

## Knocked Off Their Pedestals

Readings:

*Go Set a Watchman* (excerpt, page 117)

Isaiah 21:6-9, ESV

*Go Set a Watchman* (excerpt, page 265)

It's been a hard summer for fictional fathers.

First, Atticus Finch. The publication of *Go Set a Watchman* early last month knocked him off his pedestal, shattered the image of him. As we heard during the readings, the Atticus Finch of *Go Set a Watchman* is not the moral exemplar that so many of us who have read *To Kill a Mockingbird* know and love. This Atticus attended a meeting of the Klu Klux Klan. He has racial attitudes that most of us would consider abhorrent. His daughter struggles to make sense of this new knowledge about him.

Before I go too far into this, I must acknowledge that there are ethical issues associated with the publication of *Go Set a Watchman*. Many doubt that author Harper Lee, who is in declining health and who has said for years she would never publish anything else, was capable of giving consent to the publication of this book. The state of Alabama opened an elder abuse inquiry that found that Lee did consent to the publication, but questions remain.<sup>1</sup>

That said, it is a fascinating read. What is particularly compelling is that *Go Set a Watchman* is an early, very rough draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This early draft contains many of the same characters and is set about 20 years later. The critical consensus is that it is not a good book; the writing and plotting are not strong. It is a book that should give hope to many aspiring novelists. A very rough draft can transform into a classic. A good editor is critical. The editor who worked with Harper Lee told her that the most compelling portions of the book are the childhood memories of Jean Louise, the main character. Lee then rewrote her novel to be entirely those childhood scenes. In doing so, created a widely beloved novel. She

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<sup>1</sup> Kovaleski, Serge F. "Alabama officials Find Harper Lee in Control of Decision to Publish Second Novel." *The New York Times*. April 3, 2015. Retrieved from: <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/04/03/alabama-officials-find-harper-lee-in-control-of-decision-to-publish-second-novel/?smid=tw-share&r=0>

also transformed the Atticus Finch of the early draft, a man involved in White Citizen's Councils, a man who used racial slurs, into a father idealized by a young girl, the uncomplicated, purely noble hero of page and screen that so many of us love.

The *To Kill a Mockingbird* iteration of Atticus Finch is beloved by many, me included. When I took a New Testament class in seminary, I struggled to make sense of the parables of Jesus. They were so confusing. What, exactly, was Jesus trying to say? I remember thinking, "why can't Jesus be more like Atticus Finch?" I longed for an uncomplicated, noble hero who spoke directly, not in agricultural metaphors that I didn't understand. I was alongside the younger Jean Louise, worshipping her father. I am not alone in my love of the earlier Atticus. Atticus is increasingly popular as a baby name. It cracked the top 1000 baby names for the first time in 2004 and has been steadily climbing the list ever since. Last year, it was the 370<sup>th</sup> most popular name for a boy in this country; meaning about 850 baby boys were named Atticus in 2014.<sup>2</sup> It will be interesting to see if after the publication of *Go Set a Watchman*, after Atticus is not just a child's idealization of her father, people will still choose to make this more complicated character their child's namesake.

Atticus Finch has been knocked off his pedestal, his image shattered, but he is not the only one.

There's also the increasing number of sexual assault allegations against Bill Cosby, a man for many of us forever conflated with Heathcliff Huxtable, the fictional father he portrayed on *The Cosby Show* from 1984 to 1992. Every Thursday night, and even more often in syndicated reruns, we saw him parent his children with love and humor. I watched *The Cosby Show* every week for most of my elementary school years. My friends and I – and probably a large percentage of my generation – wished we could be a Huxtable.

The sexual assault allegations against Bill Cosby are not new. Many of the alleged incidents happened decades ago, but the women did not speak of them. Some of the women were confused by what happened. They thought rape was something that was done by strangers in dark alleys, not acquaintances who gave them drugged drinks. Some of the women were encouraged to keep quiet by people who thought they were acting in the women's best interests. Some of the women assumed that no one would believe them and that people would think that they made up their traumatic experiences for attention or

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<sup>2</sup> "Popularity of Name Atticus." *Social Security Administration*. Retrieved from <http://www.ssa.gov/cgi-bin/babynome.cgi>

profit. Because these incidents happened so long ago, the statute of limitations has passed. These alleged crimes will never be prosecuted.

We as a society have struggled for years to believe that Heathcliff Huxtable, Jello pudding pitchman, America's Dad Bill Cosby is capable of serial sexual assault. In 2005, a former Temple University basketball player told the authorities that Cosby sexually assaulted her. Twelve women came forward to support her case, to say that something similar happened to them.... The case was quietly settled. Though it got some news coverage at the time, it quickly faded from memory.<sup>3</sup> We as a society seemed incapable of simultaneously holding the idea of Bill Cosby as beloved father figure and Bill Cosby as alleged rapist.

The change came from a stand-up comedian. More and more, I believe that comedians are the prophets of our age. They are able to speak hard truths with a slight coating of humor that helps us to hear it. Last fall, comedian Hannibal Burrell, this story's modern Isaiah, brought the sexual assault allegations against Bill Cosby into popular consciousness. Burrell, an African American, voiced his frustration with the hypocrisy of Bill Cosby lecturing other black people to be "more respectable" when he had been accused of sexual assault multiple times. Burrell's words were recorded and uploaded to YouTube and seen hundreds of thousands of times.<sup>4</sup>

This time, things were different than they were ten years ago. The women were believed – perhaps because it was a man voicing the allegations, perhaps because of all of the high profile sexual assault cases in recent years and many of growing more aware of this issue. Once the first women were believed, more women told their stories. Around 50 women have now come forward to share their stories of alleged sexual assault by Bill Cosby. In late July, *New York Magazine* published interviews with 35 of these women. Reading their stories and seeing their pictures is powerful and heartbreaking.

And these are not the only father figures or heroes that disappoint us. Each of us can tell the story of a hero knocked off their pedestal, a person that we worshipped who we later found out did not deserve our adoration. For me, the starkest version of this story is about my six grade teacher. I adored him. He

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<sup>3</sup> Malone, Noreen Amanda Demme. "I'm No Longer Afraid': 35 Women Tell Their Stories about Being Assaulted by Bill Cosby, and the Culture that Wouldn't Listen." *New York*. July 26, 2015. Retrieved from <http://nymag.com/thecut/2015/07/bill-cosbys-accusers-speak-out.html>

<sup>4</sup> "Hannibal Burrell Called Bill Cosby a Rapist During a Stand Up." *Youtube*. October 29, 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzB8dTVAlQI>

taught me algebra and perspective drawing. About decade after I was his student, he was convicted of child molestation. He had victimized his students. Stories emerged of him acting inappropriately with many girls in his classes for decades. I was so angry. How could this be who he was? The community was divided with many believing he was incapable of such actions, telling all who would listen that his accusers, little girls, must be lying. Others quietly whispered, "It happened to me." I was not among those he fondled, but as I reflect with adult eyes on that classroom, I can see how he sexualized the environment, how he crossed small boundaries leading to his larger violations. I still struggle to reconcile the adoration I had for him as a child with what I know now and the stories I hear of him from others.

The more complicated pictures of these heroes – the fictional Atticus Finc , the very real Bill Cosby, the people in our own lives –exposed some of the shortcuts in our thinking. We—as individuals and as a culture – tend to sort and categorize. We sort people, groups, entire nations into good and bad, the heroes and villains, white hats and black hats. The world is complicated and categorization helps us navigate it, without having to give our full attention to every detail. But the trouble is that the world is not simplistic. The world—and each of us—is complicated.

So many of us sorted Bill Cosby and Atticus Finch into the hero category. Then, we struggle to hear and incorporate the sexual assault allegations against Cosby into our understanding of who he is. Then, we meet the publication of a draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in which Finch is racist with disbelief and anger. It takes overwhelming evidence for us to change our minds.

The trouble comes from confirmation bias. Once we've done our sorting, separating the good guys from the bad guys, we then only see information that confirms our belief. We become invested in preserving our earlier idea. We let our personal watchmen get lazy. We stop seeking out and incorporating new information that challenges our existing beliefs. This is particularly evident in the Cosby case. Even when a dozen women accused him of sexual assault, the media and many of us as individuals couldn't take in this information. It contradicted the truth that we thought we knew and so we ignored it. We ignored women's suffering in order to maintain our categories.

And then another challenge comes, once we see the evidence, see people as they are, once we overcome our confirmation bias. This next challenge is to not then return to our tendency to categorize and sort, to

not label the offender solely, entirely evil, but to see their capacity for good and evil, to see them as human, not villains.

Recognizing people's capacity for good and evil can be particularly challenging for us religious liberals. First, a definition. Being a religious liberal is not the same as being a political or economic liberal. Religious liberalism is part of the Judeo-Christian tradition that embraces the teachings of science, the use of reason and a historical-critical approach to scripture. That is, religious liberals believe that the Bible was written by people, in a particular time and place. By studying history, language and text formation, we can come to a better understanding of scripture. The way I introduced the passage from the book of Isaiah earlier reflect a liberal theological approach to scripture. We Unitarian Universalists are among the inheritors of the religious liberal tradition. Even though many of us have beliefs that are far outside the Judeo-Christian framework, these liberal Christians are a religious ancestors, shaping our thought and our church in ways we might not even recognize. In fact, when the Unitarians and Universalists merged in the early 1960s, one of the ideas floated for the name of our new combined denomination was the Liberal Church of America. Again, this is about theology, not politics.

One of the challenges of being a religious liberal, of being a Unitarian Universalist is squaring our doctrine of humanity with the world as we see it. Our Universalist forbearers proclaimed "God loves everyone. No exceptions." We Unitarian Universalists don't all believe in God, but each congregation covenants to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

We believe that every single person is important, every single person is worthy of love. No exceptions. Ever. That is a powerful statement and in sharp contrast to more traditional Christian doctrines that would assert that some are chosen and some are not or that all of us are born depraved. We tend to emphasize human goodness and rationalize and explain away misdeeds. Generally, that is a beautiful, generous impulse, but it can get us into trouble. We are often hesitant to name the evils of our world because the word evil has been used like a cudgel against us and others.

But seeing the world as it is and naming evil acts for what they are is what we are called to do. We are called to take up that prophetic mantle and speak the hard and necessary truths. We can know that heroes sometimes disappoint us, but there are still many people –fathers, father figures and others – who are worthy of our admiration. Our task is to never forget their humanity, to not let our adoration turn into

worship, to not let go of our critical faculties. We can join Jean Louise in no longer worshipping Atticus Finch, in seeing him as a man who in some ways is a moral exemplar and who also has faults and frailties. We can see that Bill Cosby created both tremendous joy and tremendous suffering in this world and recognize that we each have that same capacity. We can know that all of us, no matter who we are, no matter what we do, have inherent worth and dignity. No exceptions. Ever.

For discussion:

As we enter into this time of listening and sharing, I want to urge you all not to disclose personal experiences with sexual assault, even if that is what my reflection has stirred up in you. I know that sexual assault is part of the story of many of us in this room. Even if you feel healed and integrated and comfortable talking about it, that might not be true for everyone here. You telling your story might retraumatize someone who has had a similar experience. Refraining from sharing your story is one way we take care of each other. If you want to share your story with me, please let me know and we can arrange a time to talk privately.

So that's what we won't be talking about during this time. Here are questions to guide us:

Have you read *Go Set a Watchman*? What do you think of this new iteration of Atticus Finch?

How do you make sense of people's capacity for goodness and evil?

How do you respect the inherent worth and dignity of people who have done abhorrent things?

When has a hero disappointed you? How did you respond?