**Discomfort – Daniel Libman**

I believe in discomfort. This may come as surprise to my students who see me tipping my chair and drinking as much coffee as I can hold, but it’s true. I wear ties not because it matters to me how I look, but because when the day is over I go home and take the tie off. I slip on gym shoes and a sweatshirt and revel in comfort earned from a full day of wearing constricting clothing.

I came upon this as a guiding principle while preparing for a week-long bicycle trip in the Rocky Mountains, where all seasons are contained in each day. In the freezing mornings you chip the ice off your wheels and brakes, and by the afternoon you’re sweating bullets and slapping on sunscreen. And somewhere in there it’s going to rain and—most days—snow. This is okay if you can travel with a suitcase, but on a bicycle it makes for tricky packing. While fretting this, trying to figure out the myriad of shirts with removable sleeves and fur lined shoe coverings, my wife finally said to me, “You just aren’t going to be comfortable every minute.”

This was as a liberating concept: I could just pack for one meteorological condition and let the chips fall where they may. Sure, I might be wet and cold during the day, but I could get warm and dry that night, or as was the case on this trip where we slept on middle school football fields in mining towns, the next week once the ride was over. I found a sort of honor in being as uncomfortable as possible for as long as possible.

And I learned something else while I was no longer paying attention to comfort. Toward the end of the trip we rode our bicycles 10,000 feet up Monarch Pass. It takes hours to pedal to the top but mere minutes to descend, your heart pounding in fear and exhilaration. I wanted to remember every second of the descent, but I realized of course that I couldn’t. All the struggle of pedaling to the top was already gone, and soon so would be the pleasure of coasting down. This isn’t an original thought by any means, but regardless how many times I had heard it as an empty bromide, I physically felt it that afternoon: everything in life is temporary, the one moment you have is the only moment you get, so let go of what has come before and don’t fret about what is to come—because it’s coming anyway.

This is something I never could have internalized had I been at home, had I been reading in my easy chair, had I been comfortable. And though it is too much to expect I could always live in the present, I can still plug into the notion that whatever is happening now is soon going to end, by putting on a necktie and heading to work.

*Dan Libman is a Paris Review Discovery and Pushcart Prize winning author. His debut collection of stories entitled Married but Looking is available now and includes the fiction story "Tandem," which was inspired by the same bicycle ride down Monarch Pass.*

**Bridging the Gap – Emily Vutech**

“Wait, so you’re straight?” I got used to answering this question pretty quickly after I started to work as a hostess at a gay bar. What seemed to be such an obvious part of how I thought of myself (a girl, and straight) suddenly became what defined me. When I started work, reactions from my friends and family were mixed. Some respected and were even jealous that I was working in such a vibrant part of town and with so many unique people. Others wondered if I ever felt uncomfortable, and were curious about what the environment itself was really like. I found myself defending where I worked, and more important, the people I worked with. Others’ constant questioning led me to realize that people in my society, even people I know and love, struggle to accept those they are not familiar with.

One Saturday night, I sat a middle-aged lesbian couple at a table outside. After I gave them their menus, I told them their server would be with them shortly. One of the women stopped me and said, “Excuse me, but I have to ask, what made you decide to work here?” This was another question I received all the time, but for some reason the way she asked was different. I could tell she was genuinely interested, and even confused. I answered the first thing that came to my mind, that I enjoyed getting to meet new, fun people and that I liked the exciting and unpredictable atmosphere. Her response changed the way I thought about my job. She thanked me and said, “We need young people from outside the gay community to help bridge the gap.”

This response got me thinking. To me, I was just going to work at a place where I loved both the work and the people I worked with. From all the questions I received about my job, it was clear that the core of the confusion was far bigger than just me. After hearing that all it takes is “bridging the gap,” it seems pretty simple. I believe by exposing ourselves to new people and environments, we can increase our understanding and therefore our acceptance of people, places, and situations that are beyond our familiar experiences. I, by no means, think that by working at a gay restaurant I am doing humanity some enormous favor. I do believe, however, that if each of us can individually explore worlds different than our own and than we are expected to, we can start to break down identities of “straight girl” and terms like “gay bar.” These surface labels only define us in ways that make us seem different. When really, we are all just people, gay and straight, going to work, learning and growing from one another.

*Emily Vutech graduated from Miami University with a degree in Organizational Communication. She now lives in Chicago, where she is a client services manager at an upscale consignment service in Old Town.*

**The Presumption of Decency – Edward Glaeser**

I believe in the presumption of decency.

While I like to think of myself as being as rational as an economist should be, I can get a little miffed at minor offenses that somehow appear to me, momentarily, as great villainy. In some of my more embarrassing moments, I’ve come to see law-abiding and therefore slow cab drivers as violators of the basic standards of taxicab decency, which, in my haste, I have convinced myself demand utterly break-neck speed. While my retribution may be limited to cutting their tips from 15 to 13.25 percent, I have then spent the next hour furious at the cab driver, his dispatcher, his country of origin, and pretty much anything else in my way.

Sadly, I have also privately vilified editors who have rejected my research, restaurants that haven’t taken my reservations, and even politicians who have had the audacity to push policies that I oppose. This is the type of folly that can be avoided with the presumption of decency.

Academics can be a little arrogant, and I am certainly among those who are quite comfortable thinking that I am right and that someone else is wrong. But it is one thing to think that someone else is misled and another to think that they are evil. We don’t hate the merely annoying or the purely pathetic. Hatred starts by believing someone to be a villain without decency. And hatred is a pretty good emotion to avoid. It is personally painful to hate. Hatred clouds our judgment and can lead us to make spiteful decisions that do no one any good.

There is a personal value — the presumption of decency — which counteracts the tendency to let hatred befuddle our reason. If we hold tightly to the view that people around us are as decent as ourselves, trying, like us, to muddle honorably through life, it is harder to turn them into villains and to turn ourselves into creatures of irrational judgment. Besides, I’m certainly no more decent than most of mankind.

The presumption of decency is not naiveté. Instead, it requires a certain amount of realism. If you expect perfection, you will spend your days being furious at irresponsible teenage babysitters and equally irresponsible politicians. A better approach is to recognize human frailty and to be generous in our judgments. Today’s political dialogues could particularly benefit from the recognition that both parties are led by imperfect but not terrible people, whose mistaken policies are more often the result of error than evil.

I don’t always succeed in presuming the decency of others, but I do my best. Like most people, I’m pretty flawed but trying to be decent, and I’m trying to believe the same about others.

*Edward Glaeser is a professor of economics at Harvard where his research focuses on urban growth, and the role of cities in fostering and transmitting ideas. Glaeser is the author of Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier (2011, The Penguin Press).*