

Everything looked so wonderful in our classroom: the tenderness of its light blue walls, my fellow students' cheerfulness and optimism, even Dr. Shaw's "dry course". Oh, yes, everything looked wonderful! At least to me, Peter Young, it did. The only way I could explain my compelling optimism was the presence of an unopened letter in my shirt pocket, which I had picked up before, from the Dean's office, on my way to Dr. Shaw's class.

From that letter, I anticipated heavenly inner thoughts and more heart to keep on living.

Of course, my wishful happiness pervaded everything around me.

"Well, Peter!" Dr. Shaw said, "You started saying something about prejudice during our last meeting, but since it was terribly late, we had to stop our class discussion.

"Your premise—as far as I can remember—deserves some consideration. We wouldn't mind your expatiating on it."

I had a big surprise at my professor's prodigious memory, and my mind was straying miles away, in New York: I kept thinking about Fay and wondering at the kind of activity she got involved in.

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Furthermore, I had completely forgotten what I wanted to say during our last class meeting, except that it had some connection with intolerance.

Anyway, I had to take a stand (above all against prejudice). For, if I fostered any hatred in my heart it would derive from bigotry in general.

In other words, I take into consideration not only prejudice about difference in complexion (the most prevalent and the silliest of all), but also a wide range of others. People of the same ethnic group misjudge each other every day. Difference in education, fortune, power, size, appearance, ethics, doctrine, gives rise to prejudgment and, eventually, to injurious negativism.

“It’s beyond me,” I started, “that intelligent persons spend all their lives seeing others through the distorted prism of prejudice.

“What’s so discouraging is to find out that supposedly well-educated persons, several of whom belong to the groups of policy makers and leaders, walk right into the trap.”

I pause for a while. A dead silence reigned in the classroom. I knew Dr. Shaw and my fellow students were eagerly waiting for the logical inference to draw from my premise.

“It’s discouraging,” I went on, “because we happen to realize that, in spite of all the objective thoughts we’ve been exposed to through schooling, we can’t prevent ourselves from dogmatism.”

I had another pause.

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Then, I added, “It’s paradoxical too: prejudice comes from the Latin compound ‘prae’ and ‘judicare’, which means to judge beforehand, without the knowledge of fact. In other words, it expresses ignorance in the fullest sense of the word.

“Then, a supposedly educated person, who practices prejudice, wants deliberately to put aside his exposure to positive knowledge and rather use ignorance as a way of approaching reality. Hence—as would argue an existentialist à la Sartre—a prejudiced person acts in bad faith, because, from time to time, he must have some doubt about his unfounded beliefs, but still, because of his addiction to his crooked manner of seeing reality, he wouldn’t do anything to try a more objective system of thoughts.

“By so doing, he closes himself completely to a broader human dimension his formal education has entitled him to.”

I didn’t know whether my argument made sense or not. Certainly, many had a much more academic approach to the problem. However, I had just expressed my feeling about the whole subject.

“Who would like to comment on Peter’s argument?” Dr. Shaw asked encouragingly.

I sensed a certain inner excitement from my fellow students. In fact, they might have a legitimate reason for their slight disturbance: I was the only black student attending Dr. Shaw’s class, and my fellow students might feel more or less personally concerned about my stand. To make matters worse, they had to show caution about what they had to say (from

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an intellectual viewpoint); for, either they acquiesced to my line of arguments or they kept a low profile.

Of course, they might take the liberty of holding any wild opinion—as any layperson would do—and of bluntly sustaining that prejudice doesn't equate with ignorance and, consequently, constitutes an acceptable way of evaluating human beings. If they advanced such opinion, what else could anyone do? We attended a class of free speech.

Overall, no one wanted to make the first move.

Suddenly, Michael Day held up his hand.

Unbelievably, I had sensed he would make the first move.

He happened to be a talkative fellow who, usually, enjoyed elaborating on everything, even on subjects nobody understood. Now and then, one thought he had reached the peak of his chattering power and decided to put his mouth at rest for a while (to everybody's relief), but soon after, he would say, "Well..." and would go on and on.

Likewise, he saw reality through rose-colored glasses, except that he hated *Negroes* with passion. He enjoyed repeating, whenever *Negroes* couldn't hear him railing against them, "They are nothing but pains in the neck".

Rumor had it that he advocated a *strange doctrine* that put forward that, before creating humankind, God decreed the fall of *Negroes* and the salvation of *Whites*. Did he really hold such a view? Nobody could tell. However, if he did, he would have made a joke; knowing very well that

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such transcendent Being, like God, can't sink into spitefulness and discrimination?

Now he argued, "To speak frankly, I don't understand Peter's position. He lays stress on the fact that we should overcome or ignore our prejudices, while they have been around since the dawn of history.

"It appears as if Peter would deny the world existence or, like Descartes, he would sustain that maybe we equate reality with a dream.

"He simply attempts to avoid facing reality and to reject the compelling weight of facts.

"Listening to Peter, I should have asked myself whether we are sitting here in this classroom and are having a live discussion on prejudice.

"Again, I don't understand this line of reasoning at all. It makes no sense.

"However, we live in a country of freedom. Everybody has the right to hold an opinion."

Dr. Shaw looked at me furtively, through his thick glasses.

I thought, "The good old Dr. Shaw!"

He had a reputation as a great debater and he always wished for a *profitable* discussion. Daily, he embarked on academic debates with his colleagues and his students on the college premises, in the streets, at home, everywhere. Thus, he knew what he talked about when he kept expressing his amazement at educated persons' bias judgments.

I imagined that his house, occasionally, turned into a literary salon.

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He had never missed an opportunity to remind us, “My dear students, you must find out ideas *good* and *bad* sides. Absolute truth doesn’t exist.”

Of course, imbued with such objective-mindedness, he would show disappointment at my silence to Michael’s “strong” objection or, at least, to its *bad sides*. We should have so many other sides to choose from!

Although I could hardly resist leaving the classroom to read Fay’s letter, as soon as possible, I would take no chance to disappoint Dr. Shaw who thought highly of me.

“Michael, your objection can’t hold water,” I argued. “You have set forth what you call facts or the compelling power of facts, and believed that your argument should please us.

“However, in a human context, facts by themselves mean nothing. They become meaningful only when they generate meaningful actions.

“In the same line of reasoning, facts have meaning when we try to channel them towards significant patterns of actions, higher types of behaviors, which tally the kinds of beings we believe to be.”

Finally, I concluded, “If you accept my argument according to which prejudice happens to express sheer ignorance, it will depend on us, as intelligent men and women, to try wiping it out from our patterns of actions and thoughts. We won’t succeed if we adopt your approach, Michael.

“You sound as if prejudice is what we call the unavoidable we will have to accept peacefully. Actually, history has shown that reasonable people

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have often rejected ‘necessary evils’. Therefore, we don’t have to accept them at all!

“Indeed our rejection hints at human dynamism.”

Dr. Shaw smiled.

Then, he looked around and seemed pleased with the expression of satisfaction radiated from my fellow students’ face, but Michael’s.

Shortly afterward, Dr. Shaw made his final observation, “Peter’s argument justifies my belief that ideas must have *good* and *bad sides*, depending on the angle from which we appraise them. My friends, if you think hard, the truth will emerge from your mind. I guarantee it.”

We all laughed heartily.

He went on, “Please, my friends, don’t ever accept anything for granted. When you write your papers, always have the following thought in mind: *the most appealing argument may raise challenge*. The way you personally deal with such thought will please me a lot. Remember that. My course serves as the open door leading to objectivity and good judgment.”

He paused for a while to allow us the time to *digest* his observation and his expectations of our literary compositions.

Then, he went on, “Next time we will touch on the *immoral aspect* of prostitution. We will try to find out whether two persons who agree to exchange ‘sexual service and remuneration’ may lack moral inclination.

“Think about it over the weekend.

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“We talk about two adults, two consenting adults. They have “freedom” of action. They meet somewhere and decide to have sex, provided one pays for it.

“How could these two consenting adults lack moral orientation? Would we have any justification for having doubt about their freedom of choice?

“Now, it’s time to go.”

Our young minds already started to bubble over this topic and we exchanged conspiratorial glances.

We looked forward to another exciting class discussion the week after.

Since the session ended, I was as anxious, like my fellow students, to leave the classroom and dash away when Dr. Shaw called my name. Before stopping short, I thought, “Damn!”

Then, I turned around to face the professor.

At the sight of his smiling face, my discontent vanished.

“I read over your midterm paper and found it very interesting,” He stated. “There will give a small reward (too small, as far as I am concerned) for the best paper in the entire college system and I would like to submit yours for consideration.

“I think it can hardly be defeated. Yet, I need your consent to my suggestion.

“What do you think?”

I didn’t answer right away, because I had temporarily lost my power of speech.

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I had just rediscovered my creative power, which took me by surprise. I covered a long way from evil days I had fallen on the year before, in New York.

“Do you think I stand a chance, Dr. Shaw?” I asked.

“Absolutely yes,” he answered. “You know I wouldn’t bother if I wasn’t certain.”

“Then, Doctor, let’s try it. We have nothing to lose.”

He reached for my hand, shook it and promised, “Very well, Peter, I will notify the contest committee and let you know what happens.”