



You Must Learn the Joys of Sinning

by John Ballantine

You must learn to lie a little, bend the rules, and make the game work for you. You must learn the joys of sinning to make real money. Then we'll wrap the sins up in a big package with smiling faces, full of giving, and art all around, and they will forget.

This was not taught in school or by my parents, who enjoyed the fruits of commerce. No, the virtues of truth telling, not coveting your neighbor's wife or ass, and the golden rule were not part of my white man's world. But the lies were there, as we cozied up to Stalin, said we did not want to kill, and we fire-bombed city after city. And they were bad, the Germans, the Japs, and later the commies, so it was okay. But the lies were big, don't worry.

Instead, we were taught the virtues of the American way: industry, hard work, and honesty. The ingredients of success: a two-car garage, a wife, kids, and a job that made you feel good. Something went wrong with that TV show—in fact, it was never true for women, blacks, or the poor.

But something much deeper was wrong. I didn't know this for a long time. My sinning started slow, with a glance at the test next to me, cheating maybe; stolen change from my father's bureau; the pilfered model from the five-and-ten. The white lies that no one thought were true. The compromise of living in the gray. No black-and-white morality here.

Somewhere along the way, something more sinister emerged. Young men locked up for truancy and stealing a car, not liking the drunken parent; black children in crummy schools; the grandchildren of Henrietta, my black mama; the children who did not have a chance like me. That was just the way it was, born wrong and traveling on a different road from my circuitous way here.

The tales of woe were woven into a more elaborate tapestry. The logic of economy and the politics of those who didn't vote...the shape of our world. The money from African mines that funded good causes, trying to turn the world around. This all emerged very slowly, piece by piece. First, I learned to walk in suits and tie, counted the rows of figures, and knew that two plus two did not equal four because we could make a little extra on the side. Nothing too sly, but not totally right. We ate off fine china, talked about them and us most sensitively, but the bombs dropped nonetheless, and the money flowed with the oil of empires.

Our sinning now is fully camouflaged and dressed up in board rooms, across markets, and in the daily costumes of living. Something went terribly wrong with the virtues of clean, honest lives where we took no more than we needed.

It started so far back, almost by instinct, like the extra suckle of milk

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from the mother's breast, the cry at night when I wasn't sleepy, or the something I knew but did not say. The lie that cloaks me in blankets as I open my eyes and say it is not about the money, when we all know it is. How could I go right when it started wrong right from the start?

John W. Ballantine, a professor at Brandeis International Business School, received his bachelor's degree in English from Harvard University, then earned a master's degree and Ph.D. in economics from University of Chicago and NYU Stern, respectively. He writes about energy, the economy, finance and his reflections of the world -- using all sides of his brain. His memoir essays spring from a five year writing class and being in the world of his family, his students from around the world, the books he reads, and memories he revisits. During the past 15 years, he and his wife, Ann, host monthly "poetry potlucks" in their log home. He has taken workshops with Grub Street, The Writers Studio and the Concord-Carlisle Community School with Barbara O'Neil, following the "Writing Down To The Bones" method. He puts pen to paper and tries to "shut up and write." He loves learning, reading, writing, making sense of our wonderfully complex world. His work has appeared in *Crack the Spine*, *Penmen Review*, *Rubbertop Review*, and *Saint Ann's Review*.

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