



Right Sizing our Role Models: Madalyn Murray O’Hair, Nelson Mandela, Bill W.—game changers are people 1st, history makers 2nd.

What makes trailblazers remarkable? Are they gifted people who change the course of history or ordinary people who we canonize in reflection of their good deeds? Of course they are ordinary people with strengths and weakness who find themselves at a crossroads—maybe a familiar crossroads where they have been before. Our would-be heroes are generally facing insurmountable odds. More often than not, they are the defiant ones with the establishment against them. At that fateful moment they take the first step on a journey, the true significance of which, I suspect, they were ignorant about, and in so doing, they alter the course of history. We all have strengths and weaknesses. Some who shine so brightly with unique abilities might be severely lacking in fundamental skills that are expected and taken for granted.

Bill Wilson said that AA had many better examples of spiritual living (practicing these principles in all of our affairs) than he could live up to. He authored the formula. He was chosen by *Time Magazine* as one of America’s most significant individuals of the 20th century. His book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, was recognized by the Library of Congress for its impact on American culture. Was he a good sponsor? Was he a good husband? How would today’s recovery community rate his example to others? He experimented with LSD and his Twelve Steps were no match for depression that rendered him dysfunctional from time to time. He died of emphysema, or plainly put, addiction to cigarettes. He was a man, with noble attributes and glaring shortcomings. To this day, he has his worshippers and he has his critics.

A new movie, *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, celebrates one of our generation’s trailblazers.

Nelson Mandela’s efforts and leadership forged a breakthrough for many. Was he a good father, was he a good husband? Nelson Mandela has had three wives and six children in his tumultuous life. Only three of these children are still living. A daughter recalls being met by a father who went from life-imprisonment to being released from prison 20 years ago (serving 27 years of a life sentence) and then

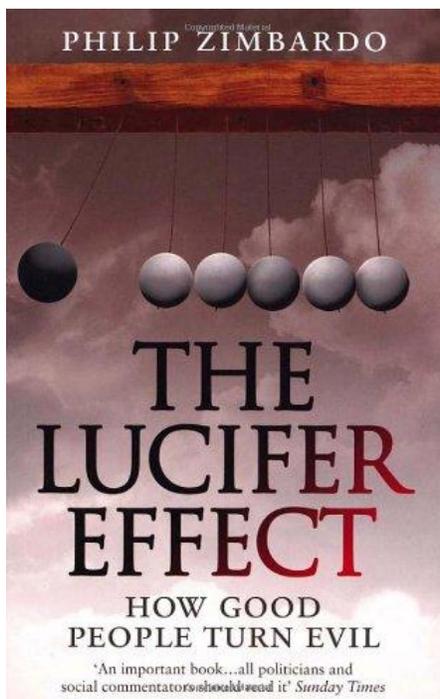


“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.”

- Nelson Mandela

being dragged away from the family again as he was thrust into the demands of public life. Zenani Mandela was five when her father went to jail. She remembers him being a stern disciplinarian, even from prison, running the family through letters and minimal contact. His son, Mandla, was recently embroiled in legal issues against the rest of the family. It's not unreasonable to expect that Nelson Mandela was an absentee father with a lot on his mind. It would be forgivable that home life would have been chaotic but what kind of environment is that for kids to grow up in?

I am not fault-finding for the pure uplifting buzz of putting others down. What I am saying is that we all have our assets and liabilities, critics and fans. We tend to want to label everyone as being a *good guy* or *bad guy* as depicted in literature—the Jedi knights vs. the dark side of The Force. But what literature is whispering to us is the Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde in each of us; not us over here and them over there.



Aleksandr Solzenitsyn said, “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them; but the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

We are all capable of good, we are all capable of vengeance. What psychologist Philip Zimbardo, author of *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*ⁱ, learned about good and evil growing up on the mean streets of Brooklyn as a youth. About the line between good and evil, Zimbardo says, “Privileged people like to think [the line] is fixed and impermeable, with them on the good side and evil on the other side. But I knew that line could be movable and permeable; good people could be seduced into evil and in some circumstances, bad kids could recover.ⁱⁱ” Our heroes have done regrettable things and villains have redeeming qualities. But we are still shocked when he hear the neighbor of the serial killer next door say on TV, “She was charming woman and president of the PTA.”

American Atheists have a Bill W-esque hero whose era overlapped the AA cofounder. Her name is Madalyn Murray O’Hair, another flawed person who did heroic things. Many of these people, Mandela and to some degree Bill W, were marginalized or persecuted people. Madalyn Murray O’Hair would become the most hated woman in America, ostensibly for being a patriot.

“An Atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that deed must be done instead of prayer said. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanished, war eliminated.”



- Madalyn Murray O'Hair

The 1953 USA of President Eisenhower was the Cold War era. Madalyn was a mother. The administration changed America's Pledge of Allegiance. "One nation, **indivisible** with liberty and justice for all" was what the kids sung out in school every

morning. The pledge was changed to "One nation **under God**..." "In God We Trust" was added to the currency as another attempt to encourage Americans to identify with their Abrahamic faith and distance themselves from the Godless communists of Russia.

Madalyn found it objectionable that her son or any child was pressured to participate in bible study in a public school. If her son resisted, he would be harassed. She objected. A decade after the unholy marriage between church and state in Eisenhower's America, the Supreme Court declared that organized prayer in public schools is unconstitutional. It was a consolidated case, *Abington School District v. Schempp & Murray v. Curlett*, that were argued in February 1963 and on June 17, 1963 an 8 – 1 decision ruled that state-mandated prayer and bible reading were a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

In this case Madalyn Murray O'Hair made this opening statement about what an atheist is. For those who identify as "spiritual, not religious," tell me if it lacks anything from your definition of *spirituality*:

1. An atheist loves his fellow man instead of god. An atheist believes that heaven is something for which we should work now—here on earth for all men together to enjoy.
2. An atheist believes that he can get no help through prayer but that he must find in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it, and enjoy it.
3. An atheist believes that only in a knowledge of himself and a knowledge of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will lead to a life of fulfillment.
4. He seeks to know himself and his fellow man rather than to know a god. An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said.
5. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanquished, war eliminated. He wants man to understand and love man. He wants an ethical way of life.
6. He believes that we cannot rely on a god or channel action into prayer nor hope for an end of troubles in a hereafter. He believes that we are our brother's keepers and are keepers of our own lives; that we are responsible persons and the job is here and the time is now.

Is anyone hearing Twelve Step philosophy here? Minus the dependency on the supernatural, of course, this is our creed. Our one-day-at-a-time mantra is eloquently expressed. I suggest that atheists have a better one day at a time program than people who believe in reincarnation or heaven. “This life is it, baby; no dress rehearsal; no second chances.” Every day matters to an atheist.

Madalyn’s statement picks up on the maintenance Steps Ten to Twelve, minus the theism but true to the principles. “Only in a knowledge of himself and a knowledge of his fellow man, can he find and understand a life that will lead to fulfillment.”—The inventory of Step 10. I hear our “faith without works is dead” of Step 11 in “He seeks to know himself and his fellow man rather than to know a god. An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said.” Who connects with Step 12 in, “We are our brother’s keepers and are keepers of our own lives...”?

The Twelve Step principles were adapted from existing values, they didn’t create something new. It’s therefore reasonable to see them vaguely or more identically reincarnated into other creeds, be they religious, spiritual or militant atheist.

So, am I campaigning to have Madalyn Murray O’Hair canonized? Ah, no. She’s a person, not a saint. I don’t even pretend that she was a nice person. She was right to defend the American Constitution and affirm the separation of church and state. She went on to create the American Atheist Societyⁱⁱⁱ that still works to defend against First Amendment infractions. She started to get notoriety that day in 1963 when photographed on the steps of the Supreme Court. Over time she was known to be outrageous, funny and fearless, standing up to irrational forces on the road or from her headquarters in the belly of the beast—Texas.

That doesn’t mean she was sweet, loveable and kind. History has even more twists than I have described. Now, for the rest of the story:

One of Madalyn’s sons stayed at his mother’s side working in the cause of keeping the land of the free, free of any particular religious influence or favoritism. Madalyn’s oldest son drifted away. William J. Murray was an apostate. From the godlessness of home, he forged a new path for himself. William had problems with the law, violence and addiction. He may have found God in AA. This is from a 1980 People’s Magazine exposé about the rogue white sheep of the Murray family^{iv}

“By that time Bill was an alcoholic. He had a new marriage and a new job as an airline management consultant, but felt his life was falling apart. He quarreled with his wife one night, struck her, and when police came he fired a rifle shot through the front door. He was sentenced to five years probation for aggravated assault (he claimed the gun went off by accident).

Chastened by that, and other crises in his life, Murray turned to Alcoholics Anonymous. Combined with a volunteer job in a drug program, it was the turning point for him. ‘I saw some miraculous things people were able to accomplish with faith,’ he says.”

His mother would continue to be a thorn in his side. William lost a custody battle of his daughter to his mom—the child’s grandparent. He became militant in his Christianity, working to undo what his family had accomplished. Madalyn publicly disowned him with the same sarcastic dismissive demeanor that she afforded any believer. As a parent and as a child I don’t pretend to know what could possess a parent to be so cruel over a difference of opinion.

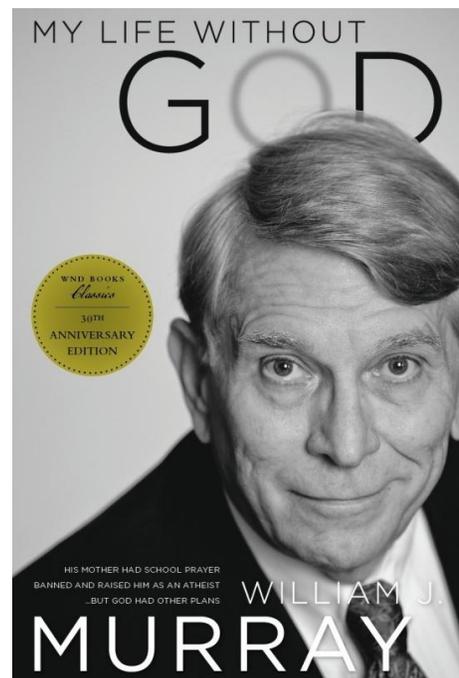
William J Murray’s faith might not grant eternity but it did save his life here on earth. William’s mom, Madalyn, along with his brother and adult daughter would be murdered. They weren’t murdered for what they believed, said or did. It was extortion.

A former felon, David Ronald Waters, had infiltrated the American Atheist’s Center as an employee and observed a pretty stack of money being donated to the organization. In 1995 William Murray’s family would be killed for \$600,000—a crime that would take years to solve. Another AA member figures into this story. George W. Bush would have been about nine years sober when he became Governor of Texas. Finding a missing atheist wouldn’t have been a top priority for the State of Texas in that era. It was the FBI and investigative reporters who kept the case alive and followed up on clues.

William Murray, the son who found God, is an author, Baptist minister, social conservative commentator and chairman of the Religious Freedom Coalition. In his role he defends Christians from American Atheists, Muslims and Communists.

If you have never heard of him it may be because he is too much of a kook even for the Tea Party. Well, I call him a kook. He feels that the Ten Commandments offer the stability that every citizen of earth should obey. Check for yourself at <http://www.religiousfreedomcoalition.org/>

The point I want to get back to is that whatever spirituality is, it comes from flawed, regular people, often reluctant messiahs. Bill Wilson never considered himself to be AA’s best example of the spiritual path. Nelson Mandela admitted that his commitment to a cause made him a second-rate father. To work with or to interview Madalyn Murray O’Hair was no picnic and I expect that her my-way-or-the-highway narcissism made her lacking as a mother. Certainly, the binge and purge turmoil that her one surviving son exhibits, leaves one wondering about Madalyn Murray O’Hair—the whole person. Analysts would have a field day working backwards from William Murray’s alcoholism



and his victim-rescuer, agitator role in life today. Looking back into Bill's experience as a young boy under the hard-headed and tyrannical mother Madalyn, opens the door to criticism of her mothering by today's standards. Madaly changed history but she *ain't no saint*.

Maybe the moral of the story is that while it is fine to be inspired by the accomplishments of others, we best not compare ourselves to them. And if we can't help having the accomplishments of our idols make us feel *less than*, here's what we can do. Digging deeper will reveal what was gained and what was lost by our role models. To see their achievements through, left them—like us—with a balance sheet of assets and liabilities. Would we be so eager to trade places when presented with the cost of doing so? Every act of greatness has a sacrifice to bear.

Madalyn Murray O'Hair reminded the U.S. Supreme Court that a noble credo needs no obedience to any creator. We are Humanists first and maybe we come this way naturally. Any civilized society demonstrates these guiding principles regardless of a predominant belief in Allah, many Allahs or no Allah at all. AA adopted this credo. Every Twelve Step fellowship that followed did too, regardless of what liberty they took in the wording of the Steps.

Madalyn is not celebrated by her country as a patriot. Nonbelievers who share her worldview are still marginalized in the USA. Even though, as she eloquently persuaded the Justices of the Supreme Court, we are good with or without God—certainly not because of him. We can also be evil with or without gods and devils—and certainly not because of them.

ⁱ <http://www.lucifereffect.com/>

ⁱⁱ http://www.ted.com/talks/philip_zimbardo_on_the_psychology_of_evil.html

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.atheists.org/about-us>

^{iv} People Magazine June 2, 1980 <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20076618,00.html>