

“Not Written in Stone”

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READING

P.D.East has written about a moment in which the world is at the brink of destruction:

The countdown had begun. Fingers were poised above the buttons that would set off the mutual destruction...But both camps hesitated. They knew that the war would not leave one living thing on this planet. In a final desperate effort, they agreed to call a truce for forty-eight hours. These forty-eight hours were devoted to a conference of all the learned [people] of the world, gathered from every discipline and every area of knowledge. They were provided with a giant mechanical brain which was able, given adequate material, to solve any problem correctly. One by one, the [scholars] shared their specialized knowledge with the brain until it was provided with everything [humanity] had learned through the ages, from every field of human endeavor and from every aspect of life. Now fully informed, the machine was asked a series of questions:

"How can we save the world?"

"How can we save ourselves? Our families?"

"How can we live in peace on this earth?"

"Slowly, ever so slowly, the brain began to print its answer on a tape, and the answer it gave was this:

"I am the Lord your God.

"You shall have no other gods before Me.

"You shall not make any graven image.

"You shall not take God's name in vain.

"Remember the Sabbath day.

"Honor your father and your mother

"You shall not kill.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not bear false witness.

"You shall not covet."

THE SERMON

There was a time when the Ten Commandments were posted in virtually every classroom in America, and in many courtrooms. While the founders of our nation set out to create a secular state, the message of their intent did not get out to everyone, or at least, its implications were not accepted by everyone. Judge Roy Moore, who was removed from the bench in 2003 for refusing an order to remove a Ten Commandments monument from his courtroom, is clearly among them. (He now goes around lecturing clergy on his version of the Constitution.)

The Ten Commandments, which lie at the heart of Judaeo-Christian morality, were once commonly viewed as being at the heart of our society. The Ten Commandments were, as I understand them, a socially accepted moral code. For the most part, of course, they were viewed as supernaturally imposed rather than as a collectively developed consensus on moral behavior. One author has referred to them as the moral equivalent of the law of gravity.

The problem with that analogy is that the Ten Commandments, being moral rather than physical, are not as compelling as the law of gravity. They have never, ever, been consistently followed - not from the earliest stories at the foot of Mount Sinai to the present day. People have always picked and chosen when to obey and when to ignore them.

It is a matter of fact that there have always been some people who have *not* worshiped one God, have worshiped idols, have exploited the name of the deity, have violated the sabbath, *d*ishonored parents, killed, committed adultery, stolen, born false witness, and coveted. There have been far fewer violators of the laws of gravity - those who tried have not lived to tell the tale.

I am not convinced that the rate of violation of the commandments is significantly different today. What *is* clearly different is that the commandments no longer have the same symbolic power they once had. People used to affirm that the Commandments represented a standard, even if they violated them. A violation brought some level of guilt. Under the influence of Freud, we've banned guilt.

It was a hundred years ago that the great French sociologist Emil Durkheim, viewing the disintegration of the society around him, suggested that there was a malaise which he called "Anomie" which came from normlessness - he saw this as a significant cause of suicide. It was his belief that a society, and the people in it, needed some kind of structure to keep people from running amuck, seeking to quench unquenchable appetites.

Durkheim's mind would be boggled by the level of anomie in our time in comparison to his. We live in a society in which not only is the moral consensus violated, but in which it can well be said that there appears to be little moral consensus.

Many people today reject the supernatural basis of the Ten Commandments, and since that was the basis on which they were supported, and are supported even today by some, rejecting their divine origin is, in the eyes of many, tantamount to rejecting the commandments altogether. George Gallup reports that although "a large majority of

Americans believe that the Ten Commandments are still valid rules for living today,...they have a tough time recalling exactly what those rules are." Gallup doesn't say just how tough a time, but keep in mind that he found that less than half of all adults can name the four gospel writers. I would hazard a guess that possibly 10% of the population could name eight of the ten commandments. How can we then suggest that they are operative as rules for living?

In the 1991 book, **The Day America Told the Truth: What People Really Believe About Everything that Really Matters**, James Patterson and Peter Kim reported that their survey found that "Only one in ten of us believe in all of the Ten Commandments. Forty percent believe in five or fewer Commandments."

We liberals have contributed significantly to the present state of affairs. We have advocated that people must "decide for themselves" - a principle with which I fundamentally agree, but which I would view in a social setting. The critique of liberalism which I find most valid is the suggestion that in our emphasis on individual liberty, we have lost track of the community. While the individual does decide for him or her self, I would advocate, and always have, that the good of the community must be taken seriously.

I am not suggesting, as many authors on the subject do, that in the Commandments we have "The Operating Instructions for the Universe," or "the fundamental laws upon which an enduring civilization is founded." It is evident to anyone who looks closely at the ways in which the Commandments have been treated over the years that they have been continually reinterpreted and brought up to date with the needs of the times.

Elton Trueblood suggested that "The Commandments, as we know them, are not a description of what we *do*, but rather an affirmation of what we recognize that we *ought* to do. It is absurdly cynical to deny the tremendous value of a recognized standard, even when we fail to live up to it.... Our standard is our most precious possession."

Douglas Taylor-Weiss, an conservative Episcopal priest in Auburn, NY, several years ago when he was in Dayton Ohio, developed a list of what an observer of our culture might identify as our functional ten commandments:

1. Have a good day
2. Shop
3. Eliminate pain
4. Be up-to-date
5. Relax
6. Express yourself
7. Have a happy family
8. Be entertaining
9. Be entertained
10. Buy entertainment.

While descriptive, these certainly do not represent the world in which most of us would prefer to live, and they demonstrate the value of reconsidering the modern meanings of the Aoriginal® commandments.

Scholars (Hebrew, Roman Catholic, and Protestant) have not been able to arrive at a common dating or authorship for the Ten Commandments. There are some who believe it is an ancient code, dating perhaps to the time of Moses, and others who insist upon relating it to the Deuteronomic reform a millennium after Moses and six centuries before Jesus; some hedge their bets by suggesting that there was an ancient code, of which what we have now is a more modern version.

There are also differences among Jews, Catholics, and Protestants as to how the Commandments are divided into ten, but we won't get sidetracked by that detail. Let it suffice to say that they are not a sign of religious unity. Let's look briefly at what we have, from where ever and whenever they came.

I.

We all know that the First Commandment says that there is only one God. Actually, it does not say that. What it says is, *"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."* It is clear that the people of ancient Israel were aware of a proliferation of gods, and many of them worshiped some of the others. The Commandment did not deny the existence of other gods, but demanded only that Jaweh, the God of Israel be placed first, or possibly that he be the only god worshiped by his people. (We know from the prophets that this commandment was not scrupulously followed, which is why they kept saying it should be.)

I believe that the principle toward which this commandment should point us, is awareness of our finite place in the infinite scheme of things. The worship of a diety is supposed to address that, but it doesn't always succeed. Joy Davidman put it succinctly, *▲The modern monotheist is frequently adoring his own image in the mirror.®*

I understand the First Commandment as calling us to envision the larger reality that lies beyond our own self interest - to claim and to live with a vision of the oneness of Life itself **■** to seek to understand our relatedness to other people and other species **■** to what came before we were and what will come after we no longer are. In short, the principle the Commandment articulates as I understand it, is that of Humility - the avoidance of what the Greeks called the sin of Hubris - of mistaking ourselves for gods.

II.

The second says *"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow thyself to them, nor serve them; for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.*

That one has been tricky, because there have been those who have read it literally and have believed that no artistic representations of any living thing can be made - no sculptures and no likenesses- no paintings, no photographs. Others have seen it as a proscription against idol worship, since people commonly believed that their gods

inhabited idols, and that the gods could therefore be in some sense controlled. The god of the Hebrews could not be reduced to anything so small. This, of course, made the concept of God somewhat vague for some people, and the Roman Catholic Church has not balked at representing God or what they believe are his son and agents, with idols in spite of the commandment.

I would suggest that while most of us do not realize it, most of what we really worship are, in fact, idols. We define our goals almost exclusively by material standards - by what we or others make: bank balances; square footage of our homes; car model; wardrobe. We even objectify our bodies or the bodies of others and try to make them correspond to an image created by the marketers. Think of the money that is spent on diet plans or surgery for cosmetic purposes!

William Purcell is particularly helpful in getting to the root of the Principle represented by this Commandment. He points out:

The worship of the false in any form is idolatry, and that is precisely what this commandment is about...."Thou shalt not give respect to, or sell yourself body and soul to, any of the images of the wealth or status, or pleasure seeker which happen to be the rage at any given moment." Objects of veneration come in many shapes; they can be graven in stone; they can be graven in the mind.

I believe the second commandment calls us to recognize the distinction between the material and the spiritual and to take charge of balancing them in our lives. I would suggest that the principle infusing the second Commandment is one which calls us to consider our priorities, to question whether we are on the track to living in accordance with the best that we can envision. As Emerson said, *It behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.*@

III.

The third Commandment says, *"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain."* Some people have thought that this commandment has to do with swearing – ie. Saying "God damn!" What it actually means is that it is a trivialization of God to make an idol of the divine name, much less his image.

One of the most obvious examples of this trivialization is when political leaders use the name of the holy to justify their political actions. It has become de rigeur for American Presidents of both parties to call upon God to bless the United States at the end of every address. This is a blatant way of trying to associate with the holy to imply that the policy statement just given has a divine blessing. Politicians claiming to speak on behalf of God is bad enough when clergy do it! The most frightening thing to me is that they may truly believe that they know God's will.@ And we complain about other, so called Fundamentalist@ states.

I believe that the third commandment speaks to our needs in modern times with eloquence. If we are to live religious lives, it is not a matter of the religious words we say, so much as the religious ways we act: toward neighbors, strangers, our planet.

The Quaker theologian, Elton Trueblood, insists:

The worst blasphemy is not profanity, but lip service.... The third commandment does not condemn those who fail to believe; it condemns those who believe and do nothing about it.

There is a Japanese story about a man who was being shown around heaven who observed a large jar of tongues. When he asked, he was told that those were tongues of those who spoke religiously but did not act that way. Only their tongues made it in.

I understand the third principle as calling us to make of our religion a way of life rather than empty words. I believe it calls us to congruence **B** as the saying goes, **A**walking our talk.@

IV.

The fourth commandment says: *Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.*

It is clear that the early prophets were not happy with the idea of the Sabbath and attacked it, associating it with pagan moon worship. It was only after the Exile in Babylonia that the Sabbath became so important to Judaism. Christian teachers were ambivalent about sabbath observance for some time – Luther insisted people should be religious all week long, not just Sunday -- but it finally became the subject of laws.

We have now thrown out the old blue laws in the name of religious liberty, but I have become convinced that we were snookered. It was corporations in search of another day in which to turn us into consumers who were behind the campaigns against sabbath laws.

My understanding of the Sabbath that our lives are multidimensional, and that some important spiritual dimensions are being forced out by the materialistic pressures of our society. We need to affirm our complexity and our wholeness, and I would propose that to **A**remember@ a Sabbath and committing to **A**observe@ it would not be a step backward, but a step forward in the realization of our true humanity. I believe its function is for us to pause regularly in our mundane lives to check out whether we are going in the right direction.

V.

The fifth commandment says: *Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.*

Some have interpreted this to be about obedience - children obeying parents, and everyone obeying authorities.

It was not originally aimed at dependent children. Like all the commandments, the

focus of this commandment was on the adult, Hebrew, male who was, after all, the only being with whom God [it was believed at that time] would enter into a covenant. There are some suspicions that the basis of this commandment was ancestor worship and that, in fact, it may originally have referred to the obligation to pay ritual homage to the spirits of departed fathers who were believed to have great powers over the world of the living. What it became, however, was a declaration that adult males were to be responsible for the care of their elderly parents - parents were not to be killed or turned out when they stopped being productive.

One of our biggest problems is our lack of perspective. It is the immediate that gets our attention. The ability to understand our parents requires that we consider their childhoods, and even those of their parents. We know that most family pathologies go back for generations, and are not easily changed. And it is important that we consider the impact of what we do, or do not do, on our grandchildren and their children, as well as on our own children. Natives Americans looked ahead seven generations.

In calling us to honor our parents, which is a valuable short term goal, I see the Principle as pointing beyond that relationship and urging us to remember the long parade of which we are only the band now passing the reviewing stand.

I understand the fifth commandment's emphasis on family to point to us as what the Bible refers to as *sojourners*. How different our ethics are when we appreciate that we are *only passing through*. It doesn't mean that our lives are unimportant, but that our responsibility to the past and to those to come is equally so. We are, however, transients on the earth.

VI.

The sixth says: *Thou shalt not murder*. Some translate the word as *kill*, but it is clear it was not originally intended to be so broad. People were to be executed for violations of the commandments. The Hebrews killed Canaanites as they invaded Canaan. Some scholars have suggested that the commandment really only applied to the premeditated murder of men who were within the clan. It was ok to kill women and children, since they were not a part of the covenant; and foreigners too.

I would suggest that the broader term, *kill* is the preferable understanding for our time. The principle, *Thou shalt not kill*, which Albert Schweitzer interpreted as *Reverence for Life* is an important guideline for us. It is an ideal toward which we increasingly stretch. Even as the circumstances of life in the real world cause us to make compromises, we hold the banner of our ideals high, as we work to transform the world so that the compromise of this principle will become less and less common.

VII.

The seventh says, Thou shalt not commit adultery. In Judaism, the claim to the faith is passed down through the mother. The prohibition against adultery was in part designed to keep blood lines and lines of inheritance clear. Over the years, this commandment has been interpreted broadly by some as a prohibition against any form

of extra-marital or non-procreative sexuality.

As I interpret it in the context of our times, the principle pointed to by the sixth commandment deals with fidelity to the commitment most people make to another person in entering into what they mutually hope will be a life-long relationship. You will please note that there are no hetero-sexist assumptions included here: I am talking about the commitment of any two people to intimately share their lives.

VIII.

The eighth commandment says Thou shalt not steal. The group to whom the Commandments were presented, or from which they emerged, was a nomadic, pastoral clan, not a bunch of city-dwellers. Nomads do not have a lot of goods. In fact, when they settle down, they usually emphasize the communal ownership of flocks and land. Rather than being an advance for private property, it is commonly agreed that this commandment originally meant, *You have no right to take community property for yourself.*@

Robert Gnuse, in his book **Thou Shalt not Steal** , suggests that:

The ancient Israelite legislator realized what too few of our contemporaries are willing to acknowledge: if a healthy society prioritizes the economic integrity of its citizens, it will stay a healthy society. The maintenance of property and possessions must come second to human need. . . . Many of these provisions would infringe upon modern property rights granted by law in contemporary society. But the ancient Israelite would respond that some of our laws infringe upon human rights granted by God.

I love this quotation from D. Stuart Briscoe who suggests:

Most often when we think of stealing we think in terms of the "have-nots" taking from the "haves" what is not theirs. In the world we have a dichotomy between the haves and the have-nots. The haves have what the have-nots have not. It is a simple law of economics. The have-nots have not what the haves have. If you're a have you'll think it'd be great if it stayed that way. Unfortunately, the have-nots won't let it stay that way, because they want what the haves have. So our natural idea of stealing says the have-nots take what the haves have.

The Bible says relatively little about this kind of theft. But it does say a lot about the haves stealing from the have-nots The Bible says you steal from others when you have economic control over them, if you do not give them their due when it is due. In addition Scripture teaches that it is stealing when you look upon suffering people and do nothing about it. Demonstrably, as the Christian Church became successful, it left such ideas behind. It became increasingly supportive of the "haves" against the "have nots."

Our Biblical heritage tells us that justice means that everyone, on the basis of

being alive, should be entitled to receive from the community enough to provide for adequate shelter, clothing, nourishment, education, and health care. It is clear that this is an ideal that we don't begin to approach in modern America.

IX.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. There is some evidence that in the original Hebrew, the meaning really was quite specifically, do not obtain a false witness to testify against someone else in a trial. By the time of the prophets, the commandment was understood to address all forms of dishonesty, rather than just dishonesty in the court, and it is that understanding of the commandment which has come down to us today. There are two clear foci of understanding of the ninth commandment: lying in general and defamation of character in particular. I center in on the important principle of veracity.

X.

Finally, comes number ten: *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.* Coveting is not the same as admiring - coveting is fixating on something and thinking about how you can get it away from the other. King David coveted Bathsheba, and got her husband killed so he could have her. The Buddha took the extreme position on this issue and insisted that the goal of life was the cessation of all desire.

What I see as the challenge of the 10th commandment is learning to differentiate between our needs and our wants. We are the prisoners of our coveting when we give priority to lesser things, when we strive to acquire things that are not really going to give us pleasure and are not really ever going to satisfy us. Coveting is much like a cocaine addiction that keeps us wanting more and, in fact, isolates us from the things that really matter. Freedom comes when we are able to make choices; when we refuse to be manipulated by empty external symbols of success; when we focus on the enjoyment of the bounties we have instead of suffering over what we do not have. The principle here is contentment.

[principles]

The principles inherent in the commandments can play a useful role in our lives. They give those of us who seek to live responsibly, a means to check ourselves, to measure our successes and failures, to possibly do better.

The Ten Principles are, as I see them: Humility, Prioritizing, Congruence, Pausing, Transience, Reverence for Life, Fidelity, Justice, Veracity, and Contentment.

These principles are not new, and I hope by now it is clear, never have been, immutable. We have not only a right but a responsibility to challenge the present understanding of them. Perhaps they ask too much of us; perhaps they ask too little.

Ultimately, I believe we have to decide. I affirm the value of being a part of a religious community in which we are answerable in some sense to one another for how well we are doing in meeting the norms of moral living. It is too easy for an individual to convince him or herself that what they feel like doing is precisely what they ought to be doing. In truth, few religious communities play that role, and when they do, too often it is in the context of a rigid set of rules. But ideally, a religious community is an arena in which the real questions of standards for living can be raised and explored in a supportive environment, by people who are committed to seeking moral principles to guide their lives. It is my belief that these ten principles, while not written in stone, serve as a good guide for living in the 21st century.