

## The Unbearable Weightiness of Being

To me, life is an accumulation of choices, conscious decisions that every person must make. I would like to think that my life is not altered by fate or influenced by the idea that “it must be.” Whether or not this is true or false I refuse to let the sentiment “es muss sein” dictate the choices in my life, or so I choose to think. Yet, the one choice I never considered is the choice between light and weight. In many ways, reading about Tomas in Kundera’s novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, was like reading my own thoughts and struggles that I could never put into words myself. I have come to the realization that for years I have been subconsciously trying to extricate myself from the unbearable *weightiness* of being without ever considering the unbearable *lightness* of being. I think there is a point in life when one must ask: do I want to live a life of weight (regardless of the pains that come from hauling around the burden of intense feeling and emotion)? Or do I want to live a life of light (of unexacting airiness, void of value but also clear of constraint)? Yet, these questions lead to a further inquiry: is the choice between weight and light a choice that every person has the power to make? Or is it an innate, predisposition toward one or the other? The thing that gives weight so much value, in many ways, is compassion. Like Tomas, the main character in Kundera’s novel, I find myself struggling with the duality of weight and light especially as weight pertains to compassion.

“In languages that form the word “compassion” not from the root “suffering” but from the root “feeling,” the word is used in approximately the same way, but to contend that it designates a bad or inferior sentiment is difficult. The secret strength of its etymology floods the word with another light and gives it a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion -- joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. This kind of compassion, therefore, signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then, it is supreme” (Kundera 20). In this passage, Kundera introduces the concept of compassion in a profound yet comprehensible manner. In English, compassion means “*to love together with.*” The sentiment behind the English interpretation of compassion is quite euphonious yet does not include the integral piece of compassion that ties it to weight. In Slavic

languages, compassion is “co-feeling.” “to feel with [another] any emotion -- [including] anxiety [and] pain.” To me, it is the agony in compassion (co-feeling) that makes it the heaviest, most “supreme” sentiment.

In the novel, Tomas rejects weight in his life as a method of self-preservation. He is caught between an involuntary sense of compassion that he has developed for Tereza, the woman he loves, and his desire to be light which he associates with happiness and freedom. Tomas finds himself at “the meeting of two worlds. A double exposure. Showing through the outline of Tomas the libertine, incredibly, the face of a romantic lover” (Kundera 22). His internal struggle is that of a person who is scared to let himself feel, scared to give weight to things in life because then they carry value and meaning, scared to feel compassion because it is the equivalent of carrying your own weight and someone else's. It is arduous enough to bear the weight of one's own sadness and anxieties but when the “Devil's gift of compassion” (Kundera 21) is present there is an acute heaviness that is the result of being so attached to another person that you feel not only with them, but for them.

One of the most affecting passages in Kundera's novel, from my perspective, is when Tomas finds that Tereza has gone through his personal items. “By revealing to Tomas her dream about jabbing needles under her fingernails, Tereza unwittingly revealed that she had gone through his desk. If Tereza had been any other woman, Tomas would never have spoken to her again. Aware of that, Tereza said to him, “Throw me out!” But instead of throwing her out, he seized her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, because at that moment he himself felt the pain under her fingernails as surely as if the nerves of her fingers led straight to his own brain” (Kundera 21).

The compassion that Tomas feels towards Tereza spurs from his love for her, yet also adds an immense amount of weight to his desire for lightness in life. Tomas has isolated himself from his family and his past; he has ongoing “erotic friendships” that give him power and the feeling of freedom, void of commitment and cumbrance. He is torn. Torn between a love for Tereza that he does not completely understand and the ideologies he has framed his life around. Torn between “Tomas the libertine” and Tomas the “romantic lover.” The narrator notes just how deep Tomas's compassion is by telling the reader

that Tomas feels what Tereza feels so intensely it is like her “nerves... led straight to his own brain.” This is the compassion that Kundera investigates, the compassion that is sparked by intense feeling, both physical and mental, for another person. The compassion that is the heaviest sensation imaginable.

It would give me great comfort to think that compassion is a choice, to think that I have the power to choose what to give weight to in my life and what to make light. However, as Kundera asserts, “compassion was Tomas’s fate (or curse)” (Kundera 21). It thus occurs to me that maybe I have no control over what or who I feel compassion towards. Tomas also attempts to control compassion, “he kept warning himself not to give in to compassion, and compassion listened with bowed head and a seemingly guilty conscience. Compassion knew it was being presumptuous, yet it quietly stood its ground” (Kundera 31). I now realize, this duality has been a central struggle throughout my growth, the decisions I have made regarding light versus weight, regarding compassion versus indifference, have been defining factors in my life.

Much like Tomas, I find myself at a crossroad, caught between the two worlds. To care or not to care. To feel or not to feel. The dualities and dichotomies of ideologies explored in Kundera’s work are extensive and complex. Through reading this novel I have become aware of my own attempts at lightness. Like Tomas, I find myself in a semi-constant, self-imposed state of detachment from the heavy things in life. For years my family was a weight, a burden that crushed me. The compassion I felt towards my dyslexic brother and the sorrow and guilt I felt for my parents struggling marriage gave my life an unbearable weightiness that I have struggled and am still struggling to escape. For a long time, it felt as though I carried around all of the pain and anguish of my brother, my mother, and my father. It was because of the “Devil’s gift” of compassion that I felt so deeply for my family; caring that much may seem like a positive attribute but it was also excruciatingly painful and immensely heavy.

Thus, looking back on my own experiences and memories make understanding Tomas’s character come fairly naturally to me. I understand his detachment from his past family; I understand his frequent and meaningless affairs; I understand his refusal to let fate and coincidence guide his life; I understand his sigh of relief when he loses his job. Most of all, I understand his fear of compassion. After years of

struggling with my family I “[keep] warning [my]self not to give in to compassion.” If I take a legitimate, introspective look at myself I would say that one of my greatest fears is the suffocating weight of compassion. I find that I live my life trying to be as light as possible. I refuse to allow anything or anyone to get under my skin. I refuse to let anyone have so much value that I would miss them if they were to leave. I refuse to let myself feel so deeply for another that when they hurt I hurt. So, in part, I do believe that one may choose who or what to feel compassion for; it is extremely difficult but in chasing true weightlessness it is essential. Before reading Kundera’s novel it had never occurred to me that I have, in fact, been making my life lighter by isolating myself from my family, avoiding entering into relationships of value, and never taking anything too seriously. I now see that I have become fixed in the unbearable lightness of being.