



“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read.”

— James Baldwin*

Dear Faithful Reader,

Years ago, a woman in a class I was teaching came up to me after a session and asked if we could talk for a moment. “Of course,” I said. She waited a beat for the rest of the students to disperse, then looked at me and said, “Do you mind if I ask a personal question?” I didn’t mind. “Have you lost someone?” she said. “I mean, someone close?”

I just nodded, speechless. A year my first child, a son, had died quite suddenly at the age of 10 months. How did she know?

She leaned in, placing one hand softly on my arm, and said, “It leaves a mark.” And I knew, without her saying another word, that something similar had happened to her.

Up until that moment I’d thought I was desperately alone in the world, that nobody else on the planet understood the pain and loss I’d been through. That encounter showed me that someone else got it, too.

In the years since, I’ve realized that a *lot* of people get it; that the experience of tragedy, as private and personal as it feels, is virtually universal.

Reading that story back now, it sounds like I might be suggesting the woman was psychic. But she wasn’t being psychic. She was being *human*.

I retold this scene, or a version of it, in *The Go-Giver Leader* (chapter 10, “An Imprint on the Soul”). A few pages later I had the same woman quote one of my favorite lines, from Joan Didion: “I write to find out what I think.” Which I wholeheartedly concur with — but I think there’s more to it. I write to find out what I think, and also to find out what I *feel*.

Not only that, but what other people feel, too.

One of the joys of writing the Chief Finn novels is the gradual process of discovering how Finn feels — about the people who pass through his life, about his broken childhood, about humanity. About himself. And not just Finn: how all the other characters in the

play feel, too, the naïve and the jaded, the noble and the devious, finding empathy with them all, male and female, old men and children, even killers and their victims.

One of my favorite lines of all time occurs in the Clint Eastwood film *Unforgiven*. Eastwood is Will Munny, an unrepentant killer aware of the irredeemable nature of his own soul. He goes on a mission with a young buck who boasts and brags constantly about all the people *he's* killed, none of it true — until the point in the film when the kid actually shoots someone dead, then promptly falls apart, aghast at the horror of what *he's* done. Munny looks at him and says:

“It’s a hell of a thing, killin’ a man. You take away all he’s got, all he’s ever gonna have.”

What moves me so about this scene? I feel him. I sense, on a bone-deep level, what it’s like to be the terrible, accursed human Will Munny is.

I recently read an astonishing novel called *The Overstory*, by Richard Powers. At first, you think you’re reading a series of short stories about eight unconnected people. About a third of the way in, however, you realize something altogether different is going on. Something bigger is connecting all these little stories. The overstory here isn’t about the lives of these people: it’s about the lives of the trees around them.

The Overstory is fiction, but its depiction of trees is quite real, and quite accurate. Trees, as science has learned, are intimately connected with one another through underground networks of root filaments and fungal mycelia. They send each other signals, even communicate across great distances. Warn each other of approaching danger. Feed each other, make medicines, pool their resources toward common goals. Trees strategize and migrate. Trees remember; trees mourn.

A forest, it turns out, is not a collection of isolated plants, like crayons in a box, but one vast sentient organism.

Humanity — even though we seem to forget it most of the time — is not so different. (Here’s a startling thing: Did you know that we and trees come from the same common ancestor and still today share a quarter of our genes?) And I think writing and reading may be our mycelium.

Writing, as James Baldwin observes in this month’s featured quite, connects us to the rest of humanity on a deeper level than we’re able to summon up in our ordinary everyday doings. It binds us filamentally.

“We are all alone, born alone, die alone,” wrote Hunter S. Thompson, and thousands of others have voiced the same thought. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. We think we’re alone, but in reality we are each a unique expression of one vast sentient organism.

We forget that. Reading reminds us.

My April wish for you: that you take a little time every day to set aside the demands and immediacy of your workaday life and sink into the pages of a book — that you read, and in reading, discover you are not alone.



*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

James Baldwin has been widely acclaimed as one of the twentieth century's greatest writers on the Black experience in America — but he was more than that. As a novelist, playwright, and especially as an essayist (one of the “greatest essayists this country has ever produced,” according to critic Irving Howe), Baldwin broke new literary ground, chronicling the inner experience of racism and discrimination, from the perspectives of both the oppressed and the oppressor.

In his explorations of identity, of the search and struggle of individuals, peoples, and nations to embrace and reconcile the layered conflicts and messy complexities of their own nature and experience, he created a kind of moral and emotional X-ray — no, not X-ray, something more nuanced; call it a psychic national MRI.

Born in 1924 in Harlem, the grandson of a slave, Baldwin never knew his biological father's name. When he was three his mother married an ardent Baptist preacher (from whom comes the name Baldwin), who proved a harsh and demanding stepfather. The eldest of nine children, James shouldered the demands of caring for his younger siblings while shielding them from both their stepfather's strictness and the harsh realities of Harlem street life in the 1930s.

Baldwin himself sought refuge from life's sharp edges in the inner worlds of the written page. Constantly immersed in books, by high school he was a gifted writer, publishing in the school magazine poems, plays, and short stories of startling sophistication. After high school he spent three years as a junior minister, absorbing the cadence of pulpit oratory that would serve him so well in future decades as a sought-after public speaker. He soon left the church, however, disillusioned by a religion that had so often been hijacked to serve as a tool of oppression.

After his stepfather's death, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village with the aim of supporting himself as a writer. He befriended Richard Wright (fresh off the staggeringly successful launch of his novel *Native Son*), who helped him land a fellowship, and he started seeing his essays published in national periodicals.

Within a few years Baldwin relocated to Paris, a move that brought about a dramatic shift in perspective for the boy from Harlem. As he later told the *New York Times*,

“Once I found myself on the other side of the ocean, I could see where I came from very clearly.”

He spent the rest of his life “commuting,” as he called it, between France and the United States. In Paris he penned his first and best-known novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a semiautobiographical coming-of-age story that follows Baldwin’s early struggles with an overbearing father and a fundamentalist religion, establishing the theme of struggle and identity that would occupy him his entire life — the struggles of a Black person in white America, of a gay person in straight society, of an artist against the forces of conformity and oppression, and the individual within the tangle and confusion of his own experience. The Modern Library has ranked *Go Tell It on the Mountain* among the best English-language novels of the 20th century.

Looking back later at these years he said:

“*Mountain* is the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else. I had to deal with what hurt me most. I had to deal, above all, with my father.”

By the sixties, Baldwin had become an enormously influential voice in the national discourse on race; his essay collections *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963) both hit the bestseller lists, each selling over a million copies. Baldwin’s oratorical skill also put him in much demand as a speaker. However, as a gay man in the midst of the civil rights movement, he was both embraced and ostracized.

Refusing to call himself a “Black writer,” he insisted on calling himself “an American writer.” Acutely aware that his essays were being read by a primarily white audience, he spoke not only to the Black experience of racism but the white experience, too, in all its nuanced implications, warning of the psychic, emotional, and moral damage wreaked by the blindness of racism not only on the trod-upon but also on those doing the treading.

For some of the most prominent leaders of the movement at the time, it was too much nuance. Eldridge Cleaver (*Soul on Ice*) accused Baldwin of hating Blacks and a “shameful, fanatical fawning” over whites. Martin Luther King, Jr. excluded the writer from the movement’s inner circles, even conspicuously “uninviting” him from speaking at the March on Washington.

The assassinations of King, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X shattered his hopes for racial reconciliation, and in the seventies his mood turned strident and pessimistic. Nevertheless, he produced another decade and a half of writings that went on to shape future generations’ entire perception of race and identity in America.

In the final analysis, it is a legacy more of empathy than of protest. As one biographer wrote of the grandson of a slave who became “the eloquent, indignant prophet of an oppressed people”:

“Baldwin has shared his struggle with his readers for a purpose — to demonstrate that our suffering is our bridge to one another.”

In an interview with *LIFE* magazine in the early sixties, Baldwin put it this way:

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens [*in a later version of this statement, he said simply “It was books”*] who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive. Only if we face these open wounds in ourselves can we understand them in other people. An artist is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian.”

Amen, James, and let your light shine on.

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