

Chapter 6.07 Hard Cases

This chapter continues the series on responses to the contradictions of modern life. Some of us have a hard time accepting any religion, any comfort, and especially any comfort from religion. Try to understand what I say here without romanticizing.

Bad Decisions.

The movie "Bar Fly", roughly about author Charles "Bucky" Buckowski, offers a toast to bad decisions. Making bad decisions, waking up in bad situations, and being forced to face some of life's bad shit, can lead to some wisdom and to a deeper appreciation for life. It also leads to much pain. Too often, bad shit does not lead to wisdom. Too often, any wisdom gained does not tell us how to get out of the bad situations or the pain, and it does not make up for the pain. Pain does not always make us wise. Pain does not always make us grow spiritually, make us better people, or teach us how to help others. Sometimes pain just makes things worse. Sometimes you just have to endure. Sometimes you have to stay in a bad marriage until the kids get old enough. Sometimes you have to stay in a bad job with a brat boss because you cannot find a better job and because your family needs money. Sometimes you stay in a motel room with a bottle and cable TV.

Finding God can help, but it too does not always make up for the pain and the feeling of being trapped. Sometimes finding God helps us to endure, and sometimes not. Sometimes seeing God makes it worse because it makes us feel acutely the gap between what is and what might realistically have been (the gap between reality and the unreachable ideal usually does not hurt as much). Call the Kingdom of God "Jesus' banquet" or "Jesus' party". It is where people understand and accept each other, help each other out, and get along most of the time. People that have made bad decisions often understand the idea of the party much better than people that have only cruised through. Sometimes we get the idea of Jesus' party but we feel we cannot go to the party because we are trapped by bad decisions and bad events. In that case, we feel worse than if we had never known about the party. Jesus' invitation was supposed to get us out of bad situations into a party that anybody could go to and feel better; but it does not always work out that way. To think that Jesus' invitation always magically takes away the weight of bad decisions and bad situations is only to set people up for some big disappointments. Pretending that religious magic can make anybody rise up out of the grave is just an insult to people that have to endure real life, and betrays the people that do rise up and do find something better.

Thankfully, a lot of the time, an invitation to the party can do the job. People have been saved out of depression, alcoholism, addiction, zealotry, and bad ideology sometimes just by realizing that God loves them. But that does not always work. When you meet somebody for whom it does not work, it is better to accept that it does not work for them than to keep poking them with the stick of God's love. When it does not work, I am not sure what to do.

Somebody once said Jesus had it easy by dying so quickly and so young, especially so quickly after he realized life could betray us. He would have known a lot more about human life if he had lived, married, eked out a bad living under a bad boss, had kids that took drugs and got pregnant at fifteen, and endured

all that for forty more years. Maybe that is true but that is not what happened, it overstates the case, and seems to cut off hope. It leaves us wallowing in bad decisions and bad situations. Jesus is too idealistic but that is part of the point. Jesus gives us something to shoot for. We cannot reach his perfect ideal but most of us can reach a better condition here on earth. At least some people can go to his party even if not everybody who gets the invitation can accept it. We can help people get to the party. Limping into the party is not always enough when we feel really bad but it is usually enough and it is about all I can offer.

Future Perfect.

All major religions aim at their own demise. If they succeed, the moral calling for the religion disappears. Suppose the teachings of Jesus prevail, or of any major world religion prevail, people are well off, and there is not much for a dedicated do-gooder moralist to do. Suppose well-regulated capitalism and sustainable development really achieve for all people what world religions have dreamed of. The entire world becomes like an American middle class suburb, a European upper middle class complex, or a walled "village" in Asia, India, the Near East, or Latin America.

This is not paradise. Too many people that already live this way go nearly crazy. If everybody lived this way, we would have "Brave New World" in which people have to take drugs, have mindless casual sex, play tennis with square balls, and watch movies about abducting innocent pneumatic young people – much like what we have now. People would not live in accord with stereotyped family values. People would not be good at finding useful lives. The arts would not have the same meaning then as now. Not everybody would become a scientist and devote him-herself to nature's mysteries. Only so many people can be fascinated by the life of asteroids or the extravagance of sexual selection. Modern people in this less-than-perfect world already are bored with blurred genders, gay-ness, transgender, and backlash. I am not sure what to do in the apparently perfect world of successful religion and successful development.

The world will change much in the next few decades, and humans will have to deal with intelligent machines, bottle babies, genetic engineering, long lives, etc. Perhaps some people will find new meaning in that new world. Some people will cooperate with machines to do science, do new kinds of art, and develop new kinds of societies. Unfortunately, most people will not find new meaning in that new world and will not find anything to do. They will not starve. They will not fight in a heroic war between people and machines as in the "Terminator" movies because there will be no such war. More likely, they will live on "people reservations" where their material needs will be met but where they will not reproduce. They will not have much reason to live. I have no idea what to suggest for that life, and I have no idea what are the implications for the teachings of Jesus or any other religion. Maybe the world is not just for humans or even primarily for humans, and that is part of God's plan too.

Moral Ambiguity.

Coolness is like heaven or nirvana. The best way to get it is not to work for it. If you work for it, you will never get it. Violence is not cool. I saw violence and its effects in real life and at a job. Once I worked in a hospital where I saw hurt people. Friends have been murdered. It is not romantic. At the same time, I also like action movies, detective movies, films noir, and movies about moral ambiguity. Just as some Americans worship violence, others worship moral ambiguity, often as part of a pose of fake coolness. Too many people combine moral ambiguity with violence, and worship both, as in many of the

movies that give me guilty pleasure. People think that reveling in moral ambiguity is a way to get cool. They are wrong.

The cure is the same for worship of both violence and moral ambiguity: accept it and deal with it. Don't romanticize it. Move on. There is violence. We have to deal with violence, sometimes by using violence. That does not change the ideal of getting along. There is moral ambiguity. The existence of moral ambiguity does not undermine moral ideals and the need to strive for moral ideals. Even when we break some morals, we do it to achieve other ideals that we recognize as higher. Some morals contradict other morals. We want to save America from terrorists but we must not torture. People have to obey the law but sometimes poor people have to steal to feed their kids. If we do not romanticize moral ambiguity, usually we can cope. You just deal with it. We do it with regret and with a clear eye on our own fault. Still, we do it.

We all know people like the "Church Lady" from Saturday Night Live. We all know people that insist on moral absolutes in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, mostly so they can use moral absolutes to browbeat other people and so get their own way. We all know that sometimes poor people have to steal. We all know that some people deserve to die, and we might be better off if we could kill them. We all might be better off if we could forget about the law sometimes. By now, a lot of us know that the illegality of some drugs is worse than the drugs themselves. There are ethical dilemmas in the world. So what?

Being able to recognize moral dilemmas does make you more astute than other people, but not that much more astute. Being more astute than other people means you have more responsibility than them. It does not make you better. It does not mean you have the right to feel superior. To pose in moral ambiguity is to act like a shopping bimbo who thinks she-he is better than other people because she-he knows what "puce" means or knows the right brands of watches. Being able to see moral dilemmas should make you more sympathetic and helpful but I have never noticed the people that use moral dilemmas as a way to coolness really are cooler, helpful, or sympathetic. Recognizing moral ambiguity becomes as much a tactic as the Church Lady's moral absolutes. People that use moral ambiguity to assert their superiority imply that there are standards by which they can step outside moral ambiguity to judge moral ambiguity, and imply a different higher level of moral absolutes, but they do not specify their new standards. The lack of clarity helps them to manipulate other people and to sustain a pseudo-mysterious image. Not only whining students do this, people from all walks of life do this when they think that other people cannot possibly appreciate the tough decisions they have to make in their jobs and lives: teachers, housewives, house husbands, parents, soldiers on a peace keeping mission, Jack Nicholson in "A Few Good Men", rock and roll singers, rock and roll fans, and religious writers. People have enough trouble already with moral dilemmas so that they do not need to suffer both from Church Ladies and their mirror images.

Stop using moral relativity as a way to be cool. Be useful instead. Weigh alternatives, make a decision, live with it, and don't feel puffy.

Modern Ennui.

This section is not for people who rebel because they can't find anything better to do. It is for people who put Lou Reed or Sarah McLachlan on endless repeat.

In American pop culture now, Justification comes by creativity. If you are not creative, if you are not an artist, then you cannot be Justified and you cannot be Saved. Artistic creativity is the surest sign of Salvation. If you are a creative artist, then you are Justified and Saved.

Some sad people are cursed to find meaning only in activities for which they have no special creative aptitude themselves. If they cannot create in a medium they find meaningful, then they cannot find much meaning. They can find some meaning in appreciating what other people do but usually not enough meaning. They are like people that have made bad decisions except they are trapped by their nature and culture rather than their history. A lot of chronically depressed people are like this.

Some people are fairly smart and pretty good at understanding literature, music, song, and painting but do not have much talent themselves. To appreciate without also being creative is not enough. To appreciate without also being creative is not a joy but is the salve that allows a tortured body to heal only to be tortured again. Some people see that politics is important but do not know what to do because they cannot accept any particular party. They can see through most ideologies such as family values but have no better ideology to offer. Some people do not mind making money but they do not want to lose themselves in making money, and it seems that nearly every occupation requires that they lose themselves. Some people see only band aids; they cannot believe that trying hard to do good will make any lasting difference. They understand the idea of a better world but they do not feel that their action makes any difference in getting there.

When these people have something to do that they believe in, such as the latest big thing in art or the latest political cause, they can be a lot of fun. But because they often have nothing creative that they can do personally, they use up a lot of their lives in bars. Often they rebel, or drift into romanticizing the underbelly of society. In the long run, that diversion bores them as well. To fight boredom, they play games of artistic holier-than-thou or PC holier-than-thou. These people are Elvira Madigan (see the movie) in Goth drag, alterna-rock drag, or post-modernist drag.

I have no idea what to say even though I have often been like this myself. Probably my childhood religious faith saved me. Probably the basic human tendency to get over it and to have a family saves most people. You either get it or you do not. Not everybody gets it. You cannot explain it so that people get it any more than you can talk people out of a history of bad decisions or out of depression.

It is alright to appreciate without being creative yourself. It is alright to work for a political cause even if the cause is not perfect and will not save the world. Most honest jobs contribute to the well-being of everybody even if they do not save everybody and even if they continue the innate flaws of capitalism. Just because you see the innate flaws of capitalism does not mean you may not earn a living. Maybe if following Jesus meant more than doling out food at a local shelter, then modern bored strangled people would be more receptive. If there were some way to follow Jesus that also meant something to these people in itself, and for which they had an aptitude, then they would get the message and do it well. If they could do "art for Jesus" and believe it, they probably would, even if their art was not radically new. If they could do "politics for Jesus" without feeling sleazy, and without expecting to save the world

tomorrow, they likely would. If they could be a “housing loan manager for Jesus”, as in “It’s A Wonderful Life”, then they might be happy. You cannot talk people into feeling those options are possible, that those options do not betray their pseudo-heroic stance, or that those options are satisfying. You can only hope that people stop looking to silly role models and figure it out themselves.

Lonely.

“All the lonely people, where do they all come from?” The world is full of external problems such as poverty, sexism, racism, oppression, and the destruction of nature. We can all do something about them, if not personally then by giving to an agency. If that is enough for you, then fine. Those problems are outside the daily lives of most Americans. In the daily life of most Americans, the biggest problem is probably loneliness. Even people that help solve other problems can still feel deeply painful loneliness. Millions of us sit lonely in front of the TV every night when all it would take is to sit in front of the same TV with friends. I do not belittle the damage caused by big outside problems such as sexism, but I think loneliness causes more total pain. To help a lonely person is a great service, a great way to carry out the message of Jesus, a great “mitzvah”. Curing loneliness would drastically cut down on medication. I am really bad at helping out lonely people, and I suffer from loneliness too. I do not know how to help the lonely people in the modern world.

Media such as Facebook help but I don’t think those by themselves are really enough, and not everybody has access to them now anyway. Telling lonely people to join a church to meet other lonely people can work, and it is quite common in the American South, but it does not work well enough even here. I want to join a church because I agree with its beliefs, not because it is a social club. Socializing with people just because they are there works if you grew up with the people but it is hard to do when you did not grow up with the people. It feels artificial and unsatisfying. You want to socialize with people with whom you share common interests. Sometimes you can develop interests so that you can socialize with people that have the same interests, like developing an interest in comic books or in guns. But mostly we want to have natural interests that show our true selves, and then find people that share those same interests.

Unluckily, in the modern world, many natural interests we can enjoy alone even though we used to need people to carry them out. The greatest interest of most people is probably some kind of art, like the drama on TV and movies, or music. We used to have to get together with friends to play music, go to concerts, or go to the theater to see plays. Now we can just sit there alone and turn on the TV. The TV makes us feel temporarily better even while in the long run it reinforces our isolation. We can download tunes and insert little ear buds. Even people that go shopping can be alone in a shopping mall full of a hundred thousand ghosts. I am not saying this is evil, or that the modern world is bad; I like the modern world. I am just saying that our technological servants only reinforce our loneliness, like rich people of the past trapped in giant ornate castles with only their dumb servants.

Ironically, reading about religion and thus realizing the religious roots of working to build a better world actually reinforced my loneliness – at least in the short run. If I were a good propagandist, I would suppress this confession, but I would rather tell the truth. What I believe keeps me out of most churches. What I believe keeps me separated from most academics. I think a very large number of Americans agree with what I believe but there is no church for us and no way for us to meet. We walk past each other on the streets and up into our living rooms with the TV sets without ever knowing. There are no

common institutions where we can show our views and help each other figure out what to do, a kind of Salvation Army Hall where normal people can get together to do what good they can. I do not know how to build institutions to help people; I have not the skill of Luther or Calvin or Billy Graham. Maybe as a result of writing this book, people that feel similarly will be able to find other people and will benefit.

Crawl Out of Your Hole First.

Sometimes religion can inspire us to overcome depression, loneliness, substance abuse, the leftover debris of a bad relationship, the perfidy of the world, the selfishness of humanity, the dead certainty that "it's all screwed up", or just feeling like crap. Sometimes religion only makes it worse. If we feel like shit, we don't usually like to hear about working to build a better world. We don't want to hear that working to help others paradoxically gets us out of our shell and saves us at the same time too. That might be true if you are not too far down in a hole, or if you are a lucky person; but if you are too far down, and for many regular non-lucky people, it doesn't work. Then, banging the religious drum just makes a bad headache into a throbbing ringing blinding pounder.

The only advice I can give is take care of yourself first any way you can. Don't worry about Jesus or about contributing to the world. Stop all the crap if you can. Crawl out of the apartment and walk around the block once. Do it every day. Get self help books, even the crappy ones written by self-serving get-rich-quick artists. Try to find genuine books by people that went through what you are going through. Go somewhere you can just look at people where you don't have to interact or even say "hello". Meditate for one minute a day until you can do more. Don't worry if you "do it right" or if you only breathe. Pray if you can. When you have to, roll up in a ball and shake and moan until it stops. Then unroll and try again to get better. Do whatever it takes. When you feel better enough about yourself, you can try saying "hello". The standard advice is to seek professional help but sometimes you have to work up out of the hole on your own just to get to the point where you can even think about getting some help. Jesus will not send you to hell because you have to look at the world through a moldy shower curtain. You are the one who needs help, not the one who has to give it. When you can give help, you will. Good luck.