

BYSTANDER IMPACT

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I CAN'T LOOK AWAY



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Where Isn't The Fire

If I told you this essay was about wildfires, would you even care? Be honest. What was once a hot button topic is now yesterday's news. Except for the small fact that wildfires are not yesterday's news. They are a life altering event for most people who survive them. Wildfires are a course altering event for the ecosystems in which they occur. Also, with each scorched acre, these fires are each more historic than the last .

According to FEMA, a wildfire is an unplanned, unwanted fire burning in a natural area, such as a forest, grassland, or prairie. Most of the time they are started by human interaction either intentionally or accidentally. However, they can be caused by natural events like a lightning bolt. Wildfires are dangerous as they damage and/or destroy natural resources, human life, and property.

Although we like to think of wildfires as "a California thing", they are happening everywhere. The wildfires of 2024 were a wake up call to the country that none of us are immune from wildfires. In late February 2024, a series of wildfires broke out in Texas which are now referred to as 2024 Texas wildfires. These were a series of fires that debilitated Texas. These fires include the Smokehouse Creek Fire which burned around 1.1 million acres, making Texas history. This fire burned the span of over 13,000 football fields. 2024 was a big wake up call to New Jersey as several fires broke out throughout the state. Most of these fires were due to the unseasonably dry conditions New Jersey faced throughout the year. New Jersey fire officials have claimed that in 2024 11,000 acres burned in the state. The normal average is 4,000 acres for the state of New Jersey.

In Los Angeles county the year started off with bang. On January 7th, two historic wildfires started burning: The Palisades Fire and the Eaton Fire. Both of these fires are around 95-95% contained. As of January 26, 2025, 11 people lost their lives in the Palisades Fire and 17 people in the Eaton Fire. As firefighters have battled those fires many others started popping up around the areas such as the Laguna Fire which is 100% contained as of January 26, 2025. These fires have rocked the Southern California community leaving many homeless and forced to start over.

We know that it is easier said than done for people to just "start over " after a wildfire. Hawaii still has a long way to go to recover from the Lahaina fires of 2023. The plan to rebuild Lahaina will take years and that is if everything goes according to plan. Currently, the Hawaiian State Government is trying to pass a bill to help speed up the process for rebuilding affordable housing. However, even if lawmakers can get Senate Bill 1170 to pass, housing cannot be built overnight. It will take years to complete the affordable housing project alone. There are still schools, businesses, medical centers and more that need to be planned, paid for and built. Hawaii Senator Angus McKelvey was quoted, "This is something that's being done very carefully, but we've got to speed this up because we are now facing a huge ton of other pressures coming in because of Los Angeles." This is because we still treat disaster relief like something we use once every ten years. On the contrary, disaster relief is needed several times every year.

Wildfires are unfortunately a part of our new normal. This is a climate issue and a social issue but it is not a moral issue. The victims of wildfires are not to blame for their suffering. We should not politicize wildfires - we should not politicize any weather phenomenon. The same way we need money for roads, for the military , is the same way we need disaster relief. Yes, we need to do more to prevent wildfires by improving our actions within our environment. We also need to accept that natural disasters - wildfires, hurricanes, floods etc -are going to happen. We need to change our mindsets to be aware, prepared, and accepting of our current volatile reality.

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**THERE WAS A
WILDFIRE
TODAY**

The People of Fire

When you think of protesting you may imagine picket signs and large crowds such as the Black Lives Matter Protest of 2020. Those protests had spanned the nation for weeks in reaction to George Floyd's murder. Maybe you'll think of something more intense such as the LA Riots where there was intense violence throughout the city of Los Angeles. Those days of rioting were a reaction to the recorded beating of Rodney King. Perhaps you'll think of the encampments from the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 which lasted two months. This was a protest of endurance to protest the economy and the greed that lead to millions being unemployed and unhoused. It is clear that the way people protest is in direct relation with how powerful the cause is. Which is the reasoning why some protests are considered more extreme than other. However, the most extreme form of protest is one in which few rarely live to share their experience of it.

Self immolation is thought to be the most extreme form of protest. Self Immolation, the act of setting oneself on fire, is most often used as an extreme act of protest. Self immolation is becoming more common in American Citizens. I think our refusal to talk about is telling of the weight of the violence that we Americans have become numb too.

The first American to commit self immolation on record, was 82, a peace activist, a refugee of Nazism who was protesting the bombing in Vietnam. Her name was Alice Herz, it was 1965 and history was made. The next person was Norman Morrison , who set himself a blaze outside of the Pentagon. He was 31 and was also against the US military involvement in Vietnam. While some sources say dozens of people committed self immolation to protest the Vietnam war through the 1960-1970s it doesn't make it any less tragic.

The Vietnam War sent shockwaves through the American psyche. This was for many reasons including the uncalled for brutality that was demonstrated throughout the war. Techniques used throughout the Vietnam war lead to genocides, permanent and irreversible damage to communities and ecosystems and left many distrustful of their government. Yet, we do not talk about the Vietnam War and the damage and sacrifices that were made much like we do not talk about self immolation and the damage and sacrifice that are made. This should be something we don't stop talking about, something that is forever looming over our heads. Instead, it is another thing we have decided to look past as if it means nothing .

It is clear that one of the goals of the mass deportations under the 2nd Trump Administration is to increase the amount of prisoners. This is because slavery is legal for the imprisoned. However, we cannot understate how cruel this all is. To purposefully create a loophole to continue an inhumane practice is cruel. To profit off of that is cruel. To purposefully cause international instability in nations to increase immigration is cruel. To persecute those who are forced to immigrate here because the instability you caused is cruel. The cruelty of this system is the point. The way the 2nd Trump Administration talks about prisoners and immigrants as if they deserve the cruelty they are subjected to - that is a part of the system.

In protest of the Genocide in Gaza several people in The US self immolated. An unknown woman in Atlanta, Georgia was the first recorded on US soil for this issue. She was found dead from her injuries. Serviceman Aaron Bushnell who live streamed his as he stood out the Embassy of Israel shouting "Free Palestine" is the most recognized. He died only hours after.

On September 11, 2024 Matt Nelson in front of the Israeli consulate in Boston - he set himself on fire. He died days after. Samuel Mena Jr ommitted self immolation in front of the a white House - he survived.

To deny the parallels between the Genocide in Gaza and the ones that took place under the Vietnam War is to deny reality. To ignore the fact that we have been here before and rather recently is a disservice to our community. It is a shameful act that will be used to point out how Americans society was complacent in tragedy. America didn't create Israel , Great Britain did. America didn't start the Vietnam War, France did. But, in both situations it is America who plays the role of increasing conflict and ultimately making the situation worse by being complacent.

Both, the Vietnam War and the ongoing Genocide in Gaza can be defined by the way they divide Americans. A majority of Americans see these atrocities as business as usual for America. Whereas for others, these are radicalizing events that alter their lives. A large reason for this is because both the Genocide in Gaza and the Vietnam War allowed access to what is actually happening that has not been seen before by the public. Reports of the deaths, of the bombings , recordings of new technologies made to destroy - all of this is information Americans did not have in prior conflicts. That information is causing division within the American society that will take generations to bridge.

Self immolation is becoming more common as more people cannot stand by and watch these terrors unfold. Unfortunately, this extreme protest is not just limited to war conflicts. In 1972 Willie B. Phillips, a Vietnam War veteran and organizer of Southern Christian Leadership Conference committed self immolation at 27 years old. It has been reported that his was a protest for civil rights in America. In April 2018, David Buckel and then In 2022 Wynn Alan Bruce both self immolated due to our destruction of the environment causing climate change. In 2024 , at least 6 prisoners set themselves on fire to protest the inhumane conditions of Virginia's prisons.

I think it is important we understand that the wave of self immolation that we are seeing is not new in America. Also that self immolation is not just a form of suicide but it is an act of protest. It is the most desperate cry for help we as humans have been able to use. As we continue our complacency over issues such as climate change, wealth inequality, civil rights we are accepting that this will continue to happen. That more people will feel forced to make the ultimate sacrifice as they beg for change. It is important that we understand that our numbness to this is not normal. That our carry on mindset is ensuring that what divides us will become harder to acknowledge and even harder to to bridge.

Self immolation is not glorious or something to sweep under the rug. It is something we must talk about and face as a society. We have to decide at this moment who we are and what we stand for.

It will take us stepping away from our individualistic mindsets. It will take serious and thoughtful intervention from us to put an end to use of such extreme measures. No one wants to live in a world of extremes. Yet, if we keep being complacent we will. We all will be subject to the extreme consequences of our inaction. You may not be the one setting yourself on fire but, you won't be able to escape the flames that come for us all.

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GLOSSARY

Glossary for Where Isn't The Fire/ People of The Fire

- Wildfire : A wildfire is an unplanned, uncontrolled fire burning vegetation in natural areas like forests, grasslands, or rural areas, often fueled by dry conditions, wind, and heat, and can threaten communities and infrastructure.
- Self-Immolation : the action of setting fire to oneself, especially as a form of protest or sacrifice.
- Protest: a statement or action expressing disapproval of or objection to something.
- Mutual Aid: organizational model where voluntary, collaborative exchanges of resources and services for common benefit take place amongst community members to overcome social, economic, and political barriers to meeting common needs.
- Community: a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.
- Genocide: the deliberate and systematic killing or persecution of a large number of people from a particular national or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that nation or group.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Luther Bravo |

I am a communicator of ideas big and small, abstract and concrete. I use different mediums to tell stories and share ideas that are often overlooked. My main goal is to be a consistent reminder of our interconnectedness.

Taylor Louise | Story Therapy

I am a storyteller and lover of stories. I help you publish your manuscripts and writing projects. I guide you through a dedicated curriculum of workshopping, beta reading, and editing to ensure that your work is the best it can possibly be. We are all writers at heart, we often just need a push. Story Therapy is that push.

Ka'Lia Zahir |

I'm a self taught digital artist/ graphic designer . I have been creating for as long as I can remember. I enjoy making art that helps others feel seen. I want my art to express the things that often go unspoken. My main goal is to create work that is impactful to those who view it whether that be emotionally or politically.

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