

Michael Ignatieff (2021), **On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times**, Random House Canada
Book Review/Essay by Dick Preston

Over the years, I have had repeated occasion to appreciate Michael Ignatieff. I read **The Needs of Strangers** while I was still teaching The Method and Theory of Field Research to the doctoral students, and was so impressed that I gave each student a copy as a present when the seminar was finished. I read **Blood and Belonging** and was glad to get his up close views on the aftermath of wars. I read his biography of **Isiah Berlin** and appreciated the genius of that remarkable individual. Then Ignatieff became the Liberal candidate for prime minister and I had a half hour to urge a federal department of peace. He listened intently and spoke with detailed understanding of what we were proposing. I liked and admired him, and regret that the Liberals lost the election. We got Stephen Harper. Ignatieff returned to the academic life, and stayed there.

Why does he focus on consolation? Spoiler alert: consolation is a foundation for hope. I hope we needn't ask, "why hope?". But we can benefit by looking at what provides that foundation. Or we can discover it in unexpected experiences, as Ignatieff did at a choral performance of all 150 of the psalms, when he found enduring aftereffects (a non-believer's rapture?) that motivated him to write this book. It is not an easy read, but it is very worth the effort.

What are we to do about suffering? Hurtful things will happen, and we need to find a way to accept these as inevitable facts of life. And we must be able to move on. We have many stories about suffering. Great literature sometimes emerges from individuals who tell of their experiences, their feelings, and their will to survive.

This book is a compilation of compassionate stories. Ignatieff has researched the stories of each of these individuals with religious attention to detail and thoroughness, so that we are given a sense of the person, where we have previously known little more than the person's name. These stories are inspiring. It is a short book with a great deal of content. Its profundity is sometimes stunning, making me read it just a chapter at a time. Much of it will be news to most readers, and we find these vignettes convincing because they are so well-researched. They speak to us of pan-human feelings of suffering, solace, and hope for meaningful life in this world that we can recognize in ourselves.

- Job, victim of a jest of God, remains faithful through unimaginable suffering, but keeps his independence as well as his faith, demands and gets an audience with his maker, is humbled and then restored to the comforts of family and wealth.

- The psalmists (the singers who composed them, over centuries) speak to us still of our contemporary feelings of despair and of hope.
- The apostle Paul takes the teachings of Jesus to everyone, not just to the Jews. He dedicates a long-suffering life to his mission of salvation for all humanity, ending with a sense of failure and an anonymous death, without glory. Until long afterwards. His letters – being written documents – outlive him. Ignatieff brings Paul’s relentless faith vividly and tragically to us in 15 pages of remarkable detail.
- Cicero, prominent Stoic Roman senator and orator, whose grief at the loss of his daughter is a more intimate story than Paul’s, also gets 15 pages. His concern is with one person, not all humanity, and with his daughter’s death in childbirth, failure of hope is certain. His grief is then compounded by Caesar’s seizing dictatorial power. Cicero is not present to bring his oratorical power to counter the takeover. So both his family and his secular world – the Roman republic - are swept away (shades of Job here?). His consolation comes through redeeming himself, at least in his own eyes, by concentrating his intellect on writing a book about consolation. A Stoic, his solution is realized through embracing a masculine ethic. He loses his fear of death, and sets a permanent standard for emotionless political leadership. Maybe he was consoled.
- It appears that a great mind hard at work and producing a great book provides us with valuable wisdom, but the writing of it may not provide consolation for the author. And a great mind (Cicero, Dante), supplemented by an imaginary female guide, gives imaginative writing help, but not consolation. Dante, with Beatrice, goes beyond words, to faith. Are these mythic guides latter-day images of gods? In any event, imaginary friends are probably not going to do the job of consoling us.
- El Greco takes us from words to a story built into a painting, with colours and shapes transcending time and place to depict one individual’s ascent to paradise. I feel a heightened sense of mystery here, but then we return to wise words.

The historical context is shifting from faith to doubt, from varieties of Christianity, to societal ideals.

- Montaigne finally declines the intellectual life in favour of the sensate life,
- David Hume declines the intellectual guidance of others in favour pursuing his own intellectual path, with friends,
- Condorcet endures the brutally excessive purges of the revolution, with his faith in an innate force of human progress via human reason, literally the enlightenment [presages Tielhard de Chardin].

- Karl Marx was a relentless critic of a welter of mistaken claims, on both the politically right and left. He is a husband and a revolutionary, a lifelong partnership with Jenny and a utopian ideal of communistic democracy. His ideal was taken in brutal directions by Lenin, Mao, Pol Pot, and Stalin. But I suggest that Marx was closer to the Apostle Paul, in having faith in a means to a better life for all humanity - "a community of brothers and sisters". Like Paul, Marx never saw his movement succeed. [Perhaps we may ascribe spirituality, as we use the word currently in Meeting, to Marx? Condorcet? Lincoln? Just a thought...]
- Abraham Lincoln, at his second inaugural, finds his faith shaken by the carnage of war. He finds a way to claim a belief that both sides in the civil war can have God on their side, if it is God's punishment for all slavery - a solution that allows healing of a bitterly divided nation. His attempt at consolation speaks to us today, in our atmosphere of hostile populism.
- Gustav Mahler inherited from romantic music the hope that beautiful music could provide the consolation that religion had claimed exclusive rights to. He matched words to music and created great art, directed to our feelings of loss and grief.
- Max Weber dismissed the notion that a person's "calling" was from God. Religion gave us a false promise. It was up to each individual to determine his own calling and to pursue it with humility and determination. This defined the meaningful life and gave us reason to hope. His message galvanized the young German students, recovering from the defeat of their country in WW1, and carried outwardly to the rest of the world. Building on David Hume's mandate to find his own path, Weber saw it as the necessary means to a secular world solution - more than his personal solution.
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- Anna Akhmatova, Primo Levi, and Miklos Radnoti, "The Consolation of Witness." When people are faced with their powerlessness in terrible situations, they may only be able to tell us their feelings, in poems or prose, or speeches. The most they can possibly do is to tell their truth, in hope that their suffering will not be ignored or forgotten. We have failed them.
- Albert Camus. Tubercular and isolated in a village in German-occupied France, with his wife working as a teacher in Algeria, he is faced with being a stranger in a plague of Naziism. If god is a delusion and humanity is so poor that it has a proclivity for brutality, what can console us? Friends, love, and the experience of being simply alive. And for Camus, joining the resistance in the face of defeat. But in

choosing his own path, he went further, in refusing to judge others who did not resist. We must care for each other, whatever their convictions, like the health workers in our covid circumstances.

- Vaclav Havel, we all make history, but not necessarily as we intend. His choice of a path is to “live in truth” - to feel responsible, not just for himself, but for all humanity. He realizes this in a burst of feeling for the confusion of a TV weather announcer who learns, while on air, that her communist regime has collapsed. She doesn't know what to do or say - she is stunned by her predicament. He feels somehow responsible for her bafflement.
- Michael Ignatieff begins the final chapter with the deaths of his parents, both were in hospital, where their passing was regarded as medical failures. He describes the hospice-aided alternative as far kinder, “a secular practice of consolation.” The dying person may be told the truth, provided with pain control, be listened to, say their goodbyes, and have their affairs in order. These, taken as a whole, allow some sense of consolation. The lead in providing these changes, Cicely Saunders (and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross) brought forward the goal of dying with acceptance and the presence of family and friends.
- The epilogue is lovely, personal, friendly. I will not try to say more.

As these chapters go over the centuries - we can see that fervent belief in a heaven with eternal reunion with past loved ones was challenged. Gradually, reluctantly, many people felt diminishing confidence in the existence of heaven.

The alternative to a heavenly future is not to try to live vicariously in the stories of past lives; they were people who had their own life situations and were trying to live their own truth. Their stories may help us to seek and recognize the truth of our own lives, with all its failures and its successes, and to continue to live with hope. Whether it is with acts of kindness, wise words, art, or sheer pleasure in the awareness of having been alive, we can try to hallow our diminishments. And, if paradise is not to be had, we can seek spiritual solace in our retrospective sense of unity with myriad others in having attempted “a life (sometimes) well-lived”, friends, and a gentle, perhaps even a loving exit. It's a far cry from the promised land, but maybe its all we've got. And, truth be known, it's quite a lot. So we have to keep going, and hoping.

Ignatieff is a very intelligent, very well-informed person. It is only fair that I sometimes felt overwhelmed by his erudite, compactly written wisdom. I am aware that it's my age showing, leaving me poorly able to retain what I read. I did not have this problem with three of his other books, but I was younger. He is 74, was recently president of Central European University, in

Budapest 2016-2021, and has written ten books. Consolation now looms large. Maybe his old-age sense of urgency prompts this dense prose. It is excellent.

Review author Richard (Dick) Preston: A frequent reviewer of non-fiction and fiction books, emeritus Professor of Anthropology Dr. Richard Preston taught at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. He specializes in the study of indigenous cultures of the First nations of Quebec and has been involved with the civil society work in conflict resolution and transformation related to creating infrastructures of peacebuilding.