
“So It Went!”

We see playful children - giggling, laughing, not a care in the world - and envy their innocence. Their spirits have not yet been hardened and jaded by the world around them. Our lives are made up of a series of moments, big and small, that continuously shape who we are as individuals. Each day we live out different experiences which at some point we will consider our 'past'. As a society, we have accepted the fact that each of our lives will most likely include its fair share of emotional burdens, and it is up to us how we deal with those burdens and let them affect our future. In *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, cowardly and sensitive Amir bottles up his past inside of him, and allows his mistakes to define him well into adulthood. Tim O'Brien, author and protagonist of *The Things They Carried*, tactfully utilizes his metafictional novels to relieve daunting memories of the Vietnam war. Lastly, Billy Pilgrim from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* simply chooses to be unaffected by any events from his past. Much like the characters from these fictional novels, many of us carry so much emotional baggage from dark times in our lives, which we all deal with in different ways. However, the question still remains as to why the past affects us in the way it does, how we cope with the events of our past, and how we can best transform these past experiences into tools that will help us to once again see the light of our childhood that we have forgotten.

The way one copes and grieves is a very personal process. Some people simply choose to sit and cry; they spend their days feeling sorry for themselves and wonder what they could have done differently. Others choose to combat their difficult pasts by brushing off the situation, or even by making jokes about it. Tim O'Brien gives us a clear glimpse of this kind of coping method in *The Things They Carried*. Based on O'Brien's use of dark humor in the novel, Tim shows readers that sometimes the easiest way to smile in the present is to laugh about tears in the past. Through this dark humor, it's clear to see that O'Brien was extremely affected by his experiences at war. After all, he has enough stories and emotions to reveal about the war to write numerous novels just on this one topic. In O'Brien's sneaky, metafictional way, he lets audiences in on the fact that writing is his way of coping by explaining, "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened...and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain" (O'Brien 158). Writing down your thoughts and is a beneficial and healthy way of coping with the past. However, readers see that this method doesn't fully heal all wounds as O'Brien recalls images from the war, "There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief" (O'Brien 180).

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Though we do know *how* O'Brien attempts to make sense of his past and overcome the trauma he has experienced, many are wondering *why* Tim is still left with responsibility and grief so many years later. This can be explained firstly by the fact that Tim is missing one pivotal psychological element in his emotional life: forgiveness. Highly respected psychologist Roberto Assagioli believes that "Without forgiveness, life is governed by an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation" (Menahem). Studies show that there is a direct correlation between forgiveness and overall mental health. Forgiveness not only decreases negative emotions, but also creates an overall sense of well being that increases one's happiness and health (Menahem). Tim does not struggle with forgiving others, but rather with forgiving himself. The innocent lives that he and/or his fellow soldiers ended during the war still haunts Tim to this day. Sharing his stories facilitates O'Brien's mental healing to an extent, but until he can forgive *himself* for his actions in the past, he will never be able to truly overcome his emotional burdens.

Much like Tim, this same battle with forgiveness is seen clearly in the life of Amir from *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. After witnessing the rape of his best friend Hassan, Amir does nothing to stop the incident and is too much of a coward to tell anyone what happened. Instead, Amir bottles up his guilt and allows one single event to have an affect on nearly every aspect of his life in the future. Amir refuses to forgive himself; his coping methods are proven unhealthy and ineffective by his negatively impacted actions, relationships, and overall psyche. However, even after all Amir has gone through, after all the lies he has told and the friends he has betrayed, Rahim Khan reassures Amir, "there is a way to be good again" (Hosseini 2). Rahim is trying to make Amir understand what many people today fail to realize - no matter how awful things were in the past, and no matter how terrible of a person you may think you are, there *is* a way to change the future because it has not yet occurred. When Amir finally comes to terms with the rape of Hassan and begins building a relationship with his Hassan's son as compensation, he concludes, "when spring comes it melts the snow one flake at a time, and maybe I just witnessed the first flake melting" (page 372). Through healthy and effective coping methods, such as forgiveness, each one of us can begin to melt the snowflakes of our past and maybe one day we will be able to live in the warmth of the present.

Along with forgiveness, *society* is another large factor in the reasons behind these charcters' actions and coping methods. Through O'Brien's experiences in the war, we see the motivation behind many of the soldier's actions as O'Brien recalls that, "They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed and died, because they were embarrassed not to" (O'Brien 180). The soldier's actions were based not on their own free will, but on the pressure that society had put on them, and their awareness of how their emotions would affect them in the future. Studies show that, "People's reactions to [certain] scenarios reflect their social preferences, that is, their satisfaction with social outcomes obtained by themselves and others" (Choshen-Hillel). If it were not for the influence of society, the soldiers in *The Things They Carried* would not feel the need

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to be such strong men by suppressing their emotions and traumatic experiences. Similarly, Amir might not have been quite as hesitant to come to terms with Hassan's rape, had he not had to carry the responsibility and image of being his father's only legitimate son.

Unlike Tim and Amir, we see an entirely different coping method altogether in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. In this novel, readers get acquainted with Billy Pilgrim, a POW very similar to Tim O'Brien. Yet Tim and Billy's perception of the world after the war is greatly contrasting. Billy has accepted every moment of his life - past, present, and future. He recalls the hard times in his life and he feels no remorse. Billy often comes across the prayer, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to always tell the difference" (Vonnegut 60). However, Billy doesn't live by these words as he should. Based on Tralmalfadorian theory, Billy doesn't think he can change anything. He lives his whole life by the motto, "so it goes". Research shows that "individuals resort to primitive psychological states as normal aspects of mental functioning when faced with significant change or loss" (Griffin). As a POW and a firebombing of Dresden survivor, Billy has many events of his past to be affected by. Yet he remains numb to virtually everything, by definition in a "primitive psychological state". Billy's past has made him insensitive, which is somewhat dehumanizing. He is no longer phased by death. When faced with a corpse, Billy admits, "I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people which is 'so it goes'" (Vonnegut 27). While this coping method may seem like a valid solution on the surface - Billy feels no pain - readers would be remiss if they overlooked the many emotional journeys that Billy misses out on in consequence of his numbness.

What we as a society must strive to do is to find an equilibrium between these three characters. In order to get us through the tough times, we need to find healthy coping methods, like O'Brien's writing. However, unlike this healing soldier and the similar character Amir, we needn't be haunted by our decisions in the past; although those memories cannot be changed, we can take comfort in the fact that they are behind us. Amir lived his whole life bottling up all of his traumatic experiences and secrets and insecurities - which obviously did help him in any way. Billy hasn't quite figured things out either. While Billy doesn't let the bad things in his life affect him, he is also missing out on everything good. We cannot live our lives being solely people of "so it goes." Instead, let us become creatures that exclaim, "So it went!" What many people today fail to realize is that no matter what our circumstances were in the past, we can use those experiences as tools for the future. We must figure out why the past affects us the way it does and carefully decide which coping methods will work best for us as individuals in the healing process. As a society, we must come together and realize that the past is the past, and the future remains as pure as those happy, giggling children we so envy.

Choshen-Hillel, Shoham, and Ilan Yaniv. "Social Preferences Shaped By Conflicting Motives: When Enhancing Social Welfare Creates Unfavorable Comparisons For The Self."

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