

THE CHARACTER CODE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
December 4, 2011

My sermon this morning may be hard for some of you to hear; it certainly was hard for me to write. But I persevered, and I urge you to do the same. Not to worry: I have nothing personal to confess this morning—except that sometimes I find it hard to be optimistic when the tide of goodness seems to be going out.

Early on Thanksgiving morning, my wife Holly Atkinson and I flew to Portland, Oregon, to spend the holiday with Holly's mother and one of Holly's sisters and her family. It rained only half the time we were there—a welcome surprise, given Portland's penchant for rain. When the sun came out, Mt. Hood appeared, and Portland looked its picturesque best. With more open space per capita than any other city in the nation, Portland consistently rates one of the best places in the nation to live, work, and raise a family. Politically liberal, environmentally aware, socially responsible, and instinctively quirky, it seems there's almost nothing not to like about Portland.

One of our outings took us to a lovely botanical garden along 82nd Avenue in the northeast part of the city. Serene and peaceful, half of the 65-acre garden sits atop a cliff overlooking Portland—a magnificent view. It turns out that the official name of the garden, owned by the Catholics, is The National Sanctuary of Our Sorrowful Mother.

Here's the irony: almost without anyone noticing it, Portland has become by some accounts one of our nation's leading centers for the sex trafficking of adolescent girls. Defenders say Portland is no worse than a host of other US cities. Whether bad or worst, 82nd Avenue—just down the street from The National Sanctuary of Our Sorrowful Mother—is the hub of the sex trade. One entire strip mall along 82nd Avenue is devoted to pornography and prostitution. Many of the prostitutes are underage girls who have been trafficked in from elsewhere in the Northwest.

More than 100,000 children go missing in our nation each year, many of them young girls coerced into working as sex slaves. Some experts place the number of missing children closer to 300,000; everyone agrees that sex trafficking is a booming business. Increasingly, these girls are middle-class kids. These are our children. This could be my child. Mark me down as a furious father.

Last year, Dan Rather reported on the trafficking of adolescent girls in Portland—or, as he called it in the title of his documentary, “Pornland, Oregon.” Why Portland? The city values its reputation as open-minded and quirky, and cracking down on anything to do with sex might make Portland seem prudish, like Texas, perhaps. If only: earlier this week, a report by an organization called Shared Hope assigned grades to all fifty states based on how effectively their laws and law enforcement agencies combat sex trafficking. Texas received the highest marks in the nation, earning a grade of B. Oregon, like New York, New Jersey, and a dozen other states, earned a D. More than half of the states received an F.

Portland has no zoning laws restricting the location of porn shops or strip clubs. One can build a strip club across the street from a middle school, and someone has. Portland has fifty detectives assigned to narcotics, but only two detectives to sex crimes.

If you traffic in drugs and get caught, you'll serve serious time in prison. If you traffic in adolescent girls and get caught, which is unlikely, you'll get a much shorter sentence, if any. No wonder sex trafficking is the new growth industry for organized crime.

Some weeks ago, I attended a ceremony at the Council on Foreign Relations, where the Train Foundation awards its annual Civil Courage Prize. Michelle Bachelet, former president of Chile and now head of UN Women, gave the keynote address. She spoke about the burgeoning problem of sex slavery around the globe and the trafficking of women and girls. It's already a huge problem, she said, and it's getting worse.

The reference to courage in the name of the Civil Courage Prize, by the way, isn't window dressing. Awardees must have demonstrated "steadfast resistance to evil at great personal risk." The Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya received the Prize in 2005 for her reports on the atrocities of war in Chechnya, despite death threats and intimidation. The following year, she was shot and killed near her apartment in Moscow.

This year's winners have demonstrated similar courage. Triveni Acharya, founder of the Rescue Foundation, rescues and rehabilitates women and children from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh who have been kidnapped and sold into forced prostitution in India. Of the three million prostitutes in India, 40% are children. Working with local police, Treveni rescues upwards of 400 girls each year. Brothel owners, who lose \$45,000 in annual revenue for each girl rescued, fight back. Treveni persists, despite frequent threats against her life.

Lydia Ribero, a prominent investigative journalist from Mexico, has been kidnapped, raped, and tortured in the wake of her 2005 book titled *The Demons of Eden*, which revealed a large child pornography ring in Cancun and the United States. She named names—prominent politicians and business leaders, as well as crime bosses—and published their pictures. In the years since, she has traveled around the world to write about the \$35 billion market for sex slaves—sometimes posing as a nun to talk with prostitutes, at other times posing as a prostitute to talk with American and European sex tourists who pay \$3,000 for a virgin teenager.

"In my career," she says, "I've survived rape, incarceration, and an assassination attempt for exercising my freedom to be an echoer of other women's voices. And here I am making a free choice that millions of our sisters cannot make. Until we walk the path together, I'll keep writing."

The song "Bullet with Butterfly Wings" is the lead single from an album titled "Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness" by The Smashing Pumpkins, an American alternative rock band. The song, which won a Grammy some years ago, begins:

The world is a vampire, sent to drain
Secret destroyers, hold you up to the flames
And what do I get, for my pain?
Betrayed desires, and a piece of the game

The song ends with the repeated lament:

And I still believe that I cannot be saved
And I still believe that I cannot be saved
And I still believe that I cannot be saved

Especially for women and girls brutalized by violence, the world is a vampire. Their lives have been drained of love, and hope, and joy. Young girls in Cancun are smuggled into fancy hotels, where men arriving on cruise ships have arranged beforehand to abuse them for pleasure and perversion. Girls age 16 and younger walk 82nd Avenue every day and every night. If a girl refuses, her pimp beats her. If she flees, he tracks her down. Sometimes he kills her. The world is a vampire.

Training wheels go on early. Studies show that today, on average, boys first view pornography at age eleven. Video games are becoming more graphically realistic and more sexually violent. Some people try to insist that internet porn and sexually violent video games don't cause problems in real life, but studies reveal the opposite. Not only do porn and violent video games change attitudes and behaviors, they also make it harder for men to form healthy relationships with women. It's no surprise that one out of every three real, live women in this country will suffer violence sometime in her life.

What are we thinking? What are we doing? The world is a vampire. In the face of the evidence, it's easy to believe that we cannot be saved.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, who teaches at Princeton, has achieved what amounts to rock-star status in the world of philosophy. In his latest book, titled *The Honor Code*, he asks how moral revolutions happen. Appiah looks at three morally repugnant practices—dueling among British gentlemen, foot-binding among the Chinese elite, and slavery in the British Empire—and asks why they persisted and how they ended. In each case, he says, a society's idea of honor sustained the practice for centuries, and a shift in what was considered honorable ended the practice within just a few decades. Moral revolutions aren't based on good arguments alone; they take peer pressure: the desire to be esteemed by one's peers.

Dueling, for example, was the means by which British gentlemen defended their own honor and that of their families. When the practice was taken up by the lower classes, however, it was soon abandoned by the elites. In the same way, foot-binding went out of favor as Chinese elites discovered, mainly through the testimony of Christian missionaries, that the barbaric practice had made them a laughingstock among foreign elites.

Moral revolutions happen not when honor goes out of fashion, but when the grounds of honor shift. Peer pressure continues to drive people to act, but in a different way. In Britain, Parliament passed laws against slavery when tradesmen and workers in England began to invoke "the honor of working men" as an argument against tolerating slave labor.

Appiah rightly observes that most people respond to peer pressure by acting in a way that gains approval from others. The problem is that honor in this sense is morally blind: it can dictate praiseworthy behavior or blameworthy behavior. Many teenage boys experience prostitution for the first time because their friends egg them on, typically during a milestone birthday celebration. In other words, we are driven more by convention than by conviction, more by what brings honor from without than by what expresses good character from within.

People who live by the character code, however, strive to do what is right, not necessarily what is popular. They do what they ought to do. The challenge, when trying to provoke a moral revolution, is for enough people to live by the character code to change the demands of the honor code.

Here's the question: what would it take to forge an honor code that would protect women and girls from pornography and rape? We have evidence that an honor code approach could work: men who buy sex say one of the leading reasons they would stop is to keep their family, friends, and coworkers from finding out. And many of them report feelings of guilt and shame.

The truth is that we should all live in glass houses, morally speaking, with nothing to hide. Following the crowd is not good enough. We need to live by the character code.

I have a homework assignment to offer. First, watch Dan Rather's report on Pornland, Oregon. (Available on iTunes: see below.) Remember that the problem here in New York is worse by far, probably by a factor of ten or more. Everything is bigger in New York, including the problems.

Then, read Marge Piercy's poem titled "Rape Poem." It includes this line: "There is no difference between being raped / and going head first through a windshield / except that afterward you are afraid / not of cars / but half the human race." (Full poem here: [Rape Poem](#))

Also, sign a statement called the [White Ribbon Pledge](#). By signing the pledge, you declare the following: "I will never commit, condone, or remain silent about violence against women and girls." Formally declaring our intent in these matters is a good idea. As you will notice, the White Ribbon Campaign is a Canada-based international organization that, as of yet, has no U.S. presence. I'm exploring whether it would make sense for us to start one. I'll let you know.

The last part of the homework is the hardest. If you are a man, ask a woman who trusts you if she will tell you how violence has affected her life. Then sit back and listen. Just listen. Remember the poem about the windshield. There's a one-in-three chance that she's been through it. Listen. If you are a woman and someone asks, tell the truth. Break the silence.

If you're struggling with any of these matters, of course, now would be a good time to reach out for help. Talk with me or one of the other ministers. We're here when you need us.

High atop the cliff at The National Sanctuary of the Sorrowful Mother stands an exquisite little meditation chapel. It's built like a diminutive movie theater, with a screen of glass overlooking the city of Portland and the mountains beyond. From there, everything looks lovely, and pure, and whole. Eighty-second Avenue seems impossibly distant—and unbearably close.

It's both. Because you and I have sometimes seen beauty and felt wholeness, we know the truth about what's ugly and broken on 82nd Avenue. Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* has called for a new abolitionist movement to end sex slavery around the globe. You and I should be in the thick of this fray. After all, our Unitarian and Universalists forebears were at the vanguard of the move to end slavery in this nation.

One of them was Theodore Parker, who once said, famously, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

The arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. This I believe, and this is why we can be saved. Imagine what we can do together.

Dan Rather Reports:

“Pornland, Oregon”

Dan Rather Reports, Season 5, Number 17 (broadcast 5/18/2010)

iTunes: <http://bit.ly/uwq9aa>

For further reading:

Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Beacon Press, 2010)

Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (Harvard, 1997)