

# No Resentment, No Forgiveness

Given my last editorial, I feel I have to make at least a passing comment on the result of the last federal elections. What can I say? We got what we deserve. In the days following the election, I became increasingly angry with Ignatieff. I couldn't help but feel that, if he had been in the House every day while it was sitting, if he had called Harper on everything and offered intelligent liberal alternatives to Harper's right wing policies and pronouncements, if he had debated him at every turn, the results would have been much different. Instead, he behaved as if being given the leadership of the Liberal Party was tantamount to being anointed Canada's next Prime Minister. He did not do his job as leader of the opposition and we share the responsibility for not having insisted that he do the job he'd been hired to do on our behalf. We all share in the hubris. Now we are going to have to scramble at every turn to try to preserve a minimum of democracy and social justice in this country and to rebuild a viable and credible opposition to Harper's right wing demagoguery. On the subject of right wing demagoguery, I invite you to read the very interesting article herein by Shadia Drury, *The Rise of Neoconservatism in Canada*.



Like most secular humanists, from time to time I have had to deal with questions from religious friends regarding ethics and morality within a frame of consciousness devoid of

God, of religious prescriptions and proscriptions and of the anticipation of an afterlife. I hold no complex ethical system or philosophy. As interested as I am in ideas and as much as I enjoy reading, it has always been my contention that one should not have to do research in order to know how to live. Simple, experiential lessons are the ones that tend to stay with me and serve me as reference points, as guidelines. Before launching into this topic, I'd like to clarify three things. In no way will I suggest that people who hold religious beliefs and who practice a religion are necessarily less ethical than humanists. Nor will I suggest that human beings are perfectible, that we can progress or are progressing to some more evolved moral state. In his fascinating study, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, Chris Hedges argues convincingly that the mythologies that underpin all wars are mythologies that suggest man is perfectible, that we will become what we are meant to be if only we can all be made to adhere to this or that set of beliefs and practices, religious, political or economic. Humankind is and will remain pretty much as it has always been, capable of a range of values and actions from the most noble to the most vile. Can we do somewhat better, collectively, than we are doing now? The amount of carnage and the rate of environmental destruction for which we are responsible suggest that we could almost certainly. Finally, while I will be referring to the basis of my own values, ethics and behaviour, I am most assuredly not setting

myself up as an example. I fail to live up to my principles more often than I would care to admit.

My own ethical sense, such as it is, arises from three general concepts. First, as has frequently been remarked, the statement that probably comes closest to the expression of a universal ethical principle is what is often referred to as the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This principle rests on the implicit understanding that we all share in a common human experience. While

all of us share in the profound mystery of being, all of us are also subject to loss, degeneration, suffering and death. It is this understanding and the compelling sense of fellowship that arises from it that inclines us to want to treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated – with understanding, with compassion, with generosity of spirit and with love.

The second concept has to do with our role as creators of our own experience. It seems to me more useful and more nearly accurate to consider personal experience, reality, not as something that happens to us, but as something we are constantly creating. In every encounter, all other factors notwithstanding, whatever we bring to the encounter defines what we create. In the immediate, there is nothing any of us can do to alter the variables and the imponderables of any given situation beyond what we ourselves bring to the situation. In every instance, it is up to each of us to create a reality of understanding, compassion, generosity of spirit and love. Considering the implications, here, everything each of us does matters profoundly, since, in a very real sense, reality is not what happens to us, it is what we create. However, some reactions are not necessarily easily controlled.

Years ago, when my stepdaughter was very young, a pervert tried to lure her into a

wooded area of a park. She didn't go and remained unharmed. But when I heard about it, had the individual been in front of me, I would have beaten him to a pulp. I might have killed him. There are primordial instincts that trig-

ger reactions before any rational thought comes into play. For example, the impulses to protect ourselves and our loved ones from violence and to hurt those who have hurt us or our loved ones are powerful, overwhelming imperatives. Many great works of literature deal with mankind's struggle to tame human bloodlust

and the instinct for violent revenge. For example, Aeschylus's trilogy of tragedies, *The Oresteia*, has as a central theme the taming of the Furies, personifications of blood vengeance, and their conversion to the service of a system of civil justice. This is one example among many literary manifestations of a struggle that continues to this day. To regulate human behaviour, on the basis of our evolving sense of universal human rights and social justice, we develop charters, covenants, legal codes, and justice and penal systems to enforce them, locally, nationally and internationally. In addition, every society evolves and passes on from generation to generation conventions of politeness and proper social interaction. These means of dealing with impulsive and unreflected reactions are not without their problems. Laws and legal systems are not all based on universal human rights and social justice. Some are designed to preserve the advantages of the privileged classes that have them promulgated, for example. And, in his book, *Wild Law*, offered for review in this issue, Cormac Cullinan makes a very coherent and compelling case for moving away from the anthropocentrism of our present legal systems, in favour of the wellbeing of earth and all its life forms. And even the rules of politeness and civility can be problematic, for example in so-

***While all of us share  
in the profound  
mystery of being, all  
of us are also subject  
to loss, degeneration,  
suffering and death.***

cieties dominated by patriarchal and misogynistic religious elites. So perhaps law and civility can be left for more thorough treatment at another time. How, then, do we make moral judgements?

I teach a course on the Bible as literature. Once in a while I give the Bible class a moral dilemma to mull over. One of them goes like this. Consider a common-law couple, Anne and John. She is an actress; he, an actor, director, writer. They are well matched and live happily together in every way but one. Anne has a healthy libido; John is an indifferent lover with little sexual energy. As a result, over the years, Anne has a number of discreet sexual encounters with other men, some within their circle of friends. However, in every case she is most careful and does everything in her power to make sure John doesn't find out. And he never does.

In her mid forties, Anne goes through a particularly trying period. Within eighteen months, first her beloved brother and only sibling dies, then her mother dies and shortly after that, her father. In the same period, having been diagnosed with pre-cancerous cervical cells, she undergoes a hysterectomy. Meanwhile John, working on a television production, falls for his script assistant. He is not successful in consummating the relationship, but, nonetheless, he pursues it. In fact, one day, at the end of the production, he brings her to the house presumably to work things out.

Not one to roll over easily, Anne waits until he is out of the room, gets nose to nose with the other woman and says very distinctly: "If you take him from me, I will kill you." Rattled, the other woman leaves shortly after this and is not heard from again. In time, the couple go on with their lives and their life together.

The question is, of course, which of the

two is the more morally reprehensible? I invite them to vote – man, woman or neither – before we discuss it. Almost invariably, more students, boys and girls, find the woman more morally reprehensible. Many of them cast their votes based on the positions, widely supported in popular culture, that the absolutes

***Relationships, I try to help them understand, may best be based, not on absolute rules, but on caring, compassion, support and love.***

on which the success of a relationship rests are absolute sexual monogamy and always telling the "truth". In the ensuing discussion I try to nudge them from those positions. Relationships, I try to help them understand, may best be based, not on absolute rules, but on caring, compassion, support and love. As well, I try to show that those who voted "neither" were prob-

ably nearest the mark, insofar as none of us is in any position to judge anyone else's actions.

To be fair, that is a realization it took me decades to achieve. I had a difficult relationship with my stepfather. For my entire adolescence and beyond, I harboured profound anger against him. It went on for a long time, even after his death. Over numerous perceived "injustices", I wrestled with a dead man for years. I don't anymore.

Here's the experience that helped me get past my resentment. In Montreal there is a subway station named for Lionel Groulx, a public intellectual, priest, historian and teacher who, in the first half of the twentieth century, promoted what has always seemed to me a very narrow, parochial, xenophobic brand of Quebec nationalism. So it irked me that the station was named for him. Until, one day, as I waited in the station, I asked myself: what if I too had been born in 1878, brought up and educated in an environment and circumstances similar to his? Would I have opposed his views then? If I am to be honest, I probably would have held very similar views. And, obviously, if I had had his genes, his body, his brain, his up-

bringing, I would have held his very views. So, what he thought and wrote is understandable to the extent that one takes into account his time and circumstances. They would be completely understandable were one able to take into account every facet of his being. My resentment of Groulx was based on my dehumanizing him, on my reducing him to the opinions he held that were offensive to me. Embracing the whole person leaves no ground for resentment. Perhaps this is a key, embracing the whole person with whom we are one in our humanity. Our shared place in the fragile web of life, our earth's biosphere, is a fundamental part of that. Also universal is our shared experience of suffering, loss, degeneration and death. Within these, each life has its understandable particularities.

These are the considerations that led me to make my peace with my late stepfather. Not to forgive him. I don't believe any human being is in a position to forgive any other.

We just don't know enough about the motivations of those who offend us. If we knew completely we would understand absolutely. So, it seems to me that both resentment and forgiveness arise from relative ignorance and from an unjustifiable sense of entitlement to some non-existent moral high ground.

It is a great relief to feel that it is the business of none of us to resent or to forgive. We can try to understand by learning as much as possible. And it may be sufficient to accept that we would absolutely understand if we were capable of knowing everything about all the circumstances surrounding whatever the offence under consideration.

Contrary to the opinion of some believers, then, moral behaviour does not have to rest on religious faith. Do we really have to refer to the Hebrew scriptures, the Christian Bible, the

Qur'an in order to know what to do? I think not. For me, compassion and understanding are the keys, recognizing that all human behaviour can be understood and that we are all one in the same human condition. On the surface of it, this may seem like the ultimate in moral relativism. But I mean something quite different. Moral relativism, as I understand it, holds that there are no moral absolutes. Since moral positions are moderated by religious, social and cultural sets, none can be absolute. What I am proposing is that all human behaviour is ultimately understandable. And, while admittedly

I haven't taken a poll, I would further claim that this understanding is endemic to the human species, across all religions and cultures. Ask anyone of any culture, religion, or nationality the following question: "Do you believe that if you knew **everything** that lead up your antagonist's actions, that you would then understand his/her actions?" If the question is clearly posed and understood,

the answer can only be "yes". As I have attempted to show above, it is then a logical step to the position that it is no one's business to judge, resent or forgive anyone else.

In the final analysis, one can only be responsible for one's own actions. When any of us feels inclined to resent or to hurt another, it may be that we just don't know enough to understand fully. It may be sufficient to know that, if we did, we would no longer have the grounds to resent nor the need to forgive. And what a great relief that would be. It would free us to respond in the fellowship of our humanity. It would allow us to bring to the encounter openness, understanding and compassion, and that would become the reality we would help create in that moment.

—Yves Saint-Pierre

*...both resentment  
and forgiveness  
arise from relative  
ignorance and from  
an unjustifiable  
sense of entitlement  
to some non-existent  
moral high ground.*

## Letters

Dear Yves,

You put an interesting collection of articles in the Spring 2011 issue of *Humanist Perspectives*. I particularly like 'Reflections On Mortality' by Bill Broderick, 'All Things Weird and Wonderful' by John K. Nixon, 'Tyranny Of The Minority' by Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova and 'Islam Or Secular Humanism?' by Khalid Sohail.

In your Editorial 'Mouammar Kadhafi and the Harper Brand' I think you are being a bit hard on Harper. He was returned with a majority so, despite what a lot of people think, he and his fellow conservatives have a lot of support amongst "the people who elected them, who pay them and whom they represent." It always annoys me when someone gets into office through the democratic process and then people, such as yourself, who are not supporters complain "disaster ensues". Disaster did not ensue with the prorogue of Parliament, though I agree that the Governor General should have pulled the plug. But maybe she sensed something we now know to be true, namely that Harper's Conservatives have more support than any other party. Your Editorial then becomes somewhat hysterical when you declare "...the imperative of global capitalism has resulted, ultimately, in the suspension of democracy in America itself." Really? So we are now living in a dictatorship? Funny how it still feels and acts like a democracy.

It is also funny, actually not so funny, how you failed to mention the real reason for such a heavy police presence during the G-20. The police were there because of the criminals intent on taking the opportunity

to destroy public property and to threaten a group of law abiding citizens meeting to keep the world finances working.

Yves, your obvious biases are preventing you from treating some subjects more objectively.

Similarly, the article by Morgan Duchesney titled 'The Canadian Council of Chief Executives: Northern Oligarchy' also suffers from lack of objectivity. Though Duchesney cited CCCE's website "For the sake of balance and accuracy..." he opines that it is ironic that the members of this "not-for-profit" organization generating billions in annual profits. Why ironic Morgan? Would you also say it is ironic that for-profit corporations support not-for-profit arts councils, hospitals and other public institutions?

Duchesney treats corporations in a way that demonstrates a lack of understanding of basic human production and consumption. Multinational conglomerates only generate profits by producing what people want. If nobody drank Coca Cola how long would they stay in business?

I agree that large corporations wield a lot of power, but they are valuable assets for society, producing the things you, Duchesney, and most everyone else, likes to consume.

I am not sure what the article 'My Lokayatika Mom' added to the Humanist Perspective? The point of the story was lost on me, and the article seemed somewhat out of character with the rest of the issue being devoted to serious Humanist concerns.

—*David Reeve*  
*Toronto, ON*

Hello David.

I am glad you enjoyed most of our Spring issue.

Just to clarify a few things regarding Harper and my editorial. First of all, contrary to your claim, if you count those who decided not to vote and all those who voted against the incumbent, nearly 75% of Canadians did not vote for Harper or his policies and practices. Not fair, you might say, but it is one measure of the breadth of his support among Canadians. It is very thin.

The sentence that you quote in your second paragraph refers to America, that is the U.S.A., not us. The threats to our own democracy are the subject matter of the bulk of the editorial. And while they, the Americans, are not living under a dictatorship, they are pretty well "governed" by a loose corporatist oligarchy, affecting policy making through powerful corporate lobbies with their huge financial power, that operates behind largely hollow would-be democratic institutions. And in the matter of civil rights and individual rights, cornerstones of American "democracy", read the Patriot Act of which Congress recently renewed three of the most controversial provisions for another four years. It is available on line. Or check out the masses of commentary on it from credible and creditable sources. American democracy has become a sad vestige of what it once almost was.

As for what you say about the G 20, I'm going to have to assume you are being ironic.

Continue reading and enjoying *HP*, David. And may you find the editorials less offensive in the future.

Cheers.  
—*Yves Saint-Pierre*