

The Moment before Us: Practicing One Ethical Act at a Time

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Just about every morning, when the alarm goes off I yawn, stretch, and jump cheerfully out of bed giving thanks for a new day full of opportunities for joy and service. No, just kidding. Most mornings, when the alarm goes off I bolt upright, say “okay” a few times to convince myself to get out of bed, turn off the alarm clock, say “okay” a few more times to convince myself to go downstairs, and then start my day, pushing myself through my morning routines until I can reward myself with email and Facebook over breakfast.

I don't have a bad life, so why is starting the day so hard? After some thought, I believe it's because mornings are overwhelming for me. There is so much to do, too much to do in fact. When I think of trying to make potentially challenging decisions on top of just getting through the day, it's tempting to despair. How is it even possible to get through my checklist, let alone make the world more beautiful, joyous, and whole?

Recently, I've been thinking about those mental “okays” I use to get going. Where did they come from? And I remembered something. Almost two years ago I sat at the deathbed of my 87-year-old Aunt Claire for several days and watched her fade in and out of consciousness. In her more conscious moments, such as they were, she said “okay” over and over again and I realized that in repeating the word “okay” she was, at some level, making peace with her impending death. She was saying “okay” to reality, accepting a reality that was soon to include her passing. Only after that experience did I start saying “okay” in the mornings.

Now don't get me wrong. I don't think I say “okay” to prepare for my demise. Rather, I think when I say it I am accepting the moment immediately in front of me. The alarm clock goes off and I say “okay” and mean, “In this moment it is my time to get up.” After turning the alarm clock off I say “okay” and mean, “In this moment it is my time to go downstairs and start the morning chores.” In this moment it is my time to do this. In this moment it is my time to do that.

We are drawing toward the end of a sermon series on practices that can help us lead lives that are both more ethical and more joyful. So far we've focused on a variety of techniques such as imagining and practicing interdependence and laughing at our egos, among others. We recently considered using rituals to deepen our commitment to and strength for ethical action. But we have not yet said all that much yet about acting ethically. Nor will I; that is for each of us to work out on our own to the best of our ability. But I do think today's topic bears some attention. Our lives really can be quite overwhelming. How do we make the best ethical decisions possible given how much is going on around us and how much is expected of us?

One approach, followed by many religions, is to modify our understanding of our lives so that we focus to the best of our ability on living just in the present moment. Consider the lilies, Jesus said; they don't worry about the future and they are always looked after. The Hindu writer Kalidasa urges us to look to this day for yesterday is but a dream and tomorrow is only a vision. Buddhism stresses awakening to and living in the present moment as each moment arises. We could do worse than ask how this way of thinking might apply to living ethical lives.

Let's start by going back to my experience of getting up in the morning and feeling instantly overwhelmed. If I had a serious Buddhist practice or started my day meditating on Jesus' comment about the lilies I would remember immediately that feeling overwhelmed is a sure sign I am not living in the present moment. Because the present moment is virtually always simple and straightforward. I don't have to accomplish a hundred things in the present moment and in fact I can't. I can accomplish one thing, make one decision, carry out one ritual, focus on one priority. Or I can use the present moment to feel overwhelmed and accomplish nothing except to experience discomfort. It's up to me if I am aware enough to realize that it's up to me.

Truth is, all we ever get is one moment at a time and the real question is how we use that moment. And this perspective, if true, suggests three possibilities for the ethical life. The first is about the present, the second is about the impact of the past on the present and the third is about the impact of the present on the future.

Here's point one about the ethical life one act at a time: the question is not how much to do but whether to do anything. Recall our reading today by Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale: "I am only one but still I am one. I cannot do everything but still I can do something and because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." It's rather humble, isn't it, and yet also brave. We cannot do everything but in each moment we encounter that one thing, that one decision, that one opportunity to make a good ethical choice or a bad ethical choice. What will we do? Probably most of us are not able to do the best we can every single moment of our life but from this perspective "every single moment of our life" is much less important than this moment right now. And this moment right now. And this moment right now. Taking it a moment at a time is incredibly freeing. We stop keeping track and start, as the musical *Candide* puts it, "do[ing] the best we know." We don't try to do everything; we just do the something we can do when we can do it.

Now, one interesting aspect of a life lived ethically one act at a time is that while we only ever live in the present, who "we" are as people keeps changing and the past does have an effect on us as we encounter the present. If we make enough good ethical choices over time, we will be strengthened as ethical people, which is likely in turn to make it easier to make ethical choices as we keep at it.

I'm currently teaching an adult religious education course at High Plains called "the spiritual wisdom of showtunes." Last Tuesday we considered humility as it appears in a number of Broadway songs. One of these songs, from a little-known show called *13*, might have something interesting to tell us.

Following a move from New York City to small-town Indiana, 12-year-old Evan Goldman grapples with his parents' divorce, prepares for his impending Bar Mitzvah, and navigates the complicated social circles of a new school, trying to make friends and impress people while staying faithful to the socially awkward girl who befriended him upon his arrival. The show ends at Evan's Bar Mitzvah, during which the cast sings about being a young person and growing up too fast and yet realizing that they are in fact growing up. Here are some of the lyrics:

“Day turns to day turns to day turns to day turns to day turns to day.
You get a little bit older, a little bit taller, a little bit better, a little bit.
Day turns to day turns to day and the days before all go too fast. You can’t hold on so you go:
Day turns to day turns to day turns to day turns to day turns to day
And I’m a little bit older, a little bit stronger, a little bit smarter, a little bit.
Day turns to day turns to day
And the days ahead comin’ on so quick, you can’t get out of the way. You keep runnin’.
Day turns to day turns to day turns to day turns to day turns to day
And I’m a little bit older, a little bit faster, a little bit closer, a little bit.
Day turns to day turns to day and the sky goes blue and the sky goes black
And no matter what you do you can’t go back. You go day into day into day
And I’m a little bit braver, a little bit broader, a little bit brighter, a little bit...
Day turns to day turns to day.”

I find this very moving, this stumbling forward through the days that you can’t control even as you recognize that you are growing up a little bit at a time. But quite aside from the power of a bunch of teenagers who sing really well articulating something I could not possibly have identified when I was twelve or thirteen or even thirty, I think this language has something to say to the way I’ve been talking about ethical choice-making.

If day turns to day turns to day and I get a little bit older, a little bit better, a little bit stronger, a little bit smarter, a little bit braver, then with each new day I’m a little bit more able to face the ethical moment before me, say “okay,” take a deep breath and do the right thing, whatever that is. So while we can only act in the moment, each moment of acting ethically prepares us for future ethical behavior. Or, as a song I know puts it, “I’m building faith with each choice that I make.” I could be building faith in my ability to make good choices with each choice that I make. Or I could be failing to do so. I could empower my best self or my less-than-best self. But if I do a little bit better as day turns to day my best self has a fighting chance.

One last thought about this way of thinking about ethical action. Focusing on the present does explicitly mean not focusing on the future since we can’t really focus on both at once. But every time we make a good decision in the present we have an impact on the future, just as every good decision in the past gave us more opportunities to do good in the present. And thus we will sing as our closing hymn a song about taking one step and then taking one more step and continuing to take that one step till there is peace and love for us and everyone. We’ll sing that song. In the one moment, all we can do is sing that song. But eventually, if we choose, moment by moment, to sing a song of peace, love and compassion, that song will be sung by everyone. Day will continue to turn to day and will continue to turn to day and we’ll keep getting a little wiser, a little kinder, a little gentler if we keep at it.

For at the end of the day, focusing on the present turns out to be paradoxical, since it is not really just about focusing on the present. Like a stone cast into water this moment ripples backwards and forwards, which is why Kalidasa can say, “yesterday is but a dream and tomorrow is only a vision but today, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope.”

So, friends, may we encounter each moment with an acknowledgment that it is our time to be our best selves. May we say “okay” to an ethical life one moment at a time. May we do the one thing we can do since we cannot do everything. May we be a little bit better as day turns to day. And may we take one more step, alone and together, one step at a time, until we have walked ourselves and each other and our society and our planet into wholeness. Amen and blessed be.