

Good Company: Using Community to Build Ethical Power

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Earlier this month, I did one of the best things for myself that I've ever done. I took three days off and went to a faculty and staff writing retreat at Colorado College, where I work. All of us in the room, whether professors, librarians, administrators, or in some other role, had research or writing projects that just weren't getting done fast enough. If you've ever been in higher education, you understand this: there's never enough time for anything. So, we made an amazing commitment to ourselves, each other, and the director of the college center for faculty development: we agreed to sit our butts down on fifteen or so chairs for three days in June and five days in July and just write. No email, no chatty conversations except over the lunch break, no errands, just work on whatever project or projects compelled or captivated us.

At the end of each day, we gathered as a group to check in: how did it go for everyone? Did everyone meet their goal for the day? What was the experience like? At the end of the third day, we had a much larger conversation about how useful the retreat had been thus far and what we had gotten out of it. And this conversation quite naturally turned to questions of why the writing had gone so much better for pretty much everyone in a group setting than it had when we all tried to write alone in our offices. We talked about accountability. We talked about "committing to sit" as writers and how it was surprisingly similar to a group Buddhist meditation. We talked about the joy of seeing everyone else at work whenever we looked up. Ultimately, though we did not agree on any one specific thing that made the first part of the retreat work so well we all thought community had a lot to do with it; we just couldn't say quite why.

Interestingly, while I was at the retreat, I was also reading a new book at night. The book is called *We Are Not for Ourselves Alone: Theological Essays on Relationship* and it is about what it means when we change our central Unitarian Universalist question from "Who am I?" to "Whose am I?" The two-letter change raises striking follow-up questions that call for deep consideration: To whom am I accountable? To whom do I belong? To whom I committed? With whom am I in relationship? And then, of course, the next level of questions arises: What does it mean to be accountable to a person or a group of people? What does it mean to belong? What obligations does it bring? When we say we are committed to a person or a group or a cause, what's the nature of that commitment? What comes with being in relationship? These types of questions inform today's topic as well as how we will engage with it.

This is our last service considering actions we can take to make our lives more ethical. We began with a brief consideration of quieting our minds and moved through imagining and practicing interdependence, laughing at our egos, pausing before we act, drawing ethical strength from our sources of meaning, creating and engaging in rituals to strengthen our values, practicing one ethical act at a time, and celebrating our ethical successes. All of this leads, naturally I think, to the question of how we can maintain and build on these actions. After all, we get to choose whether to empower our best self or our less-than-best self, multiple times a day.

Many of our ethical decisions are made alone at the moment of impact, and those are the moments for which we need to be prepared. Fortunately, we can do both some of the preparation

and some of the reflection that follows together. For this final sermon on ethical practices, I would like us to think about the practice of meeting regularly with a community for conversation, support and ritual that will strengthen us ethically when we go back out into the world and that will be joyful as well. We'll spend a little time on each of those elements of community: conversation, support, and ritual, pondering what they might look like and how they might be maximally helpful to us for those solitary moments of ethical impact. While I will focus on this community, I presume you have other communities with which you can also carry out this kind of work. I'll close with a reflection on today's reading, which I think captures nicely the points I'm trying to make here.

First, conversation. We have conversations for many different reasons, and conversations can look quite different depending on why we are having them. In this case, we are taking about both a conversation about ethics and an ethical conversation, which are not necessarily the same thing. A conversation about ethics can offer quite an opportunity to feed our bad wolves by showing off what we know, trying to fix other people, or otherwise failing to respect our conversation partners. An ethical conversation is one in which we are primarily trying to respect each other and learn from each other.

So, what does an ethical conversation about ethics look like? I imagine all of you, gathered for dinner some evening or over coffee and brunch some Saturday morning. Maybe you are talking in pairs, or maybe as a whole group. One of you brings up a difficult situation, something recent where it just wasn't possible to do what you thought was the best thing, for whatever reason. You're discouraged and maybe a little mad at yourself. How does everyone else reply? With sympathy and encouragement, with promises of continued support, and with appreciation for whatever can be learned from the difficult situation. People ask you clarifying questions that allow you to tell your story and make meaning of it in the telling. People remind you that doing the best you can may not be the same day in and day out and convey their trust that you have plenty of opportunities to feed the good wolf in days to come. Hopefully, by the end of the conversation you are in a much better place, grateful for your friends and committed to living the ethical life you want for your own.

When we talk about supporting each other on our ethical paths, a lot of that support may take place through the kind of conversation I just described. But there is another kind of support that's worth mentioning in situations where a traditional conversation is not formal enough to address a concern. Here, I'm thinking about a Quaker practice called clearness committees, which help people carry out discernment when they have large-scale decisions to make. Such a committee is often less about the day-to-day feeding of good versus bad wolves and more about situations where something life-changing may be about to happen. Should you take that new job? Start volunteering in this new setting? How should you respond to that family member who seems committed to making the same bad decisions over and over again?

A clearness committee is a special group of people gathered for their spiritual gifts and insights, people who will support you not by giving advice or telling stories or offering amateur psychoanalysis but by asking questions. Nothing else, just asking questions. Some questions they may bring with them at the beginning of the gathering, some may emerge from your answers. But the structure of a clearness committee meeting is simple: You describe your concern or

dilemma. They ask questions. You answer. They ask more questions. You answer. And if you pay good attention to both their questions and your answers you may learn something and it may help you make the best decision moving forward.

To me, what is perhaps most powerful about the idea of a clearness committee is that it is based on the idea that we have clearness within us. We don't need answers from other people. We just need to pay good enough attention to our own inner light to see where it is leading us. The compassion and love of fellow ethical travelers can help us pay better attention to our best selves, our good wolf, the light within, leading us to make larger-scale good decisions when that might be hard to do.

What, then, about ritual? We devoted almost an entire recent service to considering how the ritual of worshipping together can strengthen us ethically, but there are also other types of rituals, those that happen outside the worship circle. Consider again that brunch or lunch or coffee or dinner gathering. Undoubtedly you are talking about all sorts of things and not just having an ethics session. And yet, what would it look like if, at the end of the gathering, you went around and carried out something like the following ritual?

The first person says, "I commit to being my best self as much as possible until we gather again."

Everyone else responds, "We support your attempts to live a good ethical life and believe you can make a difference for good in the world."

And so on, to the next person, until everyone has made their ethical commitment and everyone else has supported them.

That's a pretty minimal ritual and I can imagine something more elaborate but what's most important is the basic affirmation of commitment and affirmation of support. If you did something like that it might turn out to be quite powerful. If you made it more substantial it might be practically uplifting. But what really matters is that you use the ritual to make a commitment to yourself and other people and that you then use the energy generated by the ritual to follow through.

Finally, it seems fitting to consider today's reading by Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Morrison-Reed. The reading, entitled "The Task of the Religious Community", is about how our connection with each other strengthens our work for justice but I think it is relevant for our daily attempts to live good ethical lives as well. Here's the reading again:

"The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together our vision widens and our strength is renewed."

Notice what's important here. The religious community supports our work for justice in several ways. First, it unveils the bonds we share, reminding us that we are part of something larger and that the something larger is nothing less than the transformation of the world. And it really is so easy, isn't it, to go about our daily business, confront our daily hassles, and get caught up in the chores and the intimate relationships and the creative projects and the stuff that's right in front of our face without keeping a good eye on the larger struggles of the world. Caught up in the day-to-day we can easily lose sight of the ties that bind us. The religious community reminds us of our ties, blessings, and obligations, both through interactions such as Sunday worship and through the kinds of things we think about when we gather. Morrison-Reed is talking specifically about justice and not about ethics per se but I think the same point can be made: it's easier to remember our values and goals when we have others around to help us remember them. And our feeling of connection to each other becomes part of a larger sense of connection to everyone we encounter, and even those we don't, who are impacted by our ethical choices. That's the interdependence piece.

Morrison-Reed also points out that the church reminds us that our struggles for a better world are communal, not isolated. This is important for two reasons. First, Morrison-Reed says, alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen. And again, while he is talking about justice, I think the point applies equally well to living an ethical life. One way we find out what kinds of choices are morally good is by learning from each other. Our lives are different enough that we've probably had to wrestle with somewhat different ethical situations and if we pay attention to each other sooner or later we will start being able to take other people's perspectives and strategies and make at least some use of them.

Here's an example from my own life. At college I studied ethics before I stumbled upon sociology because I was a Religion major and there was a professor in the department who taught ethics. I might have gone on thinking about ethics from a strictly humanist perspective my whole life if I had not decided to make sure I was qualified for an academic award by taking some extra social science courses. That's right. I become a sociologist in order to earn a Phi Beta Kappa key. I'm not proud of this. But once I did decide that sociology looked interesting in the abstract and signed up for a course I was completely hooked. I went on to graduate school and got a doctorate in sociology and even taught for a while. Now you could be forgiven for wondering what this has to do with ethics. Here's the answer: once I dug into sociology, I realized that it provided a whole new window onto ethics, one that incorporated but went beyond the humanist perspective of philosophy and religion. Both my thinking about ethics today and my struggles to live ethically have been deeply informed by a community of spirit, namely the community of sociologists who care about social justice and, therefore, about ethics.

In just this way we can learn from each other as we go about our ethical lives but it takes gathering as a community and talking together to make the most of our connections. It takes informal conversations and perhaps the occasional clearness committee as well as rituals that focus us intently on this work and its value and train us in how to do it better.

Finally, Morrison-Reed says, our individual strength is too limited to do all that must be done in the work of justice. If we reflect on the power of social change movements such as the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism I think we can readily see his point when it comes

to social action but it is not quite as obvious how communal strength helps us with our ethical decision-making and acting. Perhaps the best answer is to see ethical living as justice-making writ small. When I treat someone else ethically and thus affirm their inherent worth and dignity, I'm also treating them fairly, that is, with justice. We think of justice as something sought after by groups rather than individuals, but social inequality is always about individuals being treated wrongly because of their group membership. Consider the apparently endless wave of police officers or vigilantes brutalizing and killing young Black men who were unarmed and engaged in harmless pursuits. The phrase "Justice for Trayvon" rings in our ears months after George Zimmerman's acquittal. And yet, would we not also say that Zimmerman treated Martin unethically, as though he had been someone whose inherent worth and dignity did not need to be affirmed? If it is reasonable to see ethical living as justice-making writ small or justice-making as ethical living writ large, the power of a community to make a difference cannot be overstated. You may not choose to support my ethical living by organizing a march on Washington but I need your strength and support to know that it is possible for me to make the better decisions even and especially when they are difficult. For this reason as well, the religious community is a crucial site of ethical power.

My friends, what good company we are together! May we continue to enjoy this community even as we draw on it to strengthen ourselves and each other for the days ahead. Amen, and blessed be.