

Whatever Became of the Golden Rule?

Has part of our spiritual roots been forgotten . . . cynically twisted . . . or actually translated into practical living?

by Willis Elliott

"HAVE WE forgotten anything?"

Someone in every family should be wise enough to ask this question just before the final take-off from the old house or on vacation.

"Come on, we checked!" "Well, it won't hurt to check once more. Remember last time? How disgusted we all were to find we came away without the . . .?"

As a theologian and seminary administrator over the past decade at New York Theological Seminary in central Manhattan, I have had the joy and excitement of trying to help hundreds on their pilgrimages. They have been of every race, every life-stage except childhood, almost all religions, all the major and most of the minor denominations of Christianity, many nationalities, and all classes.

Could there be any continuum running through the motivation of this mixed mass of humanity? Nuns, storefront preachers, rabbis, priests, postal clerks, housewives, Protestant pastors. Ph.D.s, grade-school dropouts, and all in between. Was there any one thing each of them was looking for?

The question makes my brain expand and contract. Expanded, I might say, "Yes, they were all looking for God." Or, "They were all trying to make better sense of life." Or, "They were all puzzling over that persistent wonderment of what to do with one's life, one's time and energy, one's freedom." Or, "They were all ministers, of whatever occupation, in quest of knowledge and skills and wisdom that would help them be more faithful and effective ministers."

But contracted, my mind produces an answer equally true in another vein: They were all, from late youth to late age, working away at the exploration of roots.

Some of them sought biological roots, like Alex Haley. Many sought cultural

roots, one's own and others': the West, the East, America, a particular ethnic group and/or denomination. But all of them sought personal spiritual roots. All of them, however they may word it, were sweating out the same question: "Have I forgotten something I need now? Should I go back to square one, in some sense, and run my life through again to discover unfinished business I

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had no business forgetting? Am I a self-victim of amnesia?"

Take the Golden Rule, for instance. Have you heard it mentioned lately? Neither have I. Whatever became of it? What happened to it? (Maybe you'd like to stop reading at this point, and jot down some answers of your own. Then come back and have some fun and, I hope, profit comparing your notes with mine.)

Here are my notes:

1. The Golden Rule just got forgotten as we "grew up" and forgot the names of our Sunday school teachers. Millions of Americans are biologically mature but ages 11-14 as far as religion goes. They stopped thinking about religion when they became Sunday school (and church) dropouts. Mention the Golden Rule and they manage a nervous laugh or a nostalgic story.

Their children? Ask them "What's the Golden Rule?" and some will say "The

Golden what?" and others just "The what?" You can't forget what you never knew.

Now on the long shot that anybody reading these words can't quote the Golden Rule, here it is: *Treat others as you'd like them to treat you. Do for them what you want them to do for you.*

Whether you like my translation or some other, the meaning of Jesus' demand in both the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:12) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:31) is laser-clear. Unless we are biological or moral infants, the basis for our decisions in life will not be selfish.

I remember a rich man, inwardly poor, who drove me to the top of a certain hill, stopped the car and said, "Everything you see from here is mine." Soon thereafter, in one of the world's great museums, I saw a rich man, outwardly poor, whose childlike, wondering eyes as he looked at a great painting told me that he owned the museum. What, I thought, does "own" mean? What is "mine"? Which one of them, do you suppose, is more predisposed to live the Golden Rule?

Almost a half century ago in a public washroom I saw a thoughtless young man throw his crumpled paper towel at the wastebasket, and miss. As he left, the almost-blind old man I was with picked it up and properly disposed of it. Which one, do you think, was Toyohiko Kagawa, who started the cooperative movement and cleaned up the slums of Japan? Both men, of course, wanted public washrooms to be clean for them. Just one behaved in the only way that wanting can be met. That very day I heard Kagawa preach a sermon with a long title: "Jesus Died on the Cross: What Are You Doing with *Your* Blood?" Two rules deriving directly from Jesus'

crucifixion for us are: (1) Don't litter, and (2) clean up others' messes. William Law built this spirit into his principle of logical caring, and Immanuel Kant into his categorical imperative. Kagawa was only doing what comes naturally — to a saint.

So if we forgot the Golden Rule, did we "grow up"?

2. It underwent a cynical transformation into "Do others before they do you." Jesus' dictum is profoundly social, but our spiritually forgetful culture is narcissistically individual. The Golden Rule has degenerated into the Gold Rule: I'll get mine while the getting's good. Do unto Number One. Golden Rule idealism and altruism have yielded to Charles Darwin's survival of the fittest (understood as the most competitive) and Adam Smith's invisible hand (corrupted into a social sanction for greed and insensitivity).

For Jesus' double helix of love — of God and of neighbor — we have substituted the double helix of death — love of gold and of self. Not the healthy self-love in and for God and with and for

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neighbor, but the self-centered self-love that forgets, or is only dimly aware of, God and neighbor. The new cults tempt us to save only ourselves. The new therapies, instead of curing us, deepen our sickness by making us even more "aware" of ourselves and team up with the East to define health and salvation as self-realization, self-fulfillment, self-actualization.

Harvard sociologist David Riesman says that this amnesia about God and neighbor is making American life brutish, as is the cult of self-expression: "Letting it all hang out and being candid are viewed as virtues, and this leads to rudeness." Columbia psychologist Jonathan Freedman roots the "me first" attitude in economic pressures, political frustrations, unrealistic expectations of happiness through affluence: "The upshot may be less concern for how your actions affect others."

Against all this corruption and pollution of the soul, of society, and of the

biosphere, my closest Jewish friend, a modest though world-famous rabbi, says that whereas as a young rabbi he had messianic illusions, now his life-goal is to get into the world to come, doing as little damage as possible to this world. That's a wry way of stating the Golden Rule in its traditional Jewish negative form: "I won't treat others as I don't want to be treated." Take your pick, positive or negative — preferably both. The ancient wisdom of Israel, Greece, Rome, China, includes this saying in many positive and negative forms, all with the warning against self-centeredness and the warrant for empathetic reflection as a light on the daily path. Yes, it is for children to memorize, but it is for every age to live.

So on its way to 1980, the Golden Rule was forgotten and cynically transformed. But also,

3. It got translated into the movements for political, civil, social and economic justice. The movements that justly, though often ineptly and arrogantly, called on America to live the neighbor-idealism written into our founding documents. The movements against the isms of race, sex, class, nation. When, from concentrating our attention on the gap between the greedy and garish in American life on the one hand and what the prophets and Jesus on the other hand call "the Kingdom of God," we are tempted to cynicism, we have both the right and the duty to reflect also on the hidden presence of the Golden Rule in the world-acknowledged American love of fair play and spirit of generosity. The Golden Rule has not died from neglect or perversion; it has gone underground where it continues to nourish our roots. And the faithful Christian will find many occasions to say so, to overcome the amnesia and the perversion.

Furthermore, in pop culture the Golden Rule is getting translated into art. In his film "Manhattan," Woody Allen's big eyes express perpetual amazement at urban denizens who are *not* trying, as he is, to live the Golden Rule. When in a biology classroom one of them says to him, "Who do you think you are — God?" he replies, "Well, I've gotta model myself after someone. Besides, someday I'll be hanging in a classroom [like a nearby skeleton], and I want to be well thought of." Preaching from an unexpected pulpit! A cynical reference to God is shifted into a classical reference to the God-center of consciousness and life in biblical religion. And the self that is not

centered in itself loves itself in God, loves the neighbor as God loves the neighbor and the self, and wants the loved self to be well thought of now and hereafter.

This leads me to the most glorious thing that has happened to the Golden Rule: It has proved itself by transcending itself when it has been lived out.

4. In personal living, the Golden Rule has gone beyond its \$800-per-ounce value to become a kind of solar principle, that human life is radiant with peace and joy when it is like a planet to the God whose Son said not only "Love your neighbor," but also "Love your enemy."

In my Interpersonal Behavior course at Adelphi University last year, a student who was sour on God, life and especially his workmates took as his course project the humanizing of his office. For several years a secretary had carried her left shoulder a bit higher than her right. He hadn't wondered why, but now he asked, and was told she had found no way to cure her bursitis. So he read three books on acupuncture, and in three treatments on the pressure points her pain entirely disappeared. He was so overjoyed that he asked her if she had any friends with bursitis. The mail clerk had never talked of anything but suicide and fencing, which was the only sport he'd ever been good at. Our now somewhat less sour one lied, "I've always wanted to learn to fence! Will you teach me?" Two results: The mail clerk forgot all about suicide, and our unsoured one acquired a fresh recreation and, as I write this, is fencing once a week. Now that peace and joy are back, so is God. Self-love is back, a paradoxical reflex gift from acts of self-forgetfulness.

For "if anyone will follow Me, it will mean leaving self behind — the self that is saved when it is lost! For what good will it do you if, in refusing to deny yourself, you gain the whole world, and lose your soul?" (Matthew 16:24-27).

Now that you have compared your list of what became of the Golden Rule to mine, how about having a friend make a list, and then the two of you have a go at all three lists? ☪



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