

But On the Other Hand

Demonstrating the Dialectic

By

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Occasionally, when I'm feeling down about the world, like the bad guys are winning, I like to watch actor Liam Neeson's *Taken* movie. It's about retired CIA agent Brian Mills who springs to the rescue after his daughter is kidnapped by human-traffickers. While on the phone with one of her attackers, Neeson delivers his most famous line ever, "I don't know who you are. I don't know what you want. If you're looking for ransom, I can tell you I don't have money. But what I do have are a very particular set of skills, skills I have acquired over a very long career, skills that make me a nightmare for people like you. If you let my daughter go now, that will be the end of it. I will not look for you. I will not pursue you. But if you don't, I will look for you. I will find you. And I will kill you."

Talk about spoiler alerts. That line is delivered in the first few minutes of the film and describes the entire plot and its ending. The movie is a straight line to Neeson's character fulfilling his promise and rescuing his daughter by killing some of the vilest people imaginable. There is no ambiguity to the story. There's the good guy and the bad guys who are so vile we are relieved to watch them go.

Hollywood has a couple of tricks to help us walk out of a theatre feeling good about having just witnessed the violent deaths of human beings. Both tricks accomplish the same thing by demonizing the villains, so we don't have to acknowledge their humanity. They have become monsters that must die for the sake of humanity. The other trick is to cover their faces with masks or makeup so we can't see their humanity. I remember watching the recent *Captain America* film, my favorite comic book character as a kid, who piles up an immense body count by throwing dozens of masked Nazis off an airplane with the ease of tossing away a wad of paper.

Unlike Neeson's film, I found this disregard for human life disturbing enough that I stopped watching the movie. I wasn't convinced, just because they were wearing masks, that they weren't human beings. But the same trick is used more effectively in other movies. Horror films like *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, as well as other superhero flicks, like *Batman* or the *Avengers* films whose villains often aren't human to begin with, but jokers and penguins, or aliens and demigods.

In reality, the difference between right and wrong is seldom so discernable, and people, no matter how much we dislike or disagree with them, are a lot more complicated than Hollywood's masked villains and heartless psychopaths and monsters.

Twenty years ago, following 9/11, I was hooked on two hit television series: *24*, about counter terrorist agent Jack Bauer, played by Kiefer Sutherland, and *The Shield*, about a group of crooked cops starring Michael Chiklis. What I appreciated about these series is the moral ambiguity I experienced watching them. *24* was about a good man who was routinely

forced to do terrible things to protect the country and those he loved, things that slowly ate away at his tortured soul.

The Shield was almost the opposite. It was about a group of crooked, violent, and murderous cops who often did good things. Viewers, including myself, couldn't help but root for them and want them to get away with their crimes. I was emotionally conflicted and psychologically confused about my desire to see the bad guys win. How could I want such evil men to get away with the things they were doing? I'm guessing it was because we also saw their humanity, their struggles, their kindness, their loyalty to their friends, their love for their families, and we came to care about them as complicated individuals.

I've begun this way, distinguishing these two ways of storytelling, to point out that life is much more like *24* and *The Shield* than Liam Neeson's *Taken* movies. The difference between right and wrong, whether ideological or moral, is seldom, if ever, easy to determine, especially when we acknowledge the humanity of others, even those we dislike or disagree with. Getting to what is true or right isn't as easy as a Hollywood plotline. The ideological choices we make are, at best, based upon our best educated guesses, and our moral decisions are usually a choice between the lesser of two evils, the least of which is often difficult to determine.

That's real life. That's the predicament we are almost always in, a state of ideological uncertainty and moral quandary. Some of us, however, like Liam Neeson's character, go about life as if they are certain of the truth and have absolute clarity about the right thing to do. So, they feel justified in disregarding the ideas and ways of others, often dehumanizing them in order to achieve their own ends. This mindset and attitude leads to extremism, which may feel reassuring to its convinced and confident adherents but leads to much woe and injustice for those who disagree with their extremist positions. Such extremism is also an escape from reality that provides a false sense of security despite its destructive consequences.

The unprecedented heat, fires, and boiling oceans we've experienced just this summer are a frightening and present example of just how serious a matter it is when large swaths of humanity are incapable of coping with reality and seek to force their insanity upon the rest of us. We could have begun addressing Global Warming decades ago and prevented the terrible impacts we're now seeing. But the Republican party has long refused to face this reality and has prevented the rest of us from doing anything meaningful about it. And today, even after the apocalyptic fires in Maui, they seem far more interested in prosecuting Hunter Biden than addressing the climate disaster their decades long ignorance has led to. They are more concerned about forcing unwanted children into the world than about the welfare of those who are already here.

Today, there are extremists on the other side of the ideological spectrum who have reembraced the failed Marxist utopianism of the past, rebranding it as "woke." In their

unconscious state, they ignore the evidence of the past and hate the present, which they are making miserable in order to create a future paradise that will be far worse than both the past and present. Yet they pursue this dystopian end with the same extremist certainty as those on the far Right, and, like them, are willing to dehumanize and destroy anyone who merely raises a hand to question their methods. Like Liam Neeson, they know the plotline of their story—they are the good guys and those who disagree deserve whatever happens next.

But reality requires us to be more like Jack Bauer in *24*, conflicted about the difficult decisions we face, about the inherent dilemma in all moral choices, appropriately humble and uncertain about our own beliefs, and troubled by the negative consequences resulting from our choices, especially in the ways they impact the lives of others. And, as with the characters in *The Shield*, we must not demonize those we disagree with. No matter how flawed they might be, we must acknowledge their inherent worth and dignity.

Unlike Brian Mills, Neeson's character in *Taken*, we must question our own assumptions and consider the consequences of our actions. As my college philosophy professor, Wallace Roark says in his book, *Think Like an Octopus*, "The reason behind many bad things that happen in the lives of individuals and society can be expressed in the words of a blundering friend of mine, 'I just didn't think about *that*.' We have a moral and social, as well as prudential, obligation to think about *that*."¹ Dr. Roark used to say we must learn to "think on the other hand." Hence, the title of his book. To think like an octopus, we must think on the other hand, and on the other hand, and on the other hand, and so on, always considering other possibilities, always questioning our own ideas and beliefs.

To demonstrate this, I want to offer two examples of thinking on the other hand. One is an example of an internal dialogue I've had with myself this week, and the other is an example of a societal conversation we ought to be holding but aren't. The first example involves a local story involving Spokane's Mayor, Nadine Woodward, who got a lot of bad press this week after being photographed on stage while allowing herself to be blessed and prayed for by former Washington State Representative Matt Shea. For those who don't know who Shea is, he's an extremely militant, rightwing Christian pastor who has called for Washington to be divided so the Eastern half can become a Christian state. He's been involved in training a Christian militia for Holy War, and authored a manifesto on how its anointed soldiers can take over the country, including having targeted certain organizations and individuals. He's so extreme that his own party kicked him out after he'd been officially designated as a domestic terrorist.

Mayor Woodward is up for reelection and, given the results of the recent primary, her chances of winning aren't looking good. Some have thus concluded that she was willing to court Shea in order to win over his supporters. As someone whose Church—our Spokane congregation—and who has been personally included on Shea's list of targets, I, more than many, have a right to feel disgust and betrayal over the mayor's association with this madman.

But on the other hand, I have often imagined having an opportunity to meet with Matt Shea myself and to ask him why I'm on his list. My purpose would be to help him see my humanity and, perhaps, consider that others on his list are just as human. Perhaps he would ask if he could pray for me during such an encounter, and I'd say, "yes," out of respect for his religion and appreciation for the gesture. Maybe someone would take a picture of him praying for me, and maybe some who disagree with me about other issues would use it to publicly condemn and associate me with the far-right, just as some have already attempted to do.

But on the other hand, Mayor Woodward is a politician running for reelection and her decision to meet with Shea wasn't to create mutual understanding, some say, but to appeal to those who agree with him to get every vote she can. As her opponent, Lisa Brown's campaign, says, Shea and his supporter's "dangerous rhetoric against members of the LGBTQ+ community and view on reproductive rights and many other issues are wrong for Spokane. Mayor Woodward's poor judgment in joining them is inexcusable."

Statements like this make Woodward's actions hard to defend. But on the other hand, guilt by association is a logical fallacy and one of the oldest political ploys in the book. The GOP's obsession with Hunter Biden to discredit his father is a case in point. And the statement by Lisa Brown's campaign came in the form of a mass text within 48 hours after the story broke, and it concluded by making a pitch to vote for Brown and to join her campaign. It also seems only fair that we should take Woodward's own statement on the matter into account: "I am deeply disturbed that Matt Shea chose to politicize a gathering of thousands of citizens who joined together yesterday to pray for fire victims and first responders" Woodward said. "I attended the event with one purpose only and that was to join with fellow citizens to begin the healing process."

But, on the other hand, as columnist Shawn Vestal wrote of the matter, "Woodward chose to go up on that stage with Shea, and she stood rapt as he was praying, eyes closed, hands open toward heaven, his hand on her shoulder, smiling and nodding – and she never betrayed a hint of discomfort with any of it, right up to the hug she gave Shea at the end."²

But on the other hand, I'm a hugger and if Matt Shea and I ever had any kind of positive encounter, no matter how much I might continue to disagree with him, I would probably hug him if the opportunity permitted. As the Unitarian saying goes, "We need not think alike to love alike." It is possible for me to love people I disagree with. If I can root for the bad guys on a TV show, surely, I can embrace the humanity of those I disagree with in real life.

This back-and-forth process is usual for me, having been trained in philosophy. So, I still can't tell you where I'm at with this particular matter, only that my conclusions about it are held tepidly and with humility, tempered by my commitment, no matter what I think, to always consider the inherent worth and dignity of every person involved.

The other example regards a topic I don't know enough about to form a complete opinion on, which is probably why I've not spoken about it before now. I'm talking about the disagreement in our larger society over certain transgender issues, particularly providing certain kinds of medical treatment to children and teenagers, and the question over whether or a transwoman is a real woman or not.

On the one hand, I have more than one colleague who has a trans-daughter, a child who is biologically male, but identifies as female. They have been supportive of their child's identity from the start by immediately referring to them by their preferred pronouns and names, sought professional advice, and allowed gender affirming medical interventions while they were still minors. Their children are now adults and living life as transwomen.

On the other hand, as parents, they had serious concerns about giving medical treatment that might have permanent effects and potentially negative side effects to their kids who were still maturing and still figuring themselves out. What if they later changed their minds, as some have, and wanted to de-transition but couldn't because of the lasting impacts from, so called, "puberty blockers" and surgeries?

But on the other hand, they were told by the professionals that trans-kids who feel unsupported are prone to suicide and that not treating them risks their lives—a potentiality that would frighten the hell out of any loving parent.

But on the other hand, is a parent or primary caregiver unsupportive and unloving for simply saying no, not now, you're too young? I've known of many nonbinary teenagers who were utterly rejected by their families, many who were forced to leave home at an early age, and maybe even end up living on the streets. That kind of cruelty and rejection of one's very being can certainly lead a child to dark and desperate places. But is a parent who wants to support their kids, and is doing their best to figure out how best to do so but isn't quite sure what that means, automatically unsupportive and uncaring?

Then there's the question of whether a transwoman is "real" woman. On the one hand, I have dear friends who are transwomen, and I couldn't possibly relate to them as anything but women. They are as healthy, mature, functional, and wise as anyone I know, even more so in some cases. I relate to them as women because that's how they present themselves and it would feel unnatural for me to see them in any other way.

On the other hand, there are differences between someone who is biologically male or female and someone who is transgender. These differences are literally played out when transwomen are, in many cases, allowed to compete in women's sports. Is it fair to allow those who have retained some of the physical abilities of having been born biologically male to compete against biological females? Especially when the results often show they are able to leverage those abilities to overwhelming advantage.

On the other hand, gender is just a cultural invention and isn't rooted in any kind of physical reality, or so some have argued.

But on the other hand, what of biological women who have fought for equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal recognition for centuries? Women whom, after making great strides, are again being told by some that the only difference is that they are able get pregnant, reducing their gender to the significance of a petri dish and incubator.

But on the other hand, there are many ways to be maternal, and not every biological female chooses to or has the ability to birth children. Does this make them any less female?

But on the other hand, almost every species demonstrates behaviors that are exclusively male or female. When a male peacock spreads its feathers to impress the females, and when the females are impressed, are they simply demonstrating cultural stereotypes? Is the instinct among gorillas to follow the most powerful male silverback genetic or merely a cultural stereotype? Surely these behaviors are biological not cultural. What are the innate behavioral differences between human males and females, and which behaviors are merely cultural? It be interesting to learn but currently we can't even ask the question.

This is a rabbit hole I won't go any deeper down now. My point in raising it today is because it is an incredibly divisive issue in today's society, yet anyone who even raises these questions risks getting in big trouble, perhaps being attacked on social media, called transphobic, losing their jobs, and having their reputations destroyed. This is so because the issue is being treated like a Liam Neeson movie in which the plot is announced at the beginning and headed for in a straight line with no questions asked.

This is similar to many of today's most pressing issues. Too many of us are unwilling to question ourselves, let alone allow others to question us. So, we are divided on ideological lines. Instead of learning and growing through genuine dialogue, we hold to the prewritten plotline, demonizing those who disagree with us—the bad guys—in the process. But to truly come to understand each other and, consequently, to truly come to care for each other, and to grow and progress together, we need to be allowed to genuinely converse and that means asking questions. It means questioning ourselves. It means thinking on the one hand, but on the other hand, and the other hand, and the other hand, and the other hand, and on and on and on. That is how society and the world, together, will solve our problems and overcome our challenges. It's how we will grow as individuals. And it is the only way we can truly come to love one another. But, on the other hand ...

¹ Roark, Wallace, *Think Like an Octopus: The Key to Becoming a Good Thinker*, Wasteland Press, Shelbyville, KY, 2010, p. 21.

² <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2023/aug/22/shawn-vestal-sheas-blessing-a-political-curse-for/>