

# *Living in a Post-Moral World*

**Rev. David E. Bumbaugh**

**[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)**

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The town in which I spent my childhood and adolescence, was located in a broad valley between two mountain ridges. Sited at the intersection of a major north-south highway and a major east-west highway, it was a small manufacturing city, an important rail center, and the hub of a prosperous agricultural region. A town founded in the mid-1700's by German immigrants, it betrayed its middle-European roots both in its architecture, and its conservative life-style. When I think back to that small city and my early years, two images always come vividly to mind--one auditory and the other visual.

The auditory image concerns a siren which could be heard throughout the town. The townspeople had given the gravel-voiced siren a name. He was known to everyone as "Ferdinand." Why he was called Ferdinand, I never knew. Nor did I ever know where he was located. But every morning Ferdinand emitted a gravelly bleat to signal the beginning of the work-day, and another every evening to indicate the end of the work-day. On the occasions when a fire was reported somewhere in the city, Ferdinand sounded a coded series of long and short bleats. By counting them and then checking with a card issued to each household, it was possible to determine precisely where the fire alarm had been raised. More than this, as the fire progressed, Ferdinand kept us updated. By a series of coded signals, he reported when the fire had gone to two or three or four or five alarms. And then, when the fire had been put out, Ferdinand sounded two short bleats to tell us that all was now well with our town. Ferdinand was a regular reminder that all within the sound of his voice were one people, bound together for good or for ill, interested in and concerned for each other's welfare.

The visual memory is of the communal Christmas tree, erected every December in the very center of the town square. It was not just a large tree cut down and hauled in from somewhere. It was a huge tree, constructed on the site, by erecting a tall pole and nailing branches and even small trees to it in a symmetrical pattern to create a perfect, ideal Christmas tree. I still remember on cold, December nights standing on a hill to the west of the town square, looking down the street that ran straight and true to the town center. All the Christmas lights decorating the streets and houses of the town seemed to radiate from that central tree. The tail-lights of the cars moving through town seemed drawn--like moths to a flame--toward that tree, and appeared to orbit around that tree. Even the stars in the dark night sky seemed to wheel about the great tree which defined the center of my childhood universe.

These two symbols of the town remain with me in large part because they are reflective of the way in which I experienced life in that community. Everyone within the sound of Ferdinand's voice, and everyone centered around the great tree were part of a single,

inviolable community. And within that community there was a commonly accepted code of behavior by which men and women and children were expected to live. We were bound together by a pattern of expectations and assumptions about what was right and wrong, what was acceptable and unacceptable, assumptions as common as the air we breathed and as rarely questioned.

When I have returned to my home town in recent years, I am struck by the changes which have occurred. To begin with, the town has experienced the same kinds of disruptions which have affected much of our national life. Increasingly, the more affluent have moved out of the town into a ring of suburbs which has emerged from what used to be farms and woodlands. It is no longer possible for many of the residents to hear Ferdinand when he makes his bleating sound. What is more, his marking of the beginning and the end of the day has become irrelevant to most. Increasingly, the people of the community no longer work where they live. Many of them now commute into Washington, D.C. to work, leaving on their daily journey long before Ferdinand announces the beginning of the work day and returning only after the old siren has declared the work day over. My home town has become a bedroom community for the nation's capital, some seventy miles away and as a consequence, the energies and the time available to the local community are greatly diminished, and for many people, the sense of being part of a community is dramatically reduced.

The significance of the changes can be seen most vividly at this season of the year. As is true in most old towns, the center of this small city has fallen on hard times. Businesses have fled the down-town and moved to suburban shopping malls. Some years ago, it was decided that the great tree in the center of the town square was a traffic hazard, and so it was replaced with a small tree, off to one side. Now, at Christmas time, it is possible to stand on that hill to the west and to see how the magic has fled. Now the street decorations seem isolated and shabby and unrelated to anything. The traffic moves without obstruction through the square; there is no tree to deflect it. The symbolic center of the town is gone, and the heart has gone out of the community.

It seems to me that the changes which have occurred in that town, and in towns like it all over the country go deeper than outward appearances. Along with the evaporation of the sense of community has come a weakening of what used to be called moral standards. As I was growing up in that town, I do not remember any strong conflicts about the nature of right and wrong. I do remember an occasional strong sense of guilt when I violated the rules, but there was never any doubt in my mind about the rules. It was clear that the community did not approve dishonesty, disobedience, faithlessness, laziness, theft, or brutality. In addition, the moral code included a strong conviction that there must be no social intercourse between the races, that expressions of sexuality must be restricted to marriage, that same-sex behavior was an abomination, that non-Christian religions were to be tolerated, but not granted an equal voice in the life of the community, that the claim of the Catholic church to being Christian was to be viewed with grave suspicion, and that a major function of the public schools was to inculcate the values and the world view of a generalized Protestantism.

With the break-down of the insular community which was the town of my childhood and youth, that clear moral code has also cracked. The civil rights movement came to the town gradually, and while it did not create equality between the races, it broke down the barriers which had been erected and maintained so carefully over the years. The pill separated sexuality from the prospect of unwanted pregnancy, and legal abortion made further separation possible. The advent of television made it clear that there was a world of people for whom the Catholic church was the quintessential expression of Christianity, and even more for whom Christianity was not the only true and valid religious expression, and even some for whom organized religion held no appeal. The Supreme Court refused to allow the public schools to continue to function as parochial schools for a common-denominator Protestantism. The intrusion of the outside world made it clear that there was a plethora of life-styles available to people and that there were places where what had been defined as deviant was quite acceptable. The moral code which had shaped the community had become a matter of picking and choosing, as the citizens of my little city found themselves cast into citizenship in a larger world, no longer focused on an agreed center, no longer responding to a clear signal all could hear. And what has happened to my little city, for good and for ill, has happened to much of the world.

It occurs to me that what has happened, and what continues to happen is that increasingly we live not in real community, but in virtual community. To help explain that term, let me relate it to the concept of virtual reality. As you may know, virtual reality refers to an artificial environment created by electronic means, a reality with no existence apart from the devices which generate it, but a reality which presents itself in such a compelling manner that the observer experiences it as real. Virtual reality environments may be used to teach difficult skills, dangerous for the uninitiated to attempt in the real world--ranging from delicate surgery, to the control of airplanes and space craft, to the mastery of the high-tech weapons which increasingly dominate the military.

By the same token, a virtual community is one which is not real in the sense that the town in which I grew up was real, but which has been created by electronic media and which presents itself so vividly that we experience it as real. Increasingly, every one of us lives in a virtual community. I would guess that many of us, perhaps most of us know more about the lives of characters on television situation comedies and soap operas than we know about the people who live on our own block. Our opinions are more likely to be shaped and formed by McNeil and Lehrer, or Donahue, or Sally Jessie Raphael, or Rush Limbaugh or even Murhpy Brown than by the people who live next door to us. The meaning of world events and of our own history is conveyed to us by docudramas, rather than by reflection on our own feelings and experiences. Even the decision about what is an important event is made for us by invisible agents who determine what to include and what to exclude from our virtual community of discourse.

At first it appeared that the electronic revolution through which we have been living would homogenize human society, make of the entire human race, one global community. And so long as the sources shaping the virtual community were limited, that seemed to happen. (For example, when I was in high school, everyone on the school bus talked about what Lucy had done on her television program the night before. We were all

part of the same virtual community.) But with the advent of cable and satellite communication, of computers and modems and on-line offerings, the vision of a single, virtual community in which we would all live evaporated, and in its place came multiple communities among which we could choose, isolating us from the real communities in which we resided, and allowing us to embed ourselves deeper and deeper in idiosyncratic virtual communities.

The effect of this has been to create a post-moral society, a world in which ethical dilemmas confront us with great insistency, but in which the moral basis has evaporated. To understand what I am suggesting, let me point out the difference between moral and ethical. The term moral comes from the Latin, and refers to the customs of a community. Ethical derives from a Greek root and implies a concern for character. The town in which I grew up had a strong moral structure--a pattern of community standards which were seldom openly challenged, and by which our lives were organized. Some of those standards were of enduring value--the concern for honesty, integrity, fidelity; while others, by my lights, were pernicious and evil and wrong--the determination to treat people of African American descent as less than human, the refusal to allow people to express their love for members of the same sex, the determination that women had no right to control their own bodies by choosing an abortion.

Time and circumstances have eroded the power of real community and the moral code upon which it was built. The appearance of competing virtual communities in which standards are limited and unenforceable has made it impossible for similar moral standards to emerge. We live in a post-moral world in which communities have less and less reality, less and less power to enforce their peculiar standards upon the unwilling. If we disagree, every one of us can flee to a different virtual community. This is what makes it so difficult for us to resolve national conflicts over abortion, or gay and lesbian rights, or matters of death with dignity. We no longer live in real communities. We live in self-selected virtual communities where the moral codes, the community customs are part of what we choose, rather than a reflection of some pre-existent cosmic truth. To be sure, a residue of the moral codes in which we grew up still exists and is shared by most virtual communities--the concern for honesty, integrity, truthfulness, faithfulness. But at the edges, where we must refine those generalities into behaviors, the consequences of the electronic revolution begin to show and we discover that we are radically free to choose in a way that few generations ever have been free.

And that, my friends, is the difference between a moral life and an ethical existence. Morality is a matter of obedience. The standard is set, and one lives by the standard. Ethics is a matter of choice--a choice concerned not about what is expected of me, but who or what do I want to be and how must I act to create that person. In every moment of life, we are faced with challenges. Sometimes they may be dramatic--when one must choose between continuing or terminating a pregnancy or when one is asked to stand by a friend who has chosen to end a life made unbearable by inescapable pain. More often they are less dramatic, focused on whether to speak the truth that is in me, or remain silent in the face of a different opinion, whether to respond to the need of a stranger who confronts me on the street, or advance my gaze and walk away. No matter what decision I

make, always involved in the challenge is the question about the person I will be and the legacy of my existence. In this post moral world, the call to obedience grows faint, but the call to integrity becomes louder and more insistent. The post-moral world is a world in which there is no way to evade the ethical challenge because one is no longer defined by pre-existent community, but must choose which virtual community to enter, must choose who to be and how to live and what to cherish.

The world symbolized by that great tree in the center of the town square, the world galvanized by the sound of Ferdinand's gravelly voice is gone, and unlikely to return in my lifetime. In its place is a world of endless alternatives, a world of vast complexity and countless possibilities, in which each of us is challenged to build a life of integrity and honesty and purpose. It is more difficult to live in a post-moral world. There is no refuge behind the strong walls of communally sanctioned behavior. Every choice becomes a a curiously self-revealing, self-creating act in which we define what it means to be human, what is of value, and what matters to us. Ultimately, we are responsible to ourselves and for ourselves, and our reward and our punishment is found in the fact that we must live with the person we create, day by day, choice by choice throughout a lifetime.