

Ethical Living in a Moral Desert

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I come to you, today, from a different world and a different time. I was raised in the Appalachian Mountains of western Maryland. Though they seem little more than foothills to people familiar with the Rockies, the mountains of my home are steeped in history. It was across those mountain trails that General Braddock and his army of British regulars and colonial militia marched to disaster in the French and Indian Wars. This is a place where stories are still told about Hessian mercenaries, taken prisoner by the Continental Army who settled down in the fertile valleys to make a life for themselves after the Revolutionary War was over. Those with sharp ears may still hear the ghostly sounds of Civil War armies tramping back and forth across the landscape. And, of course, this haunted world is rich in stories of family feuds and generations-long vendettas. It is a different world.

When I was a child in those shadowed and haunted mountains, I lived for a while in a house that had no running water, no indoor plumbing, no central heating. When I was a child, any trip to another city would be undertaken by bus, and then only after weeks of careful planning. A trip by train was a luxury beyond our imagining and civilian air travel was little more than fantasy. Insulated in our mountain valley, the outside world came to us mostly by newsprint or radio. It was a different time.

In those far-off times, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president of the United States of America. Roosevelt had always been president and always would be president. Under his leadership, we were engaged in a vast global struggle between the forces of evil and the forces of good. There was never any question in our minds about where virtue resided. God was on our side and our side struggled for all that was moral and ethical and good and true and right.

I do not want to engage in a relentless bout of nostalgia, suggesting that the world of my childhood was a better world or that those times offer a standard of unremitting good. In truth, there was much injustice that went unrecognized and unaddressed in that world and in those times. In those days, American citizens of Japanese descent were locked into concentration camps. In those days, women were severely limited in the opportunities afforded them, even in the midst of a war that made increasing demands upon them. In those days, gay men and lesbian women were so firmly closeted we didn't even have a language to discuss them. In those days, African-Americans and other minority groups had only the rights and opportunities a fickle public opinion might grant from time to time, and lived in constant fear of quasi-legal violence and persistent prejudice. And the social safety net for the poor and the marginalized—a safety net we, in our time, seem so intent on shredding—was then only in rudimentary shape.

But there was this about those times. We knew, beyond any doubt, that there was in this universe an objective moral and ethical standard by which all of us were expected to live our lives. This was a time when the slogan "crime does not pay" seemed an abiding truth rather than a cynical remark. This was a time when faith that we were on the side of truth and right was a bone-deep conviction rather than a political

ploy. We knew that the standards enshrined in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount were eternally right and that all of existence was to be judged by them. What is more, we were convinced that our system of government, our laws, the moral standards by which we were expected to conduct our lives all were extrapolations from those fundamental and unchanging truths.

I was shaped by that world and those times, and that world and those times still haunt my attempts to understand and function in the twenty-first century.

But something happened to that world. Franklin Roosevelt died. The war to make the world safe for democracy was concluded successfully (if any war is ever successful), its success shadowed by mushroom clouds rising over two incinerated cities. And, in the aftermath of this great war to make the world safe for democracy, the world seemed even less safe. People who had lived on the margins of our society began to stir and suggest that our vision of truth and right did not fully cohere with the way we actually lived and ordered our society. Our enlarged role in the global community forced us to consider the possibility that our vision of truth and right might not be the only viable vision.

Oscar Hammerstein caught the spirit of this era when he wrote these words for the King of Siam in the musical *The King and I*:

When I was a lad
World was better spot;
What was so was so,
What was not was not.
Now I am a man,
World have changed a lot;
Some things nearly so,
Others, nearly not!

In response to persistent challenges to this best of all possible worlds in which we lived, we were driven to reexamine some of our assumptions about the nature of ultimate truth. Unable to ignore the fact that some people saw the world differently, and that some people drew different conclusions about what constitutes ethical and moral living, we sought a new understanding of the nature of truth.

Our response was the “Blind Men and the Elephant” model. In this ancient story, a group of blind men encounter an elephant for the very first time. Each man grabs hold of a different part of the beast and proceeds to describe the fabled animal on the basis of the part he encountered. Inevitably, each description of the elephant is partially true and totally wrong. This model reflected our unwillingness to surrender our conviction that an objective truth exists in the universe. We continued to insist that there is, in fact, an elephant. That each of us perceives only a part of the beast doesn’t change the fact that the beast is there. So, for us, the challenge was to engage the various diverse perceptions in mutual conversation in such a way that everyone’s understanding of the truth is enlarged and expanded. By sharing our insights, we might come closer to understanding the true nature of the elephant, we might come closer to grasping the great truth that undergirds all our partial truths.

We were convinced that the standards upon which we had built our civilization, our culture, our government, our laws, while partial and flawed, were not wrong. They were still rooted in universal truths and a careful exploration would reveal that the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule all had their counterparts in every culture across the globe—or at least every culture we had any obligation to respect and honor, and that all real religion shared common underlying values. All our partial truths pointed to the same elephant. And in the end, together we would find a common moral and ethical vision by which to live and by which to judge individuals, nations, and cultures.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, however, this model was called into serious question. To begin with, the message of the physical sciences that the world is not at all what it appears to be proved harder and harder to ignore. The fundamental nature of reality, science insisted, simply is not available to the normal range of human perception. That elephant, for example, is not in its essence any thing at all. It is a congeries of ever-shifting, ever-changing energy patterns—molecules and atoms and neutrons and protons and electrons and subatomic particles all coming into being and passing out of being in quite unpredictable ways and yet somehow bodying forth out of this chaos the illusion we call an elephant. Putting all the insights of all the blind men in the world together will not reveal to us the essential nature of this beast. Indeed, the very concept “essential nature” reveals how significantly we have misunderstood the universe of which we are an expression.

More than this, postmodern critics began to suggest that every concept, every fact, every insight, every standard is culturally conditioned, culturally derived, and culturally determined. Our assumptions about what we see, about what is important, about what we must attend to are shaped and privileged by our social and temporal location and have little if any universal foundation. The question we now confront is not what is the true shape of the elephant, or how can we better discern the true shape of the elephant, but can we even assume there is any elephant there? All claims about absolute truths are now called into question. The conviction that there is an absolute truth, an absolute moral and ethical standard by which life is to be lived and judged, has been challenged in the most radical way. We can no longer assert that all religions point to the same central values, teach the same ethical standards, are particular assertions of the same universal reality we embrace. Cultures and the religions they reflect are the result of arbitrary choices made in response to varied temporal experience. They are not to be understood as reflections of some universal order.

Behind the plaintive cry that arose in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center, “Why do they hate us so much?” lies a deep question about how people can see the world so differently and by what measure are we to determine which vision of reality is right. In the absence of an agreed-upon standard, is there any way beyond sheer force and violence to establish a common vision of moral and ethical behavior? Is there any way to talk across cultural divides about commonly agreed-upon values? In the absence of absolutes, how do we navigate an ethical existence in a moral desert?

Politically, we have responded to the challenge by asserting the rightness, the normative nature of our national vision and then attempted to secure that assertion by the use of preemptive force. We declared war on a noun—we engaged in a formless and endless struggle against “terrorism,” that noun being a euphemism for those who

not only see the world differently but who are as prepared as we to use violence to advance their worldview. However, even as we sought to defend our understanding of truth and virtue by attacking a surrogate enemy, a sense has emerged in the land that this is not a sufficient response to the moral challenge we confront.

We have responded to that inchoate sense in a variety of ways. In some places we have loudly proclaimed our adherence to traditional values. We have erected plaques, posters, and stone monuments containing the Ten Commandments on our front lawns, in courthouses and parks, and in other public places. We have moved to amend constitutions in an effort to repeal and revoke changes that appear to challenge the status quo as we think it must have existed in the last century. Some among us have opted to live by the ethics of the main chance—the moral question being reduced to a concern for what can we get away with and how much can we profit from the moral confusion of our day. Others of us know that the world and the times out of which we came cannot be reestablished by constitutional amendment and that no power on earth can repeal the twenty-first century. However, we are not satisfied with the morality of anything goes. For us, the question is not how can we regain the certainty of a world that is irretrievably gone, but how are we to live ethical lives in this world into which we have wandered and in the times in which we find ourselves?

I wrestle with that question both in my personal life and in my professional life as I help prepare students for a career in ministry. It is no longer easy for those of us who are sensitive to the relentless pluralism that characterizes our world and these times to proclaim an unequivocal “Thus saith the Lord.” On the other hand, it is clear that if ministry is to be anything more than chaplaincy to those who pay our salaries, we need to find a way to speak a prophetic word to the powers and principalities of our day. How, in a world in which all judgments are challenged as little more than personal opinion or cultural artifact, are we to stand in judgment?

One reality becomes inescapably obvious: Our moral judgments, inevitably, will be more tentative and open to challenge than they once seemed to be. Few of us have the audacity any longer to pretend that we speak for God. But in the absence of God’s voice, who will speak for a truth, a morality responsive to the immediate moment, the current generation, the larger good? And upon what authority shall we stand?

Confronting those issues, I have found myself returning to three central questions that have helped me discover a moral voice and a standard for judging ethical concerns. The first of these questions demands that I be clear about what I believe. What is it I am professing as I wrestle with moral and ethical issues? The second question asks in whose behalf do I act? In my choices, who is the proper focus of my effort and concern? And the third question is to whom or to what am I responsible? What is the larger context of my life and my choices?

The first of these questions, “What do I profess?” is essential to ethical decision-making in these times. Please note, the question does not ask about what is true, or what is right, or what do I know. It asks me to be clear about what it is I believe. Hidden in that question is an important element of uncertainty, a recognition that there may be, indeed there almost certainly is, a distance between the world as I see it and the world as it was, is, and is going to be. In a recent essay, Wendell Berry makes a compelling plea for what he calls the “way of ignorance.” He does not ask us to abandon our search for truth nor does he challenge the importance of facts, but he does ask us to embrace

our finitude, to understand the limitations that are built into every fact and every truth we find, and to make our necessary judgments with a consistent spirit of humility.

I am increasingly convinced that ethical decision-making requires that we affirm, at the start, the necessary limitations of our vision, our understanding, our knowledge. I need to know that I choose and I act on the basis of the best wisdom available to me, but that is not the same thing as acting as God's viceroy or as the agent of eternal and unvarying and indisputable truth. Therefore, it behooves me to avoid choices and judgments and behaviors that demonize those who disagree with me or seek to destroy as evil all those who hold alternative visions and embrace alternative judgments.

Henry Nelson Wieman, the great Unitarian process theologian of the mid-twentieth century, insisted that ethical living required of us two levels of commitment. On the first level, we are committed to that which we believe to be the source of human good. It is on the basis of that commitment that we make judgments, choose behaviors, and engage in action. But, he argued, it is required of us that ultimately we be committed to that which, in fact, is the actual source of human good. And that may not always be the same as our belief about what is the source of human good. This second level of commitment always stands in judgment over our actions and our choices, calling us ever to broader understanding, deeper wisdom, greater compassion.

This second level of commitment corresponds to Berry's "way of ignorance." It embeds in our minds a necessary and persistent whisper that while we must act on the basis of what we think we know, we may be wrong. Therefore ethical behavior demands that we choose and act in an attitude of respect and compassion. It is this qualifying element that lies hidden in my first question, "What is it I profess?"

If clarity about the assumptions that shape my understanding is central to living an ethical life, the second question serves to remind me of the relational element that is part of any ethical or moral judgment. In asking in whose behalf do I act, I am reminded that we live in an interconnected, persistently entangled world. We are born into a world that is already present and shaped and waiting for us. We live and move through a world in which we are the unwitting beneficiaries of the visions and dreams, the struggles and accomplishments, the suffering and faithfulness of women and men whom we cannot name and will never meet. As the old adage reminds us, "We drink from wells we did not dig and we warm ourselves by fires we did not light." An ethical life requires that we acknowledge our debt to others and that we make our judgments, choose our actions, engage our passions with an understanding that we never act for ourselves alone. Always, others whom we do not know, whom we cannot name are profoundly involved in the consequences of our choices, our actions, our convictions.

An ethical life does not require that we comprehend fully all the ramifications of the choices we make. It does require that we know that others are inextricably involved in every choice we make, that their lives will be profoundly shaped by what we do or leave undone and therefore the other is always part of the moral calculus. The welfare of others, especially the welfare of those who have been forced to the margins of society, the welfare of those in greatest need, the welfare of those who are least like us and therefore least likely to engage our sympathies, is a central concern in any effort to live an ethical life. A vision of an ethical life requires us to remember that we do not live for ourselves alone; that we are called by our interdependent nature to act in behalf of those who need us the most. Central to an ethical life is the persistent question whom

do I serve, who is the focus of my concern. This question draws us out of fascination with our own petty fears and itches and drives us to the enlargement of the self that is the essence of a moral vision, of an ethical life.

The third question, to whom or to what am I responsible, suggests that any kind of ethical or moral understanding of life rests in an affirmation that we are part of a larger reality, a deep, implicit process that lends meaning and purpose to our quotidian existence, even as that meaning and purpose elude our finite understanding. In the world in which I grew up, that assumption was obvious. In the living of our lives we were responsible to the God of the Universe, the source and fountain of all truth and right. In the postmodern, post-secular world in which we now find ourselves, that answer no longer seems to carry the same valence, the same conviction. Perhaps it is not that God has fallen silent in our world, but that God has been captured by so many narrow loyalties and finite interests that it is all but impossible to sift out the signal from the static. Dragged behind so many triumphant, temporal chariots, bound to so many finite causes, God now speaks such divergent truths, with so many different voices and accents that it becomes necessary to engage the question with greater subtlety and with new language.

Although traditional God language has been so corrupted and debased as to be almost unredeemable, that does not obviate our need to speak of fundamentally deep matters or acknowledge the importance to an ethical life of a deep sense of larger responsibility. We are responsible to more than our own vision, our own lives, our own families, tribes, and nations. We are responsible to more than this moment into which our lives have been cast. Traditional peoples captured this insight when they insisted that a moral life is one that is lived with a concern for the seventh generation. Ethical living demands that we enlarge our sense of responsibility beyond our immediate place, time, and ties and see ourselves imbedded in a process that is infinitely greater. As our power has increased, as our reach has extended, as our shadow has fallen across more and more of the planet and across more and more of the future, we are called to live with an awareness not of the seventh generation, but of the seventy times seventh generation.

The final question, to whom or to what am I responsible, calls us to see our lives, our choices, our actions in the largest possible context. In a universe in which everything is part of everything, in which the whole is forever reflected in every part, it ill behooves us to misdoubt the larger importance of our lives and our deeds. Science has demonstrated, over and over again, that the forces that shaped stars, planets, and galaxies out of the hot stuff of a newborn universe are the same forces that sowed life upon innumerable planets, the same forces that drove silent, unseeing organisms colonizing mud flats and floating through dark ocean depths to evolve into creatures standing athwart the planet and scrying out the secrets of that universal reality. We are the universe, come to know itself. In our knowing, all existence is engaged. We are related to and therefore we are responsible to that sacred process that bodied forth all of existence. An ethical life is one that is lived in humility and in reverence and in awe before the unspeakable grandeur that is this world, that is our lives in this world.

The moral certainty of the world of my childhood—a certainty that once seemed as constant and as persistent as the mountains themselves—has disappeared, leaving only a subtle coloring in my mind and memory. In these times, we lack that naive

certainty that right is always knowable and obvious. In these times an ethical life is one that begins with an acceptance of our finitude and embraces the limits of our knowing. An ethical life is one that is rooted not in incontrovertible rules, but in compassion for the other and that acts to enlarge the lives and hopes of others. An ethical life is one that affirms our relation to the holy process that has cast us into being, that sustains us in being, that transforms us and our world in ways we cannot transform ourselves, that receives us back to itself when life has used us up. In my experience, this attitude makes it possible for us to live moral lives, to make ethical decisions, to act with compassion in a time and a place when absolutes have washed away and consensus has disappeared and the clamor of differing visions and voices is almost deafening. We can rest in the faith that the process that brought us into being can be trusted. With that trust, it becomes possible to act on the basis of what we know, always open to correction in light of new truth and new understanding, and always in ways that serve our largest and richest and most compassionate vision of community and responsibility.