



Doing The Right Thing

The credo, “Do the right thing,” was drilled into me from birth. But what exactly is the “right thing”? Is it a moving target that shifts according to our whims? Or is it an undeviating truth that refuses to be compromised **no matter what**? And how do we discern our place on that continuum of conscience? Furthermore, do we have any interest in doing so?

Is right the choice we make out of fear of the ubiquitous “what will people say?” Or fear of reprisal? Abandonment? When fear drives your choices, you can be sure an invisible puppeteer is pulling your strings.

It was decades before I came to grips with the reality that what my mother advocated as “the right thing” was what *she* wanted me to do. Any other option, she admonished, ensured “God’s punishment.” It led to a life motivated by fear and “shoulds.” My own knowingness was in conflict with what I saw and what I heard. So brainwashed was I that I became deaf to the voice of my soul.

To the runaway ego, the right thing is whatever furthers its personal agendas or its hunger for power. It’s that part of us willing to stop at nothing to achieve our greedy, self-serving desires. It remembers every slight, every instance of abandonment, all the disapproval, the pain of every betrayal, of not being heard or valued, and all the times we felt shamed and victimized. It then transforms these wounds into a menu of responses, from retribution, to winning at all costs, to an ultra-competitive need to be right, to an overpowering craving for power and control.

The narcissistic ego revels in life as a zero-sum game. Win/win isn’t even on its radar. If not balanced by the soul’s conscience and empathy, the ego runs amok. It’s Sammy Glick in the novel and play, “What Makes Sammy Run,” who achieves show-business success through backstabbing, deception, and betrayal.

The soul, on the other hand, has immutable values. It’s the voice of our conscience, our inner compass. Ego gratification means nothing to it. Nor do ulterior motives or revenge.

The soul cares about others. It knows we’re all one. Hurt another and you hurt yourself. It quietly pays it forward, without fanfare, and uses our resources to make a difference, not to amass power and influence. Quid pro quo or leveraging our accomplishments is incomprehensible to the soul.



If we are honest with ourselves, we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the moment we betray, ignore, and repress the voice of our soul. It's that twinge in the heart and the hollow feeling in the gut, that niggling "Nooooooooo!" that we swat like an irritating, buzzing fly when we want something so badly that we're willing to sell our soul to get it. The more we repress that voice, the fainter it becomes. To further drown it out, the ego floods our minds with logic in defense of its position and then keeps us so busy we can't feel the gnawing soul pain.

Many years ago, a personal crisis took me to the edge of my known world, to a place where much of what I had been taught no longer made sense. Incredibly fortunate, I found a mentor and a guide who gently introduced me to an alternate reality. One of the first things she taught me was that my mind, my intellect would always steer me in the wrong direction, but my heart, my true inner compass, never would.

This concept was blasphemous in my family. Intellect was prized above all, the key to success in the world. Feelings, especially those that interfered with achieving that success, were to be resolutely sublimated. Now, this makes complete sense if we think about the generation in which our parents and grandparents were raised. Born during the Great Depression, our parents did not have time to feel. Their immigrant parents, themselves dropped into an alien culture, many with virtually no resources other than their intellect and scrappiness, certainly did not have the luxury of reflecting on their feelings. They either found a way to succeed or they starved.

Crushing heartbreak came to be associated with feeling. The pain and loss of the Depression and, for Jews, the emotional devastation of the Holocaust, frequently led to an emotional shutdown to anything that might trigger the re-opening of many not yet healed wounds.

And so it went. A growing obsession with a focus on the mind to the exclusion of the heart. That seed took root and grew into a generation known as the "me" generation, a generation so consumed with self that doing the right thing often became subverted into doing what was best for me. Getting ahead demanded cutting the cord to the inner compass, that wellspring of caring and compassion, of empathy and consideration for the welfare of others.

In our world of mixed messages, we promote the Golden Rule, but many ignore it in practice. The inner conflict and anxiety it creates, we then try to numb out with drugs, alcohol, exercise, or whatever our personal addiction happens to be.

Our souls know the truth. The angst we feel is the soul's attempt to turn our attention inward. But the more it cries out, the more we strive to drown out that voice any way we can.

On a hopeful note I have noticed a marked increase in email messages, newsletters, and books about the Cosmic law of oneness, emphasizing that the harm or good we do to others we also do to ourselves.



Yesterday I met a woman who had gone to Costco to buy flowers to cheer her up while she worked. Sitting outside the warehouse was a homeless amputee in a wheelchair. Seeing him jolted her out of her own mildly depressive state. "In addition to the roses I went in for, I also bought him a blanket. His smile and 'thank you' made my day."

I read about Eric, a bullied 510 pound, fourteen-year-old boy in an Indiana high school and one teacher who rallied the students to create a project to engage Eric in a get-healthy program. The teacher discovered that the weight gain began when Eric's father died suddenly of a brain aneurysm and Eric's subsequent fall in the shower that shattered his leg. Asked what prompted his actions, Don, the teacher, said, "I just like to help others. It's the right thing to do."

I've also been blown away by Tom Shaypac's new book, "Life's Operating Manual," a series of out-of-the-box essays and dialogues that challenge the prevailing and ingrained belief systems that undergird our society. In case you don't know, Tom is the directorial genius who brought us "Patch Adams," "Bruce Almighty," "Ace Ventura," and "I AM," a movie that begins with asking some of today's great minds what's wrong with the world and ends up discovering what's right with it.

In a chapter of Shaypac's book, entitled, "About "Educa-shun," the author writes that our educational system teaches children from a young age that the only way to get ahead is through competition and winning, "a cruel and insensitive system that pits student against student...that rewards being number one over being benevolent." Bullying, he argues, is a logical outcome of this "warped ideology" that creates a choice of winning or losing, with no middle ground.

Competition, Shaypac points out, comes from the Latin, *competere*, to strive with, not to kill or be killed. Shaypac doesn't espouse eliminating competition, more raising the value of compassion and cooperation along with advocating being the best you can be rather than simply being the best. But we need to reward these behaviors if we wish to encourage them.

Bullying and school shootings don't occur in societies where compassion and cooperation are paramount. Instead of pursuing conformity, Shaypac suggests a system that focuses more on each child's uniqueness.

This is soul-based education, and the fact that his book is out there is a positive sign. It advocates grass roots change, and Shaypac is visible enough to get the message out about the value of becoming who you are rather than repressing your authenticity to be accepted or to get ahead.

Raised in a family of scorekeepers, I was in my fifties when I first met a couple whose goodness, generous spirit, and kindness was antithetical to my upbringing where the cost of asking for anything was often measured mathematically.



Soul shines brightly in this couple. He's successful yet isn't ruled by money. They radiate love. Their generous spirit was shockingly unfamiliar.

To give you an example. A number of years ago, I was housebound with bronchitis and a serious ear infection. Walking from the bedroom to the kitchen exhausted me. I had no appetite and had lost weight I could ill afford. One Saturday, a craving gripped me for a rich pastry made by only one bakery that closed before my husband, Danny, could get there.

After a half-hour of mentally going through my Rolodex, the only friend I felt safe enough to call was Jimmy. Busy with their own activities, I imagined my other friends would have very good reasons for being unavailable, and I was fearful of being rejected.

After getting up the nerve to call Jimmy, I meekly said, "I called to ask if you could do me a favor," and then waited, my heart beating out of my chest, for him to interrogate me the way my parents' did, and turn me down with a laundry list of reasons.

"Whatever it is, the answer is yes."

"But I haven't even told you what it is?" I responded, incredulous.

"Doesn't matter." Jimmy might as well have been speaking a foreign language. Tears began to flow down my cheeks.

"It's Saturday, Jimmy. Don't you have family plans?" Most husbands didn't work on Saturday as mine did.

"Nothing that can't wait."

I told him about my craving and the bakery's location. His only question was, "How soon do you want it?"

"Whenever it's convenient."

Jimmy arrived at my front door forty-five minutes later with a huge babka. I sent him home with half of it. Seared in my memory, that incident was the first time I had experienced that level of caring and friendship. To this day, my eyes moisten when I think about it.

I end with a Native American Cherokee story of two wolves.



“One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, “My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is evil—it is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other is Good—it is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, ‘Which wolf wins?’

The old Cherokee simply replied, ‘The one you feed.’”

And so, my friends, feed your good wolf!