

THIRD EYE EDITION

Doing the right thing



It must happen to the best of you – someone pulling wool over your eyes, I mean. In a moment of confessional weakness, I admit it keeps on happening to me with what can only be described as embarrassing regularity. I like to explain it away by claiming to have an abiding faith in the inherent goodness of man. But this seems pretty strange, considering I am in a profession where it is our bounden duty to prove to the public every morning that mankind is beyond redemption. But I digress. One day, I am on my way to work, striding purposefully along the lane when a man on a cycle halts right in front of me. He is a portly, nut brown man in shabby clothes. Tied to the handlebars of his cycle are packets of incense sticks. Superstitious matrons don't usually say no to incense sticks. But having read Sartre and Christopher Hitchens, I prided myself on being in a different league. I started shaking my head in curt refusal. The man's face crumpled up in grief. "*Didi...* please buy... God will bless you, please have pity on me. My daughter committed suicide... she's dead, *Didi*." I was stricken with remorse. In the light of his words, he now appeared to me like a figure in a Greek tragedy, all the stars and constellations in conjunction against him. By the time he could speak again, I had already snatched up four packets of incense sticks. Nor did I quibble over the price.

We went our separate ways. Nearly a year passed by. Then once again, on my walk to office, who should come sailing along on his creaky bicycle but Mister Tragic Figure himself. He was soon trying to thrust packets of incense sticks into my hands. I had almost forgotten all

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about him. But suddenly, as he crumpled his face in an expression of grief, a light bulb lit up in my cranium and I said,

"Hold on a minute. Don't I know you?"

"Yes," he nodded, tears filling his eyes. "My daughter committed suicide."

"I know, I know. Didn't your daughter commit suicide last year?"

"Take these – *Mogra* fragrance. What to do, *Didi*, my daughter committed suicide again."

Shooting him a withering look of utter scorn, I proceeded onward, my faith in the goodness of man in tatters. I was angry that I had been so naive and wondered if my visage looked that trusting. But after some mulling over, I had the satisfaction of being able to see myself as a kindly soul. Whether Mister Sob Story was a fraud or not, my goodness was beyond question.

Which brings us to the crux of the dilemma I want to address here today. Are we doing the right thing? Everyone I know around me is always anxious to do the right thing. Young mothers-to-be agonise over caesarean or normal deliveries, parents debate over boarding school or day school. People want to know the right places to invest in, the right people to cultivate, the right surgeon to tinker with their ailing bodies, the right divorce lawyer to sort out the marital mess. So they are always comparing notes, giving each other tips and always being afraid to make mistakes. The fetish for doing the right thing slowly edges out the spontaneity of living, and the sweet surrender to chance is not allowed to happen. So life is just a gridlocked square of right decisions and the living of it is just ticking the right boxes.

When I am introduced to new people and they are told I write a column, they always assume a knowing expression and say, "Oh, so you write about women, no?" Some years ago, this used to put my teeth on edge. Why weren't male columnists not quizzed if they wrote about men? Is it because a woman cannot straddle a world that contains male, female and everything in between? During these introductions I would always worry about being asked if I wrote about embroidering tea cosies, home cures for hiccups or making the perfect chocolate gateau. That would have been doing the right thing – in their eyes, of course.

When my generation of women started getting our degrees and securing jobs, it became highly unfashionable to be just a housewife. Suddenly, fussing over the place-mats seemed awfully regressive. You had to be either lecturing students, poring over balance sheets, arguing your client's case in court or putting on a pacemaker on an etherised patient. An army of servants took over our places at the home front and we remote-controlled our homes from our workplaces. Our children and husband came to accept that we loved them but there were terribly important things to do, so just this once, couldn't they order pizza from the takeaway?

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Having painted this scenario which looks like something feminists like Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan would heartily approve of, it somehow feels too good to be true. Because it is not the whole picture. For beneath this perfection lurks a deep guilt that robs us of the sweetness of victory. We are career women but we are afraid fingers will point at us in our failures as a mother, wife and homemaker. So we end up trying to be everything, Moving mountains, programming ourselves to be zero-error robots and super computers.

All these thoughts came to me when I was watching Ingmar Bergman's drama film *Autumn Sonata* (1978) last week. Bergman wrote the script himself and one marvels at his deep insight into the female psyche. The film stars Ingrid Bergman, Liv Ullman and Lena Myman. It narrates the story of a celebrated classical pianist and her two daughters. Charlotte Andergost (Ingrid Bergman) has been neglectful and dismissive of her daughters, whom she had not seen for over seven years. Charlotte decides to make a visit to her eldest daughter, Eva (Liv Ullman) at her remote house, where she lives with her husband Victor. Upon arrival, Charlotte discovers that her other daughter Helena – who is mentally and physically disabled (and was placed in an institution by Charlotte), is living with Eva and being taken care of by her. Wounded by the selfishness and neglect of her mother, Eva begins to spill all the things she has ever wanted to tell her mother and as the evening progresses, the wave of hate and fury changes the mother – daughter equation forever. For all her glittering career as a musician, for all the adulation of the public and the wealth and privilege she has earned for herself, Charlotte is a tragic failure in her primary role as a mother. Bergman is pitiless in exposing her narcissism and cruelty, but in the end, as Eva renews her letters to her mother, there is hope of reconciliation, after all.

Suppose you were to change the sex of the key figure – Charlotte. What if Charlotte were a male pianist, obsessed with his career, shutting himself off from his family? But why pianists? All men are supposed to revolve their lives around their careers, it is not expected of them to be nurturing and self-sacrificing. The more successful he is, the greater is the justification to keep his family in the periphery. Could Charlotte have been both a loving mother and a gifted musician? But then, aren't gifted people also temperamental, self-obsessed, driven?

Doing the right thing therefore haunts us more than it does the men. For we feel we are under a microscope, a 24x7 surveillance camera which records all our flaws and goof-ups, the cracks in the painted facade. May be the best thing, the most liberating thing we eves can do is to just stop pretending we are perfect. Only then can we move on, and reach wherever we are going.