

Liggly biggly . . . gollygoops . . . woospiedoo . . . lttly bittly . . . spindingy.

Cold is with the monkey’s ears and toes. Cats, dogs, and babies, it’s Tuesday! Friends are baskets and hats. Wishes are hoping and trees are west.

Tw’as brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.
“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”

If we refuse to obey the rules that make up the grammar of a language, we get gibberish. To speak a language at all requires that we get the tenses, word order, and a host of other things straight. We can say with confidence to those who balk at the grammar of a language, “You can learn it,” “You must learn it,” and “You will learn it.”

In learning a language, everyone can master the grammar because it comes with the words and their use. If people want words but not grammar, we can say that they must learn the grammar, for the words mean little or nothing until we get sentences, paragraphs, arguments, and discourse.

Morality, thought about it terms of elementary virtues and vices, is like grammar, a grammar of life which can be learned. We have become skeptical of virtues and vices, believing they are arbitrary, intended to limit self-expression. The term “virtue signaling” is evidence of our cynicism.

Virtues are already there, already laid down as a big part of the grammar of life. Virtues are patterns of seeing, feeling, and understanding as well as acting that affect everything we do and everything we are. They are the internal laws that make us who we are as human beings.

We resist the notion of a grammar of life to our peril. Learning virtues like gratitude, humility, mercy and fidelity is like learning the grammar of a living language; it enables and empowers us to express our true selves, to make sense of our lives.

We can learn this grammar if we pay a little attention. Think about how we learn the grammar of our native language. Very few people can state the grammatical rules that govern their speaking and writing. Nonetheless, they do obey those rules; otherwise, no one could understand them. One does not need to be a grammarian to be grammatical.

A few experiences of not making ourselves understood soon conspire to force us to speak according to the rules. The business of living is not quite like that. We can neglect and refuse the grammar of life for a very long time. In our pride we can attempt to make a virtue of our independence and individuality: “It’s my life, I’ll do what I want.”

The grammar of life can be ignored, but not without consequence. We have to live, as did the prodigal son, with what we make of ourselves. We can find ourselves swallowed up by distorted habits, feelings, and attitudes about possessions, status, work, security, guilt, sex, love, family, and friends. We can get used to despair and believe all of existence is a big joke.

Even if it easy to see our brokenness and hard to see any virtues in ourselves, the virtues are never really beyond recovery. “God gave us the virtues,” said a fourth century desert dweller, “as an endowment of our nature, but God did not endow us with vices.”

This is a far cry from the modern conviction that sin, self-centeredness, and disregard for the welfare of the neighbor are somehow natural to human beings, while compassion, forgiveness, and even wholeness are not!

Every virtue is a summit between two vices, says Andre Comte-Sponville: courage stands between cowardice and audacity, dignity between servility and selfishness, gentleness between anger and apathy.

Paul urges the Philippians to let their gentleness be known to everyone. This may strike us as encouraging Christians to be wimps. Feeling powerless to change adverse circumstances gives rise to two temptations: rage, burn the house down; or despair, nothing I can do makes any difference. The consequence of either response is to make our lives less tolerable.

Gentleness is a kind of inner peace. It can be pierced by anguish and suffering or brightened by joy and gratitude, but it is always devoid of hatred, harshness, and insensitivity. Gentleness is the virtue of flexibility, patience, devotion, adaptability. It is the opposite of rigidity, haste, and relentless or dogged force. Gentleness is power over and, if need be, against oneself.

Cats are gentle with their kittens, dogs with their puppies. Humanity does not invent gentleness; it is part of the grammar of life. We can cultivate gentleness. We are sustained by gentleness and gentleness makes us more human.

The crowds, faced with adverse circumstances, asked John “What then should we do?” John does not say, “Take up arms and march on Jerusalem.” John does not say, “Sell everything you have, leave family and friends behind, come wait with me in the desert for the end of the world.”

John says, “Whoever has two coats *must* share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food *must* do likewise.”

Must! Not our favorite word. We resist it; we think it an infringement on our freedom, an assault, even, on our dignity. Why must? Because when we have more than we need, the grammar of life requires sharing with those who have less than they need.

Because the grammar of life requires we do not use power over others to exploit their labor or to extort money from them. Following the rules of the grammar of life not only makes life more tolerable for everyone, it makes sense of our lives.