



Epsilon Theory

# The Ministry of Rites and the Compassionate Man

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## The Compassionate Man

*A compassionate man once caught a turtle. He wanted to make it into soup, but unwilling to be accused of taking life, he boiled a panful of water and, placing a rod over the pan, said to the turtle, "If you can get across the pan, I will set you free."*

*The turtle was in no doubt as to the intentions of the man. But he did not want to die. So, summoning up all his will, he accomplished the impossible.*

*"Well done!" said the compassionate man. "But please ... try it again!"*

**Cheng Shi (c. 1150 AD)**

In 12th century China, you had to be a bit more circumspect in your criticism of the [Nudging State and the Nudging Oligarchy](#). But it was the same struggle and the same resistance 1,000 years ago, just as it will be 1,000 years from now. Same answer, too: [Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Can't Lose](#).

*Welcome to the Epsilon Theory pack, Cheng Shi.*



William H. Macy and Felicity Huffman

*Pretty soon, there's not gonna be any Jew or Aryan or Hindu or Muslim or Mexican or Blacks. There's just gonna be the rich and the fucked, and our grandson is already one of the fucked.*

— Frank Gallagher (William H. Macy), *Shameless*, Season 6: Pimp's Paradise

William H. Macy and Felicity Huffman love their daughters. William H. Macy and Felicity Huffman would do *anything* for their daughters. William H. Macy and Felicity Huffman get the joke. William H. Macy and Felicity Huffman are rich.

**The problem for William H. Macy and Felicity Huffman is that they aren't rich *enough*.**



Charles and Jared Kushner

*There was no way anybody in the administrative office of the school thought he would on the merits get into Harvard. His GPA did not warrant it, his SAT scores did not warrant it. We thought for sure, there was no way this was going to happen. Then, lo and behold, Jared was accepted.*

— former official at The Frisch School in Paramus, New Jersey, [as related to Daniel Golden](#).

Charles Kushner loves his son. Charles Kushner would do *anything* for his son. Charles Kushner gets the joke. Charles Kushner is rich.

**Charles Kushner is rich enough. For this crime, at least.**

When I say that William H. Macy and Felicity Huffman and Charles Kushner get the joke, what do I mean?

I mean that they understand that there is one and only one way to *ensure* that your children are card-carrying members of Team Elite, and that is to enroll them in a prestige university.

Is it the only way to make sure your children are in the club? No. But it is the surest way.

Is it just or good that this is the modern social meaning of higher education, that prestige universities are the dominant credentialing mechanism of mass society in the 21st century? No. But it IS nonetheless.

Will anything about this scandal diminish the credentialing mechanism of prestige universities? Will anything about this scandal change behavior in any way, shape or form? LOL.

*The federal government has alleged that USC is a victim in a scheme perpetrated against the university [by five employees]. At this time, we have no reason to believe that Admissions employees or senior administrators were aware of the scheme or took part in any wrongdoing — and we believe the government concurs in that assessment. The government has repeatedly informed us that it views USC as a victim and that these employees purposefully deceived USC.*

— 3/12/19 letter to the USC Community by Wanda Austin, Interim President

**C'mon, people, get with the program! Don't you understand that the universities are the real victims here?**

*This has all happened before.*

For more than ONE THOUSAND YEARS, Team Elite status in China was determined by performance on scholastic tests administered by the Ministry of Rites.

These tests varied in difficulty and type, depending on the post and the seniority of the position. For example, a cleric might need to memorize 9,000 ideographic characters. A junior magistrate might need to write a set of acceptable Eight-Legged Essays on policy or philosophic issues (“break open the topic”, “receive the topic”, “begin discussion”, “initial leg”, “middle leg”, “later leg”, “final leg”, “conclusion”). A senior magistrate might need to write a brilliant essay, as judged by a panel of still more senior magistrates.

The Ministry of Rites would administer and score the various tests once every three years, at provincial testing centers for the junior credentialing of younger applicants (*juren*), large metropolitan testing centers for mid-level credentialing (*gongshi*), and at the palace campus itself for the most senior credentialing for national administrative posts (*jinshi*).

*Oh, those quaint Chinese folks, way back in ancient times! A Ministry of Rites, you say? Like a Ministry of Silly Walks? Haha, how very droll!*

*So let me get this straight ... these young men would study a certain curriculum for three years, six if they partied a bit too much or needed a year or two “to find themselves”, and then write some prescribed essays and memorize some useless symbols in order to become a Recommended Man (juren)? Why even that phrase, “Recommended Man” ... it sounds so silly, doesn’t it? And then these “Recommended Men” would get prestigious, well-compensated administrative jobs in the province from other “Recommended Men”, just because they had passed the same test?*

*And wait ... you’re telling me that if they took an even more prestigious test from an even more prestigious scholastic curriculum, they would be in an even more elite club of national administrators, where they would interview each other and hire each other and run the country? And everyone just went along with this?*

Crazy, right?

For more than ONE THOUSAND YEARS, scholastic examinations were the dominant credentialing mechanism of Chinese mass society.

For more than ONE THOUSAND YEARS, the one and only way to *ensure* that your sons would be card-carrying members of Team Elite in Imperial China was to make sure that they passed the *juren*-level test administered by the Ministry of Rites.

Were there bribery scandals associated with the Ministry of Rites, where maybe a rich entertainer in a provincial capital was caught paying good money to have an impostor take the test for ~~her daughter~~ his son or have the test judged leniently? Of course! And those bribery scandals were punished mercilessly, usually by ~~public shaming~~ public execution of that hypothetical rich entertainer in a provincial capital.

Were there bribery non-scandals associated with the Ministry of Rites, where maybe an ultra-rich oligarch in a provincial capital underwrote the expense of a fancy new ~~scholarship program~~ Ministry building where his son would subsequently ~~attend college~~ be posted? Of course! And those bribery non-scandals



were punished not at all, because to do THAT would mean that ~~Harvard~~ the Ministry of Rites was a *perpetrator* of this sham rather than a *victim*.

Why does a credentialing system exist in mass society? Why is higher education the dominant credentialing system in a rich and stable mass society like Imperial China or the United States today?

Because then and now, it is a highly effective **Pecking Order Lie**.

**It is the promise of meritocratic social mobility in a world carefully designed to limit meritocratic social mobility when it threatens the State and Oligarchy.**

Look, it's not entirely a lie. Of course it's not, because all Pecking Order Lies must wear the clothes of Truth. Our system of prestige university credentialing (and Imperial China's, too) IS a tool for social mobility. It co-opts a steady stream of highly competent prole children into the Outer Party, to use Orwell's typology. It satisfies Inner Party parents by providing legal avenues for keeping their kids in the club. It satisfies prole and Outer Party parents by providing the occasional show trial of Outer Party parents who cheat the system.

Best yet, no one has to pay real money for all this. Limitless funding is available for parents to pay for their children's education, which means that there is no limit to tuition levels, which means that there is no limit to what universities can spend to join the prestige credentialing ranks.

*Oh, little Jimmy is going to 20-Years-Ago-This-Was-A-Second-Rate-University? I hear really good things about that school. Congratulations!*

*Thanks! We're all very pleased. Everyone except my bank account, that is. Hahaha!*

It's true, everyone is VERY pleased by the current system.

Prestige university credentialing is a steam valve <whispers> *just like elections*.

**It is the Compassionate Man's offer to the Turtle.**

**It is the Deity's treatment of the Good Man.**

## The Deity and the Good Man

*In the temple by the roadside of a village there was a wooden image of a deity. A man passing by found a ditch across his path, so he pulled down the image and placed it over the ditch as a bridge. Another passer-by saw the figure on the ground and, feeling sorry for it, restored it to its place. But the image took umbrage because he had offered no sacrifice to it, and so placed a curse on him, causing him to suffer a bad headache.*

*The spirits of the kingdom of the underworld were puzzled. "You let the one who trod on you go free, but punished the one who helped you up. Why?"*

*"You don't understand," said the deity. "It is so easy to bully a good man."*

***Xiao Zan (c. 1580 AD)***

Our deities today are [the Nudging State and the Nudging Oligarchy](#). We worship them as surely as any Chinese villager worshiped some nature totem, and they bully us as surely and as incessantly, too.

So in the time-honored tradition of the bullied everywhere, we Good People cheer when Bad People like all of these parents caught up in the College Admissions scandal are "caught", because it satisfies, even if just for a moment, our sense of justice.

It is right that we have this feeling, and it is right that they are punished.

*But it is not enough.*

**We must see our system of higher education with [Clear Eyes](#).**

Our social system of higher education is just that – a social system. It is not a meritocratic social mobility conveyor belt. Or rather, it is that, AND it is ALSO the primary credentialing system that supports the State and the Oligarchy. It is neither good nor bad. It simply IS.

And what it IS has never been more important for any young person's career.

It's the second bullet in the three-part advice I give every young person I know, including my own children. There's a fourth instruction, too, the most important of them all, which you can find along with these bullets in "[Oh hell, Martha, go ahead and burn yourself if you want to](#)".

- **Build your intellectual capital.** I've known so many people in my life who have enormous intellectual horsepower, but who were in such a ferocious hurry to get somewhere that they never built their intellectual capital. So when they got to wherever they were hurrying ... they had

nothing to say beyond the narrow confines of their day job. And they knew it. It's one of the most disappointing outcomes in life – to be very successful in your chosen field, but to find it AND yourself to be oddly empty. Can you catch up? Can you be a late-in-life learner? Sure. But just like losing 20 pounds on a diet gets exponentially harder the older you get, so does adding meaningfully to your intellectual capital. Build it NOW.

- **Get your passport stamped.** We live in a world of credentials. I'm not saying that's a good thing or a bad thing. I'm just saying that it IS. The most important credential you can have today is some sort of degree from an elite university. It doesn't matter if it's an undergraduate or graduate degree, and I'm not going to argue with anyone about whether a school is "elite" or not. The second most important credential for a young person is a 2+ year stint with an elite institution in an elite city. Again, don't @ me. There are work-arounds and effective substitutes for both of these credentialing mechanisms. But your path will be immeasurably easier if you get your Team Elite passport stamped NOW.
- **Train your voice. And use it.** Again, it's one of the most disappointing outcomes in life – to know that you're a creative person, to have something Important that's going to *burn you up inside* if you don't share it with the world ... but to lack the words or the music or the art to do so. In my experience, the unhappiest people in the world are mute creatives. To paraphrase Langston Hughes, sometimes they shrivel. Sometimes they fester. And sometimes they explode. Every creative person should start a blog to express and develop their art. Do not distribute it. Do not publicize it. Do not play **the ego-driven Game of You**. Erase it all every six months if that's what you need to do, because odds are you have nothing interesting to say! But start training your voice NOW, *because one day you will*.

**We must support our children with Full Hearts.**

There are two components to Full Hearted action.

- to promote Reciprocity, by which I mean potentially cooperative gameplay.
- to promote Identity, by which I mean an autonomy of mind.

Or if you prefer, the core tenets of Full Hearted action are to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and to know thyself. Not exactly new ideas, but if they were good enough for Jesus and Socrates ...

Acting for Reciprocity in the college admissions game is pretty simple. **We play by the rules.** Yes, we know that it's a system, and a somewhat rigged system at that, where its meritocratic elements are in full play when it's convenient for the Compassionate Man, and absent when it's not. But cheating the system is the short-sighted play, even if we can get away with it. Why? Because once we start down the path of

treating others instrumentally – *especially when we start treating our own children and other children instrumentally* – we can never walk that back. Never. And that path ALWAYS ends in tears. Or worse.

Acting for Identity in the college admissions game is a little more complex, because it's not our identity we are promoting here, but our children's identity. What does it mean to act for another's identity? **It means we listen to their "I am", and we support THAT.**

*I was having lunch with Siegfried and he was telling this story about dating a woman. I guess he saw a quizzical look on my face and he said in his German accent with his coiffed hair, "I am not gay. I am not straight. I am Siegfried." I think that's the only real truth I've ever heard.*

— **Penn Jillette, interview by David Marchese for *Vulture* (August 14, 2018)**



**"I am not gay. I am not straight. I am Siegfried."**

Penn's right. It's the only real truth I've ever heard, too. This is what it means to promote the identity and autonomy of mind of our children ... that when they say "I am", we listen and we support THAT.

*Whatever their "I am" might be.*

However much their "I am" connects or does not connect with the credentialing of higher education. However much their "I am" might embarrass us in front of *our* friends or fail to live up to *our* beliefs about how smart or how beautiful or how accomplished or how meritorious our children are.

**Because all of those emotions are ego, they are the baggage of the flaws in our OWN identity. They have NOTHING to do with the identity of our child.**

Sure, these emotions come out of love. William H. Macy and Felicity Huffman love their children. Charles Kushner loves his children.

*Loving our children is not enough.*

A quote from Pecking Order, because I can't say it better than this.

*No matter how much money we have or don't have, we can reject the idea that we can be Someone Who Matters to the World and instead embrace the idea that we must be Someone Who Matters to the Pack. Now maybe your pack IS the world. Probably not, but maybe. If it is, then be bold and matter to the world. But more likely it's your family. More likely it's your friends. More likely it's your partners and employees. More likely it's your church. More likely it's your school. More likely it's your country. It's damn sure not your political party. It's damn sure not an oligarch.*

**Our children are the most important members of our pack.** Always and in all ways. More than any other human, we must treat our children as autonomous ends-in-themselves, not as a means-to-an-end. Not to any end. Certainly not to the ends that serve our egos.

Just do THAT, and you will be amazed at how the college admissions process works out just fine. Because you will see it clearly for what it is. And you will act full heartedly throughout.

*Yours in service to the pack. – Ben*

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