

I think/I feel:

Contextualising sadness, anger, fear, and love in political science education

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Abstract

While many feminist scholars find space to recognise the role of emotions in their work, emotions do not generally take centre stage in discussions on political science education. We commonly ask students what they think about what they are studying, and why, but we do not often ask them how they feel about what they are studying. Yet my political science education has been a fundamentally emotional experience. Emotions have had an enormous influence on what I study and how I study it. I have not, however, found space to integrate that awareness into how I situate myself within my discipline, and to do so in a way that is recognisable to others. Emotion has generally been seen, at best, as incidental to my education or, at worst, as an impediment to it. In this paper, I use narrative to explore significant emotional events in my socialisation into the discipline of political science as an undergraduate and graduate student. Many of these experiences are particular to the study of politics, but all are integral to the sort of political scientist I am in the process of becoming. This paper is an attempt to hold open space for political science educators to consider how emotions have defined their own educations, and to consider how emotions shape who our students become in response to our teaching, and how they engage with political science as a result.

I: The Wishbone

I try to keep a box of Kleenex in my office at York University. It's the office I use as a teaching assistant. The Kleenex gets used a lot.

A student bursts through the door. She is crying. I encourage her to come in, and I ask her to sit. A small percentage of my students come to see me. Many of the ones who come do so because they've decided they have to; many are angry, scared, or sad. If they are angry, it's often because the grade I gave them isn't what they wanted. Even the angry ones are usually scared or sad. But they are there, and they are emotional.

So the Kleenex gets used a lot. There are workshops available on how to "deal" with upset students. I have been trained to manage the situation. This has been effective. I am no longer afraid of dealing with upset students.

But this student is not a hypothetical problem to be managed. She is not "students." She is a particular student, and she is really there, in a chair, sitting across from me. She holds her body tightly, making her already small frame seem even smaller.

I was told recently, at a workshop for teaching assistants, that TAs sit on both sides of the fence: we are both teachers and students. We therefore hold a unique position that allows us to see as teachers and as learners at the same time. This feels true to me. Perhaps it is. I don't know.

But what I do know, when I look into the red eyes of the young woman in my chair, is that I was a lot like her, once. I am still much more like her than I would like to admit. Than I have been taught to admit.

When we talk about her education, we will not speak of this. We will speak of the courses she has taken, the papers she has written, the guest lectures she has attended. We will speak of the conclusions she

has drawn about the political world of which she is a part. We will most definitely speak of her grades. If she is lucky, we might even speak of her experiences outside the classroom: how they are political education of a related sort. But we will not speak of this moment. We will not see the young woman crying in my office.

I start to feel hollow in my chair, as I run through my conflict management strategies. I know we will not speak of this. But the teacher and the student in me can only be pulled in two directions for so long. I am a wishbone. I can feel the crack forming.

I try to pull my two sides together, as I stand to show her out. I have had a niggling feeling for many years; for months, I have known it is time.

The most defining features of my political science education have been, fundamentally and profoundly, emotional. I cannot hope to understand the political scientist I am becoming without those moments, yet there is little space for them in professional narratives about my discipline. If I am to begin to understand my education, I must go farther. I must be able to speak of these moments, to others, if I am to forestall the fissure.

II: Sadness, Anger, or Guilt?

Roméo Dallaire is one of my favourite people. His book² sits on my living room shelf, where we put the volumes that are thoughtful and pretty, and worth showing to company. The crumpled science fiction paperbacks are tucked away in the office, next to my knitting books. But *Shake Hands with the Devil* has a place of honour.

I remember a lot of what was in that book, but I don't remember much about actually reading it. The last time I read it must have been 9 years ago. It was the end of my first year as an undergraduate student. I wouldn't even know that if the lieutenant general had not written the date when he signed my copy.

I had read most of the book. I had been following his then-recent testimony at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Every morning, I would use my family's dial-up internet to check online African journalism sources for news of his testimony and what he had seen. Then I heard him speak. It was May 28, 2004. I was transfixed.

But I have never finished *Shake Hands with the Devil*. I couldn't. I tried many times. I was within two, maybe three chapters of the end. I could not finish it. It has been nearly a decade since I met Roméo Dallaire, a man who to this day leaves me in awe. The weight of his story was more than I could bear, at the age of 18. Back then, I would think about finishing the last few chapters. I would feel the weight on my chest. I never finished it. Maybe I thought I would get stronger, that it would get easier as I learned more. It didn't.

² Roméo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (Random House Canada, 2003).

My handwritten notes still sit wedged in the front of the book. When I look at them now, one thing he said stands out: “My disgust knows no bounds ... when I look at humanity.”

That fall, I signed up for a course called World Politics. It was pivotal for me in many ways, and in many moments. One of the most important moments, for me, was one of profound pain.

We were to watch a documentary called *Cry Freetown*, on war in Sierra Leone. My professor was thoughtful and gentle: he told us we could leave if we wanted to or needed to. A number of my colleagues did, at varying stages of the film. I stayed.

I don’t remember much of the content of the film itself; this was nearly nine years ago. But I remember a young boy with a disability being beaten. I remember his screams, or some echo of them. I recently read a blog post by a scholar and teacher³ who described that scene without naming the film. I knew right away. I could still see it.

My eyes had been glued open, then. My friend watched through her fingers with her head on my shoulder. I stared straight ahead. I couldn’t move; I did not know what I would do if I moved. Being still hardly made it better. It was that crushing, overwhelming sadness in my chest. My spirit was crushed with it.

With those of us who made it through the video, our professor shared only one thought: “This film usually makes my students sad,” he said. “It just makes me angry.” I hear his voice in my head sometimes, as I try to figure out how to live with all I have read and seen, and all I have felt, in my studies. I should be angry; I want to be angry. But sometimes the anger subsides into that crushing feeling in my chest. Then I just feel guilty. Like when I see Roméo Dallaire’s book, unfinished, on my living room shelf.

Somehow, I was not usually pushed away from the subject matter that overwhelmed me. I was propelled toward it. I kept stumbling around political science and directly into some of the worst cruelty and hopelessness I could imagine, and some that I couldn’t. And I was drawn to Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS). The last year of my undergrad, I formally declared a PACS minor. I’m not sure whether I realised it then, but I was desperately pulling myself toward a discipline that had more room for my feelings.

What I did know then was that PACS had something for me that political science didn’t: it was a value explicit discipline. “We’re trying to promote peace,” they’d say. It was something I needed in my head: I knew I couldn’t manage with just the parts of political science that focus on explanation and on theory. But I know now that I also needed it in my chest. I couldn’t take any more poverty, oppression, cruelty, and indifference without some underlying hope, and even a little joy. PACS at the University of Waterloo is taught by an affiliated Mennonite college, across a little stream that runs through campus. I took a course in which the sessional instructor began wordlessly, without introduction. He put on a slideshow

³ Richard Jackson, “A Self-inflicted Wound; or, The Burden of Scholarship,” *Richardjacksonterrorismblog*, April 2, 2013, <http://richardjacksonterrorismblog.wordpress.com/2013/04/02/a-self-inflicted-wound-or-the-burden-of-scholarship/>.

with photos of the international peace work he had done. With it, he sang and played the guitar. It was a profound and unexpected relief. I quickly saw that the people in PACS had found some hope and a little joy to share, and they were comfortable with that. Even when I wasn't. Even though it was what I needed.

So I gratefully took on PACS. It often compounded my sorrow. I took a night class called The Quest for Peace in Literature and Film. It should have been called War in Literature and Film. The class met Tuesday nights. I would spend most of the day doing my readings for the course. Then three hours for the class discussion. We read *The Things They Carried*.⁴ We read Words For My Daughter.⁵ I would spend a lot of the day crying, alone in my bedroom. By the end of the night, I thought I would be numb. I usually wasn't.

It was not better when I went off to grad school. I lived alone for the first time, six hours away from home. I was still drawn to some of the worst our world has to offer, that which political science so often looks straight in the eye. Humiliation, inhumanity. Lost potential, lost loved ones.

It was bearable during the course work. At least then, once a week, we would all get to talk about it. Once a colleague came to class late, crying. The week's material had been all too close for her. We talked about it. It wasn't enough, but it was something.

Then my major independent project came. I had four months, on my own. I read and wrote about oppression.

I had managed to get in the habit of rising at eight in the morning every weekday. I would go to work in my office on campus. I was aided by the television in my bachelor apartment, which had a special setting: I could set it to turn on at a particular time, on a particular channel. It would function much like an alarm clock.

The Wonder Pets was on at eight in the morning. In it, an animated guinea pig, turtle, and duck live in a single room school house and wait until the children leave school for the day. Their tin can telephone rings. The call is almost always from a juvenile animal who is trapped in something and requires assistance. Inevitably, a single Wonder Pet tries to save the baby animal alone, without success. Then the Wonder Pets work together, and they manage to complete the rescue. The program is an operetta. The turning point of each story is always when the characters sing: "What's gonna work? Teamwork!"

It was the anger, sadness, and guilt that did it, mixed with a bit of loneliness. I became a 22-year-old who faithfully watched a children's show, every morning before work.

I had found a small way to bring some hope and joy into my own day. It was all I could do to balance the sadness. But by then I had been trained. Conflicted feelings of guilt and anger would rise in me. I can read the Wonder Pets as a valorisation of colonialism. The Wonder Pets rush off to save some

⁴ Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

⁵ John Balaban, "Words for My Daughter," accessed May 6, 2013, http://www.johnbalaban.com/poems.html#words_for_my_daughter.

supposedly powerless and infantilised animal. They show up without thoroughly investigating the situation, save the day, and then leave again. These are not neutral teachings. I should be angry, and I am. But not enough.

I am a feminist political scientist. I am constantly surrounded by stories, images, and experiences that promote sexism, misogyny, racism, and violence. I should be indignant. I often am. And yet, I cannot be always, and still be sane.

And so I gave in to the Wonder Pets, and still do. It helps. It is never enough, but it helps. I try to remember my professor's words, and to stay at least a little bit angry. There is plenty to be angry about. I am slowly, painfully learning to narrow my indignation. I cannot afford madness.⁶ I must do more for that boy. I still hear his screams.

III: Fear

I was battered by sadness in my Master's program, but my introduction to graduate studies was also my introduction to fear in my work. I had always been afraid of failure in my studies, and that got worse. But it was much more than that.

My Master's Research Project was on theories of privilege in anti-oppression education. As I settled on the topic, and as I pursued it, I was engaged and excited. But I became increasingly anxious as I went about my project. I found my anxiety went surprisingly deep.

I eventually gathered the nerve to mention this to my supervisor. She did not dismiss my observation. I do not remember her exact words in response, and yet I know that this conversation was pivotal. She observed that real learning often provokes anxiety in the learner. I left her office knowing that if I feel comfortable in what I study, I am doing it wrong. This work entails putting myself on the line. What's more, it puts others on the line. I should be afraid.

So when, at the start of my PhD, I was thrown into one of the most threatening classroom dynamics I have ever experienced, I eventually saw more than just my fear and vulnerability, and the knot in my stomach when I thought about our conversations there. It took me six months of distance and perspective to see it, but my fear was important. That classroom dynamic and the disagreements that underpinned it gave my dissertation topic. I am still afraid. That is how I know I am heading in the right direction.

IV: Joy

The painful emotions were always easiest to identify, once I learned to pay attention to them. For a long while, the elation was harder to notice. We do not really speak of it, either.

⁶ On this, see Aritha Van Herk, "Drowning in Bathtubs: Temptation and Terror," in *Not Drowning but Waving: Women, Feminism and the Liberal Arts* (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 2011), 197–212.

In that same second year World Politics class, I had been nearly overwhelmed with excitement when I finally understood what the professor had spent months working so hard to show us. The journey and the fight had been exhausting; the final arrival was unexpected and revelatory. I was ecstatic. There is no other word. That joy was mainly intellectual. And I didn't have much time to focus on it, given my revelation came not 20 minutes before the final exam that I had been dreading through my confusion. But some joy has been more physical.

Late in my undergrad degree, I watched a confidence vote in the House of Commons on television, alone in the living room. No one knew precisely what would happen. The vote ended in a tie that would be broken by the speaker in favour of the status quo, as was his duty by rarely-used precedent.

I don't remember much else about the vote. What comes to me when I think of it is visceral, physical.

It had started in my legs: a tingling that spread steadily and evenly across my entire body. It had never happened before. It has happened since, but not like that. Then it was entirely new, and entirely unexpected. And it assured me that despite all the pain and the horror, politics would be my life, with or without the academy.

I didn't like the results of that vote; I had been avidly rooting for the other side. It was nonetheless a moment of pure pleasure in my work. It stubbornly and without warning pulled me out of my head and out of time. It shoved me from the abstraction of my training and threw me back into my body. And when I get a hint of that feeling, while reading a textbook or attending a lecture or talking to a colleague, I now pay attention to that, too, as much as to the fear. As much as I rationalise my own research choices, and take seriously my obligation to consider and defend why and how I study what I do, I often follow the tingling. I suspect I am not alone.

I never speak of this, of course, with my students. I don't explain to them the unanticipated and largely inexplicable joy I had while watching a confidence vote, at their age. I don't mention the sensation that started in my legs.

When I try to get them excited about Canadian politics and parliamentary procedure, I tell them about history. I tell them about rules and principles of democracy. As I should. I try to let them see the excitement on my face. I hope that some glimmer will spark in their head or in their eyes if I can help them to understand the theory and the practice. I suspect that it is futile: that without acknowledging my own helpless moments of elation, there is not much hope for them to develop their own sense of joy in politics. One or two of the lucky ones may stumble across it, like I did. If they do, they will not speak of it either. They will do what I do: they will talk about what politics does in their head without speaking of what it does in their legs.

V: Love

So I was intimately familiar with fear, anger, and sadness early in my career. I eventually came to recognise unexpected, visceral pleasure. It took me until last fall to recognise love. It is still the hardest to speak of.

Richard Nutbrown was my first, and my last, undergraduate political science professor. He supervised my senior honours essay. He was irreverent, insightful, and intelligent, and a favourite among my friends and colleagues. He taught the introductory course in political science at Waterloo, and he was thus well known to students within and beyond the department. He served as our chair. He had a profound influence on my career and my life.⁷

And last summer, he died. We didn't see it coming. He had been ill for a long time, we learned, but so many of us had moved on. We might have been occasionally in touch, but our lives and our heads were elsewhere, along with our bodies. "I'll stop by his office next time I'm on campus," I would say to myself. I didn't. The guilt was to be expected.

But I did not expect to find the love that I did, from more than just me. I was asked to say a few words at his memorial. I spent hours trying to find those words.

The sadness I felt when he died was more powerful than I thought I was allowed. He had been my professor, my supervisor, for a time. Those terms are structured, institutionalised, safe. They are about job titles and positions, not about relationships. I can say he was my mentor. That at least recognises a significant professional relationship. It is accurate, certainly. But it feels sterile.

I sat at my computer for hours. I wrote many things that were true, and that spoke rightly and highly of my professor's skill, wit, and compassion. But I found I couldn't say anything worthwhile without acknowledging the love that so many of us had for him. That I had for him.

So as I wrote of him, I wrote of that, and of the little space I was finding for us to acknowledge love in our academic training and our professional relationships. But I feared saying it. I was not sure that there would be space to speak of it, even at a memorial.

Before I spoke that night, one of Professor Nutbrown's former graduate students spoke, sensitively and thoughtfully. I was elated when he, too, spoke of love. We had found some space, after all. A wave of relief rippled through me. We had found it there, for him.

As I walked to the bus that night, holding my husband's hand, I feared that space would not open again. It was then that I knew I had to find some way to hold it open. For him, for my own students. And for me.

VI: Contagion without Closure

It is hard for me to write this now, and even harder to end it. I am expected to wrap up what I have said in a morsel of summary. I am to highlight cause and effect. I am to tie what I have written with a pretty bow. That will allow us to move on, largely unchanged, with one more little piece of knowledge that we can articulate to others, and to ourselves.

⁷ Kate M. Daley, "7 Things I Learned from Richard Nutbrown," *Kate M. Daley: Academic and Civic Reflections of a PhD Candidate*, July 16, 2012, <http://katemdaley.ca/2012/07/16/7-things-i-learned-from-richard-nutbrown/>.

But I am uneasy. I am changed. I can articulate only so much to myself, and even less to others. I know somewhere deep that I am defined by these moments. But what of it?

After 10 years, my training has largely fused with my own ways of thinking, of feeling. I fear that if I do not directly tell you how I am changed, you will not take me seriously. I fear that if I do not connect the dots into a recognisable picture, you will judge me lazy and unfocused. I fear that turning my closing into an opening will encourage you, my partner in this struggle, to leave me the same as you came to me, without even a morsel tied with a bow to remind you. I know my fears are not unfounded.

Yet I know that giving you what you expect of me will mean containment. The word forces me to recognise the possibility of contagion, of that which we fear will spread uncontrollably, from too close contact, with consequences we cannot predict. It would in many ways be easier to close off the space I am desperate to hold open. I fear the contagion. But I am loath to contain what power it might hold. I must resist.

So I wait for the next student to come and sit in my chair. He may be sad, he may be afraid, he may be angry. His legs may tingle. If the tears come, if we can no longer pretend that we do not have feelings, I will hand him a Kleenex. We most likely will not speak of it.