

1 April 2007 * The Rules of Life according to "Car Talk"
Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak UU Congregation

Note: All of the "Car Talk" episodes that were played during this sermon can be purchased and downloaded at www.audible.com. You're welcome to browse for them on www.cartalk.com (in fact, I encourage you to explore that website!), but that site will direct you to Audible if you want more than a short clip.

One of the great pleasures of Unitarian Universalism is our theological and epistemological flexibility. In casting a wide net, we UU's find ourselves celebrating holy days that might otherwise be overlooked – such as our Purim service in March – and paying homage to surprising sources of wisdom and guidance. Therefore, since today is a rare convergence of three distinct traditions – Palm Sunday in the Christian tradition, the eve of Passover in the Jewish tradition, and April Fools Day in the secular world – it was difficult deciding which of these to preach on.

Right. Who am I kidding?

I've been waiting for this Sunday for months; have been waiting for *years* for an acceptable occasion on which to preach about "Car Talk." With assurances that we'll return to the theological straight-and-narrow *next* Sunday, in a traditional Easter service, I invite you to expand your sense of "wisdom," and those who shape our ethical and moral lives. *("Car Talk" theme song plays...)*

For those of you who don't recognize that banjo riff, "Car Talk" is a call-in radio show that airs on National Public Radio, usually on Saturday mornings. The show is hosted by two loud-mouth, belly-laughing, MIT-educated, Italian brothers from *Bah-sten*: Tom and Ray Magliozzi, also known as Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers.

"Car Talk" has been on NPR since 1987, and today almost 600 stations carry it, reaching more than 4.4 million listeners a week (some of whom, in Ray's words, "can only pick up their local NPR station, and would rather listen to [Car Talk] than static.") Every week, around 2,000 people call the studio to leave a question for Tom and Ray, but about eight callers actually get to talk to them during any given show. (In the interest of full disclosure, one reason I'm so fond of Click and Clack is that they took my call ten years ago, diagnosing a bad heat shield on my 1985 Celica). The brothers also receive thousands of letters and emails with questions about cars; about 1 in 1,000 is answered in their syndicated newspaper column.

Although "Car Talk" is supposed to be a show about cars and car repair, many people discover their car troubles to be not entirely mechanical: that is, sometimes car problems encroach into our personal and professional relationships, or require us to wrestle with philosophical and ethical questions. As "Car Talk" listeners know, Tom and Ray are

more than happy to dole out ethical and relationship advice – and usually it’s pretty good.

I very much wanted to include the Magliozzi’s advice about life and love in this sermon, but time constraints have forced me to focus in on simple ethics. What you’ll hear today are three callers, each of whom brought an ethical question to Click and Clack, and the brothers’ response to those issue. The first call is about...*revenge*.

Mark from Sacramento, California (12/3/05 @ 30:12)

Mark is a college student who got involved in a “car war.” Someone in his dorm stuffed canned mackerel in his car’s air vents and under door handles. Click and Clack said that, regarding the stench of fish, “there’s no hope for the car.” They wondered what Mark had done to provoke such a prank and Mark confessed that, weeks earlier, he had shaving-creamed another student’s car. What should he do now to retaliate? “This is the time to escalate!” proclaimed Ray (in jest). In actuality, the brothers both suggested, it might be best not to do anything, but to let Mark’s prankster “worry himself to death” by dropping subtle hints (“Car running all right?”) and perhaps leaving something of Mark’s near the prankster’s car as a red herring.

As you heard, the Tappet brothers were quick to suss out the relationship dynamics behind the mackerel attack on Mark’s car, and shaped their response in playful psychological terms rather than adopting an “eye for an eye” mentality. Although they initially encouraged escalation of the dorm wars, they were more encouraging of letting Mark’s prankster “worry himself to death” than having Mark actually violate another person’s property.

Two months later, the brothers aired a follow-up, incorporating listeners’ feedback:

Follow-up on Mark (2/11/06 @ 1:30)

The Tappet Brothers read two listeners’ ideas for Marks’ revenge: Mel in Mitchell, South Dakota suggested “safe, non-violent ways to get back at the jerk without property damage” – including pouring cherry Kool-Aid under the car to simulate a transmission leak. “The emotional damage and the worry, to quote MasterCard’s ads, is priceless.” Another listener, Doug, suggested sprinkling valerian root tea leaves (which, when wet, have a foul and “distinct smell, like stinky feet”) on the car (“The smell eventually goes away after six to twelve months”). Click and Clack would never recommend any of these, of course!

Tom and Ray devoted airtime to highlight “safe, non-violent ways” to avenge harmful pranks “without property damage,” making it clear that they “would never recommend” any of these tricks. There’s still an element of getting back, but it’s couched in playful, creative terms – and there’s not a single note of anger, judgment, or condemnation in their words.

You'll hear Tom and Ray's bonhomie again in this second call about...*accountability in relationships.*

Kim from Halton City, Texas (8/20/05 @ 4:05)

Kim's ethical question: she and her husband sold a car (with "the best air conditioner in Texas) to clients of theirs, who purchased it for their teenage son. Four weeks later, the car "blew up." Kim's question: "Should we give the money back?" The brothers' answer: Yes. Give back the entire amount – or at least the "lion's share" – "to maintain the proper relationship" with their client, and they'll "get it back in more business."

Again, Click and Clack's questions zoned in on Kim's business relationship with their clients. If you listen to "Car Talk" often, you'll know that their perspective isn't profit-driven; rather, Tom and Ray's sense of "fairness" is often centered on putting themselves in the others' shoes, acting in kindness, and keeping the peace in our relationships. All of that adds up to what we might amorously call "doing what's right." That's what you'll hear in this, the final call....

James from Charleston, South Carolina (7/30/05 @ 12:00)

James explains his "moral issue": seven months ago he bought a 15-year old car from his neighbor (it belonged to the neighbor's late parents), and he recently discovered a loose flap of rug in the car's trunk. Under the rug, James found an envelope with \$3,200 in small bills. His question: should he tell the neighbor? The brothers' answer: Look everywhere else in the car for more money! Seriously, they suggested, James might give the money to a charity. After more thought, the brothers counseled James to tell the neighbor about the money. Bottom line: legally, the money belongs to James, but morally, the money belongs to the original owners of the car, even though they've passed away.

What's so interesting about James' call is that, first, he invoked their shared faith of Roman Catholicism in addressing his moral issue, and second, he genuinely wanted Tom and Ray's honest answer about whether to stay \$3,200 richer. (How many people just want an answer that sounds good to them?) After a spate of jokes, the Magliozzi's counsel to James placed good faith in his ability to separate the legal answer from the moral one.

If we had all day to listen to more calls, you'd learn even more about these two mechanics-cum-advice gurus. For example, Tom and Ray don't always need to be right. When presented with a problem they *think* they know the answer to, they ask questions even when the answer could shoot down their guess. You'd observe their commitment to preserving marital harmony, and to teaching spouses not to gloat when their advice solves a long-standing dispute. You'd also hear that Tom and Ray live by a

code of kindness and respect for “the commons” – whatever helps people pool their collective knowledge, and keeps the most people as safe as possible. They’re two pretty great guys who give out pretty good advice.

But don’t take *my* word for all of that. Just tune in (or log on: www.cartalk.com) and see for yourself!