



2022

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Recommended Citation

Henry, Charles (2022) "An Object Lesson in the Humane and Ethical Treatment of Others," *Floodwall Magazine*: Vol. 2: Iss. 8, Article 21.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/floodwall-magazine/vol2/iss8/21>

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An Object Lesson in the Humane and Ethical Treatment of Others

Charles Henry

I joined the army when I was twenty-three. The army sent me to the desert to do my job.

There I met a man named Chili Bowl.

Chili Bowl was a derisive moniker. I learned that his real name was Ahmad. I suppose he was called "Chili Bowl" because those who grew up in the 90s simply recognized what a bowl hair cut was. Chili was added to the front, as it is the natural measurement of a bowl.

He was short, maybe 5'6". His complexion reminded me of a piece of cherry wood that I'd stained, in the seventh grade, with linseed oil for a chessboard that I was making for my dad. I don't recall seeing it ever displayed. I suppose it went wherever you put the things that your children give you. He was just as hard as the wood, and the game. But he glinted the way I wish that board had.

I became a teacher when I was twenty-three. I got a job teaching in Appalachia.

There I met a man named Big Beau.

Big Beau was an ironic nickname. I learned that his real name was Robert. I suppose they called him "Big Beau" because Beau is just a nickname for Robert in certain parts of the country. He was "Big" because he was small, as the natural inversion of a clever joke.

He was short, maybe 5'6". His complexion reminded me of a piece of cherry wood that I'd stained, in the seventh grade, with linseed oil for a chessboard that I was making for my dad. I don't recall seeing it ever displayed. I suppose it went wherever you put the things that your children give you. He was just as hard as the wood, and the game. But he glinted the way I wish that board had.

One morning Chili had a bandage on his face. When asked what happened, he said "Corruption!" and flashed a smile while he mimicked an explosive fist running into the flat palm of his hand, "but, I am fine." Sometime in the night his house had been attacked. He rushed his wife and kids through the back door. Then he and his brother had an old-western-style shootout into the wee hours of the night. They came for him because he helped us. We'd promised to make his desert better, but he had believed us.

I didn't see him for about a month, but one day he just came back, out of the blue. In the coming weeks, he became a regular presence. His family had moved in with a relative, somewhere. He even ate with us, most days. He laughed more than I thought he would. And we laughed too, even when we didn't know what he was saying. I think that those weeks were when I realized that every person in this world is just another person.

He became my personal savior, though we didn't believe in the same God. I think I had still believed in a God at that point. He was versed in at least four languages, though not English. One day at lunch, and the entire time we spent trying to muddle through the few words that we knew in each other's language. At the end of it, I came to the realization that Chili Bowl grew up near a mountain, and that was important to him.

It was an hour well-spent.

One morning Beau had a bloody lip and black eye. When asked what happened, he said "COPS!" and flashed a smile while he mimicked an explosive fist running into the flat palm of his hand, "but, don't ya'll worry." Sometime in the night his house had been raided. He rushed his wife and kids through the back door. Then he and his brother had an old-barroom-style brawl into the wee hours of the night. They came for him for the same reason that we did. We'd promised to make his life better, but he hadn't believed us.

I didn't see him for about a month, but one day he just came back, out of the blue. In the coming weeks, he became a regular presence. His family had moved in with a relative, somewhere. He even ate with us, most days. He laughed more than I thought he would. And we laughed too, even when we didn't know what he was saying. I think that those weeks were when I realized that every person in this world is just another person.

He became my private mission, though we didn't believe in the reason for education. I think I still believed in the purity of education, then. Beau was smart in practical ways, though not English. One day at lunch, we spent the trying to muddle through the few ways that we knew each other's world. At the end of it, I came to the realization that Big Beau grew up in Appalachia, and that was important to him.

It was an hour well-spent..

After our lunch. Chili was my constant companion as we went from village to village, person to person in that desert. Despite many films, not all soldiers are primarily there to shoot people. My job was more about mitigation. Find the dangerous part and avoid conflict.

He was a wealth of knowledge when it came to the truth of how the locals felt, and why they might be lying. He wasn't physically aggressive, though he could've been. He met the world with kindness, even though his own life had been steeped in violence. He translated his world to mine through a telephone game of language and translation. Sometimes with no point. Sometimes with an unexpected insight.

One morning he walked up to the local city mayor and shot him in the head through the open car window. The mayor's men were on him at once. Chili died on the ground bleeding into the sand.

After our lunch. Beau became my most dedicated student as went from lesson to lesson, subject to subject in that semester. Despite some rhetoric, most teachers don't want to indoctrinate their students. My job was facilitation. Find the seed and encourage growth.

He was a wealth of knowledge when it came to the truth of how the locals felt, and why they might be lying. He wasn't physically aggressive, though he could've been. He met the world with kindness, even though his own life had been steeped in violence. He translated his world to mine through a telephone game of language and translation. Sometimes with no point. Sometimes with an unexpected insight.

One morning he walked up to the local city chief and shot him in the head through the open car window. The city chief's men were on him at once. Beau died on the ground, bleeding into the dirt.

Charles Henry is a second year PhD student in the Department of English at UND. He enjoys studying the language and interpretation of premodern literatures. In his writing, he tries to play with the convention and expectation of forms in order to focus on craft choices.