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What I Learned During My Summer at Penn State

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I was sitting at Whiskers when the verdict was returned. Whiskers is a neat little pub off the lobby of the Nittany Lion Inn, the historic, colonial-style hotel on the campus of Penn State University, seemingly the place to be if you didn't want to deal with the crowds of onlookers at the real place to be – the Centre County Courthouse, ten miles to the northeast in the little town of Bellefonte.

Thirty minutes before, I had asked the bartender for my check. It was 9:30, and I had a solid half-hour walk back to my apartment on the south side of town. For the second day in a row, it seemed the jury was going to adjourn for the night without a decision, leaving all of us – visitors, residents, students, faculty members, university employees; for that matter anyone, anywhere, associated with the university (the school boasts the largest alumni association in the world) – in suspense.

The night before, I was at a baseball game. The Spikes are a minor league team that plays for State College, the charming little town that adjoins the campus and where I spend my summers. Their ballpark sits in the shadow of Beaver Stadium, second largest stadium in the country and home of the Penn State Nittany Lions, a storied football program whose legendary head coach of 46 years, Joseph Vincent Paterno, had died just months earlier, some said of a broken heart. Unceremoniously dumped by the university's board of trustees in the wake of the scandal (a representative called him at his home late one evening to inform him that, "the board has terminated you, effective immediately"), Paterno passed away from lung cancer eleven weeks later.

By the time of the first pitch, the jury had been deliberating for over five hours. The prosecution's case had included eight young men who had come forward to testify that they had been sexually abused, some of them over the course of years, by the monster that had been the Nittany Lions' once revered defensive coordinator, architect of defenses that had won championships and earned the school the nickname of Linebacker U. An assistant coach also testified to what he saw in a shower late one night at the Lasch Football Building on campus, and there was even more witness testimony from a school janitor. The collective testimony was horrifying, unspeakable; except that now it had been spoken. Bits and pieces of it would have been sufficient. In concert, it was persuasive and damning. Open and shut. I anticipated the jury would be out a few hours at most.

At the baseball game, I'd become one of those people I usually complain about; I was pulling my cell phone out of my pocket every five minutes and checking it. Around the fourth inning I noticed others doing the same. We were all checking the news. Surely the verdict would be delivered soon. I wondered if they'd make an announcement at the ballpark over the public address system.

But the evening had come and gone with no verdict. By the seventh inning, they were reporting online that the jury had retired for the evening. After the game, I walked home disheartened. Why was it taking so long to determine this man's obvious guilt? Sure, there were 48 counts of child sex abuse to sift through, but it still didn't occur to me that it could take more than a few hours. The O.J. trial came into my mind. Casey Anthony. A surprise "not guilty" verdict was not without notorious precedent.

The stakes were high. The university, the town of State College, all of central Pennsylvania needed a guilty verdict. So did anyone who called him or herself a Penn State graduate. There was a perception, seemingly nationwide, that because a few people in high places had ignored (in the best case), or covered up (in the worst), crimes as heinous as those being deliberated in that Centre County Courthouse jury room, anyone associated with the school also bore some measure of responsibility. Guilt by association – an irrational leap, of course, but there it was nonetheless. A verdict of guilty for the actual perpetrator would help change that. It would make a statement that we don't abide child sex abuse and that we don't care who's accused of it or what association he may have had with the school. A not-guilty verdict – more and more of a real possibility in my mind as I cut through campus on my way home after the game – would confirm the opposite and reinforce some of the recent descriptions of Penn State from without: an

incestuous enclave in the remote hills of central Pennsylvania, circling its wagons from the outside world, and even from justice, in the name of football and tradition.

On a personal level, the stakes were just as high. A not-guilty verdict would have suggested to me that maybe those voices from without were, at least to some extent, right. What kind of place was this, after all? How much did I know about it, really? I imagined that what I was beginning to feel was akin to what someone must feel who starts to suspect that his or her spouse is cheating. I was beginning to feel betrayed by the place that I had loved so dearly, first as a student and now as a visiting alum, spending my summers amid the sylvan campus's tall shady elm trees and old fieldstone and brick, ivy-covered classroom buildings. But it was now different somehow. It was as though I was a stranger, and as I walked under the elms that night, they seemed gloomy and haunting, distant and vaguely threatening, taking unfamiliar shapes against the dark. Nothing was recognizable. How, I began to wonder, could I stay in this place for the remainder of the summer? I felt cynical, morose.

The next day's news brought some hope. The jury was asking to take a closer look at the testimonies of the assistant coach and the janitor, the two eyewitness accounts that had come without the benefit of actual victim testimony. Of what interest to the jury, I reasoned, were those particular accounts, unless the jury believed the direct testimony of the eight victims? Why would a jury care about what a third-party witness had to say about alleged crimes if they didn't believe what the actual victims had to say of the alleged crimes? Maybe it was the light of day, but I felt cheered and a growing optimism pushed back my cynicism from the night before. Still, the jury continued deliberating, all day and into that second night.

I reached for my wallet to pay my tab at Whiskers but stopped midway. The television above the bar had flashed a bulletin, the local news team interrupting the programming to announce a verdict had been reached. The place became eerily quiet as every head turned toward one of the several TVs hanging from various corners of the bar. I put my wallet away, and the bartender poured me another beer while we all awaited the announcement of the verdict. Then the bartender picked up the remote and began flipping through the TV channels. The news was seemingly on everywhere – all the national news channels had broken into their regular programming to cover the verdict. We were center stage.

Less than half an hour later a cheer went up from the crowd of hundreds who'd been holding vigil in front of the courthouse. The TV cameras rolled, and we watched the crowd cheer and knew before the news anchors even told us: the verdict was guilty. On 45 of the 48 counts, we would soon learn. And then a cheer broke out in the bar. Justice had been served; the university and the entire area had been saved. I pumped a fist into the air and savored the feeling of vindication. We were all right, after all. Everything was all right now.

"I can't believe the emotions I've felt over the past couple days," I remarked to the guy sitting beside me, Joel, a stranger an hour or so ago but a somehow familiar friend now. "I wonder why that is?" I mused.

"Why what is?" Joel asked.

“Why I feel so emotionally tied to all this. Why it matters so much to me *personally* when the only real issue, when you stop and think about it, ought to be that justice be served for those poor sons-of-bitches that guy raped and molested,” I said, pointing to the TV screen.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Joel said.

“I mean, it’s almost like I felt somehow part of it, part of the whole ordeal, even though it had nothing to do with me,” I continued, more or less thinking out loud. “Why is that? Why should I feel a part of something that I had nothing to do with?”

“I don’t know,” Joel answered thoughtfully. “I guess for the same reason that we feel like a part of it when the football team beats Ohio State.”

I hung around Whiskers for another half hour or so, listening to the analysis from the TV talking heads. We all watched the ex-coach child rapist being led out of the courthouse in handcuffs and ushered into the back of a police cruiser to be taken to the county jail, while people from the crowd hurled invectives at him (“rot in hell,” one woman shouted out), and then I walked home and the tall elms seemed familiar and warm again.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about what Joel had said, and I found myself pondering the matter off and on over the following week. If I take the good from identifying myself with my alma mater, then I suppose it’s natural that I take the bad. But the larger question became this: why do I feel compelled to take any of it? What is it about human beings in general, I began to wonder, that makes us seek identity in institutions and other people in the first place? We gravitate towards people with whom we have something in common; that only makes sense. But when we begin to *define* ourselves by those groups of people, then something, I began thinking, has gone too far. Our very identities become defined by association. I am a Republican. I am a Democrat. I am a Christian. I am a Muslim. I am a Nittany Lion. I am a Buckeye. I am a New Yorker. I am a Floridian. I am an American.

The associations speak for us, so maybe, as I thought about it, it’s just a lazy way of saying who we are. Rather than recount my political beliefs, I can just tell you what party I’m registered with. Rather than describe to you all the wonderful things about where I live and of which I am proud (as if you care), I can just wear the jersey of my city’s baseball team, which also tells you I am a sports fan. I can raise a flag on the 4th of July to remind you (and perhaps myself) that I am a patriotic citizen. It’s a form of self-expression, I supposed. A way to make a statement and to be heard in a noisy world, especially if I have nothing else of value to offer, nothing else that can cut through the din. You might not know me and you might never hear of me, but you might know of the things with which I associate, and that gives me some instant value. Some street cred. It occurred to me that someone could do an interesting study: Do those who feel, for whatever reason, insufficiently valuable to society create for themselves the most associations? Do they advertise them the most conspicuously?

But as I reflected on the matter I came to consider that, whatever the reason we form into groups, one cannot escape the major side effect. Associations divide. Associations separate. Such is the axiomatic nature of distinction; if we choose to distinguish ourselves by advertising our

attachment to one group, then we separate ourselves from the other. It's unavoidable. And it's obvious. Nothing earth-shaking here. Ask anyone who's been the victim of racism or some other form of discrimination. But the interesting thing to my mind as I mulled it over, was how much we seem to enjoy the separation. We must, it seemed to me, or we would not consistently broadcast our associations so enthusiastically and with such pride. And I wondered at the order of it. Do we naturally attach ourselves to certain groups that happen to be separate from others, or do we wish to separate ourselves from others and therefore attach ourselves to certain groups? If the latter, why not separate as individuals, rather than split off and then re-congregate? If our goal is to declare our uniqueness, why attach to groups at all? I suspected that it has something to do with the value question. The street cred. There is strength in numbers. You can create some personal worth for yourself without having to do anything save join up, maybe even by just wearing the t-shirt. You can be unique without having to risk taking it too far. And from there, from the safety of the group, the shortest path to affirming your worth is to employ comparison: we're better than those guys.

I realized full well that it surely oversimplifies to declare that society's rampant "us" versus "them" mentality was caused merely by insecurity. I'm not a psychologist or sociologist. But I considered that there had to be some reason why people – all with relatively the same groundwork of feelings and emotions, and comparable experiences of the human condition – insist on splitting off and telling themselves that "we" are better than "they." Can that possibly be sourced in a healthy sense of self-worth?

None of this, of course, is to disparage friendly, often valuable, competition between groups. Athletic contests to a sports fan like me are enjoyable in their own right. And although I might feel undeservedly proud when my team wins (I didn't play the game, after all), it's fun to follow a team who represents something to which I can relate and see them victorious. But how often we see innocent enthusiasm cross over into vicious, even violent, partisanship. Witness soccer hooliganism.

It wasn't lost on me, too, that my pondering of these matters was taking place during a presidential election year. Talk about us versus them. Discourse between the fans of opposing sports teams pales in comparison to that between rival political parties. At first I imagined that that might be due to the presumably higher stakes inherent in political issues. But the blind allegiance I've witnessed on both sides of the political aisle – regardless of issue – had me thinking that politics is most likely just another way to separate, and then associate, and gain for oneself a little more identity.

The blind allegiance is what struck me as the most dangerous part. My country right or wrong. Or political party or college or what have you. But of course the idea that one's group could, in fact, be wrong, isn't typically long deliberated. Groups have a way of discouraging such thoughts; nobody wants to be seen as disloyal. Theological denominations handle doubt by calling for dutiful and pious faith, yet not every denomination can be right, or at least complete, with its set of beliefs, if any of them at all are. There are a lot of religions and each one believes something different, in the details if not the major theme. And that means there are a whole lot of people walking around who are wrong in their metaphysical worldviews. We know that, of course. But we also know that, by the grace of God, those people aren't *us*.

I was getting into territory far over my head and I dropped the matter at that point; I vaguely decided that I was going to make a determined effort to be careful about seeking personal identity in people or things largely outside of my sphere of influence, and that was that. Or so I thought. Then something happened a couple weeks later that caused me to revisit the matter: the Freeh Report was released, an independent investigation commissioned by Penn State University itself to learn how a child predator could go unchecked in their midst for years. And the report was damning. Four of the top people at the university, including the president, athletic director, and Joe Paterno himself, had purposely and deliberately looked the other way, said the report, to avoid the potential negative publicity. Partly to blame: “A culture of reverence for the football program.”

The findings were heartbreaking, and once again I found myself surprised at how affected I was by events that were well beyond my control and had ostensibly nothing to do with me personally. I felt let down by these men. Though the report didn't exactly come as a shock – most people suspected that a cover-up of some degree had most likely occurred – I had held out hope that the errors made had been judgmental errors of omission. The actions of the ex-assistant coach had, I'd hoped, simply been missed or at worst ignored, not overtly concealed. With that possibility dissipated by the withering pages of the Freeh Report, I felt that association again, the identity. As Penn State was getting hammered, so was I.

But then came the real hammering. From the media, the sports talk show hosts on the radio, news columnists from the *New York Times* to the *Akron Beacon-Journal*, the TV talking heads, and the general public on Internet message boards, voicing their opinions from across the country: Penn State University had knowingly aided and abetted a child rapist. The football program should be shut down immediately, came the cries. Some felt the university itself should be shut down. Most of the outcry was hyperbolic vitriol, but collectively, it all became a part of the mainstream message: Penn State was rotten to its core. We were in the midst of a 21st century version of the vigilante torch and pitchfork mob, and it was screaming for justice, screaming for someone to pay.

And it was then that I discovered something about identity and associations, something I hadn't thought of before. I suddenly and clearly came to understand that identity isn't always acquired from the associations we voluntarily make. It's often, maybe even most of the time, acquired from the associations others make for us.

Though the Freeh report made it plain that only five men were involved (including the perpetrator himself), and although all five men were gone from the university, the mob insisted that the fault lay with “the institution.” In the water-cooler conversations, in discussions in the pubs and sports bars, on talk radio programs and on Internet chat boards, people associated with Penn State were no longer individuals. We were nameless and faceless. Regarded collectively, we were members of a single guilty body. It was what I had feared during the jury deliberations of the trial had a “not guilty” verdict been rendered. Hell, to some degree I'd done it myself back then. I had regarded the university and town as a collective whole, rather than as a collection of individuals, and I had wondered if I could continue to live there. But now I began to understand the real ramifications. We were – each of us here – now one of *them*. And those on the other

side, those identifying themselves as *us*, were legion. My summer home, innocent and beautiful in my eyes, had come under siege, seemingly from the whole of the rest of America.

And though I hadn't consciously asked for it, I had never felt more a part of anything in my life.

The mob mentality took me by surprise, though history shows it should not have. The critical thing in this case, I suppose, is that I had never before been a part of the targeted group. The torches had never before lit up my front gate. It was disconcerting. It was disheartening.

Even more disheartening was that it would be the mob itself that would eventually dictate the terms of our surrender. The NCAA would buckle to the political pressure just eleven days later, crippling the Penn State football program with unprecedented sanctions from which it may never recover, with the head of the NCAA – whose job in part is to encourage a reverence for football – theatrically lamenting Penn State's reverence for football. The news was received very well by the mob (though some screamed for more, including a permanent end to the football program) with precious few nationally recognized media pundits attempting to point out the NCAA hypocrisy or the overreach into a criminal matter well beyond the field of play, the NCAA's purported purview.

Such a position, if not handled delicately, would have been worse than unpopular; it would have turned the person taking it into one of *them*. It's a side nobody wanted to be on. The stakes were high. The issue was simple: child rape. If you were perceived to be some kind of apologist for the institution, you were also perceived as condoning the concealment of pedophilia. Black or white. Penn State or the children. Which side were you on? As an alum, you had to be careful. If you argued against the NCAA sanctions (even the exceedingly bizarre one that "vacated" the 112 Penn State football victories since 1998, making believe that those games had never been played), it was clear that you "just didn't get it." This became the mantra. Penn State people who chafed against the unprecedented draconian punishment, *just didn't get it*. It's not about football, we were told again and again and again. It's about kids. Couldn't we see that?

"Well, let me start out by saying how much we all grieve for the real victims in this tragedy," was the talking point that anyone arguing against the sanctions simply *had* to make. It bordered on parody, but time and again the stipulation had to be offered before anything else could be said. You had to show your "I get it" card. And although the people still associated with the university (the hundreds of thousands minus the five individuals mentioned in the Freeh Report who were gone) were guilty of nothing more than those in Ann Arbor or Columbus or South Bend or Norman or Lincoln or Austin or Athens – a love of football – they all had to accept the sanctions. Failing to do so would call into question their sense of fairness and justice *for the children*, even their desire for a world where children would be safe from pedophiles. College football at Penn State and the safety of children were now, somehow, mutually exclusive. And we needed to get that. We needed to get the message that we were being used to send. At our most innocent, we were, as it was put time and again, "collateral damage." And collateral damage is acceptable. This is just how it works with institutions that get punished, no less than a Yale professor asserted in a national column, an argument that was essentially more shrug than explication.

But of course the problem, if one bothers to take the time to consider it, is that punishment by association encourages a mindset, incites it even, of guilt by association. I knew that personally I could live with the sanctions. Easily. But what the NCAA had done was give tacit approval to those who insisted on pigeonholing all of Penn State. They legitimized it. That was the real sanction. And when they said it wasn't about football, they were more right than they knew. It will take generations before Penn State University is thought of by most Americans without the accompanying specter of child abuse. The NCAA has made certain of that.

There was a picture on the front page of the *Centre Daily Times*, the town's newspaper, the day after the head of the NCAA gutted the football program. Students – some of the Yale professor's collateral damage – were sitting in the student union building watching the announcement. It was a photo full of young, fresh faces, all with expressions of bewilderment, many close to tears. And I knew that what they were feeling had nothing to do with football, but everything to do with the education they were now getting at the hands of their elders, more education than those college students bargained for, about how the world really works. And I wondered how they were going to get past that without getting swallowed by the cynicism. I wondered if they could heal from it.

Strangely, my love for the university and for the town of State College only grew as the summer days progressed. The area is, indeed, a part of my identity. It's a part of my past and will continue to be a part of my future and I feel it deep inside. I went from wondering about the rationale for this type of feeling to embracing it in a few short weeks. Nothing crystallizes one's thinking like coming under attack for your love of something.

But I won't make the mistake the mob did and the NCAA multiplied. I won't go into the "us" or "them" camp. And I won't let my appreciation for my alma mater, no matter how freshly intensified, serve as surrogate for that which I know I need to earn on my own. But I can proclaim my allegiance as a way to proudly support the people of the town and the school. I know now, more than ever, that I have a real connection to them. I can be in sympathy with them. I know how they feel. Or rather, I should say, I know something of how most of the individuals that make up the town and the school, alumni included, feel. There are many of us who had a lot in common before the scandal broke. We have a lot more in common now. And if we find our own little ways of acknowledging that to each other, or showing our proud allegiance to our university in front of others – whether it's with a t-shirt or a bumper sticker or a million-dollar donation to the library – it doesn't necessarily mean we're trying to separate. It might just mean we're trying to say that we're a part of something that's bigger than our individual selves (and better than the NCAA would have you believe).

It's the difference, really, between associating as a way to acquire identity (essentially a selfish act) and associating as a way to offer something of oneself to a larger cause (essentially a giving act). If the former can be divisive, the latter can be unifying, even redeeming. Maybe, as I think about those students in the union building, even healing.

On the last night of my summer in State College, I attended another State College Spikes game. The night was beautiful, warm with a gentle breeze, and I ate hot dogs and drank a couple of beers and cheered with the crowd for the Spikes. In the distance, a straight shot from center field, Mount Nittany sat as majestic as ever. Behind me was Beaver Stadium, where crowds of over

100,000 had watched roughly half of those 112 non-games. I noticed that many of the people at the baseball game were wearing Penn State caps and shirts. I didn't wonder at the reason. For a few hours we could forget the problems of the university, forget about the angry mob, forget about what many on the outside thought about us. In the ballpark that night I didn't feel the heaviness that I'd been feeling around town and campus. And the Spikes won, a 5-1 victory over another minor league team from another small town somewhere. It felt good to see State College win one.

About G.S. Payne

Since earning his undergraduate degree from Penn State, G.S. Payne has devoted his energies toward the study of his true passion: creative non-fiction. Now living on the Gulf Coast of Florida, Payne works predominantly as a ghostwriter, specializing in narrative non-fiction, memoir, and prescriptive business books. His clients have included captains of industry, athletes, and people whose lives nobody would believe, had he not been there to document them. When not toiling in relative (and welcome) anonymity with his clients' work, or enjoying the State College summers, he spends his time on Pilar, his sailboat, and splitting his days between Clearwater and Key West, paying homage when at the latter to his hero, Ernest Hemingway, by drinking in the same bars in which Papa himself drank.