

Karma and Grace

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As a boy I would often go over to my friend Lee's house during the day. His mom and mine had a babysitting arrangement, so I was over there a lot. He lived a bit more in the country than I did, and as a result small animals were a pretty common occurrence for us small curious little boys. I remember we once found a salamander in their basement, a dark dank place where they would store the canned vegetables every summer. And there he was this three inch thing, it seemed like an alien from another world to us, scurrying behind the tomatoes and peaches. We tried to catch him, but he was surprisingly quick.

One animal that we could often catch, of course, was frogs. Particularly the little frogs, only about an inch or so long, that hung out under the porch. It was damp and cool and the frogs really liked it in there. These little ones also peaked our curiosity. Unfortunately for them, they were not as smart as the salamander. Nor were they as fast. The frogs were too trusting of us and did not fully appreciate the wonder

and curiosity a small child has about life and death. Here were these small frogs that even at four years old I could hold in my little hand. Fascinating. What was even more fascinating was stomping on them. It is not my proudest moment, but more than a few of these frogs fell victim to my foot for no good reason other than I wanted to see what would happen, and I had nothing better to do. As I got older I used to kill insects too.

Many years later, I think it was my tween years, I remembered killing all of these frogs as a child and I was overcome by guilt. At this latter stage I had become a rather fervent Christian, I prayed every night to God a rather complicated prayer, actually. I began to worry that I might have incurred God's condemnation for killing these small creatures. Had I violated the "Thou Shalt Not Kill" commandment? At age 12 I was unsure. But it surely scared me enough that I felt the need to repent of my actions.

Certainly I regret killing those frogs when I was a child. Buddhism and Hinduism would say that there is a consequence for every action we take, be it good, bad, or neutral. "Action" is the English translation for the Sanskrit word "karma." Karma is simply action. Depending on the tradition and the teacher, it might be a very literal system of cosmic justice—I killed a frog and therefore in a future life those frogs will get the chance to kill me in some form, or it can be more metaphorical and this-worldly. Zen Buddhism teaches that karma is

simply the law of cause and effect; not unlike what science would say. Indeed Darwin might go a step further and argue that as a kid I stepped on the members of the frog population who were too slow or stupid to know better than to move out of the way of little kid. By squashing them, I weeded out the weak links in the gene pool, thereby strengthening the overall adaptability of the local frog population. That would certainly be an effect resulting from my actions.

As satisfying as that thought may be, and for all I know it might actually be true, the Darwinian argument lacks heart. At least in this instance, it ignores the ethics of feeling compassion for beings that were weaker than myself. I was reminded of the frogs in my friend's porch a couple of weeks ago when I was in the front lawn with my own boys. Thomas and Matthew are about the age I was when I was genetically cleansing the frog population with my right foot. As we were putting away the hose and doing various other chores to prepare for the fall we saw leaping through the grass a small cricket. Instantly they were both enthralled with this cricket's efforts to escape them. Then after watching it for a couple of minutes, my two year old Matthew declared "stomp," as if he were the Hulk and raise his little foot to squash the cricket to death. Fortunately I hadn't mowed the lawn in some time, so the cricket was able to escape under the long strands of grass. Thank God for my lousy yard work! I told my boys not to kill crickets. They were fine right where they were. In the moment I hadn't realized why I

had admonished them so strongly over something that was relatively minor, until I remembered the tiny frogs of my own childhood. There is something about the gleam in a little boy's eye when he realizes that he is not the smallest being in the food chain, and has the life of a small animal or insect in his, or her, power and control. In that moment it is better to choose grace rather than risk karma.

As a minister people sometimes come up to me and ask me what I think happen after we die. As if there were a course at Seminary we all take in which the professor draws the shades of the classroom, speaks in hushed tones, and finally reveals to her students exactly what happens after we die. The fact is, I have no more or less of an idea about that than anyone else. What Shakespeare said about death, through the mouth of Hamlet, is true now as much as it ever was. Death is, "the undiscovered country from which no traveler returns." With the possible exception of the Day of the Dead.

However, in those reflective moments when I draw the shades of my study, and speak in hushed tones, and muse on what I believe happens after we die, I usually come up with some combination of karma and grace. Cause and effect are real. If you go around in your everyday life and treat people like a jerk, you won't have too many friends. Then again, my friend Dave Owen-O'Quill, whom some of you may remember preached here last January, says that if you invite enough people over to your house for dinner on a regular basis, eventually you

will have friends! Coke had a great Superbowl commercial a couple of years ago, in which a guy walks down the street helping people, saving their lives, capturing bank robbers, and song in the background was, “Give a little love, and it all comes back to you.” While I would not monetize such a system to the point where one particular good deed earns you X number of brownie points in some cosmic ledger and therefore you should expect X number of rewards either in this life or the next. Imagine the accounting of that system! But generally speaking there is something to this: give a little love and it will come back to you somehow in some way.

I noticed this in phenomenon recently with the death of two significant celebrities in the past couple of weeks. Steve Jobs died of cancer in his mid-fifties. That in itself is a sobering fact. What surprised me though was how he was eulogized. Don’t get me wrong, I am in no way anti-Steve Jobs. But what impressed me was how significant a loss this was for people. And then I learned more about him. As the creator of Apple, he was the personification of what it means to innovate. Someone called him, “An artist whose medium of choice was technology.” Others noted the irony of learning about Steve Job’s death on their iPhone; one of his brainchildren. Indeed, Steve Jobs redefined how we think about and interact with technology. Although he didn’t see much of it, it would be hard not to put him in the conversation for the whose who of the 21st century.

I mention Steve Jobs for the nerds, now here is one for the jocks. Al Davis was perhaps as innovative as Steve Jobs was in his particular field of endeavor—professional football. He was a player, an assistant coach, and a head coach for the Raiders. When the AFL formed to compete with the NFL, Davis was the commissioner. Davis was a rival to the NFL, and a thorn in their side for many years. It wasn't until the owners of the other AFL teams, the Chiefs and the Steelers, went behind his back that the merger with the NFL happened. This by the way, is how there came to be two conferences in football—a post-merger arrangement.

As owner of the Raiders Al Davis was the first owner to hire an African American coach. He refused to have his team play football in the segregated south. The Raiders were the second team to hire a Latino coach, and the first team to hire a woman as a high level executive. With Al Davis as owner, the Raiders went to the Super bowl at least once a decade, and won three Super bowls in the eighties. Although by the time my generation come of age in football, Davis is a rather curmudgeonly figure, his impact on professional football, currently a 6 billion dollar industry, could not be denied.

Many people praised Al Davis, but I have to say it seemed a bit insincere to me at the time. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I knew that if you were to ask people a week before he died what they thought of Al Davis, it would probably have been negative. The man was a

tyrant and the game had passed him by. He meddled and micromanaged to such a high degree that it was obviously hurting his team. He made some rather shady deals and trades back in the day, and the last of a long series of lawsuits against the NFL was finally resolved as recently as six years ago. While Steve Jobs didn't have that reputation, I heard that Jobs authorized his new biography, which is of course being rushed to print, because he wanted his kids to know why he was never around.

This too is something I believe: none of us are perfect. Steve Jobs sacrificed his family life to some degree or another. Al Davis was reviled by his peers and players, even though he probably didn't care. I killed a bunch of frogs as a child. OK maybe I have done a few things worse than that since, but you get my point. I don't care who you are or who you name, Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa, they will all admit to some moral failing at some point or another.

As we heard from our reading this morning, that is where grace comes in. Grace is forgiving each other, and loving each other, even in the face of failure and mistakes. It does not forget or deny those failings, but loves anyway. There is a certain "in-spite-of" attitude to Grace. This was the genius of the Universalists, and it is also what made them so controversial. They believe that God loves humanity "in-spite-of" our sin and failing. They did not necessarily deny humanity's original sin, as the Unitarians did, but the Universalists believed that God's love and forgiveness was greater than our limited failings.

Therefore love won, and grace was true. Therefore everyone, universally, is going to heaven.

This radical notion of universal salvation scandalized many Christians, and still does. If we are not afraid of hell why would anyone act morally? Apparently Christians are only moral because they have a gun to their head in the form of fear of damnation. The Universalists responded by saying that Jesus came to earth not to get you into heaven but to get heaven into you. In other words Christianity should not be about trying to get your ticket punched into the next world. God's infinite love and mercy should inspire us to at least strive to live with more love and mercy ourselves. Thus within Universalist theology there was a turn away from worrying about the next life, and instead a concern for how to make the present more heaven-like. We are the conduits of God's grace, they taught. We should live "grace-filled" and "grace-full" lives that are service oriented toward the happiness of others.

Karma teaches us that all of our actions reverberate throughout time and space and make up the legacy of our life. We have the choice to make that a legacy of love and compassion or one of neglect and thoughtlessness. Of course the system isn't perfect. Despite our best efforts we do fall short of our intended action. That is where grace comes in.

On the Day of the Dead, it is believed that the spirits of our loved ones return to us, and that they can be addressed. People will clean their graves and bring their favorites foods. They might have a picnic, and talk to their deceased relative as if they were right there enjoying the feast with them. Regardless of whether or not you agree with the theology here, I like that the Day of the Dead acknowledges that our legacy of love is real. We do continue to have relationships with people even after they have passed on. Think of that relative you used to argue with around the Thanksgiving table. How often do you continue that argument, now that they are dead? I know I have relatives like that that I think of, and it can feel like they are still present. Their action, their karma, made an impression on me, mostly for the good but occasionally less so. Day of the Dead takes this a step further by explicitly talking to those relatives and perhaps allowing some grace and healing to enter into old wounds. Maybe there is a moment when you can say good bye, let go of some old hurt, and walk away a bit lighter, and dare I say, a little more graceful.

I have had a surprisingly complex relationship with those little frogs over these years. At first I took life for granted, then I regretted my actions and felt guilty. And then, just a little while ago, the legacy of those teeny tiny frogs called to me once again when I saw my children about to hurt a small insect. And immediately I knew that was wrong, and that I should teach my boys that it is wrong to kill small things that

are innocent and weak. I probably wouldn't take a literal stance and say that the spirits of those frogs have spoken to me, but then again it is hard to deny that they were my teachers. They taught me something about compassion and mercy and grace. Through our karma, we can bring grace to others. That was the lesson they gave me, and it was the lesson I meant to pass on to my sons.

Now imagine how the life of a human being impacts those around us. If a frog can do that, how much more of an impact do each of us have on the people around us?! Let remember the dead and learn the lessons of their life. It will be a life filled with both failure and success, just as your life and mine is. But if we can open our hearts a bit, we will find that our actions become more oriented toward grace than ever before. Amen Blessed Be.