

The Virtues of Dr. Seuss

April 3, 2008

Dr. Seuss is alive and well in Montana this spring. The movie theaters are showing *Horton Hears a Who* and the Missoula Children's Theater is putting on *Seussical the Musical* next month. When my kids were small I read them Dr. Seuss' books over and over, to the point where I knew many stories by heart. I particularly enjoyed one of his last books, *You're Only Old Once*. I even gave a copy to my parents; but I'm not sure they appreciated the gesture.

Dr. Seuss was a great storyteller, cartoonist and moral teacher. One of the important ways children develop morally is through stories. The idea that stories are central to moral development has been a major theme in ethical theory over the last few decades. One philosopher argues that human beings are "essentially story-telling animals."¹ Further, that if we "deprive children of stories [we] leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."² It's easy to see how epic and serious stories like Tolkien's, *Lord of the Rings* trilogy can teach children about virtues like courage and fidelity. However, Dr. Seuss' concise and lighthearted stories about Horton the Elephant might do the job equally well.

Horton appeared in two of Dr. Seuss' books, *Horton Hatches an Egg* and *Horton Hears a Who*. In the first story, Horton promises a bird, Mayzie that he will sit on her the egg while she vacations. She doesn't return, which results in many hardships for poor Horton. Throughout the story, children hear Horton's motto, "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant: An elephant's faithful one hundred percent." Horton exemplifies fidelity, which simply means that he possesses the quality of being faithful, he's loyal to his moral commitments, one hundred percent.

Sadly, fidelity has lost much of its meaning and power. People rarely use it; when it is used it's in the narrow context of sexual infidelities. Fidelity as a human excellence is much broader than this; it's foundational moral concept. One classical thinker writes: "The foundation of my being and identity is purely moral; it consists in the fidelity to the faith I swore myself."³ To be useful, fidelity needs to be reinvigorated. Dr. Seuss does a good job of this. To illustrate, I would like to highlight three points.

First, Dr. Seuss chose wisely in selecting an elephant to teach fidelity, as they never forget. Fidelity is the virtue of memory; it has to do with the consistency and integrity of a person's moral commitments over time.⁴ It's about steering a true course. When I was a

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

² Ibid.

³ Michael Montaigne, quoted in, Andre Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*

⁴ Andre Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*

kid my grandfather let me plow his fields. My first attempt wasn't very good. He had a good laugh and said I plowed like a guy he once knew. This fellow fixed his sight on a post at the end of the field, which he used to keep the tractor and furrows straight. However, he was nearsighted and what he thought was a post was a man pacing back and forth. As a consequence his plowing was not straight and true. Horton, of course, because he possesses the virtue of fidelity, does not waver from his moral commitments. He's straight and true.

Second, like most human excellences, fidelity is a midpoint between extremes, which are vices. In both books Horton's fidelity is contrasted with the moral failures of other characters. At one extreme is Seuss' lazy bird, Mayzie, who forgets to return to sit on her egg. The vice at this extreme of fidelity is, as one author put it, a "frivolous and self-serving fickleness."⁵ At the other extreme is the sour Kangaroo of *Horton Hears a Who*, who steadfastly refuses to believe that Horton has found a planet of tiny people, because she cannot hear or see them. The vice at this extreme of fidelity is obstinacy; it is a "dogged small-mindedness [and] stubbornness."⁶ Fidelity steers between fickleness and stubbornness.

Third, being consistent and having a good memory are not enough to be virtuous. Like courage, fidelity needs to be directed toward the right object and in the right way. People, like Hitler's henchmen, can be faithful to immoral causes. One must answer the question, faithful to what? Dr. Seuss' elephant is faithful to *his* commitments, but these loyalties are not selfish. They are commitments to protect vulnerable and neglected people who are in peril. Horton is loyal to the idea, that a "person's a person no matter how small."

Dr. Seuss' concise and comical stories about Horton the Elephant are amazingly rich and enduring. They are serious narratives about ethical character told in a lighthearted and entertaining way. I'm sure my kids were read a lot of Dr. Seuss because I enjoyed his stories and illustrations as much as they did. And, I hope we all took them to heart.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.