

Sins and Virtues

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For those of you who may want to understand more about Scott Brown, the relatively unknown Massachusetts Republican who won Ted Kennedy's senate seat in a special election last Tuesday, I have picture of him where all he's wearing is a smile. Nothing more. I received this startling picture courtesy of my daughter. We usually don't exchange those kinds of emails, but as a resident of Boston, and campaigning hard on behalf of a terribly disorganized Martha Coakley, my daughter sent me the 1982 centerfold in Cosmo of Scott Brown in his "altogether," Boston College law student and voted America's Sexiest Man. "How can people be so stupid?" she asked rhetorically.

Although I was proud of the fact that she could see beneath skin beauty, I was more interested in the polarities fighting it out within each and every human soul. Sins and virtues stalk us at all times as we make our way through life.

I disdain hypocrisy as much as the next guy, but I never felt particularly smug in the disclosure of Sheldon Killpack, our former Utah senate majority leader and co-chair of the ethics committee, when he was arrested for a DUI. He struggles with his demons like the rest of us. When our shadow side is publicly exposed, it's a great day for the devil and hard times for the person. But how do we understand sin these days, and what are the costs when we fall victim? How do we understand virtue and can we effectively pursue it?

On the one hand, sins and virtues reflect old theological themes, anachronistic, terribly moralizing yet precise in delineating behavior that either pleases or displeases God with corresponding consequences. Unitarians may think they're exempt from suffering the slings and arrows of old Christian beliefs, because we're sophisticated in our thinking and unfettered from the constraints of orthodoxy. However, I hope as we examine sins and virtues in a more contemporary light that we might well conclude that the old ideas about excess and moderation apply to humankind in any era...even the present one.

Going back in history we uncover the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Cardinal Virtues, neither of them I suspect have been memorized by anyone here this morning. But they compose some interesting insights reflecting the human landscape. The Seven Cardinal Virtues are not on the opposite side of the pendulum's swing from the Seven Deadly Sins. It's not tit-for-tat where they cancel each other out. The compiled sins and virtues have different histories that led to their compelling respective lists. The Seven Cardinal Virtues were produced in basically two stages: Three theological virtues and four cardinal virtues. The cardinal virtues are:

- Prudence -being able to make appropriate actions at a given time.

- Justice – moderating between self-interest and the rights of others.
- Temperance – practicing self-control.
- Courage – confronting fear and intimidation.

They were derived initially from Plato's *Republic* and massaged by Augustine and affirmed by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. The term "cardinal" comes from the Latin *cardo*, which means "hinge." These represent the hinges upon which the door of moral life swings. (It beg us all, even today, to consider our own door to the moral life and upon what does it hinge).

In addition to the Greek Philosophers reflecting on moral life, we have three theological virtues known as faith, hope, and love. Their origin goes back to the Book of Genesis when Jacob describes his vision of a ladder leading to heaven. The three principle rungs on the ladder were called Faith, Hope, and Love. They are referred to again in Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he states the greatest of these is love.

Technically there are four cardinal virtues and three heavenly graces, but they're folded together as a composite presenting humankind with Seven Cardinal Virtues.

I personally am a bit more attracted to the Seven Deadly Sins although they really don't seem that "deadly" anymore. Lest you have forgotten, I gleefully remind you they are: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Anger, Pride, Envy, and Sloth. They were first codified by Pope Gregory in the year 590, after he reduced to seven, the Eight Evil Thoughts that were divined by a 4<sup>th</sup> century Greek priest named Ponticus.

If we had the time I would ask you to guess which offense (or evil thought) the pope deleted from the original eight. Instead I'll just tell you that Pope Gregory decided to scrub "sadness" or "sorrow" before arriving at the final seven deadly sins. The Pope was undoubtedly insightful enough to understand that if we had to give up lust and gluttony, we at least deserved to be a little sad about those losses.

As we can all imagine, gluttony, an over-indulgence of fine foods, would always present problems for the French. About seven years ago, famous French chefs including Paul Bocuse and members from the academy approached Pope John Paul II in hopes of officially repealing gluttony as a sin. They tried to convince the pope that six deadly sins were sufficient, thank you. They presented good arguments:

- Thomas Aquinas made a clear distinction between gluttony and what the French call gourmandise.
- Dante felt that gluttony was not nearly as evil as pride or envy.
- A gourmand is generous and gives pleasure to guests.
- Jesus himself is marked by associations with food, from the wedding scene where he changed water into wine, and of course the Last Supper. (It's really all about food).

- And finally the difference between gluttony and gourmandise is only semantic. What does a pope know about making cream puffs? Better leave that to the stiffened fingers of French culinary artists.

Probably if any of us were the Pope we might have succumbed to these reasonable arguments. But at least Pope John Paul II offered sincere sympathy before denying any alteration of the seven deadly sins on his clock.

Although the seven deadly sins may not register as a conscious part of our lives today, we must concede that we know well the warning signs when we live with excess rather than with moderation. We try to hide much by using a different vocabulary.

- We are no longer angry, just assertive.
- We are not prideful, but focus on self-esteem.
- Nobody refers to envy anymore; we just show appreciation.
- Forget greed, we're just entrepreneurial; we have a healthy appetite, exercise our libido, and sloth is just an old-fashion term for stress management.

Seven Deadly Sins may not appear on our radar, and yet - - whenever we engage in self-improvement techniques or contemplate life-style changes, there's no escaping the Seven Deadly Sins. To become better people we believe deeply that we need to curb our appetites: eat less and want less. We'll take anger management classes, fast, meditate, and forsake sloth – the couch potato syndrome - by doing yoga, or playing tennis, or just exercising more because it's just plain good for us.

We may dismiss sins but we try to “align our chakras” for inner harmony, and learn those chakras face major obstacles of alignment when we feel angry, greedy, envious, or we over-indulge ourselves in our eating habits or hike the Appalachian Trail. We know our chakras are not aligned when our spouse chases after us with a golf club.

The art of seeking pleasure has always confounded human nature. How much do we need? Where do we draw the line at excess?

We have certainly stopped playing the piety game in order to please God and get good a good grade on Judgment Day. In old theological terms, life was an ardent test with many temptations to pursue worldly pleasures with gusto. If you failed the test you were toast. These days we may not lose sleep over our own immortality, but we remain well aware of the countless temptations laid out before us in all their finery.

It was Protestant thought that tempered the Catholic notion of deadly sins and the rigid life divided between sacred and profane endeavors. Protestants understood earthly pleasures in a sense that we all have these ‘evil companions’ that we need to deal with in some measure. Who here would dismiss the concept of having an “evil

companion,” a force that easily inclines us to be more greedy or envious or gluttonous or slothful than we know is good for us? Who here has never felt rage?

Whether it be Plato serving as the basis for virtue, or Pope Gregory and his finger-wagging guilt-trip about sin, we still wrestle with what it means to lead a good life. The foils to a good life have been labeled sins, evil companions, demons, our shadow side, and more recently we speak of restoring emotional health and self-awareness.

But what has really changed? Life still poses daunting challenges and temptations. We struggle to get a grip. We may dismiss sins as archaic, but we sit sullen in a Zendo to learn that greed actually leads to suffering. We contort our bodies in Yoga beyond recognition in order to add spiritual balance to our barren lives. We deal with our demons in many ways including therapy, martial arts, AA meetings, dieting, journaling, running, anything to move us to the point where we realize that our wants and desires can ultimately destroy us.

We have insatiable appetites and cravings for more and we know the challenges we must overcome to regain our equilibrium along life’s path. Call it the hinge upon which morality swings, or refraining from excess, but basically we are all vulnerable to wishing to fulfill our beastly pleasures with abandon...with no consequences...no guilt...but we also know that our instincts must be kept in check or else we will unravel amid the myriad temptation we face. Lately not a day goes by without reading about banking executives and Wall Street CEO’s with their lifestyles of embarrassing excess. They merely confirm that the old sins are hardly forgotten.

Desire is as real for us today as it has been for all humanity since the beginning of time. There are many temptations and even as rational people, we can’t just eliminate them nor simply dismiss them. We may no longer feel we’ll be punished by an external Deity for pursuing worldly pleasures, but somewhere along the road we stop and ask: What am I doing? Who am I, really? What do I want to be and how should I live my life?

The Seven Deadly Sins are guideposts along the way of life, a kind of check-in where we can take measure in how we’re doing in taming our own demons and evil companions.

Roughly eighty-five years ago, long after Pope Gregory and Plato and prescriptions for sins and virtues....roughly eighty-five years ago long before atomic bombs and globalization and five-figure bonuses for CEO’s, Gandhi captured the essence of the door that swings to a moral life...heaven’s graces, virtues that make our lives tolerable to ourselves...and he also seemed to anticipate our human failings on a grand scale when he wrote the Seven Deadly Social Sins. What did Gandhi mean by Sins? He could not have been clearer: Seven things that will destroy us:

- Wealth without work

- Pleasure without conscience
- Science without humanity
- Knowledge without character
- Politics without principle
- Commerce without morality
- Worship without sacrifice

Don't we wonder from time to time about the state of the world: the greed, the excess, the sins, the capitulation to temptation without regard for others. And then the Sunday worship, going through the motions of Christian virtues without a shred of sacrifice for one's neighbor.

Gandhi may not have been original in his list of sins, but he sure made them relevant to our age and to any civilization. Listen to Gandhi's Seven Sins once more with an eye towards health care, the current recession, the denial of human rights to the LGBTQ community and immigrants. **[read sins]** We can also turn to individuals like Scott Brown or Sheldon Killpack, who along with the big issues of our day, personify the push-pull of sins and virtues. We become painfully aware of our own propensity to forsake sacrifice, humanity, character, and principle in favor of gratifying all we crave and desire.

When society as a whole, or when individuals alone succumb to the evil companion that stalks us relentlessly, we'll do things of grave consequences. Or even worse – the sins can destroy us, and thus we look out on the landscape of our world today with dismay, making promises to ourselves that we'll keep oiling the hinge upon which the door to morality swings. And still in this day and age, we search for the spiritual strength to resist temptations so enticingly placed before us. We know that in order not to be destroyed, we must become more disciplined to want less and consume less. Not to avoid roasting in hell, but to save humankind, save the world, and save a shred of decency within ourselves. Amen