General David Petraeus is exactly one day younger than I am. Both of us turned 60 this month.

I spent my birthday evening, November 6, celebrating President Obama’s victory, the election of unprecedented numbers of women to the Senate, and a four-state sweep of marriage equality.

The next day, November 7, General Petraeus spent his birthday preparing his letter of resignation as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

As we all know now, after distinguished and some would say brilliant leadership in Iraq and Afghanistan, General Petraeus succumbed to the temptation that has toppled so many powerful figures before him.

A man whose career and public and self-image depended upon loyalty, integrity, and trust betrayed the wife of 38 years who had followed him faithfully through 23 military relocations. While there is no evidence of a security breach, any extramarital affair risks blackmail, and its disclosure undermined Petraeus’s ability to manage the notoriously unmanageable CIA.

Now, Petraeus and Paula Broadwell are tabloid fodder, the details of their relationship spilled across headlines and blogs around the world. The nomination of another four-star general, John Allen, as NATO commander has been placed on hold pending investigation into possibly inappropriate emails to Tampa social maven Jill Kelley, whose closeness to Petraeus provoked Broadwell into sending her anonymous emails that brought the affair to light. The Obama Administration faces a needless distraction amidst tension and violence in the Middle East.

“I really screwed up,” Petraeus told his old mentor, retired General Jack Keane.

How could someone so smart do something so reckless, so foolish?


Sex is a potent narcotic that clouds judgment and defies reason. But there are so many others.

For nearly a decade at Hinton State Laboratory Institute in Boston, chemist Annie Dookhan earned a reputation as a diligent employee who would often work through lunch and stay late.

The only child of hard-working immigrants, Dookhan graduated from prestigious Boston Latin Academy, earned top grades in biochemistry at UMass-Boston, and was hoping to go to medical school.
Now she’s likely to go to prison.

Dookhan has admitted to investigators that for years she falsified results at the state laboratory, forging colleagues’ signatures and intentionally mixing drug samples to cover her tracks. Thousands of criminal convictions based on those tests are now in doubt, and hundreds of convictions—the guilty as well as the innocent—are likely to be released. Reviewing all these cases will cost taxpayers tens of millions of dollars, and the social costs to convicts and their communities are incalculable.

The only motive authorities can discern for Dookhan’s misconduct was her desire to be seen as a good worker. While other chemists at her lab were testing 200 samples a month, Dookhan would plow through as many as 800. She also padded her resume with a bogus master’s degree in chemistry from UMass-Boston. “Perhaps she was trying to be important by being the go-to person,” a coworker told police.

The 34-year-old Dookhan, who has a six-year-old son, faces up to 20 years in prison for obstruction of justice.

“I messed up bad,” she told police.

Everyone knows about Lance Armstrong, cancer survivor and seven-time winner of the Tour de France, now disgraced for use of performance-enhancing drugs. Unless you’re a cycling fan, you might not immediately recognize the name Tyler Hamilton.

Hamilton was Armstrong’s teammate, protector, and later rival who himself won an Olympic gold medal, since forfeited, in 2004. On the circuit, Hamilton was best known for his astonishing physical endurance—he finished fourth in the 2003 Tour de France after suffering a broken collarbone—and for his humility and kindness.

Unlike Armstrong, Hamilton has come clean about his doping. In his new book *The Secret Race*, Hamilton lays himself bare, revealing the code names, the secret phones, the tens of thousands of dollars paid for performance-enhancing drugs. He also discloses his lifelong battle with depression.

Hamilton says he raced clean for years, only to be beaten constantly by dirty competitors. Faced with the choice of quitting the sport he loved or cheating to win, Armstrong chose cheating. He admits he lied repeatedly, even to his own family, to protect himself and his teammates.

“I thought it would cause the least damage,” he explains, not entirely convincingly.

If I had told the truth, everything’s over. The team sponsor would pull out, and fifty people, fifty of my friends, would lose their jobs. People I care about. If I told the truth, I’d be out of the sport, forever. My name would be ruined. And you can’t go partway—you can’t just say, Oh, it was only me, just this one time. The truth is too big, it involves too many people. You’ve either got to tell 100 percent or nothing. There’s no in-between. So yeah, I chose to lie. . . . Sometimes if you lie enough you start to believe it.
I’m talking about Tyler Hamilton this morning rather than Lance Armstrong because to my family, Tyler’s not just another remote celebrity.

My wife Julie grew up in Marblehead a few doors away from Tyler, she at 24 High Street, he at number 37. Tyler is four years younger, and Julie used to play in the Hamilton backyard with Tyler’s older sister. Julie will always remember Tyler as a sweet, curly-haired three-year-old with beautiful blue eyes.

When you know someone at three years old, it’s hard to demonize them when they grow up, no matter what they do.

And when you know someone personally, maybe someone at your school or workplace or even your church, who is arrested and charged with a felony, it’s hard to cast them out as one of those bad people who just do bad things because that’s what bad people do.

Because good people—good people do bad things, too.

Why?

Why do good people do bad things?

One answer, both accurate and incomplete, is that usually they don’t.

The reason the news is filled with lurid tales of hypocrisy and malfeasance is that they’re newsworthy, which is to say, unusual. Most of us live our days, most of us live our lives, without turpitude. Most of the time, my neighbor greets me with a friendly wave, not a knife in the ribs. If everyone cheated, stole, and killed, we wouldn’t be so fascinated by those who do.

But let’s admit that good people too often do bad things.

Good people do bad things because there is bad in every good person, as there is good in every bad person. The entire good guy-bad guy dichotomy is a childhood phantasm.

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus demanded. “No one is good but God alone.”

When will we learn that every saint has their secret addiction, their private stash, their closeted skeleton? Maybe it’s just a sweet tooth or a wandering eye or an ill-disguised egotism.

Their flaw does not make them false. It makes them human.

If they be wise, their imperfection does not belie their wisdom. It grounds their wisdom in reality.

Injury we must heal. Transgression we must hold accountable. But let us not be so proud as to scorn those who injure and those who transgress. There but for grace go we, and very likely shall go we someday.
Minister and theologian John Philip Newell notes that “[t]he word *sin* comes from the Old High German *sunda*, which means “to sunder” or ‘to tear apart.’ . . . Rather than seeing reality as a web of interrelated influences, in which the essential unity of life is forever expressing itself in greater and greater diversity, we participate in sin or sundering when we forget the organic unity of the whole and treat the distinct parts as disparate.”

If Newell is correct, then each of us sins when we sever the web and cast the sinner outside the great circle of connection and empathy—the sinner’s sin provoking our own.

When the Pharisees brought before Jesus the woman caught in adultery, they cited the law of Moses condemning her to death by stoning. But Jesus said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

None did. Because none could.

When good people do bad things, there is always a reason for it, whether or not we will ever know it, whether or not they will ever know it themselves.

Not an excuse. Not a justification. But a reason.

And whether that reason is physical, chemical, environmental, emotional, or spiritual, they did not ask for it. They did not choose it.

Free will overcomes many obstacles, but it is not all-powerful. Will exists in a context of causation.

When we are the ones injured, when we are the ones transgressed upon, our hearts may be seized by rage and bitterness and fear. Like a wounded animal, we must find a place of safety in which to heal.

When we have had time to heal, at least in part, then perhaps we can emerge and find a place of forgiveness, knowing our own peace is to be found there.

But—but—we can forgive only in our own time, only when we are ready, not upon the urging of another, however kindly intended their advice.

My teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, wrote a poem called “Please Call Me By My True Names”:

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow—
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his "debt of blood" to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.
Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.

There is an old Hassidic tale of a rabbi who asks his pupils how they can tell when night has ended and day has begun, for that is the time for holy prayer.

A student asks, “Is it when you can see an animal in the distance and tell if it is a sheep or a dog?”

“No,” the rabbi answers.

Another student suggests, “Is it when you can clearly see the lines of your own palm?”

“No.”

Another tries, “Is it when you can tell if a tree in the distance is a fig or a pear tree?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?” the students cry.

The rabbi answers, “When you can look on the face of any person and see they are your sister, your brother, your friend, morning has come. Until then it is still night.”

Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction by Frederick Buechner

Here is the world.
Beautiful and terrible things will happen.
Don't be afraid.