

July 29, 2011

Beloveds,

Our days together gave me a crash refresher course in interfaith dialogue. It was delightful to meet so many new people, to learn so much in those intensely packed days, and to rise as quickly as I could to the challenge of two contrasting moments. One was symbolized by the song, "Livin' the Golden Rule," and the other by the critical and cautionary notes sounded by Rabbi David Kunin, Don Frew, and Craig Phillips. The lessons I began to learn apply as well to teaching, writing, and evangelizing. I am continuing to think about what adjustments in my practices will do justice to what I have begun to learn from each interaction.

I have long worked to dissipate the impression of a facile sameness in the culturally diverse expressions widely identified as the golden rule, and I have long worked to understand and respond to the objections to which the rule may seem vulnerable. These themes are evident from the brief introductory chapter linked here: <https://sites.google.com/a/kent.edu/jwattles/home/golden-rule-home> --the entire book is online). But I am determined to give more adequate voice to the fact that people can radiantly live goodness without working with a "golden-rule"-type expression symbolizing commitment to some cluster of insights, practices, and virtues. In some traditions, this rule is absent or marginal, but that fact need not hamper the flourishing of goodness. A truth seeker embraces truth wherever it be found, so all of our traditions continue to grow. But in some cases our very devotion to golden rule may keep us from using that term with its evangelical or quasi-evangelical connotations. Much to ponder.

The challenge of the song was that it struck me at first as self-congratulatory. Confucius set very high standards of living what is commonly identified in the *Analects* as the golden rule, and he frequently remarked on his own shortcomings. As a follower of Jesus, I regard the highest interpretation of the golden rule as a call to act in what is in some sense a God-like way. So I had to assemble a new concept of what it means to live the golden rule. First, I needed robustly to accept my own, often modest, level of ability to live the mighty sequence of levels of the rule that have beckoned me for so many years. I needed a summary concept that was progressive without being unreasonably demanding. Next, I needed to build on that new concept. What was it like to see Zephryn Conte and Renee Morgan Brooks singing so powerfully? The song expresses a decision and a consecration so great as to put us on a new level of activation. It does not imply that we live the rule perfectly, but that we have made an unqualified commitment to the process of growth that it symbolizes. At least that is my idea of what I am entering upon as I gradually rise to join the spirit of that song. I have not yet achieved that decision and consecration, but I know in what direction I am moving, and I am very grateful to all the musicians who brought the song to us, because I am inspired with the potentials I glimpse there.

Here's a restatement of what I offered in my **plenary presentation, "Taking the golden rule to the next levels."**

1. The golden rule in a Wichita newspaper editor's office.

After working with NAIN Board member Sam Muyskens on his Golden Rule Project, after meeting with interfaith, ecumenical, and Catholic groups to drum up interest for the upcoming training seminars of Scarboro Missions facilitator Kate Marshall Flaherty, several of us gathered in an office of the largest newspaper in town, the Wichita Eagle. Two editors plied us with challenging questions expressing the views of diverse groups of readers, from cynical to seeking, ignorant to intellectual. It became clear that, for the golden rule movement to go to the next level, it will help for advocates and critics to become better informed. An advocate of the rule is sometimes expected to show how it can come up with quick answers to complex ethical questions and how to answer a wide range of objections.

2. Responding to objections

In my research I have come across more than thirty objections to the golden rule, and there are four ways to handle them. (a) Reject the golden rule. (b) Revise it. (c) Supplement it to clarify its meaning in context (thanks to Moses Kanhai for teaching me this option). (d) Continue to use a conventional formulation of the golden rule, but deepen your interpretation of it as you think through its meaning in the light of the objection.

3. Some tough questions

Paul Eppinger asked me to address some questions for the golden rule. While it would be a mistake to short-circuit ethical inquiry with a golden rule platitude, I found that my familiarity with the histories of the golden rule allowed me to formulate some answers of the sort that I could at least give in an interview with a newspaper editor.

The first question was this: Given the golden rule's diverse religious and secular contexts, what does the golden rule really mean? First of all, we do well to study those contexts to enrich our understanding of the many-sided truth of the golden rule. Second, the differing contexts generally reflect the different problems that confronted the persons who were working with the rule at that place and time—and these lessons are complementary. Third, context affects interpretation but need not dominate it. There is an intuitive, shared core of meaning about the equal worth of the agent and the recipient as persons worthy of being treated *well*. Most of all, the golden rule symbolizes a process of growth (see #6 below).

The second question: How can people in power live the Golden Rule? Confucianism provides the golden rule for persons in power: Treat your subordinates as you want your subordinates to treat you. In addition, realize that you have power and that you sometimes function as a leader in pair relations or in systems of three or more. Love your enemies.

Third question: How can the police use the golden rule in a crisis? This question comes close to a common objection to the golden rule. A man found guilty of a crime could plead with the judge, "If you were in my place, you'd want to be sentenced *very* leniently." But properly understood, GR does not ask you to judge based on what you imagine you would feel, but to judge based on how you now believe you deserve to be treated if found guilty of a crime (Harry Gensler teaches this point excellently). Distinguish the golden rule of sympathy from the golden rule of moral reason (clarified in #6 below).

Fourth: How can people in the legal system use the golden rule? Use moral reason rather than only sympathy (and talk to our participants here, Jannet Ann Nordemann and David DeLozier, about lawyers as peacemakers). GR may seem designed for one-to-one situations and therefore unfit for situations in which one person's decision will affect people with conflicting interests. *Imagining* oneself in the other's shoes is not enough. One needs procedural justice plus a substantive commitment to the value of the individual.

Fifth: How should we encourage a political power broker to use the golden rule? We support you in using power to pursue high goals with the wisdom befitting an evolutionary process that is usually gradual (drawing on the appendix to Jared Diamond's *Collapse* about what "one person" can do about the ecological crisis). Respect every person, even when you must act in ways that conflict with their immediate interests. Distinguish a compromise from a sell-out. Act so that you treat persons of future generations as you would want to have been treated by leaders in this generation.

Sixth: What about the extremely wealthy? Respect them and take their political views seriously. Encourage them with models of teamwork and planetary vision. Find out how Sam Muyskens is so effective in raising money for urban renewal and other interfaith projects (GFIANOW@gmail.com).

Seventh: What can the average person do to help all people live the golden rule? Live it yourself at higher levels, and your light will attract others. Conjoin enthusiasm with education so that you can

teach it well. And remember the lessons from Rabbi David Kunin, Don Frew, and Craig Phillips that persons of traditions in which GR is absent or marginal might not appreciate the rule being presented as golden or as a standard. Be creative to find alternate ways of communicating GR truth.

4. Discovering in Geneva the power of the role-reversal

Working in Geneva, Switzerland, during the Spring semester of 2010, I was teaching a course on the golden rule and carefully studying the books that had come out on the rule since my own book had come out. I had found it helpful to do the exercise widely associated with GR—putting oneself in the other person’s shoes—the imaginative role reversal. But I was not a fan of it. First, although it is associated with the golden rule, it is not prescribed by it. One can apply the rule without the role-reversal. The role-reversal does not add knowledge. And in my opinion the highest experience of the rule exercises a spontaneous and intuitive identification with the other that precludes the need for a deliberate act of imagination. But one morning I was particularly impressed by the passion for the imaginative role reversal that was evident between the lines of Oliver du Roy’s important book, *La règle d’or* (Paris: Les Editions du CERF, 2009). I also remembered Harry Gensler’s passion for the role reversal and his evident practice of it, and I thought that there must be something that I was missing. So I mobilized the total powers of my personality and *catapulted* myself into identification with the other and had a spiritual experience of love that lasted for several hours, sustaining me through several interactions with others. (By the way, one of the needs in the advancing golden rule movement is for translations—and funds for translations—to share important books with other linguistic communities. Olivier will publish his dissertation—a vast addition to planetary scholarship on the rule—with CERF toward the end of this year, and there’s also a new book, *Die Goldene Regel* by Martin Bauschke, who works with Hans Küng’s Global Ethics [*Weltethos*] project in Berlin).

5. Learning to love in Ohio

How to get through a downturn in my relationship with my bold, brilliant, sensitive, and amazingly service-minded wife? Izzy Kalman, psychologist and author travels the United States giving seminars on his golden rule approaches to the problem of bullies in the schools, problems of difficult relations in the work place, and anger management: www.bullies2buddies.com. Ever since I took one of his seminars, things at home have advanced to a new level.

The golden rule is especially needed when people clash. Here are a few of Izzy’s principles. When someone gets angry with you,

- Do not be afraid.
- Do not get angry.
- Respond to the other person in good humor.
- Treat that person as a friend.
- Love your enemies.

Given Izzy’s dynamically serious lecturing, his surprisingly engaging role-plays, and his wonderful New York Jewish humor, this can be learned easily and quickly, and it works in practice. But you do not need those qualities and a six-hour seminar to communicate the gist and make a difference. There is a psychology dimension as well as philosophy and religion dimension to the golden rule.

6. The life in the golden rule

GR is not a static slogan. If there is spiritual life inherent in the golden rule, what might be some of its manifestations? If I may dare to generalize my findings, cultures, academic disciplines, and

persons who work *diligently and persistently* with the golden rule find sequences of levels of meaning in it. The following list does not attempt to synthesize diverse cultural histories, but it is a quick way to communicate the adventure that you get caught up in when you truly begin to follow the golden rule. Here is a three-level sequence.

1. Be considerate of the feelings of others, as you want others to be sympathetic toward you.
2. Treat others in accord with reason, as you want others to treat you.
3. Treat others as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of God, as you want others to treat you.

7. A philosophy of living context for the golden rule

I can hardly imagine a better stand-alone, one-liner than “Treat others as you want others to treat you” to can serve as one’s rule of living. (Actually, my personal motto is “God is our Father; I am your brother.”) Nevertheless, for the golden rule movement to go to the next level, it needs to be placed within a philosophy of living in truth, beauty, and goodness.

Truth, beauty, and goodness are divine values, anchored in the eternal nature of God. They are alive and growing as we actualize their potentials by decisions in our situations. In that way they can be lived; and this is how mortals may live the divine life. (At this point, Tuesday afternoon at 3:40, I had anticipated that those present would be tired, so I invited them to relax the intellect and feel with the soul as I let those who wanted watch the PowerPoint slides and spoke very little.)

Living the truth: The truths of science

Moral action requires adequate intuition or knowledge of the facts of the situation. Establish material facts in the light of the truths of science. What causes led to this situation? What effects may result from alternative courses of action? How can our handling of this situation contribute to personal growth and planetary progress?

Living the truth: The truths of philosophy

Some situations that call for moral decision lead us to sharpen intuition through reason in quest of **wisdom**. Interpret intellectual meanings in the light of the truths of philosophy. The meanings of facts and the meanings of values *can* be brought together to give a coherent indication of duty.

Living the truth: The truths of spiritual experience

The golden rule flourishes in association with realization of the truths of spiritual experience. **The golden rule is the principle of the practice of the family of God.** Truth fully realized is beautiful, and it is good, since it opens up the path of duty, service, action.

Walking in beauty: The beauties of nature

Be sensitive to the beauties of nature, including the beauties of the body—an arena for enjoyment, self-mastery, and thanksgiving. The golden rule may illumine our duties regarding nature without our having to assume that a human being, a fly, a dandelion, and a piece of granite are on a par. But matter, life, mind, spirit—all are *wonderful*.

Walking in beauty: The appeal of the arts

Participate in artworks that take the mind from initial reaction to high thought. Be artistic in thought, word, and deed--as a teacher and in your service. Use cleverness and offer delight through your intelligent interactions with others.

The beauty of goodness

For the beauty of goodness, see the history of the golden rule in Confucianism and its movement from artificial, self-conscious, self-examination and social conformity to spiritual realization and spontaneity.

Participating in goodness: Morality

Dominated by goodness, be morally active and contribute to social equity.

Participating in goodness: Character achievement

Acquiring the virtues involved in the activities of truth, beauty, and goodness yields growth toward a character that is genuinely great. What we accomplish depends much on *who* we have become.

My **workshop, “The golden rule and ethics,”** used—approximately—the following text presented in PowerPoint slides and printed in a handout. I attempted to give some tips of icebergs to whet appetites and offer something immediately useful, drawing on my book. A beloved friend let me know that I tried to teach too much.

Lessons from the history of the Confucian golden rule

- Honor the facts of social asymmetry: Treat your superiors with adequate respect and your subordinates with adequate consideration (as you would have them treat you).
- GR moves from (1) self-conscious, awkward, effortful social conformity, using self-examination and self-control to (2) a spiritually centered, spontaneous love poured out upon all humankind.

Lessons from the history of GR in ancient Greece

Many people today do not know the golden rule, or cannot state it, or interpret it very poorly. The confusion is similar to that in ancient Greece. Thus the golden rule can be merely a sophistic string of words expressing a pleasing and ambiguous mix of social propriety, vague idealism, and partisan self-interest. To sort out the confusion, one must distinguish four different principles.

- The repayment policy: Return good for good and harm for harm (one use of the term “reciprocity”).
- The principle of social or cosmic justice: Acts have consequences: if we do good, we can expect good in return. If we do evil, we can expect to suffer.
- The principle of prudence: We ought to treat others well *because it is in our self-interest to do so*.
- The golden rule: a moral command about how we ought to treat others—doing the right thing even in response to being treated wrongly and even if the likely worldly consequences to ourselves look bleak.

Lessons from the classical Jewish GR

- The GR expresses the logic of fairness and consideration, predicated on the recognition that others are like oneself.
- GR expresses the way of life (contrasted with the way of death).
- GR was used to summarize the commandments.
- GR was a proverb (*mashal*, connoting rule or power) and a principle (*kelal*, rule or principle) that simplifies tradition, giving a more unified, manageable focus. Its sage brevity goes to the heart of the matter, giving generality, and emphasizing spiritual teachings over ritual requirements.

A rabbi who moved from Babylon to Jerusalem and who was decades older than Jesus of Nazareth, Hillel was renowned for wise scholarship and patient goodness. A prospective convert asked Hillel to teach him the whole Torah very briefly and received this reply. “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it.” This was a non-theological principle, neither quoting scripture or mentioning God.

The golden rule aligns with universal regard

The golden rule aligns with an emphasis on a universal Creator and on love for all humankind, rather than with the apocalyptic emphasis on the division of humanity into two classes—the wise, who pursue goodness and walk in the way of life, and the foolish, who pursue sin, the way of death.

My interpretations have been criticized, and the article on the classical Jewish GR that has impressed me most in the past few years is by Baruch A. Levine (New York University): “The Golden Rule in Ancient Israelite Scripture,” 9-25 in Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions* (Continuum, 2008).

A spiritual renaissance with the golden rule

A century ago in the United States there was a socially influential golden rule movement, which we do well to study if we hope to do as well or better. One of the leaders was Arthur Nash (1870-1927). As a favor to a friend, Nash bought a company that he later discovered to be a sweatshop. Expecting to go out of business, he raised wages 300% for the lowest paid workers and 50% for the highest paid workers. His business took off, and his devotion to applying the teachings of Jesus won him national renown.

Arthur Nash and J.C. Penney both wrote books titled *The Golden Rule in Business*. From each book the following argument can be reconstructed.

- Any acceptable economic success must be based not upon profit-hungry manipulation but upon good relationships between those involved.
- Acting in accord with GR is required in order for a business enterprise to flourish in its social relations, since the rule stimulates improved service.
- Practicing the rule in business often aids success.
- Religious motivation is usually needed to motivate the wholehearted practice of GR.
- Thus business, society and civilization need religion.

What stirred that quiver of a spiritual renaissance? The powerful preaching and practice of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man were central in the golden rule movement of that time. How might one conserve and expand the truths there today?

- Allow each person to express his or her spiritual realization in self-chosen language.

- Emphasize the equality of women and men.
- Be open to explore the concept of the motherhood of God.
- Move beyond seeing the language of family as only metaphor.
<https://sites.google.com/a/kent.edu/jwattles/home/comparative-religious-thought/methods-in-the-study-of-religion/the-universal-family--more-than-metaphor>

The golden rule and base desires

In our generation the golden rule has needed—and lacked—defense from objections including this one. “What if a sadomasochist treated other people as he wants others to treat him?” Here are some points that are part of a more thorough reply.

- First understand, then criticize. Confucius, Hillel, Jesus, and others ask how *you* want to be treated.
- GR is self-correcting: Would *you* want to be treated in accord with such a misunderstanding?
- GR assumes that the agent has a normal capacity for sympathetic consideration for others and a reasonable sense of personal dignity.
- Acting with GR can help develop what’s needed.

An interfaith puzzle with the golden rule

In conclusion, I left this as an interfaith, golden rule puzzle for the participants without attempting to sort things out. In Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael is invited by his new friend, Queequeg, to join in pagan worship. Ishmael reflects: “But what is worship?—to do the will of God—*that* is worship. And what is the will of God?—to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do me—*that* is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolator.” (In the 1967 Norton critical edition, this is in chapter 1, p. 54).