

## Idealism

A “feet on the ground” idealism, based on a sense of solidarity and practical initiatives, is not something found on every corner. Rolling up one’s sleeves and undertaking actions capable of changing people’s lives for the better is what makes the difference.

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“He’s / She’s such an idealist,” we hear.

I don’t know about you, but to me the statement sounds slightly pejorative. The implication is that the person being spoken about is not entirely practical. “Head in the clouds” is implicit. It is someone who is full of good wishes and airy-fairy theories absent a solid foundation and the practical know-how to put positive intentions into action.

Why must idealism get such a bum rap?

The example of Mãe Luíza makes idealism an altogether different thing. Since you are reading this book already, you may know the story by now, perhaps far better than I do, but I think it is worth retelling.

We will get there. First, however, there is a reason that idealism hits a very personal note. I was brought up by idealists – in the truest sense of the word. My father, born in 1915, and mother, born in 1919, developed a romance – Mom was 18 when they met, 19 when they married – based on idealism. The ideal was clear to both of them: there should be equality among human beings. Poor people should have more on which to live; no one should be oppressed because of racial or ethnic background; human beings should be kind to one another; fascism was something to overcome; no individual should dictate the way others lived. Their idealism was not necessarily in my DNA – in fact, I don’t believe in such things, because all of us, whoever we are, have ancestors whose values we don’t share – but it was in all that was said and done when I was a child. What was more important than genetics was what I heard and saw, because idealism has to be acted upon to make a difference.

It is not just that I saw my parents as romantic – although they were: my mother with her Lauren Bacall brand of womanliness, more strong than girly; my father with his swarthy looks and way of lighting a woman’s

cigarette by flicking his Dunhill lighter so speedily and quietly you only noticed it afterwards – but rather as linked by the desire for the betterment of humanity and the eradication of evil that defines idealism. Their engagement party was a fundraiser for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a small army of independent Americans who went to Spain to fight Franco and totalitarianism just as the opposite of idealism was taking hold in that beautiful country (after that, like Picasso, they would never travel to Spain while Franco was still alive). My mother wore wool stockings at their wedding so as not to have the slightest amount of money go towards buying Japanese silk at a time when Japan was trying to expand and therefore getting ready to wage war. They joined the American Communist Party – and, yes, this caused them to be fearful in the 1950s when Joseph McCarthy made it his mission to destroy all those who had considered anyone who believed that Communism might alleviate the pains of the poor and add equality to human existence. My parents had left the party by the time Stalin became head of the Soviet Union – they saw, as many idealists do, that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely – but the ideals remained in their hearts.

So, of course the first time I learned about the project in Mãe Luíza, I felt an ease and connection; idealists seem like blood relatives to me. Like my parents – my father ran the printing company that my mother's father had started – all the support groups from Switzerland, Germany and Brazil (for details see pp. 268–271) depended on the successes of solidarity to make idealism action more than hollow words.

The initiative reached the most underserved with panache. People in need were given a leg up; this was how idealism was a game changer for many.

I suppose that one of the reasons this gets to me is that in my childhood, I saw too many idealists – my parents among them – essentially throw up their hands in despair. Communism begot totalitarianism:

it was czarist dictatorship in a different form. Then, horrifically, in the 1960s, John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Martin Luther King, two individuals full of heart and hope – and ideals – for millions of people, were brutally killed. To remain an idealist in the face of such setbacks to human progress requires committed individuals, unlike some academics who study idealism rather than act according to it. Theirs is the vocabulary of gobbledygook, with lengthy texts that define it as a combination of “metaphysical philosophies” and then use as a crutch academic lingo that insistently throws in words like “epistemologically,” “ontological,” “dualistic” and “phenomenologically.” How about rolling up your sleeves and having idealism realized in a form that ameliorates hardship and lends joy to life every single day, as the Centro Sócio has done in Mãe Luíza?

One of the oldest conundrums in human thinking is why people are generous. Idealism, to me, is generosity realized: good works in action not just thoughts.

In *Of Human Bondage*, the brilliant English novelist and story writer Somerset Maugham sets up a conversation between the hero, Philip, and the worldly, over-confident artist named Cronshaw.

In chapter XLV, Cronshaw says:

“Men seek but one thing in life – their pleasure.’

‘No, no, no!’ cried Philip.

Cronshaw chuckled.

‘You rear like a frightened colt, because I used a word to which your Christianity ascribes a deprecatory meaning. You have a hierarchy of values; pleasure is at the bottom of the ladder, and you speak with a little thrill of self-satisfaction, of duty, charity and truthfulness.... You would not be so frightened if I had spoken of happiness instead of pleasure: it sounds less shocking [...]

But [...] It is pleasure that lurks in every one of your virtues. Man

performs actions because they are good for him, and when they are good for other people as well they are thought virtuous: if he finds pleasure in giving alms he is charitable; if he finds pleasure in helping others he is benevolent; if he finds pleasure in working for society he is public-spirited; but it is for your private pleasure that you give twopence to a beggar as much as it is for my private pleasure that I drink another whisky and soda. I, less of a humbug than you, neither applaud myself for my pleasure nor demand your admiration.”

One of the easiest ways to retreat from idealism, which, after all, is best manifested in working for the larger world, is to be cynical about it. Maugham’s dialogue is a delightful way of extolling the merits of empathy and consequent generosity by arguing against them. Because they are both idealistic and tenacious, the project participants in *Mãe Luíza* have braved the battle to help vast underserved populations. Idealism with traction is heavenly, not just as a theory or wish but as a force for the benefit of others.

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# Mãe Luíza Building Optimism