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 Arlington Street Church
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Doing the Right Thing

On December 2nd, 2012, in a cross-country race in Spain, Kenyan runner Abel Mutai¹ was in the lead and only a few meters from the finish line, but was confused with the signs and stopped, thinking he had finished the race. Some distance behind him, in second place, Spanish runner Iván Fernández Anaya realized what was going on and started shouting to Abel to keep running, but Abel doesn't speak Spanish and didn't understand.

When Iván caught up to Abel, instead of speeding past him, he stayed behind and, using gestures, guided him to the finish line and let him cross first.

“I didn't let him win; he was going to win,” Iván told a reporter. “He created a gap that I couldn't have closed if he hadn't made a mistake. As soon as I saw he was stopping, I knew I wasn't going to pass him. The race was his. I didn't deserve to win.... He was the rightful winner. I did what I had to do.”

His coach, world champion marathoner² Martín Fiz, weighed in. “The gesture has made him a better person,” he said, “but not a better athlete. He has wasted an occasion. Winning always makes you more of an athlete. You have to go out to win.”

What do you think?

Iván Fernández Anaya has no regrets. In response to an incredulous reporter who kept repeating, “But you could have won!” Iván replied:

But what would be the merit of my victory?

What would be the honor of this medal?

What would my Mother think?

¹ pronounced Able moo-TIE

² 1995

“My dream,” he added, “is that one day we can have some sort of community life where we push ourselves and also others to win.”

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Perhaps like many of you, I was taught that, when questioning whether or not I should say or do what I was about to say or do, a good rule of thumb would be to consider whether or not I would feel proud about it appearing on the front page of a major newspaper. I suppose that’s one way to weigh our behavior — shame does have its purposes. I’m also partial to the directive, When in doubt, don’t. But I invite us to aspire to Iván’s litmus test: He spoke of merit, honor, and his mother’s opinion — in other words, doing the right thing according to the dictates of our moral compass.

One of my all-time favorite pieces of writing is Joan Didion’s *On Self Respect*. I commend you to it. Here are my two favorite paragraphs. Joan Didion writes,

“Although to be driven back upon oneself is an uneasy affair at best, rather like trying to cross a border with borrowed credentials, it seems to me now the one condition necessary to the beginnings of real self-respect. Most of our platitudes notwithstanding, self-deception remains the most difficult deception. The charms that work on others count for nothing in that devastatingly well-lit back alley where one keeps assignations with oneself: no winning smiles will do here, no prettily drawn lists of good intentions. With the desperate agility of a crooked ... dealer, one shuffles flashily but in vain through one’s marked cards — the kindness done for the wrong reason, the apparent triumph which had involved no real effort, the seemingly heroic act into which one had been shamed. The dismal fact is that self-respect has nothing to do with the approval of others — who are, after all, deceived easily enough; has nothing to do with reputation — which, as Rhett Butler told Scarlett O’Hara, is something that people with courage can do without.

“To do without self-respect, on the other hand, is to be an unwilling audience of one to an interminable home movie that documents one’s failings, both real and imagined, with fresh footage spliced in for each screening. *There’s the glass you broke in anger, there’s the hurt on X’s face; watch now, this next scene, the night Y came back from Houston: see how you muff this one.* To live without self-respect is to lie awake some night, beyond the reach of warm milk, phenobarbital, and the sleeping hand on the coverlet, counting up the sins of commission and omission, the trusts betrayed, the promises subtly broken, the gifts irrevocably wasted through sloth or cowardice or carelessness. However long we postpone it, we eventually lie down

alone in that notoriously uncomfortable bed, the one we make ourselves. Whether or not we sleep in it depends, of course, on whether or not we respect ourselves.”³

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We choose to do the right thing, honoring our moral compass, so we can live with ourselves — so we can be happy, and peaceful, and free. And we do the right thing, says Iván Fernández Anaya, for community — the greater good, the common wealth.

Sometimes, perhaps even most of the time, doing the right thing is easy. Iván did it without a second thought, and though his running coach was mildly disgusted, the world reacted with approbation and adoration. Sometimes it’s harder. Here’s another story.

A twenty-something-year-old named David grew up on a relatively small family farm in Nebraska. Generations before he was born, eighty acres had been lost to an unscrupulous family member. Somewhere along the way, David determined that, somehow, he was going to buy back that lost parcel and make the farm whole again.

In 2011, he learned that it was coming up to be sold at auction. With two weeks to go, David needed to figure out how to secure an extraordinary amount of money. “Even though I dreamed of getting back the land for as long as I could remember,” he says, “when the day came, I wasn’t ready.” But he knew he had to give it his very best, and after more than one sleepless night, he and his father headed to the auction house with their “best number.”

Walking through the doors, their hearts sank. The place was packed; over 200 farmers were in attendance, most of whom had much larger farms and far more resources. Nevertheless, when the auctioneer called for the first bid, David and his father looked at each other, and David put his hand in the air.

The auctioneer nodded at them, then called for a second bid. A hush fell over the crowd. No one spoke.

The auctioneer called for a break.

When they reconvened, it happened again. Silence.

³ vogue.com/article/joan-didion-self-respect-essay-1961

Three times, the auctioneer called for a break. Three times, when the bidding resumed, the room remained still and silent. The third time, you could have heard a pin drop. Time stretched out. The whole room held its breath.

David's bid was the only bid — the winning bid.

Two hundred farmers kept their hands down so the farm could be returned to its rightful owners. Two hundred farmers did the right thing. When David finished telling this story to Laurie Gwilt of *Good News Network*, she asked him what he thought had happened. Without missing a beat, he answered, “Respect.”⁴

There is is again: community. Those of us who don't live in small towns may think, no one will see or hear us — no one will ever know. But while considering how our actions will look on the front page of the newspaper and determining to honor our moral compass, we would do well to ask ourselves, too, how what we are doing helps to create or destroy community. In addition to asking how we will live with ourselves, let us ask how we will live with one another.

We can ask this in our everyday lives, and we can — and should — ask this of ourselves as citizens of our country, this democracy we should never again take for granted. And so our choice to do the right thing is simple — simple, if not easy.

Beloved spiritual companions, let's close with English poet David Whyte's *Self Portrait*.⁵

It doesn't interest me if there is one G*d
 Or many gods.
 I want to know if you belong – or feel abandoned;
 If you know despair
 Or can see it in others.
 I want to know
 If you are prepared to live in the world
 With its harsh need to change you;
 If you can look back with firm eyes
 Saying “this is where I stand.”

⁴ goodnewsnetwork.org/farmers-stay-silent-during-auction-so-young-man-can-win-the-bid-on-his-long-lost-family-farm/

⁵ from *Fire in the Earth*, 1992. Out of respect for our members and friends who are Jewish, I follow the tradition of not spelling out G*d.

I want to know if you know how to melt
Into that fierce heat of living
Falling toward the center of your longing.
I want to know if you are willing
To live day by day
With the consequence of love
And the bitter unwanted passion
Of your sure defeat.
I have been told
In that fierce embrace
Even the gods
Speak of G*d.