

The Ethics of Transcendence

Social justice is often viewed as universal, but not all ideas of social justice are rooted in the same concepts. They vary, based on location, religion, culture, and tradition. Social justice movements in the East Africa are much different from the movements we have here in America, and inherently ingrained in these movements are ethics, a term which is both intimidating and liberating, and complex to its very core.

Ethical dilemmas are sometimes thought of as complicated situations with simple answers. I have found, conversely, that they are simple situations with complicated answers. Our attempts to save others often backfire in subtle ways, like when western organizations funnel their money and members into third world countries. We must ultimately ask ourselves what it means to be ethical with our remedies to damaging and dangerous situations, even when our motivations are pure.

It often happens that our choices, rather than the choices of others, determine the direction of our lives. It isn't often that those choices have the capacity to permanently impact the lives of the people around us. That is, perhaps, to our detriment. We may lose, rather than gain, in the face of challenges despite our desire and positive action in the face of atrocity. But it is precisely those losses and gains that have the ability to teach us about the intricate nature of humanity.

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My high school career was fraught with struggle: struggles with my health, family, and schoolwork, despite my intense desire to succeed. In the face of adversity, I found that I had friends, though they didn't understand how best to cope with my life situations. I felt old, tired,

and weak, but I did not know that I would find myself bearing an ugly secret that required all of my strength. Luckily, our strengths become evident in the moments when we need them the most. They flow through us and we become the people we need to be.

I met one of my best friends during my participation in a school musical. It was in the midst of thick make-up and flying drumsticks on stage floors that we came together and discussed the very things that made us human. I remember the moment I met her: she was incredibly beautiful and I would say that was of no consequence, but in this situation it stood out because of her evident insecurities. She was *too fat, not pretty enough*, her nose was *too big*. I couldn't understand her meekness and her inability to see how wonderful she really was.

In the months following the production, I learned exactly *who* she was: half Iranian (*dorage* in Farsi), with a mother, father, brother, and sister. Everything she relayed to us seemed quite normal, a term that I reserved for families that didn't have my own family's level of dysfunctional undertones. To this day I don't understand how she kept her facade so well, but it was certainly well preserved. She laughed with us, ate with us, danced with us, and discussed her crush with us. The most we noticed were her quiet spells, which I myself had, and so I chalked up these to her stress and introversion. Nothing ever seemed violent or sinister, and nothing seemed out of place.

Then one day, at a lunch table near the outside doors, she told us that her father had sexually abused her. She looked down at her lunch tray, all 15 years of her, and told us that he still did. The bite of food I had taken turned sour in my mouth and to this day I remember the way my blood stopped, the halting movement of my body in a cheap cafeteria booth. The white noise of the lunchroom ceased and for once in my life, I had nothing to say. I had never faced an actual case of sexual molestation. She made us promise not to tell and the fear in her eyes forced

me to comply. We all promised her that we wouldn't tell a single soul, but I walked out of the lunchroom that afternoon knowing that I was going to break that promise.

The cultural aspect and patriarchal structure of her family did not escape me, because I had experienced a similar family system. I knew the power that cultural upbringing brought to the table, particularly in the case of an American woman married to a man with his own international familial values. Her mother, raised in the northern US, had integrated into a family system controlled by men. After her confession, I truly saw her father's power, but I was not intimidated by it. My strength did not come from bravery; it came from my own rebellion. I saw his traditions and his control reflected in my stepfather's beliefs and found it intolerable.

I don't mean for this experience to be a critique of race or my friend's culture. I mean for it to be a critique of the world we live in, where a young woman's voice was silenced in the midst of her body's constant violation. It was an ethical issue that required very careful navigation, particularly when her father's cultural values imposed silence. She lived in a world where her own mother was brainwashed into believing that a lack of voice did her daughter justice. I cannot pretend that her father's control tactics didn't play a role. I cannot pretend that his culture was not an aspect in that control. Looking back, I realize that it was an intersectional situation and that my involvement in the downfall of her twisted family system was what taught me the difference between opinion and humanity.

It remains very important to me that I remember how clearly I knew what to do, though I didn't immediately act. Perhaps that is true for everyone who sat at our table that day. It would seem logical, empathetic, even heroic, to run straight to an authority figure and reveal the truth. I wanted to run to the nearest adult and let my friend's story flow out of my mouth, but I did not. I

sat with everyone else and stared at my lunch tray. Sometimes I hate myself for not acting sooner and for not saving her from additional pain.

I have come to realize that such situations are far from simple, though the solutions may seem incredibly easy. My hesitation arose from uncertainty. Not once did I believe she lied. Not once did I doubt her story. I knew she had spoken out because she wanted help and desperately needed to be saved. But in a cultural setting, one that I was not familiar with, the situation had taken on a terrifying aspect. Her traditional father, who obviously felt entitled to his daughter's body, would deny everything. And her mother, who allowed the abuse to continue, would do the same. Would my friend deny everything out of fear?

I had many questions, but I was unable to think of more than one possible outcome: the possibility that we would both lose. I wasn't afraid that human services would walk away with no evidence, because there was no substantial physical evidence. Her liberation and safety relied on confession alone. The fear that consumed me was that my friend, who held the key to her own release and escape, would fail to save herself. She had already lost so much, and I knew with certainty that I would lose either way.

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Four of us, all familiar to one another from years of schooling, stood in front of our classroom door and barely took a breath. I knew I was strong and I believed they were, too. In my mind, doing right by someone you loved was paramount, even if you lost them forever. That made the decision easy. I found out quickly that one of the girls did not feel the same way. Before we walked inside, she looked me straight in the eye and told me she wouldn't go through with it. That was the moment I realized how quickly you can lose respect for another human being. She saw the right path, and she saw it wasn't necessarily the easiest one, but she chose not

to take it. The words that came out of my mouth did not match the wrenching feeling in the center of my chest. I told her I understood. But I did not.

Now one shy of a quartet, we closed the door behind us and looked at one another. We were all afraid to speak, perhaps because our words would fail to communicate the horror of what we knew. Maybe we were all thinking about how the first step is always the hardest. Or perhaps it was because no one wanted to say it first.

I didn't realize at the time that my initiative would mark me as the traitor. The others were present, but they barely spoke, so when word got to my friend that I was the one who turned her parents in, I was the one who took the blame. She confronted me in the hallway, loudly telling me that I didn't understand what I had done. I just stood there and sobbed while my classmates stared in confusion. One day later she came to my house with a note, which explained that it had all been a misunderstanding. That was when I began to question my own actions.

I questioned the validity of what I had done, asking myself if I really had misunderstood. I also questioned my morality and whether or not I had made the best decision for her. If she refused to turn them in, the abuse would continue, likely escalating above its current level. The decision was, at the time, very emotional. I did not realize that it would impact my entire life, even though I acknowledged how it could impact hers. When she challenged my actions, the last semblance of strength I had in my body completely disintegrated. It was incredibly difficult to be strong for myself and my family in the midst of our own struggles. I felt as though I needed to be strong for her as well, and initially I believed that I failed.

I did not argue with her or emphasize that I was not the only one to tell. I let everything take its course and accepted that I was going to lose our friendship, but I also acknowledged that my loss was nothing next to hers. I took the blame. And I'm not sorry that I did.

The conclusion of the story was my end and her beginning. After Department of Human Services visited her house, she turned her parents in. She and her two younger siblings were adopted by the same family, a family that has given them support, opportunity, and a better life. We are no longer friends: I never see her and she never asks to see me. I see it as a contract, one that has vastly improved her quality of life, despite the ramifications. Sometimes I look her up on social media to check on how well she's doing, where she's traveled, and who she's with. Often I cry, but I remind myself that distancing herself was a move she needed to make, and one that I completely respect.

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In situations such as these, it is easy to wear what I call the "Savior Shirt". At the time, I took some form of pride in what I did: I had changed someone's life for the better. While she had been my priority, I still factored my loss into the situation. In a twisted way, that outlook helped me cope with losing my best friend and made the process easier. But to view ourselves as saviors is to place our ethics and morals above others. Doing so implies differences in worth or value, and acknowledging instances in which we have done so is necessary in dismantling our moral hierarchies.

I am not a savior. I am a catalyst. And I believe that is what we should all be. Nothing we can do will change who someone is, or even cause them to make a decision that we believe is best. In her case, it was not my decision that directly changed her life: it was her own, although I

believe my actions gave her the strength to move forward. I'd also like to think that she saw my betrayal as an act of love, but that hope is one that I can never substantiate.

It's been said that you have never lived until you have done something for someone who can never pay you back. I wholly believe that statement is true, but it is incredibly important to remove yourself from the equation. My decision was based solely on my friend's safety, but I weighed my own loss too heavily. It might have been my age, but I focused too tightly on what I was about to lose, when I should have only been thinking about what she had to gain. It is true that she cannot pay me back, but I never had an expectation for her to do so. I moved to end the abuse because I loved her and valued her life, not because I wanted something in return. The lives of others should not be bargaining chips or items in a bartering system.

The cultural values that her family held were incredibly confusing to me, despite my familiarity with heavy patriarchal systems. My father figure, while possessing the same culturally hegemonic views that her father did, had not resorted to sexual abuse. The many racist and stereotypical Middle Eastern views that we possess in the United States, combined with her situation, was incredibly confusing, though it was clear that his actions were not universally applicable to all families of their ethnicity. The male-dominated aspects of his culture, while having strong patriarchal undertones, influenced his control, and possibly influenced the molestation. Making that distinction was very important to me, because of racial undertones. I still believe that aspects of patriarchal culture should be held accountable, but I distinguish the male-domination from Iranian culture as a whole. Culture was, however, an important aspect to note because I recognized that my actions would be an invasion of their family system, unwelcome and considered culturally insensitive. I am happy that those factors did not deter me from doing what was best.

It is, simply, an issue of ethical transcendence. Preserving humanity must transcend cultural dictations and social norms, even those that are considered traditional and normalized. Humanity itself, as a whole and encompassing experience, is a bottom line. When dehumanizing actions and movements arise from cultural beliefs, they should not be attributed to a difference of opinion. Any motion that degrades a human being (who makes decisions or maintains a lifestyle that doesn't harm others) directly implies a difference in humanity between the target group and origin group. Opinions, and their amazing capacity for creating tension, must be actively separated from the value of life itself. My friend's safety and sanity were more important than her father's controlling ideals and the system that played into them. I transcended his cultural ideals because I believed that my friend's value as a human being was more important.

The differences between her father's cultural ideology and mine are not differences in opinion. They are differences in humanity: he placed value on his rights and I placed value on my best friend's life. Until we come to terms with our differing beliefs and learn to distinguish between humanity and opinion, we will continue our participation in exploitation and disenfranchisement. There is no universally accepted and concrete term for what it means to be human because we have not yet reached a point in time where we are able to see human rights as universal. Some aspects of social justice are still being debated because of cultural norms and differences.

How do we reach equality when social justice isn't universal or concrete? Social justice movements that concentrate on the liberations and freedom of women are not welcome in certain areas of the world. Iran denies altogether that feminism even exists in their country, seeing it as a western invasion and deconstruction of traditional feminine values. How can I, as a woman, agree to support a system that disenfranchises my gender? As a country, many Iranian ideals of

social justice are different from my own, ideals that I find myself unable to support. The question then becomes, how do we transcend those barriers, especially when we see them as intrinsically human in their nature?

Cultural values and traditions are strong enough to withstand time and space, as immigration has clearly illustrated. They may often change and evolve, but they don't completely disappear. They merge into their new home country and begin to mingle with the cultural dictations of others. Relationships with members of different cultural communities often cause friction, and in the case of heavy patriarchal structures, measures of control that manifest in abusive ways. The ramifications of interracial relationships on domestic violence have yet to be studied in depth (the first comprehensive study was done by Rachel Fusco in 2010, and few have followed her lead), but family systems have the capability of being undeniably resilient against forms of change. People, and their comfort zones, are usually their own roadblocks to positive change. But in my experience, they are also the keys to their own liberation.

Individuals come together to create culture, tradition, society, and deviations from the norm. Ethics, therefore, must be considered as evolutionary if they are experienced on an individual basis. Humans are not set in stone: we change, move forward, and revert. We have an uncanny ability to focus on ourselves, even in the midst of trying to focus on others, which is one reason why we are unable to completely unite. The intersection of humanity, ethics, and social justice creates an intricate world deeper than Mary Poppin's carpet bag. No simple answers and no easy solutions appear out of the depths of this bag. Our first step must come from deconstructing our values and norms. Only then will we have the capacity to see the implications that our beliefs have on others.

Mother Theresa said, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” My best friend and I did. She owes me nothing and I keep my distance, acknowledging that my presence would be an emotional burden. I say that I acted because of the value I place on human life, which is not a lie. But there is no way to untangle love from the equation of humanity. I loved her and I still do, even though the distance between will never disappear.

The bottom line is that we must begin to analyze what it means to differ in our opinions, and how those opinions often operate outside the value of human life. My friend’s father believed that his rights as the head of a family were more important than his daughter’s autonomy. That is not a world I care to live in.

Simultaneously, we must understand that, although we operate in separate spheres, humanity as a whole is constantly impacted by the opinions we hold as individuals. Humanity is non-debatable: people are viewed as people or they are not. We, as a sentient and intelligent form of life, have been hiding our notions of inequality behind opinions and beliefs. I would like to believe that humanity as evolved past the notions that divide us, but we have not. And if we are unable to put aside our differences to surmount the barriers we have created for ourselves, perhaps we are missing the point of life itself.