

Why Ethics?

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Our 16-year-old exchange student from Germany joined our household this past Tuesday. It has been a whirlwind few days of dealing with bank account issues, getting her enrolled at school and into her classes, shopping for food and personal items, introducing her to some people who matter to us, and generally getting ready for things to stabilize. It's been amazing, at times simply delightful, at times surprisingly tender.

But I can't lie, it's also been pretty stressful for me. I never wanted children and I'm not all that good with them. Phoebe has always wanted children and has a wonderful easy rapport with Klara that I envy. Phoebe has also travelled internationally a lot more than I have, and went to an international high school, and so knows how to interact with people from other countries in ways that I just don't. And everything is going much slower than I am used to. I did not realize that teenagers messed with the laws of physics, but apparently when there is a teenager in the house some ancient law of alchemy turns five minutes into twenty. Don't get me wrong. I am delighted that Klara is here and already feel myself learning and growing and stretching. And at the same time I feel completely exhausted and worry that I am not doing a good enough job.

Klara is with us until May 30. What should I do to enjoy her during this time without being worried or jealous or feeling left out or getting impatient multiple times a day?

Here's a very different question. Shortly after George Zimmerman was found not guilty of killing Trayvon Martin, I was struck by a Facebook post sharing a quote from an Episcopal bishop from central Florida. The bishop had said, "I want to live in a world where George Zimmerman offered Trayvon Martin a ride home to get him out of the rain that night." If you are like me, the possibility of that happening never crossed your mind, but once I thought about it, I realized, God, I really want to live in that world too. But it doesn't seem possible. So here's the question: what would it take to get there, to live in a world where Trayvon Martin would not be feared and would just naturally be treated well?

When I preached here a few months ago, one of the topics you asked me to address was how to live with grace and compassion and love in a world that is so terribly difficult sometimes – not a world without beauty but a world with too much selfishness and thoughtlessness and fear. And in a way, this request brings us back to the first time I told the story of our best and worst selves fighting within us. I've told the story often. But the story does not tell us how exactly to nourish our best self and starve our worst self. And the reality is, the two selves are not really equal. If we live in a selfish society, we are taught to feed our selfish self and rewarded when we do. If we live in a thoughtless society, we are taught to feed our thoughtless self and rewarded when we do. And God knows, if we live in a fearful society, we are taught to feed our fearful self and rewarded when we do. So the selves don't start out at equal strength because the society we live in is not neutral. We are actually fighting an uphill battle.

But here's the good news: I really believe that when we stop and think, when we are quiet with ourselves, when we let ourselves feel brave enough, we know that we want to nourish our best selves, even if it is not always easy to do so. So when we reach that point, in my experience, there are two things we need: concrete actions we can take and motivation to take them and keep taking them. For the next few times I am down here, I want to focus on the first of these: concrete actions we can take to feed our best selves and starve our worst selves or, to use more traditional ethical language, to make decisions that exhibit love, compassion, patience and other positive values rather than making decisions based on fear, greed, hatred, and other ethically problematic values.

I will be considering only what we can do in our own lives, but of course the topic has broader implications. If I were better at being patient, I might be enjoying Klara's presence even more than I am. And more importantly, if George Zimmerman had practiced nourishing his best self, Trayvon Martin might still be alive and in fact might have gotten that lift home in the rain from George Zimmerman himself. And if we lived in a society where, both individually and communally, encouraging our hate and fear was frowned upon and people were taught to act courageously and rewarded for acting courageously, it would never have occurred to George Zimmerman to do anything other than give Trayvon Martin a ride home. If Zimmerman had even been afraid of Martin in the first place, since in such a society there would probably be a lot less racism.

To get started, here's a question to reflect on: let's say that your best self was well-fed and your worst self had very little control over your life. Ethically speaking, you would be able to make good ethical decisions in most or all circumstances. What would this mean concretely for your life? Take a minute and think about this, then let's share some of what we come up with.

Now, a little more reflection and sharing: what is currently getting in the way of your life looking the way you described? We'll take a minute then compare thoughts.

In order to be able to write this sermon before hearing your answers, I put myself through the same two exercises ahead of time and found the answers to the second question much more interesting than the answers to the first, which were pretty garden-variety: I would be more compassionate, more patient, less angry, more forgiving, happier, more loving, that kind of stuff. But the answers to the second question were more surprising: I couldn't consistently live ethically because it's hard to do and I don't have enough energy given everything else I do in my life. Living ethically doesn't bring sufficient or immediate enough rewards from a society that has all too little respect for ethics. And most interestingly, somewhere deep inside, I've already given up and decided I and the world are too far gone to really be our best selves all the time. Yes, the good guys usually win in movies but those movies tend to be oversimplified about human nature. They often deny that good and bad run right through the center of each of us. It may be satisfying to watch a movie where the hero wins, but it's not that straightforward in real life.

So we need concrete actions to help us behave more ethically that, at a minimum, must do the following: They must provide energy rather than sapping it. They must be actions that we can manage to choose to take with some regularity. They must provide us with enough of a sense of

reward that we don't need rewards from anyone or anywhere else. They must inspire in us a genuine hope that gets us active on behalf of those ethical outcomes. Anything less probably won't be enough.

In a minute, I'll list some concrete actions that appear in a variety of religions without being doctrinally tied to any particular religion. I've used most of them at least from time to time and found them helpful. I'm grateful to my partner Phoebe Lostroh for adding a few actions to the list. What I think all of these actions have in common is that, if practiced diligently, they can open up a degree of spaciousness in our hearts and our minds and our lives, a broader awareness that we don't exist simply within our preoccupations or our fears or even our egos. There's a term from a Buddhist chant, ease of well-being, that captures this spaciousness well for me. And with such spaciousness comes more power to act ethically in my experience. Now don't get me wrong: I don't live this out anywhere near as well as I would like. But if on our free and responsible search for truth and meaning we find valuable tools and resources, I believe it is an act of love to share them with each other.

Here, then, are some concrete actions that might strengthen us for ethical behavior:

- Quieting our minds to find our peace; using breathing to slow down
- Imagining interdependence
- Practicing perspective
- Laughing at our egos
- Pausing before we act
- Drawing on our inspirational "scripture"
- Creating and engaging in rituals to strengthen our values
- Practicing one ethical act at a time
- Celebrate successes, in our hearts and with others
- Meeting regularly with a community for conversation, support, and ritual

In the months ahead we will cover each of these, one at a time, starting today with the first one, which in some ways might be the hardest: quieting our minds to find our peace and using breathing to slow down. These could be considered two steps, but since they go together so well I'll consider them as a single process.

When I talked earlier about having a hard time acting at my ethical best, I said that it was because I didn't have enough energy, because I didn't get enough reward from it, and because somewhere inside I had already given up. These sound like three different challenges but they share something very important in common: they are heavily influenced by the fact that my mind, while wonderfully helpful in many ways, is also a serious obstacle for my well-being.

Take not having enough energy to make good decisions on a frequent enough basis to turn them into habits. I bet most of us have found that when our energy is low it is harder to make the best ethical decisions. Dan Ariely, a fascinating academic who works at the intersection of psychology and economics, has done a number of studies showing that when people are at a point of what he calls depletion, whether intellectual, emotional, or both, they are more likely to eat foods generally regarded as unhealthy. On the other side of the coin, I've had times when my

energy has been high and I have been able to make what I consider good ethical decisions while also getting work done, writing songs and sermons, and generally enjoying life. What's the difference?

There is one factor that can have a huge impact on my energy all by itself, and it is the degree to which my mind is running a million miles an hour, completely lost in regrets about the past and fears about the future, keeping me up at night, jumping from topic to topic in that way described by Buddhists as “monkey mind.” Arguably, my racing mind saps my energy at least as much as any of the activities I do, because those activities are often productive and satisfying while my monkey mind is exhausting while simultaneously being completely unhelpful. It isn't even just energy; if I pay attention I can feel my body tense up, my shoulders hurt, and my jaw clench when my mind does its thing. Given all of these experiences, if I want more energy, learning how to quiet my mind and find some peace would be a great start. And then being able to quiet my mind more or less upon command would be fabulous. It might give me back enough energy and spaciousness to help me focus more effectively on making optimal ethical decisions.

The second challenge I mentioned was failing to get the necessary sense of reward from acting ethically. This is actually a pretty common topic in discussions of ethics. One definition of living ethically is doing the right thing when no one is around to see and appreciate it. By this measure, how many of us struggle to live ethically, completely satisfied with our own good works even when they are done in private? But why should this be so? Why isn't living ethically its own reward for all of us all the time?

Here, too, I think our minds play an important role – not in how scattered they are but in how profoundly they have processed the message about what is valuable in our society. Based simply on paying attention to popular culture such as movies, magazines, and TV, money is valuable. Glamour is valuable. Fame is valuable. Looking out for number one is valuable. Getting whatever we want is valuable, even if it means others don't have enough. On another day I might mull over how problematic these so-called values are if we really care about the inherent worth and dignity of all people and about the interconnected web of all existence. But today there are two other points I want to make about this way of approaching life and why it can impede ethical decision-making.

First, it contributes to the monkey mind described above because there is no such thing as enough. If we are sufficiently trapped on the material merry-go-round and aiming for brass ring after brass ring, there's no way to get off the ride unless we are willing to change how we think, which, I am pretty sure, will require the ability to quiet our minds in order to slow the merry-go-round down. If we always need more, if we are never satisfied, our mind has a great set of topics about which to keep us churning.

But there's another important problem with the material merry-go-round and it has to do with how difficult it is to simply be satisfied with doing good for its own sake. If we have been socialized deeply enough, if at some level we really believe that happiness will come with rejuvenated skin or a Chipotle's burrito or a vacation on a sandy beach, if we have internalized the message that we can never be too rich or too thin, we could be forgiven for not getting much out of our ethical behaviors. We don't receive very many messages from society that acting

ethically should make us happy. And most of us can't avoid internalizing at least some of the messages we get from the media and from other people. We may have to literally reprogram ourselves to find the doing of good things sufficient unto the day. And this will also require having a mind that we can slow down in order to be in a peaceful space. If our minds are peaceful enough, we may find pleasure in making good decisions.

Finally, what about the sense of having already given up, of finding it too hard to live ethically because despair is exhausting and disempowering? That may be encountered as a feeling but it starts as a message. Perhaps you have experienced some variation of this message: humanity is too far gone. The people with power don't want to change things. There are too few of us to make a difference. My small acts won't help anything. I've been at this for years and haven't seen much change. I'm burned out. There are hundreds of variations of this message and all of them immobilize us – exactly the opposite of the mobilization that allows people, working individually and together, to actually change themselves and the world.

Here, too, our mind is part of the problem. Yes, there is plenty of actual bad news in the world, but there's also plenty of good news. People routinely do loving and tender and creative things. We just don't tend to hear about it in the news or see it reflected in movies and TV shows. As with the issue above of being socialized to want too much and then having our minds struggle to be satisfied with ethical behavior, we are socialized to believe that things are unmitigatedly lousy and then have our minds struggle with finding the strength to keep working for a difference. Many activists over time have found that spiritual practices sustain them when they are getting burned out. And an important spiritual practice that can help with this is precisely cultivating the spacious mind I've been discussing.

How, then, do we go about quieting our minds and slowing down? Different religious traditions have somewhat different techniques, but all of them seem to involve practicing sitting still and listening, perhaps using the breath as a centering tool. A number of them involve watching our crazy minds at work, seeking not to judge our thoughts but simply to observe them come into existence and fall away. Admittedly, this is a largely Buddhist approach, but it does not require believing anything about the Buddha or even Buddhism. It just turns out to be a helpful tool.

Rather than try this out in any substantive way now, let's just do a very small breath exercise, one that I have found to be superb in releasing tension, letting go of thoughts, and providing spaciousness. Close your eyes and take a moment to notice where the tension in your body is. Don't do anything about it; just notice it. If you have thoughts flying through your mind, try to observe them without judgment, which is harder than it seems. But mostly, just take a moment to be with yourself in silence. Once you've taken that moment, take a slow deep breath and let it out. Pause for a moment between breaths. Take another slow, deep breath and let it out. Again, pause for a moment. One more slow, deep breath, one more little pause after it.

Open your eyes. Do you feel at all refreshed? Is your tension even slightly lessened? Is your mind at all slower? Maybe not. But if so, you've just had the tiniest taste of what quieting one's mind and slowing down can look like. I personally find it extremely hard to meditate but whenever I do it, I feel the benefits. Any distance from my thought stream, any ability to separate myself from it, helps me realize that I have more options in my life than I otherwise think. From

a place of mental quiet I can decide more rationally how I want to behave and why. I can remember what's good in the world, where I find beauty and comfort and companionship and courage. And when my mind is quieter and my breathing is slower, I just feel more hopeful.

If you don't already have some personal practice to help you quiet your mind and slow down, I hope you will consider looking into one. If you do already have such a practice, I hope this message is helpful in enabling you to tie it to building your ethical capacities more intentionally. For finally, whatever helps us live as ethical people to the greatest degree possible strengthens us and enables us to bring more beauty, happiness, and well-being into the world. And surely the world needs this from us. So may this be our path. Amen and blessed be.