

Can We Salvage Morality?

Gordon B. McKeeman

The inspiration for this morning's presentation came from a sermon by Gordon B. McKeeman titled "Can We Salvage Morality?" As has been my tradition in these presentations, I had intended to simply read Rev. McKeeman's sermon more or less verbatim. But as I read through the text, I realized that it was severely dated (it was first delivered in 1963). Thus many of his examples simply didn't resonate with the reality of the present even though his message still rings true. So what I'm attempting to do today is to paraphrase McKeeman and put his thoughts into a contemporary context.

The case for venality in our contemporary culture is self-evident. The Enron debacle is only the most recent and obvious example. Gratuitous sex and violence in entertainment is another. Then there's the spectacle of corporations wrapping themselves in the flag to move product while, at the same time, they move their money to offshore banks to avoid paying U.S. taxes. The common thread to many of these examples is a political system awash in special interest money where these monied interests openly buy the results they want from Congress and the White House. Sprinkle the whole with the latest accounts of teen-age crime and violence, and you have some idea why the opinion has become widespread that morality is in a state of decline and decay.

However, documenting the symptoms does not diagnose the illness, nor does it prescribe the cure. The major question is "Can we salvage morality from the wreckage of our culture?" It must be preceded by another question, "How did we get into this mess in the first place?" What caused the decay and dissolution of the former standards? Let me suggest some possible causes.

The first is a loss of faith. Western civilization, influenced chiefly by its Judeo-Christian religious tradition, erected a structure of thought which gave a theological or religious under-girding to morality. Ethical behavior was thought to be a highly personal matter in which one's destiny in eternity depended upon one's conduct upon earth. If people were moral, it was thought to be the result of their desire to achieve the reward consequent to high morality, a place in the heavenly mansions. If one failed to live up to the moral standards as set forth by religion in such codes as the Ten Commandments, and if such sinfulness was not followed by penitence, the final result could only be eternal torment in Hell. To be sure, there were some "escape clauses" inserted by the religious institutions, but in general the hope of reward in Heaven and the fear of punishment in Hell were the twin motivations upon which the structure of morality rested. It's worth remembering of course that the most serious charge lodged against the early Universalists was that they were undermining morality by denying the reality of Hell. If, said our critics, there is no Hell, everyone may do as he pleases without fear of retribution.

It never appears to have occurred to people that the basis for morality lay in the nature of our human situation, not in the artificial or imagined benefits that might accrue as a result of restraining one's natural passions. Given this orientation toward morality, it's decline is not terribly surprising.. Many people are now convinced that the supernatural presuppositions underlying this view morality are not true, and that the guarantee of eternal bliss as a reward for exercising self-

restraint during the span of earthly life is a hoax. Unfortunately, many people have erroneously concluded that if morality has no eternal significance, it has no significance at all. Thus morality is reduced to a matter of mere convenience. One is moral if it's not too much trouble.

A second possible cause for the sorry state of morality in our time may be the increasing depersonalization of our society. It's an attitude characterized by two words: "Who cares?" In a small community such as ours, where human beings are still individuals and are known to those in the community, that question is rarely asked. But in a community encompassing hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people, and in a situation in which one is reduced to a long series of numbers or worse, to records in a thousand databases, it is readily understood that many will feel that their individual behavior is of little or no concern to those about them. In George Orwell's novel, 1984, recall the arrangement by which morality is maintained. Television cameras are everywhere, so that unseen watchdogs can monitor the behavior of anyone, anytime. There is always the sense that "Big Brother is watching you." Indeed, many cities today are installing television cameras at traffic intersections to catch red light runners.

Don't we sometimes defend our own behavior by saying, "Everyone's doing it"? Or remind ourselves, "Every man for himself, and the Devil take the hindmost." One simple example of depersonalization will suffice. Thousands of people who would never think of cheating their fellow men blithely make out income tax returns calculated to cheat "the government," or at least the IRS.

A third possible cause is the loss of a concept of guilt and the sense of sin. The insights of depth psychology, initiated by Freud and developed by psychologists since Freud, have been of extraordinary importance in understanding human behavior. One of Freud's significant insights was that many emotionally ill people were reduced to that sad state by irrational and neurotic feelings of guilt induced by irrational and unconscious standards of behavior. But the conclusion to which some have come is that all sense of guilt is neurotic. "Forget the standard, it's nothing but your unconscious image of your punishing father. Your superego did you in!" The assumption that unacceptable standards should be expunged from one's psyche has been extended to include all standards. Is there no place for a feeling that what one has done is really wrong? Is any sense of inadequacy neurotic? I, for one, do not think so.

I should like also to suggest a fourth possible cause. And speaking for myself and not McKee-man, I think it is probably the most important cause. It's the profit motive. We are told, early and often, that the American way of life is the free enterprise system, which is based upon private profit (and private loss if you can't afford your own Congressman). I suggest that this is a dangerous oversimplification. Just think of how much of what comes to our attention as immorality is related directly to the quest for private profit. There is cheating in college. There is cheating in high school in response to the pressure of parents and others to get good grades so one can get into college. And why go to college? So you can get a good job in an expanding industry and make a ton of money.

Influence peddling, shady accounting practices, stock market manipulation, are not these the inevitable results of the pressure for profit, to scramble up the ladder of success, to "win at any cost"? And is it not possible that crime and violence are at least partly the result of pressuring

people to succeed, and when they can't succeed by the usual means of success in school and getting a job, and are thus denied the symbols of success, they turn to other means of reaching the goal. Psychiatrists and others are greatly alarmed at the increase in suicides among young people. The pressures to succeed are overwhelming to many. This is not to say that the profit motive is inherently immoral. It's a powerful motivator. But taken to its extreme, it produces a jungle morality, the survival of the strongest, the cleverest, the fittest. "Nice guys finish last" "I will have profit, the best way I can, but other values may be luxuries that I cannot afford"- this is what the profit motive, taken to its extreme, does to morality.

So in what direction, then, lies the salvage of our morality? Perhaps it lies in the direction of evolving toward new principles of morality. First, it will need to be based on mortality, rather than immortality. This may help to lend some urgency to the task. Tomorrow may be too late. I have only so much life, and I don't want to waste it. Like the Sculptor who chips away carefully at the precious block of marble lest one careless stroke ruin the statue, so we must walk carefully lest a misstep deface our lives irretrievably. This mortality is not a unique situation. It is shared by all human beings. All are caught in the web of mortality and all wish to make life count for them. In the folklore of Buddhism is the Story of Kisagotami, who sought some medicine to cure a child already dead. Buddha sent her in search of some mustard seed, to be obtained only from a household in which death had not been a visitor. In the process of seeking such, Kisagotami came to realize how universal is the fact of death. This is the only life we have folks. We are not going to be bailed out by cosmic compensations, such as "You'll get your reward in heaven!". You're reward is here.

Another principle will need to be that of personal responsibility, reaching even to the largest issues the people of earth face. We often see news reports of those who sit down in front of logging trucks or indeed live in trees to protest the destruction of our forests. Or those who demonstrate at the gates of the School of the Americas to protest our government's support of state sponsored terrorism in South America. Sometimes we're tempted to say, "These people must be nuts!" But is it not really the case that these people have assumed a responsibility that most of us would rather not face? We would rather believe that these problems are too large to be dealt with on a personal basis, and so we abrogate the sense of personal responsibility entirely.

At the height of the Cold War in the mid 60's, W H. Ferry, of the center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, made an interesting suggestion to circumvent the depersonalization of modern life as it applies to the making of war. He proposed that the United States and the U. S. S. R. exchange fifty children as hostages, the Russian children to live in or near the White House, the American children in the Kremlin. It would then be agreed that if either of these great power leaders came to the point that he decided that the war button must be pushed, he would be required to first take a pistol and shoot the children personally, to impress him with the consequence of his act on a personal, first-hand basis. While not necessarily endorsing the suggestion, I do commend its motivation, which is to combat the depersonalization of our current situation. Let us understand that, smart bombs and precision munitions notwithstanding, war is hell. It's blood, sweat, toil and tears.

The calculus of depersonalization makes nothing out of something. It says, "I don't count at all!" Or we say, "The government will pay for it." Who is the government that will pay for it? You, and you, and you, and I. We will pay for it.

In this connection, let us also acknowledge that guilt is real and that it can be useful. Not all guilt is an aberration of the psyche. We do violence to ourselves and to others by our actions, our words, our thoughts. Let us understand that we are not without sin and shame.

Let us acknowledge a higher motive than the profit motive: the people motive. I believe we are in fact gradually coming to acknowledge higher motives than profit, though sometimes against cries of "socialism." Consider the level of volunteerism just in our own community. Hey, we built a park! Literally thousands of hours have been donated to that labor of love. I suspect that just about everyone in this room is involved on a regular basis with some volunteer community organization or issue. Not because there's money to be made, but because there's important work to be done for the good of the community.

One thing more. These will need to be passionate convictions. We are often told, "Be good and you'll be happy!" Sometimes, yes; sometimes, no! It is not unusual that people pay a high price for their own integrity and personal morality. To have an unsundered self is not always either easy or profitable. The Rotary Club used to use this slogan, "He profits most who serves best." More recently it has become "Service Above Self," perhaps because Rotarians discovered (as others have, too) that he who serves best may profit least. It is a fact of life that sometimes we have to be good for nothing, save for the sense of integrity that accompanies moral behavior.

How, then, shall we know what is moral? Here is the answer of Albert Schweitzer:

Ethics is nothing else than reverence for life. Reverence for life affords me my fundamental principle of morality; namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and that to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil. Affirmation of the world, that is to say, affirmation of the will-to-live which appears in phenomenal form all around me, is only possible for me in that I give myself out for other life. Without understanding the meaning of the world, I act from an inner necessity of my being so as to create values and to live ethically, in the world and exerting influence on it. For in world- and life-affirmation and in ethics, I fulfill the will of the universal will-to-live, which reveals itself in me.