CUNY Lehman College

How I Identified Virtue In My Own Life

This essay will explore how I reflected over what virtue means to me and how it can be found in various aspects of my life.

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Sometimes it can be difficult to see the virtuous side of your family, especially when it's easier to butt heads with your parents or siblings than to look deeper into their actions. When I was a child, holidays were often a frustrating experience for me. I enjoyed having time off from school, like any other kid, but I was endlessly jealous of my classmates and friends who actually got go *somewhere* or just do something fun. Endlessly hearing about how my friends got to go to the Bahamas, Hawaii or Disney had started to slowly turn me bitter... which of course blew up one summer day into a spectacular tantrum when my mother said we couldn't go to a water park. I could not understand why we never got the chance to go out to eat or go to movies or arcades like everyone else I knew. It was only after she sat me down for a long conversation that I started to understand the sacrifices we were making as a family.

As a child you have tunnel vision. You can only see what is ahead of you and everything else is irrelevant because it doesn't exist in your world. As a first-generation immigrant family, us Moleros were the only ones living in New York. Which meant that we never had any extended family around, like grandparents or cousins. However, that doesn't mean they didn't exist. In fact, I have a very large extended family living in what is considered a third world country. My parents have been keeping their parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, cousins afloat for years. A percentage of every paycheck they cashed in went straight back to their family. I didn't really understand for some time *why* it was that they had to do that; it was world shattering to learn that sometimes my cousins went to bed hungry. Or that the streets were dangerous enough that no one could risk going out for days in fear of being robbed or shot. It took my cousins years to finish their education because school was often closed due to budget cuts. That the Venezuela from their stories wasn't the Venezuela that exists today. It broke my heart to learn that my family had it *easy* compared to many others. How could I complain in the face of that harsh

reality? I learned that day that I would rather never go on a vacation if it meant that someone would suffer for my happiness.

As Thomas Fuller once said, "charity begins at home, but it should not end there." For that reason, I consider my parents to be two of the most virtuous people I know. They helped put the majority of my cousins through college. They pay for their water and electricity bills so that they can focus on getting food. When someone is ill, they help with their medical bills and finding them the right solutions that they need to get better. When food itself is scarce and soap can't be found anywhere, they send hundreds of dollars' worth of supplies. They play Santa during the holidays, sending toys and clothes. They even send medicine and food to the church they once attended. My parents are always ready and willing to help anyone in need. They taught me that virtuous actions don't always benefit the person making them, but it will almost always make someone else's day. My family's relationship with religion and God has also played a role in how we try to lead virtuous lives.

Faith can be an all-encompassing emotion. There is something reassuring and comforting about the idea that we are not alone in the world. That there is someone who wishes only the best for us and our happiness. My parents raised me to believe in God, to believe in His forgiveness and love. My father took an active role in this during my childhood, reading Bible passages to us at night in lieu of bedtime stories. We went and still go to church every week. So, you can imagine what a surprise it was to learn that my father's side of the family isn't very religious at all. That it was because of my mother that my father opened his mind and heart to religion in the first place. My paternal grandparents are... difficult. They seem to thrive on chaos, constantly arguing with one another and always eager to drag everyone else into the mix. Their verbal and occasionally physical fights are considered infamous by their children and the majority of their grandchildren... they can act as pretty much the opposite of what you should do to live a virtuous

life. Sure, my grandparents were Catholic in name and made their kids get their first sacraments, but that was it. There was no connection, and they didn't try to live their lives in a peaceful way.

For my father, God and religion was an abstract construct that he couldn't understand. His first real foray into religion began as a way to become closer to my mother, before it became a lifelong passion. Since then, he's read hundreds of theological books or texts, his thirst for knowledge is almost unquenchable, and he has come to his own conclusions and realizations over the years. In religion, my father found the absolution and unconditional love that he had not found at home. He has told me time and time again that to him, teaching his children about God and faith have been the most important parts of being a father. He taught us that faith is to have the knowledge that we aren't ever truly alone, even when we feel that we are lost. Faith is having the belief that when we have done something wrong, have hurt others or even ourselves with our actions, that we will be forgiven if we truly regret what we've done. On the other hand, humans are visual creatures. We believe in things we can see, touch and taste. That's why having faith in something that we cannot experience for ourselves can be difficult. However, there is also something beautiful in having the utter belief that something is *real*. In the Bible Jesus says, "Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). It is something that my parents instilled in us as children, but it is also something that I have *chosen* to believe, to put my faith in as an adult. I think that forgiveness also helps play a huge role in not only religion but in how virtue can be acted upon in our daily lives.

It can be easy to talk about the logistics of forgiveness, of letting go of the past and the hurt you once felt... but it can be a lot harder to actually put it into practice. Let me ask you this, could you ever forgive a childhood bully? Someone that made your school life an absolute nightmare and reveled in it? Bullying, unfortunately, is something that a lot of people can relate to or have experienced at least once in their lifetime. Sometimes, depending on the physical or

emotional abuse that's been inflicted on the victim, the experience turns into a lifelong painful and humiliating memory that they can't let go of. It'll haunt them, playing over and over in their mind when it's quiet. Forgiveness can be the thing that absolves that blight from your heart and frees you from the past.

When I was in elementary school, I became the target of a larger girl in my class. She was quite tall and intimidating compared to my midgut status. As much as I was utterly terrified of her, I also *hated* her with a passion. Who wouldn't hate the person who shoved their face in the fence or stole their lunch and homework? If I was to ever have a more perfect chance to get revenge, it would have been in fifth grade. During parent-teacher conference night I witnessed my bully being smacked and verbally scolded by her mother in the stairwell. The usually stoic girl was in tears as her mother berated her terrible grades. Our eyes briefly locked before I ran away in shock. School the next morning was a tense affair; she eyed me the entire day. And every day after that until the school year ended. That night I'd witnessed my school bully at her weakest, and something clicked into my mind. The reason she picked on me was because someone was making her miserable at home. We had reached a stalemate. I wouldn't say what I saw to her cronies and she would no longer bully me.

When we graduated from elementary school, I thought it would be the last time I'd ever see her, but as fate would have it, we both started the same middle school. My once tormentor had turned over a new leaf. She was no longer a bully in school; in fact, she had nice group of friends. Occasionally we would see each other in the halls, and she'd nod her head at me. A little over three years had gone by since she'd last bullied me, but she was always on mind. On our last day of school, before we graduated, I approached her. She had been surprised but had held her ground. The words, "I forgive you. I forgave you a long time ago," had blurted out of my lips before I could stop them. To this day, it was one of the most cathartic experiences I've ever had.

I hated this girl for years, and then I was just *hurt* and hated that she had released her misplaced anger on me for years... At one point my rage had simmered down beyond understanding the *why* behind her actions and I was just left feeling hollowed out. "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you" (Medrut). It wasn't until I came to the conclusion that I forgave her that I was finally able to set myself free. Verbally acknowledging it to her was the last step I needed to take in order to completely let go of the hellish years of bullying. Honestly, I think it was something she needed to hear too. However, the virtue of forgiveness doesn't need to be as extreme as forgiving a childhood bully. What's important is learning to let go of past hurts and feelings of vengeance. Simply forgiving your siblings, parents or friends when they've hurt you is a good way of acting virtuous.

When it comes to virtue, I believe that it is a subject that should come from within us. It's personal. Our life experiences shape what virtue is, and it is something that you need to define for yourself before trying to actually live it. Virtue is a little more complicated than what is right and wrong, though it's a good place to start, and offers us the choice of becoming a better version of ourselves. For me virtues are simply the *good* things we put out into the world. Our kindness, empathy, ability to forgive, comfort and aide one another are virtues simply because they are all qualities that can help others in need. It's never going to be easy to define and choose what is virtuous, after all you may have a different definition then mine, but it'll be worth it in the end... All that's left is to start putting it into practice and taking a closer look into our own homes to spot it.

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