On Being Nice

Sadistic banshees, civil war, transformative justice

Peter Gelderloos

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Is it better to be nice, or to be remembered?

In *Banshees of Inisherin*, Martin McDonagh's haunting, beautiful movie of last year, Colin Farrell's character Pádraic and Brendan Gleeson's Colm go to war over this question. (And it is such a beautiful movie, for the love of god, don't read this newsletter until you've seen it. Seriously. You will make me very sad.)

Because one day, Colm, the older of this pair of lifelong friends, decides he doesn't want to waste one more minute of his life talking to Pádraic. He is getting old, he's starting to feel it, but he has a rare talent with the fiddle. He wants to compose a song, just one song that might have a chance of being remembered.

And everyone knows that Padraic might be one of the nicest fellows on the island (he regularly lets his beloved donkey in the house, because why should he have to stay all bored outside?), but, though no one will say it to his face, he's a bit dull. And Colm decides he doesn't have anymore time for dullness.

Padraic just can't get his simple little mind around this, he keeps challenging and questioning Colm's decision until the older man lays down, and begins to carry out, an ultimatum: *every time you talk to me, I will cut off one of my own fingers.*

In one defiant riposte at the pub, when Padraic drunkenly challenges his obsession with legacy, Colm points out that no one remembers if Mozart was nice, they remember him because he did great things, and that's what's important.

And here we come across a question anarchists grapple with. Because there are historical figures we celebrate, and whose work still inspires us, but—because of our troublesome insistence on finding an agreement between ends and means—we also wonder, and hope, *were they nice people?*

One of the most eloquent explorations of this need, and this contradiction, can be found in the tragically under-distributed book, *The Unquiet Dead: Anarchism, Fascism, and Mythology* by anonymous. What does it mean when people who champion ideas of freedom, respect, and dignity for all don't put those ideas in practice and treat people poorly in their own lives (often their intimate partners, their children...)? The author of *Unquiet Dead* embraces the complexity to be found in the tension between both stories. Carlos Tresca, the Italian anarchist featured in the book's opening was a heroic revolutionary motivated by a love for freedom, dedicated to the cause and willing to risk himself again and again. He fought for downtrodden workers in the IWW, campaigned to save Sacco and Vanzetti from the electric chair, and organized to stem the rising tide of fascism in the Italian-American community, for which he was eventually executed by the mafia. He also beat his wife, left her and their child to be with his lover Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, but then got Elizabeth's sister pregnant. He caused immense harm to the people he should have taken care of the best. Both of these facets of him are true.

The point is not to tolerate harm as inevitable nor draw up balance sheets between someone's good deeds and bad deeds as though we had Ma'at's feather in our back pocket. The point is to recognize that every goddamn person on this planet walks around all day with the capacity to do good and the capacity to do harm and we all do both. Of a completely different nature, however, are the institutions and structures with the most power to shape the entire planet. They are not people, they are not lovable damaged little packages of complexity. Rather, they are social machines that produce harm and exalt harm and metastasize harm and they grind it in to us every fucking day and their only chance for reproducing themselves is to get us to cause harm or to look away every fucking day. Our only single moonshot hope of coming together and

generating enough power to destroy them once and for all so we can finally get on with healing is to recognize our potential for harm and for care and do our best to be better. Because otherwise, every time we reach towards liberation, we will be the most effective ones at tearing ourselves down.

I really believe that's true: I have seen us beat the police, I have seen us outsmart the universities, I have seen us outmaneuver the military, I have seen us drown out the media, and I have seen us create abundance that not even the corporations could buy out or drain dry. But one thing I have never seen us do, as a movement, is to fully adopt lasting practices of conflict resolution and collective, transformative responses to harm. Though some corners of the movement have been working at it harder than others.

Urgently, we cannot support people who have been harmed without cultivating in our social circles and movements a lifelong commitment to healing. Because otherwise, we'll expect healing to fit within a simple process, we'll tend towards large, quick gestures that are more designed as loud advertisements that we're with the good guys than they are designed to create space for hard feelings and messy processes that never entirely go away. Because trauma chooses its own timeline, and we can't be present to it as long as we stick to the normative, ableist, and neurocompliant ideas of "being okay," as long as healing continues to be an extra, a marginal space of exception rather than a central feature of everything we do. (And dear god let no one read this as a call for nonviolence. With all the force of Colm suckerpunching policeman Peadar when he starts to run his mouth in that great scene in the pub, we need to insist: fighting institutions of power and the people who choose every single day to be their mercenaries is an integral part of healing.)

Just as urgently, we cannot accompany people who have caused great harm so that they stop causing harm and are present for healing if we cannot see the good in them, and this is a central tenet of transformative justice, no matter how many *white people have started using that phrase when they mean cancellation. Not only because it is scary to admit we have hurt people we care about and we need support in those moments, but because if we cannot empathize with someone else's ability to cause harm we probably cannot empathize with our own, which means that when we harm someone we will probably not let ourselves see it.

*I wrestled with the possibility of linking to some of the leading white voices totally perverting the concept and disrespecting the legacy of transformative justice, but I wasn't looking forward to the inevitable flame war and I certainly can't position myself as someone who understands it all better. So please, if you're white, whether you have a large platform or not, try to spend some time understanding the abolitionist struggle, the extreme violence of the State stealing away so many Black people and locking them up in prison. Maybe instead of bickering and posturing, we could give more support to the struggle against the prison system and white supremacy, *and as a part of that* insist that our harm is our own and being a community means calling it in rather than casting it out.

I've been learning a little about this as I reflect on one of the various miserable stories that have brought me close to the edge these past few years. A young anarchist in my neighborhood was accused of abusive behaviors by three former partners, and also spent an afternoon trying to convince a nonbinary person that their existence wasn't real, with transphobic arguments he'd gotten off the internet. I volunteered to talk with him, hoping to offer critical support through some kind of dialogue that would hopefully be transformative for him and supportive for the people he had harmed. It didn't go very well. Actually, it turned into a dumpster fire. I gave him

about five minutes of patience and when he didn't drop his defensiveness, his proud belief that he was right and innocent as he quoted "radfem" websites and ignored the suffering of his former partners, my ego kicked in and I focused, ever more belligerently, on proving him wrong. As though I were right, as though I were one of the good ones, as though I haven't also hurt people I care about or clung to wrongheaded beliefs that erased other people's experiences of pain and oppression.

It didn't help that his defenses were already up and he had reasons for feeling unsafe. Turns out, the feminist working group in the organization he was a part of knew to use transformative justice lingo but spared themselves the effort of actually learning the practice and the experiences of struggle behind it (they generally haven't bothered reading or translating Black feminists over here in Catalunya, but then again, the same can be said of too many white anarchists in the States). As their first or second step in the "process," they published this kid's name and photo on the internet and demanded his exclusion from everywhere. They also excluded some of the people he had harmed from their decision-making so they could maintain control over the process. The man with the most power in the organization, who has built up his entire identity around being a good feminist ally, didn't dare contradict them even though it was clear they had no idea what they were doing, so he stayed on the sideline instead of offering resources.

The guy's former partners, in general, didn't get support. An internet communiqué and cancellation campaign gets priority, but not their emotional wellbeing. One feminist in the neighborhood offered support, but didn't have much energy. Other feminists stayed away, because the situation was too conflictive and they were still feeling drained from being exploited or burned playing support roles for other conflicts. I prioritized confronting the dude. It ended up in an actual brawl when I found out he'd been spreading rumors against me, anything to portray his abuse as something else, including twisting information about my mental health to present me as psychotic.

I don't know where that kid is now. If he's abusing his current partner or if he's learned something. All the bridges are burned. The people who published his name and photo don't follow up on it though. He long since disappeared from their safe spaces so everything's resolved for them.

Rewatching *Banshees*, Padraic's pathetic insistence that kindness was more important than legacy reminded me of a tough fight: someone I love very much, maybe exaggerating a little the staying power of my writing, asking whether when I died people would remember me for my books or for failing to live up to my ideals, for being shitty to people I cared about. That takes me to questions of trauma as an intergenerational legacy, and how mental health and accountability intersect with patriarchal conditioning. Those essays are on a low simmer, as I grapple with how to write them (*write from the scar, and not the wound*, as Glennon Doyle says). For now, let me underline how anarchism asks us to be our best selves as we move through the world, while at the same time that world as it currently exists, with its layers of harm stretching back millennia, ensures that very few of us will act as our best selves, no matter what ideas motivate us.

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Ironically, I got on Twitter to help distribution of my writing. I hate social media and all that 21st century noise, but friends kept telling me it didn't make much sense to put so much effort into writing and none at all into the technologies by which writing is distributed nowadays. So

at the end of 2019, never having developed the adequate filters or immunities, I dove in. A couple months later the pandemic started, and I fell hard. In no time, I was fighting with the best of them, disrespecting and insulting people for talking nonsense, or maybe just for not expressing themselves well in two-hundred-odd characters, or maybe for going around with the same kind of arrogance or aggressiveness that I was. Many of you were right there with me, cheering me on. I was also flirting with people, not thinking about how a platform based on algorithms takes status inequalities and amps them up. Not thinking about it because that's how privilege works: if you don't do the work to see it, you're allowed to live like it doesn't exist.

I usually felt pretty awful after those bitter Twitter fights, but I wouldn't have gotten to whatever transformation I'm in the midst of now without the loving criticism of feminist comrades who have done the work that transformative justice asks of us. They didn't think I was a bad person just because I was acting like an asshole. They knew that social media are structured to encourage alienation and polarization along superficial, acrimonious lines, something that on a large scale has injected new life into rightwing politics. They also know that we are the only ones who are responsible for our actions. Making some kind of change, then, requires an analysis of the power structures that condition our behavior balanced with an analysis that centers our own choices.

Often, we can inhabit architectures of power like barbarians, refusing to use them the way they are designed. The same person I mentioned earlier is on sex worker twitter more than anarchist twitter and says that people there are nearly always kind and supportive, while also practicing the forms of security culture obligated by the criminalization of their income, sharing resources in a way certain old Russian geographers might call "mutual aid," and engaging in the sort of theoretical debates you would expect from smart people who inhabit contradictory spaces created by the hypocrisies in society's moral norms and who are frequently thrust into a blinding spotlight as props in various debates around patriarchy, harm, criminalization, capitalism, and the State. Yet another reminder that anarchists frequently don't make the best anarchists.

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Our many collective failings around accountability and harm should also be a reminder that even an emphasis on acting in accordance with our values can become the front lines of a new war. In *Banshees of Inisherin*, it is shortly after Pádraic cements his identity as a nice fellow that he stops acting nice. After confirming with his sister, and the bartender, and his young friend Dominic that he is in fact kind, he proves to himself that Colm is in fact unjustified in ending their friendship, and therefore he must be justified in continuing to violate the boundaries that Colm, however unreasonably, is trying to lay down. Justification in hand, he sets out to sabotage Colm's newfound pursuit of musical composition.

The moment he is the one holding the flag of kindness, he no longer has to be kind.

Some people have vastly misunderstood *Banshees* as an allegory for the Irish Civil War, and it is true that Inisherin, the fictional island the movie takes place on, translates as "island of Ireland." Instead the Civil War, which is occurring on the mainland as Pádraic and Colm's feud plays out, is a foil to the movie's plot.

I think it could be argued that the sounds of artillery bombardment coming across the channel, and then the staccato report of executions—traitors killed by the victorious side—and then the silence of a troubled peace, herald the three acts of the movie's dramatic script. Rather than an

equivalence, Mcdonagh has drawn poetic contrasts between the civil war on the mainland and the civil feud between the two ex-friends.

The feud is frivolous, coming down to Colm's vanity and Pádraic's stubbornness. I would be a little scandalized by anyone implying that the causes of the war were also frivolous; everyone knows it was caused by British imperialism and the forms of oppression that become inevitable when people confide in a new state for their liberation. No one on the little island understands the reasons for the war, but neither are they held up as paragons of discernment capable of even noticing injustice. On the contrary, island society is portrayed as conservative, moribund, and incapable of fixing itself. Its solutions are escape, whether through emigration or suicide. Furthermore, the maximum exponent of the idea that the difference between the two sides is meaningless is the cop, Peadar. And the movie's most eloquent explorations of morality, in the confessional dialogues between Colm and the island priest, make it clear that non-human animals deserve compassion, whereas cops do not. Like I said earlier, cops were people who have instead decided every single day they wake up to be mercenaries for a system that makes life impossible.

The war best expresses itself as a foil to the feud in the uneasy peace of the conclusion. Standing side by side looking out over the channel to the now quiet mainland, Colm offers a truce which Pádraic flatly rejects. The audience will watch the scene in a present in which Ireland is bound fast to a moldering peace process that we can trace back to 1923, the year *Banshees* takes place, agitated by Brexit and every year's new revelations of brutal tactics employed by the British and their lackeys. Peace, nowadays, does not have an immaculate reputation and it is on that stage that Pádraic insists, heart full of love and hate, that some things cannot be forgiven.

And yet, even though he says they will never have peace, even though he has just burned Colm's house down and tried to kill him (though he gave fair warning), both of them still commit to a minimum of decency. Pádraic takes care of Colm's dog when he sets the house on fire. Colm picks Pádraic off the ground and silently takes him home after the copper beats him up. Colm also accepts the legitimacy of Pádraic's arson, given that he had accidentally killed Pádraic's dear little donkey.

Those minimums of decency, of course, were lacking in the Irish Civil War, just as they are absent from most political conflicts. And that's the world we live in. The banshees that haunt us no longer wail and cry over the tragedies of this life. They grin wickedly, jaded, pointing out each lifeless body as we drag it out of the lake.

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Banshees, actually, does not present us with a simple dichotomy between legacy and kindness, though a tendency to recognize male protagonists would lead us to that conclusion. That would be a false contest, stacked so that everyone, performing, would say *of course kindness is more important*, even if we will rarely live that way. Instead of a dichotomy, it is actually a triangle holding up legacy, kindness, and the ineffable. The latter, of course, is represented by Siobhán. She is the only one who is capable of understanding the other two, in their intractable conflict.

She prizes her brother's kindness and for the most part she is kinder than he is, though she can also call bullshit in the face of nonsense (and we have to understand her hostility to young Dominic in light of the gendered way he, himself damaged and friendless, projects and presumes rather than respecting her boundaries). But at the same time she feels the ineffable pull of that spirit Colm tries to satisfy with his music, and eventually she follows it off the island. In her case,

though, it does not manifest as something as vain as legacy. I think what keeps her awake at night is the burning need not to just move unthinkingly through life, satisfied and inert, but to be nourished by the world and to also give something back.

When you write a book, you realize it may well survive longer than you do. If you write many books on revolutionary theory and practice, people might start to assume you embody those ideas better than they do, when all you know how to do is write them down, and you're just describing things you've learned from people around you, or people you've had the good fortune to correspond with, or people who died long ago and have been preserved by these mischievous little publications.

In a couple decades and change in the anarchist movement, I have lived through moments when the enemy really was the systems of power that are killing all of us, slowly or quickly, and the mercenaries whose very sense of self is based on defending those systems with whatever weapons, whatever cruelty, they can muster. Other times, the people on the other side of a line of conflict were people little different from me, but whom I had decided—with some justification, but probably not enough—were representatives of the ideas of power that animate the systems that are destroying us. So if they were the bad guys, as I was telling myself to justify fighting them, I must have been telling myself I was a good guy.

But how many people would have an easy time of putting me on the other side of that line? After all, I'm a settler who hasn't found the resources to ameliorate his traumas nor the time to check his privileges, stumbling through a world created by people who look a lot like me. What I know is that people who have put me there, who have treated me like an enemy when I've messed up, haven't helped me grow or make amends, they were usually an obstacle to those things, and the ones I've gotten to know have messed up just as bad as I have. It's the people who have treated me like a person who might want to live in a world together with other people who I have learned the most from. And it's thanks to those brave enough to have shown me love when I've messed up that I've survived. And they've helped me realize that there are many different versions of ourselves. That we live in some hellish architecture that keeps encouraging the worst versions of ourselves to rise to the top, and they will unless we specifically choose otherwise. And that fact alone warrants some kindness.

I probably shouldn't think of myself as a good guy, because I honestly haven't been successful at much in my life. I have been lucky, though, to be there a few times in electrifying moments, to hear ghosts who have a lot to say, and maybe to pass a little of that on in ways others have found helpful.

I think I no longer want to win. I think what I want to do is to tell stories about our failures, and my failures, but tell them with compassion. To tell stories about people I admire. About battles that were worth fighting, and peaces that weren't false. And to try, impossibly, to strike the exact note of that ineffable music that calls on us, every day, to be better.

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Unending thanks to R, who took me out to see *Banshees*, and held my hand through many of these realizations, most of them ones I should have come to a long time ago. For much of these last few years, I was dangling over the edge. Because I hadn't done the work of putting my ideals into practice, I almost dragged her over with me. She's also, not coincidentally, the person who taught me about memoir as a tool for healing the past, which has an eerie parallel with the

vision of history set forth by Walter Benjamin, one of the favorite theorists of the author of *The Unquiet Dead*, who launches into Benjamin immediately after sharing the heartbreaking story about Carlos Tresca.

Get on her newsletter here if you're not already reading her, and check out her first book: `https://beltpublishing.com/products/rust-belt-femme`

(The original quote from Glennon Doyle is alternately "You need to write from a scar, not an open wound," or "if you're going to share widely – make sure you're sharing from your scars, not your open wounds" and in the interview where it seems to have first come up, she attributes the phrase to a friend of hers, but it's been made more aerodynamic as feminist writers share the aphorism back and forth. All of which is a lovely counter to the white and patriarchal notion of knowledge in which the truest expression is singular in its source, traceable back to an original utterance, and written down.)

Postscript: Citations and Tangents

anonymous, *The Unquiet Dead: Anarchism, Fascism, and Mythology*

Kai Cheng Thom, *"What to do when you have been abusive"*

Alex Gorrion, "Kafka Reloaded: Redefining Apparatus in a Series of Government Waiting Rooms"

Henry McDonald, "Revealed: Five British spies inside the IRA" - Just a note that Scappaticci admitted to being a spy in the years since this article was published.

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