

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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Walking Gently on this Earth

How do you live comfortably on this planet knowing how many people are suffering here?

By GLENN CAMPBELL

The world is not a happy place. There may be islands of prosperity, but for most humans, life is desperate, painful and hideously unjust. Every child is born with potential, but by the time adulthood arrives, most of it has usually been squandered. The general worldwide problem is a lack of resources: lack of food, lack of opportunities, lack of adequate parental care.

If we are fortunate to live on one of the islands of relative wealth, how do we reconcile ourselves with the rest of the world? Should we feel guilty for being well-fed and free of pain? Are we required to give all our excess to people who have less? How much of the world's problems are our problems? When should we intervene and when should we leave things alone?

These are all good questions, not easily answered. The more pressing issue is how we can feel good about ourselves knowing that such suffering exists. How can we eat even a bologna sandwich knowing that someone else is desperate for something so simple?

The usual response is denial. We simply don't think about those in pain. We block them out of consciousness and pretend they don't exist. We just indulge in our own selfish tastes and enjoy the sandwich.

But denial only goes so far. From time to time, there are rips in the veneer and we see what is really going on in the

world around us. Even in the perfect suburban bubble, there is leakage from the real world: drug abuse, unemployment, child abuse. When the screen tears, we feel guilty and quickly try to patch it up.

Wealthy people often try to "buy off" the guilt by making a quick donation and then retreating behind their screen again, but this is haphazard way to address the problems of the world. If you are responsible at all for the problems of others, then you aren't just responsible for what you see but also for what you don't see.

The first step to walking at peace through the world is to not have a screen at all. You have to accept that there is suffering all around you, not just on the other side of the planet but also in your own neighborhood. Behind any façade could lie some terrible secrets, and when some of these secrets leak out, you can't run away from them. If anything, you should approach suffering when you see it, so you understand what it is and how it works.

That doesn't necessarily mean you can help. If suffering exists, it is better to know about it than not know. It is just like that philosophical question: If you had incurable cancer, would you want to know about it? Yes, because then you would have better information on how to wisely spend your remaining days.

Once you are open to it, you'll see suffering everywhere, and you will eventually accept that there is far more of it than you can possibly do anything about. If you see *all* the suffering, not just what leaks through your defenses, you'll see that giving to the needy isn't the issue; it's giving *wisely* to the needy, so that your limited resources have the greatest effect.

It is irresponsible to only give to the hand that has been stretched out to you.

Often, you have to refuse that hand if there are better uses for your resources. If you are truly open to the world, you are going to have to make these hard choices again and again, and the more often you do it, the more comfortable you will be at it.

Like an alien visiting from another planet you are not responsible for everything the humans have done to each other. You are responsible only for your own actions and effects while visiting. If you come here quietly, do what you can and gracefully leave, there is no reason to feel guilty.

You *should* feel guilty about any resources you waste while visiting. It is okay to be well-fed but not overfed. If you waste food, money, time or anything else, it is a slap in the face to anyone desperate for these things. The fact that others can't see you wasting resources is immaterial; if you want to pass comfortably through a world of suffering, you can't be squandering things that could have relieved some of it.

It is okay to have excess resources, because deciding how to use them is complicated and stockpiling them—and protecting your own future—might be the wisest choice for now. It is a sin only to squander resources when you know others need them.

You walk at peace on this earth by living a lean and efficient life where little is wasted, regardless of what your resources are. If you are blessed with wealth of any kind, you must never flaunt or misuse it, only use what you need and conserve the rest.

Good fortune is a trust, not a license to waste. You will feel good about yourself and your place in the world only if you use your blessings well.

—G.C.

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