

Free as a Bird

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The sounds of birds are music to my ears. When I wake up in the morning before the sunrise, I often hear the birds from my window chirping away for hours on end. From the morning between 4 to 6 AM, there are beautiful musical notes that you can catch, especially along the Schuylkill River Trail here in Philadelphia. When I consider birds, they are very symbolic of freedom. Think of America, and the eagle.

Birds Can't Fly in a Cage

I remember in high school, feeling physically constrained to the four corners of a classroom or the school itself. I had to enter through security, put my bag through an x-ray, and all the doors were locked—you were not allowed to go outside.

Doesn't this sound like a prison? I was always so antsy and eager to just get up and leave the classroom, ditching school, and exploring outside the school grounds. I believe this is because I realized that the things they were teaching in high school were quite meaningless—you just memorized a few things, and regurgitated them on a test later that week. I don't believe that the school system, specifically the public school system here in Philadelphia, sets students up for success.

Maybe it was my personal experience, and just my perception of the system, but what do they expect you to do and where do they expect you to go after embarking on eight hours per day, sitting down, under fluorescent lights? Perhaps they expect you to just go to work, sit down, and stay within your box, or your cubicle, under more fluorescent lights. **That's no way to live—as a free bird, we don't desire cages. We desire open spaces, and places for us to physically conquer.**

Physicality

Think of the human body as the ultimate vehicle. I see traffic jams filled with cars all throughout the city. However, by walking, I'm not only increasing my physical strength and my body, but also my mind. **I believe that a strong body creates a strong mind.** I also believe that a weak body will have a weak mind. Or in other words, **the weak will envy the strong.**

This past weekend on Saturday, my friend wanted to watch this boxing match between Tyson Fury and Oleksandr Usyk. Tyson Fury was certainly bound to win as he is much larger and appeared much stronger. I remember rooting for the smaller man, Usyk, with my friend, and we wanted to see the underdog defeat the giant. Perhaps this is a tendency of our human nature, as it is easier for ourselves to identify with those that are more likely to be the victim.

Who is Handala?

While walking on the trail this morning, I read a poster of this cartoon of a small Palestinian boy, titled, "Who is Handala?" I remember seeing this cartoon plastered on the walls all throughout Palestine while I was traveling there. I used ChatGPT as a way for me to inform myself deeper about this cartoon and its meaning.

Handala is a significant character created by Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali. Depicted as a ten-year-old boy, Handala has become an iconic symbol of Palestinian resistance and the struggle for justice. He is characterized by his simple clothing and the fact that he is always shown from behind, with his hands clasped behind his back. **This stance symbolizes his passive yet unwavering witness to the injustices faced by Palestinians.** Handala's age, which remains eternally ten, represents the age at which al-Ali was forced to leave his homeland, marking a loss of innocence and a perpetual state of resistance. The character is widely recognized in the Arab world and has become a powerful emblem of defiance and solidarity.

I spent six months studying abroad in Jerusalem, at Hebrew University, volunteered on an Israeli kibbutz, and also lived with a Palestinian family, volunteering at a hostel. **I believe I possess a nuanced understanding of the Holy Land through my direct experiences.**

When I lived in Jericho for three months, I woke up every morning, swept the floors, did my chores, ate breakfast of dates, pita, eggs, and hummus, then proceeded to knock on the door of my friend Mohammed's house. He was my guide and best friend for the next three months. He was a 21-year-old young man, the same age as me at the time, living in this Palestinian refugee camp on his own with no family, no mother, no father, no brother, and nobody to guide him. He built his own home using cinderblocks and tin. Every day, we walked to the center of town, where we greeted his mentor, Hassan, watered his garden, tended his plants, and spent time on his porch, simply chatting as he enjoyed cigarettes after using his breathing machine. Because Mohammed was alone, he sought guidance and wisdom from this elderly man. You could see a fire in his eyes when they were together, in the way that he interacted with him—they had a very strong bond and relationship. Hassan was the father figure and mentor that Mohammed lacked in his life as a refugee.

There is a resilience that these young Palestinian men face, living in solitude, in extremely harsh conditions that I would not wish upon my worst enemies. The beautiful thing about the community in Jericho was that everybody was bound under God. Each morning, I would hear from the speaker of the mosque, before sunrise, "Allah Akbar" in a beautiful song, and I would join in with many people, gathering in prayer. Despite the living conditions and situations of Palestinian refugee life, prayer, community, and God keep the Palestinians resilient during tough times.

I remember walking along the outskirts of Jericho, by the border. Most refugee camps are surrounded by a big wall, with security, x-rays, and military checkpoints to go through. The border of Jericho is not surrounded by a wall, like many of the refugee camps throughout Palestine, but it is simply guarded with a barbed wire fence. These young boys, seemingly ten years old, wanted to show me the border as they often play just nearby a farm overlooking the fence. As the boys approached the barbed wire, they pointed out to me Israeli soldiers, perched behind their trenches and bunker, pointing their assault rifles towards the children. **This sight was something that astonished me and certainly struck a chord in my soul.** To live like this as a child must be so difficult, and I certainly empathize with the Palestinian people, but more specifically with the youth that are growing up in these conditions.

Nature is Violent and All is War

One day, I was walking through the park here at Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, where I watched a hawk sweep down from the trees and devour a baby bird in mid-flight. All that was left at the scene were a few feathers falling to the ground. **This reminded me how violent nature is, and that all is war.** Perhaps there will always be war, violence, and conflict. This is always found in nature, and humans, too, partake in this conflict.

Maybe there will always be division, whether it is by religion, politics, race, philosophy, location, and dogma, but **I believe we must transcend and go beyond the horizon.** I believe that there is potential for a middle ground, or a nuanced way of viewing humanity and society as a whole. Perhaps we can go beyond the basic ways of identifying with either the oppressor or the victim by understanding our human natural tendency to seek power and dominance. There is a hierarchy within society, and the most dominant shall win. Even consider capitalism as a cruel and violent aspect of American life. While you can achieve freedom and prosperity within the United States of America under a capitalist society, this also means that there will be great disparity between the rich and the poor. This is why you will see many people flying on jets, riding on yachts, going on extravagant vacations, and spending money on luxury goods, while others are in the streets, using the concrete as their bedroom and their bathroom, begging, and sleeping on the corners.

As much as we can strive to be the free bird, soaring through the air and the open spaces with our wings spread, there will always be that keen sting and violent nature, that cruel tendency, to clip the wing of others, and tear everything down. **I believe we must remain strong, resilient, and increase our physical power.** The more you focus on physiological strength, the stronger your mind will be. We can achieve resilience against all odds, to transcend this slave mind, of identifying with the victims.

Morality is a fickle and funny thing, but perhaps violence is merely a byproduct of human nature's tendency to seek greater power.