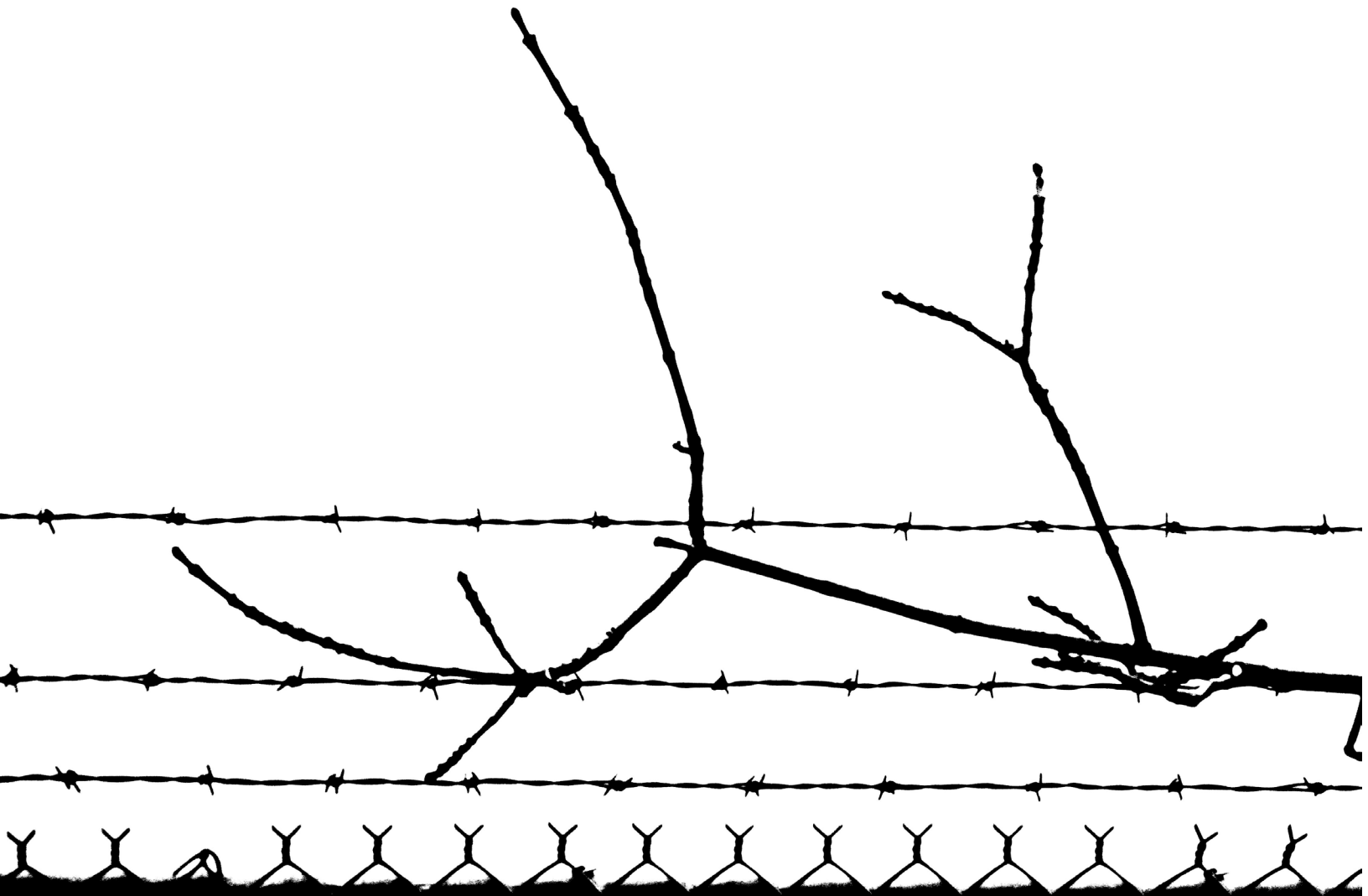


We're All Kafka Bureaucrats:

Reflections on the Writings of Franz Kafka

Brendan Seaton



Franz Kafka is one of those writers everyone has heard about; everyone periodically refers to; but few have actually read or understood. The term *Kafkaesque* has become part of our modern vocabulary, describing some vague notion of a dark, bureaucratic and hopeless world.

Several months ago I decided to read a large sampling of Franz Kafka's writings to see what he was really about. I read a selection of his short stories including *Metamorphosis*, one of his most famous pieces, and his three novels: *The Castle*, *The Trial* and *Amerika*.

A hallmark of great literature is that it is as relevant today as it was on the day it was written. Kafka, who wrote during the dying days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1904 until his death in 1924, could have been a current day novelist writing about life in a George W. Bush run world.

Typically Kafka's stories revolve around a protagonist who is caught up in a frustrating and sometimes fearsome web of

bureaucracy, petty politics or other circumstances that render his¹ life fruitless and meaningless. The protagonist is a person like many of us, often in some professional middle class role – a doctor, a land surveyor, a senior bank clerk, or a salesman - who is confronted by faceless and nameless low level bureaucrats who control access to the high level bureaucrats who make the critical decisions that affect our lives individually and collectively. This bureaucracy forms an impenetrable barrier to resolving the issues confronted by the protagonist. Woven into the stories are minor characters whose acceptance of the status quo and complacency pro-

vides a striking counterpoint to the protagonist's determination and frustration.

Kafka was a reluctant author. Much of his work was unfinished and little was published during his lifetime. Each of his three novels is incomplete. What purports to be an ending for each was accomplished by the editing of fragments by Kafka's friend and literary executor, *Max Brod*. But the incompleteness is appropriate in Kafka's world. In the world of mindless bureaucracy the process never ends. We end, but the process persists.

To say that Kafka's writings are depressing is an understatement. After 4 books I was ready to jump off a bridge (figuratively). The stories contained

enough truth about the misery of the human condition to bring down the most positive and optimistic reader.

As I reflected on Kafka's stories I naturally identified with the protagonists – the heroes of the stories - who, in spite of the frustration, persevered in

their struggles with the powers that be. Who hasn't had an unpleasant experience with the tax or immigration department? Who hasn't experienced trepidation when confronted by a police officer, customs officer or other authority, even when you knew that you had done nothing wrong? Everyone at some time or other has been a protagonist in a Kafka story.

However, when I think about our day-to-day lives, I wonder if we are more like the mindless bureaucrats and complacent citizens who have the minor roles in Kafka's writings. As much as



we hate to admit it, Kafka's world exists not only because we allow it, but we contribute to it as well.

A personal confession: in 1981 I was of Chief of Treatment Benefits for Veterans Affairs Canada in Toronto. It was a junior management position of the kind that Kafka's protagonists would encounter. I took my job VERY seriously, wanting to make a favorable impression on my superiors. Government austerity was big at the time so protecting the public purse from a greedy public was a high priority.

It happened that several months into my new job I was approached by one of my staff who had received a request from a veteran. The veteran was an amputee/snowbird who was leaving for six months in Florida and wanted a replacement prosthetic leg. On top of that it was a golfing leg². The policy was clear. Veterans were entitled to a replacement prosthesis every two years. It had been nineteen months since he had received his last leg.

My staff member and I were both in agreement. Rules were rules... and anyway why should Canadian taxpayers subsidize someone's golf junket. The veteran could either interrupt his Florida vacation to come back for the leg when the appropriate time had elapsed... or he could wait until his planned return.

Several days later I was summoned to the office of Dr. Blair Mitchell, the Regional Medical Officer, who had received a complaint about the case from the Minister's office. After hearing the rationale for my decision he opened the veteran's file and read from a few documents. The veteran was a

highly decorated WW2 soldier who lost a leg in the days following the D-Day invasion. Since returning from the war he had been active in the charitable work of the War Amputations of Canada. Needless to say Dr. Mitchell didn't agree with my decision. Starting that day, Dr. Mitchell, who became one of my most influential mentors, taught me the difference between "doing things right" and "doing the right thing". Fortunately for me and the veterans I served, Dr. Mitchell was not a typical bureaucrat.

However, in spite of Dr. Mitchell's wise interventions, my first inclination during those

early years was to default to the rules; to my understanding of the government's priorities; and to what I thought might please my superiors. I made decisions out of fear. I hid behind officialdom when I was lazy and didn't want to stretch myself.

I was one of Kafka's minor bureaucrats. What my superiors thought about me was more important than the service I was to provide for the people I was employed to serve.

You don't have to work for the government

to be a Kafka bureaucrat. Have you ever mindlessly applied your company's policies to the disadvantage of a client or customer? Or have you applied those same rules out of fear... fear for your job; fear of criticism? Have you ever lamented that the rules prevent you from serving the customer. Yes, you too just might be a Kafka bureaucrat.

I like to think that I am beyond Kafka. After spending years in the bureaucracy I have realized that I have the power and discretion to do right by



the people we serve. Am I an exception? Clearly not! Government agencies and corporations are populated with good people doing good work. But they are in the minority, and I fear that even with my good intentions I am not yet one of them.

As a complacent citizen, I am as guilty as anyone. I vote, but don't pay as much attention to the issues as I should. I fret a bit over the fact that my government has pandered to the paranoia of the US Administration led by George W. Bush but do little about it³. We've created a situation where people can be imprisoned without knowing what charges have been made against them or what evidence has been brought to bear.

The travesty of justice suffered by some at the hands of our government (which though bad in this regard, is not as bad as some other western governments) is actually worse than that described in Kafka's novel, *The Trial*. Consider the case of [Maher Arar](#), a Canadian citizen of Syrian decent. On a stopover in New York while traveling home to Canada from a vacation in Tunisia, US officials claiming he had links to al-Qaeda because he showed up on a terrorist watch list detained him. The information had been provided by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). They then deported him to Syria where he was tortured.

What was going through the mind of the low level Canadian bureaucrat who put Maher Arar on a terrorist watch list? We will never know, but I suspect that the person was trying to do their job well, protecting the public from evil terrorists. He (or maybe she) was probably working long hours to meet unreasonable deadlines. Maher Arar was no more than a name on a list, and a middle-eastern name at that. "Sounds like a terrorist to me. On the list you go along with hundreds of other names that sound like they belong to terrorists." The bureaucrat probably went home feeling good; feeling as though they might have saved the public from a horrible and very public massacre; feeling that their superiors would be pleased.

What was going through the minds of the senior Canadian bureaucrats and politicians who set up the watch list in the first place? I'm sure that they too

were well intentioned. They wanted to cooperate with the American authorities. They wanted to help prevent another 9/11. They probably had a vague notion that there would be *collateral* damage. They probably felt that they didn't have the time to set up the checks and balances needed to protect innocent people. Terrorists were beating down the doors of our commercial airliners.

What was going through the minds of the American officials who detained and deported Maher Arar? Steeped in political rhetoric that has branded Canada as a haven and launching point for terrorist activity, suspecting terrorist intent behind anyone of Middle Eastern heritage and armed with information provided to them by none other than the RCMP, they acted as anyone would who spends their days holding down a hair-trigger. They fired.

Maher Arar spent a year in a Syrian prison and was subjected to horrible torture. Yes, Kafka's world is alive and well in Canada, the United States and in most countries around the world.

I could easily be a minor character in a Kafka story, grumbling about the system, the injustice and the resulting lives we lead, but being content to do nothing about it. I explore some of these issues in my Achill Island essays [Srebrenica](#) and [An Unwitting Oppressor](#). Like the drunk who's realized that he's an alcoholic, my rehabilitation has begun, but I have a long way to go before I am an engaged citizen or compassionate bureaucrat.

I challenge you, the reader of this short essay, to read Kafka's novels and short stories. Be prepared to be depressed. And be prepared to see yourself on both sides of Kafka's abyss.

The reluctant author has much to teach us about being oppressed while at the same time about being oppressors ourselves.□

(Endnotes)

1. With the exception of one short story about a mouse the protagonists are invariably male.
2. A special prosthetic limb for golfers.
3. I did however drive from Toronto to Ottawa in November 2004 to take part in a protest of Bush's state visit to Canada. My first ever protest.