

# Choosing Life

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Consistently affirmed by philosophy, law and religion, the right to life is a fragile possession upon which all other rights depend. So why does American society promote selfless service, a value which may require sacrificing this right? While moral codes ranging from the Social Contract to the Bible emphasize respecting life, this right is a finite expression of the transcendent values for which these systems stand. Freedom, love and justice form the intangible values we quantify through our justice system, motivating us to act morally, or even exceed our legal duty, just as Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan bravely did by giving his life in World War II. In this way, I believe that life is more than a right; it is a choice to recognize the meaning of our existence beyond personal longevity. While such abstract notions of freedom, love and justice are not mandates on their own, selfless service to such transcendent values is a virtuous pursuit that allows us to choose life beyond our own finite existence.

One example of selfless service as a virtue in American history is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s journey towards freedom and equality. In his "We Shall Overcome" speech, Dr. King explains that even though some may have to die, a hope for a better future may motivate them to take action. The potential for his descendants to live in a world of acceptance symbolizes the transcendent quality of his actions that gave his service virtue. He further extends his community's connection to the ultimate in his "Strength to Love" speech, where he defines the difference between finite and infinite concerns. While the act of worshipping false gods of science, pleasure or money leads to much of the injustice in the world, he urges his community to take risks for the infinite concerns of love and friendship.

However, selfless service is only virtuous when one serves worthy values. For example, despite the alleged martyrdom, honor does not simply arise from giving one's life for his or her

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country alone. In his book, *Dynamics of Faith*, Paul Tillich describes the danger of confusing such a finite concern for an infinite concern. For example, during World War II, Hitler manipulated his people into believing that Germany, the Third Reich, was in itself a transcendent value that superseded all other concerns, including those for humanity, justice and truth. This extreme nationalism manifested itself in atrocious war crimes that in no way could be described as virtuous. In the same way, giving one's life for America as an end is not a virtue in itself. The symbols of justice and freedom are the sources that act as ends, inspiring patriotism and such service. The overarching quality of Admiral Callaghan's sacrifice that represents admirable virtue is the loyalty he showed to his troops, who were fighting for the American values of justice and equality.

Beyond the wars of ideals and the grand movements that have shaped our history, there exists seven billion people, for many of whom the concept of such sacrifice is abstract and remote. Does this mean that selfless service is reserved for the soldiers and "drum majors for justice," who symbolize bravery in our country? As a high school senior, while I have not personally been confronted with such imminent sacrifice, I believe that selfless service is virtuous because it is a lifestyle choice rather than a spur of the moment instinct. Since everyone must necessarily form internal priorities I believe we all have the potential to consciously live our lives in the service of ends greater than our own finite existence and make choices beyond biological survival instincts. For this reason, our "human nature is an invitation, not a command" (O'Malley). This recognition relates to the abstract notion of conscience, and explains our ability to feel empathy and make thoughtful decisions.

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I experienced this understanding of service in my own decision to have a Bat Mitzvah. While I knew that the tradition was important to my faith, I felt the studying and expenses would be burdensome on myself and my family, respectively. Yet upon discussing it with my Grandma, a Jewish Cantor, the spark of urgency in her eyes told me that I had a responsibility. After almost a year of learning the cadence of the chant and interpreting the ancient letters, it was time for me to read from the Torah portion *Nitzavim*. The line that immediately jumped out at me and seized my imagination was God's instruction to "choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). While my initial understanding was quite literal, as I stood at the altar surrounded by my family, I felt that my life extended past my own experience. In that moment, choosing life meant serving my family and our traditions, it meant choosing to recognize our freedom from the persecution that plagued my ancestors. These values transcended my previous finite concerns about time and money. While we may take a rational approach and apply objective definitions of virtue to historical events, experience also contributes to our understanding of personal morality. The connection I felt with my community has shown me that serving the infinite, choosing life, is indeed a virtue.

Overall, while selfless service to the finite is a trade-off that cannot provide fulfillment, dedication to a transcendent value that supersedes all others is a virtuous act that offers purpose. Martin Luther King Jr. took an extreme approach to the importance of self-sacrifice when he said, "a man who has nothing worth dying for isn't fit to live." The exceptional bravery of men like Dr. King and Admiral Callaghan does not mean that life is not a right; however, it reminds us that whether a soldier or a high school student, life is also a responsibility to look towards the ultimate values that provide lasting meaning.

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