

Getting Ahead

By Jiya Patil

At 8:16 AM on Tuesday, I'm still in my car, but I know I shouldn't be. I should be walking into school, and my heart races—the passing period bell is about to ring. Suddenly, I can't help being irritated at the student driver in front of me. And why are the middle schoolers taking so long to get onto the bus? I watch as one of the cars in front of me steers into what seems to be a hidden route. Within the next minute, it's back, and 10 cars ahead of its original spot. Excited by the prospect of this seemingly magical road, I look forward to the next day. Maybe I could wake up even later.

At 12:39, the line begins to form, curving around the metal control fences. The boys dap each other up as a means of subtly pulling each other forward. Some friend groups press themselves against the cafeteria wall, making a line of their own, and it seems faster than the lunch line. People's grumbling stomachs motivate them to push to the front of the line; everyone else is pushing past each other, so why wouldn't I? Today is not the day to get left behind.

Over the years, I've developed a technique of my own. As I slip into the middle of the line, I recite my favorite mantra, "Fill the gaps. Fill the gaps." My nose scrunches, eyebrows furrowing as I move past tall seniors. I stick right next to the fence; if the lunch line were a racetrack, I know I'd be in the lead.

At 2:13, I'm in AP Literature, and we're reading an article titled "The Tragedy of the Commons." My excitement about what sounds like a modern Shakespeare play quickly fades to unease as I realize the true content of the text. My English teacher explains that "the tragedy of the commons explains how overusing a shared resource for personal gain leads to depletion." Lost in thought, I observe how capitalism glorifies individual desire and consumption as a means of climbing hierarchies. My mind races to more examples of how we exploit opportunities to help ourselves, ignoring how it may affect others: cheating on tests to keep up with the class, deforesting trees to expand agriculture, overfishing to maintain eating habits, etc. The tragedy of the "commons" seems to permeate American culture and beliefs, and I can't help but wonder where I fit into everything: does the system make me a winner or a loser?

At 8:23 AM on Wednesday, I'm still in my car, but I'm not worried. I turn off my usual route before swerving back to pass ten cars stuck in traffic. It eases my anxiety, but I feel the weight of the tragedy of the commons in my race to school. I tell myself I'm not abusing resources; I'm just being proactive about finding *new resources*, so it's fine. If getting to school were a race, I would win, and that's all that matters. At 12:39, I make my way to the front of the line at what feels like breakneck speed, pushing past multiple groups rather than just one or two. Today is my day, and in my mind, the score is 2-0 in my favor.

At 2:13, I'm in AP Literature, and we're discussing *Into Thin Air*. I can't fathom how Jon Krakauer and his team could take advantage of the Nepali Sherpas out of their superficial need to climb Mount Everest. Eager to contribute to the Socratic Seminar, I raise my hand. I'm captivated by the narrative Krakauer paints regarding the climb, and I address the point in great detail. "To Jon, mountaineering and being a good mountaineer is a large part of his identity, so accepting the possibility of failure doesn't align with his sense of identity; therefore, instead of accepting his humanity, Jon uses the Sherpas as a means to his end of climbing the mountain. I wonder how much Jon is willing to lie to himself to justify his identity."

At 8:20 on Thursday, I'm late again, so I take my magical route and end up ten cars ahead of where I started. "I'm just being proactive. I'm just being proactive." I mentally repeat the mantra, but I can't help thinking about how Jon Krakauer's irrational need to scale Mount Everest inadvertently devastated both his team and his family. Today, I take a closer look at the ten cars behind me, and it doesn't feel like I'm winning the race. As I look in my rear view mirror, I see ten cars that have been cheated. Behind the wheel, I see someone who had to lie to be a winner, and my heart sinks.

At 12:39, the lunch line looks different to me. As more people push past each other, I notice that they no longer get to the front before the rest of us. The tragedy of the commons has made the power of finding gaps in the line obsolete; I do not doubt that the same thing will happen to my "proactive" path to school as more people discover it.

Slowly, I've realized that the tragedy of the commons is nature's way of forcing each of us to listen to our consciences, a lesson that I hope we all learn earlier rather than later. Instead of continuing to lie to myself, I hope to let my conscience guide me away from engaging with this tragedy. By choosing not to feed into it, I might ensure my status as a loser to some, but I'm no longer willing to win the race if I have to cheat to get to the front.

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