

Preparation For The Next Life – What We Want Is Not What We Will Get

✘ After war, most societies look for love. Instead of dealing with the various manifest issues that remain after years of chaos and wanton murder, they seek the understanding and hope that can only be provided by stories based on faith, something greater than the brutal logic of expedience. A certain type of story presents love as a gift to the audience, a sanctuary from the tension brought about by strife, a coherent conclusion. A happy ending. It seems, from reviews of *Preparation for the Next Life*, as well as the recent reception of *American Sniper* and the relationship between Chris Kyle and his wife that forms its logical heart, that many Americans feel that they deserve such a story as well.

Preparation for the Next Life is not about love – it's a terrifically clever and realistic accounting of the ways in which people seek escape from life at the bottom of a capitalist society. The plot's logic depends in part on offering readers the catharsis of a conventional love story, then switching the terms of the bargain without losing any momentum. By the time readers realize that *Preparation for the Next Life* uses love like toreadors use their capes, it's too late. And instead of salvation, readers encounter a tragic tale of poverty and paucity that leads into a scathing indictment of the choices Western culture has made over at least the last fourteen years. More, if one counts Chinese communism, itself a product of Western culture.

There are two main characters in *Preparation for the Next Life*. The first to whom readers are introduced is Zhou Lei, an ethnic Uighur from the northwest of China. The Uighurs are Muslims, and the ethnic (Han) Chinese tend to dislike or hate

them, which leads to her being alienated in her own country. Zhou travels from the type of crippling poverty one encounters in the third world to America (land of opportunity), where she is still viewed as an outsider by the predominantly Han Chinese immigrants. Despite the many hardships in her background, Zhou is defined by an inexhaustibly optimistic nature. This optimism draws its power from the myths her mother tells her when she's a child, and is framed logically by her father, who believes in 60's-style nationalistic, pro-Chinese propaganda. It's interesting to see how easily this propaganda fits into Zhou's idea of herself succeeding in the context of Western capitalism, as well.

The book abounds with stories and myths that the characters hear, and which they tell each other – they form the novel's life-blood, and are simultaneously vital to the plot and empty of all meaning. The myths that Zhou Lei's mother tells her, for example, serve as touchstones that readers can follow like signposts throughout the narrative. In one, offered in the beginning of the book, Zhou's mother explains that distant mountains conceal a land of plenty. Much later in the book, a tired, hungry, and distressed Zhou finds herself talking with an Uzbek Afghan grocer, who has seen the same mountains from his native country of Afghanistan. The Uzbek offers her food and water, and Zhou experiences momentary relief, which leads nowhere. In another of Zhou's mother's myths, a girl travels to the faraway land of plenty with nothing but seven seeds to sustain her. The girl burns her feet while traveling over an iron desert, but makes it through to a blue river, where she's healed. The occurrence of blue and injured feet later on in the book at various points offer useful guideposts on Zhou's actual journey – or, at least, gives readers a sense of how she views a given situation; in keeping with the book's relentless realism, these signifiers are logical to the narrative and unto themselves, but don't actually deliver any more profound truth.

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The next character readers meet is Brad Skinner, a former bodybuilder who joined the military after 9/11, and served three tours of duty in Iraq with the U.S. Army Infantry, including during the invasion. His background, delivered in the third person, states that the impulse behind joining was the terrorist attack on the twin towers – but it's more complex than that: *"9/11 was the big reason, but he would have gone anyway, just to do something."*

Skinner is surely one of the more complex veteran characters to emerge in contemporary literature. It would be a mistake to say simply that he is a broken veteran of the Iraq War, or suffers from PTSD – while both are undeniably true in the context of the text, they simplify and reduce his essential characteristics in a way that diminishes his experiences. The character readers encounter isn't a fundamentally decent man, twisted and misshapen by war – he's a savvy, emotionally manipulative adolescent who has been allowed to hide his defects behind his service, and attempts to do so immediately, as well as throughout the text. Skinner understands the archetype he's playing – the "war hero" – and he cynically exploits expected civilian reactions to this type, again and again, describing himself as a veteran whenever he senses that the listener could be sympathetic to such an introduction. We meet him on the road into New York City, having hitched a ride from a very tolerant trucker after leaving the military – after acting like an entitled jerk and getting kicked out at the first gas station possible, Skinner walks into the city and attempts to pick up one of the first women he meets:

"I just got here, literally like an hour ago. Two hours ago. We could have a drink or something and you could tell me about yourself."

"Thank you, no."

"You sure? I just got out of the army yesterday. I literally just got here. All I want to do is buy you a drink to say

thank you. Howbout it? I mean, you're not talkin' to a bad person."

"I realize that."

He moves on from this rejection, which he handles with characteristic irritation, Skinner heads to a patriotic bar. There, patrons buy him drinks for his service. Despite a desire on the part of readers to, maybe, see Skinner as a good person exposed to the horrors of war (and he was exposed to the horrors of war), few soldiers or veterans act, consistently, the way Skinner does – he's been written this way to a purpose, and that purpose, when one reads the entire novel, is a subtle repudiation of the debatable notion that moral injuries sustained in combat lead inexorably to bad ends. Sometimes injury and moral injury does lead to tragic decisions, but more often, as pointed out by thinkers like Nietzsche and Jung, moral injury from war leads to good and decent men growing and expanding – undertaking political service, as in the Greatest Generation, or literary works, as in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*. Skinner is a different breed.

The physical descriptions of war arrive through Skinner's dreams, or shaded recollections, and tend toward the surreal. They feel authentic – the way one sees vivid experiences from the past, unmediated by the conscious mind – especially in the beginning of the deployment: *"They crossed paths with other units, soldiers who had been in heavy house-to-house fighting and there was a bad feeling, like they wanted to hurt somebody and you were it."* As time goes on in the war, readers experience combat like an especially urgent impressionistic painting in which Skinner has become trapped: *"In the arc-weld light, solid forms appeared to shift – the hanging dust. Shadows were running. The drilling deafening thundering never stopped. The razor lights leapt straight across the black, flashed past – he whipped his head around – and they went away and went arcing slowly down like baseballs. The ground and the*

air were being shocked." He loses friends, and (at least at first) dreads his memories of those experiences – until later in the book, when, thoroughly in the grip of the delusion that war can provide some sort of balm for his aching soul, he dreams of the war as a happier place, a time of fellowship and shared purpose.

There's no question that Skinner has encountered severe moral injury based on what he sees and does in combat. He murders civilians, for one thing, and photographs them in awful positions for another – he is a war criminal, in other words, the lowest, most thuggish level of war criminal, but a criminal nevertheless, and carries PTSD. But the ravages of that awful psychological disorder – from which so many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer – do not explain or excuse his actions in the middle and end of the book. No – in *Preparation for the Next Life*, Skinner's choices, in and out of war, belong to him.

The relationship between Zhou Lei and Skinner is complicated, and depends in equal parts what each character represents to the other, which comes down to "escape." Zhou seeks in Skinner a replacement for her father, a sergeant in the Chinese Army who died during one of the collectivization phases of Chinese development in the 70s. To support this dependence on the pro-military narrative in Zhou's life, references to her belief in and admiration for soldiers and the military abound. She claims to have "military training" and admires the trappings of Skinner's service – his military gear, his camouflage, his boots. She does not, however, understand Skinner, and by the time his PTSD manifests and he begins acting as selfishly as he feels, she's trapped with an emotionally abusive, self-destructive adolescent. To Skinner's credit, he often describes precisely what is important to him – his war, his pistol, his dream of one day returning to Iraq – rather than concealing his ambitions. Although he usually talks about the return to combat as a way to make money, it is

quite clearly a dream to destroy himself, for a variety of reasons. Whether Zhou Lei willfully misunderstands Skinner, or it is simply a misunderstanding based on her desire for what he represents is left to the reader. For Skinner's part, he sees Zhou Lei as a sexual object most of the time, and, as time goes on and his condition worsens, alternately as a source of stability and a burden of which to be rid at any cost, until the book's unforgettable and dramatic conclusion.

This fixation on superficial aspects of love helps explain an otherwise curious phenomenon wherein physical fitness correlates with moral health. This, alongside Zhou Lei's idea of soldiers as a sort of ideal, is the most prevalent strand running through the book: immoral or insane characters project internal dissatisfaction through broken bodies, while moral or decent characters do the same through near-religious attendance to working out. Here's one of the primary characters exercising at a public park, in a scene of retreat that evokes Faulkner, Hemingway, and Hawthorne: *"Skinner was doing pushups with his boots up on a ledge. When he was done, he had trouble standing up. He sat down and did nothing for quite a while, just sat at the bottom of a slide, his chin dripping, looking down at the sweat drips falling between his fingers. When he looked up, he saw a pit bull, a beautiful powerful animal with tight glossy skin over striated muscles..."* The primary antagonist, on the other hand, *"looked like a white meaty insect whose exoskeleton has been peeled away exposing the mechanical workings of muscles and white sacks of flesh, which had never been in the open air before."* The antagonist's family members, too, suffer from physical ailments or deformities that feel linked to the choices they've made in life – the landlady is fat, so much so that she ends up suffering a heart attack. Her daughter, Erin, is described as "giant" when introduced to readers, then again on several occasions. While few would object to the medical assertion that a correlation exists between good health and good spirits (Mr. Carson of this blog argued the contrary

[here](#)), *Preparation* actually bases part of its moral hierarchy on disciplined workout regimens, or “military training,” as Zhou Lei puts it, so much so that the final image in the book is that of a good character preparing to squat more weight than they have ever before attempted. A character’s fitness or health does not mean, necessarily, that they are good, or healthy, but the absence of fitness is a sure sign of spiritual poverty. In the context of the book’s ostensible theme, then, characters use working out as a replacement for the affection they don’t derive from external sources, or as a means of escape from a world over which they otherwise have no control. Working out, according to the logic of the text, is an activity that leads nowhere, and gives its participants nothing beyond temporary respite from a sense of existential terror that runs like rapids throughout the text.

Many people believe that love offers some sort of redemption – a way to balance out the sins of violence, the choices its nation made in war. When Skinner disagrees with Zhou’s proposition that love makes the world go round, she challenges him. “*What makes the world go round,*” she says, and Skinner answers: “*War... Actually, I’d say money first. Money and then war.*” America, a capitalist society that seems addicted to both money and war, has made serious mistakes in its pursuit of both – like torture, like bullying, like unnecessary violence, like sexual assault, like disastrously unregulated financial markets, all to no apparent end. And as much as readers would like a classic love story to make it all seem okay, that redemptive narrative isn’t here for American society in the way that it seemed accessible or deserved after World War II. In the end, after all the struggles, perhaps the best analogy for this book in the western canon would be one a disillusioned Hemingway wrote after The Great War – *A Farewell to Arms*. The sad truth is, there is no transcendent understanding bought when one covets trauma and violence – only more trauma and more violence – a pessimistic, never ending cycle. *Preparation for the Next Life* delivers both, and

in such a way that one cannot help but grow from reading it.

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On Racism and Other Bigotries

Racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, tribalism, nationalism, parochialism, xenophobia, jingoism, bigotry, intolerance, hatred. These are the topics to be discussed presently. I was inspired to write this after reading a short essay by Sartre called "Portrait of an Antisemite," and realizing that all forms of bigotry are connected and share the same pathologies and deficiencies. Firstly, the bigot appeals to emotional and passionate arguments rather than reason. The bigot is happy to confound rational interlocutors by means of either worn-out cliché, invented evidence in his favor, or, in the last case, hysterics. The bigot prefers intimidation and bullying, and uses these tools to bring his opponent down to his level. He does not accept the authority of logical consistency, and if he uses any form of logical argument at all, it is an obviously flawed one that he hopes will go unchallenged. Therefore, the bigot is typically (but not always) anti-intellectual. He reacts to challenges by resorting to hysterical or violent rhetoric, or, in the best case, merely dismissing the challenger as "one of them".

Secondly, the bigot lives in a world that is constantly defined by "us versus them" and other types of Manichean struggle. His world must be a simple one in which he is on the side of "Good," and there is always something else which threatens his own well-being, which is "Evil" or "the Other." His world is defined negatively, by what he is not or what he

is against, rather than positively, what he is for. Therefore, the bigot is often (but not always) politically conservative, and when changes happen in the world he tends to become a reactionary.

Thirdly, the bigot only exists in a specific social context. He is never alone in his beliefs. His attitude itself is always the product of social indoctrination, and often validates the bigot's special sense of belonging in his community. Sartre writes: "Antisemitism is distinguished, like all the manifestations of an irrational collective soul tending to create a conservative and esoteric France. It seems to all these feather-brains that by repeating at will that the Jew injures the country, they are performing one of those initiation rites which allows them to feel themselves a part of the centers of warmth and social energy; in this sense anti-Semitism has retained something of the human sacrifice."

The impulse to bigotry almost certainly stems from a vestige of the human tribal instinct which has survived in the development of our species. Everyone who was not a member of our immediate family or tribe was potentially, and most likely, an enemy to be avoided or killed. We are no longer in need of this ancient urge, however, and its survival attests to the strength of the instinct. The more prominent place in our modern lives of reason, science, and historical knowledge also dictates that there is no excuse for those intolerant masses of people who cling to beliefs that have long outlived any usefulness they might have once had in pre-history.

Of all the types of bigotry, anti-Semitism is one of the oldest in existence and most infamous. Its history can be dated specifically to the first two centuries of Christianity, and its roots derive completely from religious intolerance, though it has acquired over the centuries a racial aspect due to the fact that Jews did not often mingle with Gentiles and thus kept their Semitic physical features. [Note on the word "Semitic": it derives from a root word that originally only

described a broad group of languages that were based around Mesopotamia and the Arabia peninsula. Though "Semitic" is commonly used to refer only to Jews, or speakers of Hebrew, it could properly be used for anyone who speaks Arabic, Aramaic, Maltese, or diverse ancient languages such as Phoenician and Akkadian.]

The Gospels of the New Testament became gradually more anti-Jewish as they were written. Mark, the first to be written around roughly 65 CE (over 30 years after the crucifixion), took no especial notice of the role of the High Priests of the Temple, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or any other Jewish agents as complicit in the death of Jesus (except Judas, of course); it was a Roman-led affair. By the time we get to John, written around 100 CE, the local bands of new Christians had begun to spread, and to win ever more converts among the Gentiles as well. The new religion needed to separate itself as a faith from its monotheistic progenitor, and placing blame on the Jews for the death of Jesus was an easy solution. After John, we see the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr and Tertullian, place emphasis on the guilt of the Jewish people as a whole for their crime of deicide. Ironically, Tertullian, who was an anti-Semite and celebrated the eternal hellfire awaiting all non-Christians, also wrote tracts arguing for religious freedom for Christians, who were being persecuted sporadically around the empire. From there, it is a long 2000-year history of intolerance towards Jews in European societies leading ultimately to the Holocaust.

Racism is the belief that a difference in the amount of the pigment melanin in his skin makes a person of particular hue incomparably superior to those with a slightly higher or lower amount of the pigment. Europeans and their descendants, having first achieved dominance over the rest of the world due (mostly) to fortunate geography that led to the strategic and ruthless deployment of guns, germs, and steel (Jared Diamond has written a book by this title that explains convincingly

the long series of causes and effects that led to Europeans dominating the world through colonial expansion and empire—I previously reviewed the book [here](#)), are the biggest abusers of the bogus “racial superiority theory” which roughly states that some “races” (namely, Europeans) are superior to others (the rest of the world, and especially other humans with darker skin) because they (Europeans) have stronger militaries. Never mind the fact that these militaries were developed over the centuries through a vicious cycle of escalating warfare amongst themselves, to which all other indigenous peoples would have rightly been unprepared and shocked upon finding themselves on the receiving end of European barbarity during the Age of Discovery. Because of this rather arbitrary course of history, we most often witness humans with white-ish skin tone being racist against other humans with darker skin tones. I must emphasize that the mental disease of racism can be found in all societies, but that it is especially common and despicable when used by those wielding power (Europeans and their descendants for the last 500 years) against those who are relatively powerless (Third World countries, and the poor and minorities in all countries).

Italy, the country in which I live, recently elected a new government; one of the appointed ministers of the majority Democratic party is Cecile Kyenga, a woman of African origins, having immigrated to Italy at a young age from Congo. She received an education in Italy, lived her life in Italy, and is obviously Italian for all practical purposes; she now serves as the Minister of Immigration, a post which would seem to fit her skills quite well. If you ask a racist, however, the only pertinent issue is her inferiority and otherness due to the higher level of melanin in her skin. Members of the Italian Parliament from the far-right Northern League party felt that it was appropriate, during a recent speech of the Immigration Minister, to throw bananas at her and yell “Go back to Africa!”. Another senior member of Parliament from

the Northern League party publicly and shamelessly called Kyenga an orangutan. These were elected members of Parliament, and racists, who were elected by other racists to support their bigoted beliefs and to try to stop the immigration of people with more pigmented skin.

Closer to home for me is the case of Barack Obama. The election and re-election of America's first black president (half-black, but no one seems to care about that distinction) would have naturally made us assume that racism was waning. In some ways it was true (we elected a "black" president!) but in other ways it revealed exactly to what extent racism is alive and well. The election of Obama seems to have deeply offended racist bigots around America (I cannot imagine why). For years they had quietly been forced underground and could not openly express their racist beliefs in mixed company, but they always knew they were right since people like them – people with white-ish colored skin – were in charge of things. They muttered about the injustice of affirmative action, and howled whenever a darker skinned person was accepted for a job or in a university when there was at least one person with lighter skin who was rejected. They knew that there was something inherently superior about their relative lack of melanin. So you can imagine the shock when Obama was elected.

Obama represents, for the racist, the Great Other—a person who is so far removed from the familiar and correct world that the racist inhabits that he might as well be an alien. Never mind that he is just a moderate, centrist Democrat with a great family and biography who is almost totally inoffensive as a person. Never mind the fact that the people who oppose him as if he were the second coming of Vladimir Lenin in America are basically opposing a guy who would have been a moderate Republican a couple decades ago. I have visited America three times since Obama was elected, and one of those times I visited the dentist. This dentist was previously unknown to me, and I went to him on the recommendation of my family due

to his low prices. He and his two assistants were very friendly and loquacious elderly people with deep Southern drawls (one might even say Southern charm). When it came time for the final inspection of my teeth, the dentist, while I was unable to talk or reply due to the metal tool jammed in my mouth, proceeded to tell me in confidence that Obama was secretly a Muslim, and that of this fact he (the dentist) had never been so sure of anything in all his life. Charming.

Though they are rarely empowered to openly state their racism (progress!), the bigot can easily transfer the reasons for his distrust of Obama from one thing to another. He will not say, in company, that the amount of pigment in the president's skin makes him evil, but that is what they mean when they accuse him of being un-American, socialist, fascist, Marxist, Kenyan, and talk about "taking their country back". Back from whom? Since white people exploited black people for slave labor in the building of America, after completing the genocide of the original darker skinned native people, to the racist this is the proper relationship for all time. In America, the strongest form of racism appears as white supremacy, which was used to control the huge African slave population of the South for centuries, as well as to ensure that the lower classes of poor and disenfranchised whites never sided with the slaves against the rich upper classes.

One final note about racism and politics in America: the Southern strategy. This was a cynical strategy formulated by Republican party operatives in the time of Richard Nixon to exploit and wield the racism of the South to create a wedge between white voters and black voters, and to ultimately win elections. The strategy was used quite effectively by Ronald Reagan, who mocked black recipients of welfare aid and casually let the white racist voter know that he will not allow black people to take advantage of the system to get ahead any longer. The Republican party continues to use the strategy today, kicking and screaming and becoming less and

less coherent in their indiscriminate use of intolerance for political gain. The two elections of Obama, and the changing demographics of America, has basically doomed to failure the Southern strategy (though not racism itself). Another strategy will doubtless be formulated to pit people of different skin tones against each other, and distract them from those who truly exploit them.

Sexism, on the other hand, is the belief that a human animal of one sex is inherently, or innately, superior to one of the other sex. While there are surely some scattered examples of women who hate or look down on men as inferior, it is obvious to all that the real issue is male chauvinism, or misogyny (from the Greek "hater of women"). This is the belief that humans of the male persuasion, who are genetically predisposed to produce more of the hormone testosterone and so become physical larger and stronger, are therefore superior, more intelligent, and more fit for power than women. You see, to the sexist bigot, bigger size means both bigger intelligence and bigger right to rule the human world. It is hard to say which is more prevalent between racism and sexism, but sexism is probably more tolerated and more bound up in the structure of all except the most progressive societies. This has been the story ever since the rise of modern human civilizations around 10,000 years ago, when agriculture led to new cities, new kings, and new war gods (who overthrew the old mother goddesses). Is there any reason a woman should not get paid the same amount of money as a man for doing the exact same job for the exact same amount of time? Rationally speaking, no. But to the chauvinist a woman can never be as good as a man in anything (except raising children, of course), and so she should not deserve equal pay or equal rights.

Back to Italy, my country of residence, we can see some of the worst examples of structural misogyny in the developed world, as well as some reasons to have hope for improvement. The man who has led Italy for the largest part of the last two

decades, Silvio Berlusconi, is both the richest man in Italy and the owner of a media empire. He surely has one of the most openly disrespectful attitudes towards women of any "leader" in the developed nations. He appointed female porn stars to cabinet positions, and has very effectively employed Italy's long-standing culture of chauvinism and machismo for his own purposes. Though he still controls the country's right-wing party, he was finally convicted in one of the dozen lawsuits against him (this one not for underage prostitution but for tax fraud) and will not serve again as prime minister. On the flip side, a recent election has just made the new Italian parliament the youngest ever (average age 47) and the highest female representation ever (31% – for comparison, after the recent US elections Congress now has its own highest female representation ever at "only" 18%). This part is too easy: elect more women, and things will improve!

It is no secret that religions have played a huge part in maintaining and justifying institutional sexism. We shudder to imagine the sad lot of most women born into most majority-Muslim countries. Not being able to drive, not being able to leave the house without a male relative, and husbands being legally protected against beating and raping their wives are three common features. It is difficult to even imagine a road towards political empowerment at this point, but we can hope for an quick improvement in basic education and human rights at the very least. Christianity has also celebrated the submission of wives to their husbands, and the second-class status of women in general. Thus, many Christian women have accepted their lot with resignation for millenia because it was written in the Good Book. Fortunately, the Enlightenment and the advent of secular politics in the Christian countries has led to the gradual enfranchisement and empowerment of women. We can already imagine the potential sexist resurgence that will accompany the first female American president (much like the resurgent racism after Obama), but let us hope in any case for more women in positions of power.

Changing to another form of bigotry, homophobia is when a person hates human beings who love other human beings who happen to share the same genitalia. The homophobe is filled with fear, hate, and typically suppressed homosexuality. Religions, once again, have told people that homosexuality demands a death sentence, and there are probably not a small number of homophobes who would like to enforce such a legal code (and still do today in certain Third World countries such as Uganda and Russia). In Leviticus, there is a long list of verses specifically outlawing sex with mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, sisters and brothers in law, mothers and fathers in law, sons and daughters in law, mothers and daughters or granddaughters at the same time, women having their period, and animals, in addition to those proscribing men lying with other men (the preceding verse also warns against child sacrifice); those other things tend to get ignored and forgotten. That would require too much logical consistency for the bigot. Even so, I do not recall any of the words of Jesus condemning homosexuals – he hung out with 12 unmarried dudes! –, or for that matter women (he hung out with prostitutes!), dark-skinned people (he was a dark-skinned person!), or Jews (he was a Jew!). He did say, however, that all of the laws of the Old Testament were valid, so we should assume that he was anti-incest, anti-child sacrifice, and anti-gay. Homosexuality is a trait that can be found in at least 1000 other animal species, including all the primates (such as chimpanzees, monkeys, and humans), many other mammals, birds, and even fish. It is a product of evolution, just like higher or lower amounts of melanin or testosterone. And despite the bigoted homophobe, love always trumps hate.

Finally, let's talk about nationalism. This is the peculiar belief that the particular section of the earth's crust on which you are born is superior to every other piece of earth, and thus it demands your lifelong loyalty. This idea is appealing to large numbers of ignorant and easily manipulated humans who, as we have seen, often need little excuse for

emotional prejudice against anyone other than those who look like them or were born in close proximity to their section of earth. This idea has had great utility for governments since the advent of the modern nation states in state-sanctioned homicide and theft against people born on more distant pieces of earth. Never mind the fact that national borders are highly artificial and arbitrary, and are often the result of accidents of history if not intentional theft. Also never mind the fact that the place where you are born is completely random and outside of your control, and that the only thing we can ever control is our own actions. Those would be facts based on reason and reflection, which are things not to be found in the bigot's arsenal.

It is no wonder that nationalism has been expertly and cynically whipped up by political leaders since the beginning of civilization, but especially since the rise of the modern industrial nation states in the last few centuries. At the outbreak of World War One, Germany and England enthusiastically asserted their mutual superiority and hatred towards each other, despite each being the biggest trading partner with the other prior to the war, and despite being the most developed scientific nations in the world. Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." While we cannot be sure exactly what he meant, we can guess that it has something to do with the ease with which a malicious intent can be excused by an appeal to Patriotism. Presumably, love of one's country, but not love of anyone else. It is not common in which we find even the most ardent patriot who evinces love even towards all the people of his country.

So now, what do we do about racism and other forms of bigotry? First, we always keep in mind that there are no different races, but only one human race. Race is a social, rather than a biological construct. Biologically, the genetic diversity between the human species is a tiny fraction of a percent of

our genetic code, and the genes that determine pigmentation are even still a smaller fraction of that fraction. According to the United Nations, there is no distinction between the terms *racial discrimination* and *ethnic discrimination*, and superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in theory or in practice, anywhere. Similarly, there is no human nature, but only human behavior. We are all free to make our own choices in how to act, but there is no excuse for acting badly towards others.

Next, we need to keep in mind that there is no paradox of tolerance, and tolerance of intolerance is, in fact, intolerance. If we create a system based on rules and reasons, and someone acts outside of those rules and reasons, then that person is outside the system. Our society is what we make it, and to protect tolerance we must not support intolerance. Every act of intolerance or bigotry is, however minor it may seem, ultimately an emotional injunction to hatred and violence. As Sartre writes: "Antisemitism is not in the category of thoughts protected by the right to freedom of opinion." This could be applied to the other forms of bigotry as well. He writes later: "The Jew is only a pretext: elsewhere it will be the Negro, the yellow race; the Jew's existence simply allows the antisemite to nip his anxieties in the bud by persuading himself that his place has always been cut out in the world, that it was waiting for him and that by virtue of tradition he has the right to occupy it. Antisemitism, in a word, is fear of man's fate. The antisemite is the man who wants to be pitiless stone, furious torrent, devastating lightning: in short, everything but a man."

Equally, the bigot is someone who falls short of reaching full humanity by excluding other humans. What is needed is a sense of solidarity, for our shared planet, our shared lives, and our shared fate. What we need is a love of humanity as a

whole. That is the only way to live, and the only way to live together.