

UNRAVELED

Introduction

Good evening! Welcome to Baylor and to the Honors College! It's wonderful to be here with you tonight to talk with you about *Unraveled*, the book you read for the Freshman Reading Book Project. You know, it's a book that made me, in preparing for tonight, have to think carefully not only about what to *say* to you; it also made me have to think carefully about what I would *wear*. So, you should know that I purchased what I'm wearing at a local secondhand shop—of which Waco has many. They're worth checking out. Of course, as Bédát says, better not to buy at all. But if you're going to buy clothing, better secondhand.

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In explaining what her book was about in a recent interview, this is how Maxine Bédát described it: *Unraveled* tries to show how “the story of our clothing helps explain the story of our world.” And that's true. But what I also found myself thinking as I read is that this isn't just the story of our *world* and how it got to be the way it is. It's a story, most basically, about *what it means to be human*. Bédát herself doesn't always spell this out; this aspect of the book, I think, is more implicit than explicit.

So, tonight, I want to make it explicit. I want to try to bring to the surface why I think *Unraveled* is also story about what it means to be human. And to be even more specific: I want to examine *Unraveled* as a story about three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: about how we relate to ourselves; about how we relate to one another—and here I'm thinking especially about who counts (and who does not count) as human, as worthy of dignity; and finally, it's a story about how we relate to the common home we share with one another, and with other creatures: with water, soil, and the wider created world that we depend upon.

So, in my talk tonight, I want to focus especially upon what the book has to say about what it means to be human in light of those three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: (1) to ourselves, (2) to one another, and (3) to creation.

Preliminaries

But before that, let me begin with two preliminary points. First: the injustices Bédât describes pervade many other industries we depend upon besides clothing. In short, the problem is much, much bigger than clothing alone. For instance, I have an extensive background in agriculture. And I can tell you that the story Bédât tells about clothing is very similar to the one I would tell about agriculture—and it's also the story about many other industries. My point is that in addressing the way our clothing or food—or any industry—is implicated in injustice, having a broader perspective is important. For instance, my work focuses on the Catholic social teaching tradition, and the current pope, Pope Francis, often talks about the problems Bédât is describing in terms of what he calls a “throwaway culture.” What he means by this is not only that we have a whole industrial system that produces waste products that don't get absorbed and reused, and so get thrown away—often into water or land or air—or shipped to other countries. He also means that we have a whole industrial system that *throws away people* as well, that treats them as if they were garbage. My point is that keeping in mind how the issues Bédât describes relate to this much larger problematic is crucial.

My second preliminary point is that if, after reading *Unraveled* you're overwhelmed, and if despite the recommendations she gives in the last chapter, you still don't know exactly what to do, or how to begin—or really, if you even want to—let me just say: that's normal and understandable. Don't get me wrong: I think it would be good for us to do the things that Bédât describes: to change the ways we purchase and the companies we support; to regret our excess consumption; to not shop as much, and when we do shop, to shop secondhand; to be citizens and use our voices to reshape

the clothing industry and other industries like it. All this is good. But it's hard. It's not easy. It requires a lot of effort—perhaps too much to expect of most people.

So, if you're someone who has a hunger and thirst for justice and who's on fire to change the world—and I suspect that there are many of you among us—I'd encourage patience, and even compassion, for those happy with the world as it is. One of my intellectual heroes is Peter Maurin (he was a co-founder of the Catholic Worker with Dorothy Day). And something Maurin always used to say is: "We must make the kind of society where it's easier for people to be good." Let me say that again: *We must make the kind of society where it's easier for people to be good.* In other words, we should have a clothing industry that didn't implicate us all in so much injustice. It should be easier than it is to be good and to clothe ourselves in ways that don't damage people and the planet. It shouldn't be as hard as it is.

Three Fundamental and Intertwined Relationships

With those preliminaries in mind, let's return to what I said at the outset about how *Unraveled* is a story about what it means to be human, a story about our relationship to ourselves, to one another, and to the world.

It's pretty clear that, at least as Bedát tells it, the clothing industry thinks of us—and wants us to think of ourselves—primarily as consumers. Actually, it's probably more accurate to say *you*. The industry wants to encourage and deepen *your* desire to consume more and more clothing (studies have shown that the target audience for many fast fashion retailers is consumers aged 18 to 24). And the reason it wants you—and me—to consume more is fairly simple: the clothing companies themselves are in the business of maximizing profit, and in order for them to make as much profit as possible, they need people to consume as much clothing as possible (see 27).

As Bédard tells us, in recent decades, the clothing industry, like many other industries, has even tried to persuade us that by buying certain brands or products that are labeled ethical or sustainable, we can actually make the world a better place—but notice: we do this *as consumers* (97). In other words, companies now include care for people and the planet in the price of the things they sell us. And we're made to believe that it's through our consumption that we enact that care.

In these and other ways, I think *Unraveled* raises fundamental questions about what it means to be human and the degree to which being a consumer is essential to who we are as humans.

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But *Unraveled* isn't just about who we are and our relation to ourselves. It's also about who others are for us are and how we relate to them—and especially about who counts—and who doesn't count—as human, as worthy of dignity. For in purchasing clothing, we're in relation to those who make what we wear. And as Bédard shows, that relationship is a pretty problematic one. The circumstances and working conditions of many in this industry are pretty dehumanizing and degrading. Recall Bédard's description of (the mostly female) garment workers in Bangladesh: “the workers on the cutting and sewing floors are machines,” she writes, “producing garments at an unthinkable pace” (61). “Each worker,” she continues later, “*became as close to a machine as is humanly possible*, executing the same task with great intensity and precision more than one thousand times a day” (64). All of which of course raises the question, “*Are humans meant to be machines?*” (61). For me, probably the most gut-wrenching episode of the whole book—and a vivid display of how such work dehumanizes people—was Bédard's visit to the home of Rima, one of those workers. When Bédard asks Rima about her hopes for her future, do you remember what Rima says? “I have no dreams for me.”

I think it's important to point out that there are people like Rima who are dehumanized and exploited in this way because the clothing industry hasn't yet found a way to mechanize their part of

the production process. Once it does, people like Rima will probably be discarded, treated like garbage, because this is how the throwaway culture works.

In telling these and other stories, Bédard is making explicit something that's more often implicit: that our economy depends upon poverty. Our economy relies upon poverty, or the threat of people like Rima falling into worse poverty, in order to force people like Rima to take jobs that they otherwise wouldn't take if they actually had the choice. Who would freely choose to be a machine if they had other options? Would you?

If we think about it all, we often tell ourselves that taking such jobs is for the good of people like Rima, that it's better for her to have a job than not have one, that such jobs are the path out of poverty for people in places like Bangladesh. But less often do we admit that it's for our good as well. *We* like the relationship on these terms because we like the cheap things that people like Rima—and so many others like Rima—produce. The cheap consumer items and services we enjoy depend upon people like her. We might not think much about the relationships like this in which we're involved. Honestly, it's hard to think about it much. I certainly don't like thinking about it. But the truth is we are involved. When we thoughtlessly purchase cheap consumer items and services, we're in relationship to people like Rima.

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Finally—and I'll just say this briefly—*Unraveled* is also clearly about our relationship to the wider created order and our place in it. Bédard describes the extraordinary damage our consumption does to the world: to the land that's degraded in growing the cotton, to the rivers and waterways into which the textile effluent flows, to the atmosphere that receives the pollutants and carbon associated with production and transportation of clothing. As I read her, Bédard is basically showing us that we're treating the world in two main ways: as a store of raw materials from which to extract what we want, and as a trash can to receive our waste.

Vision of the Human

We've been examining the story *Unraveled* tells, and I've been arguing that the book raises fundamental questions about what it means to be human, and how we relate to ourselves, to one another, and the world. In the final chapter, Bédard touches upon this a bit when she discusses the different roles we play in society, arguing that we shouldn't just be consumers, like the clothing industry wants us to be, but that our more powerful and pleasurable role is as citizens (231). And she emphasizes the crucial role of advocacy in getting companies to change their ways (239).

But when I say that the book is a story about what it means to be human, I mean something more fundamental than being a citizen and an advocate—as important as those are. I mean that the ways we clothe ourselves implies a practical response—in our own lives—to what it means to be human: in this case, that we are above all consumers, that those who make our clothes aren't fully human (or at least human in the way we are), and that the wider created world is really just a source of raw material and a trash can. At least as Bédard describes it, this simply is the clothing industry's vision of what it means to be human. The extent to which we participate in the industry is the extent to which it's part of our vision as well.

So, for those of us who do participate in this industry—or in the countless other industries like it—among the most important questions we can ask ourselves are: is this really our vision? Is our purpose on this planet primarily to consume? And if it isn't, what is our purpose, and how does our consumption of clothing and other things fit into that purpose? Are those who make our clothing (and other things we rely upon) human in the same way we are? And if we think they are, what does that demand from us? What would be necessary for Rima's work to be more like work we would want to do, for her to have more choices than either to become a machine or to face starvation, for her to have dreams for herself? And finally: is the world really given to us to mine and

pollute it as we currently do? If it isn't, what is the world and our place within it, and what does the earth require of us? What responsibilities do we have to care for the natural sources of human, and indeed, all creaturely life—for our waters, our lands, our forests, our air? In short, we need to be asking ourselves: if it's not what Bédard describes, then what should human life should look like, and what kind of life best expresses not only who we are, but what others and the world are to us?

In one of my classes this semester, we're looking at the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, one of the most well-known saints in all of Christian history—and a profound example of how clothing can mediate a very different vision of what it means to be human than the one Bédard describes.

Francis lived in the thirteenth century in Italy, and his parents were originally going to name him Giovanni (or John). But Francis's father, a wealthy cloth merchant, was so impressed with the luxurious and expensive fabrics he bought back from a trip to France that he decided to name the child Francis instead—after the splendid fabrics of France. It seemed as though Francis's life trajectory was set. But gradually, through his encounters with lepers and other impoverished, marginalized people, Francis's heart changed, and he began to use his family's wealth to address the poverty around him. Needless to say, his father wasn't pleased and even demanded that Francis return to him everything his father had given him. And Francis did. He publicly—and very famously—stripped himself of everything, including the clothing he was wearing, and returned it all to his father—a gesture which was like a symbolic rejection of the privileges, responsibilities, *and the clothing* that came with his birth as the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. After that, Francis and his followers began to wear simple clothing, almost identical to what poor, rural workers wore. This was another symbolic gesture, meant to show Francis and his followers' solidarity with those on the margins of social life. If you read the accounts of Francis's life, there are numerous stories of him taking his own clothing and giving it to lepers, to beggars, and to people suffering from the cold.

The questions I raised above about what it means to be human are large and difficult questions, and Francis's answer to them, I imagine, will likely not be your answer. But I will say: these are questions we can't avoid. They're inescapable for all of us. That means: if we don't answer them for ourselves—and if we don't do the work of putting our answers into practice—then others will be happy to offer answers for us. The clothing and other industries are ready to do so. And their answers to the question of the human will become our answers.

Fortunately for you, you're in a perfect place to discover different answers to these questions. It's no exaggeration to say that Baylor is filled with people who have reflected deeply on what it means to be human, on the good life, and on how we should relate to one another and the common home we share. The Honors College is especially filled with them—with people who can teach you about how some of the most brilliant minds in history have answered the question of the human. The Honor's College is filled with people who can accompany you in discovering your own answers and what it means to stand by those answers. If you look, you'll find faculty, staff, and classmates with whom you can discuss, debate, and discern about these matters—and even pray about them. Being a student is a unique time in your life to struggle with these fundamental questions. My unsolicited advice to you is: take advantage of this time. Don't throw it away.