

# UNIVERSITY INTERSCHOLASTIC LEAGUE

## READY WRITING CONTEST

### HIGH SCHOOL TOPICS

State • 2019

Read both of the following statements carefully; then write an expository essay on a topic clearly related to one or the other of the two statements. **Provide your own title.** You are not expected to write on both topics.

Contestants who are hand-writing their compositions must use their own standard 8 1/2 x 11-inch ruled white notebook paper or typing paper or the paper provided by the host school. Contestants shall write or print the composition **in ink and on only one side of the paper.** If contestants choose to use their own laptop computers, they must bring portable printers and associated hardware, software and paper. The typed entry must be single-sided and double-spaced, using any standard 12-point font on 8 1/2 x 11-inch white paper. When printing the contest on an electronic printer, the print command must be started by the time contest time expires. Students who opt to compose their entries on computers accept the risk of computer malfunction. In case of computer malfunction, the contestant may use the remaining allotted time to complete the composition in handwriting or compose on another computer (if available).

*Ready Writing prompts are provided as springboards for thought, not to advocate particular points of view. Contestants should not conclude that quotations or statements used in prompts reflect the opinion of the UIL.*

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### Topic I

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.\*

On Christmas Eve 103 years ago, my grandfather waited in a dark and dank cell. He sailed by steamship across the Pacific Ocean from India to America leaving behind colonial rule, but when he landed on American shores immigration officials saw his dark skin, his tall turban worn as a part of his Sikh faith, and saw him not as a brother but as foreign, as suspect, and they threw him behind bars where he languished for months until a single man, a white man, a lawyer named Henry Marshall filed a writ of habeas corpus that released him on Christmas Eve 1913.

My grandfather Kehar Singh became a farmer, free to practice the heart of his Sikh faith — love and oneness. So when his Japanese American neighbors were rounded up and taken to their own detention camps in the deserts of America he went out to see them when no one else would. He looked after their farms until they returned home. He refused to stand down.

In the aftermath of September 11th when hate violence exploded in these United States, a man that I called uncle was murdered. I tried to stand up. I became a lawyer like the man who freed my grandfather and I joined a generation of activists fighting detentions and deportation, surveillance and special registration, hate crimes and racial profiling. And after fifteen years, with every film, with every lawsuit, with every campaign, I thought we were making the nation safer for the next generation.

And then my son was born. On Christmas Eve, I watched him ceremoniously put the milk and cookies by the fire for Santa Claus. And after he went to sleep, I then drank the milk and ate the cookies. I wanted him to wake up and see them gone in the morning. I wanted him to believe in a world that was magical. But I am leaving my son a world that is more dangerous than the one I was given. I am raising — we are raising — a brown boy in America, a brown boy who may someday wear a turban as part of his faith.

And in America today, as we enter an era of enormous rage, as white nationalists hail this moment as their great awakening, as hate acts against Sikhs and our Muslim brothers and sisters are at an all-time high, I know that there will be moments whether on the streets or in the school yards where my son will be seen as foreign, as suspect, as a terrorist. Just as black bodies are still seen as criminal, brown bodies are still seen as illegal, trans bodies are still seen as immoral, indigenous bodies are still seen as savage, the bodies of women and girls seen as someone else's property. And when we see these bodies not as brothers and sisters then it becomes easier to bully them, to rape them, to allow policies that neglect them, that incarcerate them, that kill them.

Yes, rabbi, the future is dark. On this New Year's Eve, this watch night, I close my eyes and I see the darkness of my grandfather's cell. And I can feel the spirit of ever-rising optimism in the Sikh tradition Chardi Kala\*\* within him.

So the mother in me asks "what if?" What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all of our grandfathers and grandmothers are standing behind us now, those who survived occupation and genocide, slavery and Jim Crow, detentions and political assault? What if they are whispering in our ears today, tonight, "You are brave"? What if this is our nation's great transition?

What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Because if we don't push we will die. If we don't push our nation will die. Tonight we will breathe. Tomorrow we will labor in love through love, and your revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children.

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.

--Valerie Kaur (1981), American Civil Rights Activist, *Breathe and Push*, 2016.

*\*The beloved community belongs to divine Oneness, and so does all that it achieves.*

*\*\*Ever-rising spirits*

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## Topic II

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination -- indeed, everything and anything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled. I pulled his chin down sharp upon the crown of my head, butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, and I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out, and I yelled, "Apologize! Apologize!" But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding. I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh yes, I kicked him! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him by the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth -- when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! And I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street. I stared at him hard as the lights of a car stabbed through the darkness. He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on weakened legs. Then I was amused. Something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery. Would he have awakened at the point of death? Would Death himself have freed him for wakeful living? But I didn't linger. I ran away into the dark, laughing so hard I feared I might rupture myself. The next day I saw his picture in the Daily News, beneath a caption stating that he had been "mugged." Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man!

--Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) American Author, Prologue,  
*Invisible Man*, 1980.

## 1A Champion

### Loneliness: The Human Situation

Throughout the countless eras of mankind's presence on Earth, there has perhaps been no greater problem than that of unraveling the nature of our subjective reality. The greatest philosophers to ever live merely only scratched the surface of this most pressing folly of the human psyche. It is as Albert Einstein once said, "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one". In our haste to uncover the secrets of our universe, we have come to ignore the very fact that all of it could be unraveled by arguably the most basic of philosophical and scientific questions that could ever be asked—"Is this real?".

If one were to be approached by a man in rags in the street, exclaiming that nothing is real, what would be said in response? Our most ignorant yet ingrained behavior would be simply to disregard the man, for he is clearly insane. Our egos successfully disguise the fact that the poor, ragged man is, in fact, the wiser. He may have failed within the constraints our world, but he has succeeded in acknowledging that nothing within it could ever be said to truly exist. In other words, we often define reality as simply being our world. However, at its core, it is a much more subjective term than that. Our reality is most directly our worldview. It is what we have all come to agree upon as the only truth. Though to agree with others, we must first verify the existence of others, which is yet another equally impossible task. How could we verify anything except ourselves to ever truly exist? How could others do the same, when under the presumption we are not the only conscious entity?

It soon comes to our understanding, when prompted with these questions, that we can not validate the truth of the existence of anything beyond our own mind. In many ways, reality is exactly what it has been said to have been—Merely an illusion, such that all that exists is that

which we perceive to exist. We are never truthfully close to others, we are merely given the illusion that we are—Our egos are force-feeding us the illusion that others exist at all. To proclaim anything beyond that is only bold conjecture. There is not even any way of estimating how likely the truthful existence of anything, including others, really is. Our world, for sake of its new most literal interpretation after this fact is considered, is only what we believe it to be, and by extension only what we perceive.

Stepping back, the significance of this existential problem can also be highlighted under the objectivity of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. How are we to know that we have not merely been chained to the walls of a cave, doomed to watch shadows dance on the walls, believing that these shadows are the truthful reality? How did we come to the assumption that the old, ragged man is truly wrong? The ignorance and ego of mankind has a remarkable way of simply filling in the gaps to protect our worldviews. Indeed, it is in the moments when we feel our brightest that we often are at our most ignorant. Many of us have been reduced to countless lost souls, speeding down the freeway like flares cutting through the darkness, never stopping to give a second thought to anything. We have become invisible to each other, separated by the differences in our respective subjective realities, so much so that we can never truly know whether another mind exists.

The worldview of a man is a very fragile thing. It is protected, like how the soft flesh of a coconut is protected by the stubborn shell. Our ego manages to fill the gaps in our worldview, insisting that we are never wrong. Our innate ignorance, as imperfect beings, disallows us an understanding of our most basic selves. We live day by day with clay masks wrapped around our face, holding back our ideas as a dam holds back water. We cannot truly ever hope to share our mind with one another. In other terms, we will always be invisible. Others will always be

invisible. Merely acknowledging this fact will never allow you to truly see them. This is the struggle of the silent—The true struggle of the musicians, artists, and even writers of our time. To be seen is to let others glimpse inside your mind, to feel your feelings, to understand you at a most basic level. One of the many flaws of such simple entities as ourselves is that we can never truly connect with each other. In understanding the implications of the subjectivity of our reality, we come to realize how alone we truly are. This loneliness is unlike anything else, but in a righteous heart, it turns into a burning flame and passion to deliver our thoughts into the great abysses, hoping someday that we will hear a response back. This is at the heart of human connections. The few words we speak to each other say so much, yet so little. In understanding just how distant we truly are, we can struggle to close the distance, by strapping our words, our artwork, and our music across ourselves like bandoliers, and facing down the greatest con of our mortality—Our inherent lack of ability to wholly articulate ourselves. Within us lies the power to mold ourselves and our world, but only ours. We are but many lonely gods, in charge of our lonely world, struggling against the darkness that separates us. Just as it has been before, and just as it will be until the end of time, mankind will continue to struggle against the most inevitable human situation—Loneliness.

## 2A Champion

### Humanity's Breaking Point

"The end justifies the means," Machiavelli stated this many years ago, and many men still live by this philosophy as if it were fact. They live as if mankind can be ruled by only reason. That is why their soul breeds an insatiable anger. It is the man left without anything that is willing to act in the most irrational way. Fear and anger rule over the souls of mankind. Machiavelli himself endorsed this idea. He believed that a human is basely evil until they experience life and find motive to be moral. He also believed in his own virtues, not at all similar those stated by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. These virtues appeal to the reasonable side of a man and abandon all faith in the more effeminate, beautiful virtues of Aristotle's philosophy of happiness. The two opposing ideas give light to the struggle that occurs between the two sides of a human, evil and good. Though, Machiavelli does state that he believes great evil can be justified, he does not provide any way to live humanely and happily. Aristotle's virtues such as courage, restraint, intellect, and many others lay the path toward happiness, but without money and without love these virtues become obsolete. A man made invisible by the vicious lifestyles of society can no longer find freedom through Aristotle's teachings and will live for the comforts of Machiavelli's justifications.

People like Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* are the ones who find such cozy compassion in the words of Machiavelli. Raskolnikov suffered in the bitterness of poverty. He stays tucked away in his little apartment hiding from the rest of the world and obsessed with the idea of what makes a man extraordinary. Fyodor lets men like Napoleon make themselves idols in Raskolnikov's eyes. No longer are they men to him but Gods. All because they have seized the power from God to take a life. They can kill without

remorse. His idea is very similar to Machiavelli's, that if needed great men can commit great evils. So, Raskolnikov finds his comfort and he strikes. He kills an old woman who he's had to pawn all his belongings to for money. This viscous cycle of embarrassment led him to a psychotic break. Dostoyevsy makes it clear that man can only take so many hits to their pride. Raskolnikov makes the mistake of staying too long in the old woman's house and her sweet sister whom he admires comes in. He has to commit murder, but this time it is his friend he's killing. No longer do the means justify his end. The world made him invisible and he resented it for that, but all the sudden all he could ask for was to disappear. How can a man so infatuated by the power of blood shed be so sickened once he takes action? Simple, he is still a man. Hate is a learned behavior. To find joy in the killing of others is inhumane. Which may be why Raskolnikov found such evils to be the credentials of his idols, but these actions don't make them Gods it makes them tyrants. Some men involved in such awful actions could even be considered demonic, but he was lost. Society and economic disasters made him invisible., and the most dangerous thing for the soul is a lack of acceptance and love.

That is why characters such as Burris Ewell in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* exist. Characters like him are the literary representation of humanity's greatest downfalls. Ewell is at, what science would refer to as, the bottom of the food chain. Only black people and their position in society keep his ego afloat. It seems strange that a man who embodies all the evil in the world can be so prideful, but every tragic hero, in this case tragic villain, must have their fatal flaw as Aristotle stated in the *Poetics*. Burris had his hubris. So, the overly prideful low man



on the totem pole of white classism in America desires attention. He doesn't realize this fact until he's faced with the dilemma of Tom Robinson. All eyes are on Ewell after he makes the accusation that Tom raped his daughter. He finds overwhelming joy in the chaos he causes, but when Atticus manages to make him feel his place in life once again he feels nothing but resentment. Atticus makes him visible to everyone in a different way than before. Burris becomes the unsightly pimple on the tip of humanity's nose. This makes him audacious. He feels the overwhelming need to lick his wounds and get even. He is less than a man because he can find it in himself to attempt to murder children for purely selfish reasons. He represents the breaking point at which a human becomes devoid of all humanity.

Many nations in history have faced the same breaking point. Germany in particular felt the sting of being stripped of their pride after WWI. They were victims of circumstance and were blamed for the start of a war that included the entire world. They were poor, hungry, and thirsty for leadership. So, when an evil man like Hitler came to them promising food and riches they were deceived. Complete and total obedience was granted to him because they could no longer think for themselves. These people who were living without all the necessities of life were starving for hope. A nation without hope is a nation without morals, and Hitler abused the opportunity he had to brainwash an entire country.

Human kind cannot function without the love of others. A man will find joy in the despair of others if he is not offered the necessary affection of another human. Without validation, all the remnants of a humane lifestyle disappear and all that's left is a child crying to be held, fed, and begging for the love of its mother. Life without love leads humanity to its breaking point.

### 3A Champion

#### The Acknowledging and Obscuring of Reality

On a table lays a pair of spectacles. They sit there innocently yet insolently; they are doing nothing wrong, breaking no rules, and yet, despite their innocuous appearance, manage to be the most destructive force in our world. These glasses rest docilely on tables across the globe: on bedside tables, kitchen bars, waiting room desks, and restaurant booths. In fact, each and every one of us encounters these glasses multiple times throughout our day. However, whenever a person consciously makes the choice to pick them up and wear them, their perspective changes—drastically. Instead of seeing the world as it is, these individuals, wearing their twisted rose-colored glasses, view the world through a lens of stereotypes, prejudices, and delusions. Many in our world wear these invisible glasses every day, or at least carry them within easy reach in their front pockets at all times. It is an unfortunate certainty that people make the active decision to morph their perspectives of the realities we exist in so that they will conform to their ideals and standards, regardless of whether they are unjustified justified or irrational.

The pages of human history are filled with the good, the bad, the glorious, and the disgraceful. As a multi-faceted and ever-evolving species, there will never be a time where a historian will be able to place a tack on a timeline and say, “*There*. That is where humankind finally did everything right.” A prime example of this can be found when examining the World War II era. The “Golden Generation”, the group of young American men and women who came to age and served to protect the rights of all during that time period, were juxtaposed with the atrocities and horrific ideals of the Axis Powers. Adolf Hitler’s principles and visions were indisputably unfounded and absurd and would not have stood up to logic. However, rationality have absolutely nothing to do with his schemes and dreams; Hitler was completely blinded by

his prejudices and hysteria-filled grudges. Through his twisted perspective (one shared by no one but those similarly brainwashed) he glimpsed none of the normal moral barriers and merely his end goal. It can undeniably be said that only someone who watched the world through a different pair of glasses than everyone else would have been able to commit the crimes that Adolf Hitler did.

Many times over the eons has humankind struggled, thrashed, broken free, and sprinted forward on the road to so-called perfection only to discover that there was no road at all, and that we were merely running aimlessly through a field, imagining that we kept seeing glimpses of a path in the distance. Though history provides an almost painful number of examples of this occurrence, perhaps the most compelling can be found within the pages of the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. In the book, Viktor Frankenstein, a brilliant, ambitious college student, is essentially consumed by his desire to make a great discovery and earn fame and success. As the plot progresses, he discovers the secret of bestowing animation upon lifeless objects. Of course, his first thought is to make a new species, one of more perfect appearance and mentality than his own. The result, naturally, is anything *but* perfect: a looming eight-foot giant with yellow eyes and a voice like grating asphalt. However, the creation of the monster is not the most defining moment of the story. Upon realizing the terrifying deed he has done, Frankenstein swiftly abandons his helpless creation in disgust and loathing. He chose to focus on the unpleasant aspects of his creation (which, ironically, existed specifically from the work of his own hands) and desired to forget the whole ordeal. Predictably, this did not go over so well with the creation, who began to murder Frankenstein's loved ones after enduring the scorn of humankind for too long. Though an unorthodox example, this novel explicitly demonstrates that

problems are only created when one chooses to not acknowledge the existence of another, regardless of whether they look, talk, or interact in the same manner as oneself.

There is no denying the fact that there are extreme divides between nearly every person in our world; there are not two individuals who are exactly alike in regards to appearance, religion, wealth, education, or background. Even within families, between members of the same flesh and blood, there exist differences of opinions and desires. Therefore, one might wonder how any of us politely converse with one another at all! The simple fact is that there are no truly irreconcilable differences in the world. With enough effort and just a smidge of an open-mind, almost anything is possible when it comes to cohabitating with the fellow members of our species. Such a case can be found in the budding nation of the Republic of South Africa. Despite the recent memories of the oppressive apartheid days, the new fully desegregated country is setting the standard for closing the chasm between warring people groups. White, black, or brown, all are welcome, equal, and warmly invited to be helpful writers of the country's history. South Africa is truly an example of the good that is a direct consequence of permanently discarding the disoriented spectacles that often hold us back.

The only worse alternative to wearing these invisible glasses is completely shutting one's eyes. Unfortunately, this occurs more often than one might like to imagine. When scrutinizing F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, there is no better example of this than in the character of Jay Gatsby. Fixated on Daisy, the wife of Tom Buchanan, he completely removes himself from situations that remind him of unfortunate truths (such as the fact that he is pining over a married woman). He cannot bear to be in the same room as the two Buchanans when they are together, because they remind him of Daisy's utter unattainability. However, he has absolutely no qualms when it comes to having the actual affair. This begins an inevitable cycle

of tragedy, one entirely preventable had Gatsby made the decision to open his eyes to the truth of his situation and not delude himself in believing the world to be different than it truly was.

The decision to view our world at point-blank with a naked eye is not always an easy task. It would undoubtedly be simpler to continue on with our respective personal filters of illusions and hate and only associate with those who pose no obvious disagreements. But what type of future would that create? Surely no type of future at all; we would merely be backsliding into the comfortable past to land in the welcoming arms of mediocrity. Though much more difficult at times, the choice to discard the perspectives that restrict us will always lead to improvement and steps forward. In the end, there is only one true reality in the world: the one that stares back at us unabashedly, daring us to be brave enough to acknowledge it.

## 4A Champion

### Massive Impact: The Power of the Rejected

Evenly distributed throughout the known universe, there exist countless miniscule particles which together make the Higgs fields. Until 2006, these phantasmagorical particles were mad speculation foreshadowing revolutionary truth: the fields holding matter together are made of various collections of particles which cluster around substances to create mass. Higgs particles are the reason a man's mass remains the same whether he is on Earth or on Mars, although his weight may change. In contrast, photons are the massless particles that create light; because they do not interact with the ever-present Higgs particles, they are free to travel at the speed of light, a phenomenon which allows their influence to expand exponentially further than that of massive particles, which are limited by the Higgs field. In the same way, those individuals whom society does not burden with its purpose are free to shine forth without restraint across the galaxy of humanity. Societal outcasts, forgotten names, and broken souls have been given an inestimable gift of freedom. Society releases them to be purely human. While many individuals founder in the massive field of society's conforming influence, the massless individuals whom society forgets are free to radiantly experience true humanity.

True humanity cannot be found in a society where inequality exists. In London during the 1900s, women's equality was a laughable dream. Women were inferior to men; they were massless, mindless, pretty, and pointless. Women who tried to peacefully protest and demand suffrage in London's streets faced the police, who often sexually harassed them until the protestors fled the scene. Within this society, Emmeline Pankhurst, one of the photons society ignored, dared to hope for a brighter future. Along with jiu-jitsu practitioner Edith Garrud, Pankhurst organized a group of women dedicated to realizing the suffrage movement. These

women, clothed in black and hidden behind masks, would flood the scene when police began harassing protesters and deter them using martial arts skills. After escorting the protesters to safety and incapacitating the police, Pankhurst and her lady ninjas would vanish without a trace into the busy streets of London. The news called them the “suffrajitsus”. Because her society rejected her, Pankhurst was not anticipated as a threat; this anonymity gave her an edge which she fiercely exploited. Due to her efforts and the admirable work of other women warriors, Pankhurst lived to see British women receive the right to vote. The suffrajitsus blazed across the dark expanse which dared not touch them—and there was light.

Beneath the path of massless photons, the darkness of the massive particles trapped in Higgs fields reaches out to the light. In “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., the dystopian society Harrison Bergeron exists within traps its citizens in a cruel field of conformity. Handicaps are forced upon any individuals who are gifted beyond the average level, whether they are physically strong, mentally adept, or artistically excellent. Beautiful women wear gruesome masks. Ballerinas dance with weights shackled to them. Harrison Bergeron is a god among men, and, frightened by his physical and mental abilities, his society attempts to build a cage for a god. Because of his uniqueness, Harrison Bergeron is rejected as abnormal and forced to wear iron shackles, a mask, and every sort of Handicap available. Despite this, Harrison Bergeron is free of the mass his society attempts to cover him in. He shrugs off their bonds and, massless and unstoppable, he exists in a euphoric moment of self-acceptance and freedom before he is murdered by the Handicap General. In the Higgs field of Vonnegut’s world, Harrison Bergeron is the last photon in an existence of darkness. His identity is his greatest power, and because he is free of society’s choking insistence, Harrison Bergeron experiences true humanity, if only for a moment.

Higgs particles force a heaviness on the universe which vividly contrasts the concept of light epitomized by individuals cast out from society. Surrounded by a society clinging to a strict morality, artists such as Gertrude Stein had no place in the early 1900s. Stein, as a lesbian and a poet, was a hideous mistake of nature and certainly a lost cause in the eyes of an America recovering from the Great War. Faced with this pronouncement, Stein found that she was not alone; artists such as herself hovered above a society that had released its claim on them. Far from being morose, they were enthusiastic about this liberation. Stein coined the term the Lost Generation to describe those poets, writers, and great minds who felt as if they did not belong in their society; these photons burned hotly against the darkness, reveling in their freedom as they published, painted, and spoke out loudly against the conformity which attempted to reject their expression. Stein and her companions heralded a new age of tolerance and literary achievement which revolutionized America's search for humanity. Under the Lost Generation's guidance, the Higgs field of tradition was replaced by the massless light of human intuition, experience, and revelry in life itself.

Burdened by mass, a particle enslaved by the Higgs field can never know light's freedom. In "The Literomancer" by Ken Liu, the man known as the Literomancer supersedes the labels placed upon him and endeavors through love to pierce the dark heaviness of the world around him. After Lilly and her father move from Texas to the U.S. military base in Taiwan, Lilly battles loneliness until she meets Teddy and his grandfather, the Literomancer, who welcome her warmly into their culture. The Literomancer weaves the words of his native language into stories to entertain Lilly and teach her about his culture. Despite the fact that the Literomancer knows Lilly's father is in Taiwan to interrogate those who, like him, have past communist affiliations,



he does not hesitate to form a fast friendship with Lilly. Above the massive differences which drag his own culture and Lilly's apart, the Literomancer hovers, massless, dedicated to spreading a light which Lilly's father and his culture of war and divisiveness can never understand. These differences doom the Literomancer but the light he provided in Lilly's life continues to shine boldly against the bleak conflict consuming their reality.

Underlining the darkness of the universe, the Higgs field, vibrant and all-present, dutifully weighs down all existence. The particles cling to everything from planets to protons, from the greatest stars to the lowliest grain of sand on Earth. Above this midnight strikes the sunbeams of photons that surpass the Higgs fields' control. If photons were constrained to mass the way other particles are, light as the universe knows it could not exist. It is through their very rejection that photons find their place in a universe that would be blind without them. This same freedom which particles of light experience liberates individuals who society ignores. Individuals bound by society's field are deadened to their potential by the mass which drags them down to a reality identified by darkness. It is those who bear the light ever onward, the massless and the forgotten, the abused and the invisible, who can unveil their purest potential and live what it means to be human.

## 5A Champion

### Invisibility...or Ignorance?

The air that surrounds me as I walk through the streets of Kandy, Sri Lanka is sweet and heavy, as if it is mango jam that I can taste if I open my mouth. There are flies everywhere-on the brim of my wide hat, lining the coconut husk netting of the *tuktuk* whizzing past, on the honey *jalebi* that lay in greasy piles in front of old men squatting near the road. I love it all, so much that it hurts to think about it. I can't bear to be away very long- every summer, I return to my beloved homeland, this miniscule island on which my grandparents raised my parents with the stern love that characterizes the people. And yet, every visit, I never fail to forget the absolutely abysmal state of living most Sri Lankans endure-on accident or not, I am not sure.

Poverty is a given in Sri Lanka, and it is best seen in Kandy, where small, ragged children and wailing adults crowd the streets. Most people ignore them, much like they ignore the flies. But my parents do not allow this-not at all. There's a certain slum we visit every summer, and a certain area of that slum in which we are forced to stand during each visit. It is in between two bright blue stucco buildings, and holds the cardboard boxes that house many a beggar. These boxes, or at least their ancestors, once housed my grandparents, and my parents as well.

When I stand there, I feel disgust-not only by the conditions of the place, but mostly by my sheer ignorance, my ability to eradicate this dreadful area from my mind as soon as I return to the states. Does this happen because I know I can't live my life happily, knowing that other people live in a perpetual state of misery? Or, worse-is it because I'm so feeble-minded and shallow that the slums of Kandy, Sri Lanka subconsciously slip from my mind as we enter our own house?

It pains me to say this, but it is somewhat comforting to know that I am not the only one

who lives as if they are the only ones on Earth, or perhaps less extreme-everyone is living in the ideal conditions they are so blessed to have. This ignorance is a disease-an epidemic that has spread through our nation, infecting our very cores and leaving us to live our happy lives while others suffer magnanimously. Even as I sit here typing, and as you are judging, there is someone, somewhere, who is hanging onto their pitiful life by a thread. It sounds terrible, like we are evil beings, doesn't it? But the first step towards improvement is to acknowledge that something needs to be improved-and that is what we must do, as a nation. We must see the invisible man, women, and child, and tell them *we will ease your suffering*. And then we must keep our promise, for otherwise, it is useless.

I don't have to look any farther than my phone to see these useless promises. Like most teenagers, I have social media. There are thousands of relief and support accounts on these platforms, generating millions of likes and comments per post-*How terrible! Those poor children! We send our love!* You know what I'm referring to, right? The picture of the stereotypical American tourist, surrounded by a circle of emaciated African children-perhaps one of them even in her arms, if she's brave. The caption says, "I will pray for you, beautiful child of God," or "I have fallen in love with the people of Kenya." Then the tourist returns to the US, to their comfortable suburban house-picket fence, two kids and a dog. They brew coffee in their Keurig. They drive to work. Perhaps a certain smell of damp earth or the sight of a beggar jogs their memory, but for the most part, they *forget*. That post, for them, is enough. In their eyes, they have succeeded by not only visiting the children, but showing their experience to the world! They have raised awareness!

Or so they think. I see the picture. I feel an overwhelming guilt as I look around my lavishly furnished apartment. And then, and *then*, I double-tap, maybe donate \$5 to a relief organization, and move on.

See, here's the problem-similar to the difference between hearing and listening, there is also a very important distinction between seeing and processing. And while I did see the picture, like so many other Americans, I did not truly process the reality of the heartbreaking situation. Because if I, and others, *truly* processed what was seen, then I would have done everything I could possibly do to help. We, as a nation, need to learn to process, and not just see.

While we are quick to feel guilty about our own lives, we are incredibly sluggish when it comes to actually acting on that guilt, or other similar feelings. It occurs at home, too, and minorities are often the victims. Picture this: Wichita, Kansas, July 4th 2007. LaShanda Calloway is in a local convenience store when she is robbed and stabbed. As she lays there, bleeding from several serious wounds, five shoppers just stepped right over her and kept on going. One shopper stops for a moment and snaps a picture. LaShanda later dies quietly, in a pool of her own blood. It is sadly ironic that she dies on July 4th, when the freedom and equality of everyone is celebrated.

What caused the people to simply ignore the terrible tragedy in front of their very eyes, when they could have easily saved LaShanda's life? Psychologists have dubbed this phenomenon (or should I say disease?) "the bystander effect," which shows a negative correlation between the number of witnesses to an accident and the percentage of people that attempt to help. The hypothesized cause for this correlation is that the more people at an accident, the higher the "diffusion of responsibility." In other words, the more they are likely to think that everyone else in the crowd, or someone that is more skilled than them, will help, rather

than themselves. Thus, when everyone thinks like this, nobody acts, and the accident is free to occur. We need to extricate ourselves from this disease-I can bet my life that it is better for more people than necessary to help someone rather than nobody help at all.

A few days ago, my family was discussing the excessive use of water in our household. We made a pact to reduce our shower times to less than five minutes, and stop running the tap when brushing our teeth. As we made the plan, my brother stated, "It won't matter if we do it-everyone else will keep wasting water. So why should *we* change?"

I could barely suppress my guilt and sadness at this statement. To be honest, I had felt the same way not too long ago. This is yet another example of the bystander effect-if nobody is helping, we shouldn't, either, because it doesn't matter. But here's where we're wrong-it *does* matter. Every single person on Earth matters, and every single person makes an impact on the planet. By thinking of everyone else's supposed ignorance, we're depriving ourselves of an opportunity to save our planet-and if everyone thinks in this manner, then we truly are doomed.

Perhaps people will care more if I relate this ignorance to politics. Not long ago, under President Nixon, there lived the Silent Majority. This large group of people did not voice their political opinions regarding the Vietnam War, and thus, the few racist radicals that did make sure to do so seemed to embody the American spirit. In truth, they did not, and America didn't actually support the war to the extent that it seemed. Instead, people just simply didn't *care*. This, actually, is said to be the reason we wasted so many resources, lost so many lives, in that war. If those people had only voiced their opinions earlier, before Nixon had to practically beg them to in his famous speech, then maybe the US could have saved those lives, and maybe even won in

the process. But what's done is done, and what's even more upsetting is that we refuse to learn from our failures. In present day, millennials are the largest generation so far. They are also much less likely to vote than the generation before them, the new Silent Majority. And when they, and the younger generations after them, get upset about the decisions made in office, they often fail to recognize their own ignorance, their own forgetfulness of the crisis plaguing our planet. Thus, we must act. We must vote, if we can, and if we are too young, we must voice our opinions in other ways. We must yell and shout and shake our fists in the face of inequality, and ignorance, and expose the issues of poverty and shame, because if we don't make our opinions known, if we don't draw attention to issues that need to be fixed, we will get absolutely *nowhere*.

Sure, you may ask, as my brother did, naïvely, *Does the issue matter, if it doesn't directly affect us? Should we care?* In response, I remember Barbara Kingsolver, and her *Poisonwood Bible*. Rachel, the oldest Price daughter, embodies today's America-she is petty, superfluous, and can't seem to stop yearning for American luxuries as she and her family mission in the Congo. Her only consolation is, sadly, that she can just forget Africa when she returns, and just pretend it was a bad dream. This works brilliantly in cheering her spirits until her youngest sister, Ruth May, is bitten by a snake and dies. Rachel realizes that she can never forget the Congo after the permanent damage it has sustained on her family. The truth is, even if someone we know and love doesn't perish in poverty or starvation or the countless other evils of the world, it is essential to acknowledge these issues, because these people are still precious living beings. Additionally, it is impossible that any issue with our world does not influence us in some way. Those homeless people bring you feelings of sadness when you walk by. Those poor neighborhoods are subject to

gentrification and will increase the cost of living for everyone. That terrible disease that turns people into sacks of blackened blood may mutate and travel across the Atlantic Ocean, affecting cities very close to your own home. And even if such issues didn't affect us, it would be incredibly selfish and conceited to disregard the problems of others just because they seem to be outside of one's own life. But, of course, that is exactly what we do. But awareness, and action, is key. We mustn't forget Hitler's Nazi Germany, and the ignorance of many as they openly allowed their Jewish friends and neighbors to be transported in cattle carts to the very gates of hell. Where were their morals, the very fibers of their ethical being? Dissolved in the acid of fear, or simply nonexistent to begin with? Thus, I conclude, that the acknowledgment of these problems is also the essential acknowledgement of our own moral characters.

Only a few weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, terrorists bombed many Catholic churches and upscale hotels in Sri Lanka. Most of my family fled to jungle hideouts that they keep stocked-ethnic conflicts are a common occurrence in Sri Lanka. However, nothing as horrific as the recent attack has happened since the nation's Civil War, and I am deeply gratified to see the humanitarian aid that has acted. We will return to Sri Lanka again this summer, albeit with more precautions. We will return to Kandy, to see if the slums of my parents' youth still remain. Of course, I am excited to experience the essence of my culture once again. But more than anything, I yearn, with every part of my soul, to throw myself into restorative efforts of the families and sacred churches that were so cruelly torn to pieces by metal bullets fueled by hatred.

I see you, oh invisible man. I see you in the scarred and trembling veteran under the bridge near the park. I see you in the rape victims huddled in abortion clinics. I see you in the broken mother, and the city of the lead water, and the burning cathedral. I see you in my own eyes when I glance at a mirror. And I refuse, absolutely *refuse*, to ignore you. I will not succumb

to the urge to tuck my head down, to walk on by and turn a blind eye. I will stand and scream and point to you, suppressing my sobs of sympathy. I will beg others to help me help you.

I acknowledge you. I sympathize with your struggles, and I will do whatever I possibly can to cease your suffering.

Now- I turn to you, reader.

You know what you must do.



“Woke” is the New “Cool”

Being “woke” is totally ‘in’ right now. Just ask any new-age social justice advocate. The word “woke” is an adjective (stemming from the word “awake”), which is used to describe perceived social consciousness. Social consciousness is, of course, important, but a new phenomenon of “woke culture” is finding its way into the mainstream. “Woke culture” allows the masses to feign concern over social issues and uphold a sense of self-righteousness, even when such righteousness is devoid of empathy and understanding. Disingenuous activism, encouraged by “woke culture,” perpetuates the metaphorical invisibility of oppressed groups; instead of participating in meaningful change or discussion, new-age “woke” activists project their own sense of morality onto otherwise complex issues. As such, activists begin to treat the oppressed as blank canvases, onto which they can project their flawed understanding of their social condition.

“Woke culture” is perhaps best illustrated by American tragedies, which occur in a sort of cycle. Whether it be a mass shooting, hate crime, or other noteworthy event, the same set of events appear from under the rubble. First comes *impatience*. The 24-hour news networks begin reporting stories before the details have emerged. Perhaps a panelist will speculate the religious affiliation or skin color of the perpetrator. Then comes *editorialization*. Maybe a pundit will begin advocating for the implementation of their political agenda. Next is *sensationalism* and *virtue signaling*. Politicians capitalize on the opportunity to score ‘points’ among social justice advocates. If an African-American was shot by the police, police brutality becomes the most important issue facing the country. If a hate crime was committed against a stereotypically

Muslim-looking individual, tackling Islamophobia becomes the most pressing initiative on the policy agenda. Now, it is “woke” to participate in this phenomenon of sensationalism.

But hurry! Soon, everyone will forget.

This cyclical process is, of course, tragic. However, its predictable nature has allowed it to become normalized—so can we really blame those who jump on the “woke” bandwagon? Everyone—even the most socially-conscious among us—has their own affairs to tend to. Someone has to drive the kids to their soccer game, pick up dinner on the way home from work, and make sure the bills are paid. In a time during which home-life balance seems to be becoming a thing of the past, who has time to solve racism, sexism, or homophobia?

The struggles of the oppressed are easily appropriated as *fads*, and as such, we perpetuate the mechanisms by which their voices are silenced. The busy parent cannot devote the little free time he or she has to protesting, contacting their Congressperson, or participating in any other means of meaningful change. But a post on Facebook or a Tweet with #neverforget is just a few clicks away.

Yet behind the seemingly innocent #neverforget is a harmful instance of groupthink. It is as if the plight of African-Americans, of Muslim-Americans, or of any other ‘hyphenated American’ is not truly understood by anyone except the members of that specific group. Tragedy, which is often symbolic of greater societal issues, is reduced to the level of a fashionable political choice, and the masses can “try on” a specific brand activism for some time, before moving on to the next cause—or to no cause at all. All the while, the concerns of the oppressed groups are not truly addressed, and their identity remains muddled behind a veil of invisibility and victimhood.

Selfishness is an unequivocal characteristic of the human condition, and perhaps rightfully so. This ‘virtuous selfishness’ is the basis of the philosophy of one of the most polarizing figures in all of academia: Ayn Rand. But it is Rand who summarizes the sentiment of the masses the best—“no one has ever given a *reason* why we ought to be our brother’s keeper.”

Perhaps Rand is right. Perhaps there is no *reason* why we ought to be our brother’s keeper. But then again, maybe there is no *reason* to advocate for any change at all. The only *reason* there is in an existence marked by selfishness is personal gain. Individuals who join the grief bandwagon (seeking vindication) unintentionally erase the complexity inherent to large groups of traditionally oppressed people. Ultimately, the victim status of these oppressed groups begins to perpetuate the invisibility of their members.

African-American is not a synonym for poor. Muslim-American is not a synonym for persecuted. Asian-American is not a synonym for victim. But in the language of social justice, the semantics of oppression become vague.

The illusion of the over-arching arrow of human progress is uniquely damaging because it pressures those who have no real care for their fellow humans to feign outrage and activism. In the case of society’s oppressed, we do not truly see the nature of their oppression. Above all else, we feel our own pity and we see an opportunity to express our own self-righteousness.

Here lies the second interpretation of “invisibility.”

When social causes are sensationalized and turned into fads, the identity of the oppressed is degraded to that of a *cause*. When the gay rights movement is labelled as “today’s civil rights movement,” the complexities of the issues and personalities of queer Americans everywhere are tainted. When Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. are relegated to the same section of the same chapter of history books, the massive differences in their philosophies (let alone the

nuances present in their temperaments) is bulldozed. In a word, they become invisible. Those who throw their support behind “today’s civil rights movement” or place trust in the hands of their history textbooks fail to perceive the demands of these ‘victims.’ Instead, they perceive their own feelings of complacency and satisfaction. They perceive everything except those who they think they are concerned about.

Oppressed groups do not need pity. They do not need our hashtags or Facebook posts or lit candles or any other form of virtue signaling. If they are truly to be understood—to rid themselves of the plague of invisibility—we must dismantle “woke culture” in favor of honesty.