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FEEDING THE SOUL
Three lectures on Strengthening Moral Courage in Public Life
Lecture Three: Moral Practice

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My lords, ladies and gentlemen.

At my 21st birthday party, my father made a speech, in which he told this anecdote.

A cockerel had been purchased by a farmer to service his hens. Full of bright promise and good intentions, the cockerel went into the hen coop to start his work - and found that he was incapable. He failed, miserably. The hens cackled at him and shooed him out of their coop. Flopping around the farmyard, distressed as anything, feeling useless and foolish, the cockerel found himself drawn despite himself to the field of cows where, without a shadow of a doubt, and clearly with great skill and enjoyment, the bull was performing the very service at which the cockerel had been so dreadfully lacking. The cockerel drooped miserably on the fence by the side of the field. The bull, having finished his day's work, sauntered over to the cockerel.

'What's up, old chap?' he asked.

I've failed,' said the cockerel. 'I'm supposed to do to the hens what you've just been doing to the cows, and I've failed. I - I just can't seem to manage.'

The bull was sympathetic. 'I've a solution for you,' he said.

The cockerel brightened. 'Really?'

'It always works, believe me,' said the bull, with total conviction.

'Tell me, tell me,' said the cockerel eagerly. 'I'll do anything you say!'

‘For the next three days,’ said the bull, looking straight at the cockerel, ‘nibble a bit from the edge of my droppings - you can choose the dryer ones - just a bit, every day for three days. You should find that does the trick.’

The cockerel, though slightly disgusted, did as the bull recommended. For three days, he nibbled at the droppings. Nothing seemed to change, he felt as droopy and useless as ever, until the evening of the third day, when, as if by magic, he perked up. So much so that he went straight to the hen coop, and taking no nonsense from the hens, performed his duty on every one of them. It took till midnight. He was so thrilled at his success that he flew up to the highest point in the farmyard, the roof of the farmhouse, threw his head back and let out the loudest cock-a-doodle-doo in Christendom.

The farmer, wakened suddenly and violently from a deep sleep, leapt out of bed, grabbed his gun, ran out of the front door, and shot the cockerel, who died instantly.

And the moral of the story is: if you get to the top through bull****, don’t crow about it.

Tonight we will look at stories - stories that inspire, stories that lie, stories we tell of ourselves and those that others tell of us. This story, which I have never forgotten, taught a necessary humility and awareness of the role of others in any achievement.

To recap: in the first lecture I offered a framework for ethical analysis to assist clear thinking in moral decision-making, drawn from the western philosophical canon. I suggested that a proposed action be scrutinised from goal-based, duty-based and right-based perspectives: goal-based to consider what the proposed action was trying to achieve and whether those goals were desirable and good; duty-based to consider what had to be done in order to achieve the goals, and whether the means were acceptable, not to justify the ends but intrinsically; and finally the right-based perspective to consider whether those most affected by the proposed action were happy with it: had their consent been sought? With such an analysis at hand, I suggested, moral thinking would become clearer, if not easier. Strengthening moral courage in thinking means exercising these analytical skills, allowing our minds to stretch when apparently mutually exclusive moral goods compete, and being ready to be quickly decisive if called upon, knowing what compromises had been made and why. The image I left you with was that of a three-legged stool, that stands firm even on uneven ground.

Last week we considered what it was to feel moral. We looked at four perceptions of the world around us, drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition, to help us see the world with new eyes, to feel our connection with everything else, to feel, as Hildegard of Bingen expressed it, that ‘God made everything in the world in consideration of everything else’ and so to be conscious of the fact that everything we do has an effect on everything else. That was the creation covenant perception. Then there was the sense of the sacred, that everything in creation is loved by God and is therefore to be treated with deep respect - there is nowhere called away where we can throw things. The priesthood of humanity saw the human family as guests at a feast, receiving the good things of

creation as gifts, not as rights. Finally the sabbath feast of enoughness permitted us, and all creation, to rest.

Strengthening moral courage in emotion means falling in love with the whole; facing the global challenges of climate change, sustainable development, trade and finance which are all connected. Then the three approaches of goal-based, duty-based and right-based thinking can be brought into play, but in a much bigger, more joined-up and global world than we had been aware of hitherto.

In practical terms then, one starts with the lesson of lecture two, the feeling or orientation of love for all, and then takes the lesson of lecture two, using ones analytical skills to consider the moral choices one faces on a daily basis.

And finally, this week, I want to look at moral acting. What gives us the courage to act? It is one thing to experience beautiful feelings of connectedness and responsibility, then to have worked out on paper, as it were, what is right; it is quite another to stand up and take a step forwards. I promised, last week, that I would show how to travel from a high moral vision to its achievement, citing the example of JF Kennedy as the one who inspired US citizens to see beyond national self-interest to the good of all and who showed the way to get there. This week's lecture will describe a path from feeling and thinking morally to acting morally.

The material I am going to use comes from Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a thousand faces*. I am once again indebted, this time to Luke Parsons QC, for introducing me to this work, and with whom I co-founded the Ethics Academy to teach ethics to young people and others using the story-telling approach found in Campbell. Campbell was a social anthropologist, and understood myth and the power of myth better than anyone I have come across before. He shows how in every myth that has ever been told there is a common thread or plot, in which the protagonist or hero embarks on a quest that transforms him or her, and from which he or she returns with the elixir that in turn serves others.

This mono-myth describes the journey of the self into virtue and communitarian ethics, hence our use of it for young people, and we will look at it together tonight. But there are two lenses I want us to use, because of the particular circumstances of these lectures. One is that the hero of the story, because it is us, and we are public servants, starts knowing that this journey is not about me. The public servant acts, by virtue of his or her title, for others. That is what the Nolan principles all point the public servant towards. Moreover, we can also think of the story as being about the development of the collective, the community, institution, nation or human family. Because we are public servants, we can let our minds work on the story in this non-individualistic way. The other lens I want to suggest is that rather than use the word 'hero', I will use the word 'pilgrim', removing the connotations of specialness that 'hero' implies, and joining us with the countless thousands who have journeyed here over the centuries.

So - think of your life, or that of your institution, as a film. You, unique you, like whom there never has been and never will be anyone, ever, are the protagonist of the film of 'Life of [your name]'.

What kind of a film has your life been so far? Romantic comedy? Tragedy? Thriller? And what kind of a pilgrim have you been so far? Are you enjoying yourself? Are you challenged, or are you bored? Are you open to new possibilities? Do you know who or what you want to be? What sets your belly on fire?

Or - do you feel as though you are treading a well-worn path through a thousand weary days of getting dressed and going to work, feeding the family, a slave to the quotidian calls on your time and your purse, with no clear idea of what you are doing or where you are going? Do you feel even more of a victim than that? Are you bullied? Are you physically or mentally challenged in some way that makes you feel you are being held back from doing what you have always wanted to do?

What would you do if you were not afraid?

In the story, this stage, the first stage, is called The Ordinary World. This is where the story begins. It is your platform, your comfort zone. But something is calling you out of it. Stage two: the pilgrim Hears a Call, which may come from inside you or outside. You may indeed have heard such a call, a *vocation*, to public service. It is undeniable and often unwelcome. In the Ethics Academy programme we use film clips and one such, loved by the boys, is from *The Matrix*. Neo, the main character, takes delivery of a mobile phone that rings as he picks it up. The voice that speaks is that of Morpheus, who becomes Neo's teacher, confirming the hunch that Neo has had that there is more to life than the world the Matrix has created around him. Morpheus tells Neo to climb out of a 30 storey building on to some scaffolding. That's Neo's call.

And he can't do it. The third stage of the journey is 'Refusing the Call'. It's an important stage - we've all had the experience perhaps of leaping too enthusiastically at a suggestion, rushing into action, and falling flat on our faces. Refusing the call is the moment when you take stock and question the wisdom of the call. But it can also be the rearing up of fear and self doubt. You are scared, it's a step into the dark, you know it's going to present difficulties and you don't know if you are up to dealing with them; it's a move out of your ordinary, safe, comfortable world. So you Refuse the Call.

But then, as you sit around in your now profoundly dissatisfied state, thinking of all the hundreds of reasons why you shouldn't start and knowing they are sounding increasingly unconvincing, you meet someone who knows what you are capable of, believes in you and the vision of your journey, and knows how to help you take the first step. You Meet your Mentor - stage four. In *The Matrix* the mentor is Morpheus, who teaches Neo. In *Lord of the Rings*, another classic hero's journey, it is Gandalf. Or the ballet teacher played by Julie Walters in *Billy Eliot*, and so on. It may be someone you briefly meet or even a book or a painting. Whatever or whoever it is, the mentor knows you have it in you to respond to the call. The mentor stands still - note to helicopter parents and micro-managers - stands still and does no more than point in the right direction and believe in the ability of the hero, or pilgrim, to go there.

And then, stage five, you Cross the Threshold. You make a commitment to the journey. This is a profound moment, a step into the dark. You have said yes to change without fully know what that

will entail, or whether you will be able to manage what it does entail. You have surrendered the safe control of your ordinary world, cut the ties, left the known shore.

One of the clips the Ethics Academy used to illustrate this stage is the Council of Elrond scene in *Lord of the Rings*, favoured by the girls. Frodo has brought the ring as far as Rivendale, the kingdom of the elves, and Elrond, the king of the elves, has summoned all the goodies together: the dwarves, the humans, the elves, Gandalf, Frodo. The ring sits in the middle of the group as the group ponders what to do. Elrond forestalls any notion that the power of the ring might be used against Sauron, the evil one. He knows, as by now does Frodo, that its power is itself evil, and will change those who try to make it serve their purpose. Moreover, it is stronger than anyone present, which Gimli the dwarf discovers when he tries to smash the ring with his axe. Elrond declares that the ring must be destroyed, and the only way that is going to happen is if it is thrown back into the fire whence it was forged - the fire at the heart of Mordor. A row erupts: one does not simply walk into Mordor, guarded by a thousand armies of Orcs. And who is going to have charge of the ring? The dwarves and elves do not trust each other; the humans are divided, and soon everyone is on his feet, shouting to be heard. We see Frodo looking at the ring and wincing at the noise, as if the ring was already working its evil power on those present, turning them against each other.

And then, in the midst of the row, Frodo stands up - and of course he is only half the height of anyone present except Gimli. He says, 'I will take the ring to Mordor.' At first no one hears him so he says it again and silence falls. 'I will take the ring to Mordor,' he says. 'But I do not know the way.' This is Frodo Crossing the Threshold, stage five, stepping into darkness, knowing that he will be stretched beyond anything he can imagine and not knowing if he will make it through.

And then, one by one, each of the Council members declares his support. 'I will be your guide,' says Aragorn. 'You will have my bow,' says Legolas the elf. 'And my axe,' says Gimli. 'I will help you in any way I can,' says Gandalf. And then the three other hobbits emerge from the bushes determined not to be left out. And so the fellowship of the ring is formed, but only *after* the pilgrim has crossed the threshold. And that does seem to be the way the stories - our stories - go. The really worthwhile things are only attainable if we make a commitment to the journey towards them, and the help on the way only emerges after the commitment has been made. Note, the help is indispensable. The journey is about community, not individuality. Frodo could not have done it without the help of the Fellowship - but he still had to show leadership in making the commitment in faith and trust and hope.

Stage six, Trials, Allies and Enemies, is the journey itself beginning in earnest and this is where the pilgrim learns who his or her allies are and who the enemies. You face obstacles and learn which are unreal and of your own making, such as fear, and overcome them. You face trials, you make mistakes, you fall over, you get up, you realise that the journey is not about you at all but about everyone else: in other words you grow in moral courage and discernment. Trials, Allies and Enemies. The journey is changing you.

In all the great stories and endeavours there comes a point on the journey when everything goes wrong. This is stage seven: Facing the Darkness. Your friends have deserted you, you have forgotten why you started on the journey, you are uncertain and afraid and everything that you thought you had learnt seems to have gone, along with your allies. Here's an example from Martin Luther King:

'Around midnight, as he struggled to sleep, the phone rang one more time. "Listen, n*****," an ugly voice crackled over the wire, "We're tired of you and your mess now. If you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house." King paced the bedroom floor in angry fear, then walked across the hall to the kitchen and heated some coffee. He tried to find solace in what theology and philosophy had taught him about the meaning of evil. Could there be food without evil? Could there be redemption without sin? No answer came to shake his despair. Nothing relieved the fear in his gut. He was ready to give up...

'He discovered at this midnight hour that "religion had to become real to me" - not merely the hand-me-down family business - "and I had to know God for myself. With my head in my hands, I bowed down over that cup of coffee. Oh yes, I prayed a prayer. I prayed out loud that night. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still very vivid in my memory. Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I am weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership. I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.'

If we have been through this story once or twice we know - afterwards! - that the darkest hour is just before the dawn. The absolute darkness is only an appearance because there is a bend in the tunnel and once you reach the corner you will see the light at the end. If you are going through hell, *keep going*.

The darkness fades, sometimes, as for Martin Luther King, with the light breaking through, as he put it "I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before". Sometimes it is because time passes and stage eight, The Great Ordeal, is night. This is the high point towards which the journey has been inexorably moving, the moment you have been being trained for in the testing stages of the journey, and everything in you is ready, even if it doesn't feel like it at the time: the speech, the giving birth, the match, the performance, the job interview, election day, and so on.

This story, all the more powerful for the diffidence of his speech, comes from a former head of MI5:

'I was put in mind [by the hero's journey narrative] of our collective leadership experience over 2005 to 6, with the 7/7 attacks and the 21/7 failed attacks. Paradoxically the high point was not 7/7 but 21/7. Coming two weeks to the day after 7/7 we were already tired and 21/7 made us fear that there was a whole series of these attacks already planned and of which we knew nothing, on top of

which the 21/7 perpetrators had got away and could have another go. That was a really terrifying thought, institutionally and personally. Of course all you can do is take a deep breath, press on and trust that by doing your jobs well and applying what you have learnt, you will turn the corner. In a sense we did, with the discovery of the 21/7 attackers' hideout in West London (remember the photos of the man on the balcony in his boxers?). That wasn't the end of it, and that autumn was tough, with wave after wave of credible intelligence of terrorist plotting against the UK. In October we got to a point where we started to worry that we would be unable to respond to any new reporting. Again, you keep plugging away, and finally with the disruption of the liquid bomb plot (and other less well-remembered operations that summer of 2006) we seemed to have gained the initiative and to be able to breathe again. That wasn't the end of the struggle, but it did seem we had turned a corner and achieved some breathing space..."

The Great Ordeal is not necessarily a big exciting moment but can be a gruelling test of endurance and skill and intelligence under pressure that doesn't let up. These MI5 officers just kept putting one pilgrim foot in front of another.

The ninth stage is Claiming the Prize. For the public servant or pilgrim hero the prize that is only for him or her is not the real prize. The trophy or the election or the vote in Parliament or being the one to ensure the bomb plot fails.

Baroness D'Souza told this story:

'I was in post-Taliban Afghanistan in early 2002 - a still traumatised country reeling from the Soviet occupation, the civil war and the reign of terror by the Taliban. I came across a small bundle of energy and goodness called Aziz Royesh who had started a school for girls in a half-ruined hut teaching about 30 children in three shifts. To cut a long, long story short I was so impressed by him and what he aimed to do (a man who had been educated at a Red Cross primary school when he was a refugee in Pakistan) that I began to raise funds - in really small amounts - for him. Over the years the school (Marefat High School) has flourished and become what has been called the St Paul's of Kabul - with 3,000 students, half of whom are girls, and over 95% of whom go on to higher university education all over the world... but who return to teach at the mother school. It is an outstanding success driven by this man and is providing cohorts of young people who are Afghanistan's future leaders and who are versed in the liberal arts including ethics, civic duties, human rights and languages as well as the sciences.'

Frances had to stop visiting when she became Lord Speaker, for security reasons, but to her delight her daughter became involved, a journalist who was, in her words 'at the rather frivolous end - Vogue and the like.'

Frances' prizes were not for herself. 'My joy at the development of the school is matched by witnessing the development of my daughter into the person she has become through a chance encounter with a society that is living and has always lived on the edge of brutality, war and extreme poverty.'

The journey does not end with the prizes. There is a critical tenth stage, a New Level of Life, where, transformed by our journey individually or collectively, we stand ready to continue our lives' journeys as servant leaders, strong in ourselves, with moral courage and discernment thoroughly awakened and exercised.

This is the way to inspire ourselves and others, not only to feel and think morally, but also to act. The hero's journey or pilgrim's journey is a dynamic map. Most worthwhile endeavours follow a similar trajectory. Like JFK, we describe our noble vision, beyond the horizon of narrow self-interest, and we describe the path to that place where we all long, in our heart of hearts, to be, knowing the journey will not be easy because no worthwhile endeavour is.

Being human isn't easy. None of our choices and actions is completely right - we are fallible people in a confusing world. Joseph Campbell said that life is like coming into a cinema in the middle of a film, not being allowed to ask anyone what is going on, and leaving before the end. And still having to make decisions! I have offered some structure but I know as well as any of you that structures can only make limited sense of what is a bigger mystery than any of our brains can fathom.

'God made the angels to show Him splendour, as He made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But Man He made to serve Him wittily, in the tangle of his mind,' as Thomas More said to his daughter Margaret in the play *Man for all Seasons* (Robert Bolt).

Tonight we have been telling stories. One of the prices those in public office pay is that others tell stories about you. They are caricatures, and they can be cruel. Here are stories about the public servants around Parliament Square, told and re-told by lazy minds not prepared to find out the truth.

The elected public servants with brittle egos, currying favour like celebrities, desperately seeking attention, motivated by ambition, bending like reeds in the wind that blows according to consumer preferences, having to seek and then retain power. Greedy and entitled.

The non-elected politicians of the Upper House, safe in their ermine, fatly claiming expenses for doing little, and outrageously accepting the existence of the all-male bishops' bench.

The Judges, taking advantage of the low esteem in which politicians are held, drawing legislative power craftily into their web.

The Civil Servants, threatened with creeping politicisation, burrowing down into their shrinking departments, turning away from the costly responsibility of speaking truth to power, feeling betrayed and victimised as their ministers brief against them and they cannot defend themselves publicly.

The mischievous media, telling the story that is 'too good to check'.

These are the stories that may be told about you - *are* told about you. What are the stories you will tell of yourselves? How will you ensure they are good and true?

In the spirit of humility so instilled by the cock and bull story my father told all those years ago, I'd like to offer a different set of narratives.

Elected public servants who 'never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all mankind'.

Members of the Upper House who live by and speak authentically from principle to set the tone of legislation, and who scrutinise, line by line, the bills that pass through their hands to ensure no devil comes to life in the detail.

Judges serving justice not bureaucracy, who administer justly the law of the land, debated and agreed by the legislature whose role is to decide what social changes are needed.

Civil Servants whose steady hand on the tiller holds fast the boat, flexible against the prevailing political winds and the choppy seas of 'events, dear boy, events', but not so flexible as to swing too far either side of the compass direction of 'the good', and writing a politician's name in the wake.

Journalists who 'empower citizens with clear and relevant information, to nourish the national conversation with understanding,' as BBC Home Editor Mark Easton put it (personal communication).

These are, or should be, non-negotiables. But they are also ideals from which we all fall short. Hence I am so taken by the idea of the journey to goodness, rather than the Pelagian requirement to be good, actually a Christian heresy. And a journey without pitfalls and mistakes and challenges and scary moments is, well, boring and not really a journey at all.

I stand in profound respect of those who take up public office. I believe we should give you all our support. We need your strength - your moral strength. We only deserve your moral strength if we provide the community out of which it can grow - where else do public servants come from if not from among us? - and so, in the end, strengthening moral courage in public life is a call to every one of us to take moral responsibility, to set our face towards the good and travel towards it, together.

If this were a science lecture I would have a final slide with pictures of the team out of whose research my findings, the content of my lecture, would have arisen, in recognition of the fact that all achievements are team efforts. And so, without the help of a slide, I would like to acknowledge the Dean and Chapter and all my colleagues here at the Abbey, for their support and hard work. In particular I would like to thank Kathleen, Sir Stephen and Canon White for all the help you have given. These lectures truly were a team effort.

I left you with two images in the two previous weeks: that of the three-legged stool, and that of the three-dimensional spider's web. My last and culminating image is the one that you have been sitting under for three weeks in this Lady Chapel of Westminster Abbey, this glorious canopy of a fan-vaulted ceiling, itself a culmination of the exquisite beauty of the Abbey church. Look at it and see the work of anonymous hundreds, sprung from the Benedictine foundations of obedience, stability and the conversion of manners. If they did it, why should not we?

So, finally, I honour that which this place honours: God, through whom all this, every last part of it, has been possible.

Thank you very much.