

Humanity: The Forsaken Soul of Western Civilization

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[A recent] visit to Africa...led me to ask: Why is it that cultures that built pyramids and Taj Mahals could not make wheelbarrows for their women and children, slaves and laborers? I discovered that it was a particular belief that enabled the West to abolish slavery and grant to their women greater liberty than even matriarchal cultures. The belief was that all human beings, whether high or low, educated or illiterate, rich or poor, healthy or sick, male or female, or black or white, were equal. And what made the strong and the weak equal? It was not that everyone evolved equally but the *fact* that every human being was made in God's image and therefore was endowed with dignity.

This peculiar doctrine of the dignity of man was the force that made the West different from the rest of the world, but now it is no longer a part of Ivy League universities. At the dawn of the modern era, Michelangelo painted this idea on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He depicted God reaching out his arm to create Adam in his own image, while Eve is in the other arm of God, looking at the marvel that is Adam and awaiting her own creation, which will be a marvel for Adam. The contemporary West mocks Michelangelo's worldview and devalues human life to the level of mere animals. Let me illustrate the transforming power of this truth by sharing a true, though tragic, story.

When Ruth and I moved out of the city to serve poor peasants, I was writing my first book *The World of Gurus*, which became recommended reading in universities such as Cambridge. We had no tables or chairs. I sat on a stool and handwrote the book on a small wooden plank that came out of the wall on one side of our bed. Ruth sat on the other side of the bed, editing my manuscript and typing it on a typewriter. When I didn't have enough work for Ruth, she would cycle to the village and go door-to-door to learn about our neighbors. She wanted to know how many children were studying and what we could do to help those who were not going to school. Ruth ran into a ten-year-old girl and asked her, "How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"Three, maybe four," the girl replied.

"Do you have three or do you have four?" Ruth asked, seeking clarification.

"Three," she said. "The fourth is almost dead."

"Can I come and see this child?" Ruth asked.

Ruth had to bend down to go through a little door into a mud hut without a window or lighting. In the middle of the room was a bare string cot, and on this was an eighteen-month-old skeleton of a girl's body with pus oozing from sores all over, including from her head. Flies covered her face because she couldn't raise her hand to chase them away.

The girl was so weak that she couldn't cry. When she tried to cry, she only sighed. Her thighs were as thick as an adult's thumb. As Ruth looked at this dying child - Sheela - she started to cry.

"What's wrong with her?" Ruth asked the mother.

The mother smirked and said, "Oh, she doesn't eat anything. Whatever we give her she vomits."

"Have you taken her to the doctor?"

"What's the use? What can the doctors do if she will not eat anything?"

"How do we know what doctors can or cannot do? Shouldn't we give her the medical attention that is available?"

The mother got a little irritated. "How can we afford to go to the doctor?"

Ruth was sorry that they were too poor to go even to a free clinic in the city, so she said, "I will give you the money to take this child to the hospital."

The mother said, "I am afraid of the city. I can't go there." "Well, take your husband."

"How can he go? Who will look after the fields and the cattle?"

"What if I gave him money to hire a laborer for a day to look after his field? Would he then come with you? I will come with you and help you navigate your way around."

"I will speak to my husband." With that the mother ended the conversation.

Ruth bicycled back to our house and got after me. "You have to talk to the husband." Though I wasn't playing cards or watching TV, I had to submit. I went, even though the couple wasn't expecting me.

They had made up their minds that they were not going to the hospital.

"Why?" I asked.

"We don't have the money."

"But my wife told you that we will give you the money." "We don't want to get into debt."

"I will give it to you in writing that this is a gift, not a loan. We are never going to ask you for this money back."

"But we don't have the time."

"My wife told you that we will pay for a laborer so that you can create time to come."

That really got them irritated.

"Why are you bothered? She is *our* daughter."

I didn't know how to answer that. *Why am I bothered?* The only way I could interpret that question was that they wanted Sheela to die. Although I didn't believe that any parent could do that, there was no other way to interpret their behavior. So I decided to raise my voice and at least pretend to be angry.

"Are you killing this child? If you are killing her, why are you being so cruel? Why don't you pick up a knife and stab her, instead of letting her go through this pain and suffering?"

They were stunned, but I continued. "Look, if you don't take this child to the hospital, tomorrow I am going to bring the police here and lodge a complaint that you are killing this child."

By this time there was a crowd around us, and I tried to put the pressure of public opinion upon the parents. I looked around for moral support, but everybody looked at me as though I was a fool. It took me months to realize that I was, in fact, utterly ignorant. The parents were doing what was customary in the village. They already had one girl; why did they need the second girl? The first one can cook and clean and look after the siblings. Why should they take on additional trouble to bring up another girl who will need a dowry to qualify for marriage?

One elderly gentleman told the parents, "Look, this fellow is crazy. He might actually bring the police. If the police take your daughter to the hospital, you will have to pay the bill. Since he is offering to pay, why don't you go?"

The next day Ruth took Sheela and her mother to a hospital that was not free but was of better quality. Sheela was so anemic that the hospital staff couldn't give her any medication or feed her fluid through her nose. She had to be put on intravenous. In a week she gained enough strength so that they could start treating her and feeding her with a tube. After another week the doctor said, "The bill is getting too high. Why don't you take Sheela to your home and feed her? I will come once a week to look at her."

Sheela stayed in our home for a month. India did not have disposable diapers, and we had no washing machine. Dirty diapers had to be washed by hand. It was a new experience for the men in our household - especially because Indian men did not change, let alone *wash*, their children's diapers. Once we made the decision to do whatever it took, we really fell in love with Sheela, and she began to respond to that love. For the first time we could see her smiling. Her smile was worth all the trouble. Few experiences have been more satisfying for us as a family. But a month or so later the mother came and started fighting.

"Everyone in the village is saying that our daughter is eating your food and this is polluting our caste. We will be excommunicated. We want our daughter back."

Ruth said, "We have no intention of taking Sheela away from you. We want you to take your daughter and look after her. I will pay for the milk, but I will give it directly to the milkman. You take care of Sheela, and we will come and visit her."

Ruth started paying the milkman, but within a few weeks Sheela was back to square one. The milk was being fed not to Sheela but to her brothers. The whole process had to be repeated. Ruth had to fight with the mother, I had to fight with the father, and then Ruth had to take Sheela and her mother to the hospital. Sheela was again put on intravenous, then fed by tubes, and eventually brought to our home. And the mother came back and fought again. We assumed that she had learned her lesson, so we gave her another lecture on parental responsibility and gave Sheela to her along with some clothes, hoping that this time things would be better.

Within days, dear Sheela was dead.

I was convinced that her parents had killed her. Ruth didn't believe that any parent could possibly do that. After we had three more experiences of that kind, Ruth began to realize that infanticide was a common practice in our area and decided, therefore, that we should never take this risk. If parents do not want a child, we should take the baby and find a home for her (or him). We made that our practice: no questions, no arguments - if you don't want the child, we will find a home for her.

This is no place to go into those stories. The point is that what we experienced with Sheela's parents was a clash of two worldviews, both of which cannot be true. We saw this child very differently than the parents saw their own daughter. For us she was a precious individual. For them a second daughter was a liability: you feed her for ten to twelve years, treat her, educate her, and then you have to go into debt to get her married. That is not the end either. The in-laws may torture the girl to extract a larger dowry from her parents. Her whole life is suffering. Why not end this suffering quickly and smoothly and avoid hassles to yourself and the child? What is the truth - was Sheela a liability, or was she as valuable as her brothers and any other person in the world?

If an American were to argue with Sheela's parents, the parents might respond: "Look, if we had facilities for ultrasound, if we knew that this was going to be a second daughter, we would have aborted her. Since we didn't know that she would be a girl - an unwanted baby - we made the hard decision to end her life after she was born, after we knew she was a girl. We didn't do anything different than what you do when you know you won't be able to give a good life to your babies. You kill them too. You just don't see what you are doing because you pay the doctors to dispose of your babies for you. You soothe your conscience by giving it a different name. The fact that we took eighteen long months to make that painful decision only shows how difficult that decision was - how much we loved her."

"Why is it wrong to kill unwanted babies?" her parents may go on to question you. "We believe that cows are sacred, but you kill them. Your ancestors in Greece and Rome practiced infanticide as we do, but now you think that human life is sacred. Why should we be bound by your values? After all, according to your universities, a cow is one kind of animal and a human being is simply another kind of animal. Whatever value a society ascribes to either cows or humans is an arbitrary social convention. If your universities are right, if there is no God who has said, "You shall not kill," then why is murder wrong? Where does a person get a fundamental right to his or her life, property, or conscience, if not from society? Why can't a society take away the right to

life, which it gives - or at least make exceptions to the normal rules? Our society allows us to kill unwanted babies. Who gave *you* the right to impose your moral values on us?"

Sheela's parents had no philosophical basis for affirming the positive value of Sheela's life. In fact, they did not realize their own human dignity. They did not know that poverty and misery are not inevitable and inescapable. They were Hindus, but like most Hindus they accepted the Buddha's first Noble Truth that life is suffering. They didn't know that life does not need to be suffering. Suffering is not written in our stars, karma, fate, or destiny.

Sheela's mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother may have experienced life as miserable. But could Sheela's parents give to her a different and better future? Could a poor family bring up a daughter in a way that she could become a source of a better future for the whole family? Could a girl lift an entire village out of poverty? Sheela's parents were poor, but their poverty was more than material. They knew we were willing to give a new life to Sheela, but they lacked faith. A second daughter was not valuable enough for them to resist the pressure of a culture that preferred she die rather than eat our food.

Compare this story with the story of Helen Keller. When she was nineteen months old, Helen became deaf and blind. Because she had not started speaking by then, she also became mute. Although physically she was capable of speaking, psychologically she couldn't. She was shut up in her own self, unable to communicate with anyone in the world, frustrated, angry, and irrational.

From the secular viewpoint of our age, Helen's life had little value. She was a girl - deaf, dumb, and blind. Today in the Netherlands she could be euthanized legally. Along with legally accepting polygamy, the Netherlands has become the first Western nation to legalize infanticide under certain circumstances. America will follow the Netherlands, China, and India as more and more people decide that a human being is nothing more than an animal: she has no intrinsic, God-given value; the only value she has is relative, arbitrarily assigned to her by other human beings.

Fortunately for Helen Keller, she was born in a different era, when the West still believed - on the Bible's authority - that a deaf and blind girl is still a human being, the image-bearer of God.

Anne Sullivan, Helen's nurse, teacher, and maid, loved and served Helen. One day she took Helen to a well where there was some fragrant honeysuckle. Someone was drawing water at the well, and Ann put Helen's hand in the water stream. As Helen was shocked by the sensation of water falling on her one hand, Ann started spelling *water* on Helen's other hand - first slowly, then quickly. Helen was mesmerized. All of a sudden she understood that what was being drawn on one hand was the name of this cool something falling on her other hand. Helen's world changed - the magic of language began to make sense. Excited, Helen went back home and started learning language. Although she was still mute, with writing she learned on the very first day words such as *father*, *mother*, *teacher*, *brother*, and *sister*. In a few weeks Helen began to speak. Then she learned to type on a special Braille typewriter and went on to become a mighty spokeswoman for handicapped children all over the world.

What made the difference for Helen? Was it her parent's wealth or their belief that a deaf, dumb, and blind girl was valuable? There are aristocratic families in Western India that boast that they have not had a single girl born in their clan in fourteen generations! They won't tell you that their female babies are aborted. (Earlier girls died mysteriously at birth.) Helen was helped to flourish because her culture believed that a deaf and blind girl was not a useless child without value. Helen was so important that God himself had come to earth to give her eternal life; therefore, people had to do all they could to help her find abundant life.

The belief in the unique dignity of human beings was the force that created Western civilization, where citizens do not exist for the state but the state exists for individuals. Even kings, presidents, prime ministers, and army generals cannot be allowed to trample upon an individual and his or her rights. The idea of human dignity liberated children from the dark, satanic mills of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. It led to the American Revolution, which ended colonialism, and to the American Civil War, which ended slavery. It continues to inspire all sorts of movements for justice and equity.

The West was never perfect, but it was a mighty achievement to create a civilization where the king of England or the president of America had all the power to do right but no power to do wrong by taking away the life of a deaf and blind girl. The West valued human beings because the Bible says:

What is man that you [God] are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
[Even though a human being is but a speck]

You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory [*dignitas*] and honor.

You have made him ruler over the works of your hands;
you put everything under his feet. (Ps. 8:4-6)

The contemporary West, especially Europe, is now busy amputating its soul. It is rejecting the source of its greatness, that is, the truth revealed by God's Word that defines the value of every individual and redefines the purpose and the function of the state. The West is discarding the source of its morality, rationality, family, and humanity: the intellectual foundation of human rights, justice, compassion, care, and education. In this depressing environment one comforting fact for me as an Indian is that Bollywood movies such as *Taare Zameen Par (Stars on Earth)* are trying to change India by injecting into our culture the biblical idea of the dignity of every child.

Serving a weak, unwanted girl may be a more attractive idea than killing her, but why should Sheela's parents pay the price to follow an idea simply because it sounded attractive? Why not choose an easier, more convenient, and cheaper course of action - killing her? Helen Keller's parents chose the emotionally and monetarily costly course because they *believed* that as a human being endowed with a soul, Helen was infinitely valuable. It is truth that transforms.

But is transformation possible in our world? As Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah realized, a commitment to truth can be costly in a society that has sold its soul. Reflecting on the cost of ultimate healing and transformation, Isaiah wrote, "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (53:5). It is by his wounds that the Messiah brings healing to a nation.

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