

The Seven Not-so-Deadly Sins

A sermon for Unitarian/Universalist congregations by Martin Bryant
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From the Tao te Ching #2 (translated/interpreted by M. Bryant)

We can appreciate beauty, only because there is ugliness

We can find the good, only because there is wickedness

These apparent opposites support and define each other.

We must not let our judgments of beauty and ugliness, good and evil, deny the underlying unity that the beautiful and ugly, the good and bad, the long and short, the high and low describe.

They are as a beautiful chord of music, made possible by dissonance

Act within this unity, losing yourself in the unity

By being a part instead of apart, you act without accomplishing,

Give without expectation of receipt, teach by example, create without possessing,

Live in the moment. By losing your work in the unity that existed before time, it necessarily lasts forever.

Emerson: Man is a God in ruins, before we lost our innocence – we were immortal, now the price for our sins is death. But each infancy is as a new messiah.

According to Catholic Church canon - there are seven deadly sins, and they are:

Pride, Envy, Gluttony, Lust, Anger, Greed, and Sloth.

Why are these "deadly" sins - and not murder, rape, incest, infidelity, theft, lying, and talking during a movie?

Perhaps these are the deadly sins because somehow supernaturally, as Emerson implies, if one could live one's life without any of them - one could by grace of metaphysical power live forever. How would we know?

It is hard to believe that anyone - even the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, or even the Buddha, or Jesus has not committed most or all of these sins - if only in a small mental way. That Jesus indulged in some anger, and perhaps very minor sloth and pride are documented in the New Testament and that he may have indulged in some Jimmy Carter style "lust in his heart" is widely speculated. As innocent as newborn babes are - it is hard not to perceive occasional anger, gluttony, and sloth in them.

Another answer may lie in "Canterbury Tales" where Chaucer wrote -- and I have the text -- here -- but I will spare you my butchery of the old English and paraphrase in contemporary Texan:

Now is it bihovely thyng to telle whiche been the sevene deedly synnes, this is to seyn, chiefaynes of synnes. Alle they renne in o lees, but in diverse manneres. Now been they cleped chieftaynes, for as mucche as they been chief and spryng of alle othere synnes. "It behooves one to learn of the seven deadly sins -- in as much as they are the wellspring of all other sins. "

So, according to Chaucer, the seven deadly sins are the "gateway sins". If one can hold these seven sins in abeyance - then one can lead a virtuous life - the other sins will not trouble you. This seems a good description to me.

However, it seems to be almost the nature of these sins that most of us likely commit all or nearly all of them in some small way in thought or deed in the course of every week.

I'll repeat them again.

Pride, Envy, Gluttony, Lust, Anger, Greed, and Sloth.

Now take a moment to reflect on this - without regard to calling them "sins" or "offenses against God" or even wrong - just thinking about these words as adjectives applied to your thoughts and behaviors - how many here have thought or done things in the last week that could be described by at least four of the seven?

I guess we got a pretty sinful group here. Perhaps it is not to surprising – the ethicist Joseph Epstein insists all of the sins except Envy are fun. or Wow! - I'm a sinner among the righteous - who should be speaking up here!

The “sins” are mentioned as early as the fourth century – by the Greek monastic theologian Evagrius of Pontus – who cited eight of them – including “sadness”. In the sixth century – they are prominent in Dante’s inferno and Pope Gregory the first reduced the sins to seven and proposed the opposing seven cardinal virtues.

These are Faith, Hope, Charity, Fortitude, Justice, Temperance, and Prudence.

The sins, or at least discussion of them as such , probably had their heyday in the 14th century - when Chaucer wrote about them and they were a popular subject not only for priests but for artists. During this time - it was believed each sin had a corresponding punishment in hell:

- Pride - broken on the wheel
- Envy - put in freezing water
- Anger - dismembered alive
- Sloth - thrown in snake pits
- Greed - put in cauldrons of boiling oil
- Gluttony - forced to eat rats, toads, and snakes
- Lust - smothered in fire and brimstone

By this time, of course, Catholic doctrine held you could go to hell and these terrible punishments for the commission of any of these sins – but all you need do to avoid this fate – was to confess your sins... and perhaps buy a little indulgence now and then..

Now, like most of you, I consider most of this ludicrous, even comical, but I'm willing to "confess my sins" – and I'm also willing to go along with the idea that all seven of these, if not deadly, are wrong, even sinful. Let's look at why one Taoist/American Transcendentalist UU thinks this:

First what about sin? - what is it and should we really worry about it?

Most theologians would consider a working definition of sin to be “an offense against God”. This implies several things about sin: - when you think of it, much of what we do related to God is not physical action – service is “Godly”, true – but meditation, prayer, worship, awe, are basically thought and word. So it would follow perhaps that if you can offend God at all, you can do it as much with word or even thought as you can with action. In fact the term is “offend” God, not injure God which implies thought or word. - sin can seem, at least among to us who aren't Gods - victimless – you don't have to directly, or maybe even indirectly harm anyone – even yourself – to sin - you must have some sort of God to sin.

Now for me God is a spiritual, mystical metaphor beyond metaphor for the subtle, ultimate reality in which deep unity is a creative, destructive, and sustaining force. And although I'm not sure that God can be offended in any sort of emotional way – there are ways we can be in accord, even in reverence for this unity and ways we are, well, not-so...

Sin, would therefore be an offense against this unity. Sin is act or thought which denies the underlying unity. We could therefore see sin as ego-existentialism. Simply, all forms of sin would be forms of selfishness.

Interestingly, all seven of the “seven deadly sins”:
greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, sloth, and pride

can be seen as forms of selfishness. Greed, gluttony and envy are self-evidently selfish. Anger – is a self-focus that will not permit the empathy or understanding with another. Lust is focusing on what “I want” in sexuality rather than on pleasing another and allowing them to please you. Sloth is unwillingness to contribute energy to help others and “make the world go around”. Excessive pride is unwillingness to share credit for accomplishments and a lack of recognition for all that others do for you. They are all selfishness.

Each involves loss of the view of the God/Unity in one’s thoughts and actions. The seven deadly sins as gateway sins are very consistent with Taoist teachings. Hold the unity in your heart and mind – in your thoughts and actions – be one with Tao - and you cannot offend or be offended. You will not sin.

If you don’t hearken to the terms Tao or God or sin – consider Love. Love is essentially a selfless creative state or act. As important as it is – we may have problems defining it. However I think we can sometimes see clearly what it is not. It is difficult to consider any of the following: greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, sloth, and pride as loving and in fact all can be seen as distractions from loving behavior or even the absence or destruction of loving behavior. We could describe greed as acquisition without love, envy as admiration without love, anger as passion without love, lust as desire without love, gluttony as self-satisfaction without self-love, pride as self-esteem without love, and sloth as well – too lazy to even love.

So if it is one of your goals to become a more loving person – eliminating these behaviors would not be an unreasonable step.

Is there punishment for sin? ...other than being dismembered alive in the afterlife, of course... Well, I don’t believe there is in any metaphysical sense. Obviously, in excess, many of these sins carry their own punishments. No one really likes to be around greedy, envious, angry, leering, arrogant, lazy pigs, over-indulgence in these behaviors will likely

alienate others from your company. In addition, there are dangers to your health involved in lust, gluttony, and sloth – and perhaps anger and several others if you include elevated blood pressure. You may, but I don't believe that there are any even karmic or “what goes around, comes around” sort of penalties from a judgmental God or sentient universe for these behaviors or thoughts. But even if we are safe from retribution, many of us want to avoid destructive, unholy behaviors.

Benjamin Franklin, hardly a Catholic – in fact, a Universalist, thought the seven deadly sins and the cardinal virtues useful. He set himself about focusing on one sin and one virtue per week, trying to eliminate the sinful behavior and enhance the virtuous one. He recorded in his diaries his successes with resisting the particular sin for the week. He did not record if during the week he was controlling his anger he was particularly lustful or gluttonous.

Now if you like wise old Ben, would like to use the seven not-so-deadly sins as a tool of self-improvement, perhaps you'd like to know where to start. I'm not the author of this, but as it has been a popular sermon stuffer among mainstream protestant churches for awhile – many long-term UUs may have missed it – but help with resisting the seven deadly sins might come from a surprising source – a diverse group from all walks of life struggling with each other as much as the elements in primitive conditions on a remote desert island.. no, not Survivor - Gilligan's Island.

Many of you may remember the seven stranded castaways of the S.S. Minnow – Gilligan, the skipper, the millionaire and his wife, the movie star, the professor and Mary Anne – Here on Gilligan's Isle.

So if you'd like to know which of the seven deadly sins deserves the most attention from you – you could start with those seven stranded castaways. If you identify most closely with Gilligan – perhaps you could work on eliminating sloth from your thoughts and actions If you think more like the Skipper little buddy, then maybe gluttony is your problem. If you identify with Mr. Howell, the millionaire – perhaps you should consider

if greed plays too big a part in your life. If you think you are more like his wife – Mrs. Howell – perhaps anger is the sin you should look out for. If, of the seven castaways, Ginger, the movie star, is your role model, or alternatively if you can't think of any of the other castaways except Ginger – perhaps lust is sin you should attempt to work on. If Mary Anne is your castaway – maybe you should look to reducing envy from your diet of thoughts and behaviors.

In a crowd of UUs- I bet we have some folks that identify with the Professor here – and if that is you – then perhaps Pride is your bugaboo. The professor could be kind of the patron sinner of Unitarians – our faith tradition certainly has its share of pseudo intellectual /pseudo mystical vainglory. Pope Gregory “the Great”, way back in the sixth century felt pride to be the most serious of the seven deadly sins.

So now you see – Gilligan's Island really shares a good bit with Dante's Inferno and Canterbury Tales – it represents invaluable self-improvement - so you no longer need to be embarrassed about watching it on the TVLand channel any longer. Even if it is somewhat slothful.

This week, we will of course, all fail in our attempts to be sin-free. As I pointed out and many of us confessed - few of us get through a week without thought or deed which could be described by most of the “not-so-deadly” sins. I know I probably won't get through the day without sloth and it won't be long before pride and lust show up too. I'm only mortal and my seven deadly sins are here to stay.

But I will keep on trying to resist them. I'll do this, even though my offenses are almost entirely victimless and I don't really believe there is any mystical punishment for any of them. I'll do this because I'm convinced there is a metaphysical and humanistic basis for morality – but that's another sermon. And I'll do this because I'd like to keep my focus on – the good stuff.

Ultimately, Ben Franklin had it right – the seven deadly sins are not so much crimes deserving of punishment but indicators which can help us focus on the positive. Excesses in any of these areas indicate we are off course – and we know what can happen to tiny ships that get tossed off course.

As a self-appointed lay minister of a rather non-charismatic religious movement – I don't have the mystical power, the lamb's blood, and waters of the river Jordan, mumbled phrases or any other tool to absolve you of your sins. I won't even let you pay me absolutions for them. I will refrain from heaping guilt on you by insisting that anyone has died for your gluttony, greed, or arrogance although I may say exactly this about our collective selves as a nation.

No, the only sins I can absolve are my own.

What can I do about my sin-drenched soul? I can forgive myself – I can forgive myself as the universe forgives. Because as Jesus and all of the other great prophets have preached “the sun smiles on the wicked just as it does on the righteous” At the right hand of love is forgiveness and we sinners must start to learn to love by loving ourselves (although not too much or we open up most of these sins... remember – all of them are about selfishness)

In closing – I'll say to you Go forth and sin – somewhat less!