

The Sin of Missing the Point

By

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Little did I know when first planning today's message that it would come on the heels of a national Presidential debate that completely missed the point. What was meant to be an opportunity for Americans to hear the candidates' plans about a variety of overwhelming concerns—the pandemic, the economy, racial injustice, healthcare—ended up being about a 74-year-old man who couldn't control his rude impulses and need to dominate the conversation and spotlight while hurling disrespectful insults at his opponent. Listening in was like trying to participate in a conversation with other adults while dealing with a screaming toddler. We were constantly distracted, often missed the point of whatever was being said, the interruptions kept preventing Joe Biden and the moderator from concentrating and making their points and questions, and the Interrupter in Chief couldn't stay on target long enough to make many coherent points of his own. It was a missed opportunity to have a more informed electorate. Although most people can guess who I'm voting for given the choices, Trump did say a couple of things I agree with, and Biden said a couple of things I found disturbing, but neither was able to stay on target long enough to say anything to influence my vote.

This “crying shame” is a good example of the original concept of the word “sin.” For centuries Christendom has beat much of the world down with its nonsensical notion of *Original Sin*: the idea that sin is genetic, something we are all born with, something inherent in human nature, rather than something that occurs in relationship, in the ways we sometimes mistreat each other. But this silly doctrine is itself a sin because it misses the entire point of what sin really is. Even the Old English word *synn*, from which it derives, has to do with wrongdoing and misdeeds: with actions, that is, not genetics or anything else innately wrong with humanity. But the word translated as “sin” in the Bible, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, more literally means “missing the mark.” A Hebrew proverb says, for example, “Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.” (Someone should have read that one to Trump before the debate.) The point is, the notion of sin isn't about ontological evil, the idea that evil is a thing or a substance that has an existence of its own that we can inherit, catch, or become possessed by. Sin is about making mistakes and missteps, as we all do. Sin is something we usually recognize in retrospect, with 20/20 hindsight. It is caused by our actions and can be redeemed by our actions when we make amends and strive to do better. There's nothing magical or sinister about it.

The concept of Original Sin wasn't invented until the 4th century CE, as one of Augustine's minor afterthoughts, but didn't become official Church doctrine until it was adopted by the Council of Trent twelve hundred years later in the 16th century. Yet, as Erich Fromm, who was himself Jewish, says, “The Old Testament does not take the position of [humanity's] fundamental corruption. Adam and Eve's *disobedience* to God are not called sin; nowhere is there a hint that this disobedience has corrupted [humanity].”¹ Hebert Haag, a former president of the Catholic Bible Association, concurs: “The doctrine of original sin,” he says, “is not found in any of the writings of

the Old Testament.”²

So let’s take the mystery and shame out of sin and start thinking about it in real human terms: as the ordinary tendency to make mistakes and missteps, as “missing the mark,” from time to time. In this sense, there’s nothing evil about it. If sin is just another word for mistake, misstep, failure, and such, then it is necessary if we’re to learn and improve ourselves. In this way it can be considered another word for “practice.” An archer can’t learn to consistently hit a bullseye without lots of practice and lots of misses. Practice may eventually make perfect but only if we are willing to learn through our failures along the way. To err may be human, but we should not require divine forgiveness for our errors, especially if we use them to help improve how we do things.

The only real sin is not learning from our mistakes—the insanity of repeating the same errors over and over again and expecting different results. This is what makes the devastating fires in California, Oregon, and Washington this summer, doubly tragic, because they keep happening year after year and we don’t learn from them in a way that has led us to meaningfully change our behaviors. The same is true of the continued police shootings and killings of unarmed or subdued black men and women. When will the authorities learn from this and begin doing things differently? There is much faulty behavior in our society and personal lives that we can but don’t learn from, and, thus, keep repeating and ending up with the same unwanted results. When it comes to Global Warming, and racial justice, and income inequality, and healthcare, and so many other issues negatively impacting millions of people, we keep missing the mark.

Again, missing the mark doesn’t have to become a major issue so long as we are committed to learning from our mistakes and adjusting our behaviors. The problem, rather, is that too many of us don’t really want to hit the bullseye. We’re aiming at something else to begin with, with no desire to get things right. This, to me, is the real meaning of *sin*, of what it means to miss the mark. It isn’t simply taking aim and missing the bullseye; It’s aiming at the wrong target to begin with. It’s about focusing on the wrong values and goals altogether.

The death of Pat Tillman, the Arizona State football star who turned down a professional team to join the Army after 9/11, is an example such a sin. Although the military initially attempted to cover up what happened, claiming he’d been killed in Afghanistan when his unit was ambushed, it was eventually revealed that Tillman was killed by friendly fire, a literal example of just how tragic missing the mark can turn out. But how many of us commit this same kind of sin by aiming our rage at the wrong target in other ways? How many of us demonize the wrong people? And, in truth, demonizing anyone, individuals or groups, means demonizing the wrong people.

In her book critiquing White Supremacy Culture theory, Anne Schneider, a retired sociologist, takes on Robin DiAngelo’s White Fragility hypothesis, which is an issue our religion is responsible for because it was the Unitarian Universalist Association that irresponsibly published *White Fragility* even though there’s been no research backing it up, which is why it’s only a hypothesis that isn’t worthy of being called a theory. I won’t go into the fallacies of DiAngelo’s unproven hypothesis

here, which I've already discussed at length in *The Gadfly Papers*, as have many other progressive thinkers. Schneider criticizes it for several reasons, including that there's no research backing it up. But the issue she brings up that's pertinent to the topic at hand is its proponents' compulsion, like other extremist groups, to blame and attack those who are already on their side:

It seems odd that the most extreme advocates of a political movement would direct their most vitriolic criticisms not toward others on the far end of the ideological spectrum, but instead to those closest to them. On the right, for example, the Tea Party Patriots criticize traditional conservatives and moderates more than progressives or those on the far left. People on the far left point their fingers not so much at KKK members but at moderates or liberals who are not doing enough.

"DiAngelo falls into the same pattern," Schneider says, "when she writes that, 'White progressives cause most the daily damage to people of color.'"

It's another kind of friendly fire, another example of missing the mark by pointing at the wrong target. Maybe other progressives are easier to hit because they already care about the issue, but it's still the wrong target. As I say in *The Gadfly Papers*, and have been preaching to you for a decade, according to the United Nations' list of social wellness indicators, nonwhites in the U.S., especially African Americans and Latinos, are no better off today in the areas of housing, education, health, and employment, than they were before the Civil Rights bill was passed in 1968. This is so because too many in the U.S., including the U.S. Supreme Court, and, as of late, extremists on the far Left, continue conflating being racist with racism, heart with habit. This is contrary to Dr. King's target of an integrated society where we all hold hands as one people. King repeatedly stated that his purpose was to change laws not hearts, and he never tried to make people feel ashamed of themselves for some original sin, but called upon all of us to be at our best by doing our best for each other:

It may be true that you can't legislate integration, but you can legislate desegregation. It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important also.³

Going after allies by assuming they are all living privileged lives and accusing them of unconscious racism, particularly when coming from other virtue signaling whites, is the wrong target. This is especially true when so little has changed in real quality of life issues for nonwhites, in addition to routinely witnessing the extrajudicial killings of some who were only guilty of driving while black, sleeping while black, wearing hoodies while black, smoking while black, and so on. We also have genuine white supremacists openly walking our streets, often armed with military style weapons. KKK, Neo-Nazis, Alt-Right, and the Proud Boys go unchallenged, even encouraged, by the highest Office in the land while progressive organizations trying to work against these outrages are being destroyed from within by linguistic puritans who seem to only care about controlling the speech of their those who are already on their side. They are aiming at the wrong target. What a shame. What a sin.

Extremism on the far Right is no better, where some are aiming at the wrong target with real guns. There's been a lot of controversy in our own community regarding Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich's wish to bring Dave Grossman to Spokane County to have his officers undergo Grossman's controversial *Killology* training. Killology is based on some of the claims in his book, *On Killing: The Psychological Costs of Learning to Kill in a War Society*. It sounds pretty official and Grossman does have a Master's in Education degree in Counseling Psychology. But his book, *On Killing*, is based upon the theories of S.L.A. Marshall, who was an Army Brigadier General, a World War I veteran, and a prolific author on the topic of warfare. His book, *Men Against Fire*, which Grossman's Killology depends on, claims that only 1 in 4 soldiers fired their weapons during the first world war because of our natural psychological aversion to killing. Killology seeks to help soldiers and law enforcement officers overcome this aversion when facing life and death situations. It should be noted that there are many questions regarding the validity of Marshall's original research.

About the time this controversy erupted in Spokane, shortly after protests of the killing of George Floyd began, I'd receive an email from my colleague, Rev. Davidson Loehr. He told me an anecdote from his seminary days when a student in one of his classes began vehemently criticizing sociologist Herbert Spencer, who had famously applied Darwin's theory of evolution to the evolution of society, coining the term, *survival of the fittest*. "Her invective was brilliant and unforgiving," Davidson recalls. "He had screwed up evolution, science, thought, everything he touched. She sounded like a fundamentalist preacher condemning a heretic to hell." After she finally finished, their brilliant professor, Stephen Toulmin, told her that she hadn't yet earned the right to criticize Spencer, especially since he was considered one of the greatest minds of his time. He then gave her a reading list and some time to prepare a proper report on Spencer, further explaining, "To earn the right to criticize someone, you must first understand their argument well enough to present it in a way they would accept as informed and fair. Before you have the right to condemn a heretic, you must get inside his or her head and soul, and explain why that way of thinking is the only true and correct way of thinking, in ways that your opponent would applaud." Two weeks later she returned and gave a report that Spencer himself would have applauded. "Good work!" Toulmin said. "You have earned the right to criticize him. So now get on with that because he certainly needs to be criticized."

As a friend of Sheriff Ozzie, and knowing nothing more about Dave Grossman than what I'd read in the paper, and the invective against him coming from those who don't wish to hear a single word he says, or allow anyone else to hear him either, I decided to dig in a little deeper to figure out for myself where Grossman is coming from. I wanted to be able to explain his position in a way that he would approve. Here's what I learned:

Firstly, Dave Grossman doesn't think of himself as an evil man, and neither do I. As Socrates said, "No one knowingly does evil." It is our nature to do what we believe is right. Grossman believes he is a good person working to defeat evil, and so do those who ascribe to his teachings. Like a lot of people, he believes evil exists, that it is an ontological reality that must be defeated by good people. "We're fighting a war against evil," he's says in one interview I watched, "cops and first responders, military—they have seen evil. They know there is evil in this world." He further believes such evil

is much worse than most of us erroneously believe, because advances in medicine have prevented what would have otherwise been included in the murder rate. Grossman is vigilant against evil and considers it his responsibility to protect the people he loves from evil. "I am my family's Secret Service," he says. He calls himself and those he trains, "sheepdogs," meaning they are the protectors of innocent people that the forces of Evil seek to harm. The method of such protection is Hojutsu, the Martial Art of the Firearm. Sheepdogs must be prepared to protect society from ontological Evil with gunfire if necessary, and by learning to overcome their psychological aversion to killing that might otherwise prevent them from protecting their loved ones and other innocent people.

I think this is as fair and objective as I can be without delving deeper into Grossman's books and videos, and I also think he'd consider it a fair explanation coming from someone who isn't a sheepdog. I hope this is enough to earn me the right to now criticize his thinking. Firstly, I'd point out that if Grossman and his followers and trainees are society's sheepdogs, that makes the rest of us either sheep or wolves. This seems condescending to me, and presumptuous. Sheep, who aren't smart enough to own and use guns, or tough enough to do what it takes to protect themselves and others, because they haven't had their aversion to killing others trained out of them, have to be cared for by those who are, whether we want them to or not. But the larger issue I have with Killology is that we can't really use guns to kill "forces of Evil." Guns can only be used to kill other people. The evil Grossman is at war with, that he thinks he's protecting society from, and that he's teaching others to fear, is embodied in real, living, breathing human beings. So, on the one hand, Killology is touted as a philosophy that loves and protects life, but on the other hand, it does so by destroying life.

So when we routinely see innocent people, or people engaged in petty crimes at most, being sheepdogged to death in our streets because, after 400 years, we have been unconsciously conditioned to association brown skin with crime, violence, and ontological Evil in our society, then we're being not being protected. And that's why I consider Killology a sin, because it's aiming at the wrong target. It's missing the mark, and in so doing is actually killing innocent people, not protecting them. Black lives matter and that means they need to be protected too, not instinctively reacted to as if they embody the forces of Evil.

We saw this troubling mindset in full force just over a month ago when a 17-year-old sheepdog from Illinois decided to take it upon himself to travel to Kenosha, Wisconsin to help police there protect society from the forces of evil he believed were present during protests against the police shooting of David Blake. The teenager, Kyle Rittenhouse reportedly told a *Daily Caller* reporter on the scene that "Part of my job also is to protect people. If someone is hurt, I'm running into harm's way. That's why I have my rifle. I've got to protect myself, obviously."⁴ He was arrested a short time later after killing two protesters and has since been charged with murder. I don't know if Rittenhouse or the group of other young protectors he was with knew anything about Grossman's thinking, but their philosophy is the same. Rittenhouse is the hero of his story and, unfortunately, has since become a heroic figure to many others who are also aiming at the wrong target.

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Fighting Evil by firing guns at real people is missing the point. Winning a debate at the cost of one's integrity is missing the point. An ineffective anti-racism program that's based on shaming and estranging one's friends, while ignoring the real injustices that continue diminishing the wellbeing of millions of nonwhite citizens, is missing the point. Protesting injustice while deny free speech to those we disagree with, is missing the point. Basing the success of an economy on the growth of the GDP while millions of people have no financial security and diminishing paychecks, is missing the point. Lawmakers who gleefully change the rules whenever necessary to suit their own interests, are missing the point. A government that demands law and order while thriving on corruption, is missing the point. A government that promises to keep it citizens safe while ignoring the destruction of the very environment they depend on, is missing the point. Choosing Supreme Court Justices at the expense of a Party's integrity may feel like a bullseye, but it's missing the point by a longshot.

These are real sins, not because some evil spirit is orchestrating them, but because they are human behaviors that are harmful to the wellbeing and flourishing of other humans. They are sins caused by some people aiming at the wrong target and, thus, are doomed to miss the mark, even when they do hit a bullseye, because they are always hitting the wrong bullseye. But we don't have to continue making these mistakes. We can learn from them and redeem ourselves as a society by doing better, by taking true aim at the right target—human welfare and individual unfolding. Anything less, would be a sin.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *The Heart of Man*, Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1964, 1980, p. 19.

² Ibid., p. 47.

³ King, Jr, Martin Luther, April 5, 1965 speech at UCLA

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/27/kyle-rittenhouse-kenosha-shooting-protests/>