

# WHY GOOD IS BETTER THAN BEST

As spring shoots out green stems and colorful blossoms, the Church's Easter Vigil syncs up with the reality around us, as heard in the opening reading from the first chapter of Genesis. God created one thing, then another and then more things, and at the end of each day, "God saw that it was good." (Genesis 1:10) The sacred story speaks of God gazing upon creation as good, and the sixth and final instance God looks upon all creation and finds it very good. (Genesis 1:4-31)



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This repeated refrain of goodness stands in juxtaposition, if not a radical critique of a societal fixation on "the best." Publications and social media boast the best tech gadgets, the best summer vacation spots, the best physicians and more. This constant parade of "the best" forms the ego to only desire what others have identified as top-notch.

Good seems so hackneyed in these contexts, even dismissed, as the ego drives the mind's awareness to a narrow focus. We overlook that best comes at the end of the line of good and better.

## BEST PRACTICES

The best of consumer goods and social gathering spots are a close cousin to "best practices." Over the past three decades, the "best practice" label soared in health and human services, public policy and higher education, among other disciplines. One early usage of the phrase emerged in a book by an American mechanical engineer, Frederick Taylor, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Taylor believed there could be "one best way" to perform every worker's action.

Therein lies the connection between today's lingo of "best practices" with benchmarks.<sup>1</sup>

The idea is that a workflow, policy or medi-

cal intervention becomes a best practice because it has become accepted as superior or preferred over alternative actions. Naturally, when a patient enters a surgical prep bay, they trust the surgical team to follow only the best proven clinical techniques. These practices save lives and lead to higher quality and safety outcomes.

Aspiring to the best is quite normal. Yet a disproportionate disappointment can unfold when a best-case scenario eludes us. Even if the outcome is good, yet not the best-case scenario, a person may feel they missed out or were harmed. Social jargon tries to make light of it with the phrase "the fear of missing out." Psychologists back this up. A handful of terms relate to a psychological phenomenon where people experience losses more heavily than equivalent gains or experiences of goodness. One such term is loss aversion.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, when the best lies beyond our reach, loss aversion and its perceptions may obfuscate the good. Take, for example, a story I heard

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one afternoon in which a reporter described a painful stall in labor negotiations among striking workers as one side sought to "get the best deal

possible.” The holdouts wagered that better options would come to them even when good options had been presented by the opposing side.

Popular leadership publications and academic journals have applied scrutiny and skepticism to the prolific use of “best practices” for more than a decade. Critics point out that they work only if they fit one’s intended use and situation.<sup>3</sup> Managers who espouse them too closely tend to shut down fresh ideas from their team. Best practices tend to reinforce so-called norms, which may not apply universally across populations, such as to the disability community, rural populations, diverse groups or other marginalized communities.

One writer suggests shifting to “next practices” as an alternative.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, I choose phrases such as “leading practices” or the wordier, “an example to consider is ...” These prompt reflection, and they respect prudential judgment and leadership freedom.

These linguistic gymnastics are an initial (yet minuscule) indicator of larger practices. They reflect an awareness and appreciation of a broader goodness that permeates diverse circumstances, conditions and individuality. The words reverence that what is best is rare and only comes forth from first identifying what is good.

### **TREASURING THE GOOD**

I learned to savor what is good during sessions on a couch across a cozy room from a wise man, I’ll refer to as Lee. Lee patiently sat with me as my spiritual companion, receiving my rants and tending to the grief I experienced in the twists of my journey and vocation. Once I paused from my grumbling, Lee looked at me with that sage, worn

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smile and soft eyes beholding me through the deep wrinkles of his face, and just said, “Darren, look for the good.” He had to help me a bit. Like a skilled analyst, he gently pointed to the things my upset ego blinded me from recognizing. Lee gently reminded me of the many good things I had shared in recent sessions. “Look for the good” then became a mantra and enduring spiritual practice.

Looking for the good can be a counterpoint practice to the bombardment of the best that saturates our society. The problem is that our egoic mind becomes so fixated on someone else’s best practice, capitalizing on the fear of missing out, that we suppress creativity. Also, like my younger self sitting on Lee’s couch, we may fail to see and celebrate the good that is already present. Perhaps the task is not to duplicate some other best practice but to recognize, foster and advance the existing good.

I realized that I was saturated in seeing many things askew. I didn’t see all the good around me. Lee started me on a formation journey toward the good.

### **FORMATION FOR THE GOOD**

Ministry formation programs typically commence with reflection on a leader’s vocation. That process entails claiming one’s gifts and talents. These are outward signs of one’s own goodness. It is as if God looked upon them when God dreamed the individual into being and said, “How good you are!”

Dictionary definitions of “good,” when used as a noun, refer to “something conforming to the moral order of the universe.” This explains why in the Genesis story, God’s creative acts were described as good, which was an ordering of the universe. More commonly, this is why humans praise their dog or pet for being “a good girl.” It is because the pet displays actions that conform to an order. More importantly, when it is said that someone is a good person or has displayed goodness, it is because the individual has fostered their own character in such a way that they demonstrate a moral uprightness.

The ongoing formation experience includes content, reflection and dialogue on the Catholic moral tradition. Formation involves a process of equipping leaders to guide with integrity in ways consistent with this Catholic worldview and ethical lens. It is a process of further forming leaders who come to the ministry with their own inherent goodness and supporting them with additional skills, habits and ways of being so that part of their character as a Catholic health ministry leader entails integrating into the moral vision and Reign of God. These all serve to foster great good.

## **When we seek the good in our role as leaders in the healing ministry, we support the bountifulness of the ministry and the flourishing of the patients and people served by our ministry.**

A second definition in *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* says “good” refers to the “advancement of prosperity or well-being,” such as the good of the community. This definition resonates with CHA’s vision of strengthening the common good. In other words, ministry formation cultivates leaders who enable the healing ministry in service to human goodness.

A final insight is when “good” is used as an adjective, it means bountiful or fertile. Striving for what is good is to participate in the Creator’s life and activity. It is a co-creative act. It is our efforts to be bountiful in our work and to share our God-given gifts. When we seek the good in our role as leaders in the healing ministry, we support the bountifulness of the ministry and the flourishing of the patients and people served by our ministry.

Ministry formation creates a space where participants discover God’s goodness working through them. God desires us to experience our own goodness and the goodness of the world around us. Indeed, our world remains broken, and though imperfections outnumber occasions of achieving “the best,” God’s grace draws us forward into goodness.

Looking for the good opens a new horizon where God’s energy of love calls us forth. Our awareness of such goodness often comes in bite-sized experiences, and seldom with pinnacle experiences of “the best.” The lens of “the best” shackles the mind to default to diminishing one’s self, harboring low esteem or worse, engaging shame.

For example, when laypersons were first called into roles of mission leadership, they often doubted, saying, “I don’t know that I can do this. I’m not as good as sister.” The perception that sister was seen as the best stymied many of our predecessors, at least initially, in their journey.

A similar sentiment echoes among those called into sponsorship. The responsibility entrusted to leading a ministry of the Church, with origins

in Jesus’ own ministry and with proper canonical grounding, can cause lay individuals to doubt whether they are best suited for the role. Real discernment, of course, is necessary to test this or any call to ministry. The Second Vatican Council and the more recent Synod on Synodality affirm the inherent goodness of the role of the laity in the life and mission of the Church. Whether called to sponsorship, mission leadership or an executive role, others often see in us a goodness that we might dismiss.

Lee lovingly initiated my vision for the good. With practice, any of us can see the goodness all around us, in ourselves and in others, and share it abundantly. The best, after all, does not exist without lots of other goodness and betterness behind it. Good is enough, and what is good leads to flourishing.

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### **NOTES**

1. Frederick Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Harper & Brothers, 1911); Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil, “Best Practice: Past, Present, and Personal,” *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* 25, no. 2 (2010): 26-28.
2. The concept of loss aversion was first introduced and studied by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in 1979: Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk,” *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (March 1979): 263-291.
3. Liz Ryan, “The Truth About Best Practices,” *Forbes*, November 3, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2014/11/03/the-truth-about-best-practices/>.
4. Nirit Cohen, “Best Practices Are Yesterday’s News—Welcome To Next Practices,” *Forbes*, December 12, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niritcohen/2024/12/12/best-practices-are-yesterdays-news-welcome-to-next-practices/>.