

# **Morality Today in America:**

**To be or not to be the change you wish to see**

**Sean McCormick**

**The City College of New York**

**September 27, 2011**

## **To be or not to be the change you wish to see**

As human beings are the most complex of social creatures, at least intellectually and emotionally, we are also equipped with certain traits that urge us towards harmony with fellow members of our social groups. The emotion of shame that may arise when a mistake is made that is incongruous with social relations is a clear example of the natural biological tendency towards harmony rather than conflict. The timeless and indisputable existence of love in its myriad forms is proof of our hardwiring for harmony and also an essential ingredient to a happy and fulfilled life. Love, respect, harmony, and other positive emotions are most likely to be born from the fertile soil of morality. Morality provides a framework for interacting with other living beings that precipitates increased love and industriousness and allows human beings to transcend laws of the wild that pit living creatures against each other in the chaotic struggle for survival. To understand what morality entails, the Golden Rule, which is echoed in almost every major religion and is the basis for Confucius's teachings, "Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself,"<sup>1</sup> is a concise definition of how morality can and should govern our lives.

It is no secret that America has some of the highest rates of crime, depression, and divorce in the developed world. Engaged in multiple foreign wars, a pop culture centered on violence and hedonism, and declining education rates, America is rotting from the inside and in great need of a spiritual revitalization, which can best be orchestrated by a renewed focus on morality as an essential element in youth education. Currently, the major focus of our education

---

<sup>1</sup> The entry for "golden rule" in *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, in giving examples, states: "... Confucius, for instance, was asked whether the true way could be summed up in a single word...."Editorial consultant (for seventeen contributors): Antony Flew, ed (1979). *A Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Pan Books in association with The MacMillan Press. p. 134 (entry for "golden rule"). ISBN 0 330 28359 X.

system is how to amass wealth. There are many possible reasons for this, but a major factor in America's plethora of problems is that the system of capitalism awards the highest social standing and benefits to those who amass the greatest amounts of wealth, rather than to those with the purest virtue. The transformation of America from a capitalist to socialist or communistic system, both, which in theory would be more conducive for morality will most likely not occur, so instead morality must be voluntarily propagated by concerned individuals and organizations within the framework of the capitalist system.

One needs only to imagine a world without morality to understand why its necessity. Without it, human beings would be subject to the ebb and flow of their ever-changing desires. No one would be held accountable or hold others accountable for decisions, leaders would lead based on emotion and whims, rather than tried and true moral principles, and the social structure would collapse, reflecting the random nature of a life ungoverned by morals. If there were no respect for morality, what personal laws would prevent spouses from cheating on each other, neighbors robbing one another, and random violence in all public arenas?

If morality was placed on a higher pedestal than wealth or fame in our society, children would have stable spiritual ground to make decisions that would not only benefit themselves, but future generations. Many children in America are raised in front of the television, and thus are bred to buy and consume, rather than contemplating how they can be a productive member of society. Constant advertisements breed a sense of dissatisfaction and inflame the desires of the ego, and if a child is exposed to this constantly from a young age, the mutated desires for consumption and shallow ideas of success can be hard-wired into his or her system. It is the job of the parents, family, and friends to teach morality, to show the child the difference between right and wrong and be available for guidance and protection from the social

ills that plague America and its “freedom.” In doing so, the child will have a foundation of respect, integrity, love, and personal responsibility that will interweave to form a protective blanket of morality. Under this blanket may they rest and dream of a better world, rather than chasing fantasies of celebrity hood and disproportionate wealth.

The greatest obstacles to leading a moral life for the individual are the egotistical desires for material gain and sensory pleasure. These egotistical desires are wildly inflamed by our celebrity culture that places gaudy houses, cars, fashion, and superficial relationships on a pedestal, almost to the point of idolatry. These flaws in America’s morality are passed on generation-to-generation and usually made worse with each following generation. In America we are often taught that the apex of life is our “15 minutes of fame.” This illusion of success leads people to sacrifice moral principles in the pursuit of attention and wealth, rather than dignity, sincerity, and the importance of interpersonal relationships. Parents who demonstrate morality for their children by spending quality time, exhibiting virtuous behavior, leading a life of meaning and purpose, and preventing the exposure to harmful social ills to the budding mind can establish a concrete foundation on which a tower of fulfillment and happiness can be built.

As I mentioned before, another potential obstacle to morality is the capitalist system. Because capitalism is based on the accrual of wealth and not the proliferation of virtue and morality, its most fundamental systems are organized to work in harmony with capitalism. Government, non-profit, and even religious organizations must in some form or another function in conjunction with the designated system that has flourished in America since its conception. It is the job of concerned individuals and organizations to bring the humane or moral element to life within a capitalistic country. Some companies voluntarily donate a portion of their profits to charities, while others mandate community service for their employees. Whether one is a patron



or employee at one of these businesses, it is important to be conscious about what one invests his or her money in so that one does not indirectly support immoral practices.

If Americans had greater respect for virtuous behavior and cardinal values such as justice, integrity, and universal humane treatment, the morality of this country would increase. In order to uplift the general level of morality in our society children must be raised with a strong sense of social justice and the proper tools to become contributing members of a society. This can be done using the lives of moral figures throughout history as blueprints for the creation of a better America. For example, when one looks at the life and teachings of Gandhi, there are specific ideals that can be followed to improve the level of morality in the individual. The words, “Be the change you wish to see in the world,”<sup>2</sup> encapsulates the Golden Rule in a proactive manner. Children can be given assignments in school such as, “For one week, record the manner in which these words apply or don’t apply to your behavior. If you repeat these words before you make decisions, do you see a change in your behavior?”

Morality cannot be forced, but it can be fostered in the minds of the young. The seeds of discipline, integrity, compassion, and love can be planted in the hearts of young children, take root in their adolescence, and bloom in their adulthood if properly nurtured. There are many ways to begin this process. Having children learn the art of gardening from a young age teaches the power of patient and unconditional love, as well as self-sustainability and dedication. These are virtues that build character and enhance the individual’s sense of responsibility leading to upright morality. When a child learns how to nurture a seed into a plant, and finally into a fruit or vegetable, they are able to see how steady love, discipline, and attention creates a natural life

---

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2001. Print.

sustaining process and can be pleasurable at the same time. Gardening as part of the education experience or other activities that have a moral component such as community service and engagement would do a great deal to foster a sense of moral responsibility in the lives of the young and old alike. My father often said to me, "Think globally and act locally." Issues of poverty, drug addiction, pollution, racism, bigotry, and many other social ills plague America, especially urban cities. In a dense and varied environment such as New York City there are opportunities everyday for students to engage face to face with these issues and get on-site experience with morality and a lack thereof. In engaging with less fortunate members of society young people will gain a sense of perspective, gratitude for the many things they have that others may be lacking, and a sense of social justice. In seeking to live a fulfilled and happy life, Gandhi said, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others,"<sup>3</sup> However, it is easy to speak on, but more difficult to implement, and this is why concerned individuals must push local community boards, politicians, and other parents to get involved with designing creative curriculums that will foster a sense of morality in their children and community. Each individual has the responsibility to foster a sense of morality within the self and in doing so, the sense of discipline, happiness, fulfillment, and sincerity will emanate from the individual and be a light to guide others on the path towards a better America.

---

<sup>3</sup> Gandhi. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2001. Print.