

## Reading 1: from the Martin Luther King Jr. sermon *Rediscovering Lost Values*

"...the first principle of value that we need to rediscover is this: that all reality hinges on moral foundations. In other words, that this is a moral universe, and that there are moral laws of the universe just as abiding as the physical laws. I'm not so sure we all believe that. We never doubt that there are physical laws of the universe that we must obey. We never doubt that. And so we just don't jump out of airplanes or jump off of high buildings for the fun of it; we don't do that. Because we unconsciously know that there is a final law of gravitation and if you disobey it you'll suffer the consequences; we know that. Even if we don't know it in its Newtonian formulation, we know it intuitively, and so we just don't jump off the highest building in (Austin) for the fun of it; we don't do that. Because we know that there is a law of gravitation which is final in the universe. If we disobey it we'll suffer the consequences.

But I'm not so sure if we know that there are moral laws just as abiding as the physical law. I'm not so sure about that. I'm not so sure if we really believe that there is a law of love in this universe, and that if you disobey it you'll suffer the consequences."

## Reading 2: Marianne Williamson's *Our Deepest Fear*

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.  
We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
Actually, who are you not to be?  
You are a child of God.  
Your playing small does not serve the world.  
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking  
so that other people won't feel insecure around you.  
We are all meant to shine, as children do.  
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.  
It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.  
And as we let our own light shine,  
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.  
As we are liberated from our own fear,  
our presence automatically liberates others.

## Sermon: a liberal reclamation of natural law

When Dr. King argued in our opening reading that there are moral laws that are just as abiding as the physical laws, what laws is he referring to? In order to be clear in our consideration of an answer to this question, we must start by being clear about the nature of morality. Morality is the distinction between right and wrong, between

good and evil. So, what Dr. King is arguing is that just as there is a law of gravity that describes the inevitable relationship of attraction between two masses, there are laws of morality that describe the inevitable relationships between right and wrong, between good and evil.

Classical natural law was the first systematic attempt to explore these relationships. It was based on the idea that there is a human nature and a human essence which defines how human beings must live in order to have a good life. Aristotle's formulation of the first principle of natural law was that one should do good and avoid evil. However, if we survey the history of natural law, we can't help but notice some of the dogmatic and inhumane positions that have been taken in its name. We can look back to Aristotle and read of natural law used in defense of slavery. We can survey contemporary natural law thinkers and read of opposition to abortion, opposition to gay rights, and support for economic disparity. When we view this checkered history, we might reasonably assume that the idea of natural law is simply one more archaic holdover from a bygone past when humankind had little understanding of the world and relied on inflexible and absolutist proscriptions to govern social life. We might reject the very idea of natural law and embrace the relativistic ethics of postmodern academia. But I suggest to you, that tossing out the idea of natural law along with its substantial historical baggage is a case of tossing out the baby with the bathwater, because, perhaps more than ever, a reclaimed version of natural law could provide the very anchor that liberalism seems to be so badly in need of.

So, let's start with a fresh look at the core concepts of natural law in light of our current religious and scientific knowledge. The basis for our revised concept of natural law is simply the idea that there are rules or laws which govern the operation of the universe. This proposition is generally accepted when we are dealing with the analytical categories of the hard sciences; with laws of gravity, laws of inertia, laws of ecology, laws of genetics, or laws of biology. But when we attempt to formulate what natural laws govern humanity, this is when things have tended to become more controversial. If there is natural law that applies to all living things or natural law that applies specifically to humanity, perhaps these constitute moral law as Dr. King spoke about. The question is: how can we discern these laws? It is true that we are not exempt from the laws of gravity, or inertia, or relativity, which effect all matter in our universe. It is also true that we are not exempt from the laws of ecology or genetics which govern all forms of life as we know it. But human natural law, moral law which applies exclusively to our species, must itself be rooted in those aspects that are uniquely yet universally human.

Aristotle's analysis identified reason as the key human virtue that distinguishes us from other animals. Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and the other major figures in natural law thinking have all followed suit. So, if it is reason, if it is our advanced capacity for logical and speculative thought, that differentiates humans from the rest of the animal kingdom, then it is here that we will find the core of a human natural law.

Our contemporary understanding of human biology and cognitive science, as well as the contextual issues of biological and social evolution, provide us with important insights that were unavailable to the classical thinkers. For instance, it is quite clear to us now that the human ability to reason does not develop much beyond the level of our primate cousins without the acquisition of human language and symbol systems. Language is the cognitive toolkit required for human level reasoning and we are not born with it, we must acquire it through learning. What makes us human is that we learn, and what and how we learn determines our humanity. The evolution of human knowledge and culture has become much more critical to our survival than our biological evolution.

Research in developmental psychology indicates that our worldview and moral development proceed in relatively linear stages, for example from pre-conventional, to conventional, to post-conventional. In addition, there is strong evidence that the average mode of moral development of a population is strongly associated with the types of social structures, institutions, and cultures that the population will have. Along these related arcs of individual development over a lifetime and social evolution over recorded human history, we find opportunities for a new take on natural law and a new story arc for humanity.

Just as most classical natural law has been rooted in the Christian theology of the Fall, in the presumption that humanity is imperfect and flawed, in the assumption that we are incapable of overcoming the taint of original sin without divine intervention; so our reclaimed natural law must be rooted in the ideology that humanity has awakened to an amazing capacity to learn, to understand, to act, and to create. We are here to learn about our universe and about ourselves, and as we learn, as we understand, as we act, and as we create, we are perfected. The ancient Hebrew understanding of the word perfect was not a state, it was not a condition, it was a process. It is this dynamic process of continually learning, understanding, acting, and creating that I believe is the fundamental human natural law.

The first corollary to this law is humility. Humility is the recognition that there is no end to this process of learning, no end to this process of perfection. Our perception of our place within this process may be accurate or it may be wishful thinking. We must be assertive about acting on our beliefs, but open about the ultimate rightness of those beliefs. Like good scientists we must remember that our understandings are only theories and that they may need editing or be disproved as we continue to learn and as our understanding grows. Developmental stagnation often occurs when we forget humility, when we cherish our current theories more than we cherish learning, when we believe we have already learned something, or don't need to learn any more. These failures of humility happen when we forget that it is our essence to keep learning, when we forget that what we already know is just tentative, just a bridge to the next realization.

The second corollary to the fundamental human law is compassion. If humility is the recognition that we never stop learning, compassion is the recognition that the same is true for our brothers and sisters. Compassion, in this context, is remembering that

it is more important to be peaceful than to be right. A focus on being right produces an emphasis on the other person being wrong, it short-circuits the possibility of constructive dialogue, where people can share their understandings and potentially reconcile their disagreements. It is failures of compassion that produce most developmental stagnation at the social scale. When groups and individuals in society become convinced that they are right, that others are wrong, that they have learned all there is, or all that they need to know, then they stop producing open and honest dialogue with one another. While this critique applies to much of the religious right in this country, it also applies to the dogmatic left. Dogmatism is, by definition, both a failure in humility and a failure in compassion.

As we engage successfully in this process of perfection, of learning and acting, then we progress toward enlightenment. These elements of learning, understanding, acting, and creating make up an iterative process of human engagement. In order to work effectively we must learn through observation, understand through abstraction, and apply what we have learned through action, thereby creating our best version of reality. Our moral development stagnates when this process becomes broken, when we fail to learn, when we fail to understand what we have learned, when we fail to act on our understandings, when we have these failures, we fail to create the best world of which we are capable. Because we are not powerless, our greatest fear has come true, we are powerful beyond measure.

Those who have realized their power, who have let their light shine out to the world, they are the prophets in our human story. They are the beacons of moral development who blaze ahead into uncharted territories, showing us the way. They taught us myths when we knew only of the hunt and the cave. They taught us to love all our human brothers and sisters when we knew only of the love of kinship or the love of the tribe. They taught us science when we had turned our myths into facts. They taught us compassion when our hearts were filled with greed. They taught us humility when we knew that we were right. Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Martin Luther King Jr., Tenzin Gyatso the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Mohandas K. Gandhi and how many others whose names are lost in the past, and how many more who will bless us in the future? They are out there among us as we speak, waiting to teach us the next lessons. They are the outliers on the bell-curve of moral development, those who have managed to evolve further than their peers, the bodhisattvas of humanity, hoping for the chance to lend us a helping hand as we labor to live up to our status as the radiant children of god.

If we reject the story of the Fall and its implication of our inherent imperfection, if we embrace the idea of awakening, if we embrace the idea of our perfectibility, then we must embrace the open ended nature of our own story. Once again we have the benefit of knowledge and insights of which the classical thinkers were unaware, we know, even though it is very difficult to understand, that our universe is old beyond imagining, that it is vast beyond our comprehension, that countless species of life have come into being and passed into extinction on this very planet we call home, that the timescales of our human civilizations are but blinks of the eye in the history of life on this planet. We have learned these things together, we struggle to

understand them, and one day we must act on this understanding to continue the creation of our story. Right now our story is but a tiny chapter in the tale of this universe. How large a part we will ultimately play is up to us, for we are powerful beyond measure.

We learn, we apply what we learn to our universe, to our societies, and to ourselves, we recreate the universe as we go. This is the nature of our gift, the nature of our humanity. When we apply this gift to the betterment of ourselves, to the betterment of our brothers and sisters, to the betterment of our environments and ecologies, to the betterment of our governments and institutions, then we do good. We promote the fullest version of humanity that is possible in that moment. Then, we are powerful beyond measure. Then, we are the radiant children of god.

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