

Santos' Lies Reflect the New Cachet of Victimhood

It is better to have suffered oppression by proxy than not to have suffered at all.



by Theodore Dalrymple

George Santos, congressman-elect for New York's third district, has been caught lying about his life. Perhaps the most significant of his 'embellishments' (as he called them) of his *curriculum vitae* was his claim that his mother's Jewish parents fled persecution first in Ukraine, then in Belgium.

Presumably he said this to enhance his chances of election, and possibly to enhance himself in his own eyes. If he couldn't be a victim himself, he could at least be a victim by descent – or by proxy victimhood.

The interesting question is why anyone should wish to be touched by victimhood, even remotely, and why he should think he would derive benefit from it. Mr. Santos was fashioning his life story, after all, to what he thought would confer kudos on himself. His "embellishment" was therefore illuminating a cultural or psychological quirk in the population, at least as seen by him. I do not think he was altogether mistaken in his view.

No one likes to admit nowadays that he has had an easy path through life. Human existence is rarely easy in all respects at all times, but there can be no doubt that some have it easier than others. On a scale of one to ten of ease of path through life, I would put myself, for example, at about eight or nine.

In adolescence, I might have put it much lower, but knowledge and experience have combined to slide me up the scale in my own mind. My sufferings, such as they were, bore no comparison with those that the great majority of human beings throughout history, and even in the present day, have had to endure.

Relative good fortune has, paradoxically, some disadvantages if taken the wrong way. It disallows blaming your circumstances for your failures and failings: you have only yourself to blame, which is painful. A free man might almost be defined as the person who has himself to blame – mostly to blame, that is – for circumstances are never quite perfect and excuses for oneself can always be found.

Even the dullest and least imaginative person is immediately stimulated into the wildest flights of invention when he or she is blamed for something, especially when the blame is justified. *Then* the faculty of imagination is called into action almost quicker than a driver at Mexico City can sound his horn when the lights change.

The victim is undoubtedly the hero of our time. Never to have

suffered oppression, other than in the most minor and inconsequential ways, is to be inferior to those who have suffered it. Doctor Johnson said that every man who has not been a soldier or to sea is aware of his own inferiority (invented military records are not unknown). It is better to have suffered oppression by proxy than not to have suffered it at all.

Of course, if you are going to invent stories about past oppression that somehow has filtered down the generations and affected you adversely, such that you have had heroically to overcome its effects, you might as well, indeed *must*, go in for whoppers.

No one is going to give you much credit if you tell the story of how your grandfather was unfairly dismissed from his job or issued with a parking ticket unjustly. In a world of famine and genocide – “never again” is always a mistaken slogan – suffering is on such a scale that unless one has had some connection with it, one has led a comparatively easy life.

There is thus a whole genre of fake Holocaust memoirs, some of them very well written and even convincing in their detail. Their exposure as fakes comes as a surprise. Among them is, for example, is supposedly a memoir by an Australian of having been a stoker, that is to say a person who shovelled bodies into the ovens at Auschwitz. It was pure invention.

Another, more famous case is that of Benjamin Wilkomirski, whose Holocaust memoir, “Fragments,” widely praised as a masterpiece when first published, was exposed as a fraud and then denied even literary value.

To have suffered greatly can be used as a claim to special moral insight and consideration that is denied to others who have gone through life like a hot knife through butter. Even a faint whiff of such suffering is supposed to confer superior understanding, compassion and wisdom about the meaning of

life.

And indeed, in the face of someone who has suffered greatly, criticism of what he or she says is often disarmed. How can you say I am wrong when I have suffered so much?

The congressman-elect was therefore responding to a demand that will always find a supply, admittedly doing so in an extremely foolish fashion. If we confer special moral status on those who have suffered greatly (and it is difficult to avoid doing this), even by the fairy dust of the suffering of previous generations, we must expect bogus claims to exceptional status.

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