

The Art of Practice: Living (in) the Institution of Telluride

I arrived at Cornell University full of hope in the promise of education, having grown up in the multicultural mecca of upper Manhattan. I knew then, as I do now, that education spanned spheres of life—from morning encounters in *bodegas* to small-talk on crosstown city buses. Education was in and of life, with institutions present to enrich us and expand our understandings of possibility. I learned as an adolescent from the Lebanese Drews running our local minimart, what it was to flee civil war; from the owner of the corner pizzeria, what it was to find yourself without citizenship at the sudden, bloody demise Yugoslavia. I believed I would continue to learn at Cornell, through encounters and offerings of others, through the *practice* of education side-by-side with a thousand young, bright minds. I arrived at Cornell full of hope and longing for another home.

It is in the large red-brick house of L.L. Nunn, perched between the foot and the top of Cornell's steepest hill, that I found this promise fulfilled: education in and of life, supported by and yet reaching beyond the institution. At Telluride, where I moved my sophomore year, I engaged in long debates over dinner, spanning mathematics and Middle Eastern politics. I played pool to the tune of perfected piano notes, watching television with biting, intermittent commentary on marriage equality. I worked into the late hours in the library, side-by-side with friends, the gleam of light and heaviness of history keeping us awake as evening turned to morning, prose flowing from my fingers with ease.

Telluride promises to educate through the practice of service, leadership, self-government and deep appreciation of intellect. It bestows upon us, burgeoning adults, responsibilities in which we flourish, flail and also, sometimes, fail. It makes a space in which not only to learn, but also to share and to deliberate. From the cool-headed

communist to the libertarian armed always with Atlas Shrugged, the child of Haitian migrants to the son of Midwestern cherry farmers, the diversity of the house was, more than appreciated, acted upon. House meetings, at time endless, revealed what it meant not to live in but to *practice* democracy. This art, in turn, prepared us to practice democracy more broadly—in our own careers, in a country increasingly split at its red-blue seams.

Telluride in fact became a place of engagement and flourishing for my entire family. My parents took long weekend vacations away from New York City, sipping early morning coffee with our faculty residents. They appreciated the warmth and intellect, young minds who could discuss with ease, whether economic proofs or the best of Archie comics. They felt the spirit of what set Telluride apart, as not only a place to live but a place to practice life.

The purpose of Telluride is to give young generations a space in which to develop intellect and also empathy, to learn to stand up for what they believe in but also how to back-up those with other beliefs. It teaches how to embrace controversy as much as compromise; with service not as charity to others, but a gift in and of itself. And it is through the fostering of relationships within an actual home that we learn these lessons, whether as TASPers or house members or both. Sometimes, I learned through confronting my next-door neighbor when his late-night jam sessions went on to long. Others, I learned from philosophical debates on the origin of values over lemonade on the sprawling porch. Telluride was—and is—a microcosm of the world that we must navigate and manage. It is not always easy, to live with others, whether sharing bathrooms or failing to share political views. Yet the challenge of making a home, a safe space in which to be different and yet one, is the challenge we all face in our conflicted and disparate world.

When I returned to visit Telluride in 2015, I witnessed the same fierce intellect among its residents. Graduate students heatedly discussed the treatment of female students in the sciences over breakfast, as an undergraduate studying psychology taught my toddler son to sing. I found myself transported to my time living in the house, in which we knit our way through discussions, creating lengthy scarves that somehow held the stories of our evenings, voting on everyday decisions that mattered, in that they embodied our democratic practice, no matter how small.

By bestowing responsibility and yet structure, allowing us to take part in its making of history, Telluride gifts its members time to reflect upon education. The weight of tradition cannot be decoupled from the experience of Telluride, that we *in our practice* belong to a tradition of education, within and yet ascending this single institution. The promise of Telluride: to have faith in its students, allowing focus on individual and communal growth.

The practice of Telluride, like the practice of life: to find yourself as an individual and contributing member of society; to balance everyday tasks—whether choosing the color of curtains or budgeting the running of a house—with larger life goals. To have the time, space and company with which to ask life’s biggest questions: What can I do that matters? How can I be fair, honest and just?

As a sociologist, I am often confronted with questions of institutions. Do they reflect culture, or separate from it? Do they act in and of themselves? Grounded in the experience of living in the Telluride community, I believe that the best of institutions (and also very few) provide a culture of practice, do not constrain but rather release us willingly into the unknown. And it is only there, in living and practicing the unknown, that we come to know

our potential as not only residents, but as active citizens of the house, or a city, this country: our world.