The Responsibility of Knowing

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The manners and morals that people uniquely possess, their familial relations, genetics, and education are all irrelevant. None of it matters. The truth is, people have little to no control over how they react to their given circumstance according to Malcom Gladwell’s essay, “The Power of Context”. He discusses the influence a surrounding environment has on people’s actions, proposing the idea that behavior is a direct result of a person’s immediate context. This theory helps explain some soldiers’ irrational thoughts and inhumane actions while immersed in the thick of the Vietnamese, jungle warzone as explained by Tim O’Brien, a Vietnam veteran, in his essay, “How to Tell a True War Story”. Despite being deployed to Vietnam, where soldiers were exposed to toxic circumstances that prompted uncharacteristic behavior and actions, Tim O’Brien, when confronted with death and the gore of this warzone, realized that, above all else, he wanted to be a morally upstanding man striving for peace and human concord. O’Brien’s realization challenges the basis for Gladwell’s “very strange environmentalism theory” that a person’s character and well established values and ethics may have no effect on how they react to a given circumstance (159).

Gladwell’s theory, “The Power of Context”, does not dispute the importance of a person’s genetic and physiological predispositions, like schooling and upbringing, and the role they play in provoking certain behaviors, but offers another reasoning for why people respond to certain circumstances the way they do. Gladwell’s environmental argument says, that behavior is a function of social context” (159). That, “the impetus to engage in a certain kind of behavior is not coming from a certain kind of person but from a feature of the environment” (155). Gladwell pushes the common understanding of behavior by saying a person’s character and core values have almost no control over their actions and reactions in a particular situation. Gladwell writes, “character isn’t a stable, easily identifiable set of closely related traits...character is more like a bundle of habits, tendencies and interests, loosely bound together and dependent, at certain times, on circumstance and context. The reason that most of us seem to have a consistent character is that we are really good at controlling our environment” (163). But when this predictable, immediate environment becomes volatile and inconsistent, a person’s well established morals and ethical decision making, in certain situations, are distorted. This idea holds true in the story of Bernhard
Goetz in Gladwell’s essay the, “Power of Context”. Goetz, a “white professional...who doesn’t fit the stereotype of the kind of person who ends up in violent situations”, who carefully follows the rules of everyday life, shot “four young black men” who were “trying to rip him off” on the subway one day (158, 152). Gladwell attributes Goetz’s behavior as a direct result of his surrounding environment. The “dimly lit platform, surrounded on all sides by dark, damp, graffiti-covered walls” and the fact that “the midtown shuttle, was covered with graffiti—top to bottom, inside and out” all attributed to his reaction to this particular situation (153). That in this situation, Goetz “far from being someone who acts for fundamental, intrinsic reasons and who lives in his own world – is actually someone acutely sensitive to his environment (159). That when being “harassed” by these youths, his behavior had “everything to do with the message sent by the graffiti on the walls and the disorder of the subway” and perhaps has something to do with Goetz’s instability and “apparent psychological problems” that prompted him to shoot these men. (160). The immediate circumstance of being approached by these young men and the environmental context in which the situation took place prompted Goetz’s uncharacteristic, rash, destructive actions.

Similarly, this same environmental theory, that says an immediate situation may prompts certain behavioral actions, is valid in a story Tim O’Brien tells in his essay, “How to Tell a True War Story”. O’Brien introduces the reader to one of his buddies in Vietnam, Bob Kiley, better known as Rat whose friend, Curt Lemon, was killed. O’Brien shows us how shocking Rat’s behavior is in reaction to the immediate circumstance of losing his best friend. Curt Lemon was blown into a million pieces after unknowingly stepping on a booby-trapped 105 round while playing catch with smoke grenades with his buddy Rat. After peeling Curt Lemon’s skin and intestines from surrounding trees, the soldiers moved on, higher up the mountain where they encountered a baby water buffalo. Rat Kiley proceeds to mutilate this baby buffalo, methodically shooting off the animal’s mouth, ears, knees, hooves, and tail. Everyone stood and watched Rat abuse this innocent animal; “nobody said much...and there wasn’t a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo...Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world” (274). He did not murder the innocent baby water buffalo to simply, “kill, it was to hurt...It was a question of pain”, grief and his inability to cope with the unfair death of dear friend (274). After witnessing Rat’s brutality, a fellow soldier said, “Well, that’s Nam...Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin’s fresh and
original” (275). The immediate environment, the warzone, and the situations that present themselves to the soldiers in this environment, in this case the death of Curt Lemon, elicit uncharacteristic, irrational behavior in which the only logical explanation is being surrounded by horrible, inexplicable brutality. However, about a week after the death of Curt Lemon, Rat writes a heartfelt letter to his buddy’s sister in which he “tells her what a great brother she had, how together the guy was, and how he was a number one pal and comrade” (269). He proceeds to “pour his heart out. He says he loved the guy. He says the guy was his best friend in the world.” Tim O’Brien shows the reader what a loyal friend and good man Rat was, taking the time to write to a member of his friend’s family. When these soldiers were deployed to the Vietnam war, they were taken from their somewhat predictable, stable lives, at home in the U.S., and placed in a cruel, foreign, dehumanizing warzone. The circumstances of war were unforgiving and, “the only certainty was overwhelming ambiguity” (276). Tim O’Brien says that, “in war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself.” That being in and experiencing the exhaustion, heartache and brutality of war changed the soldiers’ behavior and their ability to grapple with pain and determine right from wrong. For Rat, the immediate circumstance of losing his best friend overcame his inherent behavioral tendencies and characteristic traits, turning him tactless and destructive.

The grief and helplessness that Rat experienced as a direct result of the immediate death of his best friend, Curt Lemon, prompted him to act in such a vicious, malevolent manner. But if the “Power of Context” holds true, why did Rat write Curt Lemon’s sister a letter? Why did he not continue to kill innocent beings? Perhaps, it was an inherent quality Rat Kiley possessed, his genetics, his morals, his predisposed psychological tendencies, that compelled him to be a good man and write a painfully heartbreaking and honest letter to his best friend’s family member. Likewise, the same remains true for Tim O’Brien, who, amidst war’s horrific trials and tragedies, that in some cases could turn a man vindictive and cruel, made O’Brien realize he wanted, above all else, to be a morally sound, ethical man.

When confronted with death in the Vietnam warzone, Tim O’Brien writes, “you feel an intense, out-of-skin awareness of your living self – your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it. In the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted. There is a kind of largeness to it, a kind of godliness. Though
it’s odd, you’re never more alive than when you’re almost dead. You recognize what’s valuable” (276). Tim O’Brien suggests that there is no way to tell a true war story nor is there a way to tell if a war story is true because, in the end, all that matters is if it is personally meaningful. Gladwell does not account for Tim O’Brien’s inherent want to be a good man, which ultimately refutes the understanding that a person’s direct circumstance is the only factor effecting a person’s resulting behavioral actions. However, O’Brien only comes to this realization, that in his life he wants to be an ethical man above all else, in the immediate environment of war. Therefore, without having been exposed to the specific circumstance of being confronted with death, he would not have been prompted to have a personal, monumental, life epiphany.

Being exposed to an immediate environment or circumstance does not always yield a negative behavioral outcome. In some instances, like Tim O’Brien’s and Rat Kiley’s, a person’s particular situation can prompt them to make new, groundbreaking discoveries, shedding light on their personal morals and ideals thus pointing them to greater truths. Gladwell’s theory, “The Power of Context”, can help explain a person’s rash, uncharacteristic actions and reactions to new, influencing circumstances, but cannot be understood as the sole reason for a person’s behavior. There is a fault in Gladwell’s theory wherein he does not explain people’s curious want to be “courteous, moral, and ethically” sound (276). That, despite being exposed to evil and prejudice, there are those people who are morally steadfast and goodhearted. Knowing and understand Gladwell’s theory allows people to grasp that they are not prisoners to their behavioral actions in any given circumstance. On the contrary, people are in control of their morals and the decisions they make in every specific circumstance or immediate environment. Gladwell holds people responsible for their actions and prompts them to ask themselves why they do what they do, who they want to be at their core and what morals and values they hope to remain true to. If people take responsibility for their actions, knowing full well they may be effected by their immediate environment or circumstance, after understanding Gladwell’s theory, the world would inherently be filled with more thoughtful, ethical and morally sound individuals.