The Giver: Sanctuary or Prison?
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A half decade before *Harry Potter* swept the world, the first children of the post-Cold War order adored another book, Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, published in 1993. In this paper, we'll cover the book itself, address many of its themes, and explore some of the deeper questions it raises.

The Giver opens by introducing us to Jonas, a young boy who is about to turn twelve years old. He is nervous about the upcoming annual Ceremony, which serves as a formal rite of passage for each age group of children. For example, young children receive stuffed animals, while older children are given bikes. Jonas' world, called the Community, has no crime, disease, or money, and upon reaching the age of twelve, children receive assignments for the role they will serve for life. Every aspect of their lives to this point is carefully monitored, every decision analysed, and the Elders, who maintain order in the Community, are entrusted with placing them into the job that best fits them. Most of his peers, given their interests and aptitudes, have some idea of their potential assignments; Jonas, a rather eclectic boy, has none.

During the Ceremony, while Twelve after Twelve is assigned with ease, Jonas is, to his horror, skipped over and left to the end. His fear turns to astonishment when it is announced he will be the new "Receiver of Memory," the most honoured and respected role in the Community. There is only one Receiver, who is old and needs to pass it on to a new generation, and Jonas has been selected to be his successor.

The Receiver– whom Jonas calls the Giver– performs a vitally important role: he is the sole keeper of the memories of the past. In order to maintain harmonious order, the Community needs someone to recall harsh lessons and advise on how to proceed when unforeseen situations arise. In the novel, "memories" might be better described as visions, fully immersive sensory experiences. During his training, Jonas experiences a diverse range of these memories, from a warm and loving Christmas evening with family, to a wartorn battlefield that resembles the trenches of France. Rather than opening Pandora's Box for all to suffer, Jonas must step inside it on his own to complete his training. The remainder of the story covers his struggles with all of this new knowledge.

The book is loaded with themes, and the parallels to the then recently collapsed Soviet Union are inescapable. There are all sorts of questions about the nature of society and how it should be structured. For example, jobs are not the only things which are assigned; sex has also been abolished. Men and women are matched together by the state to be mother and father figures, and they are allowed after sufficient time to apply for a child. There is also a role, Birthmothers, whose sole job is to produce babies that will be issued to qualifying families at the Ceremony. Even the names of the babies are assigned, not chosen. As Lowry herself summarised in an interview, "over the course of many generations, they have made certain decisions in order to create a stable and safe society, but in doing so they have obliterated individual choice."

The obvious question glaring at us, though, cuts to the entire core of the novel: if the society is so perfect, why do they need a role such as the Receiver of Memory? If they have in fact abolished all forms of evil, and they have perfect social cohesion, even to the point of abolishing colours to prevent racism– this *is* a children's book– why must they maintain this single link, however thin and frayed, to the past? Could this be an unspoken admission that, despite their best efforts at controlling every aspect of the lives of the people in the Community, there are certain elements of human nature which will inevitably arise and challenge the status quo?

To try and answer these questions, we'll now turn to what has posed as modern society's answer to the problem of evil for the last 80 years: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Originally set forth in his

1943 paper, Abraham Maslow proposed what he called a “positive theory of motivation” in which each of us has base needs, such as food and shelter. Once these base needs are met, we can focus on the next level of needs, such as love and belonging, eventually reaching self-actualization. Maslow claims each level serves as a sort of locked gate to the next level: “For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food. He dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only about food, he perceives only food and he wants only food.[1]” The argument here is that when this man gets food, when the need is satisfied, the next level (in this case, safety) will naturally emerge.

In a very real sense, *The Giver* serves as an unintended repudiation of Maslow’s Hierarchy. The Community of the novel is a fictional realisation of Plato’s *Republic*, operating through Socrates’ Noble Lie. Once Jonas has experienced his “coming of age” moment and learns the truth of what has been taken away to ensure everyone has their basic needs met, he falls into an almost Cartesian level of crisis, questioning everything he has ever known to be true. But why? While Jonas (and the Giver) are in some sense serving as scapegoats for the sins of the past, Jonas is not mad about his *own* situation. He is upset that he has been lied to, shielded from the horrors of the past, and, rather than being grateful to the Elders for creating a world where he can have all of his needs met, his trust in them is shattered.

At this point, we might pause and ask why choice, or individual agency, is so important. Who cares if we are fed a Noble Lie, if we never have a reason to question it, and all our base needs are met? Put another way: if we were given the option to have lifelong peace, where every issue was handled for us and we would never starve, but in exchange, we had to undergo a procedure that would wipe our memories so that we would know nothing but this “perfect” world, would we say yes? If Maslow is correct, then we shouldn’t even hesitate. However, let’s say that after ten years of this perfect world, something slips up and we are told the truth, exposed to some of the erased memories, and also told that *we* were the ones who made this choice. How would we respond? Would we have gratitude towards our ten-years-younger self for trying to make our lives better, or hatred for being overly protective?

It’s worth asking how Maslow himself might have responded to this book. Let’s imagine that the hungry man from Maslow’s example is able to get a reliable food source, and spends his whole life ensuring his children will never have to endure that pain. Perhaps he even goes a step further to protect them by never telling them about the horrors of starvation he experienced. Then one day, one of his children learns the truth. How might his relationship with that child change? We can answer this to an extent already: parents will often keep things from children in order to protect them. Maybe a family member had a drug addiction, or a loved one came home from war with serious mental health issues. At a certain age children will begin to ask questions, and the care with which parents handle these questions helps the children mature into adulthood.

So, why do children ask questions? It is likely because they begin to notice things in the environment, such as when a family member tenses up when a certain topic surfaces in conversation, or they send donations to an unusual support group. As a child nears adulthood, they will naturally start to wonder about such things and then inquire. But in a world like the Community, efforts are made to ensure these environmental oddities are eradicated. There are no hints of issues beyond squabbles that may transpire, such as an argument over who won a children’s game of football. Decades or centuries (we’re never told which) of efforts have gone into eliminating every possibility of deviation from Maslow, to ensure that everyone has equal chance at self-actualization.

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[1] *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Page 5

We should note that in his original paper, Maslow's description of each need becomes shorter, vaguer, and more fine-tuned to each individual as he moves up the hierarchy. He even concedes, near the end of his comments, that "we do not know much about self-actualization.[2]" We could argue that the Noble Lie told to Jonas violated one of his basic needs and thus stunted his ascent up the hierarchy, but given that the Lie was told for his own good, should this matter? What is it about the need for agency and challenges that drives us?

There might be a parallel to gymnastics, where by applying stress to some body part through stretching or working out, it gets stronger, and if we take too much rest it grows weak. Another view is that we need challenges for life to seem worthwhile. Look at how often children of rich people, who have all their needs met on every level, turn to crime and drugs. Perhaps we have a built-in drive that searches for conflict when we lack any of our own. If we are protected from challenges, does that betray a lack of trust in our own ability to fend for ourselves? Imagine two parallel schools that teach the exact same material, but one of the schools never tests or evaluates the students, to protect them from the emotional trauma of getting a bad grade. Which students are more likely to prosper after graduation? Maybe we ought to ask the Giver.

[2] *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Page 11