

A Tribute to Elias

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The Beginning, The Classroom

In 1972, I was one of the 1st students in the 1st class Elias Baumgarten taught at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Existentialism. John Paul Sartre, “No Exit,” Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Notes from the Underground,” Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus.” Yes, great philosophers and authors of the human condition questioning the existence of God, the authentic self and confronting the meaning of life and death.

When this short curly haired man walked in the room for the first-time, old-school leather briefcase in hand, we glared at him and he at us. At first, we labored and with hesitation expressed tentative ideas. Quickly though, Dr Baumgarten sparked “the magic of the classroom” by his youthful enthusiasm and charismatic curiosity. We were inspired to raise our hands and take part in “the great conversations.”

A fellow classmate and friend, Peter Cooper, exceptional in his own right, was compelled to stand up and ask, “What is what?” The rest of us spellbound, stunned really, acquiesced to the pin drop silence. Why did he stand up? Even Dr Elias was not prepared for that one... I doubt that any of us will forget that day. I can’t tell you how many times we recalled that day in class with laughter and wonder.

Here we were, working class kids commuting to college suddenly catapulted into the intellectual world of great ideas. We were learning how to examine ideas from many perspectives and most importantly – think critically. Elias brought about the experience that we had a sense of belonging in that world, and it was exhilarating.

Elias made it a point to get to know each of his students. On the first day of class, he had us fill out an index card with all the usual biographical and background information and *at the top* we were to say our personal interests. I listed music, art and nature and clearly this piqued his interest. I suppose the long hair and beard added to the mystique. He thought that most students in Dearborn were interested in engineering, cars and drag racing and I was happy to dispel his preconceptions.

Soon thereafter I suggested we go out, have a beer and rap – the vernacular of the day. He later told me that I was the only student to ever suggest that... leave it to the Irishman, right? This was the beginning of a great friendship and that is how it was, back then.

Naturally, after 52 years, there were many twists and turns, adventures, and misadventures. Afterall, it was inevitable that the student would wish to win a debate or two with The Professor. So, you could surely say it was a *storied* relationship. But today I am going to share just one of those stories.

World Travels, New Delhi, India

This story highlights Elias's love of travel and in particular, India. But it has a twist. It centers on an experience I had while traveling alone in India for my first time. Elias and I would meet up later in Dharmasala and he was so delighted that he had a hand and a great influence in my traveling to India.

I started out in New Delhi, and I had researched and found a wonderful B&B that was small and quaint. Its rooms were named after the Hindu Gods, and I stayed in the Ganesha's room. Elias later stayed in the same place, the Krishna room, and loved this place as much as I and he praised my findings. Now if you know Elias you know this is high praise because he liked to be the ONE to find great places.

The place was owned by Usha and Avnish, ex-Bollywood actors who were very helpful, personable and hospitable. Each morning Usha came down to breakfast and encouraged the travelers to sit around the table for discussion. She held a “friendly court” each day you could say. She excitedly inquired about what each of us had done the day before, and our plans for the day. She shared her perspective, commented on each place, and reacted to our experiences.

One morning later in my stay she explained her philosophy on giving money to begging children. She was strongly opposed and assured us we would encounter it. She felt that giving in this way sent the wrong message about how to live life and that it created dependency. Plus, it would discourage the development of resilience and responsibility. The strength of her perspective was compelling, and we all listened carefully.

Near the end of my four-day stay, Usha asked me where I was going on my last day in New Delhi and my next stop. I said that I was going to Sarnath first and Varanasi for the next stop. She paused, seemed a little concerned and said, “Michael you are going into the most sacred and chaotic places in India.” Be careful, take your time and remember what I said about the children, “you are raw.” Ok Usha. I was taken aback feeling a little self-conscious about her comment -- but I was listening.

Sarnath, India

That day, I headed to Sarnath, south of New Delhi. This is the renowned place that the Buddha delivered his first sermon following his enlightenment. In honor of that, several stunning statues of the Buddha were built, one called "Standing Buddha." Buddha statues in Asia are not what we are accustomed to in the West, they are huge. "Standing Buddha" in this case was 80 ft. After a day of seeing awe inspiring statues, I went to the town market. As you can imagine, it was colorful, incense filled and accompanied with the sounds of people, rickshaws, cars and scooters. I still felt a little disoriented but was beginning to become immersed in the flow of India. But soon, I was being followed. It was a little girl speaking Hindi. I suspected I was going to get tested, the one that Usha forewarned.

I tried to quicken my pace and ignore her, but she only followed more closely, kept pace and spoke in Hindi now louder. I glanced over at her a couple of times and could see that she was adorable, you know, big, beautiful innocent eyes, simple plain sundress, dark hair and very petite. Soon enough she grew frustrated by my lack of attention and straight away grabbed my travel pants by one of the pockets and brought me to a halt. I froze with a little sense of dread. I was going to be confronted with a decision, and I now had to pay attention and sharpen up. When she grabbed my pant pocket and smacked my hand... it was at first strange, not what I expected and jarring. Finally, I realized she was fixated with what I had in my hand -- a big water bottle. She quickly held out her hands as if to suggest that she wanted to wash them. They were dirty as were her shoeless feet. I thought ok, I got this. I'll gladly wash her hands, and I even had soap in my pocket as had been suggested for my India travels. But then in yet another twist, she carefully and tightly cupped hands now suggesting she just wanted a drink of water. Once again, ok I got this. But

as soon as I filled her tiny tightly cupped hands with water, she dashed off quickly and started running, water splashing seemingly everywhere, up and away. She then went to a booth near the end of the market, stopped, raised her hands as high as possible and a man, presumably her father, stooped and drank whatever water was left in her hands. That visual arrested me and I was paralyzed and transfixed. You know that sense of being a witness to something totally unexpected and at first completely NOT understood. Usha had forewarned me, but it wasn't what I or she expected. This was such an act of profound love and selflessness and such a beautiful moment. This image became implanted in my mind, and I imagined that a great artist would have translated this into a great piece of art.

A Shared Favorite Story of India

Now as I told this story to Elias, it was at that moment that he jumped up and with his characteristic hand gesture and exuberance said, "this is the best story of India, better than all of mine!" Here again this was high praise from the professor who himself had so many great moments in India. He said he was going to tell this story to his students and each time he did, he relayed the experience to me. He relished the idea that he had a hand in this powerful experience. To think that he would share a friend's story with such delight and joy is a memory that will not be forgotten.

This was Elias's favorite story of India and now it's my favorite story of Elias.

One Last Thought

Our dear friend Elias had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, a taste for travel adventure and an eye for beauty. He was never at a loss for sharing a travel story and this will be greatly missed.

Elias greatly admired the travel writer Pico Iyer and once told me that if he were to live a life different from his own, it would be a life like Pico Iyer's, traveling all over the world in search of those who experienced the world in different ways. In a quote from his book, "The Art of Travel," 2002, Iyer says,

"Travel is like love, mostly because it's a heightened state of awareness in which we are mindful, receptive, undimmed by familiarity and ready to be transformed."