



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE
Guest Columnist

The parable of the child who suffers so others can be happy

Rather than accept the cruelty demonstrated by our state government, many of our neighbors and friends are “walking away” and leaving the state like characters in a Le Guin short story.



Gabrielle Union, left, and Dwyane Wade sit courtside as they attend the 2023 WNBA All-Star Game at Michelob ULTRA Arena on July 15, 2023, in Las Vegas. [ETHAN MILLER | Getty Images North America]

Published in 1973, science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin's tale "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is arguably one of the most influential short stories printed in the last 50 years. The issues of morality and justice that shockingly unfold in the Le Guin story continue to startle readers today. The moral lessons in Omelas are particularly useful to citizens struggling with current ethical issues unfolding in Florida.

Omelas is about people in a city that seem happy and content in life. There is much laughter, playfulness and festivals. Children experience joy and, overall, the community appears to be a sublime and tranquil place. Yet, Le Guin reveals that this happiness in Omelas is dependent upon citizens accepting a disturbing feature of life in the city. In the basement of one of the buildings, a small child is locked inside a room. The child is abused and experiences malnutrition and neglect. People look in and the child cries out, "Please let me out. I will be good!" But, no one answers these pleas and the child must survive on a half-bowl of cornmeal a day and sit in its own excrement.

Le Guin writes: "They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it; others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city ... the health of their children ... even the abundance of their harvest ... depend wholly on this child's abominable misery." The social agreement in Omelas is to accept that this one child must suffer horribly so that the rest can be happy. The risk of setting the child free is that the comfortable life for the citizens of Omelas could be destroyed. People feel horrible for the child, but determine that there is nothing they can do. The protection of the happiness of the greater number of citizens is the priority over the suffering of this innocent child.

And yet, some do walk away. After seeing the child in the room, they can't accept the ethical compromise on their personal morality and they walk. "They leave Omelas; they walk ahead into the darkness and they do not come back."

Omelas provoked lively and difficult discussions in my ethics and international relations classes. Student comments often focused on the exploitation of workers,

and in particular child labor. For example, horrible labor conditions for Apple employees in China was repeatedly raised. Students were uncomfortable when they realized that the iPhones in their pockets were probably created by exploited workers, including possibly children. Students discussed how our affluence, based on affordable technology, could be threatened if Apple and other corporations ended exploitative labor conditions abroad. As with the citizens of Omelas, do we ignore the documented cases of labor abuse to protect our standard of living? Is this comparable to citizens in Omelas accepting the suffering of the child in the basement? Students also pointed to the primacy of “utilitarian” ethics in America, which is based on the “greatest good for the greatest number.” From this perspective, the suffering of a few may be necessary for the flourishing of the society overall.

We citizens of Florida today live in a state that exploits immigrants, demonizes LGBTQ people, falsifies Black history and valorizes white supremacy. Rather than accept the cruelty demonstrated by our state government, many of our neighbors and friends are “walking away” and leaving the state. The local and national press is filled with stories of immigrants, African Americans and LGBTQ people exiting and boycotting Florida out of concern for the safety of their families. These residents are leaving Florida not for better jobs or to be closer to family but because they no longer feel welcome. Like those who “walk away” from Omelas in Le Guin’s short story, these individuals cannot ignore the ethical nightmare our current governor has created in our state.

Miami Heat NBA star Dwyane Wade “walked away” from Florida. The 2023 Hall of Fame inductee stated that his decision to leave Florida came in response to the state’s anti-LGBTQ policies. Wade is the father of 15-year-old Zaya, who came out as transgender in 2020. Wade said, “my family would not be accepted or feel comfortable” in Florida.

Even former U.S. Rep. David Jolly, a Republican, stated that he is considering leaving the state he was born and raised in due to DeSantis attacks on migrants, the LGBTQ community and African-Americans. Jolly declared: “Why would I want to raise my kids in an environment in which they’re shamed for embracing diversity of thought and diverse cultures?”

As a gay married man living in Florida, I also feel unwelcome and unsafe due to the attacks by Gov. Ron DeSantis on our basic rights and his homophobic presidential campaign. Yet, for me the key issue doesn't revolve around leaving or staying. The central issue, rather, is how to overcome passivity, silence and inaction and become a force helping to protect human rights for all.

Karl Jaspers, the German-Swiss psychiatrist and philosopher, wrote: "But each of us is guilty insofar as he remained inactive. . . . But passivity knows itself morally guilty of every failure, every neglect to act whenever possible, to shield the imperiled, to relieve wrong, to countervail."

Perhaps Jaspers is asking us to establish a line at which we say to the government, "Not in my name." It is essential in a democracy for every citizen to protect their individual moral integrity and soul and refuse to blithely accept destructive policies. In Florida today, that may mean "walking away" as demonstrated by some in Le Guin's Omelas. Or, it may also mean picking up Jasper's plea to overcome our passivity and act to create a more compassionate government.



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