humiliations. There were the discordant notes that sounded whenever I tried to make my way to anyone as a child—the accented English and the awkwardness that makes plain the presence of every social chameleon (all the way into my mid-twenties I thought drinking water out of a glass, as opposed to out of a bowl, was a sign of affluence—I used to make a point of waiting until I had stepped out of the kitchen and into a friend's living room before relieving my thirst, so I could drink my water out of a glass in full view of other people). There was the childhood sexual abuse (a neighbor, a pink-tiled bathroom) that, prevailing views notwithstanding, amounted to little more than a molehill in the alpine terrain of my childhood disfigurements—that I would relive a million times over if it meant I could flatten the surrounding vista.

And then there was the surrounding vista itself.

I am telling you now that so long as your life conditions are not life-threatening, it is not a great effort to exist.

What makes existence a drag is high contrast.

High contrast is everywhere inside this demented topography, it is the smile we give to the luminary and the smile we give to the luminary's doorman, it is our dream-vision of the best-case scenario for our lives and our nightmare renditions of the worst—it is what separates every category of human fate from every other. At the peaks of disfigurement—the images that come to mind now are of children born into cyclical poverty who become the adults we cycle into solitary confinement; the slaves who clean and peel shrimp bound for

Whole Foods and Red Lobster (i.e., “the overseas market”)—the audacities of high contrast begin to take on quasi-comedic undertones. (What comes to mind now is my memory of watching, on a grainy T.V. set at a hospital in Peru, an interview with an American movie star that had as its closest spiritual analogue Woody Allen saying to his psychotherapist on a couch in Manhattan: “*I feel trapped. What I want is more freedom.*” Something about his identity-characteristics just wasn’t doing it for him, had made his experience of life poorer for the wear. I can only imagine the profound haze of confusion and affection and longing that I, too, would have felt had I been born into the global underclass and—to unwind after a long day’s work—put on a Hollywood movie.)

The disorder is general.

With modernity came existential freedom for the great many of us, and inside these growing pains we remember, at both the scale of the world and the scale of America, that *existential freedom didn’t come for all of us*. But as in a mass psychosis, we bury these uneasy suspicions, sublimate the uneasy apprehension that “*none of this was right, none of this was just, and none of this is fair*” into pieces we can digest, into pieces we can do something about, into pieces we can handle. We buy fair-trade coffee. Dreamlessly we return ourselves back to the vigor of daily life, the quiet charms of being alive—we remind ourselves that we, too, have to find our way through this world and bring to mind our own afflictions, call to mind our own memories of being passed over and pushed aside for a whiter face, remember all the ways our own identity-characteristics just haven’t been doing it for us either.

And then, only after our strength is restored, we turn our gaze back to the world outside.

What lingers in the aftermath of catastrophe is not the catastrophe itself, but the soul that its contusions create.

Pure hearts are my great interest here—the figures in human history who stood out to me above all others when I

was a child, the anti-narcissists, the figures who pushed back against a view so prevalent in our modern age, and so favorable to the perpetuation of our meritocracy, that humanity is primarily a self-service experience (“If you’ve got it, flaunt it,” “It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there,” “It’s every man for himself”), lowering the bar for all of us .

In fact the one true privilege of having been raised in the twenty-first century is inheriting a humanity made finer by these pure hearts: a humanity of heroes everywhere, albeit far many more unsung than sung, hidden among and doing the quiet work of counterbalancing the effects of all the many narcissists who, too, have shaped the course of this species.

I want to be clear, now, about what I mean by “narcissist” and “anti-narcissist”—words I rely on only because there are no ideal words for what I am trying to describe.

That existential freedom did not come for all of us creates a duty in all of us who it did come for.

In high school I remember being mesmerized by the quiet work of Harriet Tubman, whose escape from the South marked the beginning of a decade spent traveling thirteen times back into the South to rescue seventy others from genocide, who became the only woman to plan and lead an armed raid into enemy territory during the Civil War, and who during the end of her life devoted almost all of her time and money to maintaining a home for the poor and elderly, despite being poor and elderly herself—I remember emphasizing during a class project on American heroes, without quite understanding why, that *Tubman herself had died in poverty*.

In retrospect I was already beginning to sense, I think, the thrum of anti-narcissism strumming its quiet drumbeat all around me—empathy and compassion for more vulnerable people, people born into the wrong time and place or else people born into the wrong identities, the wrong physical envelopes, people disempowered by all manners of structural humiliation inherited from our narcissistic forefathers who thought only of themselves and their own tribal affiliations,

war and genocide, climate change, systemic abuses of all manners and manifestations. Everyone's life dream back then, like Harriet Tubman's, was to make the world a better place for other people, and we would write about that life dream on our college applications, we would post about it to Tumblr.

I myself had volunteered at a soup kitchen, beaming with pride at how my weekends were spent, unlike my peers, in service to other people. If you had asked me back then how I identified I would have told you with a straight face that I identified as a budding young humanitarian—a moral compass that pointed inexorably due north had by then become intrinsic to my self-definition, and empathy and compassion intrinsic to how I understood my generation (no, they weren't quite where *I* was in terms of moral thoughtfulness, but they were still less morally misguided than all the Strom Thurmonds and Eugene McCarthies that had come before them). "Jesus Christ, you're such a self-important hypocrite—*how can you not see that?*" I would fume to myself late at night, hate-reading a user on Reddit less contemplative than I was just to feel better about how my own moral compass had turned out, on a smartphone whose factory origins I didn't really care about, while popping shrimp into my mouth.

By the time I graduated college, the spirit of Harriet Tubman was everywhere, embraced by all of our country's most vaunted thinkers, the spirit of duty to others and self-sacrifice the unifying element of all our most vaunted cultural institutions—Harvard, *The New York Times*, Hollywood, Silicon Valley, Capitol Hill—and I couldn't wait to climb the meritocracy myself, get in there and make the world a better place. An egalitarian self-presentation would be my little red rocket ship to the top—and I pinned some hint of it to every last internship application, some trace of my moral and social high purpose to every last conversation I ever had. I even plundered my love for Harriet Tubman to vault myself into law school (an actual sentence from my personal statement: "What always moved me the most were not the stories of those

who were deprived of their freedoms and were forced to fight, but those who had their freedoms, and *chose to fight anyway*").

I waltzed right in to Harvard and Yale.

The world was still on fire, yes, but that was only because the meritocracy hadn't finished working its magic yet. Our country was still clogged by narcissists from an earlier time—tribal narcissists, racial narcissists, First World narcissists, people who cared about nothing so deeply as their own self-elevation—the opposite of the spirit of anti-narcissism that all of our finest graduate programs and the masthead of *The New York Times* embodied. We just needed to wait until my classmates who spoke out the loudest about injustice took over the reins—with each passing year, the meritocracy would elevate an ever more pure-hearted subset of us into higher and higher positions of power and influence, making the world an ever more humane place to live for the most voiceless and disempowered among us.

That the meritocracy might not be very good at elevating pure hearts at all—that the people who set the cultural agenda for our country in Brooklyn Heights and DuPont Circle and Los Gatos and Harvard Square might not generally be high-minded free-thinkers with all their ducks in a row, and that any pro-social outcome that dripped down from the meritocrats might simply be the more palatable byproducts of a system that by and large converted the spirit of duty and self-sacrifice into ever more potent strains of narcissism—were thoughts that could only upset me. "*Who the fuck do you think you are? Have you seen my Twitter feed? I've earned my moral stripes with every last ideology I've pushed back against, with every last belief I've held onto.*" In fact my knuckles were raw from how hard I held onto an understanding of myself as a good person—all the clarity I had flowed from this spring.

Moral clarity is an intoxicant, and it can be used to prop up the most defenseless among us—as so many of our foremothers have done—or it can be used to prop up ourselves. That moral clarity only achieves full clarity when this latter function becomes perfectly obscure is an irony

understood by every child the moment his sobs of hunger and his sobs of gluttony are treated differently by an exasperated parent. I myself look back on the life I've lived in a haze, unsure of where inside this thicket of self-flattery and high purpose the pieces actually fall—which palatable effects on the lives of other people dripped down as a result of the love I had for other people, and which dripped down as the milky white byproduct of narcissism.

Because narcissism is every bit as world-shattering as love is—in fact it is a subset of love, it is a love that bonds the self to the self, and the tension between the love we have for others and the love we have for ourselves is made muddled all the time by the mundane ways in which these two loves exist so often in harmony.

In fact these two loves exist mundanely in opposition to each other.

In fact we so routinely cannot have our cake and eat it too that entire civilizations have collapsed under the weight of all our many attempts to try—and inside the pall of climate change, our entire species might too. Narcissism has shattered the world at precisely the fault lines where pure hearts have gone on to mend it. And let me be honest now: of course nothing is more inimical to my heart and soul than the prospect of true duty and self-sacrifice.

Let me be clear now.

Narcissism has given me everything I have.

The original appeal of identity politics is the forever and ever appeal of humanist politics.

“High resolution” and “grace” are what I suppose I'm after here, high resolution and grace in the face of what all reasonable minds can apprehend as a vast and fine-grained disorder. The texture of disempowerment is vast—varying not only between individual to individual within a single identity category but between minute to minute within a single individual life. Identity politics—like its older stepsister class

politics—is an act of *unionization*, a way of essentializing individuals with similar attributes under the common banner of disempowerment, and pooling that disempowerment into moral clarity. Sometimes that attribute is disempowered by definition (my father, for instance, is physically disabled) and sometimes that attribute is disempowered by social and historical circumstance (my father, for instance, is non-white, uneducated, and poor).

But the moral clarity generated by disempowerment tends to incentivize all disempowerment politics—including class politics—toward narrative stasis, toward permanent victimhood, toward a resistance to accommodating precisely the shifts in power dynamics that the politics itself seeks to realize. (Try telling Marie Antoinette on her way to the guillotine that she was overpowered.)

I've seen the powers and freedoms granted to me as I transitioned from childhood to adulthood proliferate over time, in part due to the victories of identity politics, but almost all of it due to the unmitigated failure of class politics to *gain any traction in America*—I *needed* class politics to languish as I was climbing the meritocracy, you see, I *needed* the labor of the underclass to continue to be devalued so that my own purchasing power could continue to exponentialize, I *needed* scarce resources to continue to circulate unevenly throughout humanity so that the existential freedoms I enjoyed could continue to accrue to me without ceiling. (I plant, now, a kiss of gratitude on the forehead of every child who lives in poverty so that I can afford the goods and services your mother and father produced for me. Maybe someday you'll figure out a way to get into Yale, too.)

And inside the low-resolution accounts of disempowerment produced by identity politics my own moral clarity grows and grows—what a fabulous enemy of injustice I've grown into! I just want everyone in the world to have what I have without having anything in the world be taken away from me, I embrace every critique of injustice that stops right at the feet of my own complicity, I puncture an I-shaped hole

into every bomb I lob into the powers that be. After all, there's a wonderful little ceiling to the paths forward suggested by identity politics that the paths forward suggested by class politics can't quite offer—no story I could possibly tell you about the Rorschach pattern of my voting habits can quite fully account for my presence inside the restaurant while people outside the restaurant sleep hungry.

We can all intuit this, and so we choose our paths forward accordingly.

Narcissism, after all, is primarily a disease of the viewfinder. Inside the narrative stasis of my own disempowerment I've found all sorts of ways to have my cake and eat it, too. I go along with the depictions of human misery en vogue with the bourgeoisie, whose good graces mean everything to me, and do my best as a team player to help obfuscate anything inside the contours of disempowerment that might complicate the photograph, or fail to flatter our own superiority. I elevate certain degradations into fires of utmost emergency while keeping certain other degradations unseen, certain surpluses misremembered, certain identity categories insoluble as a matter of routine. And in exchange for my "team-player status," a photograph favorably blurred will still somehow manage to capture every last microhumiliation I've ever received.

An egalitarian politics produced by a narcissistic society will produce some of the blurriest photographs in the world.

The empowerment of the already powerful is best served by low resolution.

The empowerment of the most voiceless and invisible among us is best served by high resolution.

In lieu of high resolution, I double down on my own moral clarity—there I am, a perpetual figure on the backdrop of the right side of history. What each of us have inside us is an ancestry, proud and sprawling like the view from the highest mountain. In the final stage of identity politics: gorgeous new walls are erected over our identity-characteristics, and we are free to invent our lives however we want inside of these

palisades, insulated from the idiosyncrasies of identity that might individualize us a little “too” much for the moral and social high purpose we were all born for—we’ve seen all too clearly what happens to the turncoats and apostates.

Acts of high resolution and acts of grace alike become recast as acts of “apologia”—efforts to excuse power, exempt power, enable power, to offer power the fawning tongue-bath of fan service. In fact “apologia” is distinct from grace—the former springs from a commitment to maintaining one’s own privileges and complicities and proximity to power, while the latter springs from a commitment to human dignity for all. “*Human dignity for all*”—could any thought be so quaint? Could any spirit be more at odds with these strange times we live in than having only the fleeting trace whispers of a good life yourself—and yet devoting those last trace remnants of your well-being and vigor to people who, in the moment you encounter them, have even less than you do?

Yes. In fact, mundanely yes—in fact the spirit I have just described mundanely animates every last homeless American I’ve ever known and befriended on the front porch of my old home in New Haven.

Pure hearts are everywhere in America.

Anti-narcissism is only absent—structurally absent, and for structural reasons—from the cultural institutions that tower over this country. *Do not take at face value the moral clarity we disseminate.* That “existential freedom didn’t come for everyone” is the difficult truth we must all come home to—and how we come home to it will be a moment of private reckoning that will vary from tribe to tribe, culture to culture, and individual to individual. We have seen all too clearly now how the loudest voices in politics, academia, and the national media will come home to it.

I know now what dehumanization is.

It is identical to indifference, it is identical to the neutral zero. Linger at the neutral zero for too long and the moment self-interest intrudes, you’ll be extracting from the bad fates of others all the moral and social and professional capital you can

mine—this is the gravitational pull of narcissism. To look at your own pain but not stall there—to jump immediately from our own pain to the sincere pain of others—is an act of duty and self-sacrifice made difficult all the time by forgetfulness, and made impossible by moral clarity.

And yet inside the clear blue waters of moral clarity I float, underneath the palm fronds, in dark glasses, reading *The New York Times* and sipping from the bad faith of others—entranced by all the bad consciences they seem to carry and all the narcissisms they seem to embody, all the news that's fit to print, all the cake that never ever seems to spoil. Was this life for everyone? No, I do believe it was not. I do believe it was just for people like you, and people like me.

And with the moral clarity of someone who has everything to lose if his betrayals were ever seen clearly,  
I sleep soundly at night.