

## “The Loss of the Creature” – Walker Percy

I enjoyed this reading very much. It provided me with a lot of new thoughts about how I perceive the world around me. I was surprised by the number of points Percy made that were similar or directly relevant to observations I have made or situations I have experienced in life but which I never really bothered to think about in depth. For this critical review I will briefly recap the major points/sections in the chapter, and where appropriate I will attempt to explain my interpretations and personal experiences which I thought about while reading.

### Part 1: Visiting the Grand Canyon but not really seeing it

The opening example of the experience of the Grand Canyon was a perfect way to open this chapter. When Cárdenas discovered the Canyon, his experience was one that a) defined the expectations of those who have not yet experienced it for themselves and b) is unlikely to ever be replicated in the experience of another person except under very drastic circumstances. Certainly Cárdenas' eyes were not the very first of those from the race of man to experience the sight, but his experience was only as “true” as it was because he literally stumbled upon something that was completely unknown to him. It is the knowledge of the thing (the Canyon) before experiencing it, which instills some form of expectation about what the expectation will be like. The amount of knowledge can be very slight and still have the effect of creating some amount of expectation – even if one knows nothing other than the title for where they're traveling: the GRAND Canyon, this leads to a certain expectation upon arrival. It is rare that the expectation is met in the actual experience, and even if it is met, the experience will be somewhat different because it will be dictated entirely by the nature of the expectation. The satisfaction with the experience is directly related to how closely the experience conforms to this expectation, and

instead of “seeing the Canyon for what it is,” what will instead be seen are the particular nonconformities of the experience to the expectation.

In some sense, Percy explains how the development, even commercialization, of the park surrounding the canyon has led to the downfall of the true experience which Cárdenas enjoyed. There has been a “packaging” of a part of this experience through the tourist stations, designated “scenic views” and even the continuous presence of other sightseers which, by congregation in an area of the park suggest particular viewings which are worthy of seeing. This packaging results in a loss of the sovereignty of personal experience – now the experience is no longer that of the person, but that which is prepackaged for the group known as “tourists”.

In order to escape this packaging and recapture the true experience of the Canyon, Percy suggests several techniques. First, he recommends leaving the beaten track – avoiding the sights prepackaged by the park organizers through designated trails and scenic areas, and instead blazing through to areas which are not maintained, and thus experiencing the area anew. The irony of this recommendation, which Percy points out, is that when park organizers seek to create the best experience for the Canyon visitors through developments such as trails and stations, they are in fact destroying one’s ability to experience the Canyon to the fullest – instead people experience the trails or stations themselves as they are supposed to.

Another way, apparently the strongest way but the way which requires the most effort, to recover the “true” experience of the Canyon would be to become aware of the dialectical relationship between the true experience and that which is prepackaged and clouded by expectation. This involves staying on the beaten path, following the crowd of tourists, but with a mental exertion to rid the mind of the influences of expectation, and to accept the prepackaging but realize the quality of the experience through it.

The next recovery method is similar to the “off the beaten path” method: through a breakdown in the symbolic machinery by which the park organizers present the Canyon, one can

see it more truly. If for whatever reason, you were able to experience the park with no one else around, you would be much less inclined to follow the rules which are explicit or assumed through the boundaries of trails, railed viewing areas, etc. Then you could be free to disregard the prepackaged influences on the experience, and the absence of other people would eliminate the influences of what to see/where to go.

Finally, the last recovery method is described as a disaster which literally or in one's personal experience would return the Canyon to a semi-pristine state, untouched and a new experience for those who encounter it afterward. When reading about the last two recovery methods, I was thinking of the recent Will Smith movie, *I Am Legend*. I didn't see the movie (but plan to), but the idea of being the only man alive in a post-apocalyptic New York City would allow this man to experience the City in a whole new way, one closer to the true experience. There would be a removal of the walls built by rules and culture- or society-imposed expectations for how to experience the objects and places, and the experience would be truly different.

An example of an experience in my life came to mind while I was reading this part of the chapter. A couple summers ago when I took my wife with me to the town where I had lived for most of my life as a child. When I was 12 we moved away and I had only visited the place once or twice since then. So it had been approximately 10 years since I had been in that town. One thing we did while there was to walk from the house my family lived in to my school – retracing the steps I took on a daily basis growing up. This walk continues to stick out in my memory for a couple reasons – first, it was a lot shorter than I remembered it, and all the landmarks along the way didn't look as large as I remembered; and second, it was a beautifully scenic walk! Granted, some of my appreciation for the scenery around me was borne of nostalgia, but much of the walk was adjacent to beautiful flowering trees, and crossed over a creek and through a park. The time between the grueling walk to school as a child and this scenic walk was enough for the

experience to become new to me. I was able to recover (at least somewhat) the true experience of the scenery along the walk as I was traversing under a freer context, consciously observing along the way. I also climbed down some of the embankment near the creek (went off the beaten trail!) and saw, anew, the beauty it held. This creek was one I was strictly forbidden to venture near as a child, and these rules were enforced by urban legends of children who had drowned in it. Those were never enough to overpower my childhood curiosity and keep me from going near it anyway, but with my revisiting, the symbolic machinery of the rules and stories were removed and I was free to see it as a truer experience.

Here is another example of how previous knowledge and expectations will frame the experience of something. Since I am an engineering student and have an office and most business on North campus I had spent (and still do) almost all of my time away from Central Campus, only venturing there for certain classes or other isolated errands. One day when I was a relatively new student at Michigan, I was killing time between meetings on Central and for whatever reason, I wandered into the Natural History museum. Prior to this time I did not know the museum existed on campus, and it was a lucky coincidence I happened to be walking by and saw the sign when I had some time to kill. The experience I had was one similar to the situation of Cárdenas experiencing the Grand Canyon for the first time – I appreciated everything I saw (relatively) free of expectation and the experience was much better for it. In subsequent visits to the museum, I expected the same level of enjoyment as my first trip and have been disappointed when it doesn't live up to my expectations – those which were created from my first visit.

## Part 2: Finding the hidden gem but ruining the experience

The next part of the chapter follows a story of a Midwestern American couple who ventures deeply into Mexico, presumably to get the full experience of a different geography and

culture. At first they are disappointed in their trip, because they visit the places which are supposed to be the best while filling the role as tourists. Unable to shake this label, and the inherent behaviors that go with it (including those bestowed upon them by the community that caters to the usual desires of tourists – like by selling them fake designer sunglasses), they cannot really experience the new environment as they intend. It is not so hard to understand that a tourist's experience is vastly different from one who lives their everyday life in the same area.

In order to attempt to escape the prepackaged experience of the tourist, they attempt to find an “unspoiled” location to absorb what they assume to be the true Mexican experience. This leads them to a small, uncharted village where natives are performing the rituals that are part of their everyday life, minimally affected by the influences of the tourist-centered economies of neighboring areas. Here, they *think* they find what they were looking for.

Percy explains how while they have discovered a place few others know about, tragically, some preoccupations preclude them from truly experiencing it as they hope to. As they watch the village perform a ceremonial dance, they exclaim to each other: “this is too good to be true!” And that truly is the preoccupation: instead of enjoying the experience to the fullest, they are constantly anxious that the situation really isn't true, that at any minute the bottom could fall out and the experience will no longer be what they were hoping for. Percy proposes the analogy of this anxiety to a mother watching her child – lovingly watching the child grow and flourish, but constantly afraid that they might fail them at any moment.

This anxiety culminates in an actual feeling of *relief* when they finally leave the village. They experienced everything that they were hoping, but the constant anxiety of the trip becoming a bust has essentially drained much of the joy of the true experience.

I found it especially interesting that this feeling of relief was also driven by the sense of the experience being “put in the bag” – so to speak – safely stored in the memory and perhaps on film. This struck me as being relevant to my own life, and a much more important experience

than that which you might have with a good vacation: the growth and development of my 1 year-old son. Since our nearest relatives are a six-hour drive away and we have family all around the country, we are constantly trying to capture his life on camera so we can share with them. Every time he does something cute, it's a dash to get the camera to capture it instead of to enjoy the experience free from obligation. I guess this tendency is also driven by our desire to remember his life at the current stage, but this was also something that Percy called me on – we attempt to capture the past and preserve it for our experiences in the future, but tend to ignore the present, the actual experience. The fact that we can never fully recreate the experience of the present is good, but ignored, reasoning for making more of the true experience, and de-emphasizing the desire to capture it.

### Part 3: The degradation of the enjoyment of experience to expectation-matching

Following along with the Mexican village tourists example, Percy describes how the couple thought that their experience would be so much better if their friend, and ethnologist, could have been there to share the experience with them, assuming that his presence and shared insight would somehow enrich the situation for them. Then he explains how this is not really the case at all, and that they don't truly wish to share the experience with their friend to enhance their enjoyment of the situation, but instead to be assured that the experience was, in fact, true and could be enjoyed.

This role of experts – “those who know” – is not the fault of the expert, but their influence undoubtedly shapes the layperson's experience in that the laypeople assume that since the experts have the most experience in the topic, that they know which are the most positive/enjoyable aspects of it. The laypeople then try to match their expectation of what (they assume) the expert feels is positive or enjoyable with their experience. This essentially transforms the measure of their enjoyment with a situation to a measure of how closely the

experience matches with those of the expert, and thus seeking acknowledgement from the expert before they can judge the quality of the experience.

This “seeking of approval of experts” is something that I think loosely translates to the behavior of some students (laypeople) in relation to their teachers (experts). In the quest to achieve high grades, a student will attempt to conform their experience as closely as possible to that which they believe is a teacher’s dogma. The ability of the student to discover new knowledge – which should be the goal of the teaching system – is muted by the desire to gain approval from the expert teacher. I personally am not entirely innocent of this type of behavior.

#### Part 4: Dogfish dissection and Shakespeare’s sonnet - consumers and the role of packaging

This section uses the dual example of the dissection of a dogfish and the reading of Shakespearean sonnets, in each case under different circumstances, to introduce the role of the symbolic packaging of these experiences. In the case of the dogfish dissection – on one hand it is being done by a student in a classroom, according to a predefined list of steps dictated by the teacher; on the other hand, it is the action of a curious island native who happens upon a dogfish washed up on a shore. The Shakespeare analogy involves the citizen in Huxley’s *Brave New World* coming across an ancient tome of the sonnets and enjoying them as they are, as compared to the reading that is mandated in a high school or college English class, and is overwhelmingly directed by the teacher’s personal interpretation of the writings, whether intentionally or not.

In a certain way, I can relate to Percy’s arguments with the sonnet example. I am not a word person, I have always been mathematically-minded, and so I could never understand the world of my English-major friends who would discuss meanings behind classic poetry or prose. To me, these works could have limitless interpretations, and so I found it silly how often they would agree amongst themselves on one particular, although very abstract, interpretation of a piece of poetry. This is likely due to the fact that they would take the same or similar classes and

were surrounded by people who were being trained to think about the writings in similar ways. By being free of the packaging from their experience, perhaps I was able to make freer interpretations of the work, perhaps experiencing them in a truer way, at least in the sense that my preconceived notions did not lead me to conform to a particular interpretation.

These examples are used to introduce what Percy refers to as the double-deprivation of experience which occurs in the classroom learning environments we are all familiar with. Part of this deprivation comes from the role of topical experts (“those who know”) and their influence on laypeople’s experience of events relevant to those topics – again, whether intentional or not. Another part of the deprivation comes from the nature of the framing of the experience due to environmental factors, previous experiences, and other influences which cloud the true experience of discovering the dogfish or interpreting the poetry. For example, the student reading the poetry will likely be unable to separate the poetry from the packaged experience of the classroom – this package encompasses everything about the reader’s experience except the meanings of the poetry: the particular media that the poetry is printed on, the weather outside, what they ate for breakfast, the social climate amongst classmates, everything. Percy is right to point out that several years later the student, being tangled in this packaging, is more likely to remember the smell of his or her English teacher than the experience of the poetry.

The double deprivation of this packaging of the experience, as Percy defines it, is 1) the loss of the sovereignty of the thing and 2) the spoliation of the thing. In the first point, this is related to the relationship between experts and laypeople as described before. There is a loss of wonder in discovery through learning because the thing that is supposedly being discovered (the dogfish or the Shakespeare) has been stripped of its ability to be “owned” by the discoverer, and hence the discoverer’s ability to freely explore is lost. This can be explained as when an experience, or a thing being experienced, no longer is something a student can fully enjoy but instead becomes something that is to be compared with the knowledge of the expert. In a sense,



the experts are assumed to own the experience, and we laypeople seek from them a validation that when we follow their prepackaged instructions, we will be experiencing things as they do. This leaves the overall experience empty and somewhat meaningless for the supposed discoverer.

The second part of the double deprivation – a thing’s spoliation – refers to the automatic classification or categorization of an individual object into simply an element of a group, which essentially amounts to de-individualization. The student who is attempting to follow the rules and procedures to dissect the dogfish does not consider their dogfish as a unique thing to be seen unlike any other, but instead as a “specimen of *Squalus acanthias*”. Through the theory of studying this thing, the uniqueness of the dogfish has been disposed and cannot be easily recovered. This leaves the experience of the dogfish subject to the expectations imposed on it by stereotypes with the identified group.

To combat this double deprivation, Percy seriously and smartly suggests a new educational technique, in which the English class is suddenly presented with a dogfish to “interpret”, and the biology classroom is given a sonnet to “dissect”. The plain fact that this would remove much of the expectations in which the thing (fish or poem) is packaged would lead to an ability to experience the thing in a much more complete and satisfying way.

As I have finished reading this chapter I have found a new respect for learning, true learning, and have made a silent vow to attempt to recover some of what is lost through my own academic pursuits by employing some of the recovery methods proposed by Percy. At least, I will be more aware of the struggles required to salvage true experiences from the symbolic packaging imposed by our institutions.

I have never been to the Grand Canyon, but it is right at the top of the list of places my wife and I have talked often about visiting when we can afford to take a vacation. When we do, I

am going to have her read this paper so that together we can make an effort to follow some of the methods Percy describes. Maybe then we can attempt to unpackage the true experience.