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Do Unto Others?

It was a particularly cold North-Jersey morning early in March. I was in the midst of my daily train-ride to school, and, like every morning that had passed before, the train-car was filled almost to capacity with people. Most of them—aside from the regular conductor and a friend of mine who was traveling to the same place—were strangers. I did not know them and they did not know me, yet this did not deter us from pressing the “door open” button for each other, or from exchanging the occasional nod or salutation. In fact, I listened as one stranger warned another of a wet, slippery area on the floor of the train, and had a pen that I had unknowingly dropped handed back to me by another. Later that same day, I felt compelled to give another passenger an apple from my lunch-bag as he spoke of having not eaten that afternoon to his companion.

Why did each of these individuals do what they did for a stranger when others may have not? Did they feel compelled to uphold a certain standard of social decorum or did they feel a more personal obligation to help another person in need? Both of these motivations are certainly valid, and the questions surrounding them can be explored further by examining them through the lens of the experiences of individuals described in Jason Elliot’s travelogue *An Unexpected Light* and Joseph Conrad’s novella *The Secret Sharer*. These two texts not only help to unravel the complexities of what motivates certain individuals to treat complete strangers with dignity and compassion; they also raise further questions about the roles of shared social customs, religious beliefs, and individuals’ personal conceptions about their purpose in the world in molding the way they treat others.

In *An Unexpected Light*, an Englishman named Jason Elliot reflects upon his experiences during three trips to Afghanistan. His words reveal the character of the people

there, who display “prototypical human dignity” – holding fast to their traditions and social customs despite the ongoing strife of war in their land (Elliot 6). Elliot’s account also serves to outline the tremendous importance of showing hospitality toward strangers and foreigners in Afghani culture. In one passage early in his account, Elliot describes his meeting with three men living in a “half-ruined room”, who, despite being “utterly destitute”, still exchanged their traditional greetings:

“Peace to you, brothers,” I said.

“And to you. Welcome”

“Thanks be given. Are you well?”

“Praise God, well enough. And you – your souls are happy?”

“We are happy. And yours?”

“Fazl-i khoda (By God’s grace).”

(Elliot 36)

This passage not only exhibits the level of social etiquette upheld in Afghani culture, but also suggests the lasting importance the men in the room see in upholding it, for they continue to observe it even in the troubled times they face. While the men’s true motivations for greeting strangers in this way is not explicitly stated in the text, one can draw a correlation between the “Peace be with you” spoken by a man on the streets of Qandahar and the “Good morning” greetings exchanged onboard the train in New Jersey. Both of these courtesies could be considered “traditional” in that they have been preserved through transmission from one generation to the next. Perhaps they have been taught specifically as polite gestures – much in the same way an American parent may implore a child to say “Please” and “Thank you” – and thus they become the phrases that are used in their respective cultures when one finds it necessary to be courteous. The inclusion of “praise God” and “by God’s grace” in such Afghan courtesies could also be tied to tradition, given the strong influence of the Islamic faith in public life in Afghanistan. Such a blending of religious references with courteous phrases can also be

observed aboard a New Jersey Transit train when a passenger sneezes and is met with a chorus of people saying “God bless you.”

The hospitality shown to Elliot by the men in this passage extended far beyond an exchange of socially-accepted polite phrases, for despite their extreme poverty, they found it proper to invite Elliot and his companions into their dwelling as guests. One of the men, who had only one leg, “took off his shawl and, balancing on his good leg, laid it over the dusty floor for [them] to sit on” (Elliot 36-37). Similar acts of “unfailing courtesy” are depicted elsewhere in Elliot’s account – and he is treated to tea, free meals, and places to sleep in the homes of several similarly destitute individuals. Such images are truly striking, for they illustrate how deeply the Afghans feel they owe their foreign visitor such hospitality – even if they have little to spare for themselves. Such a custom appears to extend well beyond the realm of simple social decorum – and may have roots in the need for the people of Afghanistan to be able to depend upon one another when food and resources are scarce. In such an economic climate and social arrangement it is likely that one would go to such lengths to assist a stranger because of the unspoken understanding that the stranger would do the same without hesitation.

The motivations behind this seemingly universal expectation of mutual assistance in times of need can be traced beyond the realm of upholding socially-accepted standards of civility or the security ensured by such a social arrangement. The standards of hospitality upheld by the Afghans in *An Unexpected Light* most likely derive from their shared Islamic faith and their adherence to the religious laws set forth in the Qur’an, which sets clear guidelines dictating how the less-fortunate should be treated. These guiding principles are stated clearly in the second surah, or chapter, of the Qur’an, and can lend insights into the source of the social customs described in Elliot’s account. “The [Islamic society] thus organized must live under laws that would guide their everyday life,” one passage begins, “based on eternal principles of righteousness and fair dealing... honesty and helpfulness” (Ali 66). The passage continues to emphasize the vital nature of “charity and help to the poor” in Islamic society (Ali 67).

The importance of such acts of charity is not understated in the Qur'an, and the yearly giving of zakat, or alms, in one's community is considered to be one of the Five Pillars of Islam. The Qur'an also provides instructions that could be interpreted as a call to aid strangers in need, as suggested in three lines of the ninety-third surah. "Treat not the orphan with harshness," the text states, "Nor repulse the [beggar]" (Ali 1664). This passage lends insight into the possible motivations behind the hospitality shown toward Jason Elliot by the destitute one-legged man in *An Unexpected Light* – for it calls for generosity to all people in need, including non-Muslims. While Elliot was certainly not a beggar, he was a lone traveler in a foreign land who, much like an orphan, was in need of a place to stay and food to eat. The strong relationship between hospitality in the Islamic world and the words of the Qur'an can also lend an additional layer of significance to the phrases "praise God" and "by God's grace" used in the traditional greetings spoken during Elliot's exchange with the men in the "half-ruined room" (Elliot 36). When viewed within the context of Afghanistan's Islamic society, these words take on an explicitly religious tone that is not shared by the slightly more generic phrase "Bless you" used when someone aboard a New Jersey transit train sneezes.

While Jason Elliot's *An Unexpected Light* paints a portrait of individuals who care for strangers based upon a mutual understanding of expected social customs that stems from a shared religious and cultural background, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* tells of an unnamed ship captain's covert act of hospitality toward a fugitive from another ship. The captain has taken command of the ship "only a fortnight before" and is among the youngest people onboard (Conrad 1-2). Furthermore, he is unacquainted with his already-bonded crew and his new vessel, and describes himself as a stranger. This self-description not only underscores the feelings of uneasiness that prompt the young captain to take the first night watch on his own, but also reveals an important part of his disposition that strongly molds the way he comes to view and treat the man he finds "[clutching] the bottom rung of [the ship's] ladder" in the water below (Conrad 3).

The man—who later introduces himself as Leggatt—does not directly ask to be rescued and taken aboard, and he goes as far as to ask if the captain of the ship is “turned in” before climbing the ladder (Conrad 4). Despite this rather suspicious behavior, the captain reveals himself and chooses to save the man’s life because of what he later describes as his own “psychological reasons” (Conrad 12). Certainly the captain was not obligated by any form of external social expectations to save him – for he was alone on deck and could have easily let Leggatt drown. The fact that this notion is not ever entertained by the captain in the text suggests that the captain feels empathy toward Leggatt – and the strength of this empathy is highlighted further when the captain decides to allow Leggatt to “slip into [his] stateroom” and hide after learning that he had fled his nearby ship after strangling a man in a dispute (Conrad 4-6). Throughout the rest of the story, the captain goes to great lengths to hide Leggatt from the rest of his crew for several days, despite the possible dangers of harboring a murderer onboard his ship and the potential consequences he could face if the crew discovered his secret.

In a sense, the captain’s act of hospitality actually defies the social expectations placed upon him, who, arguably, was obligated to apprehend Leggatt and return him to the captain of The Sephora from which he fled to be punished for his crime. However, when the skipper of the Sephora comes aboard to question the young captain about the “criminal” who fled his ship, the captain instead chooses to defy his unspoken social obligation to a fellow captain at sea in favor of the personal commitment he feels to protect Leggatt. As the captain deliberately misleads the skipper he senses the skipper’s mistrust of him, and takes an even greater risk on Leggatt’s behalf – giving the skipper a thorough tour of his ship – including his stateroom – in order to fully dissuade him (Conrad 12-15).

These actions make clear the extent to which the captain feels compelled to protect Leggatt, and his thoughts as he deceives the skipper lend insights into the nature of his personal motivations for taking such risks on behalf of a stranger. In one line of the text he acknowledges that he “should have sympathized with [the skipper]”, but could not “detach [himself] from [his]

mental vision” of Leggatt – whom he describes several times as his “double” (Conrad 12).

Perhaps the source of the captain’s continued empathy toward Leggatt comes directly from his ability to relate to his being a stranger – the same word he uses to describe himself at the outset of the story. Like Leggatt, the captain is in the unfamiliar surrounding of a new ship “[striking] out for a new destiny” (Conrad 23). Thus, his motivations for helping a stranger may very well be his personal understanding of what it feels like to be a stranger – much like a famished man in Afghanistan might feel compelled to feed a hungry traveler because he himself knows what it feels like to be hungry.

The strikingly personal motivations for aiding a stranger in need displayed by the captain in *The Secret Sharer* cannot be further explored in the context of social expectations or a shared religious tradition like those of the men Jason Elliot encountered on his journeys in Afghanistan. The secretive nature of the captain’s hospitality virtually eliminates the influence of society as a motivation for his actions and suggests a deeper incentive rooted in his own personal spirituality – what he himself referred to as his own “psychological reasons” early in the text (Conrad 2). These “reasons” – which are never fully described in the text – can be further explored through the lens of the poem “Wild Geese” written by the Unitarian-Universalist poet Mary Oliver.

“You do not have to be good,” the poem begins plainly, “You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting” (Oliver 1-3). These opening lines accurately summarize the situation Joseph Conrad’s un-named captain found himself in as he encountered Leggatt in the water while he is alone on deck – for he was not made to rescue Leggatt, but instead, chose to because of his own sympathy. In the words of Mary Oliver, the captain “let the soft animal of [his] body love what it loves” and acted on what could be viewed as an almost innate drive to show compassion toward another human being (Oliver 4-5).

The secret bond formed between the captain and Leggatt is also echoed in the lines of Oliver’s poem. “Tell me about despair, yours,” she writes, “and I will tell you mine” (Oliver line

6). This line not only reflects Leggatt's literal sharing of his story with the captain but also the captain's ability to relate his own feelings of isolation aboard his new ship to Leggatt's being a stranger hidden in a stateroom. It is the strength of this emotional connection that motivates the captain to defy his social responsibility to turn Leggatt in to the captain of *The Sephora* in favor of the personal obligation he feels to protect him. In the words of Mary Oliver, this act marks the moment in which the captain firmly but secretly "announces his place in the family of things" (Oliver 17-18). The captain's actions make clear the fact that he identifies himself with the plight of Leggatt, and that aiding him supercedes his formal obligations to his crew or another captain. This is the captain's "place in the family of things" – and it is a role that he chose himself. Perhaps Mary Oliver's simple notion that individuals have a role to play in shaping the lives of others serves to illuminate the nameless captain's motivations for going to such lengths to help a man in need – much as a Afghani Muslim's faith would motivate him to never "[treat] the orphan with harshness, nor repulse the [beggar]" (Ali 1664).

Perhaps the portraits of individuals' motivations for showing hospitality toward others painted in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* and Jason Elliot's *An Unexpected Light* can lend insights into the motivations behind the simple acts of kindness I observed on the train that cold March morning. When the woman in front of me pressed the "door open" button in the train car for the stranger behind her, she may have been motivated by her conception of polite public behavior like the man who threw his cloak down for Jason Elliot to sit on. Perhaps she, like him, was motivated by the religious guidelines for treating others put forth in some religious text. Perhaps the man who warned a stranger about the slippery spot on the floor of the train-car did so because he himself had slipped and fallen when he stepped onto the train a few stops before. Alternatively, that man may have stepped onto the train without incident, being motivated to warn the stranger by the private spiritual beliefs of a person who "does not have to be good" but still chooses to be (Oliver line 1).

And what of my own act of kindness aboard the train that day? Why did no one else aboard the train that day choose to give their apple away to the hungry stranger before I decided that it would be wrong not to? One may also wonder who among us that day would have been prepared to risk their own safety and the safety of others to help the criminal in need of empathy like the young nameless captain in *The Secret Sharer*. If one day on my train-ride such an event occurs one may then ask – what motivated *that person* to treat a stranger with such courtesy and compassion?

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