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THERE MUST BE HAPPY ENDINGS



ON A THEATER OF OPTIMISM & HONESTY
Megan Sandberg-Zakian

**THERE MUST BE
HAPPY ENDINGS**

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*Ladies and gentleman, don't feel let down:
We know this ending makes some people frown.
We had in mind a sort of golden myth
Then found the finish had been tampered with.
Indeed it is a curious way of coping:
To close the play, leaving the issue open...
What's your answer? Nothing's been arranged.
Should men be better? Should the world be changed?
Or just the Gods? Or ought there to be none?
We for our part feel well and truly done.
There's only one solution that we know:
That you should now consider as you go
What sort of measures you would recommend
To help good people to a happy end.
Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust:
There must be happy endings, must, must, must!*

Epilogue to *The Good Person of Szechwan* by Bertolt Brecht

There Must Be Happy Endings

During our wedding planning, my now-wife and I had a disagreement about including the words “till death do us part” in our vows. I said: This is what it means to get married! You stay together until one of you dies! She said: Absolutely not! Why should we stay together until death if it isn’t working?

It’s likely that what she actually said was something very nuanced and reasonable—something like, “Getting married means you’re willing to work at being on a shared path together. Sometimes people change, and sometimes paths diverge.”—but what I heard was “Not every marriage has a happy ending.”

In Homer’s *Odyssey*—which I was somehow never assigned in school and so had the pleasure of reading, of my own free will, as an adult—Penelope dismantles her weaving each night, as a ruse to postpone a second marriage and thus remain faithful to her absent husband Odysseus. While Odysseus travels the hero’s journey, facing monsters inside and outside of himself, Penelope waits at home—raveling and unraveling, to defer the ending, to preserve the possibility of happiness.

I’ve always liked Penelope’s story, but I began to deeply

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empathize with her while attempting to write this book. I am a theater director. I have never written a book before. As I've raveled and unraveled these essays, I've felt how painful it is to unmake something I so carefully and recently made. I have seen how easily the thread is tangled, how tedious the weaving and unweaving can be, how tempting it is to turn away from the loom and surrender—to a pint of Cherry Garcia, or, I suppose, to one of your 108 suitors. I have seen how desperately I crave a happy ending, whether to a book or a life's story.

But an ending doesn't *have* to be happy to be satisfying. A good ending, happy or not, draws a line around the experience of story hearing and telling. It picks the story up, holds it in its hands, and offers it out, whole. It gives us the opportunity for a collective breath. A good ending is honest: a boundary we can feel, the knowable edge of a reliable container. It is a ritual threshold between story and not-story.

In my theater-going life, I've seen attempts to subvert the ending: installation performances where we can choose when and how the experience begins and ends, plays with no curtain call, which leave us sitting in tense silence for long minutes until uncertain applause begins, plays that turn up the music, pull us into the aisles, and transform the performance into a dance party. But these are just different kinds of endings, and in all these cases, as an audience member, I knew when the show was over.

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As a director, I often find the ending image of a play first. I'll daydream about the ending, replaying it decadently, guiltily, like a child who is only eating dinner because she knows what's for dessert.

It's not strictly true that I've never written a book before. Every year at Madrona Elementary school during the annual read-a-thon, we got to write a book—you could tell it was a book and not a story because the handwritten pages were spiral bound with a laminated cover. In fourth grade, my book was called *Everything Always Comes Out In The End*. It was based on the story of my unlikely friendship with Amy Swift, who, to my despair, had moved away at the end of third grade. I remember conceiving of the ending, in which the narrator, who had been brave and vulnerable enough to reach out to a new friend only to lose her to California, was rewarded for her open-heartedness by receiving overtures of friendship from not one but *two* other girls.

The title of the book felt both aspirational and true. I *did* want everything to come out in the end, and I thought it probably could. I loved stories that offered triumph over adversity, unlikely reunions, last minute rescues. I rooted for happy endings. I believed they must be possible.



When I graduated from college, I moved to New York City

and registered to vote at my new address on Hudson Street. On election day, my neighborhood polling place couldn't find my name, so I rode my teal-blue Schwinn down to the Board of Elections on Varick Street. I was filling out forms in a lobby on the 17th floor when a jetliner dropped out of a perfect azure sky and flew into a building twenty blocks south. A man next to me kept repeating, "My nephew works in there. He works on the 90th floor." We were close enough to make out dark forms leaping from the upper floors of the building. As I pedaled back up Hudson towards my apartment, I saw hundreds of people lining the streets convulse in unison, crying out. I realized later that must have been the moment when the first tower fell. I watched the second tower collapse from the roof of my building.

It felt like the end.

I was altered by that encounter with the world's violent unpredictability, which I'd previously understood only in the abstract. Before that day, I saw tragedy, violence, hate as blemishes in an essentially compassionate universe, as aberrations that must be resisted, fought against and overcome for the sake of our beautiful world. After, I saw them as pervasive. I saw the fundamental chaos in the lives of those nine-year-olds in my playwriting class, who were often at the mercy of brutal public systems. I heard it in the sobs of my roommate through the wall at night and in the voices of Baghdadi teenagers that came over the radio in the months and years after my country invaded theirs.

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I looked into the faces of strangers on the street and recognized my own devastation. Now I understood that *this was the world*: unjust, irrational, cruel.

But September 11 was not the end, at least not for me. Both before and after that day, I made theater. I still make theater. Sometimes—often—it seems like a deeply inadequate response to a world of terror and chaos. But I strive to meet that world with my full and honest attention. In the collision between that striving and the whisper of my childhood longing—*please, let everything work out*—I find myself again considering happy endings.

What can a happy ending offer us?—and, now, I mean an honestly happy ending, not a dishonest one. Not one that papers over reality with false cheer, but one that earns its happiness with full truth, with clear-eyed presence. That acknowledges the irrationality of the human heart, the infinite unavoidable harms to self and others, the violence of the systems we've made to support us but that fall so short, the maddening complexity of things that should be clear.

Is this kind of happy ending even possible? One that gives us a compassionate space where grief and loss can co-exist with hope and joy? One that offers us an alleviation, a space of relief, where the weight of the world's terror abates momentarily? Perhaps it could act as a restorative, a tonic that refreshes and rebalances? And then, too, it would need to open up the space to

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rejoice, to be washed with pure delight, wouldn't it? In a world where everything changes, in an ever-expanding universe, can a container the size of a theater and the shape of two hours be big enough to hold all this?

I've tried to retain Penelope's faith that happy endings are not arrived at inevitably, but made, and re-made, and re-made. She perseveres—in the face of possible violence to her person, rejoicing in hope long after there is reasonable cause for it, imagining reunion when others assume it is impossible. Faced with forces—both human and divine—that seek to overpower her, she courageously, optimistically, persistently, continues to make her own story. She reminds me that there is only one way I can know for certain there will never be a happy ending: if I do not persist in imagining one.

And still I wonder: how do I reconcile my desire for hope and possibility, connection and transformation, with an authentic witnessing of darkness and despair, hate and violence? In the face of an enormously unjust and chaotic history and present, is it acceptable—is it ethical?—to believe in the happy ending? Is it possible to be both honest *and* hopeful? Although I write from the viewpoint of someone making theater, I believe that this balancing act is one that all sensitive human beings must at some point attend to. It is the essential question of how to, as Walter Lippmann wrote, “live forward in the midst of complexity.”



In the midst of preparing this book for publication, I went on my first week-long silent meditation retreat. The teachers kept emphasizing that the work of being truly present in the here and now, being with *what is*, is a process of constantly remembering and forgetting. We have moments of clarity and insight that seem to transform us. Then we become preoccupied with the small tasks of daily life, and we forget that we were transformed. Then, we turn back towards the present, we practice, we breathe, and we remember. Everything changes. We forget, we remember. Over and over.

I saw this so clearly as I roamed the surrounding farmland in between meditation sits. Twin baby goats were born, and in a week went from collapsed and helpless, to head-butting the chickens. I fed their mother some grass through the fence. Her breath was warm and her tongue gentle as she took it from my hand. Near the grape arbor, a group of caterpillars clustered together on a branch, while other caterpillars wove a white silk enclosure around them. There was a dead toad on the path. Then, one night, a large and very alive toad hopped out of the woods and stopped for a long time to stare at me, its throat pulsing rapidly, a shimmering cloud of small flying insects between us.

I was vibrating all over. I felt the edges of my body pulsing, melting. The moon rose, smelling of honeysuckle and, for some reason, peanut butter. My feet—or someone's feet—walked on

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the damp grass. I felt I might be in a dream, dreaming myself. I might go to sleep that night and wake up gone—some part of me in everything, but the shape of me dissolved, like a sugar cube in a lake.

If the end were to come now, it would be a happy ending.

But I did not dissolve, that I could tell. I appeared to come home in the same physical form as I'd left.

My wife was on a work trip so the house was empty. I walked—slowly—from room to room. We live on the third floor of an old New England triple-decker. Spring sunlight filtered through the branches of the fir trees that fill our small front yard. The owner of the building on our left had for some time refused to cut down a large and very dead tree in his driveway. This tree, right outside our living room windows, provided endless hours of speculation and dread. Every time there was a big storm, we were terrified that it would come crashing down. After the last blizzard, during which several large branches had fallen, thankfully damaging nothing except our recycling bin, I had made yet another complaint to the city and to the landlord, neither of whom replied.

Now, in the spring, the red-bellied woodpeckers were loving this tree. A pair of starlings was flying into a hole in the trunk with worms to feed their babies. And I could see that, directly facing the living room, a peach-colored dove had built her nest

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in the crook of a dead branch and was sitting, serenely, atop it.

I got home on a Friday. On Monday, a landscaping company pulled up to the house next door and began to unload. I watched, first with curiosity and then with horror, as they prepared to finally remove this hazardous old tree. Their chain saws buzzed. They prepared by tying ropes around various branches, attaching pulleys, calculating. A man ascended in a small metal cabin on the arm of a machine. From the living room, I locked eyes with the dove on her nest. She sat, tensely, even as the sawdust began to fly around her. The starlings, alarmed, flew around in circles. They might have been screaming, but I couldn't hear them over the machine's roar.

It was very, very loud.

I backed away from the window. I thought of leaving the house, but that felt both disloyal and cowardly. I couldn't watch, but I couldn't leave. I sat, quietly, at our dining room table, for hours, while the tree, and everything in it, came down in pieces. Once the pieces were down, the landscaping team fed them to a wood-chipping machine and drove them away. The street was quiet again. I crept back to the window. A pair of doves and a pair of starlings flew in confused zig zags around the yard.

Was this, perhaps, the end?

I felt like it might be. I was so nauseous I could barely stand.

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The tree had been removed at my insistence. The baby birds had been fed to a wood chipper because I asked to be safe.

Maybe, I thought, there is only a finite amount of peace. Is the world always rebalancing in this way—yin for yang, hard for soft, dark for light? Does safety here mean peril over there? Does comfort there mean hardship over here? Maybe happiness is a zero sum game.

In the decade since I began writing these essays, I've moved to a different city, built a thriving career, gotten married, gotten sick, lost people I loved, lost my car in a flash flood. The world, too, has been swept with altering events. It has been made and unmade. It is now 2019, and when I tell colleagues the subject of my book, they sigh in recognition. They say it is a book we need right now. I think, but do not say, that this is a book I have needed over and over in my life, at moments spanning radically different political regimes and personal experiences. The questions in these essays are not questions for times that are worse or times that are better. They are persistent questions. I have asked and answered them differently over the years. They are questions about the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

I am writing this, my first (adult) book, in the dining room of my middle class home in a gentrified neighborhood of a progressive city in a wealthy nation. Destruction—of baby birds, of the planet and its inhabitants—is done in my name, with my collusion, for my safety, for the warmth of my home and the

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speed of my travel.

I'm also the grand-child and great grand-child of Armenian and Jewish immigrants. I have twentieth-century genocides on both sides of my heritage. My spouse is African American. She is the great-grand-child of enslaved persons. We are both queer women. When we scroll past the news side by side, it can feel like there is quite literally no part of who we are together that is not under attack, that somebody does not want to obliterate.

We suffer. We are implicated in the suffering of others. We can seek to anesthetize our suffering; we can refuse to see the harm we have done. Or we can try to step forward, to show up for our own suffering, to be present to the suffering we have abetted, to seek remedy.

Looking directly at terrible things is hard, but harder still is looking at the part of yourself that understands them. It's easy to say, "that doesn't make sense." It's very hard to say, "I can find the impulse for that violence in myself. That thing of darkness I acknowledge mine."

It is winter now. The stump outside our window cannot be seen—it is covered with snow—but I know it is there. The wind blows hard, slightly shaking the old plaster walls. I can hear my wife, in her office, singing.

I am glad the tree is down, that she is safe.

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As I cut these essays from the loom—happily—I know that this is only a book-shaped moment, the length of ten essays. The way I answer these questions has changed in the writing of them, and will certainly change again. Everything changes. I will remember, and forget, and remember. I know enough to understand this isn't the ending. But at least now, I have begun.