

“The New Saint is not a Good Person” - From “The New Saints” by Lama Rod Owens

So many of us are obsessed with being good because the performance and pursuit of goodness are tied to many cultural and religious ideas of being a person or human. If we are not good, we are not considered human. If we are not human, we are considered bad, flawed, or invalid, which means that we lose our humanity and become othered. In this otherness, we no longer receive the basic care that good people get. This logic fuels the prison industrial complex. When people break the law, they become bad and thus othered and punished without any regard to care because they no longer deserve it. Without care, bad people become the reciprocals of violence masked as justice.

Thus, we learn that being good is how we maintain our humanity and get the resources we need, especially love. But this politics of goodness is linked to one of the most violent expressions of care: conditional love. Many of us have traded actual goodness for a performance of goodness because we are trying to get the care we need to survive. If being good requires us to perform heteronormativity over our innate and authentic queerness, we do that. If it means pretending to agree with someone because they hold the resources we need, we do that, too.

For most of my life, goodness was something used to keep me in line. To be a good boy meant that I adhered to certain etiquettes that have been mostly informed by anti-Blackness, anti-queerness, ableism, class, and capitalism. Being good meant making other people happy through conforming to these etiquettes, which required my silence and complicity in the harm others were causing me.

Systems of dominance have co-opted the work of goodness to keep people from disrupting systemic violence. In this sense, goodness is understood to be an expression of virtue if it does not challenge the power imbalance and does not make the people who benefit the most from that power imbalance uncomfortable. When you are good, you are not causing trouble. Here I define trouble as creating discomfort for others.

I am no longer interested in being a good person. Performative goodness, conditional love, and shame are a violent trinity that has functioned to silence and repress countless beings and which has live belies so much of the violence we deal with each day. I have long known that conditional love and shame are effective weapons of interpersonal and cultural warfare, but we never think of the weaponization of goodness as violence used to harm people by suppressing and silencing them.

I am not a good person. I can't be a good person because goodness is more than something we perform or something we are. It is not an identity location we settle into. Goodness is the choice I am making each moment to do what is conducive to freedom for me and others. Goodness is a verb that I am actively engaging with: I like to say, "I am gooding" as opposed to "I am being good."

We practice goodness not because we want to be seen as good or because we want to experience happiness or even because it is what we are supposed to be doing. We choose goodness because it's how we get free while inviting others to join us. Voting, educating ourselves, highlighting the voices of the most underrepresented folks, being at least liberal, recycling, carrying people's groceries, reading the current justice books, never saying "Candyman" into a mirror, putting up Black Lives Matter signs, saying please and thank you, paying taxes, not wearing white shoes after Labor Day, supporting charities, avoiding cracks and walking under ladders, and offering thoughts and prayers are all wonderful things to do, but they are more about feeling good about ourselves and making sure others view us favorably. Which one of these beloved labors will actually get us free?

In the past few years, we have been obsessed with voting. According to popular liberal opinion, if you don't vote Democrat, you are a bad person who doesn't give a shit about the rights of others. But there are just as many racists, capitalists, ableists, rapists, and misogynists voting Democrat as there are voting Republican, and voting is no longer going to save us and set us free. I do not consent to anyone voting for me to be free. Voting never freed my ancestors. Our labor, love, magic, and acting up offered us whatever freedoms we have today, and it is these same tools we and all oppressed communities will continue to rely on.

There are two expressions of goodness: relative and absolute. Relative goodness is how I choose goodness in order to be happy, suffer less, and help others suffer less. Absolute goodness is choosing goodness because we want to get free and help others do the same. For goodness to be sustainable in our lives, we must turn our practice toward the absolute and train in goodness that lights the path into real freedom while showing others how to do this as well.

Practicing goodness also means that I must experience the grief of what it means to align myself with freedom and away from chaos and drama. We must recognize that we have built our lives and identities on the experience of conflict and distraction, which makes sense because although we may talk a good game about freedom, we still use drama in order to distract ourselves from the real work of getting free, which is the work of figuring out who we are through the rage and brokenheartedness. With drama and silliness, we have no idea who we are.

Some of us get into goodness because we want people to like us, while others choose goodness to avoid the shit in our lives by using the pleasure we get from good experiences to cover up the pain of unpleasant ones. These motivations for choosing goodness will lead to more suffering because we are not choosing to be with the truth of who we are. Freedom is only discovered through truth-not through comfortable stories that make us feel good.

To choose goodness does not mean we are performing, documenting, or broadcasting goodness. Goodness isn't a show for others to influence how they think about us. Seeking the approval of others will always enable those others to dictate our freedom. But it may be the case that folks around us don't want to be free, and the choices we make may trigger them. Freedom doesn't require validation; it is a personal choice we must make on our own, even when others around us do not consent. To choose goodness is to choose freedom: first for ourselves and then for our communities.

Goodness also means that I acknowledge the duality of light and dark, which is the practice of acknowledging balance. Balance is one of the laws of the relative world experiencing itself as the idea that there cannot be this without that. There is no light without dark, no up without down, or maybe no understanding of liberation without the discomfort of incarceration.

To choose goodness we must also know what it has meant to choose the dark. Some of the most influential change leaders and healers have been people who once chose what wasn't conducive to freedom. John Fire Lame Deer believed that in order to really help others as a medicine man, he had to know his trauma, get lost in it, and eventually emerge from it so he could understand how to help others move through their trauma. Or I think about Malcolm X who, after years of struggling to figure out who he was beyond the pain and confusion, came to understand freedom while he was physically incarcerated by the state.

But choosing goodness in this context doesn't mean I stand in opposition to darkness. It means that I recognize that darkness is asking to be held in care and awareness. If I can hold darkness like this, then it becomes a teacher. When I can't hold it, then it holds me, and this is the beginning of evil.

When we realize that goodness is a choice we are making to be free, and that choice becomes a habitual process, we start experiencing the state of virtue. I am practicing virtue when everything in my life is grounded in the pursuit of freedom. I am not trying to be a virtuous person. I am trying to choose what is conducive to freedom, and that continuous choice slowly begins to orient my life toward freedom.