INSIDE THE LABYRINTH

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How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?
—Simón Bolívar

When I was seven months old, I was baptized in a small church in my neighborhood that, located in the very heart of Warsaw, stands right around the corner from the house where I was born. My deeply religious mother used to take me to there every Sunday, and each time I followed her devoutly. Inside this Roman Catholic sanctuary, I watched her turn into a precious figure that, while praying, looked as if frozen in a dreamy state. Focused and yet peaceful, she always seemed so present, and she constituted an integral part of a vibrant congregation—the one that, week by week, I was made to graciously rejoin with her.

When I was eight years old, my mother's father died. On the day of his funeral, we all dressed in black and marched from the church to the cemetery, tossed dirt on the casket, and prayed in silence while the priest sang. Perplexed and young as I was at that time, I could not fully grasp the finality of that sad spectacle, and yet I could feel the heaviness overtake everyone there.

Soon after the ceremony, my mother grabbed me, put me on her lap and said: “Anna, he’s in a good place now. He’s with Grandma now. He’s happy, and we’re happy for him.” Then she cried until she could not hold me anymore, but I remained with her—it hurt to see my own mother so desperate and devastated. Overwhelmed by a wave of emotions I could not even name at that time, all I wanted to do was to console her. I stroked her hair and looked into her big, brown eyes, and told her that everything would be all right, because God had reunited my grandparents who now looked and smiled at us from somewhere in the vast terrains of heaven.
However, when I left the room, I squirmed. I felt as if a monstrous creature, released from some obscure place deep inside of me, grabbed my intestines and clutched them with a strength hardly possible for me to bear. I slumped down to the floor. I looked around the empty room and in that very moment was struck with the most frightening feeling of loneliness—the one that suddenly overtakes you and fills your soul almost irrevocably. In my head, I was already exiled from the crowd of mourners, even though only a few minutes earlier I had tried to relate to my mother’s grief and faith.

In his autobiographical essay, “Salvation,” Langston Hughes explores the notion of each individual’s inner desire to belong. He reflects upon being a part of a community—a concept very much presupposed as essential by our society. At a “big revival” at his aunt’s church, Hughes, along with a group of other children, was bound to undergo a ritual of salvation—a ceremony during which the young congregants, “young sinners . . . who had not yet been brought to Jesus,” were incorporated into the church (595). Having been promised beforehand by his aunt to “see and hear and feel Jesus,” Hughes was awaiting a revelation (595). But nothing happened; stuck on “the mourners’ bench,” the little boy was filled with frustration: “I wanted to see [Jesus], but nothing happened to me. Nothing!” (595, 596). He was “escorted to the front row” of the church, faced for the first time in his life with the notion of being forced to belong (595). Surrounded by a “singing, praying, and shouting” parade of preachers, he was faced with a very difficult dilemma of whether or not to join the warm crowd and just “be saved”—not only from sin, but also from frightening loneliness (595, 596). Finally, Hughes got up, thereby claiming to have seen his Savior. However, contrary to what he had anticipated, the celebration that followed only intensified the feelings of profound emptiness and reclusion that he had been so desperately trying to be rid of.

Hughes’s struggle carries universal significance. Every day, we are compelled to juxtapose our personal beliefs against a whole variety of distinct attitudes held by other individuals, authorities, or communal norms. There are times when our judgment does not fit the social construct. Sometimes we conform to others’ views and beliefs just as young Hughes did, hoping that, as a result, we will belong to a group. However, this compromise comes at a higher price than we often acknowledge. Not only does the dilemma concern
our views, but, more importantly, it relates to our perceptions of ourselves in the face of our communities. For me, telling my mom that my grandfather still existed in heaven had little to do with my actual beliefs. Now that I am finally able to trace the alleys of the past, I know that my action was prompted by the specter of guilt about losing my faith—a thing of utmost importance for my mother, but scarcely significant to me. In turn, Hughes’s decision to join his aunt in the dancing congregation to be “blessed in the name of God” had little to do with religion (596). Both Hughes and I sought a sense of belonging and the certainty that this feeling would last forever.

In a kaleidoscope of all the important events in our lives, the ones that remain the most painful are often marked by immense pressure. It was at the very moment when I consoled my mother that I became aware of my lack of faith in the afterlife, God, or any other spiritual power. And yet, expected by others (and myself) to comfort her, I preferred not to reveal my real judgment on whatever would happen to my grandparents after their death. Approval of my proclaimed faith by the rest of the family was supposed to assure me that I had done the right thing. Instead, it undermined my confidence in their beliefs even more. It felt so strangely comfortable to be embraced by the crowd that my lie became dangerously close to being unnoticed not only by others, but also by me. It appeared that the young child’s primal need to belong had the power to outweigh my integrity.

In his essay “Labyrinthine,” Bernard Cooper attempts to contrast child-like naïveté with the pragmatism of adulthood, using the metaphor of labyrinths to explain our ever-changing relationship to the world around us. Mazes used to be young Cooper’s obsession: as a child, the writer saw mazes everywhere and spent his days drawing them. He explains later that those seemingly ordinary bundles of loops provided him with “an embracing safety” that he felt even when “trapped in [their] hallways” (345). While “dutifully” navigating through the alleys of a labyrinth, Cooper frequently experienced the abrupt “triumph” of finding “that one true path toward [the] reward” (345). But when Cooper showed his mazes to his parents, they appeared unimpressed, refusing to “sacrifice the time” to “lapse into the trance” of the labyrinths (346).

Only as an adult did Cooper “understand [his] parents’ refusal” (346). After their death, he was forced to realize that the only constant in life is
change, and that “that one true path” he used to hold on to while playing with mazes was as illusory as that “embracing safety” he experienced within them. Cooper attempts to grasp the transformative nature of life by pondering the gradual metamorphosis he underwent as he grew up. He became aware of reality’s overwhelming, haphazard complexity. In his essay, Cooper conveys that no matter how right our decisions seem when we are enveloped in security, it is impossible to truly ever feel certainty. Yet we have to believe in something and need someone to turn to in moments of doubt, even if giving up our views to feel included can lend us only temporal comfort. Therefore, we bend and adjust, caught up in the alleys of the “loopy and confusing” labyrinth of life, where ever-haunting uncertainty eventually becomes “virtually indistinguishable from the truth” (346, 347). The worst part is that we cannot escape the maze; the “endless succession of burdens and concerns” of our lives shroud and encase us inside its massive walls (346).

It seems that in the long and convoluted labyrinth of life there is no “one true path,” nor one incontrovertible truth (Cooper 347). Nevertheless, we often fool ourselves into thinking that there exists a predetermined path of absolute comfort and certainty. Despite feeling guilty and angry at himself for lying, Hughes never reveals his lack of faith to his aunt, nor have I ever confessed my disbelief in my grandparents’ afterlife to my mom. I couldn’t bear to tell her that I had lied, just as I couldn’t bear to acknowledge the secular beliefs that went against the faith fostered within my family. It turns out that the idea of autonomy is a lot more cumbersome than I had anticipated, leaving me on a very thin verge between freedom and isolation. Balancing between these two states only reminds me of my fear of exclusion. Such is the price I may have to pay if I ever renounce my family’s faith and embrace the idea of complete independence.

When I go back to the day of my grandfather’s funeral, I crumble. With his death, not only did I lose a childhood hero, but also an epitome of stability. Every now and then, when I attempt to gather my memories of him, “remembered events merge together or fade away” (Cooper 346). Sometimes, I just wish I could believe that “he’s in a good place now”—existing happily in heaven with my grandmother. But just as young Hughes was not able make himself believe in God, I cannot force myself to agree with my mom. From this observation I gain the impetus to redefine my system of
values and discover my autonomy. Does it scare me? Definitely. It seems inevitable to get lost in the labyrinth built upon an intricate framework of receding recollections of the past, where, as Cooper tells us, “the truth . . . is never naked, but always wearing some disguise” (347).

It is not easy to live with uncertainty. We are forever encapsulated in a reality that is not only elaborate, but is also stripped of directions. There is no one correct path towards the center of a labyrinth, just as there is no right way out. I believe that we have to embrace uncertainty and accept this facet of life, or at best try to push its walls away from one another, so that we shall not fear to wander, explore, and experience the full extent of its realm.

WORKS CITED