

Do it for the Fat Lady: Discussing the Virtue of Ren

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I first read Franny and Zooey by J.D. Salinger shortly after my brother passed away. I related to the main character in that not only had I too lost a brother but it was also difficult for me to find any real meaning in life and I was growing jaded by the superficiality and selfishness that seemed to govern the world. The story tells of a young lady's struggle with the grief of losing her brother, Seymour, while simultaneously pondering the meaning of life. All the while her remaining brother, Zooey, helps her through the crisis by reminding her why we must persevere. "For the fat lady" he told her. The fat lady was an answer Seymour would give to his younger siblings when they would question why they must do certain things. Why bother to shine your shoes? For the fat lady. Why should we smile or make our beds? For the fat lady. They shared their unique ideas of who this imagined lady was as they reminisced and looking back she realizes how peculiar their little inside joke was. At the end of the story Zooey explains to her "I'll tell you a terrible secret – Are you listening to me? There isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady. That includes your Professor Tupper, buddy. [...] Don't you know that secret yet? And don't you know – listen to me, now – don't you know who that Fat Lady really is? . . . Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It's Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy." (Salinger) This is how the book concludes and it always left me feeling an excited sense of utter contentment similar to the one it's described to leave Franny in. Her inner turmoil is seemingly vanquished by those words. All we do, we should do for the sake of "Christ" or rather "Love" itself. There need not be any other reason but that and that's how I have decided I want to live my life. To do my best and give my all for the fat lady.

That being said, I believe Confucius's postulated virtue of ren to be most fundamental of all virtues. For without love to serve as the foundation, other virtues may not necessarily be positive or could be subject to corruption. For wisdom, if not guided by love, could be used for deception. Loyalty would not necessarily be to a good cause or person. Faith and hope are wonderful concepts when it's a faith that love will conquer all or a hope for peace which can only be truly attained through a love for our fellow man. Love, especially unconditional love which births benevolence, is the virtue that I've relied on to guide me in the decisions I've made in life. Unfortunately this virtue appears to be less prevalent in society in recent years as it seems the competitive mindset is increasingly being rewarded while kindness is more often being portrayed as a flaw. Even in my lifetime I have seen a marked change in the way people treat one another. The idea of "we are all in this boat together" is being replaced with "Every man for himself."

"Treat everyone you meet like God in drag." (Ram Dass) It was this quote and others like it that I first read in *Be, Here, Now* that allowed me to open my heart to the world in a way that I had not done before. Ironically enough, I had first picked up this book after getting my heart broken. I didn't know how to handle all the unrequited love I was suddenly burdened with but this book made it clear to me. Love is not a possession to be held but a state of consciousness, a flame to emit. It is in the awareness of the ephemeral beauty in every person, situation, plant and animal. Over a decade later I still hold true to this belief. As a nursing student, mother, daughter, sister, friend and veterinary technician I strive to remain in the moment and treat all I come across as I would treat the people I am closest to. I believe this creates a ripple effect and spreads kindness and connection. For if we could just harness this vulnerable compassion with one another we

could greatly reduce the hardship in the world and find happiness as a species instead of placing our happiness on conditional, fleeting and sometimes unattainable objects and concepts. In order to truly be righteous and courageous one must relinquish themselves from the confines of their ego and simply be the love that resides within them and emanate that light to all they come across. I believe that even when confronted with people who may object to this viewpoint by chastising or belittling it, that love can transform them. It is somewhat like water in the sense that it has the ability to soften things, gently persuade those who oppose it and flow them in the right direction over time.

All religions seem to encompass the notion of unconditional love and caring for one's neighbor as well. For the bible states "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself", and the Qur'an states "Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him; and do good- to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (ye meet), and what your right hands possess: For Allah loveth not the arrogant, the vainglorious". If this virtue is present throughout religions it is clearly an important concept and one we should strive to keep alive if only to remind us of all we have in common as today's world likes to constantly remind us of all our differences.

Throughout my nursing school experience this virtue has helped me greatly especially during clinical rotation. When I first started in hospitals I was overwhelmed by anxiety. I did not know how I should talk to patients. I didn't want to come off as unexperienced or aloof but at the same time I felt I was both of those things and I knew this would undoubtedly make my patient nervous. I remembered Ram Dass's quote and when I entered the room instead of letting myself

be engulfed by my worried mind I surrendered to my heart and allowed my compassion to guide me. I imagined how I would treat my own mother or father if they were the one in a gown before me. The words came to me with no effort and I let my heart navigate my actions. It was a success as I believe the patient was able to feel my sincerity allowing them to open up to me. This was about the time I decided I would like to pursue psych nursing upon graduation as I am confident I could bring a level of open hearted understanding which is imperative for recovery.

We can only grow as much as we all can grow. We can only move as fast as we all can move. I strive to bring this notion of benevolence back every day, to treat my neighbor as more than the person who lives beside me but as my fellow man. Sometimes it seems that self indulgence has won and individuality has replaced humanity. Especially when watching television for more than 5 minutes and get a snapshot of the world around me it makes me feel sometimes that I am fighting a losing battle but then every so often, something will happen to shake me from this defeated mindset. While riding my bike home from work one day I fell and dropped all of my groceries and a kind couple walking past had rushed back to make sure I was ok. They helped collect my things, offered me a water bottle to clean my wounds and wouldn't leave my side until they were assured I was ready to ride off once more. This event, and others like it, always refuel my faith. There are still people among us that care for their fellow man, we just need to keep that ripple flowing by not giving up despite obstacles, by opening our hearts, setting an example, and continuing to treat each other with the unconditional love we all tirelessly seek and absolutely deserve.

In sum, despite one's background, age, sex, religion, culture or any other factor that individualizes us the one theme that unites and us is love. It is, in my eyes, the reason we are here and why I find ren to be the most important virtue to hold on to and incorporate into our busy lives. To look past all of our self created boundaries, see we are all on the same path and to love one another like family. I would like to end this essay by quoting my favorite song which has served as a mantra for this belief. Anytime I feel myself being drawn into the superficial, egotistical lifestyle that modern media seems to propagate, I remind myself that "There's nothing you can know that isn't known. Nothing you can see that isn't shown. There's nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be. It's easy. All you need is love. All you need is love. All you need is love, love. Love is all you need."

Works Cited

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