The Seven Deadly Virtues
Introduction

On Virtues, Past and Present

Jonathan V. Last

A true story: The day after I was born, my pediatrician came to the hospital in scenic Camden, New Jersey, to check on me. I was the first kid, and my mother and father were, like most new parents, a hot mess. Into the room strode Dr. Ludwig Schlitt, a German immigrant in his early forties. He was straight out of central casting: trim, ramrod-straight posture; short, clipped hair; and a long face—handsome, in a Teutonic way—that could have been chiseled from the Alps. He bore an uncanny resemblance to the young Christopher Plummer.

Dr. Schlitt poked and prodded and did what doctors do to newborns. When he was satisfied that everything was perfectly *üblich*, he turned to my parents and issued the following verdict/command: “Babies ah a joy. You will enjoy zis baby.” And with that he turned and strode out of the room, heels clicking on the linoleum as he marched down the hospital hallway.

This is a funny book. You will have fun reading this book. Just not yet.

*The Seven Deadly Virtues* is filled with funny writers. If you want to flip ahead to P. J. O’Rourke or Matt Labash, by all means, go ahead. One of the joys of book reading is that no one makes you eat your spinach first. You can have the ice cream, the pecan pie, the funnel cake, and the chocolate decadence, one after
another, and then circle back to the spinach whenever you like. Or even skip it altogether.

But we’re going to start with some spinach here, just the same. Because it’s good for you. And after all, that’s what “virtue” is about.

The Original Book of Virtues

In November 1993 an unlikely book appeared at the top of the best-seller lists. Bill Bennett’s Book of Virtues was a tome; 832 pages of moral instruction. People ate it up. Newsweek called it “just what this country needs,” and Time said it “ought to be distributed, like an owner’s manual, to new parents leaving the hospital.” Looking at a copy of The Book of Virtues today is like examining a relic from some forgotten age. You pick it up, turn it over in your hand a couple times, and think, People were so different back then. How did they live like that?

The answer comes in a few different parts. First, it really was a different age. Think for a moment about two years—1971 and 1993. In 1971 America was still celebrating having landed a man on the moon. The Watergate break-in wouldn’t happen for another year. Vietnam was on a low boil. The Department of Education didn’t exist.

By 1993 the Department of Education was an entrenched part of the federal government, and it was the almighty Soviet Union that no longer existed. The Cold War was in the rearview mirror, and with it the space program had begun to wane; an entire generation had never seen a live moon walk, and no American would ever again leave low earth orbit. Instead of looking to the skies, we were looking into screens: The World Wide Web had migrated into common use with the creation of the web browser. The two Americas of 1971 and 1993 were quite different. And here’s the kicker: We’re as far away from 1993 today as they were from 1971 back then.
Yet some human longings seem innate. The success of *The Book of Virtues* suggested that there was a latent demand for virtue back then, which, at first glance, looks strange from where we sit now. Who would dare suggest today that parents be given a thick book of moral instruction for raising their children? But if you stare hard enough, the picture changes. If anything, we might be more puritanical and values-driven today than we were back then. We just adhere to different values. And boy, howdy, do we cling to them. People still believe in deep moral truths, you see. They simply apply those beliefs in the service of very different virtues.

By the time you read this, the world will have long forgotten Donald Sterling, but the historical record will show that for two straight weeks in April 2014 he was the most important story, and the most reviled man, in America. Sterling was the eighty-year-old owner of a professional basketball team, the Los Angeles Clippers. He had been married to the same woman, a lady named Rochelle, since 1955, but, beginning in 2003, he began carrying on with a series of younger women. And by “carrying on” I mean buying them real estate and cars and bringing them to sit with him, courtside, to watch basketball games featuring the team he co-owned with his wife.

In 2014 the most recent of those girlfriends secretly taped a conversation with Mr. Sterling in which he said some not-very-nice things about African Americans. He used no foul language or racial slurs, but was demeaning and nasty nonetheless. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being your garden-variety bigot and 10 being a KKK Grand Wizard, Sterling was probably a 4. But the tape of that conversation became public, and the great machine that is American society lurched into action, its gears screeching and grinding. Television and radio hosts condemned Sterling; the public convened protests. Corporations that did business with Sterling’s team cut ties. The president of the United States—the president of the United States—interrupted
an overseas trip to castigate Sterling at a press conference. And then the NBA announced that it intended to forcibly terminate Sterling’s ownership.

None of this is meant as a defense of Sterling. He seems by all accounts an unpleasant fellow who, more or less, got what he had coming. No, the point is to highlight America’s shifting emphasis on different virtues. Sterling’s infidelity and the public humiliation of his wife—the woman to whom he had been married for almost sixty years, who had borne him three children—was literally unremarkable. It was mentioned nowhere as a defect of Sterling’s character. His private, whispered racist thoughts, however, were important enough to invoke the displeasure of the leader of the free world. They were enough to cause his associates to expel him from their business and deprive him of his property.

In short, think of the litany of shame and approbation heaped on Hester Prynne and then multiply it by a thousand. Except that it wasn’t adultery that did Sterling in; it was racism. The scarlet “A” doesn’t exist anymore, but the scarlet “R” is very real indeed.

Now, this may well be a positive development. Racism is terrible, and perhaps private racist thoughts are a graver sin than infidelity and the kind of romantic cruelty that causes the breakup of a family. (Rochelle Sterling filed for divorce with improbable quickness.) I’m not a professional philosopher, and this is a safe space. A tree of trust and understanding. A nest of nonjudgmentalism.

But it’s clear that the problem isn’t that we no longer live in an age concerned with virtue. The problem is that we have organized ourselves around the wrong virtues.
The Modern Virtues

Did I say “wrong”? Sorry. That’s so judgmental. We’re supposed to be in the nest. So let’s call them, instead, the “modern” virtues. There are, by my count, seven cardinal modern virtues:

- Freedom
- Convenience
- Progress
- Equality
- Authenticity
- Health
- Nonjudgmentalism

If you’re going to be one of those uptight philosophical types, some of these virtues are more like values, but I’d argue that this is largely a distinction without much of a difference. These are the characteristics modern society most prizes and has begun to organize its strictures around. Often with nonsensical results.

For example, the writer Mary Eberstadt notes that we live at a bizarre moment when it is nearly impossible to speak with any moral judgment about sexual practices—but a great deal of moral and philosophical energy is spent on the subject of food. You wouldn’t dare say that someone ought not put this part there with that person. And you wouldn’t say it because (a) your peers would think you a troglodyte and (b) you don’t really think it’s wrong. It’s just a lifestyle choice. Maybe it’s not for you, but who are you to judge? Food, on the other hand, is different. It’s morally elevated to eat organic grains and eggs that come from cage-free hens. You’re a better person if you only eat locally grown produce. A better person, still, if you don’t eat meat. And the best people eat with one eye always—always!—on “sustainability.” Whatever that is. On the subject of
food, some lifestyle choices are better than others. And we’re not afraid to say so.

Actually, there is one—and pretty much only one—judgment that you can make about sex, and it is this: Imagine that you’re in college and one Saturday morning your roommate comes home and proclaims that she just slept with some guy she’d never met and whom she never intended to see again. Could you suggest to her that this might be a suboptimal life choice? Why no, no you could not.

However, imagine that your roommate came home and confessed that she slept with some guy she’d never met and that they had not used “protection.” Well, that’s a different story. You could lecture her. You could shame her. You could gather your friends and stage an intervention, explaining that this is a terrible, awful thing to do. Downright irresponsible. Something that just isn’t done, because you could get a disease. Sexual morality is now a function of health outcomes.

And not just sexual morality. Consider smoking. Over the last thirty years, an overwhelming moral consensus has emerged concerning smoking. Where people once smoked on airplanes and in movie theaters and in bars and at home during dinner, today smokers are treated as if they have a terrible and highly contagious disease. They can’t smoke in public buildings or often even in public spaces. Smokers are the new lepers, except that no one would look down on a leper as being morally repugnant. Why the reversal? Because it is now universally agreed that smoking is disastrously unhealthy. And healthy living is a cardinal virtue, something to be pursued at all costs, not merely because it is prudent, but because it is good and right.

Yet, at the same time that smoking tobacco has become verboten, smoking marijuana has been gaining wider acceptance. How could this be? It’s not like getting stoned is good for you. No, the emerging moral acceptance of marijuana comes when health is trumped by another of the modern virtues—freedom.
Because today we tend to believe that people ought to be able to live however they like, and that societal norms should have little claim on them.

You can see the tensions inherent here. Why should freedom be a virtue when it comes to reefer but not to Lucky Strikes? For that matter, why should health trump freedom in one context but not another? But these tensions aren’t unique to the modern virtues. Certainly, the classical virtues are often in tension, too. It can be devilishly hard discerning, for instance, when prudence should override perseverance. Or vice versa.

So, the real problem with the modern virtues isn’t that they’re contradictory—the classical virtues can be just as confused. And it isn’t that they’re somehow “wrong” as virtues. Equality, authenticity, a devotion to physical health, and even nonjudgmentalism can be fine things, taken in right measure. No, the modern virtues fail because, for the most part, they concern the outer self, the human façade, the part of ourselves that the world sees most readily—while the classical virtues form an organizing framework for our inner selves . . . for our souls, if you believe in that sort of thing. And it turns out that when you scale people out to the societal level, the superficial moral framework of the modern virtues turns out to be an insufficient organizing principle. When it comes to virtue, the old ways are still the best ways.

The Perils of Virtue

If you’re looking for a good explanation of the old ways, you could do worse than Alasdair MacIntyre’s summation of Aristotle. Here’s MacIntyre explaining what virtue really is:

The virtues are precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve eudaimonia and the lack of which will frustrate his
movement toward that telos. . . . For what constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to secure such a life. . . . Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways.

There’s a lot to unpack in those ninety-four words, even if you remembered what eudaimonia is. (Don’t worry, I didn’t either.) But overall, it’s a fine working definition of virtue: Virtues are the internal qualities that allow us to be our best selves and enable us to lead complete and fulfilling lives. When you think about virtue in that sense, you really understand why the modern virtues are so inadequate. Being your authentic self and living a physically healthy life are clearly second-order goods. To be your best self and live the most fulfilling life, it’s far more important to exhibit, say, charity and courage.

Yet one of the recurring themes you’ll find in the pages to come is that extremism in pursuit of virtue can easily become vice. Which is to say, no single virtue is, on its own, necessarily virtuous. Hope is essential for the human spirit, yet when it stands alone it turns its bearer into a Pollyanna. Charity—one of the greatest of the virtues—is sublime, yet if you have nothing but charity, you might well become gullible. Curiosity is wonderful; without it we’d still be living in caves and clubbing large animals with sticks. But curiosity run amok, and unleavened by other virtues, turns you into a gossip. Or worse. Mengele was a curious sort.

I don’t mean to be overly dramatic, but history is full of monsters created by manias for a single virtue. Robespierre, for instance, was devoted to justice. When he fostered the Terror it wasn’t an accidental by-product of his wild pursuit of virtue—it was his object: “Terror is naught but prompt, severe,
inflexible justice,” he wrote. “It is therefore an emanation of virtue.” Yikes.

If you take anything from this book (other than the yucks), it should be that virtue is additive. No single virtue is sufficient in and of itself, and each one, taken on its own, is corruptible. Yet each virtue becomes more valuable with the addition of others. And for any single virtue to be brought to its full bloom, it must be surrounded by its sisters. Courage and prudence: Together they give people the spine to do great things. Integrity and forbearance: Without them, no society can function. Chastity and temperance: All right, let’s not get carried away here. The point is, when a man has cultivated the virtues as a class, then, and only then, does he become a man in full.

Of course, not everyone can be expected to cultivate all of the virtues at all times—we are not, all of us, Augustines. We have to muddle through as best we can and pick our spots. So how do we keep our imperfect devotions to virtue from becoming malformed? In Patrick O’Brian’s Master and Commander books, Stephen Maturin, a physician, philosopher, and spy, notes that virtue should always be commingled with humor. This observation is, I think, the best engine governor we have for virtue, to keep it from pushing the needle across the line and into the red zone. I’d bet just about anything that Robespierre never laughed about justice.

The Heavyweight Championship of Virtues

All that philosophical stuff is nice enough, but this is America, where we love winners. So what you’re probably thinking right about now is: Fine, no single virtue is good enough on its own. But which virtue is the best? Who’s the king of the virtues?

Picking a favorite virtue is like picking a favorite child: It’s the kind of thing you’re supposed to pretend not to do—but that everyone does anyway. We can toss chastity and temperance out
of the ring straight off, obviously. They’re important, in their way, but exactly no one is going to make them contenders for the title. Same for thrift and simplicity. Nice to have, but not first-tier virtues. Fellowship is fine, but a luxury. And justice? As Rob Long suggests some pages down the line, that’s the virtue we’d much rather have done unto others than practiced on ourselves. No thanks.

Some pages after that, Christopher Caldwell argues a pride of place for curiosity, “because the knowledge acquired through curiosity grounds your other virtues, while leaving to you the choice of what those virtues will be.” Aquinas called prudence the queen of the virtues, saying that she gently guides all the rest. And Aristotle deemed courage to be the first virtue, because it makes all the others possible.

Good points, all of them. And you probably have your own favorite. But I’d like to make the case for gratitude. Cicero declared, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.” It is the alpha, the point from which all virtues must begin. It is gratitude that allows us to appreciate what is good, to discern what should be defended and cultivated.

You need not believe in God to pursue the virtues (though it certainly helps). Yet if you do believe, then your first instinct in all things must be gratitude: for creation, for love, for mercy. And even if you don’t believe, you must start again from gratitude: That a world grown from randomness could have turned out so fortuitously, with such liberality. That the Hobbesian state of nature has been conquered. At least for a spell. As my friend Yuval Levin explained not long ago, “We value these things not because they are triumphant and invincible but because they are precious and vulnerable, because they weren’t fated to happen, and they’re not certain to survive. They need us—and our gratitude for them should move us to defend them and to build on them.”

Gratitude magnifies the sweet parts of life and diminishes the
painful ones. It is the wellspring of both humility and ambition, the magnetic pole for prudence, the platform for courage, the inducement to charity and mercy. And in addition to everything else, gratitude is the engine for progress: We build not because we are dissatisfied with the world as it is, but because we are grateful to all those who have built it to this point and wish to repay them by making our own contributions to their work.

None of this is to say that the world is perfect—it isn’t. But if it’s to be improved, that improvement will come one person at a time, through the exercise of virtue—through the conscious decision of all of us to try to be better people, to live better lives, and to make a better world. All of which begins, from first light, with saying “Thank you” for what we have, right now.

Which is where I’ll start: Thank you for picking up this book and spending time with me and my friends.

And that’s all for the spinach. Now go and have some fun.
Part I

The Cardinal Virtues

The ones you were taught in Sunday school but have totally forgotten about until this very moment. Go ahead. Try to name them. We’ll wait. . . .
Before we consider what virtue has been up to lately, we should take a look at how vice is faring.

The conceit of every era is that people are more inclined to vice than they used to be. In *The Clouds*, first performed in 423 BC, Aristophanes has the personification of “Just Discourse” recount how vicious children are nowadays, compared to the youngsters of yore who “would not have dared, before those older than themselves, to have taken a radish, an aniseed, or a leaf of parsley, and much less eat fish or thrushes or cross their legs.”

What Aristophanes said is true to this day. I’ve seen a child, sprung from my own loins, munch a radish. With crossed legs. And before I’ve even mixed a predinner martini. (Although, in fairness to our kids, we have trouble getting them to eat fish at all, or aniseed, or parsley—never mind thrushes. Their penchant for vice does not extend to calling first dibs on gobbling roast songbirds.)

The long-lost “Golden Age”—a time when people and things once were better—is a myth in every mythos. I’m willing to bet that Australopithecus shamed its biped brats with stories of noble hominids brandishing proper tails and blissfully living in trees.
That said, vice is doing very well these days. Note, for example, how practically everything featured in the *New York Times* Sunday Styles section is one of the seven deadly sins.

For starters, envy might as well be the section’s title. There’s not a person in the Styles section who isn’t leading a life that’s more celebrated, glamorous, rich, exciting, dramatic—or, at the least, more stylish—than our own. Every advertisement is a promotion of avarice. You could, I suppose, be charitable (charity is one of the seven virtues) and believe that the baubles being hawked are all meant to be given away as gifts to the poor—a Coach bag for the bag lady, a Montblanc pen for a homeless man to letter “Will Work 4 Food” on a piece of cardboard. But even if that were the case, a remarkable degree of avarice would have had to be practiced by the givers in order to afford such gifts in the first place. As for pride? Pride goeth before a *New York Times* wedding announcement.

Fashion, of course, is the handmaiden (excuse me, handperson) of lust. You might not think that, given some of the fashions you see in the *Times*. But then again, everything according to taste. The presentation of purple hindquarters excites the mandrill. And who am I to presume that *Times* readers are less sensuous than this noble primate? Then there’s the sloth evident in just having enough time on your hands to bother reading the Styles section. But whatever else you want to say about the Styles section, you can’t accuse it of gluttony. The people you see pictured are always beautiful and terribly thin. No, for gluttony you have to go over to the paper’s “Dining Out” section. The portions may be small, but the prices are voracious. And as for wrath, well, just consult the *Times* editorial page. Or consult me after I’ve read it.

So vice flourishes. Does virtue languish in its shade? Golly durn right, it does, I say, stopping myself just short of committing the mortal sin of taking the Lord’s name in vain. Not
to mention committing the unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost—despair.

I mean, who even remembers the names of the seven virtues these days? Well, except justice. That gets a lot of play. But as for the others . . . I’ve never seen protestors marching through the street shouting, “No justice! No prudence!” Here, for the record, is the list:

1. Prudence
2. Justice
3. Fortitude
4. Temperance
5. Faith
6. Hope
7. Charity

These are the so-called Seven Cardinal Virtues. Although, technically, if you possess Virtue #5—Christian Division, only the first four are cardinal, so called because they were the principal virtues handed down from the ancient Greek philosophers. The last three—faith, hope, and charity—are theological virtues, supplied by the New Testament because the ancient Greek philosophers were hopeless logic-choppers who detested each other and had faith in things like a nature deity with a goat’s bottom who played a wooden kazoo.

Not that there haven’t been competing lists. The fourth-century Christian poet Aurelius Clemens Prudentius composed a different roster of “Seven Heavenly Virtues” in Psychomachia. (It was a medieval best seller.) Prudentius, despite his cardinal virtue of a last name, chose chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility.

People will have their own partialities, of course. For my own part, I’m not so sure about diligence. It depends on what you’re being diligent about. There is the kind of hollow, due diligence
that JPMorgan Chase did on Bernie Madoff’s transactions. Or, for those who like their moral turpitude without fear of an SEC investigation, there’s the abhorrent manner in which a grown man “diligently” learns to master *Grand Theft Auto V*. But note that “self-esteem” doesn’t make anybody’s list.

Virtues are hard to tabulate because being good is an inversion of Tolstoy’s maxim about families. Indecencies are all alike; every decency is decent in its own way.

And inversion is just the word for virtue’s current state. Virtue has by no means disappeared. It’s as much in public view as ever. But it’s been strung up by the heels. Virtue is upside down. Virtue is uncomfortable. Virtue looks ridiculous. All the change and the house keys are falling out of virtue’s pants pockets.

1. **Prudence** has become such an object of scorn that a call to violate it is the motto of the world’s most famous sneaker company. (Perhaps you ought to think it over for five seconds first. “Just do it” ranks second only to “Watch this” on the list of phrases most commonly heard before gruesome accidents.)

People will name their children anything these days. Anything. It wouldn’t surprise me to find out there are half a dozen boys in my son’s fourth-grade class named Aurelius. But there’s no girl named Prudence in any grade school in America, even though “Dear Prudence” was a Beatles song that sucked—which is usually enough to send American parents into a nomenclature frenzy. (See the half-dozen boys in my son’s class named Jude.)

Why is prudence so unpopular? Because it’s become synonymous with an unhealthy inhibition resulting in psychologically damaging exclusionary behavior toward those with a healthy lack of inhibitions. How accepted is the shaming of prudence? These days, no politician, pundit, celebrity, public intellectual,
mainstream Protestant minister, or Reform rabbi can rebuke any type of personal behavior without the disclaimer, “I’m no prude, but . . .”

That is, unless the personal behavior in question can be construed as exclusionary, racist, sexist, homophobic, insensitive, exploitative, or right-wing extremist. In which case no prudence will be exercised in branding the person whose personal behavior is in question as one or more of the above. The majority of voters in “red states” are also fair game.

But the truth is, prudence is the first of the virtues. You can’t name one good thing that’s been done that couldn’t have been done better with more prudence. (Except for my wife marrying me.)

2. **Justice** is justly sought. But justice is also what everybody claims he wants but nobody seems happy about when he gets it. It’s the “Aw-I-don’t-want-anything-for-Christmas” present of virtues. And it’s the one virtue that’s better when we practice it on others than when others practice it on us. As a priest friend of mine says, “I don’t know about you, but on Judgment Day I’m going to be praying for mercy, not justice.”

3. **Fortitude** is quaint. We praise the greatest generation for having it, but they had aluminum siding, church on Sunday, and jobs that required them to wear neckties or nylons (but never at the same time). We don’t want those either. Instead of fortitude we seek help from others. There’s nothing unvirtuous about that. But when help isn’t forthcoming, fortitude is what we used to need. Now we need to complain. The lionheart has been replaced by the caterwaul: “She’s so brave to be talking about this.” Instead of holding onto our courage, we share our fears. Lacking prudence, we prize impulsiveness. And sharing is such a generous impulse.

4. **Temperance** has become a twelve-step program. We praise it unstintingly, thirty days a month, while we’re at Promises in Mailbu. For the rest of the year, well . . . temperance doesn’t
make good reality TV. Or garner YouTube hits for celebrities. And temperate political speech is an easy way to lose a political primary.

I’m no prude, but . . . as described in the Catechism, temperance “ensures the will’s mastery over instinct and keeps desire within the limits of what is honorable.” Yet mastery is nowadays unacceptable in the home and the workplace, at school, and anywhere else except among consenting adults in one of those West Village dungeons you see profiled in the Times Sunday Styles section every so often. And as for the rest of what the Catechism says about temperance? Instincts are good things. Desires must be fulfilled. And “limits of what is honorable”? That’s so judgmental.

5. Faith, however, should not be tempered. Or should it? There’s such a thing as a surplus of faith, and we’ve got it. Faith in ourselves is an article of faith, and we have the utmost faith in the businesses and industries devoted to this faith—psychiatry, psychology, therapy, counseling, self-help books, and motivational speakers.

We have faith in man and all his works (unless they have a large carbon footprint). And all his empty promises, too. Indeed, the more empty the promise—free health care!—the more faith we seem to have in it. So, for instance, a Yale University website says 70 percent of Americans have faith that the climate is changing. As well they might, since a sign has been given unto them. The climate changes every year, getting warmer in the spring and colder in the fall. And of course we have faith in all sorts of things we see on the Internet.

We have faith in government, although we may deny it thrice before the cock crows—and more often than that after a couple of drinks. But the very size of the Leviathan is a mark of our faith. The U.S. government dwarfs the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine or any megachurch. Tithing? Government lays claim to 40 percent of our entire GDP. And, as for government
services, daily attendance by Americans is almost 100 percent. Church is just once a week, and less than one-third of us go that often.

There is one sort of faith that’s on the wane in America. More than one-third of us aren’t certain about the existence of God—or say we don’t know, or don’t believe in Him at all. At least that’s according to the Pew Research Center, in whose polls we have faith.

6. Hope . . . and change! That pretty much tells us where this virtue has gone—down the rabbit hole of wishful thinking. Hope was not always so faint a word in the English language. The root meaning is “expectation of a thing desired.” In the Book of Common Prayer during “The Order for Burial of the Dead,” the presiding minister says, “the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection.” He doesn’t mean, “Wouldn’t it be nice if . . . ?”

But hope has been out of artistic fashion for more than a century. It’s hard to think of a great modern novel, play, or poem that ends on a hopeful note. Or even begins on one. Take the first line of “The Waste Land,” for instance: “April is the cruellest month.” Excuse me, Thomas Stearns, Mr. soon-to-be Anglican convert, did the Easter Bunny skip the Eliot household? The Great Gatsby concludes with F. Scott Fitzgerald declaring, “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” And smack into the dock, no doubt. Even when he was a lad taking sailing lessons, there was no hope for Scotty.

True, the last words of dialogue in Henry Miller’s Death of a Salesman are from Willy Loman’s wife, who says, “We’re free . . . We’re free. . . .” But Miller isn’t proposing an ontological truth in order to refute determinism. He’s just being fashionably ironic. What Linda Loman is talking about is how the final mortgage payment on the house was made the day of Willy’s funeral.

If you judge by the number of apocalyptic movies released
lately, there’s no hope in popular culture either. Somebody’s probably working on an end-of-the-world remake of *The Sound of Music*.

DOE, endangered species deer
RAY, the earth collides with sun
ME, the only person left
FAR, Zombies! I’d better run
SO, what am I going to do?
LA, the town this crap comes from
TEE, been there, got the shirt too
Which brings teens back to see . . .

Movies like this over and over again.

7. Charity, however, we do not lack. As long as it’s tax deductible.

Or go to any wedding. No matter how godless is the couple, the groomsmen, the bridesmaids, or for that matter the officiant, you’ll be forced to endure a bowdlerized version of 1 Corinthians 13 that goes something like this:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not Amnesty International, I am become as sounding brass. PETA suffereth long, and is kind; Doctors Without Borders envieth not; the Sierra Club vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up. Planned Parenthood is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; UNICEF beareth all things, believeth all things, endureth all things. And now abideth Nature Conservancy, Make-A-Wish Foundation, Habitat for Humanity, these three; but the greatest of these is United Way.
Of course, usually the Revised Standard Version of the Bible is used, with the word “love” in place of “charity.” They’re not the same thing. In Greek (which was the language of Saint Paul in his letters to the Greeks in Corinth) there are four words for love. *Eros* is love in almost the only way we talk about “love” anymore except (let us invoke the virtue of hope) when we say we love our children. In that case, we mean *storge*, or affection. “I love you, dude,” is *philia*, or friendship. The word Saint Paul uses, however, is *agape*, the unconditional love of God and all his creation. Invoking the virtues of hope *and* faith, let’s suppose that’s what they’re doing at the United Way.

Which points to the nonprofit nature of practicing the virtues in the modern world. Virtue survives. It just doesn’t provide modern Americans with the minimum compensation that they feel is necessary to meet their basic needs.

Prudence keeps you out of the stock market. Justice costs like heck in legal bills. Fortitude is expensive, what with the cost of mixed drinks these days. Temperance, ditto, what with the cost of Promises in Malibu. Faith is broke—broken when the Democrats caved in on a budget deal that didn’t extend unemployment benefits. He who dines on hope is sure to lose weight. And charity begins at home. This is why you’re still living in your mother’s basement.

The wages of sin may be death, but the wages of virtue are $7.25 per hour. Unless Congress changes the law.