

## Whooshing Up: Can America Be Moral?

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In his classic novel East Of Eden, John Steinbeck gives us an unlikely moralist and Bible scholar in the character of Mr. Lee. As you heard in the reading earlier, the Chinese cook recounts his two year process of deliberation regarding the meaning of the Hebrew word *timshel* in Genesis.

He ultimately settles on the definition, “Thou *mayest* rule over sin.” “It might be the most important word in the world,” he argues. “For it says the way is open and throws it back on a person. For if “thou mayest” – it is also true that “thou mayest not.”

As a minister, I am often asked: “What does it mean to be good?” “What do you think about evil?” I believe my response would have resonated with Mr. Lee. We are born with free will and the way is open. Therefore, we must choose, in every moment of every day, in even our smallest actions, to co-create with positive forces in the Universe or to co-destroy with negative ones.

This notion of choice – thou “mayest” or “mayest not” -- lay at the very core of both our American society and our liberal UU religion. This relative latitude to choose is both awesome and horrible at once. It begs the question: How do we *know, or learn*, moral behavior and how to exercise our moral freedom in a postmodern society and creedless religious tradition? What instincts might we cultivate, what skills might we strive to hone and pass on to our children regarding ethical decision-making, especially now, in the moral wreckage of the Trump Presidency?

More so, if we are to embrace, and genuinely nurture moral freedom in America, how will we arrive at some common ground about the meaning of such slippery terms as “virtue” and “ethics?” When it comes to “right” and “wrong,” “moral” and “immoral” is a consensus

at the crossroad even a possibility? And if it isn't, how do we co-exist in this country in 2021, a nation of Proud Boys and BLM activists, in which fellow citizens consider *virtuous* what we would define as the starkest *evil*, and *visa versa*?

From the time we crawled out of the primordial ooze or, if you prefer, from the third day of Creation hence, the question of right vs. wrong has vexed, captivated, and engaged humanity. In his book, How Good Do We Have to Be,? the Rabbi Harold Kushner speculates that people from the Judeo-Christian traditions have attempted for centuries to re-create the Garden of Eden by temporarily going back to a time before we knew the difference between right and wrong, good and evil; a time when we could behave like children, like animals, doing what we felt like doing and not being held responsible for our actions because we could not be expected to know better.

But there is no going back to Eden. We've both decimated it and outgrown it. We reside Steinbeck country, East of Eden; not a paradise, but rather an undulating landscape of temptations and choices, the ridiculous, the cruel, and the sublime. We are human beings, blessed and burdened with a conscience, and we cannot pretend to be naïve children, no matter how much of an escape hatch or a lark that might provide. It would amount to what Christians call "cheap grace."

Rabbi Kushner concludes, and I agree with him, that, for the most part, human beings *want* to be held accountable as moral beings, rather than being treated like clueless children or Neanderthals who can't grasp the concepts of right and wrong. The internet, Twitter, QAnon...they've made this more difficult, but I stand by my premise.

Jesus may have uttered on the cross, "Forgive them Father for they know not what they've done," but I, for one, do not believe anyone (including the Pharisees or our former President and his minions) deserve such a "Get out of moral jail free" card.

In the civilized modern world, most folks recognize at least the *option* of cultivating virtue in their lives. Yet, this word "virtue" is a

slippery one. In writing his book, Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice, (written back in 2001) scholar Alan Wolfe argues that America is moving from “time-tested moral rules” into an age in which “individuals are expected to determine for themselves what it means to lead a good and virtuous life.”

Wolfe is not entirely comfortable with these developments. Are you? He notes that the economic liberty of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led not to “independent yeomen” but “a regime of mass consumption;” and that the political freedom of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, far from creating “enlightened civic participation,” instead brought “voter apathy” and toxic individualism.

Wolfe worries, too, that moral freedom will not produce an age of serious moral judgment, but rather one of increased murkiness and ambivalence. And we see where we’ve come to in the past 20 years. Wolfe’s hunch was spot on. A case in point -- when Wolfe asked Americans of all stripes to define the term “virtue” and to define the term “vice,” the success rate with the latter word was substantially higher. Defining virtue turned out to be surprisingly and uniformly difficult.

When we consult the dictionary regarding virtue (and find that it means moral excellence and moral behavior with an efficacious benefit to society) our dilemma unfolds. In every case, the issue of moral subjectivity arises. This thicket of ethical relativism ties back to landmark events such as September 11<sup>th</sup>, in which we see the divide clearly articulated by both sides: “ My country’s agents are righteous, they have virtue; your agents are terrorists, they lack virtue.” Moral smoke and mirrors -- unnerving, isn’t it?

On the other hand, some scholars fret that in a society without widespread belief in God and increasingly without a shared set of common cultural values, there is a potential for nihilism, that is the rejection of all moral principles to the point where nothing matters. In our post-truth society, I see this too and it scares me.

In their book entitled All Things Shining, professors Sean Kelly and Hubert Dreyfus, note that in the past, people had relatively few existential choices to make because a system of beliefs was reinforced by social hierarchy and respect for civil order; but today, a burdening crush of choices and an air of mayhem have left many of us marooned between the island of external influences and the mainland of our innate wisdom and goodness. [Writing in Harvard Magazine, Jonathan Shaw explains that,] “This predicament, this dilemma of choice, seems inevitable, but in fact it's quite new. In medieval Europe, God's calling was a grounding force.”

In ancient Greece, a whole pantheon of shining gods stood ready to draw an appropriate action out of you. Like an athlete in “the zone,” you were called to a harmonious attunement with the world, so absorbed in it that you couldn't make a “wrong” choice. Shaw continues: “This ability to live at the surface, to take the events of daily life with the meanings they present rather than to seek their hidden purpose, to find happiness and joy in what there already is derives its root in not just a pre-Christian age, but a pre-Buddhist, pre-Platonic, pre-Hinduist, and pre-Confucian one as well. Let's just say, that the concept has been around awhile but its gone a bit astray.”

Nevertheless, Professor Kelly believes (and I agree) that it is possible to train our characters to respond reflexively during meaningful moments in life. His book draws on the traditional canon of Western literature, from Homer to Dante to Melville's Moby Dick, as a means of laying out a solution to the problem of contemporary nihilism: the cultivation of a knowledge or understanding so deep that when the need to choose is called for—however unexpectedly—its possessors will act correctly almost without thinking, drawing from their community or cultural heritage the knowledge of what to do.

He calls this process “**whooshing up**”...a communal, sacred phenomenon that is as close as we might get to what the ancient Greeks admired and cultivated. Kelly argues, perceptively and sadly (I

would say), that one of the few such sacred or “whoosh” moments left in modern life occurs, he says, when a crowd rises spontaneously to cheer a great play in a sports arena. Most people can identify with that reaction, and he hopes awareness of this visceral understanding can lead to the development of other kinds of consequential, shared experiences....or whoosh moments of something deeper...like virtue .

In a fundamentalist milieu, these whoosh moments are often quite circular. Biblical prescriptions, Islamic Shariah law, conservative Christianity, Orthodox Judaism – in each case, they offer moral simplicity and clear-cut, if often contradictory, ethical rubrics for daily living. Even so, there is no free will “mayest” in these milieus. It’s one way or the highway – straight to hell, the executioner’s sword, the torture chamber, and the gulag. Under the Taliban, women who had been professionals were stoned in the streets for leaving their homes without a male escort.

A mob invading and desecrates the US Capitol, Abortion clinics are picketed and bombed. A young gay man is made a sacrificial scarecrow on a Wyoming rail fence. A black teen with a pocketful of Skittles is shot dead in a Florida subdivision. Activists fighting fascism are labeled “antifa” and considered subversive.

Although “evil” in broad-brushed capital letters is too often and too easily heralded as the enemy of folks with fundamentalist views, I’d argue that moral complexity is the real nemesis of Americans who crave simplistic, no-muss-or-fuss ethics for everyone. Conservative Christians generally do not believe that Americans should be free to live as they choose, especially when they choose what evangelists consider sinful: homosexuality, for example, or reproductive choice.

However, in his book, Wolfe exposes the irony that, “evangelists are often people who reject the religion of their upbringing, opt for start up churches and prefer to home-school their kids, giving them more in common than they realize with gays and lesbians who have redefined marriage and family and founded houses of worship that serve their

own spiritual needs.” Of course, as we’ve heard many times from the hatemongering ilk, “immorality” is considered synonymous with liberalism, because inherent in the liberal voice is the notion of “mayest.”

To be religious or political or moral liberally is to face the task of discernment and the responsibility of choice. For when we choose to embrace the moral complexity in our world, we must examine not only the many options for ethical decision making, but we must also confront our own inner moral complexity. In doing so, we agree to grapple with our capacity to make not only good moral choices, but also bad ones, with alarming regularity.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I consider this call towards reflection and wrestling with our demons a gift rather than a curse. As I see it, we either chafe under the weight of codified moral codes in our society or else demonstrate a willingness to become unfettered, but skilled ethicists in even our smallest actions.

Virtues are instincts to be cultivated and activated, not techniques which are taught; the difference, for example, between living our UU Principles and merely memorizing them or reciting them on Sunday morning. Yet virtues, unlike skills, also engage the will. If someone accuses me of unjust behavior, I cannot *excuse* myself by saying “Oh, I did it *deliberately*,” as if its sophisticated or clever to be immoral.

Case in point...have you watched the TV series, *Dexter*? OK. You know where I’m going here. This immensely popular series has prompted protest from parents groups and concerned television watchers because, in their view, the show is "celebrating murder". So, is this award-winning series morally ambiguous? Well, yes, of course it is, being as it's about a serial killer of serial killers. He is a vigilante cleansing the streets of those he disagrees with. But the vigilante is a forensic police blood splatter expert with a chainsaw, so it's not exactly aspirational. It's not being shown after Sesame Street, and it's not part of some career planning evening, so hopefully that's not what people

are going to take away from it.

I think that most people coming to the show would know that serial killing is bad already, helped in no small part by all those other shows that have told them so, over, and over, and over again. And even Dexter knows that serial killing is wrong. He is after all killing the killers. By doing bad things to bad people, he is, he thinks, in some way doing good. Sadly, two wrongs don't make a right, they make a lot of death and blood and bits of guts all over the floor. But we can't just produce and watch television that represents the shiny and the nice in the human spirit. We can't always be galloping behind the guys in the white hats, and cheering every single time they save the day. I can't preach a sermon every week that is a warm bath in a cold world.

Moral ambiguity is one of the ways that media and culture can challenge its audience. It is holding up a mirror and asking them how much they understand or condone the action being taken. For us religious liberals, the tool box for our apprenticeship in virtuous living is characteristically unorthodox (including TV shows like Dexter). We can not pick up any old hammer or wrench and expect it to aid us in the construction of a postmodern morality.

Even though we know better, our distinctly American faith tradition is unfairly impugned, at times, as being disinterested in moral or theological discourse merely because we've cast off the shackles of convention. Sometimes this can be amusing, for example, I recall an episode of Fox TV's "The Simpsons" in which young Bart was playing a "religious" video game with some fundamentalist friends. Apparently, the object was to strike a "heathen" with a ray of God's love and convert him to Jesus. Bart "hits" a suspect heathen and exclaims, "I got one!" The friend says, "No, you just winged him and made him a Unitarian."

In truth, the intentional cultivation of conscience, reason, and tolerance is and has always been a central activity for Unitarian

Universalists. William Ellery Channing went so far as to argue that the development of human conscience heightened our likeness to God.

On a practical level, our seven UU principles, broad though they are, provide us with a working hypothesis for whooshing up. And though our principles appear most often as statements, they can also be creatively recast as the ethical and moral questions to hold before us as we go about our daily rounds. A colleague pointed out to me that the lifelong search for truth and meaning lays at the midpoint of the seven principles, between the individual and interdependence.

It follows then, that after stating “I affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” the next step is to ask yourself: “Is there any person whom I have disrespected? Am I in right relation to all people?” It’s all well and good to “affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” Yet, upon further self-reflection, we must ask: “What have I done today to promote peace, understanding and freedom throughout the world and in my own corner of the world?”

Sure! It’s a no-brainer to “affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.” Then take it a step further. “How have you personally reduced the negative impact of living on this planet?”

There are no easy fixes, no pat formulas, no fool-proof recipes for morality. As we decide “mayest” or “mayest not,” moment by moment, we must ask ourselves: “Am I using my moral freedom, my reason, my conscience, all of the ethical tools at my disposal responsibly?” As we join together in a new chapter for America, we must be willing to challenge ourselves with the question: Can I be instigator of courageous living? Can I follow some fairly straightforward concepts like “Love Thy neighbor” and “Return to no person evil for evil.” Am I whooshing up or have I become ambivalent and marooned?

We have been given an opportunity with the advent of this new administration to reset the moral and ethical machinery of our country and UUs can be an important voice in that project. Friends, this quest



is so sacred and so dire, because as the Rev. Robbie Walsh tells us, “If nothing is settled, then everything matters. Every choice, every act, every word, every deed is making the meaning of your life and telling the story of the world.”

Here, East of Eden in a postmodern, pandemic afflicted and morally weary, but hopeful and resourceful America, there is no lone Tree of Knowledge sunlit in the garden. We reside in a dappled forest of relative freedom where we are blessed and we are challenged by choice. “Thou mayest” and “thou mayest not.”

What will be the meaning of your life? Think on these things and choose wisely. Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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