

## NECESSARY EXCESSES

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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The relationship between last Saturday and last Sunday in the secular calendar reminds me of the relationship between a certain Tuesday and a certain Wednesday in the Christian calendar. Last Sunday was New Year's Day, which is a time when many of us traditionally take stock of our lives and make resolutions about how we want to change. We resolve to eat better and exercise more, spend less time doing email and more time with our friends, organize our photos and pay off our credit cards. Before we take on these added rigors and responsibilities, we typically participate in the annual blowout known as New Year's Eve, when the usual rules about sensible eating, restrained drinking, and responsible behavior tend to get relaxed.

A similar dynamic appears in the Christian calendar at the beginning of the season of Lent, which is a 40-day period of sacrifice and preparation leading up to the commemoration of Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday and the celebration of his resurrection on Easter Sunday. This year, with Easter falling on Sunday, April 16, Lent begins on Wednesday, March 1, also known as Ash Wednesday. Devout Christians often give something up for Lent — usually some pleasurable food or activity — as a way of identifying with the suffering of Jesus.

On the day before Lent begins, some Christians celebrate Shrove Tuesday, also known as Fat Tuesday — and in French (and especially in New Orleans) as Mardi Gras. Perhaps even more than New Year's Eve revelers, Mardi Gras celebrants seem hell-bent on reminding themselves that any restraints imposed by Lent can be freely violated before Lent begins.

If you step back from these two occasions of revelry and ask what larger spiritual principle they demonstrate, it would arguably be this: discipline and restraint are necessary and even virtuous, but they're not much fun. Exhibitions of excess, on the other hand, are desirable and enjoyable, but they're not at all virtuous. While this principle certainly reflects our nation's Calvinist roots, I've come to think that it has some serious flaws. Maybe certain forms of excess can be a good thing after all.

In psychoanalyst Adam Phillips' book titled *On Balance*, he writes, "Excess is everywhere now — excesses of wealth and poverty, of sex and greed, of violence and of religious belief. If the twentieth century was, in the title of historian Eric Hobsbawm's book, *The Age of Extremes*, then the twenty-first century looks like the Age of Excess. When people are being extreme they push things to their limits; when they are being excessive they push things beyond their limits."

Phillips goes on to point out that excess originally meant the opposite of access. Access is the freedom to go in, and excess is the freedom to go out. As a psychoanalyst, Phillips naturally wonders what we are going out from when we are being excessive.

He says, “When we are excessive, in whatever way, we depart from what is considered appropriate behavior; we go out from, we abandon, the version of ourselves we are supposed to be.” As Phillips notes, the idea of what constitutes appropriate behavior, and of what we are supposed to be, comes from the society we grow up in. He adds, “If we are so good at spotting excessive behavior when we see it — excessive eating, excessive sex, excessive shopping, the excessive beliefs of religious fanatics — then we must know, or think we know, what just the right amount of these things is.”

Phillips makes a good point, though I would add that many of us seem to have a better sense of the right amount for other people than we do of the right amount for ourselves. In any event, the idea that we can identify just the right amount of any behavior has been around for a very long time. In his treatise on ethics, Aristotle says that we achieve our ultimate purpose as human beings — and thus achieve happiness — when we display moral virtue by always choosing the moderate option between two extreme options. He describes this moderate option as lying along what he calls the golden mean.

Aristotle explains that the golden mean lies equidistant between two vices, one of which is an excess of virtue and the other a defect of it. Confidence, for instance, can be described as the midpoint between an excessive confidence, such as arrogance, and a defective confidence, such as cowardice. With regard to pleasure, the mean could be described as temperance, with the excess being self-indulgence, and the defect self-denial. Aristotle continues at some length his table of moral virtues, with accompanying excesses and defects. When it is complete, he concedes that “it is no easy task to be good.” Anyone can act — get angry, give money, speak to friends — but, he says, “to do something to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not easy.”

Aristotle’s view of moderation as the epitome of ethical behavior been hugely influential over the past 2,000-plus years. But here’s the problem. His approach suggests that the moderate course is not so much a virtue in itself as it is merely a way of avoiding two vices. And it’s not clear to me that the vices he identifies are always vices. In some situations, self-denial may be a virtue. And there may be situations in which the same is true of self-indulgence.

Perhaps what Aristotle should’ve said is that we need to find a balance — the golden mean — over the course of our lives, but not necessarily in every situation. In order to be virtuous, and thus happy, we must sometimes be passionate and sometimes reticent. Sometimes busy and sometimes at rest. Sometimes reckless and sometimes cowardly. Sometimes extravagant and sometimes frugal. The art of life consists of discerning what’s appropriate in a specific situation, all the while knowing that happiness requires an acceptable balance over the long run.

In the short run, however, the search for balance can sometimes lead us astray, which is the point Phillips wants to make in his book. He points out our cultural fondness for being realistic, which often means finding an artificial balance that keeps our deepest feelings at bay. Sometimes we need to stop being realistic and try out our optimism, he says. Until we do, it's not clear in which areas of our lives a balanced approach will help us get the lives we want. Referring to the high-wire act in a circus, he says, "Balancing acts are entertaining because they are risky, but there are situations in which it is more dangerous to keep your balance than to lose it." The problem with the picture of a perfectly-balanced life, Phillips adds, is that we end up excluding much of what we feel from the picture: "our hungers and our desires, and our griefs and our commitments, and our loves and our hates."

Phillips notes that one of the things people most frequently say in psychoanalysis is, "Perhaps I am overreacting, but..." He responds, "My proposition is that it is impossible to overreact. When we call our reactions 'overreactions,' what we mean is just that they are stronger than we would like them to be. In other words, we sometimes call ourselves and other people excessive as a way of invalidating or tempering the truths we tell ourselves or that other people tell us."

This is a point worth pausing over. No matter how much we try to deny it or avoid it, excessive behavior speaks the truth about our own lives and the lives of others — perhaps especially when we don't want to hear it. We tend to avoid such experiences for good reason: they can unsettle us and throw us off balance, and perhaps even terrify us. But sometimes we need to be thrown off balance. And so we ask how excessive behavior can be useful.

Sometimes excessive behavior demonstrates the horrific truth about what human beings are capable of. Phillips says, "We describe people as excessively violent not when they are being more violent than they really are, or should be, but because they are being more violent than we want them to be. They are showing us what people are capable of: we may want to think that people who torture others, people who are committed to ethnic cleansing, people who will kill themselves and others for their beliefs, are the exceptions that prove the rule; but actually they reveal to us what certain people in certain situations, certain predicaments, want to do."

Sometimes to our horror, excessive behavior reveals the truth about who people are and what they want. Whether you are a psychoanalyst, a military tactician, a political strategist, a social justice activist, or an individual struggling with a pernicious addiction, trying to constrain excessive behavior without addressing its underlying motivation — whether greed, or hate, or pain, or fear, or grief — is destined to fail.

But it occurs to me that there's another side to excessive behavior — or at least behavior that other people may judge excessive. Sometimes such behavior enables us to get things done that otherwise would never happen. In our pursuit of love, we sometimes need to be excessively passionate. In achieving our vocational goals, we sometimes need to be excessively industrious. In setting our spiritual compass, we

sometimes need to be excessively disciplined. In our pursuit of justice, we sometimes need to be excessively daring. In expressing our gratitude, we sometimes need to be excessively extravagant. In demonstrating our responsibility, we sometimes need to be excessively vigilant. And so on.

Sometimes balance in life is a good thing, and sometimes it's not. There are necessary excesses — expressions of who we really are, and what we really want, and what we really need. Sometimes we need to speak the truth about ourselves and our world, even if others don't want to hear it — and even if it frightens us to say it.

Here on the cusp of the new year, my question for you is this: what do you need for yourself and our world this year? Perhaps there is some part of your life where you need to rein yourself in — impose some discipline and restraint. If so, the beginning of a new year is a good time to bring things under control.

But perhaps there is also some part of your life where you need to let yourself loose — release your optimism, unlock your creativity, and unleash your enthusiasm. Maybe now is the time to stop holding yourself back. Maybe now is the time for you to discover the outer limits of what's possible. If so, the beginning of a new year is a good time to set yourself free.