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Facing the fear of losing identity

Public places are where urbanites form a community, where democracy finds a voice and a physical presence and where freedom is best experienced as a humane alternative to the fiction of identity. Rabindra Sarobar, Dhanmondi, Dhaka. PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Recently I was invited to present a TEDx talk at the George Washington University in Washington, DC. The theme of the daylong event was "Fear Itself." I would like to share my talk here, hoping to bring readers' attention to one of the key pathologies of our times.

I was in Thailand a month or so ago. When I was on the way to the airport in Bangkok, I was fascinated by a massive billboard next to the highway. It was an

airline ad. An airplane flying over a collection of global architectural icons: the Statue of Liberty, Big Ben, Eiffel Tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Colosseum, the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China, and Sydney Opera House.

It was fun to see the beautifully uplifting ad. But I thought that there was also a hidden message in it. It was a profound story about our lives today—the life of modern nomads. These nomads are in a frictionless and borderless world, where they can travel enormous distances in a matter of hours and days.

In short, we are global citizens in ways that our grandfathers and grandmothers were not. The ad, in a nutshell, was an homage to globalisation or a "flat world," to use Thomas Friedman's description of our interconnected planet today.

Yet, I kept thinking about the ad and the complicated, not-so-innocent world that we inhabit. As we become global citizens, as we overcome old separations and divisions, there has also been a paradoxical, opposite reaction—the fear of losing our identity in a world where all lines are in a continual flux.

In fact, this fear has become a hallmark of our times. But what is identity? By identity I mean how we see ourselves in a world of communities, how we seek to define ourselves or fortify our identity by certain cultural traits, social attitudes, geographic attachments, lifestyles, language, eating habits, physical attributes, and many more. We seduce ourselves to believe that all of these rather sacrosanct, supposedly pre-ordained qualities, collectively define us, give us our identity, or solidify our position in the world.

Thus, we often seek to reinforce what we consider our identity-shaping qualities in things that we do in our daily lives. Consider our mundane yet consequential use of social media and how we advance our worldview through it. Let's not forget social media's incredible influence on our political lives and democracy. Facebook has 2.2 billion subscribers worldwide. Imagine the kind of global impact your post (or fake news!) may have on Mark Elliot Zuckerberg's virtual republic.

The fear of sacrificing identity can provoke people to do all sorts of things—some are exclusionary, some elitist, some separatist, some nationalist, some nativist, some self-aggrandising, some militant, and some even violent.

Consider the ongoing gun-control debate in the USA. As much as it is about rights, this debate is also a great deal about (racial) identity or rather about constructing it. In our anxious world, refugees, migrants, the poor, the rich, brown, black, and white people perpetually enter into a cultural vortex, with unexpected chemical reactions, complicating or even polluting "our" way of life. This anxiety can quickly morph into a perceived existential threat and, ultimately, produce the next generation of divisions and walls.
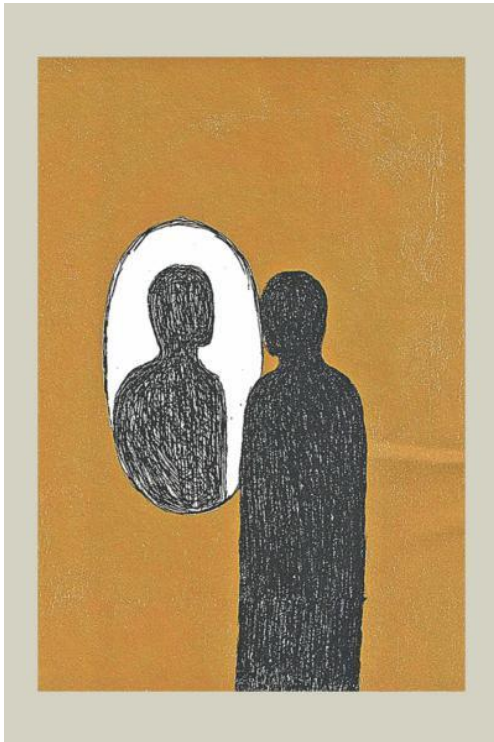

Illustration by Mimmo Paladino for James Joyce's Ulysses.

One of the paradoxical effects of globalisation, global movement of ideas, capital, and people is the fear of losing one's identity, induced by an alleged loss of the original, the authentic, the pure, the native, the national, the organic. This fear has sometimes provoked reactionary, atavistic sentiments, repurposed to restore some kind of perceived cultural, religious, ethnic, or racial purity.

Think of the proposed US-Mexico wall. Is this wall a physical object, an idea, a metaphor, or a modern reincarnation of a persistent human fantasy of protectionism across historical eras? Trump has valorised it as "an impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful, southern" border wall.

Consider the American teen Trayvon Martin's dead body on the sidewalk of a gated community at Sanford, Florida. Crossing the wrong gate could result in fatal consequences and spur a national debate on racial identity and the politics of self-defence. In your own town, you may find a gated golf club, fortified in its aromatic exclusivity, or a high-end resort, meant only for certain economic classes, or a beautifully designed school, where you can't send your children because it is too expensive.

Consider some of the grim suburbs of Paris. They are called banlieues. Many claim that these banlieues are the dystopic ghettos where many North African immigrants and their French-born children live. Paris has become, as some recent observers suggest, a classic tale of two antagonistic cities. One is French and the other not-quite-French. When they collide we see the tragedies of Charlie Hebdo.

Why do we still need to see genocide in the 21st century? The persecuted Rohingya people, expelled from Myanmar, allegedly for their denigrated ethnicity and now living in extreme conditions in Bangladesh. This tragedy reminds us that the scourge of ethnic-cleansing may not disappear, even if we advance socially and technologically.

As we cross many borders, are we not building more and more social, cultural, economic, and racial barriers?

In 1989, we saw the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In 2018, we see more walls rising in the USA, Saudi Arabia, Hungary, Israel, and the Indian Subcontinent, among other places. We delude ourselves by believing that we can resolve complex social and political problems with our fetish for megastructures!

The social pathology of identity loss has become a key driver of policies across the world in recent times, particularly in cities, the proverbial melting pot of civilisation, globalisation, and ideologies. The fear of losing identity has had direct or indirect spatial and urban implications, producing a range of architectures of exclusion

The crucial issue is this. The desire to preserve one's "identity" in itself is not a problem. The problem arises when one's identity becomes a tool or an occasion for the exclusion and marginalisation of others.

So, what can we do about social marginalisation in our cities? The social hazards of exclusionary identity have to be best mitigated in dynamic and diverse public places, where people of all sorts come together and celebrate the idea of greater social good. It doesn't hurt to reclaim some old-fashioned faith in the power of enlightened, people-centric design as a bulwark against isolationism. City planners can significantly reduce the exclusion of people by fostering urban conditions that alleviate social inequity, alienation, and the "breeding ground" of radical ideologies. They must create one city, not fracture it into unequal economic zones and privileged gated communities.

We need to see how the city functions and serves or does not serve its people, fostering alienated pockets of unemployed youth or a marginalised racial group, often predisposed to social anarchy and extremist ideologies. A 2013 United Nations report examined how neglecting basic principles of equitable, integrated urban planning can result in widespread social uncertainty and crime.

The human story is best celebrated in the spaces of robust public engagements. The urbanist William H Whyte's study of pedestrian behaviour in 1960s New York is instructive. He concluded that strangers start imagining themselves as a community when they have the opportunity to freely access public plazas with others.

The Colombian city of Medellin has lately been seen as a success story of urban regeneration through investment in urban plans based on public transportation, housing, and public plazas, all considered drivers of civic life and social integration. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA

The Colombian city of Medellin offers a good case in point. This ungovernable city of drug warfare and assassination has lately been seen as a success story of urban regeneration. Beginning in early 2000s, three consecutive mayors heavily invested in

urban plans based on public transportation, housing, and public plazas, all considered drivers of civic life and social integration.

We need to invest in our urban plazas, piazzas, zócalos, malls, and maidans. Public places are where urbanites form a community. This is where city people become the public and learn to be civic. This is where democracy finds a voice and a physical presence. Public places are where freedom is best experienced as a humane alternative to the fiction of identity.

Irrational fear dehumanises us and others. It is not necessary. We don't need fear. We need empathy for ourselves and others. Most of all, we need to be curious about others. We can rejoice in our differences only when we remain genuinely curious about others. There is no greater and more enlightening power than empathetic curiosity.

Imagine yourself in the astronaut Neil Armstrong's space suit, on July 20, 1969. The Eagle has just landed on the moon. And when you said, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind," you offered the greatest verdict against insularity and the most transcendental—almost spiritual—statement about curiosity as the driver of human imagination, and in this case, space exploration.

To be curious is to be human and humane.