

Prologue

“So, what do you do?”

The question challenges you to justify your own existence. To lay claim to this air you still breathe. I used to be eager to answer, and to answer proudly. Now I want to strangle the person. Or at least say something like:

“Thanks for asking but I’d rather not get into that right now. The wider world is so much more interesting. Let’s try and keep talking about *it* for a while.”

But I can’t really say that, can I? At least not without sounding like a madman. Even though it’s not really all that crazy or confrontational a thing to say when you think about it. The what-do-you-do question is unavoidable in any decent self-respecting capitalist country. You can never get more than a few sentences out before it gets asked, no matter how deftly you try avoiding it. Inexorably it arrives at you by some relentless law of thermodynamics. So I usually oblige and say, as unassumingly as possible, and with a little foreboding:

“I’m a college professor.”

It’s a portentous phrase. Like conversational crack. Well, maybe not exactly crack. More like conversational cappuccino. Crack would be if I wrote Hollywood screenplays or something. Nevertheless, it’s a bonnet buzzer. And it gets us straight to “Oh? What of? And “Where at?” And “My so-and-so went there!” And “What’s it like?” And, “Kids today. . .” Once that dike is open, it’s virtually impossible to stop the flow and pivot onto something else—to block the torrent of perfunctory

jabber on *me; my* life, *my* likes, *my* dislikes—and then their turn. To simply share a precious moment of disinterested reflection on something. Anything. Besides what you or I happen to want or to feel. But it just won't fly. Those days are done.

What happened? It all seemed to change so fast. Politics, sex, money, and religion were always off limits. But now if you pay close attention, you'll observe that this taboo realm has extended to basically anything that doesn't affect anyone directly. Everything must always be considered from the self-interested point of view. Otherwise, who's going to care? Grow up. Get real.

It's gratifying that I get to work at something interesting. Something others still want to talk about. But the truth is that I don't really matter. At least my story isn't so much about how fun and exciting and daunting and exalting it is to be Professor Me. But you, dear reader, have got to have some vested vantage point. So here you go. This is what I do. Though I'll try to avoid revealing to you what exactly I am a professor of. After all, I'm not so sure myself.

I

To be sane in a world of madmen is in itself madness.

– Rousseau

It's day one of the Fall term and I'm walking to my first class with a million papers, syllabi, and textbooks in tow. If all goes well, I'll get in a good thirty to forty minutes before it happens. But I know it will happen eventually, surely as the sun will set.

I open the door and enter the classroom, introducing myself with some kind of playful quip before launching into a monologue about the general problems and paradoxes we'll be exploring throughout the term. I ask the students a few questions to break the ice and find out what they've already been exposed to and what brings them to this course. I then distribute the syllabi and start going through the readings, assignments, ground rules. We get through about forty five minutes like this, sauntering serenely together in shared contemplation of the wider world around us. Then, inexorably, it happens. A hand goes up and snatches the world right out of our heads:

– So, Professor?

– Yes?

– It says here that you don't allow laptops in class.

– That's right. No cell phones either. They're too distracting. I've found they do more to undermine the class environment than to improve it. By the way, there was an interesting study last year showing that students using laptops in class tended on average to earn a full letter grade lower than students not using them. What's

more, students without laptops—but who could still see the screens of others using them—saw their grades fall by the same amount.

Long deafening silence

Then finally:

– Uh, the thing is, all the other professors allow them though. And I’ve gotten used to taking my notes that way.

– I certainly hope I’m not the only professor forbidding them. But even if I am, I’m afraid the rule still stands.

– But then how can I take notes?

– Use pen and paper.

– I’m afraid I won’t be able to read my own handwriting.

– Well then, I suppose I’m doing you a favor by forcing you to practice.

– Why do I need to practice?

– Because you’ll do better in class that way. Besides, you might need to write by hand someday if you don’t have a computer handy.

– What if I can’t find anything to write with?

– I do believe you are more likely to lose access to a computer than a writing utensil and a scrap of paper!

– I’m not so sure.

– Yes, well this class isn’t based on what you are or aren’t so sure of. Would someone please lend this man a pen?

Awkward

His line of questioning was imbecilic, and that’s all that would normally bother me about it. But what I see now is the deeper picture that this so-called student is pathologically incapable of seeing beyond his own perceived self-interest. This is the root cause of his willful ignorance. I am not here to convenience him. I am here to engage him in a fuller apprehension and reconsideration of reality—*itself*. On its own terms. Not his. But once this ego-zombie has parted his jaws, he starts to infect

the room with his airborne virus. And I can scarcely corral the class back to attention. Narcissi reach for their mirrors and the rest recedes to afterthought.

A second hand goes up:

- So, will you be posting lectures and PowerPoints online?
- No. I expect you to show up to class to take notes yourselves.

Sigh

Then another hand:

- So, if I get a low grade on an assignment, can I do it over for a better grade?
- Not under normal circumstances. You see, I expect you to try for your best work the first time.

Pffft

Another hand:

- So, is attendance required?
- Um, I'm afraid so.
- So you're going to take daily attendance then?
- I'd rather not, but I will if necessary. On days where attendance is low.

Ugh

- Will there be an online study guide for exams?

Arrrgh

- A rubric for each paper?
- Excuse me? What do you mean by "rubric"?
- I mean a checklist of all the elements required.
- No, I won't be handing out checklists for essays. But you will get a general description of what I am looking for that we will discuss in further detail in class.

The essentials of each assignment are already included here in the syllabus. I don't want to lay out every element of a good essay. Writing is a creative process that we murder by dissecting. It's impossible to completely define it anyway.

Sheesh

- What does that say on the board?
- You mean what I just wrote?
- Yes, I can't quite make it out. What font is that?
- It's called "cursive".
- I don't know how to read that.

Help

It goes on like this for a good half-hour that feels like an eternity. Then, mercifully, the period ends. But I now have a searing headache, can barely see straight, and my knees buckle at every step. So I stumble back to my office and try to shake it off. When I get there, I close the door behind me and just stare out the window at all the hustle and bustle pushing by.

It feels like I keep waking up in the middle of my own extremely slow burial. The kind that takes a lifetime to shovel over. And since it happens countless times a day, I'm never quite myself. How can I be when confronted by zombies all day long? These zombies don't eat your brains so much as devour your world. Authentic persons still walk the Earth but are being pushed to the brink of extinction by these mindless human husks. Though they do have a kind of soul, it rapidly deteriorates into one less noble than a dog's. For as Plato observed long ago, dogs at their core are wisdom-loving creatures. Simple-minded as they are, they'll happily set their own pleasure aside in service of those they love. Not so the Narcissi. As they are blind to all but personal satisfaction.

I don't know exactly how the disease is contracted but have developed a working theory. It seems to be a kind of memetic virus or thought contagion that enters the

host mind via prolonged exposure to popular electronic forms of intensely gratifying stimuli. As these stimuli are shared, they germinate linguistic memes. These memes are then carried from mind to mind through linguistic expression. Each time a meme is transmitted, it mimics the sense experience of the basal stimuli it represents. Gradually, these memes invade the host mind, accumulating to a point of cognitive saturation. This induces a neurotic state of perpetual satisfaction-seeking fed by constant controlled interaction with other memetically saturated minds (MSM's), a.k.a., ego-zombies.

I'll do whatever I can to help anyone I meet stave off infection. I like to think I have a respectable rate of success, at least among my students. You never know what can rekindle someone's humanity. If a well-placed remark can slow the infection, a full semester with the right professor can arrest it completely. And since today is day one of the term, I should be brimming with optimism. So I tell myself that it's not all bad. That despite the general decline of civilization I manage to be of some use.

I've just about cleared this mental clutter when I notice voices coming from the next room. It's my colleague, Susan Hendrix speaking with a student. She occupies the neighboring office and likes to keep her door wide open. So I tend to hear every word. She doesn't so much have office hours as what she likes to call "salon hours", where students drop in for a good ego-stroking pep talk in which she lavishes them with as many compliments as she can muster. I guess you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. Somehow she always finds a way to beat her last praise-per-minute record. The entire conversation basically goes like this:

- Hey, what have you been up to?
- Well, I did *this*. And *this*. And *this*!
- Awesome! *This* is so exciting!
- Thanks. What about you?
- Well, I did some of *this* too and now I'm doing *that*!
- Really? I always wanted to try *that*. Do you like *that*?
- Absolutely. Much better than that other thing.
- I can imagine. It's great you went ahead with *that*!

Essentially, it's little more than taking turns validating each other's experiences. I get to talk about what I'm doing while you listen and offer sympathetic and encouraging quips. Then, *you* get to talk about what you're doing while *I* offer encouraging and sympathetic quips. That's it. Sometimes, we might talk about other people, but only in ways that affect us directly; that is, friends or family or most commonly, complaining about what others have done to us. What's most troubling to me about it all is that ninety eight percent of conversations have become like this. No one seems to want to talk about anything that doesn't concern themselves directly. Try this simple experiment: start sampling conversations people have around you at parties, social and family gatherings, bars, on the street, at restaurants and cafés (actually, no one talks at cafés anymore. Everyone is a castaway on a laptop island, usually with headphones.). Listen to whatever conversations take place in your perimeters just long enough to glean the general topics. And see how many of them have to do with anything that doesn't directly concern the persons speaking. I run the experiment all the time. And I can tell you, coming across a genuine conversation about ideas is getting about as likely as finding signs of life in outer space.

It's particularly vexing here at the university, where you'd expect students and professors to engage each other in thinking about the world. That's supposed to be what college is for. At least it used to be. Maybe now it's mainly for developing social contacts. Evidently, the pursuit of knowledge isn't necessarily what gets students to come to office hours (or even to class) anymore. The best you can do these days as a professor, it would seem, is to hold up a flattering mirror to your students. And to do your best at meeting their expectations, which, above all else is to be entertained.

It sounds like Susan's salon talk is off to a strong start today. It's day one of the term so everyone is energized. She begins with the usual disarming openers on what the student did last summer, then self-deprecatingly transitions to the latest diet she is failing to keep up with. It takes only a few minutes before they are reliving personal joys, hopes, fears, anticipations, life challenges, and family dramas. A bond is

established—at least for show. Then, as the red carpet is fully rolled out, Susan says something that startles me. It's so pure and fake I do a double take. So boldly, so deftly it brings them into focus, without the slightest hedge or hesitation. Six little lilting syllables:

"So, how can I serve you?"

That's quite a phrase. "How can I serve you?" It conveys exactly the message that today's savvy student expects. It immediately puts the customer in the driver's seat and sets her at ease. I could never pull off that sentence myself. But Susan is a natural. Always closing. Always finding new means of maximizing student satisfaction. She doesn't just talk the bullshit. She lives it.

By the way, she is a known master of the "flipped classroom". It's the latest thing. The post-lecture promised land. You do next to no lecturing. You just facilitate class discussion. You no longer waste your breath forcing students to learn via brutal facts and unbending logic. If lectures are fascist, the flipped classroom is fair. It lets students explore and discover themselves at their own pace. It's much less threatening and more empowering for them that way. Plus it lets you conserve your energy for research, which is a big bonus. Susan has even managed to raise this method to the next level. Students don't just run the class, they also grade themselves. She's flipped the grading! Everyone grades each other's participation, which amounts to half the course grade. This way, students have equal say in what their final grades end up to be. It's the perfectly egalitarian class that no student in his right mind would ever object to. And it works. Her students nearly all end up with good grades. So by any market measure, Susan's classes are sterling successes. She even won a teaching award last year despite the fact that she requires students to do a bit of actual writing. But it's always a take-home case analysis based on previous years' assignments that all the students forward to each other in advance to ensure A's. So they can't really complain.

Wait, there's a knock at my door. A petite and perky blonde in her late thirties pokes her head in. It's Susan.

- Hi Jules! (My name is Julius. But most call me Jules).
- Hello Susan. How’s your first day going?
- Not so well actually.
- No? What’s up?
- So, a few students challenged me in class.

By the way, isn’t it annoying how no one can just start talking about anything anymore without dropping a coy little “so” first? I wonder if they do it in their heads too when thinking to themselves.

Anyway, she continues:

- Four guys—frat boys I think—started defending the view that everyone should only pursue their own self-interest. It was a little shocking.
- Ah, egoists! You’ve never run into those before?
- No.
- Huh. I have. Pretty much every term. I expect it actually. Prepare for it even.
- Well it’s never happened to me. I like to think it just goes without saying that we should all care about one another.
- It’s surprising to me Susan that after all your years teaching, you’ve never had to confront this attitude. I find it’s very much on the rise these days.
- Perhaps it is. I’m going to have to think about how to handle it.
- Did you try to reduce their arguments to absurdity? There’s plenty of ethical theory and psychological, sociological, and economic data to appeal to.
- Well, the thing is, that’s easier said than done. I don’t want to put myself in the position of saying that their views aren’t valid.
- Good point. The last thing you want to do is to challenge or correct students right in the middle of class. It can be devastating to their self-esteem. You might never regain their trust.
- Yes. This will be interesting. I’m hoping other students will shame them going forward so I don’t have to confront them myself. I’ll see if I can enlist some troops during salon hours.

- Sounds like an excellent strategy Susan. What tangled webs we weave!
- See you at the department meeting?
- Absolutely.

Clearly, Susan hasn't yet been fully infected—as evidenced by her alarm at finally being confronted by the four horsemen of naked self-interest who showed up in her class today. But as a practiced and accomplished Narcissi-appeaser, she's almost worse than a full-fledged zombie. For she's essentially little more than a hired hand accelerating the plunder of our collective consciousness. Like a double agent caving to the enemy in the hopes of saving her own skin.