

## Learning the Art of Goodness

To me, the art of goodness involves answering the following question with action:

*“What is the best, most loving use of my time right now?”*

I call this the Path Management question. If you ask yourself this question (or ask in prayer) and answer it sincerely with *action*, you will be on a path of goodness. Then whenever you have completed the action or task, you ask the question again in order to take the next step down the path.

The question is simple and unchanging, but the answers are *ever-changing*. If you are truly sincere about answering the question, you’ll soon realize that at some point the answer to the question “What is the best, most loving use of my time right now?” is to *learn* how to do more good. That is what this part of the website is about: learning how to do much more good than the average person of good will.

I suspect that some people naively believe that the way to answer the question is to do the first thing that pops into their heads, or perhaps to brainstorm for options and then choose the best action or the hardest action. Some people might believe that they can intuitively or automatically always come up with the “right” answer to the Path Management question. I disagree. I think that the average person *can* often instantly intuit right from wrong. But I don’t think that the average person can, in a few seconds, first think of several possible good actions, second foresee the likely consequences of these actions and third, choose and resolutely begin the best of them.

In fact, many times when we try to do good, we end up doing one of the following:

- 1) Mediocre good or “nice” things.
- 2) Actions that end up having very little positive or enduring impact; or
- 3) Actions that are actually harmful in the long run.

To illustrate this point, I wrote a story called *The Joy of Really Knowing that You Helped*. The title is ironic, and those who ponder the story will realize that many of the things that we think are good deeds can be disastrous. The story will depress some people

because they'll realize that in many cases they can't easily know if they're helping or hurting someone. Others will find the story horrifying because they'll realize that that something they've done or are in the process of doing, often with the best of intentions, is in fact destructive.

But there are other ways to look at the situation. Doing good is sometimes easy and natural. But sometimes it is challenging and complex. Overall, goodness is *intricate*. Think of it as an art form. As with any art, there are basics to master. But then there is the need for analysis, creativity, and *design*. Since goodness is a performance art, like modern dance or playing jazz with others, there is the need for timing, interpretation and response in the present moment—observation, *listening* and intuitive response.

If you are artistic, this realization that goodness is an art form may inspire you. But those who aren't artistic may prefer to compare it with surgery. Both require skill and both save or improve lives. Some people have taken time to learn the basics of first aid, and they are to be commended for this. Others have dedicated their lives to studying and mastering one of the healing arts, and their sacrifice and skills are that much greater.

To me, the question “What is the best, most loving use of my time right now?” is beautiful in itself. Some of the goodness of the question lies in the phrase “right now,” in pulling you out of the past and future (daydreams, regrets and worries) and putting you into the present. Some of it lies in pulling you out of theories and abstract philosophy to put you in touch with the actual situation, real life. If you can get past the fact that you can't *know* what the best, most loving use of your time with the same certainty that you can know the answer to a multiplication question, then you will not reject the question as impossible to answer.

I take pleasure in the question because it makes the world an artist's palette with which I can paint a work of art, whether it is the work of an hour's effort or a lifetime's. I love the question because of the inherent drama that comes about with doing something new: The question is the same, but the situation, the moment is different. My attitude toward the question is like the adventure involved in stepping up to the plate in a softball game: I ask myself, “Will I hit a home run this time?” Hitting a home run, and making a ball sail into the blue heavens is cool—and beautiful. It requires skill, timing and perhaps a little luck. Doing great good is *very* cool and *very* beautiful. Much of the time you can't

be absolutely sure that you are doing good or not, but sometimes you have the irrefutable moments when you feel the inner beauty of your actions.

I have a saying that absolute goodness is only slightly less incomprehensible than absolute evil. Ideas such as ‘goodness,’ ‘ultimate purpose,’ ‘God,’ and ‘absolute beauty’ are ultimately beyond the reach of human comprehension. These, as well as the phrase ‘the best, most loving use of my time’ function better as ‘guiding stars’ with which to orient our lives. ‘Godward,’ ‘toward-beauty,’ ‘toward-honor,’ and so forth are directions in which you can travel.

But the journey is not always pleasant. Rilke wrote that beauty is the beginning of terror. Goodness can also be terrifying in the extreme because you may lose your bearings if you reckon by conventional and traditional frameworks of good and evil. Not only do you sometimes not know where you are, you don’t know *who* you are because you are in the process of being changed. I have found my journey to comprehend goodness at times disturbing, grueling and harrowing. Out of my struggles I have formulated the training in goodness contained in this book.

More precisely it’s a formation, not a training. Therefore, I must warn you that this training cannot be as stimulating and entertaining as the typical self-help best seller. To use an analogy, medical students who require that their textbooks and courses be entertaining will be disappointed and will probably fail.

To continue the analogy, if I’m like the medical school professor, my primary job is not to inspire you but to instruct you. But encouragement is built into the design of this training, however, so you will receive encouragement *if you follow instructions* and arrange the ongoing support—or accept it when offered. If you do not follow instructions, and only read these webpages, you are likely to do almost nothing with the knowledge they contain.

Once again, here is your starting point: “What is the best, most loving use of my time and life, right now?” At least some of the answer of how to spend your time is to *learn* how to do greater good. And another part of the answer is to *use* what you’ve learned to *do* greater good.