

IT'S NOT ABOUT ME
CORNELL COLLEGE BACCALAUREATE SERMON
JOSEPH MOLLEUR, MAY 7, 2016

Congratulations class of 2016 graduating seniors—*it's all about you*. No I really mean it—graduating from college is a remarkable achievement, and *this weekend* really is all about you. I'll give you until Monday morning at 9:00 to revel and bask in it, and then, from that point forward, it's not going to be all about you any longer. At least, not if you want to be *happy*.

More than 25 years ago, I read something that really stuck with me in one of those daily meditation books—you know the kind, there's a short passage to contemplate for each of the 365 days of the year. Here's what it said: "Life is not a search for happiness. Happiness is a by-product of living the right kind of life, of doing the right thing. Do not search for happiness, search for right living and happiness will be your reward. . . . True happiness is always the by-product of a life well lived."ⁱ

True happiness is always the by-product of a life well lived. But that gives rise to the question: What exactly constitutes a human life well lived? What does such a life look like? In my studies of the great religious traditions of the world, I've noticed a common thread when it comes to this question of a human life well lived. In a word, what it all comes down to is *altruism*, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "regard for others as a principle of action; unselfishness." Regard for others as a principle of action. Unselfishness.

One example of this common thread of altruism in the world's religions is seen in our reading from the Hebrew Bible's book of Leviticus, which identifies two seemingly worlds apart categories of people and then for all intents and purposes commands identical behaviors toward each of those groups. The first group is those closest to us, described as *our* people and *our* neighbors. The specified behavior is that we "not take vengeance or bear a grudge" against those closest to us, but rather that we love them just as we love ourselves. The second category of people is identified as the aliens who reside with us in our land, with the insistence that our behavior toward them is to be as follows: we are not to oppress them, but rather we are to treat them just the same as we do our own citizens. Not only that, Leviticus goes on to use the exact same language it had earlier used concerning our nearest and dearest, but this time those words are applied to the aliens residing with us in our land: we are to love them just as we love ourselves.

Is this sort of thing easy? Heaven knows, it *isn't* easy. The selection from the Qur'an of Islam that was read earlier compares the attempt to live altruistically with trudging up a steep path. The Qur'an instructs us to set free those who are in bondage, to share our food in times of scarcity with both orphan relatives and needy strangers in distress (note once again the specification of both those near and dear as well as perfect strangers), and further we are to be patient, kind, and compassionate ourselves, while encouraging and inspiring other people likewise to be patient, kind, and compassionate. To live like this, says the Qur'an, is difficult but humanly possible, like making it all the way to the top of a long, steep path.

In a passage from the New Testament that inspired the name of Matthew 25, the Cedar Rapids neighborhood empowerment organization for which some Cornellians have served as volunteers, Jesus gives several concrete examples of the sorts of activities one can engage in as they climb the steep path of altruism. He mentions giving food to the hungry, giving something to drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers into our homes if they have no place else to go, providing clothing to those in need of clothing, and taking time out of our busy lives to visit people who are sick or imprisoned. These things are hard, and that's why I think Jesus provided us with some extra incentive to get busy about it: he promised that if we do any of these sorts of altruistic works on behalf of the least, the last, and the lost living in our midst, Jesus will regard us as having done them for himself.

Tenzin Gyatso, better known as His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, has for decades been a tireless advocate of altruism, making it clear that he considers “unselfish regard for others as a principle of action” to be the very heart of religion and spirituality—more important than which, if any, scriptural text we consider most absolutely true; more important than how, if at all, we name or conceive of God; more important than which savior figure, if any, has our allegiance. I once heard the Dalai Lama respond to the question, “How does a person practice altruism?” with the succinct and memorable instruction, “Both directly and indirectly.” Both directly and indirectly. Directly is quite straightforward, though not easy; directly means: if it is within your power and capability to actually *do* something to help another human being who is in need of assistance, then *do it!* Give them a helping hand, in whatever way you can.

Our previously discussed readings from Leviticus, the Qur'an, and the Gospel according to Matthew provide us with many "for instances" of "directly."

What then is the meaning of "indirectly"? This is where activities such as prayer and meditation come into play. If you aren't able to do something to directly help a person or group of people suffering from adverse circumstances, you can still be of assistance by enfolded them in prayer, or incorporating them into your meditation, or somehow making them the focus of whatever it is you do when you're trying to get deeply in touch with things. Our reading from Hinduism's *Bhagavad-Gita* provides one suggestion for how a person could go about this. Krishna teaches a two-step process in which we first try to see ourselves in others and others in ourselves, and then, having thus identified ourselves with others, we take it to the next level of considering the suffering of others to be our very own suffering. Another suggestion for "indirectly" is made by our reading from the Buddhist text, *The Way of a Bodhisattva*, which instructs us to radiate thoughts of compassion and lovingkindness toward those who find themselves in a variety of adversities: those suffering from mental or bodily torment, those who are crippled with fear or anxiety or grief, those who are sick or in prison. One could hold such people in their minds or hearts and send them thoughts such as, "may he be happy," "may she be free from suffering."

I can't claim to know whether these sorts of indirect activities actually help the persons we are praying for or meditating about—I'm open to the possibility that they can be really helped, and I hope they can be really helped, but I don't *know* whether this is the case. Skeptics might say, "Prayer and meditation, that's just words and thoughts; how can words and thoughts be of any actual assistance to others who are suffering?"

My response to this critique would be that even if we can't be sure whether prayer and meditation have any positive effect on *others*, these practices most certainly *do* have positive effects on the person doing the praying and meditating. A number of scientific studies have reached this conclusion. I won't go into scientific studies here, but I do want to share with you a very powerful statement written by a Hindu monk whom I greatly admire, named Swami Prabhavananda. He was responding to the view that repeating words or thoughts in your mind during prayer or meditation has no practical effect. Swami Prabhavananda wrote, "We are always, anyhow, repeating words in our minds—the name of a friend or an enemy, the name of an anxiety, the name of a desired object—and each of these words is surrounded by its own mental climate." The swami goes on to say, "Try saying 'war,' or 'cancer,' or 'money,' ten thousand times, and you will find that the whole mood of your mind has been changed and colored by the associations connected with that word. Similarly, [repeating a kind word or a compassionate thought] will change the climate of your mind. It cannot do otherwise."ⁱⁱ I would add to what the swami said, to engage in this sort of prayer or meditation over a period of many years will condition our minds in such a way that we will be more and more likely to *directly* help suffering beings whenever and wherever we encounter them. Repeated practices of indirect altruism predispose a person to more regular practices of direct altruism. It cannot be otherwise.

Back to our starting point: "Life is not a search for happiness. Happiness is a by-product of living the right kind of life, of doing the right thing. Do not search for happiness, search for right living and happiness will be your reward. . . . True happiness is always the by-product of a life well lived." And so, class of 2016, my

prayer for each and every one of you is that you will be *very happy*. Because if you are, that will mean you have done an awful lot of *collateral good* along the way in the process of living your lives—you will have assisted, and uplifted, and encouraged, and inspired many people, both directly and indirectly, by living a life of unselfish service. In your lives, the words of the Prayer of St. Francis, attributed to the namesake of the current Roman Catholic pontiff, His Holiness Pope Francis, will have been realized. That prayer says, in part, “Lord, make me a channel of thy peace— . . . grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted—to understand, than to be understood—to love, than to be loved. For it is by self-forgetting that one finds. . .”ⁱⁱⁱ

It is by self-forgetting that one finds. It’s not all about me. At least, not if I want to be happy. I give the final word to the Vietnamese activist and Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who wrote: “Happiness is made of one substance—compassion. If you don’t have compassion in your heart you cannot be happy. Cultivating compassion for others, you create happiness for yourself and for the world.”^{iv} May it be so for each of you!

ⁱ *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, Dec. 16.

ⁱⁱ *How to Know God*, pp. 59-60.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 99.

^{iv} *Peaceful Action, Open Heart: Lessons from the Lotus Sutra*, p. 200.