

21W.745: Advanced Essay Workshop
Natania Antler

I Don't Care: Apathy, Rebellion and Beyond

*There was once a boy named Pierre
Who only would say, I don't care!*

–Pierre, Maurice Sendak

As I watch the presidential primaries I'm happy to see that Barack Obama is doing well. As a native Chicagoan, I would be hard-pressed to root for anyone but the home team, but I'm hoping that Obama's campaign won't develop any characteristics of the Chicago Cubs late in the game. I even have the bragging rights to having worked briefly for his U.S. Senate campaign in high school. A group of us were put to work leafleting in various Chicago neighborhoods. After a day of this, I developed a keen sense of sympathy for the people who leave Chinese take-out menus in front of houses. A menu for the *Empire* restaurant, often carefully rubberbanded to doorknobs and slipped under doors, preceded our every move in one exhausting corner of the city. But I digress. What I meant to say is that while I'm happy that Obama is doing well, I'm even happier to see people my age caring about something.

You see, I had my doubts. In first grade my classmates decided that Barney the purple dinosaur was uncool. This was a point of some consternation for me because I rather liked this cretaceous creature, who took up a sizable slice of PBS airtime and the kids' video market. "I love you, you love me, we're a happy family...what's wrong with that?" I thought. I didn't realize it at the time, but my classmates probably disliked Barney because they were mostly older, and tired of Barney's happy-go-lucky preaching. Or they'd discovered the risqué fare on the Nickelodeon cable channel which my family didn't get.

Even so, those reasons alone can't account for the fact that Barney the purple dinosaur was not just disliked, but truly hated. If they could have burned him in effigy, they would have. Soon I would forswear Barney too, and would have to do so publicly long before I'd outgrown his show in private. Why was it that my classmates hated Barney so much? I think it was because he dared to show enthusiasm. His biggest crime was that he cared about learning, cooperation and inclusion, and said so, loudly. The most vocal of the Barney haters was Sandra. She hated Barney with a passion; with thorough tongue-lashings she made an example of anyone who dared speak otherwise. Soon, with Sandra and her cohorts' urging, if you were shown to care too much about Barney, about school, about other people, about anything really, you were immediately ostracized. By third grade my classmates resembled moody teenagers. I got burned more times than I care to count. A typical exchange:

Sandra remarks: Lilly your art project looks like chicken scratch.

Lilly exclaims: It does not!

Sandra taunts: It does too!

I say: Sandra, leave Lilly alone! It doesn't look like chicken scratch.

Looking at me disapprovingly, Lilly replies: Jeez, Natania, don't have a cow!

In my socially awkward way I had created a win-win situation for both Lilly and Sandra. Sandra gets to make both of us miserable, and Lilly gets to salvage some of her pride by turning on me. I had sinned on two fronts—I had worried about Lilly's feelings, and I'd shown that I cared by responding too passionately. I hadn't yet learned that there was another way to respond to this type of attack, with humor. It's a far superior method, which I still haven't mastered to this day.

Instead, I learned soon enough the easiest way to deflect Sandra. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. I became impassive and indifferent, just like the invincible Sandra and her gang. I took the age old advice that if you stop responding to a bully—if eventually she can no longer get a

rise out of you—she'll get bored and go away. It sort of worked for me, but Sandra was a lot more persistent than the stereotypical bully who beats you up and steals your lunch money. The problem with that age-old advice is that if you say you don't care often enough, eventually you really will stop caring. You'll stand there quietly as you are abused, and you will turn a blind eye as you see injustice done to others. Apathy is just like any other mask; you wear it long enough and sooner or later it will stick and become part of you.

I tried my best to make sure it didn't stick to me. I still cared about the teasing going on around me, which I hid as best I could, until I couldn't stand it anymore and spoke out. Furthermore, I still cared deeply about school and learning, something I could never hide. I wondered, though, how well my classmates had fared in the same battle. An even scarier thought, what if it wasn't a battle for them? Apathy, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, may mean, "Freedom from, or insensibility to, suffering; hence, freedom from, or insensibility to, passion or feeling; passionless existence." Were my classmates free from the minor miseries I endured almost every day in my interactions with Sandra and the popular crowd? I hoped for both my sake and theirs that they weren't immune. To suffer and sacrifice because one cares—about people, learning, the arts, or a righteous mission—it seems to me that suffering for a cause is fundamentally human. My classmates were not robots; they had to have cared about the teasing. From my perspective, only reports from my mother of other girls also going home in tears to *their* mothers could poke holes in their masks of apathy. Without this I would have imagined my classmates—perhaps *everyone* else my age—returning home each night, behaving just like Maurice Sendak's Pierre. Indifferent, even in the face of a marauding lion:

*Now as the night began to fall
A hungry lion paid a call
He looked Pierre right in the eye
And asked him if he'd like to die
Pierre said—I don't care!*

...
*Then I'll eat you, if I may
—I don't care!
So the lion ate Pierre.
-Maurice Sendak*

I would imagine that apathetic youth are an age-old problem. Or maybe it's just that people complaining about apathetic youth are an age-old problem. The place where they complain the most? Civic duty. And how did my class do in comparison with the norm? Well, as luck would have it, people with interest in politics are easy to find because most of them enjoy loudly holding forth. There were a few people in my class in lower and middle school who cared about politics, far fewer who could speak intelligently about the subject. A notably articulate exception was Jim. He wrote an essay in fifth grade with the provocative title, "On Being a Republican in a Democratic School." He was bang-on about the Democratic school part. My kindergarten through twelfth grade school was a progressive school in the middle of the liberal-minded city of Chicago. My classmates were mostly Democrats because their former-hippie parents were Democrats.

By high school, when I asked one of my classmates a question about politics, they responded as their parents would respond. Usually the party line, and by that I mean both in the sense of the DNC, and also in the sense of the Macarena or the Cha-Cha Slide. In terms of relative levels of interest in politics and partying, I would imagine that my class was about average compared to the rest of people our age. The only people in my school who would give

answers differing from the political norm were Jim and a kid in the class below named Sam, who was an anarchist with a Marxist bent. Whenever given the chance, Jim and Sam would debate their politics, in the paper, school assembly, hallway, lunch room. They were good friends though. On Halloween they went as each other; Sam wore a button down and khakis, Jim a Che Guevara t-shirt and knit cap with earflaps.

What fascinated me about Jim (and Sam too) was that finally here was someone who was unique! In a strange turn of events, Jim seemed to have rebelled against the liberal uniformity of our school by becoming a *conservative*! I was disappointed to find out that Jim's parents were actually conservative too, so he wasn't *really* rebelling in all quarters. Sure, it still took some guts to stand up to the political majority, but that's all it was, guts, good public speaking and a heavy dose of 1950s square.

On the political front I never really could figure out where I stood. I didn't want to be a Democrat simply because the rest of my school (and city) was Democratic, and by the same token I didn't want to follow the lead of my slightly crazy Marxist-hippie turned Republican father. The only option left to me was to decide where I stood based on my own research, which was a daunting task, and one I'm still trying to sort out. I've been stuck squarely in the middle, dissatisfied with both parties. To this day I often have to hide behind a mask of apathy to get out of arguments I know I don't have the necessary guts or information to win.

I may have been on the fence about politics, but one thing I consciously decided against in high school was becoming a typical rebellious and partying teenager. My classmates had augmented the atmospheric cloud of apathy from lower and middle school with pot smoke and an alcoholic haze. What I found both funny, and at times tragically ironic, was that they really

thought they were being unique by rebelling, but they weren't. Their baby boomer parents had done the exact same thing, and with much more spectacular results! I agree wholeheartedly with Richard Rodriguez, who writes in his book Brown that "the teenager persists in rebelling against her parents, against tradition or custom, because she is shielded (blindfolded, entranced, drugged) by American culture from the knowledge that she inherited her rebellion from dead ancestors and living parents." Although I didn't much like the guys in my high school class who formed a band called "Store Bought Rebels" (SBR), I have to admit that at least they had their eyes open. That was the thing about rebellion and apathy at our school. Neither demeanor was about being radical or unique. Rebellion and apathy were about conforming. They were both very good strategies for fitting in.

*They rushed the lion into town
The doctor shook him up and down
And when the lion gave a roar
Pierre fell out upon the floor
He rubbed his eyes and scratched his head
And laughed because he wasn't dead.
-Maurice Sendak*

Just like Sendak's Pierre, my class did eventually begin to care. I think it's because we grew up a bit. Much to the dread of everyone who'd been around in elementary school, Sandra came back in 9th grade. She'd grown up since lower school too, and managed to keep a low profile, until as a final insult she was recruited away by our rival high school to play on their basketball team. Jim wrote prolifically for the school paper, scored a 1600 on the SAT, went to an Ivy League school, and to the best of my knowledge is still a Republican. And I finally realized towards the end of high school that I'd somehow gained the respect of my peers, and they in

turn had gained mine. I began to find proof for what I'd hoped all along, that they were in fact human beings, and not mindless conforming robots. In the elevator as we left Calculus with a newly returned test, my classmates were boasting about how well—and how badly—they'd done. I'd kept quiet, until asked how I'd managed. I smiled and said "I did fine." Yuki, who'd been in the popular crowd for years, replied "and that's Natania, quietly running circles around the rest of us." A few weeks later, a day after I'd posted my Yale rejection letter on the Wall of Shame in the senior locker area, I discovered someone had scribbled on it, "MIT, BITCHES!" It was these sorts of completely unexpected compliments that began to restore my faith in our class, and my generation as a whole. Sure, most of them still drank and smoked themselves silly on weekends, and they still didn't get along that well with their parents, but they had shown me that they could be kind. They played sports, or sang, volunteered, acted, debated or wrote. Some of them even built robots. Most importantly, it became cool to care again. It was finally okay to give a damn, and that felt like a start.

What had irked me the most about our school was that they were trying to teach this wonderful and lofty progressive message about the value of individuality within a community, but with my classmates in lower, middle, and even high school, I saw the message ignored and even subverted. We were all so lucky to be at this very well-off school with excellent teachers, good facilities and understanding administrators. Time and again I watched it taken for granted. The worst culprit was apathy, with rebellion its obnoxious older brother, and both were slave to conformity. I can't argue with apathy in the stoic sense, when it is used as a way to bear suffering that cannot be avoided or fought. I can't argue with rebellion when it is against true

injustice. I can and will argue, passionately, against apathy and rebellion for the sake of conformity.

That's why I was so happy when my class finally started to wake up in high school, as I hope happened at high schools across the country. Three years after high school graduation, at MIT and enjoying passionately most every whirlwind minute of it, I have been watching the presidential primaries with glee. Voter turnout among people 18 through 29 is holding steady or increasing, tripling and quadrupling in some states. I may still be on the fence about some aspects of politics, but I am decidedly glad to see people my age showing evidence that they care. They must have cared all along, but thank goodness they're finally showing it.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21W.745 / WGS.576 Advanced Essay Workshop
Spring 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.