

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in College Toward the Maturation of Morality

By

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December 4, 2011

After the publication of his 1988 bestseller, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian Universalist minister, became one of the most popular American authors around. The book is really titled after the first of several folksy essays contained within its pages, including some that help us imagine our world through the eyes of a child. But the book is so well titled that we almost get its point without having to read it—the world would be a better place if we all remembered to share, take turns, play fair, rest once in a while, and hold each others hands. “Think what a better world it would be if we all—the whole world—,” he says, “had cookies and milk about three o’clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess. And it is still true, no matter how old your are—when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.”¹ Or, as Rodney King more succinctly said, “Why can’t we all just get along?”

And when it comes to simply “getting along,” I think Fulghum is right, all we really need to know we learned in kindergarten, the first time in our lives we were no longer the focus of everyone’s attention, of our parent’s adoration, but had to begin focusing our own attention on others. And the first lessons we learn about being part of the wider community, about getting along with others, are those requiring us to share, take turns, play fair, rest, stay together and hold hands.

Unfortunately the world we are in doesn’t seem to demonstrate this simple morality very well. Where is the sharing in an economy that gives almost everything to the top 10 percent and almost nothing to their counterparts at the bottom? Where is the turn-taking amongst politicians who refuse to cooperate and compromise with their opponents when they are no longer in the majority? Where is the fair play in a culture where minorities, gays and lesbians, immigrants and the poor must fight and struggle for the same rights and opportunities as everyone else? Where is the rest for a planet that no longer has time to rejuvenate and replenish its resources because it’s being overharvested at an unsustainable rate? Where is the sticking together in this grand new age, the 21st century, which began with the pointless destruction of the World Trade Center and the continuing wars this tragedy has spawned? Where is the hand holding for those poor countries that have been further impoverished by International trade agreements that seem only to

¹ Fulghum, Robert, *All I Really need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, A Ballantine Book, New York, NY, 1988, p. 5f.

benefit the wealthiest and most powerful nations? Or the handholding of our nation's own children, millions of whom don't have healthcare or adequate funding for the educations they need?

So, yes, I think Fulguhms is correct in reminding us of the important lessons we learned way back when we first started socializing with others. What's sad and disturbing to me, however, is that the morality we learned in kindergarten is far from the best we can do! It is, of course, a far cry better than the ethical egoism that drives infants and toddlers who, understandably, must be demanding of others if they are to survive and get their basic needs met. But by the time we are fully mature we should also move well beyond the elementary morality of kindergartners. This elementary morality is but the least we must do, not the best we can do. It is, what we might call, the Golden Rule morality, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." For kindergartners that means no hitting or biting, taking turns, sharing, etc., etc. For adults it means, "loving our neighbors as we love ourselves," or, at least, treating them as good as we want to be treated.

The Golden Rule, in fact, is such an obvious ethic, so elementary, so necessary to the success of any community, that some form of it has been articulated in almost every society. It truly is the "Universal Golden Rule." In addition to Jesus' familiar version, Confucius said, "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself."² Buddhism says similarly, "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."³ Hinduism teaches, "This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what you would not have them do to you."⁴ In Islam it is said, "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself."⁵ Taoism states, "Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss."⁶ And the Talmud, from Jesus' own tradition, says, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellows," and goes on to say, "This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary."⁷

But the point I want to make today is that this is not the highest ethical summit, that there is more to be said, that the golden rule is so basic, so elementary, that we begin to understand the necessity of it as young children. If we want to get along with others, we need to play fair. This is the least we should do, and yet, as a society it seems we can't practice even this much most of the time.

In the study of moral development, the Golden Rule, Fulguhms' kindergarten morality, is but a midlevel morality, the traditional morality we ought to come to long before we fully mature. I'm certain enough about this that I wrote the following

² Analects 12:2.

³ Udana-Varga 5,1.

⁴ Mhabharata 5, 1517.

⁵ Sunnah.

⁶ Tai Shang Kan Yin P'ien.

⁷ Talmud, Shabbat 3id.

in my own dissertation; “Developmentally speaking, this simple notion reflects only a midlevel morality; the morality any kindergartner acquires when learning to share, take turns, and play by the rules. If one wants a turn, or a piece of the pie, one must grant the same privileges to others.”

This is so, I believe, because the Golden Rule is a more pragmatic morality than it is an altruistic one. If society doesn’t make certain everyone is treated fairly, we end up with all sorts of injustices that inevitably lead to civil unrest, much like we see going on around the world today, and with the Occupy Wall Street movement here in the U.S.. In fact, developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who sometimes described this middle stage as the “law and order stage,” suggested that social conventions “are always interpreted in a physical pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of ‘you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours,’ not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.”⁸ And, indeed, if we could just learn to do this much, to make sure everyone is treated fairly, as we want to be treated ourselves, making sure nobody gets left out, the world would be a much more civil, law-abiding, place.

Until we can do this much, we cannot move on to achieve our highest moral potential, a morality that doesn’t merely treat people fairly out of practical necessity, but out of genuine love and compassion. This higher sort of moral thinking that treats all people, known or unknown, friend or foe, with respect and dignity, doesn’t come from a place of reciprocity, with the expectation, that is, of getting something out of it for ourselves. Rather, it comes from the sense that all people have an inherent worth and dignity and ought be treated fairly simply because they are persons. It’s not about making sure everyone gets a turn so I can get my turn, or is treated fairly so that I will be treated fairly, but about treating people fairly because they deserve to be treated fairly, because, as the framers of our Declaration of Independence once envisioned, all are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights.

In his book, *The Evolving Self*, Robert Kegan, tells of an Israeli soldier, a medic, who, unlike most of his comrades, gives equal treatment to wounded Israelis and Arabs. “Regarding the Arab,” he admits, “I’ll do the same actions, but I’ll do it, ...not out of love for the man, but out of some kind of a *duty* I feel I have toward him.”⁹ He has come to this feeling because he realizes morality not only transcends his own needs, but his own life. Justice, for him, is a universal principle that must be equally applied to all people, whether they are part of his life, his community, and his culture or not. On a personal level the Arab may be his enemy, but his morality transcends his own self and must be extended to all selves.

It’s not coincidental this stage of morality coincides with cognitive development. At the elementary stage of thinking, the kindergarten stage, children

⁸ Munsey, Brenda, ed., *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, Religious Press Education, Birmingham, AL, 1980, p. 91.

⁹ Kegan, Robert, *The Evolving Self*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982, p. 230.

become concrete in their thinking, meaning they recognize others, but only those who are in their own environment, those, that is, who are concrete, or actually present in their lives. Thus, the Golden Rule morality is applied, at best, only to those they know, not to those they don't. Had the Israeli medic maintained this kind of moral awareness, he would have had no problem treating his Arab patients in a lesser way than his Israeli comrades.

Several years ago, for example, my work required me to attend a speech given by President George W. Bush. At one point he put his arm out in midair, as if around an invisible person, and said, "You've got to put your arm around your neighbor and tell 'em you love 'em." The carefully selected crowd of supporters roared with accolades at his botched attempt to quote Jesus. Yet, in almost the very next paragraph he began talking about "the terrorists," promising to "hunt them down one by one and kill them." The same crowd applauded once more with almost the same level of enthusiasm. It seemed clear to me that for President Bush and those at his presentation, "loving your neighbor" only applies to one's concrete, tangible neighbors.

But around age eleven, if they are allowed to mature without interference, without, that is, being instructed to shut down their minds and critical thinking skills, children naturally begin thinking abstractly, and once that happens they can think better about people and places they've never seen before. This is reflected morally when we begin to understand that all people, those known and unknown, friend or foe, deserve to be treated justly, regardless of anything going on in our own lives and circumstances, regardless of what's in it for us. In terms of faith development, psychologist James Fowler says, "Such persons are ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition."¹⁰ This is why he calls people at this stage, "Universalizers." Or, as Kegan explains it, "Persons become first of all members of one human community, a community to which the Israeli medic, in a way he seems himself to find almost strange, feels finally most drawn."

Indeed this is the world our highest aspirations ought to draw our entire species too, a world in which we need not be reminded to treat one others as we would like to be treated because we understand deep down that all persons, if not all beings, ought to be treated with worth and dignity. But to get here, we eventually must grow beyond our childish milieu so that we don't need rules, golden or otherwise, to maintain law and order, to maintain a civility.

Being the slow learner that I am, I did not begin to understand this until I entered college. Although by age 11 I may have begun thinking somewhat abstractly, I lived in a culture that did not encourage me to look beyond what was happening in my own life, among my own friends and community. At the time I didn't think about people I didn't know, and didn't consider the welfare of those

¹⁰ Munsey, *ibid*, p. 230.

who weren't like me. As a Southern Baptist, in particular, I was encouraged to mistrust, dislike, and dissociate myself from anyone who held different beliefs and lifestyles than my own. I was taught that my world is the only world that matters, that my truth is the only truth, and all others are wrong. I wasn't at all encouraged to put myself into the shoes of strangers, but, at best, to bring strangers into my fold, to make them like me by convincing them to accept my truth and my way of life.

Fortunately, during my university studies, I was forced to put my abstract thinking skills to use and before long both my consciousness and my morality began to expand. So much so, in fact, that I can now say *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in College*. The first lesson I very quickly came to learn was, *I don't know everything*, that, *All I Really Need to Know*, if you will, *I Don't Really Know*. It's an odd paradox, when you think about, because we expect we're going to college to learn something, but a good higher education helps us to unlearn, and I've been unlearning ever since I graduated 25 years ago. Socrates, one of those people I had to learn about during my studies, said, "I am wise because I neither know nor think that I know." Imagine a world, if you will, where such a mindset is commonplace. If we all approached one another with such humility, none of the religious or ideological wars that have plagued humanity even to this day could be justified. Admitting we don't know everything opens us to other possibilities, and to the possibilities of others.

The second lesson I learned is that *I need to continually expose myself to new ideas*. Going to college wasn't about learning a specific school of thought, but about learning how to continue learning for the rest of my life. One of the courses I took, for example, was called, *Interdisciplinary Studies*. In it I was required to read from a variety of sources, everything from classic psychology to science to *Time Magazine*. The course, like my liberal arts education in general, reminded me to become well rounded and not to focus too narrowly in any one direction. In fact, one of the courses every student in the school was required to take at least two semesters of was Philosophy. Most students found it so abstract that it felt like torture to them, but I loved it and soon made it my major. But had I not been required to take it in the first place, I would never have become the thinker I am today. More importantly, this lesson, that I need to continually expose myself to new ideas, doesn't merely open me to other possibilities, but excites me about them! To this day, I not only welcome those who are different from me, but am genuinely curious about what makes them different, and what makes us the same. I want to learn from and about strangers as much as I can.

The third thing I learned is that *it's up to me to get things done*. Going to college is a lot different than going to elementary school and high school, at least it was for me. As a child I was required to go to school, didn't have much aptitude for it, and certainly didn't want to be there. As a result, I never applied myself and couldn't wait for the whole experience to finally be over with. But when I found myself in college, almost by fluke in my case, I realized that I was there of my own volition, that I was paying for it, and that I was ultimately accountable only to myself. If I was going to succeed in college it was going to be up to me. As children,

it's easy to become dependent upon others, to have others telling us what to do, but as we mature we need to become independent enough to take responsibility for ourselves and for our own accomplishments and failures. I may not have to take many tests anymore, or make good grades, but college has instilled in me the certain sense that it is up to me to get things done. More broadly, it means that if I want the world to be better than it is, it's up to me to help make it happen, not the politicians, not my friends and family, not the government, not the experts, or those I admire—it's up to me.

The fourth lesson I learned in college is that *There Are More Important Things than Hanging Out With My Friends All the Time*. I remember being a freshman and, particularly as such, being more susceptible than the upperclassman to taking 8:00 AM classes. Nevertheless, I too often made the dreadful mistake of hanging out in a peer's dorm room talking and joking with other students far too long. So I'd go to first period English, which was already boring enough for me, hardly able to keep my eyelids open. As I sat there, listening to the torture, I vowed I would never stay up so late again—and this time I really mean it! But, alas, my addiction to good company often got the best of me. But eventually, as I better realized *it's up to me to get things done*, I also realized *there are more important things than hanging out with my friends all the time*. This lesson, perhaps more than any of the others, taught me the importance of balance and moderation in all things, that there is an appropriate time and season for everything. It also helped me realize that there are more important things than just my friends, than just my relationships; that I have responsibilities not only to myself, but also to people beyond my circle and life. This lesson, in turn, helped open me to my responsibility toward all people, known and unknown, friend or foe.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned in college, however, is to *Question Everything*. You see, I not only learned that I don't know everything, but that it's not possible for anyone to know everything or to know anything with absolute certainty. This is how college turned me into a mystic, into someone who has had to become comfortable living in the mist, in the mystery. There are, by contrast, many people who prefer to evade the discomfort and uncertainty of not knowing. So they pretend what few answers they might have are the ultimate answers to everything, and unjustly disdain anyone or anything that causes them to question their own worldview. This is the root of many of the injustices and atrocities throughout human history. But in becoming a mystic, in questioning everything, in using the critical thinking skills I learned in college, I'm now able, in my own small way, to make the world a more gentle and peaceful place.

So, to paraphrase Robert Fulghum, "Think what a better world it would be if we all—the whole world—understood that none of us knows everything, and the we must all continually expose ourselves to new ideas. Or that it's really up to us, not our governments or anyone else get things done, and that all people are important not just our friends and those who are like us. And it's okay, not matter how old we become, to keep asking questions.