

Coworkers, Coin-Flippers, and Leon Trotsky

Walking home from Scott Smith's memorial service, I reflected on his impact on me. It is a tired cliché that your favorite professor inevitably has a profound impact on your life. However, like so many who shared their memories of Scott Smith that night, my meaningful moments with Scott were when he shared blunt insights, not sweeping declarations. Scott was the first professor to grade my writing, and I remember writing my first essay for his class quickly and provocatively. Scott gave me a "B" with simple feedback: my argument was polemic at best, deftly destroying a sad excuse of a straw-man.

Unfortunately, I considered his feedback a fluke, not an indicator of the broader problem with my style of argumentation. No prior teacher had constructively critiqued my work, and I was a slow learner despite earlier signs of a problem: after a series of contested political arguments with my grandparents, they gave me the book *Thank You For Arguing* as a birthday gift; and in high school I won the dubious honor of "Most Likely to be a Lawyer." While I refused to reconsider my approach essay to essay, Scott patiently critiqued my one-sided argumentation.

I took Scott's class on the Soviet Union—my last class with him prior to his cancer diagnosis—and was fascinated by his adept descriptions of the human cost of Stalinist policies. Scott juxtaposed horrific accounts of the gulags with the Bolshevik conviction that the ends truly would justify the means, complicating the portraits of people oft-condemned without second thought. Scott's empathy for all involved in the Soviet experiment, from Bolsheviks to babushkas, helped me understand the importance of suspending argument in favor of understanding, and finally—after two years of Scott's classes—I wrote my first essay worthy of a Scott Smith "A." I had selected Trotsky, the Bolshevik I least understood, and attempted to

understand him. I remember proudly tucking the graded essay away, blissfully unaware that it would be the only “A” Scott would ever give me. His unexpected diagnosis would soon end his teaching career.

A year after my last class with Scott, I studied abroad in England. My time abroad was overshadowed by two seismic elections, as Brexit and Trump prevailed in the worst one-two punch to globalism since the annexations of Manchuria and the Rhineland by Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany, respectively. English society is constructed around the institution of drinking, and thus English nights occasionally found my friends and I at a bar, talking politics. On one such night, my friend Will let it slip that he had voted in favor of Brexit, deciding his vote with a coin-flip. Heads won, and England headed out of the European Union. Soon after Will's admission, I witnessed the most surreal American election of my lifetime as ‘hate trumped love.’ It was not until I stayed with Will in his hometown—a place that has not seen economic growth since Margaret Thatcher did away with its industry in one flourish of a pen—that I was able to ask a deceptively simple question of both his and America’s choice: “Why?”

In answering this question, I remembered another day that the sun shone bright: I sat in a white government pickup truck with my 45 year old coworker, both making sure that we took up every second of the 30 minute (unpaid) lunch break in the oasis of air-conditioning. Our lunchtime conversations were usually predictable: sports, how his daughters were doing in sports, and sports. But whoever used the pickup last had set the radio to the wasteland that is AM radio, and so for lunch we received a healthy helping of Hilary hate, courtesy of Rush Limbaugh. Limbaugh’s rant opened up new ground: a discussion of politics. My coworker planned to vote for Trump, but as he explained *why* he planned to vote for Trump, he did not show any ‘deplorable’ sentiments associated with Trump supporters. Instead, he conceded that Trump was

far from perfect, maybe even an idiot. But, in his eyes Trump was an idiot willing to keep Americans safe. On this damp grey English day, I realized that my coworker's rationale was important. His first priority was *always* his daughters, and it was through that lens that he saw the world: an unfair, unsafe world in need of *change*. While my coworker and Will are remarkably different, both had been confronted with a reality in need of change, and made their decisions accordingly.

By spending more time with both Will and my coworker, I was able to apply the lesson Scott impressed upon me: that empathy and a desire to understand the rationale behind an actor's actions are necessary. We cannot simply stop with the assumption that an actor was wrong, thereby condemning him or her. Scott's empathy for mass murderers and their victims in the Soviet Union and his insistence on the suspension of argument serve as reminders of what we are missing in America today. Condemnation should not be based on assumption. No-one should be immediately relegated to a 'basket of deplorables,' as answers are more complicated than such declarations suggest. America is a divided nation all too quick to draw comparisons, to condemn one another. Arguing and creating in- and out-groups is easy, after all. We would all benefit from practicing empathy, by asking why. When I suspend argument and exercise empathy—with coworkers, coin-flipping friends, and even violent revolutionaries like Leon Trotsky—I know that Scott's wisdom lives beyond the classroom, beyond the grave.