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Understanding Why “Good” People Do “Bad” Things

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Note: This paper will also be used as the basis for work on two active projects in my life:
1.) As the basis of two consecutive class sessions for a new course I will be proposing to the University of California system, tentatively called, *Philosophy: Making Better Decisions*.
2. As research for a play I’m currently writing called, *The Grey Place*.

“Tell a Lie Once, and All Your Truths Become Questionable”

-unknown

Introduction

10 a.m. Thursday, December 23, 1976

Cook County Criminal Court, Chicago, IL

Judge Robert J. Collins, presiding

Sentencing portion for D. S. Frey

(This summary includes a basic history, then summary of today's events.)

On November 20th, 1976, Donald S. Frey was convicted by a jury of eight men and four women after two and a half hours of deliberation for defrauding his client, Virgia Moore, 46, Chicago, out of more than \$20,000 in insurance payments after the death of her husband in 1969. Other courts in and outside of Cook County still have outstanding cases against Mr. Frey for charges ranging from tax evasion, commingling of funds, other incidents of fraud amounting to more than \$92,000, charges from the Illinois Bureau of Investigation, and, in Winnebago County, IL, for failing to post bond. Other charges filed in 1974-75 have been dropped for insufficient evidence, or after satisfactory settlement of claims. Last December, Frey's wife, Janet (aka Jean) Imbrie Frey was sentenced to one year on probation for perjury before a grand jury probe into her husband's activities.

Today, in the downtown branch of the Cook County Criminal court system, Mr. Frey received his sentence for forgery and theft. Thirteen witnesses came forward, all telling the court stories of their friend, former Evanston attorney Donald S. Frey. These accounts recalled the ten years, between 1960 and 1970 when Mr. Frey led the Freedom of Residence movement in Illinois, fighting realtors, communities, towns, counties, and the state to change their regulations and laws so that people of all colors could be shown and/or purchase homes in their economic parameters no matter the neighborhood, no matter, period. Without the courage, fortitude, and intrinsic goodness of Mr. Frey, they declared, the state of Illinois, much less the entire nation, would have made no progress in the equal opportunity home-ownership area of the civil rights movement.

Mr. Frey's friends speaking on his behalf today are a somewhat "D List" of clergy, civil rights movement leaders, aldermen, civic advisors, and retired lawyers, both black and white, according to those in the press who would later rush to write their copy for the evening editions. Along with reminding the judge of Mr. Frey's litany of awards (including one given to him from Eleanor Roosevelt, and a nomination to the Supreme Court), the judge makes no indication of being swayed. The final witnesses, all clergy, remind Judge Collins that sentence should be delayed. "After all," one said, "Mr. Frey has an honorary doctorate in religion from the Evangelical Seminary in Evanston, and tomorrow is, after all, Christmas Eve." As if they were reading from a script, they also added that their friend should either get probation or a work-release sentence, and by all means, no sentencing should start until after the first of the New Year.

Finally, the disbarred lawyer took the stand. Frey pleaded for mercy and claimed that he was a target of revenge in a "campaign to kill me" because of his former civil rights activities.

Judge Robert J. Collins rejected all of these requests. He said that the character statements were inconsistent with the fact that blacks had, "entrusted to this defendant their troubles, and he repaid them by taking their money."

State Prosecutors Douglas Cannon and James Sternik argued for the stiffest jail term.

Then, in what one reporter described as an icy voice, Judge Collins calmly, firmly, sentenced Frey to ten years in jail and fined him \$10,000, imposing the maximum sentence. "You have dishonored yourself, your family, and your profession," the Magistrate noted.

When the judge passed sentence, Frey hung his head. His wife and daughter wept.

Frey's lawyer, Robert Bailey, again asked for a postponement of the jail sentence until after the holidays.

Judge Collins said: "Six years ago, Mrs. Moore had her money taken away about Christmas time. Justice has been delayed for too long. There will be no more delays. Mr. Sheriff, take him into custody."

Collins set January 13th for a hearing on the status of four remaining indictments.¹

Understanding How People With Reputations of Being “Good” Do Something “Bad.”

A revered civil rights lawyer goes to prison for stealing from his clients.

A trusted small-town Midwestern city comptroller gets caught stealing \$53 million dollars from the town she has lived in all her life.

A beloved spouse the community nicknamed “Honest John” passes away suddenly of a heart attack, and two days later, his family finds out he has defrauded them all by setting up and maxing out credit card accounts by forging their names.

Virtually everyone in the world, from the beginning of time right through today, knows someone they believed to be good, but whom later it was revealed did something(s) bad.

We are left in the wake of these people, stunned by their deception, ashamed of our inability to see through their scam, gossiping about them at the water-cooler, then suddenly realizing that a “bad” person could be among our trusted circle of colleagues, friends, or family.

I became interested in this phenomenon when, during my first job after college, I befriended a woman who I thought was a pillar of goodness, charity, and virtue. (I still have the 3x5 cards on which she wrote her favorite recipes and gave me at my bachelorette party.) On the rare occasions she spoke of her family, Jean always contended that her husband, Don, was innocent, framed by the enemies he made while fighting so hard for civil rights, and given the times (the post-Nixon, post Viet Nam era), I had no reason not to believe her.

But were things as they seemed? Did something bad happen to a good man? Was he wrongly convicted? Or was he the crook they said he was? It wasn't until years later that I found out Jean herself had served time for lying under oath, protecting her husband, who was convicted of stealing from his law clients. What had I missed?

I lost touch with Jean after her husband was released from jail late in 1980. But the plight of Jean and Don haunted me – especially because my new in-laws were also named Jean and Don.

Life went on, but in the back of my mind a quest had started: how did people make good choices, and how did people made bad choices?

Eight years later, my own mother-in-law, Jean, someone I knew was damaged from unspeakable pre-teen incidents involving abuse by the elders of her church, stole, gambled, forged

signatures, and defrauded almost everyone in our family of approximately \$200,000, then committed suicide.

I asked myself why didn't I see past the damage, past the waves of "I'm fine," past the fact she was always energetic, beautiful and well-dressed, and comprehend the reality that Jean was stealing from her husband, my husband, his brothers, my grandmother-in-law, and all of my husband's cousins? How could I have been so stupid? How could I not see then what was right in front of me?

I asked myself those questions over and over. They are the same ones millions of people ask daily of a neighbor, a co-worker, a political icon, or a loved one. Though sometimes we see through to the truth of someone's true intentions, most times we completely miss the signs. And frankly, some people are just very good at fudging the numbers, pulling the wool over our eyes, and/or telling us what we want to hear. But at the core, we don't see the signs because we naturally see people as "good" until the evidence is so overwhelming we are rocked to our core.

Thus began, in earnest, my search for understanding of the nature of the virtuous vs. the unscrupulous. I wanted to study what lessons from past philosophical giants I could ascertain about this human dichotomy. Could I come to understand the phenomena of good people who did bad things?

I had to start at the beginning:

What exactly is "good?"

What exactly is "bad?"

How do we know the difference between a "good person" and a "bad person?"

At the end of my block while growing up, the boy in the tan brick house used to kill animals. We saw him do it a couple of times, but mostly, we would see him running home after putting dead pets on our front steps and ringing the doorbell. When my mom would march to his house, his mother swore that her beloved son was just a normal boy doing normal boy things, and that my mother, and all the neighborhood mothers, dads, and kids, were blowing everything out of proportion. "Our son is a good boy," his mother would insist, then slam the door.

Was he?

Dr. Steve Taylor of Leeds Metropolitan University, UK writes that,

"Good means lack of self-centeredness. It means the ability to empathize with other people, to feel compassion for them, and to put their needs before your own. It means, if necessary, sacrificing your own well-being for the sake of others. It means benevolence, altruism,

and selflessness, and self-sacrifice towards a greater cause -- all qualities which stem from a sense of empathy. It means being able to see beyond the superficial difference of race, gender, or nationality and relate to a common human essence beneath them."

*"Evil people are those who are unable to empathize with others. As a result, their own needs and desires are of paramount importance. They are selfish, self-absorbed and narcissistic. In fact, other people only have value for them to the extent that they can help them satisfy their own desires, or to which they can exploit them. ...They can't sense other people's emotions or their suffering, can't see the world from other people's perspective, have no sense of their rights. Other human beings are just objects to them, which is what makes their brutality and cruelty possible."*ⁱⁱⁱ

The above descriptions give a pretty well-accepted, cross-cultural, timeless definition of what we think of as someone who is the epitome of good or evil. But where in this mix is the definition of "bad?" That is a much trickier answer to pin down.

A "bad person" has definitions that include a wide range of harm: wrongdoer, bad egg, decadent, uprooter, destroyer, libertine, rounder, panderer, defiler, polluter, poisoner, scallywag, seducer, shocker, snake in the grass, varmint, jerk, douchebag, jackass, annoying, dick, and meanie...just to name a few.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

We generally understand that a "jerk" might be a "bad egg," and that the "libertine" might be a "dick," but their "bad deeds" probably don't come anywhere close to the more exacting standards that differentiate between someone who is just annoying/rude/aggravating, and someone whose bad deeds deserve punishment by the rules of law. (Note: At one point in the history of western civilization, people were labeled "bad" for being poor, uneducated, weak, despicable, cowardly, timid, even ugly, and those that were "good" were generally those who were noble, beautiful, wealthy, and strong.^v For examples, read any novel by Charles Dickens!)

There are no clear-cut definitions in the worlds of saints and sinners. With the research I have done over the past four months, I now believe that the simplest format to categorize human behavior into would be seven broad categories:

- 1.) Paragon: A person venerated and admired because of a consistent near perfect level of virtue and integrity. Regarded as an example of excellence.
- 2.) Honorable: A person who strives for a high level of honesty, morals, ethics, virtue, integrity, credibility, kindness, and worthy distinction.
- 3.) Good: A person who is generally honest, kind, helpful, harmless, reliable, uncomplaining, hard-working, well-liked, and commonly abides by social norms of good behavior and attitude.
- 4.) Neutral: A person of whom no one has a strong evidence of either good or bad deeds.

5.) Bad: A person who finds it easy to occasionally transgress social norms, who destroys, ruins, or lays waste to the thoughts, feelings, or personal welfare of others.

6.) Evil: A person who knows the difference between doing right and doing wrong, finds it easily justifiable to harm/bring injury another, either financially, emotionally an/or physically. An evil person can act all at once, or carry out harm gradually.

7.) Sociopath: A person who fits the criteria of the Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R) developed by Robert Hare and his colleagues, or the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI) by Lilienfield and Andrews. In brief, no feelings of conscience, guilt, remorse, shame, concern for the well-being of strangers, friends or family.

We tend to say, “Good vs. Evil” or “Good vs. Bad” but I think bad and evil are two entirely different entities. Evil, put in layman’s terms, is cold-blooded, conscienceless disregard for human life.^{vi} Evil’s telltale anti-social behavior includes (but is not limited to) extreme and/or prolonged violence, torture, and terrorism.^{vii} Some would say that “ordinary” good men and women can be induced into behaving in “evil ways” by turning on or off one or another social situational variables through de-individuation, aggression, vandalism, and moral disengagement.^{viii} And for being able to do such inhuman deeds, or be talked into doing such morally corrupt actions, they rightly deserve the title of evil. But bad, and even evil people have a chance at true redemption (and not necessarily in the biblical meaning), whereas those who are psychopaths have no ability to genuinely reform (although they are master tricksters at faking being good, or even being virtuous at times!).

In search for what makes good people do bad things, I now see that it’s not as huge a fall from good-to-bad as I originally thought.

What stuns me the most is when “virtuous” people do “bad” things, especially when the level of “bad” is closer to the border of evil than it is to neutral. This long fall makes the plunge deeper, which accounts for the level of shock and disbelief we associate when our heroes end up in jail. “The fall” is relative to the level that the person is originally perceived. At this point we then must make the distinction between “the ideal of greatness,” and the “disappointment of bad/evil.” The labeling of goodness or virtuous can be debated in almost any civilization, but a bad deed or an evil deed is an easy concept to understand as detrimental in any society in which the concept is embedded.^{ix}

Truth, honor, genuineness, trust, dishonor, right, wrong, paragon, great, good, neutral, bad, evil, psychopathic... These are all terms that we come to know from childhood as taught to us by parents, family, neighbors, community, and culture. Some of the meanings of these words seem to bend and curve with historical timing, yet others stand firm. We test them ourselves as children; take a piece of candy in the grocery check-out line, lie to a teacher on the playground, sneak out of the house when we are grounded, etc. Then, though our early and late teens, we start to choose which behaviors we will add to our own moral code; we revise, adjust, reevaluate, and attempt to daily live with our own version of true north.

We search for this perfect point on a compass. But no matter how great the leader, no matter how flawless the ideal of a perfect utopia, no matter how many laws, canons, rules and restrictions put on us, how much good intention is in the “group-think,” the sad fact is that no version of a utopian society has ever sustained for long in the annals of human antiquity. (Examples include Jonestown, Guyana, 1974-78, the Shaker movement, 1774-1900, Pullman, IL, 1880-1894) The inevitability of uncertainty always opens the possibility of enantiodromia (a thing turning into its opposite).^x We as humans, with an innate free will, the right to choose (even in the most strict and oppressive societies or regimes), the tools to exercise that choice and the desire to do so,^{xi} can never predict our own future actions with 100% accuracy, much less the future actions of those around us.

In general, goodness, kindness, generosity, empathy, compassion, honesty, and love win out much of the time. Statistics show our true natures: One percent of people will always be honest and never steal. Another one percent will always be dishonest.^{xii} The rest of us fall somewhere in the middle, with the Pareto Principle (that only 20% of the population cause 80% of the bad and evil part of the statistics^{xiii}) possibly giving us a better insight on the triumph of the better angels of our nature.

We are drawn to the stories of the hero/heroine’s journey. We love tales where right makes might. We love a day where the sun is shining and the birds are singing, and the people we love are safe and happy. If we were to list some of the values we honor, most people would include: Accountability, Benevolence, Competence, Dependability, Diligence, Discipline, Ethics, Fidelity, Integrity, Judiciousness, Loyalty, Mindfulness, Peace, Professionalism, Reason, Reflection, Reputation, Responsibility, Self-Control, Thoughtfulness, Trust, Trustworthiness, Truth, and Virtue. Other values are not bad or evil in themselves, but in excess, or in severe depletion, these

next concepts can turn quickly from healthy to corrupt: Abundance, Ambition, Audacity, Boldness, Cleverness, Control, Cunning, Euphoria, Ferocity, Influence, Outlandishness, Outrageousness, Power, Prosperity, Shrewdness, Status, Success, Victory, Wealth, and Winning.

Why are we fascinated by the bad, the evil, the cruelty one person can bring to another? Because, the fact is, we are. From childhood, we are thoroughly raised with the premise that there are two opposite aspects of life – the light/right, and the dark/bad.^{xiv} Good has evil, full/empty, strong/weak. From religious texts to myths and metaphorical stories, we are taught this dichotomy, and understand the dark should be avoided. Primitive mankind quickly learned they were vulnerable in the shadows, and conversely, they felt the strangely heady rush of adrenaline when faced with dark dangers. Are we just drawn to the unknown, the unconventional, and the darker elements of life because of their forbidden aura? Maybe it's simply that oddity is interesting? Yet, it is important to note that fascination and interest in the dark side does not mean, or lead to a direct temptation to act with bad, evil, or psychotic intentions.

Virtuous and good people are tempted to do bad and/or evil almost every day. Why do some of us cave into enticement, and for others, they either actively fight the invitation, or never even consider the enticement as an option? Sometimes, it seems the only way we seem to be able to find the light is by our passage through the dark. Religious sites attribute our temptation as an extended punishment from Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden.^{xv} But in truth, the dichotomy of life itself (born/die, turn right/turn left), especially as seen through the lens of Western Philosophy, makes it always a possibility that anyone can slip into a state of irrationality, and thus do things they would never think to do under normal circumstances.

Unfortunately, there isn't an unfailing laundry list of triggering causes, for they can be highly varied, and in some cases, utterly unknown. Sometime "good" people can be chemically or physiologically induced (such as when exposed to a mind-altering chemical, or after the ravages of disease have altered the brain's normal processing system, prolonged torture, etc.) to do and say things that might have been completely out of character only months before. Others, like those with a pathological psychosis, can feign goodness, when in fact their brains are laced with corrupted logic.^{xvi}

Most "good" people who do "bad" things do so after (or because of) a mish-mash of varied circumstances. The most common are (in no particular order): primed behavior^{xvii}, childhood trauma, childhood abuse, tunnel vision, want of power, social pressure, poor self image, time

pressure, acceptance of small thefts, a self-serving bias, money, the way you are perceived and treated by others, family/neighborhood/local/government corruption (modeled behavior), resentment, obedience to authority, blinding effect of power, thinking your actions won't mean anything outside a very small circle, wanting to be a team player, wanting to win at any cost, suppression of rationalization and cognitive dissonance, unfair punishment, lack of sleep or food makes people weak, a "compensation effect, the high of taking risks, social numbness, bad communication, and feeling trapped by circumstances or people."^{xviii}

Other experts say there are only three reasons why good people do bad things: desperation, boredom, and ignorance.^{xix} But in life, there are normal levels of desperation, boredom, and ignorance that happen to everyone in the myriad of daily circumstance. It's when unparalleled stress is added to these three that things start to go off track. Everyone's tipping point is at a different level, depending on conditions, environment, and context.

As much as we like to feel that we would never be tempted to cross the line, remember that we are all as human as the next person, and be it for the grace of the gods, we are never put in a position where temptation is ripe, options seem few, and results will fix our most painful woes, even if only for a short time. It is shocking how little unexpected pain, disappointment, or command from an authority figure will push normal people into survival or panic mode – where they will harm those around them with almost no understandable, logical thinking. (Example: the 1961 Milgram Experiment^{xx})

Sometimes, if we see the pain, see the signs that someone is slipping into an unusual level of anxiety, we can try to intercede. Most times, by the time others see the signs that someone's panic, fear, laziness, or incomprehension are more than just a passing "phase," the person sliding into the unreasonable is already deep in a black hole, and their comprehension skills are severely compromised. That doesn't mean that you can try and reach out, to help, to heal the pain and stop the "runaway train." But the reality is that, a.) we can't see into the minds and souls of others unless they allow it, b.) we can only take on what we can handle (both physically or psychologically), and c.) we aren't perfect ourselves. We teach our young so they can be independent, and we get used to expecting that we should trust others to be responsible for themselves. And we know, no matter how much we learn to understand why someone does something, we can never know to the 100th degree the inner workings of another's mind, much less our own. Asking "how" and "what" questions lend themselves towards action steps where we can

have an impact and make a difference. But examining the “why” is usually an examination of something that is already past. We can learn from the past, but we can never undo it, and that leads to frustration and a feeling of defeat.^{xxi}

So why do so-called “good” people do “bad” things?

Here are some thoughts^{xxii}:

1.) We judge ourselves by our good intentions and we judge others on the results of their actions (their behavior)^{xxiii}.

Example: Mr. M paid his bills on time, every month, all his life, openly bitter about, “people who cheat the system.” Now nearing death, he charges over \$30,000 on his credit cards, because he heard that since he has no blood relatives, this credit card debt does not have to be “paid” by anyone. When it is brought to his attention that every person with a credit card will pay just a little more in the store to cover the cost of this loss, he won’t believe this is so. “The debt just goes away,” he insists. “I paid all my life. I did so much good. This won’t matter...”

2.) Cognitive Dissonance: When a person finds himself or herself in a position where two items of information do not fit together comfortably, they tend to change/ignore/discount one of the factors.

Example: Mr. P says he “doesn’t believe in doctors,” yet he knows that he has an illness that can be eased, if not cured, with the correct daily medication. He either has to go to a doctor, and defy his lifelong position about “not believing” in modern medicine, admit that he is just afraid of the facts of medicine and health, or die. He’s not stupid, yet he values his stubbornness more than truth. In the end, he died of an ulcer at age 54 rather than change his thinking process. His family is left in total financial ruin.

3.) We will not only reject one item of truth and embrace a falsehood, we will work to debunk the truth and find reasons to support the information we wish to believe.

Example: Uncle J is convinced that the pharmaceutical companies have known of a cure for cancer for decades, but “Big Pharma” needs the revenue from cancer patients to keep their profits high. No matter the fact that all levels of pharmaceutical managers have lost spouses and children to cancer, Uncle J insists that these “corporate sorts” let the “occasional family” members die horribly to keep us paying.

This rumor about a cancer cure suppression myth is still quite popular on the internet by conspiracy theorists. See Reference for one just put out this past week!^{xxiv}

4.) Not only will we say what we believe, but we will actually come to believe what we say.

Examples: George Washington cutting down the cherry tree^{xxv}; President Bill Clinton believing that because it was oral sex, he didn't have "sex" with Monica Lewinsky^{xxvi}; President Richard Nixon proclaiming that, "I am not a crook," when the tapes showed he knew much more about the Watergate break-in than he claimed^{xxvii}; Nazi Germany (among other nations, communities, and individuals) blamed their economic woes on the Jewish people amongst their population. Even though anti-Semitism has no basis in reality, this devastating lie has come back to haunt the annals of history far too often, and can be read daily in our newspapers.

The most famous lecture on this subject in modern history was by American philosopher and psychologist, William James, (1842-1910) published in 1896^{xxviii}.

5.) The Eichman Effect: that people will commit acts of unspeakable atrocities when they see themselves as an instrument of higher authority.

Examples: Those who owned, bought, sold, or had anything to do with slavery seeing themselves as blessed by God as superior to those they held in bondage^{xxix}; Boko Haram, in the service of Jihad^{xxx}, have killed 20,000 and displaced 2.3 million; Joseph Kony, who proclaims himself a spokesperson for God, has led his Lord's Resistance Army in turning 66,000 children into soldiers, and displacing 2 million people^{xxxi}; Colorado Christian, Robert Lewis Dear, killed three people at a Planned Parenthood clinic in a "religious zeal," in direct opposition to God's commandment not to kill.^{xxxii} Police officers who have a badge and gun and step outside the law because they feel they are arbitrators of a "greater good" or superiority?^{xxxiii}

6.) Blind to Any Other Option: The Survival Ethos "Teleological Suspension of the Ethical^{xxxiv}"

Good people can be talked into doing bad things by seemingly rational thinking.

Example statement: "I had to do it for the organization to survive. It was for the greater good."

Example: Tulsa, OK company board of directors were talked into giving the company's charismatic co-founder an unsecured \$236 million dollar personal loan just before corporate decisions collapsed the company under almost \$3 Billion in bad "hedges," (read "gambling"). The board didn't want to ever say "no" to the man who grew their company from seed to a one-time net worth of \$3.6 billion. Thousands lost their jobs, and outstanding debts were settled year's later pennies on the dollar, forcing many of the town's business to close.^{xxxv}

The Lure of the Dark Side:

When we strive to justify our bad or evil actions, we usually try one or more of the following methods:

1. Rationalize: Trying to make our action(s) connect to some sense-based reasoning.
2. Defend: Trying to make our action(s) connect with something right or righteous.
3. Explain: Trying to make our action(s) opaque if we defend, rationalize, and go into detail long enough.^{xxxvi}

Why do we feel compelled to justify our actions?

1. To cast off even the slightest shadow of impropriety. Except for the 1% of the population that is truly psychopathic, most of us are aware that the world holds itself to a modicum of morality and ethics (no matter how skewed they may or may not be). Once exposed as someone who does bad or evil, we worry that we may lose face, lose status, and lose respect. We worry that our actions now could escalate to betrayal, personal vendettas, or disloyalty.

2. To explain our actions as ringing true, or at least logical in the circumstances. We must convince ourselves, as well as others, that our actions had some semblance of merit or worth.

3. To explain away our need to destroy, exploit, or control with reasoning. We will resort to the fabrication of fear, scarcity, or panic to justify our actions, because if they “speak” for themselves, we cannot control the narrative.^{xxxvii}

What is so bad about justifying our actions?

1. Humans are capable of justifying just about everything. Unless we deal realistically and opening with our reasoning (in other words, evaluate after an action), we are doomed to repeat a bad/wrong/evil action(s) again and again.

2. Humans are capable of defending our actions even if they are wrong. When we learn to see our world through the grey veil of bias and judgment, we close ourselves off to options.

3. Humans are capable of inflicting unnecessary pain and suffering. Without open dialogue and review, we can create or add to needless grief and distress.^{xxxviii}

How can I, or anyone, rise above the temptation to do bad or evil?

1.) Education. Plain and simple, education is the greatest tool in internalizing a common sense of values that raise life to something above basic needs, and more importantly, puts our need

for security into balance with a life well lived. This education is given and received in a myriad of ways: at home, in schools, within family structure, within religious (or secular humanist) communities, within community, country, and culture, within our timeframe on planet Earth, as we work, travel, observe, experience, and mature.

We learn to ask ourselves: should I buy a gun to shoot someone who is robbing my television? Is my TV worth a human life? Is keeping my job/pension/benefits worth falsifying a financial statement I know is not right because I am being pressured to do so? Should I go into a burning building, knowing that there is a good chance I will be burned, to save my grandmother? Would I turn and walk away from a fight that threatened my safety, or that of my children, if I did not believe in the cause – and then be called a “Welsher^{xxxix}” for not engaging in combat, regardless, since I was “officially” challenged?

The only way we know the answers to these huge questions is through making the effort to learn, understand, think though, etc. – always through the filter of the values we were taught (or adopted at some point, or honorably mentored) of honesty, integrity, fairness, respect for others, promise-keeping, and more. These values are passed down, right or wrong, from lessons learned by past generations. Once we grow to a certain state of adulthood, we learn to “weed” these lessons, leaving behind childish ideas and selfish tendencies, and understand how the world at large operates, what is true versus what is opinion, what is fact vs. what is conjuncture, what is “right” and what is “wrong.”

I put right and wrong in quotes in the last sentence because the baseline for the judgments on these two hotbed words had changed in popular belief with time, worldview, and careful thought. Has it ever really been “right” to enslave another person? Our gut tells us no, but free labor is free labor, and those who need the security of more things will do anything, say anything, and justify anything to make it so. Has it ever really been “right” to mutilate a woman’s sexual organs so that she will feel no pleasure from sex, and therefore, make her less likely to stray from a patriarchal society? Our gut tells us no (as it has from the beginning of time), but the fear of losing power over a woman has more pull than the effort it takes for both men and women to be intimate in the best way possible, work to build and maintain bonds, be kind, and understand that you cannot impose your unvarying will on another human being without inflicting damage.

2.) Being Championed. Having a mentor, friend, spouse, parent, teacher, or authority figure that you know to be a touchstone of honor in times of problems tends to keep your feet planted

with your toes on the side of doing what is right. Everyone should make it a point to have someone they know they can call, write, text, or visit who will never steer them wrong. Having someone in your world who advocates for right gives you an inner strength that you can easier call upon in times of Catch-22, a quandary, a crossroad, or overpowering emotions.

3.) Knowing the difference between an “acute dilemma” and an “acute rationalization.”^{xl}

An acute dilemma arises when someone truly does not know what is the right thing to do. Recognizing that you (or someone you know) is in the middle of an acute dilemma requires you to reach out to the wisest, level-headed, and honest people you know for guidance and help.

An acute rationalization arises when someone knows (or is pretty sure) what is right, but does not want to use that solution. To avoid rationalizing yourself, and possibly others, into such a critical crossroads, you must raise internal red flags whenever you hear, “But nobody’s really getting hurt,” “management says don’t ask questions,” “That’s just the way things work around here,” or “everybody does it.”

4.) “In most circumstances, positive affect enhances problem solving and decision making, leading to cognitive processing that is not only flexible, innovative, and creative, but also thorough and efficient.^{xli}” Alice M. Isen of Cornell University did a research project showing that positive effects leads to acts of helping, generosity, and interpersonal understanding. Being part of a family or community that regularly experiences of joy, interest, alertness, makes people significantly more likely to go beyond an assigned task, do more than is required, and have extrinsic thinking. Even mild positive affects have an important influence on rational, and facilitate systematic, careful, cognitive professing, both flexible and innovative understanding among people. Viewing ourselves and others as unique, capable, and of inherent of worth, combined with enhanced social skills and kindness results in broad societal benefits.

5.) “The Big Picture.” My driving instructor used to tell us, almost *ad nauseam*, that to drive safely, we had to have “The Big Picture.” He said that if we practiced enough, The Big Picture would come as natural as the answer to 2x2. Slowly, over the course of six weeks, we figured out what TBP was: a fairly good sense of where we were, where others were, and all the factors (weather, light, traffic, etc.) that were around us at every moment. Because of his teaching, if you were to randomly sit in a car when I was driving, I could tell you where every car around me was, how fast or slow they were driving, if there were any weather conditions of note within a 360 degree circle, what color at least the next three-four traffic signals were, and where the sun/moon

was in relation to my direction. And all without me “thinking.” Because of this, I rarely have a “hole in my thinking,” a cognitive bias, when I am driving, and therefore, I have never had an accident (even with 21 years of Chicago driving in all weather, and 21 years of Southern California driving in crazy traffic and 18 lanes of highway!).

My point? If we all gained a practice of seeing TBP in our everyday lives, we might see where we have cognitive biases, aka a hole in our thinking,^{xlii} that blinds us to the truth and keeps us from doing the right. A good Big Picture keeps our “guardrails” in place, and bring us back to the road when we stray off the path. The Big Picture also works to counter the negative pull from powerful personalities, and our tendencies sometimes towards egocentricity, risk-blindness,^{xliii} conformity, and treating those not in our immediate world as “objects” or “less than.”

Talking to People Who Have Been Hurt by Good People Doing Bad Things

Over the past few months, I have been interviewing people who have had a personal experience of someone they considered good doing something bad. Below is a culmination of what I took away from my enquiries. (See Appendix 1 for examples of my exact interview quotes.)

1.) There is a Truly Surprising Commonality to the Stories of this Syndrome. Examples: Rotten childhood events, a sense that they are due something good, whatever good comes into their life is not enough, they test bad behavior in smaller ways. If they’re not caught soon after, they dive into the rush of temporary happiness that money, power, outsmarting, and psychological release that comes with “getting what I deserve,” “outsmarting them all,” “finally feeling like I am one of the winners,” and “making things even in the world.”

2.) The Blast Radius is huge. While the blinders of doing bad or evil are up, the perpetrator tends to only think of themselves. When the truth is revealed, they only partially see how many people their deeds have hurt. This may be because if they acknowledged the full truth, they might not be able to go on living (which happened in a few cases I interviewed). And finally, the actual number of people affected by the wrongdoing of another extends wider, and in ways the perpetrator never imagined. Example: A young Muslim/American woman is attacked after the San Bernardino killings in California. Someone who blames all Muslims for the tragedy runs her off the road. This causes a 3-car accident and a 20-mile backup on the 10 westbound in LA, affecting hundreds of lives. She is injured, as were others, and her bruises show the next day at work, where she is a hospital delivery nurse. This freaks out the expectant mothers, and she is told to take the day off.

3.) The Damage Done is Irreversible. No matter how many virtuous or moral acts you do, the tinge of suspicion will always follow you. And for the victims, the loss of faith and confidence in you never really heals completely. Example: “He gets work, because, let’s face it, he is great at making money. But now, he’s either working on his own or bouncing from company to company. Everyone wants access to his money making magic, but they don’t want him to stay long enough to possibly embarrass or steal from them. Before our company imploded, he had a history of steady, long-term teamwork, but now the longest anyone has kept him on is six months. He’ll never be able to escape the news stories that are so easily looked up on the internet, and personally, I think that is a good thing. He’s not a good man.”

4.) No Matter Your Intent, Bad is Always Bad. Yes, others can understand your motivation, even sympathize with your predicament, but stealing is stealing, and wrong is wrong. Example: “There were so many tragic elements in her life: cancer, pneumonia, and bankruptcy. She was stealing to pay the bills, keep the bill collectors from calling and coming to the door day and night. She was going to pay it back, she said, but she was a bookkeeper, and never, ever would have made enough to live on, take care of her sick mother, and repay the debt. She stole from my dad, her employer. If she had come to him, been honest, they could have worked something out between them, the hospitals, and the doctors. But she chose to steal, from people who liked her, brought over tuna casserole, shared an office. She thought her intent was good, but it was skewed and bad.”

5.) No One Looks Good in An Orange Jumpsuit! Despite the title of the television show, Orange is NOT the new black. Example: An old friend, who is a warden at a huge Midwestern prison wrote in our high school’s 10-year anniversary book: “Prison is an atrocious place. Take this seriously: There is no revenge, no money, no drug, and no deed worth doing if it will land you in prison. Nothing! There is ALWAYS another option. Find that option, no matter how challenging it might be.”

6.) People Who Do Bad Things and are Caught, Usually Don’t Learn Their “Lesson.” It is very rare (and takes great personal fortitude and courage) for someone to do something bad once, and never do it again. Even if caught, even if reprimanded, even if reparations are made, the temptation to do it again, with your new insights into why you got caught the first time, acts as a kind of incentive/test to see if you can do it better, win bigger, not get caught, feel the rush of success. Example: The woman with brisk, stingy parents steals as a child from the local grocery store. The rush is thrilling, and the “things” she hides in a box under her bed make her feel super-

human. Eventually, she gets caught, is threatened with jail, and pulls away from crime for years. But later in life, when the children are grown, the marriage is stale, and the money is tight, she starts stealing again and again. “I’ve got two things that make me feel alive: pretending to be a young surfer guy on line, and stealing little things from the drug store.”

7.) If You Feel Like You’ve Slumped From the Life You Once Lived, You Will Do Almost Anything to Save Face and/or Get That Life Back. Whether you were successful in a company that closed (not at all your fault), and now you can’t seem to find a job or company that you competent or effective in, you will be tempted to do or say just about anything to get self-confidence, monetary remuneration, and/or self-importance back. Example: You have been a successful civil rights lawyer, with a salary and benefits that enable you to live well for years. Finally, you have won the cause you have been championing for ten years. And then, you don’t get the political job you were hoping for, the splashy headline case that fills the national papers for a year decides to use a more famous lawyer from out of town as the lead for the plaintiffs, and you find you are bad at the grunt work of cases taken on spec. Your income drops by more than half. You are yesterday’s news. Your client list drops to a list of “D” level petty insurance claims, yet you still have bills to pay, a lifestyle to upkeep, adult children who are used to nice “gifts” from Dad at the holidays, and on their birthdays, and you can’t bring yourself to admit to anyone, let alone yourself, that you are not the man you once thought you were. So you steal a few thousand from a client here and a client there, fully “intending” to put the money back when business picks up, but secretly knowing that day will probably never come...

8.) Your Family Will Deny, Cover-up, Tell Lies, Stretch Truths, and In General, Ruin Themselves To Live With What You Have Done. Example: The town thinks her husband who died of a sudden heart attack was a saint. She doesn’t want to tell them he financially ruined her and their daughter for years to come with his credit card scams, so they go about the town, nodding and smiling as neighbors remember him, all the while, they are dying a little inside every day.

9.) The Same Lines From the Victims and Family Time and Again. Example: The things people say about the person who did the bad/evil deed: “I always knew he was strong-willed.” “He never told a lie...until he did.” “He was like a second father to me.” “He humiliated me.” “I always look for the best in people, so I just didn’t see it coming.” “I thought she was a great woman.” “She seemed blessed, almost perfect.” “It came as a complete surprise.” “I/We couldn’t believe it for the longest time.” “I cope by blocking.” “I get so very sad sometimes because I think

what could have been...” “He was the most charming/selfless/brilliant/cheerful/brave man I ever met.”

10.) I Feel Bad For Him/Her” Example: Almost everyone I interviewed who had been a victim of someone who had done something bad – anything above pure evil or psychopathic – said “I feel bad for him/her.” This bothered me for two reasons: 1. I have never felt bad for the people who were bad/evil in my life. Am I supposed to say, “I feel bad”? Or is it okay that I feel hurt, betrayed, and deeply disappointed? Is it wrong/bad for me not to have feelings of mercifulness? Is something wrong with me? 2. How can you feel bad for someone who has done something very wrong?

I am amazed and humbled by the capacity of forgiveness human beings have towards those who have done them wrong. Is this astounding mercy what keeps us going in our darkest moments? Or do we not want to go to that place of anger at another person because we fear it will be hard to come back from that level of disappointment? I do not know, but I am looking for the answers as I explore this subject further.

Final thoughts:

My sister-in-law, Reverend Betsy Williams, of Ohio, told me that in her 30 years as a Lutheran sister, and now minister, it is still “breathtaking” to her at how much we can forgive, and how much we long to heal. When good people do bad things, they “pull to pieces” everything we assume we know. Luckily, they rarely can dismantle everything that makes us “human,” in the very best sense of that word.

In my quest to understand why good people do bad things, I have come to understand that there are no simple answers, formulas that reveal, or scientific studies that are close to eliminating evil from our world. So, we are left with cautionary examples to keep the majority of us on the straight and narrow. From the boy at the end of my block who tortured and killed animals, to the sad story of lawyer Donald S. Frey, to the heartbreak of my lovely mother-in-law’s demons, I have been witness to bad, evil, and the psychopathic. Although stunning, sometimes earthshattering, in balance they hardly compare to the good, the amazing, and the holy I experience with greater frequency.

As I look towards teaching a future college course that will include a unit on “Why Good People Do Bad Things,” I’m confident I have begun to explore the theory, philosophy, and ideals of this subject enough to create a wise, moving, and transformative lesson for young adults.

-End-

ⁱ Sources for this section are a compilation from:

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ⁱⁱ Taylor Ph.D., Steve. “The Real Meaning of ‘Good’ and ‘Evil.’” *Psychology Today*. www.psychologytoday.com, 26AUG2013. Web. 13DEC2015

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^{xix} Waldschmidt, Dan “3 Reasons Why Good People Do Surprisingly Bad Things.” DanWaldschmidt.com 5DEC2012 WWW 12DEC2015

^{xx} McLeod, Saul. “The Milgram Experiment.” *Simply Psychology* 2007 <http://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html>

^{xxi} Cabelly, Harriet. “When Painful Things Happen and You Don’t Understand Why.” TinyBuddha.com 2012 WWW 12DEC2015

^{xxii} Curtin, Leah L. “Why Good People Do Bad Things.” *Ethics in Management. Nursing Management*. July 1996.

^{xxiii} Covey, Stephen M.R. *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*. New York; Simon & Schuster, Print. 2008 Mine is a variation of his quote.

^{xxiv} <http://healthimpactnews.com/2014/the-cancer-industry-is-too-prosperous-to-allow-a-cure/> Article by John P. Thomas at a website that touts is tells you the health news that “other media sources” may censor.

^{xxv} <http://www.mountvernon.org/research-collections/digital-encyclopedia/article/cherry-tree-myth/>

^{xxvi} Cameron, Deborah and Kulick, Don. *Language and Sexuality*. Cambridge, England; Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print. Page IX

^{xxvii} Note: There are those who believe that unless Richard Nixon was “Pardoned” by his successor, President Gerald R. Ford, President Nixon would have been convicted of one or more of these criminal activities: Conspiracy, Wiretapping, Tax Evasion, Lying under Oath/Perjury, Bribery, Extortion.

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- ^{xxxvi} Ghosain, Manal. “What We Justify (and What We Don’t).” OneWithNow.com/justify 14OCT2013 WWW 15DEC2015
- ^{xxxvii} As Above.
- ^{xxxviii} As Above.
- ^{xxxix} The word “Welsher” is perceived as insulting to or by the Welsh, the people of Wales, of which I am a full descendent. The term was begun by the English after the Welsh and English were about to go to battle in the 1100’s, but during the night, the Welsh women, who had equal say in political matters, decided that the land they were about to fight and lose their sons and husbands over was not worth the bloodshed. The Welsh retreated, the English took over the land, but they were bitter about not having won the day in battle. The term is an insult to the Welsh, because in reality, they did the sensible thing.
- ^{xl} As in XXI
- ^{xli} Isen, Alice M. “An Influence of Positive Affect on Decision Making in Complex Situations: Theoretical Issues With Practical Implications” *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 11(2), (2001) 75-85 Print
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Appendix 1:

Quotes from interviews: (In no particular order)

“I feel bad for him.”

“Inner demons seemed to take over his life, and he didn’t have the ability to fight them.”

“Always was strong willed and opinionated.”

“Everyone called him ‘Honest John.’ He just couldn’t tell a lie. Until he did.”

“He was everything to this community. His good will seem to have no limits. He was on the radio, was the county legislator, drove the ambulance, webmaster – the kind of guy neighbors would call in the middle of the night knowing he would help - a hero, beloved. And all the while, he was forging my signature.”

“I had to posthumously charge my husband with identity thief.”

“I knew he had inner demons from a strange childhood, but I thought he was fighting the good fight, battling the past with a constant string of great acts of kindness.”

“I feel bad for him.”

“He was like a second father to me.”

“I never once saw him depressed or drinking. I knew sometimes he got very quiet, but then, he had a hard job. Only after the event did his daughter, my friend, call to apologize for her dad’s behavior. He had done it to others before.”

“I don’t feel bad for him. I pray for him, but he is far from my thoughts.”

“He dismantled everything I knew.”

“I didn’t know how much practice he had at being good and being bad.”

“I pray for his soul.”

“He humiliated his family. His wife was destroyed, his son and daughter shattered.”

“The financial ruin was not only to our company, but to all our supplier who ended up years later with pennies on the dollar. His greed, and that of the board, ruined the city.”

“She always had something. A mother with cancer, a sister with pneumonia, a brother on the verge of bankruptcy. My dad was so kind to her. He thought of his employees as family. She stole so much money. If she hadn’t gotten sick, no one would have discovered her system. It was a shock.”

“As an accountant, I am in charge of vast sums of money. Why am I not tempted to steal? Well, I made myself a code of ‘Stupid Rules’ for myself before my first job out of college. I wrote them and framed them so I would never forget. The two most important are that 1.) “I never will work at a company where as the accountant, management wants me to do the taxes.” They need an independent firm to go over my books every year or I won’t accept the job. I get it in writing. Why? Because it keeps me honest! 2.) “Remember the look on your dad’s face when he found out his beloved accountant was robbing him blind.” I was sixteen, and I will never forget his eyes. I could feel his heart crash to the dirt. And 3.) “I don’t look good in an orange jumpsuit.” Honest. Orange is not the new black. Whenever I feel temptation, I look in a mirror and think about myself, locked away, in and orange jumpsuit.”

“I look for the best in people. I audit for the worst in people.”

“How could she steal \$53 million from our town? This is our home. It’s a small town. We knew her from school. Everyone in our town suffered from her greed. We are a national joke. Someone must have guessed. Why didn’t people double check – year after year?”

“I feel sorry for her.”

“He connected with us kids in the church. He seemed to understand us, and we truly felt closer to Jesus’s teaching of kindness and caring because of him. Then it was all gone. I was only ten at the time, but I remember feeling lost and confused.”

“I felt let down. Sorry that he couldn’t be the man we thought he was.”

“It was as if she got close to us to make sure the ring got on her finger. Once the wedding was over, she pulled our son away from us in a way that, three years later and no communication, we are stunned and shocked. My wife wakes up, gasping for breath, her heartache always there.”

“He was a great man. He made some mistakes. That’s all I’m going to say.”

“They seemed like the perfect family. Socially conscious. Fighting for a cause they believed in. Some in town didn’t like their politics, but no one could deny his passion. And then, like that, it all blew apart.”

“My senior year in high school, we had to write a paper on someone we admired. Lots of the kids wrote about MLK, JFK, RFK, and people like that, but I wrote about him. I went to his house to interview him. I remember him being smart, a little square, but super kind to me. We listened to him on the black radio station, and read about him in the black papers. I had just graduated college when I heard he was arrested. I couldn’t believe it. I still don’t know if he was framed. I always felt sorry for the guy after that.”

“He was nominated to the Supreme Court. You know that most of us in the county laughed about that. He was a joke. He got what he deserved.”

“My husband couldn’t believe his audacity. They had him dead to rights on the theft, but he had his little circle of believers. They were like a cult, seeing only the good, and forgetting that he was also stole. No matter how many people remember the great things you might have done in the past, when you are in front of the judge, and you are guilty, all the good went out the window. My husband slept well the night he went to prison.”

“I covered that beat for years. I sat at the trials. People crying, begging for forgiveness, assuring the judge they would never do it again. But in the end, you had choices, and you chose the worst option, and there are consequences for your actions. Forty years as a reporter covering the court system. It was an education in the best and worst in people. Your guy, he was one of the bad guys.”

“It was a crazy time. Lines were crossed. It’s just the way it was. Some people got hurt, yes, but he helped a lot. We all did. Like I said, it was the way it was.”

“When I stole, I felt a high. I felt like I was finally getting what I deserved.”

“I betrayed the trust of people I liked. How could I do that? Who was I?”

“Every day I struggle. I see opportunities to steal everywhere. I can’t say I am now a saint, but I fight my demons, remember that I never want to see the inside of a jail cell again, and ask people to keep me in check. Medication helps, as well as faith, my husband, and my psychologist who is on my speed dial!”

“I feel sorry for her. That’s not really what I mean to say. Sorry isn’t the right word. But I can’t find the right word. It’s been 26 years, and I can’t find the right word to describe what I feel. I understand her skewed motivations, I understand the great betrayal of the deacons of her church when she was just a child, I understand the theory. I just can’t see how she thought she had no options. I mostly feel guilt that I couldn’t see how narrow her vision had gotten. I tried to help, but I was young, and in reality, the damage was done so many years before I was even born. It was like she was a train rolling through the station, unable to stop. I can forgive her for myself, but not for the hurt I saw in my husband’s eyes, and not for the moment we had to tell our children the truth about their grandmother.”

“I try not to think about it; about what could have been. I cope by blocking. I think I always had a sense something bad would happen, but everyone else saw her beauty, her style, her generosity. I saw her drinking in the middle of the night, alone at the dining room table.”

“When I heard, I couldn’t understand. We loved her. She was always a delight. I sensed there was depression, but she seemed to be a brave fighter.

“She took everything from you all, but they were just things, the money, the jewelry, the real estate. You still have each other. And a sad life lesson.”

“He was young, funny, charming. And very, very talented. I felt like there might be a black place behind the charm, but I didn’t know him long enough. And he goes on, being hired because he is so gifted, but he leaves a wake behind the scenes with the minds he recklessly messes with for his amusement.”

“They were my friends from the time we were in pre-school. Their parents and my parents were best friends for years. And when they died, their parents shut us out. We were the poor kids from the other side of town. And it was blatant, obvious to everybody. We weren’t allowed in the funeral service at their boarding school. We were 16, and our friends had just died. And, yes, their parents were grieving, but they couldn’t see that we were too. This is a small town, and even now, they turn their eyes away when I see them in the street. We had nothing to do with their sons death, nothing, but they will only grieve with their new set of wealthy friends. They were some of my favorite adults as I was growing up, and now, I am hurt. It took me three years to tell anyone, and I am only telling you now because you live in America, and I just have to talk about it to someone.”

“He was the most charming man I ever met. There was that hair that raised occasionally on the back of my neck, but how could I know that he was the devil? He got to know you, find your weakness, then he found someone who he could play to exploit that weakness. Then he sat back, smiling, while the world crumbled around him. We were all fighting with each other for reasons we really didn’t understand, and he was the master puppeteer, pulling the strings. I never knew how true evil worked until it was too late. He even ruined the kids in the cast, playing on their willingness to believe. It was horrible. It was 16 years ago, and I still feel disoriented, angry, stupid. He was parked next to me in the parking lot after the last show. I remember him looking me with his dead eyes. He smiled, and said, “It was all so easy.” Then he got in his Mercedes and drove away.”^{xxxliii}