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### Keep Your Thoughts To Yourself, Pack Mentality

Tipping Points control human actions and intentions. They seed from carelessness and portray disorder. They are environmental cues that can be as slight as litter or as considerable as stereotypes. Malcolm Gladwell cogently delineates how intoxicating small-scale physical environmental woes can be in his essay “The Power of Context: Bernie Goetz and the Rise and Fall of New York City Crime,” while Beth Loffreda illustrates just how sizable intangible Tipping Points can be in selections from her essay “Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder.” Gladwell and Loffreda lend two very different accounts that reiterate the same truth. The Power of Context affects human behavior, pack mentality and unique thought generation.

The Power of Context is an inescapable conglomerate composed of social norms stating what is and is not permissible. Environmental surroundings in any manifestation send subliminal messages that regulate human response. Regarding the Power of Context, Gladwell argues, “behavior is a function of social context” (242). The environmental context acts as a guide to the way conducts him or herself, and how he or she responds to a particular situation or stimulus. Humans are not born with the inherent knowledge that cursing in church is unacceptable, that taking candy from strangers is only permissible on Halloween, or that chatting with your mother-in-law about your sex life is a no-no. These are examples of learned behaviors plucked from environmental and social clues. Social norms have a direct lifeline to Tipping Points; Gladwell

writes, “The impetus to engage in a certain kind of behavior is not coming from a certain kind of person but from a feature of the environment” (238). Thus, one’s behavior cannot be attributed to seemingly unnoticeable messages from the conditions. Wearing the guise of environmental cues, the Power of Context controls human behavior.

Human behavior is in direct conjunction with the physical world. Gladwell delves into the phenomenon in his essay “The Power of Context: Bernie Goetz and the Rise and Fall of New York City Crime.” Due to seemingly unknown factors New York City was a cesspool of crime during the 1980’s with well over 2,000 murders and 600,000 serious felonies a year (Gladwell 235-236). Arresting vandals appeared to have little to no effect on controlling law-breaking behaviors and the crime raged on. However, by the end of the decade the level of violence had dropped rapidly. What appeared to be an inexplicable downturn in crime can actually be attributed to the Power of Context. Gladwell concluded, “For a crime to be committed, something extra, something additional, has to happen to tip a troubled person toward violence, and what the Power of Context is saying is that those Tipping Points may be as simple and trivial as everyday signs of disorder like graffiti and fare-beating” (246). Something as small and seemingly trivial as litter can send a widespread message of disorder, puncture people’s outlook on authority and propagate disrespect. Simply taking notice and manipulating the small overlooked contextual issues that plagued New York City during the 1980’s is exactly what caused the crime rates to plummet. Thus, the tangible, visible world is a natural phenomenon, which works to shape who people are and how they act.

Contrary to popular belief, environmental conditions affect human disposition more so than unique personality traits do. Most people attribute specific behaviors, actions and ideals to one’s character or family upbringing, however according to Gladwell, “Character is more like a

bundle of habits and tendencies and interests, loosely bound together and dependant, at certain times, on circumstance and context” (246). How one reacts in response to specific situations is more telling of his or her character than attributing the behavior to a personality trait. Assuming that one’s own characteristics do not catalyze particular behaviors begs another explanation as to why hate crimes are committed. In his freshman year at the University of Wyoming, Matt Shepard was brutally tortured and murdered for being homosexual. His murderer’s, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, intended to “teach a lesson to him not to come on to straight people,” as described by Kristen Price, McKinney’s girlfriend who was charged with accessory after the fact to first-degree murder (Loffreda 379). Indeed, Henderson and McKinney probably possessed their extreme and vehement anti-gay mentalities before the murder; nevertheless Tipping Points ignited the materialization and execution of such dispositions. Behavior resulting from an encounter with environmental and social Tipping Points is telling sign of character.

Pack mentality thrives on behavioral instincts allowing true character to be exposed. Media news of Shepard’s murder spread at full tilt across the nation breeding support, prejudices and incrimination. In the midst of the chaos Loffreda recalls her disbelief, “. . .to be in the middle of it, to watch rumor become myth, to see the story stitched out of repetition rather than investigation, was something else entirely” (375). Independent of reliable sources, the news reporters fed off of each other ravenous energies fueling the uproar of national conflict. The reporters were more likely participate in unjust behavior because he or she was in the midst of the group’s excitable momentum. Gladwell exemplifies that such pack mentality is indeed contextually based. Referencing the fare-beating epidemic of the New York City subway systems Gladwell states, “. . .once one or two or three people began cheating the system, other people – who might never otherwise have considered evading the law – would join in, reasoning

that if some people weren't going to pay, they shouldn't either, and the problem would snowball" (239). Self-serving behaviors that chiefly benefit the individual's welfare without concern for other's interests is perceived as acceptable if the behavior is widely used. People are easily swept into a certain mentality based on the environmental context.

Acting on the basis of other people's behaviors plots groups with differing opinions against each other. The aftermath of Shepard's death gave rise to three main groups of people: those who loved and mourned Shepard, those who stood up for a cause and those who fought against his symbolic identity. Stephanie, Shepard's prospective mentor from the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association (LGBTQA) group at school recalled differentiating between the groups, "There was a tremendous outpouring of support – the vigils, the parade...but some of those people – if they had known Matt was gay while he was alive, would have spit on him. But now it was a cause, and that made me upset" (Loffreda 377). To the masses, Shepard became a dehumanized symbol of pro-gay and anti-gay advocacy, but to his friends and family he was sorely missed. Stripping Shepard of his human qualities was a Tipping Point that acted as a gateway leading to more controversy. Blame was recklessly cast in every direction at colossal proportions and Wyoming as a whole was mercilessly condemned. Stereotypical remarks such as, "Well, this kind of thing probably happens a lot up there," or "You have that cowboy mentality in Wyoming, so this was bound to happen," shocked and dismayed Wyoming residents (Loffreda 375). Laramie itself was held accountable for Shepard's murder, and consequently became another mental Tipping Point. Pack mentality silenced minority opinions and perpetuated a cycle of emotional Tipping Points, which escalated into catastrophe.

Pack mentality strangles unique thought generation. Individuals become frenzied into majority opinions. A peer of Shepard's who was also a University of Wyoming student

confessed that he “straight-up hated fags” before Shepard’s death (Loffreda 381). The student admitted that he claimed that viewpoint simply because it was the majority opinion; the word “fag” was commonly used to make fun of friends for not being manly rather than to slander homosexuality. Being exposed to commonly used terms such as “fag” acts as a Tipping Point, which invites larger acts of slander, however it is more difficult to avoid the Power of Context. Jim Osborn, chair of the LGBTA and friend of Shepard’s, was able to resist the Tipping Points and avoid the pack mentality. Loffreda notes, “...[Jim] tried to rehumanize Matt by offering up small details – the nature of his smile, the clothes he liked to wear” (377). Osborn never once faltered in his behaviors, viewpoints and opinions. Unique thought generation is achieved by avoiding pack mentality and remaining steadfast to what is know to be morally right.

Human behavior, pack mentality and unique thought generation are all interwoven parts directly linked to the Power of Context. Each part is both independent and dependent of the others. Human behavior is inherently connected to physical and social environmental cues. Pack mentality escalates disorder and the loss of individuality. Unique thought generation is the state in which an individual has a hand in controlling his or her own behavior. Together, these traits denote how Tipping Points affect and control human actions and intentions. Malcolm Gladwell conveyed the importance of remedying small-scale Tipping Points in the Power of Context to cut the life source of unlawful and immoral behaviors in his essay exemplifying New York City crime. Beth Loffreda illustrated that tinkering with small environmental factors, physical, mental and social alike, produces enormous effects in her essay about the anti-gay murder of Matt Shepard. Tipping Points in any context allows individuals to learn what is morally and socially acceptable, shaping his or her character as a result.