

# *On Life and Meaning*

MARK PERES

## **Episode 26** – Dianne Chipps Bailey – Doing Well and Good

### *On Privilege and Virtue*

And now a personal word,

Dianne Chipps Bailey lives a life that is remarkable. She is seemingly good at everything she sets out to do, from her educational achievements to her professional practice to the standards of excellence by which she presents herself to the world. It is no surprise that she studied literature and philosophy as the traditional goal of these pursuits is to teach us what is good and how to live well in the world.

The philosopher most closely associated with living well is Aristotle who said that the aim of life is to achieve well-being. There are two types of well-being: hedonic well-being that focuses on happiness and attaining pleasure and eudaemonic well-being that focuses on meaning and self-realization. Aristotle identified a set of virtues or traits that were instrumental to well-being. The most important of these traits became known as the cardinal virtues: courage, justice, moderation, and wisdom. The master virtue that controlled them all was wisdom. Christianity soon added its own set of virtues: faith, hope, and charity, with the greatest of these being charity.

Greek and Christian virtues together became the north star of Western civilization: the primary goal of education for centuries was the development of character. Greek and Christian virtues spurred the Renaissance and Enlightenment and were the basis of the founding documents of our nation that spoke of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, a form of well-being. Americans are called to virtue: to do well and good in the world.

Here is the important point about virtues: they are a discipline. They are really hard to realize. Every day brings a set of challenges to one's practice. One develops and hones and tones one's virtues in a thousand daily choices that become habits and character.

With well-being, or nobility of character and condition, came the obligation to act generously. One learned the obligations of nobility or *noblesse oblige*: to improve the world for others, so they similarly could become noble in character and condition.

Today we speak less of nobility and obligation and more about privilege and oppression. Privilege is most often defined as unearned benefits or unearned access to resources and

social power that are only readily available to people in a specific social group. Oppression is the state of being subject to unjust treatment or control.

There is good reason to speak about privilege and oppression as we live in a world with structural advantages and disadvantages. We are rightly sensitive to issues of equity. In the past those with class consciousness sought revolutions against the established order. Today, with revolution discredited, social activists instead speak about individual subjective experiences and deconstruct language to shame those they categorize as privileged oppressors. But shaming people about privilege and forcing confessionals does not create a movement for structural change. It just creates further resentment and division. Movements for change do not arise from differences between people but from solidarity among people. Difference insists that others cannot understand. Solidarity relies on empathy and imagination to reveal the ties that bind.

Dianne knows that it is a privilege to live her life, and her life has many privileges, including the ability to achieve the standards she seeks. But it is too reductive to see her life in terms of privilege and not in terms of virtue. There are many people who are far more privileged than Dianne who live far less virtuous lives. To speak only of privilege is to discount the incredible degree of vision and work and discipline—of virtuous practice—that brought her character and condition into being.

Dianne rightly notes that wallowing about privilege is not helpful. Rather she is devoted to living generously and creating movements of change. We would be far better served to embrace the virtues Dianne models and join each other in solidarity to create greater equity and more earned advantage in the world.

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