

Seeking Compassion

“To have compassion for those who suffer is a human quality which everyone should possess, especially those who have required comfort themselves in the past and have managed to find it in others.”

– Giovanni Boccaccio¹

I’ve never thought much about ethics. I’ve never needed to. I’m a white, educated, middle-class, Protestant young woman who’s spent her entire life in the heart of the Bible Belt. I feel as if I have no right to speak about ethics, because I’ve never personally experienced a moment of ethics breached, a moment when someone has truly, fully, actively broken the ethical code of humanity because of me, to me. I’m too privileged.

~

In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis discusses the concept of what he terms the *Tao* – the common values and systems of morality every culture has within its structures, every person has within his or her soul. While not discussing the possibilities of these moral values being given by a Higher Source (for this is a text on literary criticism, not Christian apologetics), he claims these ethical values *must* be true, innate, because the same values are found universally.

This thing which I have called for convenience the Tao, and which others may call Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles or Practical Reason or

*the First Platitudes, is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained.*ⁱⁱ

~

My private school was nothing like the ones portrayed in film and television and books. We had an enforced dress code, but we didn't wear uniforms, and certainly not those purpose-defeating plaid miniskirts. The fanciest our cafeteria meals ever got was the Thanksgiving dinner, a conglomerate of the leftovers from our church's old-folks luncheon; the most exciting it got was when the lunch lady made Rice Krispies treats instead of cookies on pizza day.

We were not an all-girls' school; we were not an all-white school, although I could give you the name of every student of color attending at any given time, especially as our enrollment numbers dropped every year. While many students were children or grandchildren of doctors or other well-to-do families, many were not. We were a small school, and a relatively poor one, in the middle of one of the skeeziest neighborhoods in the city—one day we all stood out in the parking lot to watch the drug house two doors down burn. We were not a rich school. But we weren't supposed to be: our school didn't exist to provide a good name on a transcript for rich kids; its goal wasn't even to produce a good education, although it certainly did; its purpose was to share the gospel of Christ and to guide young people toward truth.

Ethics were a major part of that education, although taken for granted: it was a Christian school, so of course everyone was expected to be "ethical." A violation of basic ethics—lying, swearing, cheating, not wearing a belt, disobedience—were all worthy of demerits, maybe even

detention (I never found out); repeated offenses got you heart-to-heart talks with teachers desperate to fix you, help you mend your ways, pray for you.

But few people ever broke those rules to heinous extents; people were reprimanded for bad attitudes, boys for not having their hair cut short enough above their ears, couples for kissing in the stairwells; but it was never seen, at least by students, as the breaking of any Moral Code of the Universe; it was breaking the school's rules, preferences, not the Ten Commandments.

I never broke said rules; my only demerits were for being ten minutes late to school on the mornings my little sister couldn't find her glasses, and were from the teacher who handed out those hateful white and yellow carbon paper slips like gospel tracts for the salvation of souls. And, just like I never broke the rules, no one ever broke them as an attack or affront to me—sure, I was mocked for my bushy hair and sensible shoes, for my obsession with Narnia and my delineation as the class Good Girl/Teacher's Pet, but really, I should have seen that coming.

I never experienced ethics breached *because* I was the Good girl of a Good place—to truly breach ethics in any sort of obvious way would shatter the identity of every student there (even the bully with her mocking words): because we went to a Christian school, every student, Christian or not, had to perform Christianity (at least for the teachers).

I've never seen ethics breached, because I am too good. I am too privileged.

~

As much as we were taught the value of loving others in this Christian school, we were never truly taught *how*. What mattered was that the world could see we were Christians by the way we acted—by not drinking, by not swearing, by attending church every Sunday, by looking

well-put-together, by making good grades, and by generally being *nice* to people. This included not stealing or cheating or lying, of course, the big ones; not harming anyone physically or emotionally—all the obvious things. This included leading them to the Lord, though how to bring up the topic of salvation so you could use the Roman Road or the Gospel Beads in a normal conversation was never fully explained.

What this did not include was charity. Every Christmas my class donated a turkey (two, if we were feeling particularly generous) with money from our class fund, scraped together through bake sales and car smashes and ice cream stands. But we never saw the people these turkeys went to, or bought the turkeys ourselves, or even knew the name of the man who collected the turkeys for the very church our school was a part of. Our charity was a notation in the class meeting minutes; it was a scratch in our class funds, a twenty dollar bill swept off the top of a pile of twenties stuffed in a Ziploc bag. It went by unnoticed by most of us, because the only one who knew how much money we had was the class treasurer, and he never knew what was going on.

Every year we did have a day devoted to volunteering—“Serve-A-Thon”—but that was to fulfill the school’s volunteer requirements; it somehow ended up being a fundraiser, anyway. If it was meant to instill within our malleable youthful minds the value of charity, it did not do its job: it was, instead, a day of freedom from classes, a day to goof off and eat hotdogs and go home early after three hours of painting or shoveling mulch.

Even our church, aside from the school, was woefully lacking in any sort of charity work—and we still are. We never go door-to-door getting to know the people and their needs in our neighborhood; we never do any outreach. Part of our money goes to our missionaries; the rest goes to the budget deficit, created by building *too many things*. Other churches in the area

partner up to feed the homeless on Saturday mornings down by the river; one church, two blocks down from ours, sets up awnings on street corners and hands out hotdogs and water and offers of prayer. When I was younger, our church held a Fall Festival every Halloween, where kids could play games for candy. And that is the extent of our outreach, as a congregation. One old man—the one who collected our inconsequential turkeys—gathers whatever paltry donations of canned foods congregation members bring for Christmas baskets for the poor, whenever they think about it. The individual elderly volunteer at times; but as a church, we do very little.

And I guarantee, if asked, there are members of that congregation that would shudder in disgust or outrage or self-righteous indignation at the thought of giving money to people on the street corner. *It's his own fault he's gotten to this place, they'd say; he should have made better choices, or worked hard, or gotten better grades in school, or went to school in the first place. And he'll only use it for beer or drugs.* He could never use it on a coat or this month's rent.

The idea must be that spiritual charity—that giving your good example, your righteousness, your Christ-likeness—is far more important and everlasting than whatever physical acts you do; that a man's soul and spiritual needs are more imperative than his body. But how can the soul survive long enough to accept that salvation we've never learned to preach, if there's no body left to house it?

~

I helped out at the Salvation Army a few times—three, to be exact. Although most of us had attended this school since we were kindergarteners and had long since fulfilled the required ten hours of community service, Mr. W. was a radical, new teacher, determined to mix things up

both in and out of the classroom. The assignment was ten more hours of community service *outside* of school requirements.

I chose the Salvation Army; it was only ten minutes from my house and no one else had picked it yet. Besides, I was close with the school's Spanish teacher, who could get me in to volunteering there with minimal effort on my part.

Unexpectedly—though it shouldn't have been unexpected at all, as a Christian it should have been the only thing I could expect—I enjoyed it. Loved it. I loved carrying food from the kitchen to the dining room (not having a license to cook, myself) and arranging it aesthetically; I loved setting up the room, loved serving the food to the line of people who walked past the table, their plates held out beseechingly, humbly. I loved smiling at them, making conversation with them. I loved the dirty little faces of the children in their dirty little coats; I loved the old men who weren't lecherous at all but far more gentlemanly than any young man I had ever met; I loved the prostitute who lived under the bridge and picked out a tune on the clanky old piano, its plastic key coverings yellowed and chipped or broken off altogether, loved the way she cried when I told her it sounded beautiful. I loved the prayer the wall-eyed man in the wheelchair prayed every day, the sense of community I felt from and with every person in that room.

I never went back after those three Saturdays. I don't know why; I loved it.

That's a lie. I know exactly why. It's because I'm lazy and I covet my Saturday mornings and the warmth of my bed, too much to give them up when my senior-year English grade isn't at stake.

I've never seen ethics breached, because I've never put myself in a position to see such.

I've been told ethical explorations often occur out of negative experiences—trouble, strife, or wrongdoing against the individual. But can ethics be explored outside of the negative? Can that exploration even be valid?

~

I spent a month studying abroad in Florence, Italy. It was magnificent—the old buildings with their wood-carved doors with lion's-head knockers, the large stones laid for the narrow streets, the massive marble Duomo and the elaborately decorated churches, their steps speckled with beggars.

I knew they'd be hard to resist—the chaperoning professors had lectured us quite extensively on keeping our money safely hidden away from thieves at the train stations and beggars at the churches. We were told they didn't want the charity of our measly Euros, loose change; they wanted to see where we gullible Americans kept the rest of it.

But Professor D. was different. She was obsessed with nuns and social work, and had befriended an English-speaking nun while over there. The nun's main focus of advocacy was ministry to the Roma, “gypsies,” of Florence; she told Professor D., who passed the word along to us, that it was dangerous to give alms to the poor. Dangerous for us: we might get bombarded with more Roma who had seen us extend our hands, or we might mistake a thief for a Roma, a thief who would make off with our purses and wallets so subtly we wouldn't notice until we went to reach for Euros for museum admissions or gelato. Dangerous for them: it kept the Roma

in a cycle of poverty, begging, poverty, rather than giving them the initiative to seek out the social workers and programs formulated to get them out of it.

~

One of the most obvious signs of piety, of dedication to the Christian life, of ethics, has been, historically, charity. Christ gave all, and as His followers we should be willing to give all—time, money, compassion. And as He reminded us, multiple times, there will never be a time without those needing compassion.

“Some people nowadays say that charity ought to be unnecessary and that instead of giving to the poor we ought to be producing a society in which there were no poor to give to. They may be quite right in saying that we ought to produce this kind of society. But if anyone thinks that, as a consequence, you can stop giving in the meantime, then he has parted company with all Christian morality. I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So what do you do when charity harms?

~

We were entering the Santa Maria del Fiore the first Sunday we were in Florence. Mass at the city's biggest tourist attraction was the perfect opportunity for them to solicit the pious worshippers and the curious foreigners.

I saw a flash of her hot pink shirt in the corner of my eye. I'd like to say I hadn't notice her because there was a crowd, but that would be a lie. I was too overwhelmed with the way the white marble gleamed in the morning sunlight and the pigeons perched on the statute of an apostle to take much notice of anyone around me as I made my way to the sanctuary door.

"*Scusami, scusami!*" I dazedly looked in her direction. She continued on in rattling Italian, her voice scratchy, as if from cigarettes. She shoved a dirty paper cup housing one euro in my direction, a cup clutched in a grimy brown hand with broken, yellow nails.

I took in the spider's web of wrinkles across her small, squarish face, looked at, not in, her cinnabar-colored eyes. Looked down at the cup. "No, no," I said, smiling gently. The professors who had warned us of charity were waiting for me to join them before the door of the church; I didn't want to hear another lecture. And besides, I needed to save my change for the offering plate.

"Please, *bella*," she tried again, putting her thumb and fingertips together, to her mouth, away again, blowing me kisses Italian-style. I blew them back. I wanted to show her love, show her I wasn't just a cold-heart; I think it looked more like mimicry, mockery.

I left her kneeling on the steps of the Duomo with her cup and euro as I went in to the ornate sanctuary for Mass.

I was lucky enough to get a scholarship and a loan for the trip to Florence.

I've been the cause of ethics breached, because I'm too privileged.

~

My father doesn't believe in charity. Oh, he'll help out at street ministries, handing out bananas or bottles of water or granola bars to the homeless and poor lined up in the church parking lot. He'll do it when it's organized. But to just give away money to a cardboard-wielding man on the side of the street? No way. He won't even look that direction.

But the man on the street is more often than not a man in line on a church parking lot. My mother and sister and I try to give a few dollars to sidewalk men when we can.

On my sixteenth birthday, we passed a man and drove back around to give him a granola bar, pleased with ourselves and proud of him for his gratitude, for tearing into that bar like he was starving, not a drunk.

~

It will not bother me in the hour of death to reflect that I have been "had for a sucker" by any number of impostors; but it would be a torment to know that one had refused even one person in need.^{iv}

~

Professor D. was collecting any leftover items that we had no more use or luggage room for, to give to the nun who worked with the Roma. I wanted to go with her, to meet this woman and possibly these people I had neglected for a month.

But I was too shy to ask. And besides, it was getting dark, and I was hungry.

~

He sat in a metal fold-up chair on the steps of the Museo di San Marco. We scurried past him while his back was turned. I hadn't seen a Roma man my entire stay. His hair was thin and silver and combed over, his eyes were dark and thick-lidded, their corners stretched out to the sides.

We looked at more paintings, just as we had been doing every day for a month—Fra Angelico's *Anunciation. Deposition. The Last Judgment.*

He was still there when we came back outside, sitting in his cold metal chair. "*Bella, bella, per favore!*"

I shook my head and walked past.

Stopped.

Ignored the way my friend took tiny, shuffling steps in an attempt to get me to just come along.

Reached into my pocket where I had shoved all the spare euros I had gotten for change in the gift shop. Listened to the way they *plinked* against each other as they fell into his wooden bowl.

"*Grazie, bella.*" His voice was scratchy, too, and thick with spit. He blew Italian kisses.

I blew them back. Looked in his eyes. "*Grazie*," I replied.

It was my last day in Florence, I wasn't going to use them, anyway.

~

The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you "love" your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.^v

I don't want to be a part of ethics breached because I am too privileged.

Bibliography

-
- ⁱ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Richard Aldington (Garden City NY: Garden City Books, 1930), v.
- ⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 43.
- ⁱⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 86.
- ^{iv} C.S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 105–106 (October 26, 1962).
- ^v C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 131.