

Echoes of the Decalogue

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Poetic Interpretations of the Ten Commandments

by Alan Harris

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1990

**The killing knife pierces
the center of your own heart.**

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Preface

The Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue, were written down by Moses thousands of years ago and recorded for humanity in the twentieth chapter of Exodus, verses 1-17. I have interpreted them poetically here in an attempt not only to bring alive their literal meanings with imagery, but also to pick up some of the wisdom and beauty latent in a seemingly austere code of conduct.

The Ten Commandments are timeless guides for living in time. They help us to avoid stress-causing actions. They encourage us to transcend our selfish desires. They focus our minds on what is right and good. Intelligently followed, they engender love and growth, steering us away from blunders which might later bounce back upon us as pain or illness.

If we are observant, we notice a law of cause and effect at work in our lives. Unselfish actions and constructive speech generally return dividends of health and happiness, whereas our selfish actions and destructive words lead us inexorably toward discomfort and suffering. We reap what we sow. The Ten Commandments help us cut down the weeds in our daily lives and sow fruitful seeds for the future.

Life on earth has been called a school for souls. Those who know and observe the rules are quickest to pass on to the next class. Human beings, however, are always free to choose their own path. There would otherwise be no need for the aid provided by the Ten Commandments. Freedom's great blessing is that we can begin improving our own destiny any time we choose. We are the slaves of our past, yes, but we are equally the masters of our future. What could be more fair?

First Commandment

I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no others gods before me.

Cleave to none but the One.

The Many will court you,
lure you into their shrines
set up to Power,
to Wealth,
to Fame,
to Security,
and bid you worship there
and lay down your life.

Beware of the Many,
for they are always without,
while the One is always within.
Understand the undersound of the One
before heeding any outer speeches.
The One speaks with thundering silence
in the heart of your heart.
Authority devoid of the One
is no authority at all.

The One in you,
you in the One,
is All.

Second Commandment

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them....

Follow an idol
and you will discover
the taste of sand.

Powerful pullings there are
from praise-beggars
who give trinkets in return
for adulation.
Exciting are the fantasies
of the mind through which masterful
spinners of words invite
allegiance and wealth transfer.

But the mightiest guide
is the most invisible,
the most inner and still,
the most subtle and sublime.

Murmurings of holy power
are here and now and always,
not in the cunning phrases of phonies,
not in the glittery glamor of idols,
but in a quiet breeze of the brain
that sways you gently toward your
fellow men and women
as brothers and sisters
in our Cosmos.

Let all the idols chatter and clatter,
for they know nothing of the
One Grand Architect
Whose love dissolves
the graven images of pretenders
and Whose flowing word
silences all advertisements
for self and greedy gain.

Look through, not to, the idol.

Third Commandment

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

The Name of Names
is What Was,
What Is,
and What Shall Be.
Who but a thimblebrain
would arrogate that Name
to his own lust,
his own anger,
his own power over others,
his own slanderous speech?

The Name of Names
is a fountain of peace,
a strength in the heart.
Pervert that Name
for self-gain or show,
for pyrotechnic cursing
of the twiddling tongue,
and ultimately you will feel
nagging loneliness
when you cannot call on that Name
for succor in some desert.

The Name of Names
speaks itself in every instant,
billions of times in every light wave—
but usurp the Name of Names
for flippancy or anger,
and your light will gradually fade
until you babble in the darkness.

Fourth Commandment

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.

The seventh day is holy—
is when you wrap up the stress of six
and throw it all into an inner abyss—
is when you richly resonate
with the lessons of the week—
is when you pack your soul's lunch
for the next week.

To ignore the seventh day
and keep your work going
on and on
is an attachment to flutter
that will tear you
nerve from nerve
over years.

A little nap is good
on the seventh day,
a hug or two,
a game.

On the seventh day your heart
can launch a loving arrow
across the next six days
to penetrate and renew
your same heart
older by a week and softer.

Remember the seventh day
not as a burden but as a blooming,
not as a prohibition but as a permission.

All seven days are holy to be sure,
but on the seventh comes a celestial smile
that only stillness may see and feel.

Fifth Commandment

Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

Father and Mother are One.
You were always with Them,
and They with you.

Never were you not,
nor ever will you not be,
so long as your Father and Mother
are alive in the heavens.

Flowing humbly like water
into all the cracks of Creation,
your Heavenly Mother speaks to you
gently through your inner ear.

Your Heavenly Father
penetrates your soul
with His primal power
to further your growth,
spark from His Flame
that you are.

Honoring your Father and Mother
is to speak the Holy Language
which no book nor Bible
can fully reveal.

The Heavenly Couple,
the Yin and Yang,
make up the Holy One.
Your earthly parents
are a living reflection
of this Heavenly Union
which nourishes you,
allowing your awareness
to mellow and deepen.

Sixth Commandment

Thou shalt not kill.

Do not kill.
There are a thousand
reasons to kill,
and only one not to.

What is that reason?
Read it in a cow's gentle eyes.
Hear it in a rooster's crowing at dawn.
Feel it in the handshake
of a so-called enemy soldier.

The killing knife
pierces the center
of your own heart.

Seventh Commandment

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Love's pure waters
may not with impunity be poured
into a muddy stream.

The sanctity of the committed Two
in harmonious devotion
has the blessing of the One.

Adultery lurks in a mental alley,
holding up colored pictures of bliss
before your inner eye
and inviting you to walk on in.

You walk only into illusion,
a present pleasure
hiding a future pain.

Corrupt the Two,
and smirky demons
will buzz your thoughts
like flies around dung.

Purity, purity, purity.

Eighth Commandment

Thou shalt not steal.

To take what belongs to another
is to feast on poison.

While Everything belongs to Everyone,
not everything belongs to you.

Looking outward, you see
flashy trinketry and tempting affluence
flaunted by those who have and have.
You lust to take it, to surround it, to own it,
to finally be happy and free.

But looking inward to the Source,
you can see that
you have all anyone needs
from the Fountain of the Infinite.

Burst open then with giving,
and theft will become absurd.

Ninth Commandment

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

A lie is like a fingernail
screeching across a blackboard.
It jangles your mind,
perverts your heart,
and sickens your body.

To lie is to build
an ugly, frail structure
which to maintain will require
more and more deceit until,
when you no longer remember
the first lie that laid
its flimsy foundation,
the edifice must topple
and come crashing down
upon your head.

To lie is to slice yourself away
from the Eternal Source.
Each lie says,
“I am more important
than WHAT IS.”
But tongues that lie
are tongues that taste
the dirt of doom,
for WHAT IS
cannot be altered a whit
by either false words
or false silence.

Those who speak truth
will prevail,
while liars will lie—
lie whimpering
in the cosmic gutters.

Tenth Commandment

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

Your neighbor's grass
across the fence looks oh, so green,
much greener than yours.
But the illusion lies in the fence,
not in the grass.
You are your neighbor
and your neighbor is you.
These fences, whether of skin
or legal documents
or wire mesh,
are made up entirely
of separative thought.

How can you love your neighbor
while coveting his possessions?
In your envy you wish to shatter
the whole universe into fragments
in hopes of picking up
a few of your neighbor's toys
in the confusion.

Wanting hungrily through fences
burns out your mind.
Envy grows like a green worm
eating away at your heart.

Arise from envy,
tear down the silly fence
which has no reality anyway,
and give your neighbor
the gift of unimpeded friendship.

Then both of you will have
more than everything—
you will share Unity.



About Alan Harris

When Alan Harris was born on Sunday, June 20, 1943, his father, Keith E. Harris, was piloting a B-17 in bombing missions over Europe while his mother (Margie) worried about Keith lovingly from Illinois.

Schooling in Earlville, Illinois (Alan's home town) was interesting, useful, and generally free of creativity (do what the teacher says, get the good grade). From 5th through 12th grades he played the trumpet in the school band and enjoyed the contest trips. His father drove a school bus as part of his living (farming was the other part), and if Alan happened to ride on his father's bus, he had to very much behave.

Illinois State University was where Alan became chagrined over how a student with a full class load could possibly keep up with all of the assignments given in said classes.

He felt he was a pawn in a game, but with judicious time-shuffling and corner-cutting he plowed along and made respectable grades amidst all the worries.

A bright spot at ISU was taking a contemporary American poetry class with Dr. Ferman Bishop. Through him Alan discovered depths in poetry that he had never dreamed of while in high school. E. E. Cummings took him for zingy flights of in-your-faceness. T. S. Eliot, whose symbols even had symbols, fully baffled him. Robert Frost was slyly charming. Emily Dickinson's mastery of rhyme and meter for conveying soul and spirit made the young poet's heart go funny. Alan started "being a poet" in his sophomore year (1962) at ISU. Poetry had been previously unneeded in his life but now was available to contain parts of his soul that he hadn't realized were there.

After graduating from ISU in 1966 there was the little matter of having to earn a living, which took the form of two years of high school English teaching, three years of tuning and repairing pianos, and (after a 1976 MS in Computer Science at Northern Illinois University) about 25 years of computer work (mainly programming, in-house computer teaching, and Web development—for Commonwealth Edison Company in Chicago).

During most of that vocational stint before retirement, Alan continued to write poems. Even with the whirl of commuting it was still possible to emote at home. He launched his current Web site (www.alharris.com) in 1995 with a few poems, and eventually has populated it with almost everything he has written. As a poet, essayist, story-writer, and photographer he has spurned the print publication route, having seen the excruciations gone through by other writers trying to make a big name and big money for themselves via magazine and book publishers. With the Web, there's instant publication, moneyless communication, and a worldwide potential audience. Of course, the literature has to stand on its own feet to get readers, but it's always there for those who seek it, or just happen in, or get sent in.

Alan met his wife Linda at ISU in 1962 and they were married in 1966. Linda has worked as a school speech therapist, insurance medical office worker, and medical transcriptionist, in addition to being a conscientious wife, mother, and grandmother. They have a son, Brian, who is a Tucson percussionist.

