
Opposite Sides of a Hundred Dollar Bill

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One Side

I HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT ALL PEOPLE, regardless of gender, social status, or ethnicity have to face moral dilemmas at various points in life. The ideas of right and wrong and good and evil will be questioned, pondered, and, hopefully, answered within the confines of each individual's mind many, many times as we travel through our own little space in time which we term "our lives." Whether the question is macro, such as a President having to decide whether to cover up some government scandal for the sake of "the people," or whether it is micro, such as a person telling a "little white lie" to protect the feelings of a friend or family member, is irrelevant. What is important is the conclusion a person stumbles upon and the effect his or her decision will have on future actions, not only in a short-term sense, but further on down the road of life. Ultimately, has that person's karma been routed in either direction, good or bad, to a point that places it in jeopardy? I faced such a question in my own mind just the other day.

But first, let me explain some things....For much of my life, I didn't believe in consequences, second chances, corollaries of an action, or any other ideas that "new-agers" have made popular again. I existed for the here and now, holding desperately to a live-or-die-by-the-seat-of-your-pants doctrine that made more sense to me than any karmic philosophy ever could. But, as the proverbial saying goes, "that was then; this is now," and my beliefs have gradually altered to provide for ideas of consequence. Now, I *do* believe that if I steal money, harm others, kill innocent, cuddly animals, or participate in other dastardly deeds, I will be penalized by some entity other than myself. I am also convinced if I drop a

pebble in the ocean, the repercussions of this act will be felt by a butterfly in China (or however the hell that theory goes — I’ve never been one for physics). All of these beliefs have become an integral part of my overall system of theology which, although mystifying to some, makes perfect sense to me.

The bottom line is this — I now adhere to a completely different system of values than those of my teen and young adult years. One of these values states that life is what you make of it. It can be enjoyable and exciting, or it can be difficult and disheartening. Sometimes it can be a complete contradiction of both extremities at once. So now we get to the crux of my story...

I had been feeling flustered by a barrage of wonderful highs and equally devastating lows. My life was changing fast, entirely too fast for me to keep up, and being a Taurus sun-sign, change wasn’t necessarily a condition I gracefully embraced. After a few too many days of being cooped up in my all-of-a-sudden-really-messy house, I decided to go out, get some fresh air, maybe breathe a little stimulation into what was fast becoming a mundane existence. The day was hot, as humid and sticky as only a day in the Deep South can be, a day in Myrtle Beach that could rival anything “N’awlins” has to offer. Before I could second guess myself or give my depressed mind a chance to talk my body into *another* Oprah rerun, I jumped into my car and headed toward the ocean. At the last minute I decided to skip the beach, thinking that a stroll downtown might be revitalizing. I parked my car and started walking, feeling the brisk scents from the ocean actually lift my spirits as if they were in a balloon filled with helium, and then it happened: I experienced a brush with morality.

I was walking beside a bank (ironically my own), when I noticed a newspaper on the ground a few steps ahead of me. Underneath it was what appeared to be a crisp one hundred dollar bill. Parked along the curb was an empty armored car. I glanced around and instantly realized there was no one else within at least a hundred yards of me and that big-headed picture of ole Ben. What to do, what to do? Should I open door number one or door number two? The lady or the tiger? Common sense told me the money had been dropped by one of the armored car occupants (who still had not returned), and that I should return it to them, while that devil who lives in the other side of my brain whispered gleefully to just “take the money and run.” Isn’t THAT funny? The devil was speaking to me, quoting the Steve Miller Band. More irony? Well, *sure*... So this was how my day was progressing. I go outside to feel better, and something that could really make my day (hey, a hundred bucks’ll buy a couple of pairs of decent shoes) was

lying on a dirty sidewalk right in front of me. The biggest slap in the face was my conscience telling me that taking the money would be *really* wrong. “Bad Karma! Bad Shelley!” Of course, on the other end of the spectrum was the devil’s voice (he can be *so* seductive) urging me to “Go on, take the money and run.” I wiped the sweat off my brow with the back of my arm, all the while thinking about the money and how darn HOT it was...hot it was? And then it hit me! I had an epiphany! Before that day, if anyone had even hinted that it was possible to have an epiphany ANYWHERE in Myrtle Beach, SC, especially in the middle of downtown, (even with the devil crooning in your ear), I would’ve said, “no way, Jose!” But there it was. The answer I was asking the universe to provide had arrived. I reached down, grabbed the bill, stuffed it in my shorts pocket, turned around, and strolled nonchalantly away. Well, actually, I sort of walked (trotted, ran) pretty quickly back to my car, occasionally checking over my shoulder the way you do when you feel a tad bit guilty about something you have done. Of course, I wouldn’t personally KNOW that guilty feeling, but I have heard about it before. *Ahem...*

Other Side

I had had a rough week. Well, maybe every week is rough, but this one was worse than usual. My husband’s diabetis was actin’ up, and the weather had been really hot, so hot that on my bi-weekly walks to get his medicine and what food we could afford, I was having a hard time keeping my old self going. Well, I’m not that old, really, but when life is hard, sixty-five feels like ninety, or at least that’s what I suppose.

We are poor, always have been and always will be. When I was a young girl, and still holding on to my looks (they were, after all, what got me Herb), I used to dream I was adopted. Now, in these dreams, I’d *know* that some day my real parents — a great lady and rich, handsome gentleman — would come back to claim me, feelin’ sorry as hell for givin’ me away and sayin’, “Gloria, we want to make up for all those years we lost.” But dreams are seldom reality, and my reality has always lived just one step short of absolute poverty. Sometimes I swear we *are* living in absolute poverty, but the government swears otherwise, you know, based on those little charts they keep. We are classified as *poor*, but, to me, poor is more than a classification — it’s a life-sentence. Poor means I can look, but never have, it’s the places I’ll never see, and the food I can’t afford, the people whose circles I will never belong in. And, believe you me, sometimes poor can

get to be a great big pain in the ass, especially if you have dreams which never seem to come true.

We live in a single-wide trailer in a mobile home park sorta on the outskirts of Myrtle Beach — you know, one of those areas the local rich purposely avoid and the local poor migrate into. Anyway, I haven't driven for nigh on 10 years or so, and that leaves my two dogs as primary transportation, except for the ever-so-often time our daughter is in town. Then she drives me around to do our errands, (and it sure seems like a never-ending list of bills to pay, doctors to see, and medicines to get — lots of stuff for two old farts like me and Herb). And then there's that strange girl who picks me up occasionally. She pulls over whenever she sees me huffing my way down the street and gives me a ride. No reason at all, she just gives me a ride — it's the damndest thing I've ever known. Today, however, our daughter wasn't in town, and I hadn't seen the strange girl on the road, so I'd walked the whole way to and from the store. I'd picked up some sugar free cough syrup for Herb and some potatoes, carrots, and meat for a stew. That was it. All we could afford. Today was Monday, and we weren't gettin' another check from the government 'til Friday. Sometimes *poor* meant hungry...

One Side

I felt at peace with my decision to take the money. I know, I know. I stole money. I knew where it came from, and I took it anyway. How can this be OK? How could I be calm about it and feel like my karma had not been seriously jeopardized? I had a reason. Her name was Gloria.

Gloria was an old woman, at least sixty-five or seventy, who I had (somewhat) befriended a year or so ago. I first noticed her walking along the road near the apartment complex I lived in at the time. It was a hot day then, too, and she was looking all red in the face. She was carrying a grocery bag, and she seemed definitely overheated and overexerted. I whipped my car around and pulled up alongside her. I told her not to worry — that I wanted to help her. I offered to take her wherever she needed to go. After some hesitation (she obviously needed time to figure out whether or not I was a psycho killer), she got into my car and directed me to the trailer park where she lived. From that day on, any time I saw her, I'd pick her up and give her a ride. I gave her my number on numerous occasions and told her to call me when she needed to go somewhere, but she never called. I'd just see her on the road sometimes and, I have to admit, she'd

look pretty relieved when she saw me pull up beside her. So you see, Gloria was my justification. I went to her house, knocked on her door, and...

Other Side

...and so I was standing in my kitchen, trying not to worry about how I was gonna make the teensy bit of roast and veggies stretch all the way to Friday (we've done it before, but it ain't easy or stomach-fulfilling, for that matter), when I heard wheels crunchin' on the gravel outside our trailer. I looked out the window and lo-and-behold! There was that strange girl I mentioned earlier. She jumped out of her car and headed straight for our door. I wondered what in blue blazes she could possibly be thinking, but I reached for the door handle anyway, my curiosity getting the better part of me, and...

One Side

...when she opened the door, I handed her that one hundred dollar bill. I turned around without a word and headed back to my car while she stood in her doorway, stunned and stammering. I knew she could use that money for something important, and the way I looked at it, if those men carrying the money into the bank were careless enough to drop a little of it, then that gave me the right to take it and put it to good use. A little bit of a stretch, I know, but all was right in my world and my karmic scale still felt balanced.

Other Side

There it was — the answer to our food problems (although I certainly never would've thought of *this* girl as the answer to my prayers). I guess the Lord really *does* work in mysterious ways (and all that other jazz), 'cause I sure can't think of any other reason why this miracle could've happened to me and Herb, here in this little single wide, with our cupboards next to bare. I felt the tears getting gritty behind my eyelids, and the only thing I could think of to say to her was...

One Side

...“Why?” she asked. I turned back around to face her, and although I can't swear by it, I'm pretty sure there was a tear in her eyes (I know there was a twinkle in mine). I answered as truthfully as I could... “The Steve Miller Band made me do it.”