

## PLEASE TAKE ME SERIOUSLY !

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Hugh Mackay<sup>1</sup>, who lives in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, is the author of a number of books - nine in the field of social analysis, social psychology and ethics. In 2013, his book *The Good Life - What Makes a Life Worth Living ?*, was published by Pan Macmillan Australia. In the Preface of the book, Mackay clarifies what he means by 'the good life':

*..... I'm referring to a life that is characterised by goodness, a morally praiseworthy life, a life valuable in its impact on others, a life devoted to the common good. This type of life is marked by a courteous respect for others' rights, a responsiveness to others' needs (including most particularly their need to be taken seriously) and a concern for others' wellbeing. A person living this life will be motivated by kindness and compassion.*<sup>2</sup>

The core of Hugh Mackay's book lies in the proposition he refers to as the 'Golden Rule'<sup>3</sup>:

*Virtually every philosophical and religious tradition .... tells us ..... that there's only one good way for humans to live. If we want to contribute to a civil society by promoting the peaceful, harmonious and mutually supportive communities which are our natural habitat, we must learn to treat other people in the way we ourselves would wish to be treated - the so called Golden Rule.*<sup>4</sup>

In the book, Mackay looks at many aspects of the Golden Rule, including difficulties and distortions of it. His approach is from his experience of sociological research, a human point of view, with references to religion, theology, philosophy. He concludes:

*No one can promise you that a life lived for others will bring you a deep sense of satisfaction, but it's certain that nothing else will.*<sup>5</sup>

So this is not a book about how to feel good, how to find happiness or how to reap a reward for goodness. It is a book about living a life characterised by goodness. It is also a book which has its roots in basic human nature, but which acknowledges that many human beings will wish to go further than the Golden Rule emphasised in the book.

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Mackay, Website accessed June 11, 2013, at: <http://www.hughmackay.net.au/about-hugh-mackay/>

<sup>2</sup> Mackay, Hugh, *The Good Life - What Makes a Life Worth Living ?*, Pan MacMillan, Sydney, 2013, Preface p 1.

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia - The Free Encyclopedia, *The Golden Rule*, accessed June 11, 2013 at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_Rule](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule)

<sup>4</sup> Mackay, Hugh, *The Good Life*, Preface p 1.

<sup>5</sup> Mackay, Hugh, *The Good Life*, Ch 7, p 254.

## The Golden Rule in the Scriptures<sup>6</sup>

Christians have tended to claim the Golden Rule as their own. In the New Testament, the words of the Golden Rule are put into the mouth of Jesus. In Matthew 7:12 we find:

*So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the Law and the Prophets.*

and in Luke 6:31 we have:

*Treat others as you would like people to treat you.*

We even find a form of the Golden Rule added to the "Great Commandment" in Matthew 22:37-39 as Jesus' response to a Pharisee:

*Jesus said to him - You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself.*

Then we note that the Great Commandment comes from Deuteronomy 6:5 in its list of commandments to be observed by the Israelites:

*You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.*

The second commandment added to the Great Commandment comes from Leviticus 19:18 in its precept as to how to treat our neighbour:

*....but you will love your neighbour as yourself.*

Other forms of the Golden Rule can also be found in the Old Testament. The book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) was probably written around 190 BC. In Sirach 31:15, we read:

*Judge your fellow-guest's needs by your own, be thoughtful in every way.*

The Book of Tobit, probably written in Egypt in the 5th-4th centuries before the time of Christ, loosely refers to historical events dating back much earlier. In Tobit 4:15 we see:

*Do to no one what you would not want done to you.*

The point about all this is that the so-called Golden Rule spoken of in the New Testament has in fact been around for a long time in various forms in the Old Testament. As indicated earlier in this reflection, Hugh Mackay would maintain that practically every world religion and philosophical tradition includes the Golden Rule as one of its tenets<sup>7</sup>. It seems that the Golden Rule is something that has been an ethical principle for human beings over a long period of time.

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<sup>6</sup> Scripture texts are taken from the *New Jerusalem Bible*.

<sup>7</sup> Mackay, Hugh, *The Good Life*, Preface p 1.

## Please take me seriously

Throughout his book, Hugh Mackay speaks of many ways of observing - and corrupting - the Golden Rule. One item he finds on nearly everyone's list for how we should treat one another is "Please take me seriously as a person."<sup>8</sup> He suggests that this is one of the most ubiquitous and pervasive of all our social desires. Everyone wants to be acknowledged, appreciated, understood, valued and respected. We want our role in the human race to be recognised, we want our voice to be heard. He gives an example:

*You want to know to worst thing about getting older ? People don't take you seriously any more. They don't ask your opinion about anything, and they don't listen when you have something to say .....*<sup>9</sup>

We resent being lumped into a category as a stereotype - in the above case it is the categories of being older and unimportant. Other stereotypes would be baby boomers, single mothers, refugees, Jews, Catholics, Muslims, the wealthy, the unemployed etc.

Not being taken seriously can lead to frustration, Mackay says, and eventually boil over into anger and violence. People begin to feel their rights are being violated. If people become cranky, sullen, withdrawn or antisocial, they are often expressing nothing more than their desire to be taken seriously. When people are mocked, exploited and abused, this desire is being frustrated.<sup>10</sup> And this applies to people of all ages and situations - young, middle aged, elderly, poor and rich.

The above is fairly obvious, and we can apply it all to ourselves, knowing that **we** would not like to be treated in this way. And yet, there is often a gap in our behaviour in what we believe and claim, and what we actually do. Sometimes we ignore the idea that the Gospel has a human component.

As a way towards addressing gaps in our beliefs and behaviour, Mackay suggests that we regard ourselves as all being both "therapists" and "clients".<sup>11</sup> By this he means that we all suffer from human frailty in some way. We all need to receive support from family, community, social groups etc., a support which needs to be given by ourselves to others. So, to make a community or group successful, we all must give, and we all must receive. We all can provide therapy for one another no matter what our age or state in life. One of the great therapies for taking one another seriously which is suggested by Mackay, and which can be used in our daily living, is simply listening attentively.<sup>12</sup>

Taking one another seriously, despite our human frailties, can go a long way toward living a good life!

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<sup>8</sup> Mackay, Hugh, *The Good Life*, Ch 6, p 193ff.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p 193.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p 194.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p 202.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p 207.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. If we accept the Golden Rule as a basis for living with other people, are there gaps in regard to what we claim and what we actually do ? Is this a human problem before a religious and spiritual one ?
2. Do our Christian beliefs and practices go beyond the Golden Rule ? If so, how?
3. What is the biggest obstacle we find to taking other people's views seriously ?

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