

LOVE'S IMPERFECTION MORAL BECOMING, FRIENDSHIP AND FAMILY LIFE

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ABSTRACT

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This paper concerns friendship as an aspect of family love and its fragilities. I explore love as an on-going ethical demand and problem in family life, one that can present continual obstacles to the ability to continue as a family. I also look at intra-family friendship as a means for addressing such threats. Drawing upon long-term fieldwork among African American families caring for children with chronic illnesses and disabilities (Mattingly 2010a), I explore a situation faced by one of these families when a household accident badly injures one of the children. Although I examine a family rupture, I part company with the widely held view in anthropology that the properly moral (or ethical) needs to be radically contrasted with the ordinary. Rather, I argue that the ordinary can provide resources for what Stanley Cavell calls 'moral transcendence'.

Keywords: ethics, anthropology of morality, Cavell, kinship, love, friendship, moral psychology

Introduction

This paper concerns friendship of a particular sort—as an aspect of family love and its fragilities. I explore love as an on-going ethical demand and problem in family life, one that can present continual obstacles to the ability to continue as a family. I also look at intra-family friendship as a means for addressing such threats. Drawing upon long-term fieldwork among African American families caring for children with chronic illnesses and disabilities (Mattingly 2010a), I explore a situation faced by one of these families when a household accident badly injured one of the children. This accident not only threatened but, for some time, effected a break in the family, a kind of divorce among the three women in a multi-generational household which was comprised of a grandmother, two of her adult daughters and their six children. Only through painstaking practices of on-going and everyday family care were the bonds re-forged. Through this reworking, they did not return to the family they once were but became something new. This moral becoming becomes possible not through a radical break with the quotidian (as anthropologists of morality often argue) but because of the potentialities that ordinary life may afford.

Family love—as I explore it—is a troubled moral practice that makes strenuous demands upon the self and requires the cultivation of virtues that can seem (or actually be) unattainable. This is certainly not the only way to explore love. It has been variously considered as fantasy (Berlant 1998, who discusses and complicates this), discourse

(Faier 2007), or economic transaction as it is regarded in much reciprocity literature in anthropology (Constable 2009; Dyson 2010; Faier 2007; Hardt 2011; see useful discussions of this in Venkatesan et al. 2011). Despite this array of approaches, love has not been a topic for anthropological theory or debate until recently (Jankowiak and Fischer 1992; Venkatesan, et al. 2011; Zigon 2013).

While one might imagine that the family, as conceptualized in kinship studies, would have provided a central venue for elaborating culturally diverse practices, discourses and experiences of love, this has not been the case. This is largely because, historically, kinship was widely perceived as the basic social structure upon which the political functions of a social group operated in 'stateless' societies. There have been substantial differences in the way kinship has been analysed but a broadly shared presumption is that kinship has served as the crucial site for maintaining political and social order in societies where larger governments and states were (presumably) absent. Significantly, in this early work, a crucial intellectual move was made to separate the domestic sphere of family life (the nuclear family) from its political and juridical functions, and within wider kinship networks (Borneman 2001; Carsten 2004). This division between the domestic sphere and broader kin-based systems excluded women and erected a boundary between the personal and intimate, on the one hand, and the political, on the other. It also involved subsuming the intimate within the economic in such a way that the exchange value of relationships was emphasized (as in Levi-Strauss' classic study of marriage and the exchange of women).

If love is now becoming a topic to be rethought, it may have something to do with the new kinship studies that have at last made the domestic sphere central and challenged anthropologists to examine family life in terms of practices of care and relatedness (Borneman 2001; Rapp and Ginsburg 2001, 2011; Horton 2009; Allan 1996), love (Edwards in Venkatesan et al. 2011) and moral experience (Zigon 2013). Feminists outside anthropology have added impetus through their long-standing contention that care has been neglected within Western moral theory. They have argued for an ethics of care distinct from dominant moral theory's ethics of impartial justice (Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993). In feminist literature, 'care ethics' stresses responsibilities, relationships, intersubjectivity, the circumstantiality of ethics and activity rather than rights, rules and abstract reasoning. It also ethically privileges a 'connected self' rather than an 'autonomous self'.

This paper attempts to further these considerations of care, connected selves and ethics by introducing Cavell's theory of moral perfectionism and friendship (Cavell 2004; Hall [ed.] 2010; Saito 2003). I adopt what I have called elsewhere a 'first person' consideration of moral transformation and the ethics of care (Mattingly 2012, In Press). This means that my analysis parts company with much of the current work in kinship studies for even where 'care' and 'relatedness' are coming into fashion, the connection to a first person perspective, to an *individual* (one who loves, fails to love, is loved etc.) has rarely been elaborated and is often explicitly contested (e.g. Strathern 1992a, 1992b). This is not surprising since the individual as an analytic category has always been problematic in anthropology (Hollan 2012; Humphrey 2008; Mattingly 2010b, 2012, 2013). In other work, (especially Mattingly In Press) I offer a much more extended discussion of first person virtue ethics than I can do here. However, to put it briefly, I am not speaking here of autonomous individuals but of relational ones. This first person perspective I advance

analytically foregrounds and depends upon both the singular ‘I’ and the plural ‘we’—a point that will become increasingly clear in what follows. Friendship, which turns out to be so crucial in the case I offer, exemplifies the first person qualities of moral projects.

Friendship and family love

The moral vocabulary surrounding friendship in the context of family life, particularly as developed by philosopher Stanley Cavell, provides an immensely illuminating window through which to explore the social dimensions of love and friendship, and their demands for moral transformation. Cavell explores moral transformation as an intimate interpersonal task, one that requires the assistance and care of significant others with whom one has a serious and committed bond. Cavell argues that friendship is central and necessary for personal projects of moral becoming. Transformative work requires self-reflection and self-critique, he contends, and friends provide an essential resource for this.

To understand why friendship is so morally essential for Cavell, I need to say a bit more about the moral framework he introduces which he calls ‘moral perfectionism’. He contrasts this framework from the two most well known moral traditions in modern Western thought—one that privileges calculative judgment about the best course of action (utilitarianism) and another that privileges abstract moral principles (deontology). Moral perfectionism, in contrast to these two primary traditions, ‘focuses instead on the worth of a way of life, of my way of life, which has come to a crossroads demanding self-questioning, a pause or a crisis in which I must assess something that has been characterized as being true to myself’ (2004: 50). Cavell traces moral perfectionism to Aristotle whose notion of human ‘actuality’ speaks not simply to our customary ways of living and acting but to our potentiality, to who we might become. Cavell tells us that this journey of moral becoming that we already find in Aristotle is propelled by ‘the power to be attracted to a further self, or state of the self’, and this, in turn, is motivated not by simple optimism or strategic calculation but by moral ‘dissatisfaction with one’s present condition’ (Cavell 2004: 352).

Cavell also contrasts Aristotle’s moral position with both utilitarianism and Kantianism because Aristotle’s ethics are rooted in the particularities of self and situation. As compared to utilitarianism ‘Aristotle emphasizes *myself*, this individual, this development of my character, as the touchstone of goodness and rightness—so forcefully and continuously that some have found his theory to be an ethics of selfishness, not a morality at all’ (2004: 357). In contrast to Kant’s a priori, universal principle, Aristotle focuses on ‘individual circumstances (...) here it is the exercise of my perception of a situation—not an intellectual grasp of necessity, but an empirical judgment (...) of practical intelligence (...) that determines the course I shall take’ (2004: 357).

When Cavell emphasizes situations in which a person has ‘come to a crossroads’ because her whole ‘way of life’ has been put into question, he connects the moral to moments of crisis, what Zigon (2007, 2011) has termed ‘moral breakdowns’. But Cavell adds something else—the place of friendship as an *essential* feature of moral life. To see why friendship is so significant, it is again necessary to return to Cavell’s formulation as

it contrasts with dominant philosophical moral theories. In Cavell's moral perfectionism, one is confronted not by an impartial judge (a sort of third person arbitrator) who demands justifications for one's actions. Rather, one encounters oneself and one's way of life in a questioning way through *conversation* with friends. This is where we see the force, indeed the analytic necessity, of a first person moral perspective that attends not only to an individual or singular 'I' but also to membership in communities which are mine and of which I am a member, such as 'my friends'. Notably, as we shall see, a 'second person' perspective also emerges as central. My own moral becoming depends upon my relationship to intimate, and yet distinct ('not me') others with whom I have a powerful and irreplaceable bond.

Conversation, Cavell remarks, plays the same role as calculation in utilitarian schemes and moral law in Kantianism. In conversation (obviously, conversation of a particular sort), one is confronted by a particular, personally significant other—a friend, in fact—who is essential for reflective self-consideration. But there is another difference operating here too. While in utilitarian and Kantian schemes, I am required to justify myself 'to offer or refuse reasons on which I am acting' (Cavell 2004: 49), in these conversations with friends, something else is required. I am asked to 'reveal myself' to an intimate other, and through this revelation, my response is *not* justification in front of an impartial judge (as in dominant moral schemes) but something fundamentally dialogical: 'one soul's examination of another' (ibid.).

Thus, self-questioning precipitated by some kind of moral crisis is not an internal, subjective process as much as an intimately intersubjective one. It depends upon the presence of another person who has some moral standing with me. Moral perfectionism insists on a first person moral perspective, in other words. While in Kantian and utilitarian schemes, someone's personal relationship with me is of no consequence; this is not true of moral perfectionism. If you confront me, there is no universal moral imperative that can carry the argument or compel me to listen. Rather, 'you had better have some standing with me from which you confront my life, from which my life matters to you, and matters to me that it matters to you' (Cavell 2004: 50). I listen to the advice of my friend because I believe that this friend is someone to be respected. More than this, I heed it, or find myself compelled to be confronted by it, because it comes from a person who knows and cares about me. The being known and cared for is an essential ingredient in what gives that person moral standing.

In the situation I present below, a mother (Sasha) is thrown into a moral crisis and into intense self-questioning. Self-questioning is furthered by the role that her own mother (Delores) plays with her, acting as a friend in Cavell's sense. While I have written about this incident elsewhere (Mattingly 2004, 2010a, 2012), I have not explored it in relation to friendship or moral perfectionism, as I do here. In doing so, I also try to speak about suffering in a way that does not reduce it to negation but recognizes how it can open a space for moral potentiality and deepening relations, 'reveal[ing] a special kind of presence or intimacy that is mediated through pain' (Throop 2010a: 774, 2010b).

The kitchen accident

Sasha's son Willy, just a year and a half old at the time, toddled into the kitchen after his nine-year old cousin Shareen who had decided to fry some bacon. She was not an experienced cook and did not realize that bacon required no grease. She heated oil in the frying pan and dropped the bacon in. It immediately splattered uncontrollably and in trying to figure out what to do, she did not notice that Willy had somehow managed to reach up to the stove. He tipped the frying pan on his head, covering the lower part of his face with burning oil. Delores heard the screams, and immediately called 911 for an ambulance. Sasha was not at home. She had left the house a few minutes earlier to pick up her cousin. It was a short trip—she would be back in twenty minutes so she did not worry about leaving her son in the care of her mother, her sister and Willy's older cousins. There were plenty of people around and Shareen had promised to look out for him. By the time Sasha returned from her errand, a few minutes later, Delores and Willy and Shareen were already in an ambulance on the way to the hospital.

This traumatic event created a family rupture. Through Delores' considerable efforts, theirs had become a close-knit multi-generational household even if fractious at times. Squabbles and rifts would periodically arise not only among the children, but also between Sasha and Marcy. However, Delores' presence was so powerfully felt and her daughters were so loyal to her that they tried to work out their differences. But now, one of Marcy's children had not watched out for Willy and Sasha felt betrayed. 'I lost my trust', Sasha said. She found herself bitter and angry. In addition, Sasha was confronted with a new, unfamiliar maternal task—how to care for a child who now had many medical needs and whose face had become disfigured, perhaps permanently so. This demanded the acquisition not only of technical skills (how to dress a wound, how to entice her son to wear the medical face masks he hated), but a project of moral becoming—how to gain the strength (as she often put it) to become a good mother to this child, under these circumstances. Delores played a crucial role in guiding Sasha in both these tasks.

Initially, Sasha 'divorced' her family. While she continued to live in the extended family household, she isolated herself and Willy from everyone else, hovering over him continually, not only keeping him inside the house but also trying to keep other family members away from him. 'My trust—leaving my son with people—I couldn't do it for a long time...' For several years, Sasha continued to worry about whether or not she could leave her son at home. As she put it, 'I wonder sometimes, is it or isn't it safe to leave him? If I leave him this time what will happen this time?'

Delores put steady pressure on Sasha to re-enter everyday family life and to allow the other children in the family to help care for Willy. When Sasha's sense of being a 'good mother' or being part of a good, or at least 'good enough', family was thrown into radical doubt, she was confronted with the question: What can a good life be for myself and my son now? She could not financially afford to move elsewhere but she could exert protection by isolating him from other family members. It was precisely this which Delores challenged—continuously encouraging Sasha to allow the other children to help in the daily care of Willy's bandages which Sasha relented and allowed them to do.

Delores also explicitly challenged Sasha's approach to safeguarding Willy by preventing him from seeing his disfigured face. When he initially came home from the hospital

after several weeks in intensive care, Sasha covered every mirror in the house. ‘I wouldn’t let him see himself’, she said. Delores was adamantly opposed. Sasha reported their conversation: ‘My mom said, “You can’t do that to him.” She said “Because you’re forcing him into a place that he’s not ready to go.” And so, I didn’t understand it. I was just like, “What are you talking about?”’ While Sasha did not initially accept Delores’ position, she subsequently came to understand it, as she discloses in a later interview. ‘And when she, when she brought it to my attention, that’s when I began to deal with it. And then once I dealt with it, it was just like, “I don’t care what anyone thinks.” I just reassure my son, you know. “Don’t let anybody tell you different. You know, you’re not different from anybody else.”’

What is especially striking from this reported on-going conversation between Delores and Sasha is that what Delores ‘brought to [Sasha’s] attention’ is not that she should not cover the mirrors but something much more profound. Sasha comes to understand that it was she, and not her son, who could not ‘deal with’ his disfigurement. Returning to Cavell’s moral perfectionism, Delores serves the crucial role of friend by pointing not to a simple error in moral judgment but a whole way of understanding how to support one’s child who is going to be confronted by social stigma. Hiding is not the answer; coming to accept one’s physical imperfections is. But this means challenging the way the world is likely to see you—developing an internal resilience that can withstand the scorn of others. If Sasha wants her son to think that he is not different from, or less than, others, she must herself come to see her child in this way. She must summon a new kind of moral courage she has not needed before, the kind that will allow her to not ‘care what anyone thinks’ about her son’s scars. Sasha is herself clear that ‘dealing with’ her son’s disfigurement has entailed a shift in her moral outlook that is very profound. It has involved facing her own vulnerabilities and inadequacies as a mother. She remarked once, plaintively: ‘Everyone would say you have to be strong for [Willy]. But, I mean, how do you, be strong, you know? It’s like, that’s like, that’s my kid (...) I’m vulnerable, you know what I mean? Because this is my kid and he has just suffered, you know’, she paused here, voice trembling at the force of the suffering he has endured, ‘something I never imagined’.

Even deciding to allow her son to undergo a series of surgeries to repair the scars on his face has to be done from a place of strength: each one terrified Sasha. These on-going situations, which must be ‘dealt with’ are episodes in Sasha’s unfolding life story. She situates them in the ongoing work of making good choices about how to care for Willy within a broader project of remaking her own life, including reorienting her own moral perspective. She has had to confront her own prejudices toward others with disabilities or disfigurements. She believes she has become a better person because this has happened to her. As she put it a few years after Willy’s accident, she was once rather ‘judgmental’ of people, but the accident

made me a better person (...) Cause I used to be like really judgmental. Like, ‘Oh, what’s their problem?’ Or, you know, ‘What’s wrong with them?’ But it kind of made me realize that, you know, people do the same thing that I did to others. You know, to my son. And I try to protect him from that, you know. And I know no matter how I try to protect him that there’s gonna be someone out there that’s gonna be like ‘Ohh.’ You know or some kid out there’s gonna be like, ‘You’re ugly’, or something like that. But he takes it in stride, he takes it in stride. And I’m really proud of him, you know? And that’s that.

Her moral re-envisioning has allowed her to embrace the pain of others—to quite literally see others, those with disabilities and disfigurements, differently.

Delores plays the role of a friend to Sasha in another way, by insisting on bringing Willy into everyday family life. She challenges Sasha's initial instincts to keep him away from the rest of the family. This isolation, as Sasha readily admitted later, was not only about protecting her child but also about her own anger and bitterness, especially at her niece who had not looked out for him properly. Her own moral striving is clearly evident in her accounts of her changing perspective in which a central practice of striving to love involves forgiveness. Sasha portrays her most difficult struggle as battling her initial rage. It was difficult for Sasha not to be angry at Shareen, but she knew that her niece was not only 'really, really sorry' but also felt horribly guilty. 'She couldn't even, when I got to the hospital, she couldn't even look at me.' In the hospital Sasha acts generously—she hugs her niece. But this generous act is only a moment in an on-going effort not to become bitter or blame anyone for what happened. This internal effort is at the heart of Sasha's many stories about caring for her child. Here is one of many quotes on the matter: 'It was, oh God, so, so painful for me (...) 'cause you first, I mean, you want to be mad. That's what I wanted to be initially. I wanted to be mad.' She has had to fight this impulse. 'I tried really hard not to be angry, not to be bitter, because I know how it can make a person'. She is grateful that despite her anger, the feeling of hurt is what predominated. And even her hurt has gradually subsided. She has been able to move on, even to consider herself lucky for her child who has survived his surgeries and is 'so, so smart'. She couches this moral transformation in the language of healing: 'I healed from my hurt', she says.

When Cavell insists that moral transformation is not merely an internal process but an interpersonal one, the examples he chooses to illustrate his claims are taken from a genre of Hollywood remarriage comedies of the 1930s. These sparkingly written films showcase fast-paced, clever dialogues among the key protagonists. They are, quite literally, conversational. In drawing upon his idea of conversation I want to expand this notion in a way I believe quite compatible with his argument, to include a less sparkling, indeed less verbal form of dialogue, one that is rooted in everyday practices of care. In the thirteen years I knew this family before Delores' death, she was at the helm in keeping the household together and her primary avenue of action was the crafting and recrafting of everyday home routines in response to the changing circumstances of their lives together. When Willy was hurt, she did not so much converse with Sasha as steer her and the whole family toward new ways of being together in which care for Willy became a family project. Home routines and rituals provided the space for recreating love and connection. Sasha has repeatedly underscored that family healing occurred through actions. In the initial days when he came home from the hospital, Willy was the central figure in the household. Sasha remembers:

It was like everybody needed a role to be able to function. You know, like everybody wanted to either bathe him or to clean his wounds or you know have something to do with him directly. You know for everyone to feel like OK, I'm a part of this, you know. Or, I'm dealing with this, you know?

She noted that in her family it is through such practices of care, rather than talking together or focusing on emotions, that people try to heal their collective hurt.

Because, I mean we honestly, we've never sat down as a family and really talked about it. We just embraced it, and moved from there. We never really sat down. Well I've never sat down with them, you know. And none of them have ever come to talk to me about it. Like well, 'Let's sit down and talk about the situation.' Like OK, 'This, this hurt.' 'This really affected me.' Or 'This is how I felt.' We never did like that. We never did that. But everybody grabbed it and just made it a part of them.

Love, imperfection and the moral ordinary

I have described a moral crisis, a breakdown of the love that has united a family, which precipitates, for Sasha in particular, intense self-reflection and a process of moral transformation and re-orientation. Even if family routines were called into play as part of this transformative process, the situation I have described might seem far removed from something we would call 'ordinary life'. In fact, this kind of crisis event and the call for love it demands might seem to fit very well with recent considerations of love that have contrasted its possibilities with the normative constrictions of the everyday. In this vein, the excessive and even transgressive properties of love have been elaborated (Berlant 1998, 2011; Willerslev in Venkatesan et al. 2011; Zigon 2013). Zigon, following Simon Critchley (2010) and especially Badiou (2001), argues that love presents an

evental demand [which] shakes one out of his or her normal everyday existence and impels a transgression or transcendence of one's already acquired way of being in the world. In this sense, the demand of love initiates a moral breakdown. We are not equal to the demand of love because, in the very act of loving, we lose ourselves—shatter ourselves—and, in response, must struggle to remake selves capable of remaining faithful to the new subjective trajectory initiated through love's demand. (Zigon 2013: 212)

Berlant also offers a portrait of 'excess' in trying to create a theoretical space for intimacy that cannot be reduced to convention:

For intimacy refers to more than that which takes place within the purview of institutions, the state, and an ideal of publicness. What if we saw it emerge from much more mobile processes of attachment? While the fantasies associated with intimacy usually end up occupying the space of convention, in practice the drive toward it is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized that way, or any way. It can be portable, unattached to a concrete space: a drive that creates spaces around it through practices. (1998: 284)

Berlant works to capture something important here that does not have to constitute history with a capital 'H' but can flow in and out of ordinary life, as when she states of these 'wild' spaces that they are 'produced relationally; people and/in institutions can return repeatedly to them and produce something, though frequently not history in its ordinary, memorable, or valorized sense, and not always "something" of positive value' (Berlant 1998: 285).

I have quoted her at some length here to get at the subtle—but *important*—difference between Cavell's moral perfectionism and her transcendent possibilities and intimate wild moments. Berlant is especially concerned with illicit moments that transgress conventional norms. Thus, the normative tends to be treated as something that crushes, or at best neglects these illicit intimacies: 'desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable

spaces of culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them. What happens to the energy of attachment when it has no designated place? To the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon?' (Berlant 1998: 285)

It is unquestionably valuable to explore intimacies that are outlawed by everyday normativity but if these situations become the exemplars of our theoretical understanding of something so pervasive and variously fraught as love and intimacy, we risk missing how much trouble and challenge *everyday love* in a relatively more conventional intimate structure can create. The hope of 'excess' has the problematic consequence of making conventional life *too* conventional. Cavell's work offers a useful corrective that brings some of the 'wildness' that Berlant describes into relatively more normatively sanctified and familiar spaces—like those of a mother's love in North American society. Drawing upon Cavell, I want to expand a claim I have made elsewhere (Mattingly 2012, 2013), that the moral ordinary cannot be reduced to the simple production of hegemonic discourses or unthinking dispositional practices (see Lambek 2010 for a discussion of this). Rather the ordinary has a moral complexity in which the habitual, repeatable, and conventional offer an unruly potentiality for the new. Why is this so? The moral ordinary is not merely the place of predictability, of routine, but also a space of potentiality. As a *moral domain*, it contains within it possibilities—qualities that Cavell describes as 'transcendent'. He states: 'the general condition that perfectionism depends upon [is] the knowledge of oneself as, let's say, transcendental with respect to one's given subject position as defined by society' (2004: 154–155). There is an identity at least possible to us, Cavell suggests, that is not simply ratified by our social roles. But transcendence or potentiality is not exactly a gift. If we are marked by moral potential, we are also poised for moral disappointment. Indeed, it is *disappointment* that deeply characterizes everyday life, in Cavell's view.

This situation of moral disappointment also has a long claim on philosophical thought, Cavell argues. The Western beginnings of philosophy are intimately linked to 'disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects, and perhaps to lodge the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world. So common is this pattern of disappointment and desire (...) that I think of it as the moral calling of philosophy, and name it moral perfectionism.' (2004: 2) One might imagine that this disappointment might compel one to try to leave the everyday, or to find a better world in a place quite apart from the everyday, as it commonly has in philosophy and religion. But Cavell, following especially Wittgenstein, insists upon exploring this perfectionism within the everyday. He seems to suggest a kind of perverse longing that characterizes the quotidian—it intimates possibility precisely as it disappoints. It confronts us with a continual paradox even as, in moments of crisis, life may seem to demand that we undertake transformative moral projects. The existential paradox is that our moral projects do not simply allow us to realize our ideals, even if we might sometimes be able to achieve 'an attainable next [moral] self' (2004: 84). Undertaking these projects also presents us with an on-going 'task of accepting finitude' (2004: 4).

Das offers an especially clear elaboration of Cavell's consideration of the everyday that separates it from the more usual ways anthropologists have envisioned it. She states:

Everyday life can be understood in many ways. Everyday life might, for instance, be thought of as the site of routine and habit, within which strategic contests for culturally approved goods such as honor or prestige take place. For others, everyday life provides the site through which the projects of state power or given scripts of normativity can be resisted; (...) our attachment to routines and habits is inflected by another affect (...) the experience of the everyday [is] also the site of trance, illusion and danger. (Das 2010: 376, 2007)

The ordinary as *also* a space of illusion and danger is of paramount importance to a Cavellian understanding of moral striving. It means that 'to secure the everyday, far from being something we take for granted, might be thought of as an achievement' (Das 2010: 376, 2007).

This recognition that the everyday can be a precarious achievement is evident in this case and especially in Delores' responses to Willy's accident. While Sasha often envisions him either as a victim or, more often, as a family hero, Delores has many strategies for countering Sasha and for operating, again as a Cavellian friend, in helping Sasha to appreciate how ordinary he is. We can see this with particular clarity in a story that Delores instigated and that became part of family lore.

The 'Dog Food Dinner': the cultural shape of the moral ordinary

Delores created many small moments within the routines of everyday family life to signal that Willy, however his face may be changed, is neither victim nor hero. He is still a headstrong child who can make anyone laugh. She told many stories to reinforce this. Here is one in which cooking for the children becomes a chance to craft a story in which Willy's agentive, witty and cantankerous qualities are revealed. The household routine in this family is that on days when Delores cooks dinner, she likes 'to start it early' and then people can eat whenever they please. She laughingly recounts how Willy asked for his food and what he thought about her cooking.

She tells this particular story to a group of other parents and members of our research team. This was during one of our Collective Narrative Group meetings, which Mary Lawlor and I have co-run for fifteen years as part of our longitudinal ethnographic study. During the primary years of the study (1997–2011), we held between two and four such meetings each year. Delores was a regular member and the other families already knew her as well as Sasha. They had heard humorous stories about Willy before, generally recounted by Delores. In the Dog Food narrative, Delores offers a picture of a young child who is far from a victim. Not only can he be safely cared for when Sasha is away from home, he exhibits the ability to take good care of himself. She pulls in Sasha (also present in the group) as co-narrator. It is important that Delores does not simply help to create the experience she later recounts, but that putting this experience into a narrative, and telling and retelling that narrative—charging Sasha to be a co-narrator—is her means of memorializing such moments.

Delores: I like to start my dinner early, and so Willy came to me and said last night, he said, 'I'm ready to eat.' And I said, 'OK, I'm gonna fix your plate right now.' And he always says something funny. Last night I had barbeque chicken and cabbage. And he says, 'This is dog food.' [Group laughs.] And I said, 'What did you say?' 'This is dog food!' And I said, 'Well don't

eat the cabbage, eat the meat.’ And he tastes the meat and says, ‘That is pretty good.’ Later in the evening he comes back for more food. About ten o’clock last night he came back. He said, ‘I’m ready to eat again.’ And I said, ‘Remember you told me I cooked dog food?’ He laughs and I tell him, ‘Eat the cabbage.’ And he ate the cabbage. He said, ‘This is pretty good, this is pretty good.’ And he ate it all. And so when Sasha got home I said, ‘Sasha, your son said I cooked dog food!’ [Delores laughs.] And [Sasha] asked him—what did you say? [She turns to Sasha] Sasha [reluctantly joins in at her mother’s solicitation]: He told me he ate dog food. [Group laughs.] Delores: I said, ‘Out of all the years I’ve been cooking I never cooked dog food for nobody.’

This joking episode is further elaborated by Willy’s cousins. They went to the store and brought back some dog food that they then presented to Delores. Delores adds this epilogue to the co-narrative amidst much laughter by the rest of us. While Sasha consistently identifies her son as a gifted boy and a family healer who is somehow above the fray, Delores actively creates a different child, one who is ‘ordinary’, not a hero at all. He is even the kind of boy willing to insult his own revered grandmother, moral compass of this household. Delores’ repeated narration of this story of disrespect furthers another kind of family identity attached to Willy. In insisting that his grandmother’s cooking is not just flawed, it is so bad that it’s not fit for humans, Willy, rather unheroically, becomes notable in the family for his insults.

The Dog Food story suggests a genre of joking deeply rooted within the African American tradition. Delores presents a grandson who has (somewhat precociously) already begun to master an important rhetorical skill. By valorizing such tales as the ‘Dog Food Dinner’, Delores draws upon a culturally prized capability to trade insults. Anthropologists and sociolinguists have long attended to playful verbal virtuosity that has been cultivated in the African American community. Abrahams noted some decades ago: ‘Perhaps the clearest indication of the distinctiveness of the Black speech community lies in the use of speech in the pursuit of public *playing* (...) Playing, in fact, is an important way in which one distinguishes oneself in public, and engaging in witty verbal exchanges is one important way of playing’ (1974: 241). Among children, this can be initiated as part of disputing (Goodwin 1990). Traditionally in the Black Oral Tradition, insults took the form of ‘the dozens’—riffs that were ritually aimed at someone’s mother or other relatives (Labov 1972: 304; Smitherman 1999). Speaking in the vernacular popular in the 1990s, Smitherman elaborates: ‘Literally speaking, when you “dis” someone, you discount, discredit, disrespect that person—a dis is an insult. In the Black Oral Tradition, however, a dis also constitutes a verbal game, played with ritualized insults. The disses are purely ceremonial, which creates a safety zone. Like it’s not personal, it’s business—in this case, the business of playing on and with the Word’ (1999: 223). In Delores’ story, she attributes this verbal agility to Willy. He has evidently offered ‘dozens’ insults not about someone else’s mother (as would be proper) but about her, someone who is an ‘other mother’ for him. In attributing this insult to Willy, Delores is encouraging Willy to cultivate a particular kind of skill that he will need in order to survive in the world of other children. The purpose of this kind of game, variously called ‘dissing’, ‘signifyin’ or ‘snaps’ is one-upmanship. For this, it is a game ‘best played in a group of appreciative onlookers, who are secondary participants in the game’ (Smitherman 1999: 224).

In sum, Delores insists on offering a portrait of Willy’s strengths in a way that morally confronts Sasha, although in an indirect way. Sasha’s initial transformation of the home

space—covering up all the mirrors—is reworked by Delores who eases Willy into family routines where his smartness and wit can be highlighted. The point is not to hide his face (Sasha’s instinct) but to learn how to show his face. His skill at verbal play proves useful, in fact. As Sasha feared, when Willy grew older he became a regular target of teasing, not only by ‘harsh’ children on the street or at school but within the family. Delores’ Willy, however, is the kind of boy who not only gets called ‘ugly’ by his own family, he can use this insult to advantage to display his own superior wit. We can see in the following exchange with his younger cousin Charles with whom he regularly squabbles. In this interchange, Willy provokes a fight to be captured ‘on camera’ by Kim, one of the researchers on the project. The initial provocation occurs when, grinning, he tries to stick his fingers up Charles’ nose. Charles squirms away as Kim looks on uncomfortably, wondering whether she should try to separate the boys. Willy does this in full awareness that he is being filmed and relies on Kim as audience.

Willy [to Kim]: Watch this, he don’t like people digging in his nose.
 Kim: I wouldn’t think so. I don’t like people digging in my nose, do you?
 Willy: Look, now look, he’ll try to fight me. You see?
 Charles starts to swat Willy.
 Kim: Yup.
 Willy: Stop Charles.
 Charles: Shut up.
 Willy: Whatchu say?
 Charles: Shut up. That’s what I—
 Willy [interrupts, more loudly]: What did you say?
 Charles: Just said, ugly.
 Willy: Say, [pauses with a glint in his eye] spell ugly.
 Charles (confused): Ugly? How do you spell?
 Willy: No, there’s a word called ugly. Spell it.

Charles confesses that he does not, in fact, know how to spell ugly, to Willy’s delight. While the two children are quite aware that the video camera is on them, these exchanges are common among the cousins. Willy’s ‘ugliness’ becomes a part of him that can be exploited in their rough and tumble play where everyone’s vulnerabilities provide fodder in battles of one upmanship. Though Willy is regularly taunted by Charles, who calls him ‘ugly’, he proves to have his own resources for rebuttal and even instigation, showcasing Charles’ ignorance of spelling. Willy’s skill here is not only a matter of mastering a form of verbal play but also necessary in a child’s world in which he must learn to stand up for himself in whatever disputes arise with other children. In Goodwin’s meticulous ethnography of African American children’s play and social organization, she noted that children themselves believed it important that they be able to fight their own battles without assistance. ‘Indeed, requiring the assistance of an adult is treated as a form of cowardice and can result in extensive ridicule. Children state that the intervention of adults in their disputes is unnecessary.’ (1990: 156) One could trace Willy’s skill and his willingness to play such games to the training that Delores has provided through her insistence on family narrations of, for example, the Dog Food Dinner. Here, the home emerges as a sanctuary, not in the way Sasha hopes for and sometimes euphemistically portrays it—a place in which her son is safe from being insulted—but one in which safety

comes from being able to take up a 'subject position' of the disfigured boy and play with it, even use it to advantage, in a game of wit.

Willy's verbal skills also suggest a kind of transcendence that goes beyond inhabiting a particular subject position, a possibility for moral becoming. As Willy grows older, he is no longer the same center of family concern. New family tragedies arise that once again challenge family love and reveal its limits. Most devastating was the murder of Leroy, Willy's older cousin. When Willy was nine years old, Leroy was shot and killed in his front yard when he was 16, while Willy stood just next to him. The two boys had been very close, with Leroy often acting as his protector. We can catch a glimpse of this possibility of moral becoming in the brief funeral speech he gives for Leroy. As is common in African American funeral services, there is a period where people from the floor are given a chance to come up and speak. This includes not only prepared speeches but spontaneous ones as well. Willy is the only one among his young cousins in the household who chooses to do so. He moves to the front of the packed church and stands to face us. He is short even for nine years old and his face still bears the scars of the accident, even after many surgeries. But, his voice is unwavering as he tells about family love. How is that love expressed by him? Willy recounts the on-going trading of insults, mock battles and trickery that were part of his relationship with Leroy, the way he would 'dare' his cousin (more than twice his size) to come get him. He is the only speaker that day who makes those of us in the audience laugh. He concludes with the simple words: 'Leroy, I love you.'

Conclusion

I have made two interrelated claims in this paper. One concerns the centrality of friendship to moral transformation. I examine efforts at transformation precipitated by a moral crisis, or in Cavell's words, a 'disappointment with the way the world is'. The second claim concerns the necessity for something like a 'moral ordinary' even when theorizing transformative efforts precipitated by a 'moral breakdown' within everyday life. I part company with a widely held view in anthropology that the properly moral (or ethical) needs to be radically contrasted with the ordinary (Faubion 2011; Zigon 2011). I have attempted to elucidate what I see as equally important to a theory of love—and to moral anthropology more broadly—namely recuperating the complexity and transcendence that belongs even to the mundane. My hope is not so much to leave the important concern with ruptures, excesses and disjunctive moments behind—far from it—but to consider how to bring to love, friendship and family life a gaze that foregrounds the singularities of what anthropologists have so often cast as mere 'repeatable' routines and practices.

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