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Louise Conces
Valparaiso University

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The Human Experience in Regards to Self-Sacrifice

By Louise Conces

The transition from a stable, routine life of eighteen years in the same hometown, Zionsville, to the independent, foreignness of Valparaiso University's campus I personally found to be quite challenging. With a schedule composed primarily of science-oriented classes, CORE was more so a breath of fresh air than a mere freshman requirement. The ultimate purpose of CORE is quite unique in its unit by unit analysis of "The Human Experience" across the expansive array of natural progressions that essentially compose life's foundations. While facing numerous difficulties this year, reading and discussing the elucidations of characters, historical figures, and even classmates to similar scenarios has provided me with peace of mind and encouraged me to reflect on what is truly valuable during the short life span of an individual. Amidst the numerous works we have explored in this course, the overarching life lesson that I found to be the most profound was the remarkable extent people are willing to sacrifice for loved ones as well as complete strangers. This theme has enhanced my own understanding of the magnitude to which I would sacrifice in order to better myself and those around me.

My attention was particularly drawn to this concept after writing a review in the love unit of the 1993 film, *Philadelphia*. Here, I evaluated the extent to which Joe Miller was willing to alter his ingrained preconceptions and defy societal views in addressing the two largely controversial and bigoted subjects of homosexuality and AIDS. The vast majority of the film highlighted the monumental struggles that both men, especially Miller, were forced to overcome due to the outrageous ignorance of others. Miller's peripheral exposure to the constant prejudice and mistreatment that Beckett encountered persuaded Miller to place his morals and sense of humanity before his pride and long established beliefs. I was impressed by the professional and personal risk that Miller took by not only representing Beckett in a court of law but also in Miller's evolution from a man skeptical and critical of gay individuals into one much more accepting and benevolent. Miller's exceptional sacrifice provided the audience with a crucial glimmer of satisfaction at mankind's love and ability to ultimately disregard personal dilemmas in order to whole heartedly pursue necessary justice and the betterment of others. My generation is relatively unfamiliar with the fierce, widespread societal opposition against homosexuality and AIDS associated with the film's time period. Consequently, when writing this paper I was confronted with the task of assuming the outlook of other individuals in order to provide a carefully considered and expressed analysis. My initial reaction to the prompt was to consider the standard,

discernible manners in which love is depicted between Miller and Beckett through their words and actions. However, before long I realized that the film illustrated the most profound and significant message regarding love through the more subtle, intangible sacrifices made by its characters. Writing this film review brought about an even greater consciousness and gratitude for just how necessary it is for one to genuinely reflect on less ostensible and often more influential truths in both films and in life. Overall, the process of writing this paper was valuable in broadening and adding diversity to my arsenal as a writer.

A text that I read in this course that was central towards my general veneration towards self-sacrifice for strangers was the novel by Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. The story's main character, Paul Farmer, possesses an unfathomable concern for the poor and is steadfastly dedicated to helping them in every way possible. One is able to identify multiple sacrifices made by Farmer as he literally forfeits his own needs and desires in order to satisfy his ultimate wish, to care for the destitute. Despite the weakening toll that this situation has upon Farmer, he still sacrifices his own well-being by traveling great distances to seek out patients in need of assistance. Farmer's willingness to exist under a lifestyle on the opposite end of the spectrum from the one many individuals can merely dream of serves as testimony to his saint-like mentality of self-sacrifice. He is a remarkable man in both sacrificing and utilizing the blessings he has been granted in life in order to ensure the

wellbeing of as many less fortunate individuals as possible. With dreams of eventually becoming a doctor myself, I view Farmer's sacrifices as incredible, though slightly extreme, models of the correct mindset that will be necessary to pursue a career in such a demanding field. While I doubt that I will ever be able to relentlessly exert myself as extensively as Farmer, I can definitely foresee myself sacrificing more modest possessions like time, energy, and money. This conviction is a noteworthy evolution from my initial assessments regarding personal sacrifice for strangers upon beginning CORE. Growing up I participated in charity work, but rarely was such volunteering exclusively altruistic in nature; I often benefited in some manner, whether a free t-shirt or another activity to add to my resume. Paul Farmer stimulated me to reconsider my prior motives when he stated that those who expect something in return for doing the right thing should feel ambivalent.

Another text with self-sacrifice that sincerely affected me and caused me to reflect upon how I would handle certain, in this case ultimatum, situations was Sophocles' play, *Alcestis*. Although like *Mountains Beyond Mountains* in that the notion of self-sacrifice is a key theme in this work, the intentions of the main character, Alcestis, are on behalf of a loved one rather than a stranger. Taking the place of her husband in the sealed fate of an individual's death, Alcestis is making the ultimate sacrifice by losing her life and her role as the mother of two young children. Her sacrificial decision is influenced by both her love for

her husband as well as a need to follow Greek moral code. Women had to ultimately remain devoted to their husbands above all else in Greek society at the time. By sacrificing her role as a mother, Alcestis leaves the duty of caring for the welfare of her family to her husband, Admetos. Her sacrifice is also not without additional risk that Admetos could possibly find another woman to fill her role as wife and mother. Thus, although Alcestis sacrifices herself for her husband, she certainly does not die without apprehension about what will come of her choice. This reality is quite different from Paul Farmer's situation in which his feelings of remorse and distress are stirred when he is not continually in a state of sacrifice. While I indeed respect Alcestis's decision, I am reasonably certain that I would not have done the same if I were faced with similar circumstances. The role of a mother is too essential to be forfeited and I believe that it is the duty of the man, not the woman, to die on behalf of a significant other. Again, this outlook varies from my initial opinion before reading this book in CORE. As a college student reading CORE texts revolving around origins and love, I have become more keenly aware of my impending fate as a mother. This consciousness has influenced me significantly to value the relationship between a mother and her child in an increasingly mature and defensive manner. Thus, I oppose Alcestis's decision to sacrifice her life because I no longer agree with my preceding views that the duty of a man, like Admetos, to his kingdom is a priority.

Similarly to Alcestis, Euripides's Theban play, *Antigone*, highlights the course of its main character, Antigone, in sacrificing herself for a loved one, her brother, Polyneices. She too makes the ultimate sacrifice by dying on his behalf when she defies the traditional subservient role of women in ancient Greek society by disobeying the male leadership of her uncle, Kreon. In the case of Antigone, she willingly forfeits a bright future as a young woman of noble birth in order to honor her brother's burial rights. Furthermore, Antigone sacrifices her relationship with her sister, Ismene, as Antigone's insolence and society's reaction towards her cause tension between the two. Antigone upsets Ismene in multiple cases by rejecting her attempts to sway, and later support, her decision. Besides risking her own well-being and reputation, Antigone also jeopardizes the future and safety of Ismene in order to stand by her beliefs. A third substantial sacrifice on Antigone's part is her decision to abandon a marriage to her true love, Haemon, by refusing to submit to Kreon's will. While Antigone despairs over the realization that she will never hear her wedding song, she remains steadfast in her determination that Polyneices receive proper respect. This aspect of last minute regret is comparable to the feelings of uncertainty expressed by Alcestis as she, too, approached the ultimate sacrifice of death. However, she is more alike to Paul Farmer than Alcestis is in that she readily makes every sacrifice necessary in order to attain her ultimate aspiration that Polyneices' death be treated with proper decency in accordance with

cultural traditions. My interpretation of Antigone's approach is somewhat conflicted. I disagree with the seeming recklessness of her sacrifices, especially in regards to Ismene and Haemon. I doubt that I would ever sacrifice for a deceased loved one if it would knowingly harm a living loved one. Nonetheless, I would argue that there is still a lesson of bravery and virtuousness to be learned through her choice to oppose the forces of everyone else around her out of love for her brother. Ultimately, I believe that I, along with many other people, would sacrifice within certain limitations in order to uphold the integrity of the deceased. Before being a student in the CORE program, I would have predominately felt that any individual who made decisions comparable to those of Antigone was utterly imprudent. Yet, CORE has forced me to recognize that one should not automatically abide by the rules of others in order to avoid conflict or promote self-preservation, particularly when a loved one is involved. Although I would still not go to the same extremes as Antigone, I now appreciate that there are conditions in which it is valiant and indispensable to protect what is veracious regardless of the consequences.

The final aspect of this course in which the concept of sacrifice had an impact upon me was through the film, *The Joy Luck Club*. Here, again, the personal sacrifices made by the characters, the four mothers, are with the intent of bettering loved ones, their daughters. One mother, Suyuan, makes perhaps the most difficult sacrifice a mother could when

she abandons her twin baby girls by a tree. Fearing that she would soon die of dysentery while fleeing, she wanted to provide her children with a better chance of surviving by being taken into the care of another. A second mother, Lindo, sacrifices a dominant feature of Chinese culture, her parents' pride and wealthy status by tricking her mother-in-law into allowing her youthful marriage to end. Having been treated cruelly for failing to produce a grandson, Lindo was concerned for the treatment of her future children in such an environment, particularly any potential daughters. Ying-Ying, another mother, sacrifices her baby boy by drowning him during his bath in order to spare him the misery and probable harm of being raised under the care of his playboy father and the whores he exposes to his son. The last mother, An-Mei risks severe punishment as an orphaned child by retaliating at her mother's funeral. Playing upon the superstitions of her mother's husband, she forces him to revere her mother as his first wife instead of third. Despite having different outcomes, one may draw parallels between the purpose of An-Mei's sacrifice and that of Antigone. All four mothers are united in their sacrifice of leaving China's difficulties in hopes of providing their daughters with better lives in America. Once in America, they continue to sacrifice aspects of their culture in order to assimilate into American lifestyle and understand how it has influenced their daughter's generation. For me, this film best exemplified the power of sacrifice because it not only involved women sacrificing themselves for others but

also sacrificing others for their own sake. While the motivations behind the actions of Suyuan and Ying-Ying are understandable, I know that I would never have the strength to sacrifice my child regardless of my fears for their future. I would be much more likely to take risks similar to those of Lindo and An-Mei since any negative outcomes would be my direct responsibility. I do, however, support the decision of all four women to sacrifice their Chinese culture in order to provide their daughters with more encouraging prospects under the influence of a culture elsewhere. My opinions towards the choices of Suyuan and Ying-Ying were not altered by my CORE experience. However, I would not have behaved in the same manner as Lindo and An-Mei before taking this course. The numerous texts read and ideas discussed in CORE have considerably enriched my confidence to hold steadfast to my principles and instigated me to embrace my independence and its accompanying responsibilities. Witnessing the vivid plight of these four women ensures me that, under analogous circumstances, I would relinquish my former timid approach and sacrifice my culture for the betterment of a loved one.

Over the span of my freshman year, CORE has addressed nearly every important aspect of what it means to be human and how life's experiences shape us. While many units and works were influential, sacrifice was the single concept that my mind continually returned to in analyzing the impact of each of life's components upon an individual.

Recognizing the countless manners in which humans may sacrifice themselves or others for the sake of a loved one or complete stranger, convinced me to realistically evaluate how I would react to such scenarios. People can never know for certain the decisions that they will make until they personally encounter crucial moments. However, this common thread throughout the course has afforded me with the consciousness necessary to avoid being impulsive due to oblivion.