

On Backsliding

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Today I'd like to explore some surprising similarities between what I do and what you do.²

I work on corruption. (May I quickly add, on the prevention side.)

If you're like many people, you may be thinking, "Really? Good luck with that! You're fighting against human nature. People are greedy. And some cultures are systematically corrupted. Are you aiming to change human nature, change a culture?"

Maybe you've heard something similar when you tell people you're a Christian who shares the faith.

"Really? You work on helping people get saved? Good luck with that! You're fighting against human nature. People are inherently sinful. And some sub-cultures are just plain evil. Are you planning to change human nature, change a sub-culture?"

Regarding corruption, I might answer this way. You're right, human nature is self-interested and voracious. I like what the architect Frank Gehry said about designing buildings. "As an artist I have constraints—gravity is one of them."

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² Text behind a talk given to Christian faculty and staff of the Claremont Colleges, April 30, 2019.

In designing public policy, *greed is like gravity*. We analyze how systems currently work (or don't work), and then think of better alternatives (remembering that changing to new alternatives can be costly). Economists say, let's suppose what each person is doing is a self-interested calculation of benefits and costs, of risks and rewards. Let's also observe each action's social benefits or costs, not just personal ones. How can we design systems so that the total benefits minus total costs is at the highest point, given the costs of design, change, and implementation?

Whew.

A lot of words, but notice what isn't there. We don't try to change what people want (or, in the words of the great song by Vertical Worship, to change "what we see and what we seek").³ We don't want to create a new culture. Peter Drucker is quoted as saying, "Company cultures are like country cultures. Never try to change one. Try, instead, to work with what you've got."⁴ That's excessive, but this statement isn't: in

³ "When you do what only you can do/It changes us, it changes/What we see and what we seek." "Spirit of the Living God" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogGOIGswStA>

⁴ It turns out that Drucker never said exactly these widely cited words. Here's a valid quote from him, writing in 1991: "What these needs require are changes in behavior. But 'changing culture' is not going to produce them. Culture — no matter how defined — is singularly persistent. Nearly 50 years ago, Japan and Germany suffered the worst defeats in recorded history, with their values, their institutions and their culture discredited. But today's Japan and today's Germany are unmistakably Japanese and German in culture, no matter how different this or that behavior. In fact, changing behavior works only if it can be based on the existing 'culture.'" Peter Drucker, "Don't Change Corporate Culture: Use It," *Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 1991: A14. Hat tip to

public policy, we know little about changing values and attitudes, except by changing people's behavior.

Backsliding

Alas, in both my work with corruption and your work (our work) in sharing faith, backsliding occurs. A country has declared itself against corruption, enacted new policies, and succeeded in reducing corruption. The success has popular support. And yet, a new government in the same country, or alas sometimes the same government, backslides. It becomes, in the phrase of Phyllis Dininio, “recorrupted.”⁵

Recently I taught a graduate class where we looked at the country of Colombia. In 1998, a new president, Andrés Pastrana, took office in the midst of economic recession, civil unrest, cocaine trafficking galore, and widespread corruption. He tackled the corruption in remarkable ways. In 1998, Colombia was ranked at the 6th percentile in the Corruption Perceptions Index; by 2005, it reached the 65th percentile. Investment soared. Our class studied how the Colombians did this.

But I also talked with the students about backsliding. Today, Colombia is at the 43rd percentile of corruption perceptions, and according to the Global Competitiveness Index 2019, is ranked 80th in “incidence of corruption,” tied with Brazil and Indonesia,

Chad Dickerson: “Why Liberal Arts Education Matters: The Story of a Drucker (Mis)-quote,” <https://blog.chaddickerson.com/2013/02/03/liberal-arts-matter/>.

⁵ Phyllis Dininio, “The Risks of Recorruption,” in *Fighting Corruption in Developing Countries: Strategies and Analysis*, edited by Bertram I. Spector. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005, pp. 233–250.

worse than Albania, Ghana, and India. And consider this alarming episode. In June 2017, Colombia’s head of the anti-corruption unit in the office of the Attorney General, Luis Gustavo Moreno, was arrested for accepting bribes and laundering money. His cooperation subsequently led to investigations or indictments of three Supreme Court justices as well as many legislators and officials.

Backsliding in public affairs is more general. So-called “democratic backsliding” is a phenomenon around the world (after what Samuel Huntington called “the third wave of democracy” of the late 1980s and early 1990s).⁶ Definitions are as always problematic, but most authors agree “democratic backsliding” is not a sudden massive change—say, from Swiss cantons to Genghis Khan. Instead,

Backsliding makes elections less competitive without entirely undermining the electoral mechanism; it restricts participation without explicitly abolishing norms of universal franchise seen as constitutive of contemporary democracy; and it loosens constraints of accountability by eroding norms of answerability and punishment...⁷

In their book *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt describe the incremental demise of democracy:

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

⁷ David Waldner and Ellen Lust (2018) “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21(1): 93–113.

<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>

Many government efforts to subvert democracy are “legal,” in the sense that they are approved by the legislature or accepted by the courts. . . . Because there is no single moment—no coup, declaration of martial law, or suspension of the constitution—in which the regime obviously “crosses the line” into dictatorship, nothing may set off society’s alarm bells. Those who denounce government abuse may be dismissed as exaggerating or crying wolf. Democracy’s erosion is, for many, almost imperceptible.⁸

Backsliding occurs in other areas of public policy. For example, Ecuador has eradicated malaria three times. Wait, how can something be “eradicated” more than once? If the conditions for mosquito breeding are not watched with care, those blasted insects will migrate back in and reestablish themselves. Governments find it easier to pronounce reforms, even with costly first steps, than to maintain reforms through the undramatic daily disciplines of upkeep and refurbishment.

There are analogies in our personal lives. We announce our fitness program with fanfare and pay to join that gym. We make progress. But within a year, or sadly a couple of months, our ardor may flag, our old habits resume. We may backslide.

So it goes with dieting, watching television, avoiding that second drink—and in more concerning behaviors, fighting addictions. “The relapse of problem behavior after

⁸ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*. New York: Broadway Books, 2018, pp. 5–6.

apparently successful treatment,” write Duncan Pritchard, Marguerite Hoerger, and F. Charles Mace, “is an enduring problem for the field of applied behavior analysis.”⁹

Aristotle called it *akrasia*, defined as uncompelled intentional behavior that is contrary to the agent’s better judgment.¹⁰ The apostle Paul confessed, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, and I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15, ESV). The Nobel prize economist Thomas Schelling studied our battles with self-control. It is, he said, as if we contained different selves—one wanting to exercise, the other not—locked in “an intimate battle of self-command.”¹¹ In my experience, rulers may sincerely want good government and yet, alas, they, or the systems they lead, succumb to corruption. So, too, the believer’s battle with sin. Lapses and relapses. Contradictions. Backsliding.

Religious Backsliding

A few years ago, the satirical magazine *The Onion* had a story about an “area man” who, while driving home, suddenly had an epiphany—and then forgot it.

⁹ Duncan Pritchard, Marguerite Hoerger, and F. Charles Mace (2014) “Treatment Relapse and Behavioral Momentum Theory” *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 47(4): 814–833.

¹⁰ Meanwhile, *enkrateia* is the opposite, namely self-control, continence, strength of will. See Alfred R. Mele, *Backsliding: Understanding Weakness of Will*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

¹¹ Thomas C. Schelling (1984) “Self-Command in Practice, in Policy, and in a Theory of Rational Choice” *The American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings* 74(2): 1–11.

Life Changing Epiphany Wears Off on Ride Home

ALBUQUERQUE, NM—Despite being overcome by a profound realization just minutes earlier that challenged his long-held beliefs and promised to forever alter his daily existence, sources confirmed that 42-year-old Thomas Wilson’s epiphany had fully worn off during his drive home Wednesday. The deeply affecting and eye-opening revelation, which in an instant had caused him to completely reassess his priorities, was reportedly pushed to the back of Wilson’s mind as he stopped to fill up his car with gas, fading to just a fraction of its initial impact moments later as he began listening to a podcast. According to reports, as Wilson shifted his focus to navigating road construction and merging onto a particularly busy stretch of highway, the last shred of his momentous eureka moment had nearly dissolved away. At press time, the life-changing insight was fully extinguished as Wilson walked in through his front door and discovered the latest Hammacher Schlemmer catalogue waiting in his mail.”¹²

Forgetting is something with which many of us are becoming increasingly familiar. Friedrich Nietzsche once said that forgetfulness had its upside. “The advantage of a bad memory is that one can enjoy the same good things for the first time *several* times.”¹³ Lewis Hyde has a book coming out in June that praises various kinds of forgetfulness in society and in our personal lives.¹⁴ In a remarkable story by Jorge Luis Borges, a young man fell off a horse and was rendered quadriplegic—but at the same time, he was able to perceive and to remember *everything*. In the end, Borges said, the wondrous, incessant multiplicity of phenomena and memories, in their glowing and fragrant distinctiveness, made reasoning impossible for the young man. “To think is to

¹² <https://local.theonion.com/life-changing-epiphany-wears-off-on-ride-home-1819577152>

¹³ *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, §580 (1878), trans. R.J. Hollingdale.

¹⁴ Lewis Hyde, *A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their presence.”¹⁵

What about forgetting *epiphanies*? Could it be as Seamus Heaney puts it? “Just like that, we forgot that the vision was ours,/ Our one chance to know the incomparable/
And dive to a future.”¹⁶

A few years ago, I read a touching account by a middle-aged Christian woman after she attended a convention of college-aged evangelicals. She was caught up in their fervor and joy, and then she felt somehow sad. I used to be that convicted and committed, she thought. What happened?

Age happened, I suppose is one answer. As with the bodies of athletes, some things fade with age. What can be done? One idea is to adjust. You can’t play linebacker anymore, at least not outside a mental institution. You can’t pull three all-nighters composing music, at least if you want to end up with more than a long-form “Louie Louie.”

Even so, do insight, passion, and awe remain available? To restore and renew religious insight and passion, human beings everywhere have invented disciplines, techniques, and reminders, including indeed religious services and obligations.

¹⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, “Funes the Memorious,” in his *Labyrinths*, trans. James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962).

¹⁶ Seamus Heaney, “The Mud Vision,” in his *The Haw Lantern* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988).

Scripture

One is scripture itself. The anthropologist Joe Henrich and his colleagues show that a moralizing God or gods only appear in a religion after a group possesses or encounters a written language.¹⁷ Fascinating if true; but maybe for us irrelevant, because we have scriptures. Indeed, we have *our* scriptures, the ones that helped convict and convert us. We may no longer have this passage, that argument, this concordance fresh in our minds. We may even experience that Nietzschean surprise of reading once familiar passages as if for the first time.

We may also, in a different way and, in some sense, as different people from “the first time,” experience conversion anew.

Biologists distinguish between a resilient system and one in homeostasis. The latter never changes, whatever the shocks. A resilient system may change with the shocks of time, but it continues to function anyway. So, too, with faith. A fragile faith dissipates, even disappears, with the shocks of time. A resilient faith may change, just as believers change, and yet it still functions as bedrock and inspiration.

¹⁷ Henrich recently tweeted, “The only way to ‘see’ moralizing gods in their data is if the society has writing or if people from another society with writing show up and write stuff down (Inca, Hawaii). Several sites get moralizing at the same time they get writing” (March 21, 2019). See his article with Martin Lang *et al.* (2019) “Moralizing Gods, Impartiality, and Religious Parochialism across 15 Societies” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 286: 1898. 6 March.

Scriptures bolster resilience. Even if we forget passages. But we do have to read them. Enter here the roles of disciplines and habits.

I want to remark on an irony, if not a contradiction. A component of conversion may be a sudden recognition that our practices and habits have been the problem, not the solution. This can be true even of religious practices and habits. Paul writes about religious laws actually abetting sinfulness.¹⁸ With Jesus, love becomes the essence, not what you eat or wear.

To describe an extreme: religious rules and practices, alas, can *get in the way* of salvation. Can *substitute* for grace and compassion. Can *stand between* us and God.

And yet. Practices and rituals can also lead us back to epiphany. So can great religious music, awesome cathedrals, words of the wise. Marilynne Robinson wrote of a time as a sophomore in college when she read a passage from Jonathan Edwards that changed everything—and decades later, she remembers not only that experience of hers but also can return to Edwards again for, if you will excuse the word, revival.¹⁹

¹⁸ For example, Romans 7:7–10. Also this from Jesus: “Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.” Luke 11:52 NIV

¹⁹ “I went to the library and read an assigned text, Jonathan Edwards’s *Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*. There is a long footnote in this daunting treatise that discusses the light of the moon, and how the apparent continuing of the moon’s light is a consequence of its reflecting light that is in fact continuously renewed. This was Edwards’s analogy for the continuous renewal of the world by the will of God, which creates, to our eyes, seeming lawfulness and identity, but which is in fact a continuous free act of God... Edwards’s footnote was ... my escape, and what an escape it was, from the contending, tedious determinisms that seemed to be all that was on offer

Meditation and Prayer

Meditation is a practice that can be scheduled like taking your car to the dealership—except one hopes more often. When I was a senior in high school, I attended a Jesuit school in Spain. Mass every morning, rosary every afternoon. As the only Protestant in the school—the only American to boot—I was not expected to participate fully. Many of the boys would blast through those Hail Mary’s. The priest would sometimes admonish them: “Slow down, boys, think about the words you’re saying.” To many of them, it was an empty practice I’m sure. But I remember it affectionately. I liked and still like the spirit of it—devoting time every morning and afternoon as part of the routine. And I found, myself, time to reflect and maybe even be revived.

Another way to bolster resilience is prayer. I love another insight from Marilynne Robinson: “First reverence, then belief.”²⁰ Prayer is a vehicle of reverence.

Managing Cues and Precursors

Paradoxically perhaps, research on addiction may shed light on how to preserve and renew callings and insights.

to me then...[B]y grace of that footnote, I realized that I could think of God as present and intentional, and of reality as essentially addressed to human perception—perception being then as now my greatest interest and pleasure in life.” Marilynne Robinson (2008) “Credo” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 36(2): 27.

²⁰ “So reverence should be thought of as prior to belief...I would propose that reverence is the great corrective to the tendency of belief to warp, contract, and harden.” Marilynne Robinson (2008) “Credo” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 36(2): 30.

Many if not most addicts wish to quit. In what might be called the addict's normal mode, he (or she) does not want to get high. He understands the costs and has a correct perspective on the benefits. But then he is exposed to cues, which remind him of his addiction and evoke the benefits. The cues may be a certain setting of cigarette smoke, music, and other people getting high. A metaphorical switch in the brain flips, and he is a different person: in economic parlance, he behaves as if he is maximizing a different utility function. The addict falls off the wagon and indulges. Later, when his high is over, the addict (often) returns to the first mode and (usually) laments his decision to take a hit. It is not quite that he was acting irrationally—rather, that he was acting rationally by a different utility function that he, in what we called his normal mode, rejects. The cues then become part of the problem, and part of the solution. Self-control involves managing one's exposure to cues.²¹

Can a similar idea be applied positively, not to cues that drive us to addiction but cues that inspire our calling and insight? How can we get positive cues that will switch us back to the better people that, upon deepest reflection and commitment, we wish to try to be?

Consider Reinhold Niebuhr:

The general revelation of personal human experience, the sense of being confronted with a “wholly other” at the edge of human consciousness, contains

²¹ B. Douglas Bernheim and Antonio Rangel (2004) “Addiction and Cue-Triggered Decision Processes” *American Economic Review* 94(5): 1558–90.

three elements, two of which are not too sharply defined, while the third is not defined at all. The first is the sense of reverence for a majesty and of dependence upon an ultimate source of being. The second is the sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond oneself and of moral unworthiness before a judge. The third, most problematic of the elements in religious experience, is the longing for forgiveness.²²

Majesty

For you, what might evoke that feeling of *majesty and dependence*? Can you renew it through thirty minutes of gazing at the constellations? Or with a hike to the top of a mountain and then sitting there and staring out, with a wild surmise, at the nature you partake? Or is it a particularly deep or noble study in history, or archaeology, or science? Can you beckon something outside yourself that enables you to perceive deeply, and be awed by, life's beauty, complexity, and mystery?

Moral Obligation

What might cue up for you a sense of *moral obligation and moral unworthiness*? Perhaps moral outrage is a start—outrage over cruelty, dehumanization, or the mistreatment of the environment. But it's only a start, because outrage may often lead to blaming others and condemning “the system,” rather than to inspiring yourself and

²² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, Vol. I. (New York: Scribner's, 1941), p. 131.

changing yourself. Niebuhr's point is to focus inside yourself on your own moral obligations, and what he provocatively puts in the same breath, your own moral unworthiness. What cues might evoke those feelings in you?

Forgiveness

Finally, what do you associate with a feeling that you want or need *forgiveness*? Niebuhr calls it a longing. Can you recall having a longing for forgiveness? When? What were the accompaniments? What might cue that feeling again?

Concluding Thoughts

The fact that recorruption occurs is depressing, because people everywhere say they despise corrupt systems and yet people everywhere, or a lot of them, feel compelled to participate in corrupt systems. The fact that backsliding occurs among converts to Christianity is also dispiriting (if you'll pardon that term). If through conversion people are new men and women, with the Holy Spirit in residence, then their reverting to being old men and women makes one ask, "What does conversion mean if it's not sustained?"

William James had an interesting answer.

One word, before I close this lecture, on the question of the transiency or permanence of these abrupt conversions. Some of you, I feel sure, knowing that numerous backslidings and relapses take place, make of these their apperceiving mass for interpreting the whole subject, and dismiss it with a pitying smile at so much "hysterics." Psychologically, as well as religiously, however, this is shallow. It misses the point of serious interest, which is not so much the duration

as the nature and quality of these shiftings of character to higher levels. Men lapse from every level--we need no statistics to tell us that. Love is, for instance, well known not to be irrevocable, yet, constant or inconstant, it reveals new flights and reaches of ideality while it lasts. These revelations form its significance to men and women, whatever be its duration. So with the conversion experience: that it should for even a short time show a human being what the high-water mark of his spiritual capacity is, this is what constitutes its importance—an importance which backsliding cannot diminish, although persistence might increase it.”²³

Of course, there’s more to do than thinking back to “what a high point that was.” We can rekindle that passion, fortify that reverence, be awed anew by the mysteries, through reading scripture, attending to rituals and practices, imbibing inspired books and music and art, meditating, praying, and managing our cues and precursors.

It is our comfort, at least sometimes, that we can do these things by ourselves, in our own ways.

Also, at least sometimes, that we can do these things together. As at luncheons like these, among generous and regarded fellow followers of our faith.

²³ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 1994 [1900]), pp. 251–3.