

A BRIEF DISCOURSE ON MYSELF THROUGH LITERACY

ENG W131: HONORARY MENTION

Donovan D. Chang

“Who am I?” is the fundamental question I am left with, or have finally boiled down into, through this explication, an inquiry into myself. Before delving into who and which are my literacy sponsors, and how they affected me, I recollected what I have been introduced through the course so far. It began with an exploration of writing itself, revolving around four threshold concepts – composing, literacies, rhetoric, and communities; followed by transfers, an application of knowledge in new or different situations. Then, a few distinctive and notable examples of literacy narratives were given, and now it is my turn.

I see these concepts as no surprise I was reminded of an article whose main idea was “Language shapes our thought” (Boroditsky, 2011), where she evidently demonstrated the importance of language by discussing the power of how one talks in affecting, influencing, and eventually reshaping one’s mentality, i.e. how one thinks. A remarkable example was the generally found differences in cognitive ability according to one’s mother tongue, where each language’s word order, sentence structure, and linguistic units are highly suspected to be in play (Boroditsky, 2011). Therefore, it is highly valuable, necessary, and warranted to examine our own literacy, the fluency in utilizing language for communication and social interaction (Wardle & Downs, 2020, pp. 13), for us to discover, to understand, and eventually to improve ourselves.

Our literacy is not formulated instantly, but over time, and we call the elements or constituents sponsors, irrespective of their proximity, tangibility, and benevolence (Brandt, 1998). There indeed

would be countless many sponsors of mine which affected me, and thus it would be sensible to focus on a handful few with a strongest impact and influence. To me, they are my studying and life in the U.S., and a distinguished author and writer, Milan Kundera, from whom, perhaps, I inherited a writing style. Prior to discussing my sponsors, I deem probing into my nature is necessary, as not only it laid ground for my study in the U.S., but also it is crucial to understand how I felt on my first encounter with Kundera – how extraordinary, how exceptional our encounter was; and how dumbfounded, how awe-inspired I was.

What readily crosses my mind, thinking of my nature, is the thirst and passion for knowledge, stemming from a curious mind. As long as I can recall, I have always been a “nerd,” who is studious and scholarly often to the boring extent. True that my parents had high expectations, and while a part of me found joy in making them proud by delivering them good news, fundamentally it was for myself – putting in efforts to make an understanding of ideas and concepts, practicing until I become familiarized enough, and accomplishing the goals I had set. Reading was no exception; driven by the notion one has to cultivate and nurture his soul through extensive reading, and with a desire to become wise over simply being smart or intelligent, I myself had been an avid reader at least up to the age of 12, when I entered middle school and was about to “be busy” dealing with a flood of study materials.

In my childhood, I was deeply into informational texts, with a particular interest in the following three genres: (i) biographies and autobiographies, whose common theme is almost always self-help, vividly describing the accounts of a hero or heroine overcoming enormous hardships and challenges, while not giving in to, nor being subdued by impossible situations until the end, which makes him or her a significant and memorable figure; (ii) a collection of anecdotes, which give us lessons through their moral of the story and inspire us on how to live our life; and (iii) information-rich expository writings,

whether they be social, scientific, or historical.

What about literary works? Unfortunately, or interestingly, my meaningful encounter with fiction, specifically novels, was rather belated. It was circa 2009-10, when I was in my third or fourth year of a 6-year-long baccalaureate program, sitting at the very end of my teenage years. For someone who occasionally said, "I do not understand why people read a novel, as I see no point or value in it," I would even say I had an epiphanic or enlightening moment to be introduced to Kundera, so much so that I initially read all his works in Korean, and then twice or thrice more in English. In hindsight, I suspect the reasons why as follows: (i) I was missing someone; I had been harboring an irresistible yearning for someone who I thought was "the one" for me; reading Kundera's explanation on nostalgic feelings from an etymological perspective was like finding a diagnosis for such a mysterious illness I had been agonizing with; (ii) Kundera wrote as if he were me; I felt the world in front of him was almost identical to or synchronous with mine; his elaborate descriptions and depictions of the world and characters involved, indeed reflecting his rather cynical view, resonated with mine – one example would be the embedment of his satirical or disapproving view on totalitarianism and collectivism, which led to the ban of his publications and ultimately ostracization from his motherland, Czechoslovakia; and (iii) in Kundera's novel, a substantial portion is allotted to establishing characters with a specific focus on their core or essential aspects; their idiosyncrasies, i.e. what makes him or her unique. Kundera left it to the readers' imagination to fill in their appearances.

Let us briefly digress to have a peek into the event, finding a diagnosis for my "mysterious illness." It was in 2006, when I first saw her as two years my junior in the last year of high school. While "cool kids" knew how to get along and interact with girls, and naturally accrued a decent amount of dating experience, that was not the case for me. I was lucky enough to get acquainted with her to the extent

we greet to each other on our accidental rendezvous, but nothing more than that. The time for me to graduate arrived sooner than I expected, while she remained at high school and in my mind as well, unbeknownst to me.

Time went by and I was having another ordinary day as a sophomore, planning to join a gathering, where I had no idea I would see her again. Miraculously, a party I attended by caprice turned into a date. A few more occasions, literally two or three, ensued – we casually had lunch or dinner, chatted at a café, or hung around at a park. Well, it did not matter what we did. What mattered was the fact that I be with her, right next to her, spending time with her. Tragically and ironically, I never saw her again after the night we walked under a shared umbrella in pouring rain, safely drove her home in my dad's car, and hugged her in front of her house. Without any explanation, she simply shut me out, pushing me off from the apex of cloud nine I was striding on. It was brutal. At the influx of seemingly endless grief, and whenever I realized the gigantic hole in my heart, which gave me an acrid, corrosive pain, I did not know what to do but to simply be and survive.

I have no clue on how much time had passed till I came across with Kundera, but I daresay, in retrospect, it was salvation for me in that recognition and making an understanding in words is a stepping stone for acceptance. Following is the remedy I had, a quote from his book, *Ignorance*: “The Greek word for ‘return’ is nostos. *Algos* means ‘suffering.’ So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return. [...] In that etymological light, nostalgia seems something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. You are far away, and I don't know what has become of you” (Kundera, 2003, pp. 4).

The reading activities mentioned so far must have served as a basis and formed a foundation for my literacy. However, to truly be literate, to be able to fluently utilize language as a medium for communication and social interaction, practicing is essential. In that

regard, unfortunately the learning environment I was exposed to up to the completion of first baccalaureate in early 2013 did not entail much of literate activities. Primarily it came from the nature of a medical school curriculum – each semester came with a largely preset study schedule, and thus there was little to no room for maneuver. Also, simply there was way much information for us to absorb or memorize. The other is fewer literacy-enhancing activities in Korean curricula, especially in secondary education, compared to those of the U.S.

The honing of my literacy began with the master's training at a graduate school of public health. While my concentration was epidemiology, which employs statistics as a primary tool to determine the distribution and risk factors of diseases, the timetable I had reflected my keen interest in health policy and management. Busy semesters went by while writing summaries and policy briefs, having discussions, and delivering presentations. I gained confidence; no longer did I need to fear them.

The culminating experience was indeed thesis-writing and publishing in peer-reviewed medical journals, while personally experiencing many of the threshold concepts. Through numerous revisions and taking heed to my adviser's comment, "Never label any draft final," I came to understand the meaning of the statement that writing is a process; I learnt the importance of rhetoric, as it was my first professional writing, where the target audiences were also experts and specialists in the medical field, and accordingly there were certain expectations I had to meet in terms of accuracy and scientific rigor; and looking at the increasing citation index after their publication, I felt a sense of belonging to the medical and public health community with a notion that we researchers were making impacts and standing at the forefront of our arena.

Further training ensued after a few years of a break, as I began my second baccalaureate in mathematics in 2019, yet it brought about an unexpected development. Armed with clear and practical objectives

to “launder” or improve my GPA, as well as to earn a bachelor’s degree from a U.S. institution, I planned to complete my study within 2 years. Also, it was highly unlikely for a curriculum of a mathematics major to include a substantial amount of activities involving literacy. The significant event, which turned out to be a blessing, effecting a significant change in the course of my study, was the invitation to the Honors program.

The blessing was to be provided a chance to ponder on higher education itself, and eventually the meaning of life. The course entitled, “Introduction to Honors Program,” which every student has to take to graduate with Honors, encompasses diverse subjects in liberal arts from historical and social restructuring to ethical concerns in the use of modern biomedical technologies. By the time the introduction to Honors was over, after completing extensive writing assignments, I realized academic excellence constituted only one of many pillars of Honors education and had a sense of shame for my initial ignorance and misconception that graduating with Honors is just about adding one fancy or appealing line that I was a studious, industrious, and bright student. Since then, I revamped the course of study to not only develop expertise in mathematics and natural sciences, but also to nurture, enrich, and fatten my soul through education in liberal arts.

The pursuit of a second baccalaureate is, in fact, another steppingstone for me to study law, a novel interest I found while working as a head of a township-level community health center. It was at a meeting convened to develop strategies to tackle a newly emerged communicable disease, COVID-19, when I desperately felt the need to speak the language of legal professionals. Not to mention it was panicking that so little was known about the disease itself and its vehement potential to disrupt our society at that time in early 2020, it was highly frustrating for me to see a substantial portion of time was being “wasted” for the professionals involved to understand each other – medical professionals might suggest disease control and quarantine

ideas, which would only be deemed impossible or highly infeasible from the perspectives of lawyers and government officials, and vice versa. I was motivated to study law, wishing I were the one to facilitate the process as a connecting bridge in the middle. Also, the nature of law being highly analytic, logical, and rational seemed to benefit me.

Now that I am soon to graduate with honors, I am envisaging myself as an aspiring lawyer, whose essential element is brilliant literacy. I claim literacy is located at the very heart of his existence, in addition to sound logic and tenacity to seek truth and justice. That being said, I am aware it is not the end, and I have far more way to go. But thinking of how to improve and polish myself, and to become a distinguished lawyer, a saying, "Practice makes perfect," rings in my mind. What can I do but to perpetually hone myself, aiming for perfection, as proclaimed in the textbook, "Writing is a process, and all writers have more to learn" (Wardle & Downs, 2020, pp. 10). ■

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■ **Dr. Donovan D. Chang** is a senior at IU East majoring in mathematics and also an on-call physician in South Korea. He wishes to develop expertise both in medicine and law.