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Can People Change? 'Ted Lasso' Revived an Ancient Debate.

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10–12 minutes

In a time when societal consensus, let alone advancement, seems painfully unattainable, the quirky television comedy *Ted Lasso* has struck a chord—as evidenced by its previous four Emmy awards and third nomination for Outstanding Comedy Series.

This soccer-themed runaway hit, featuring an unwitting Kansas football coach turned British soccer manager, premiered on Apple TV+ in August 2020 in the eerily uncertain early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over three seasons, and even with a major drop-off in quality in the third, the show has offered some welcome comic relief and a strong tonic for pessimism.

The series acknowledges how helpless it can feel to be human: "Yeah, it might be all that you get. Yeah, I guess this might well be it. Well, heaven knows I've tried," its theme song laments. But at the same time, *Ted Lasso* illustrates the transformation that can result when people resist acquiescence and challenge one another to grow. It resonates with viewers because it probes and, to some extent, gratifies a longing we all have: We want to see things get better.

At the heart of the show is a question one of the characters raises in the series finale. Roy Kent has just experienced a spectacularly abject failure in his efforts to improve himself. Overwhelmed with dejection and remorse, he is tempted to give up. Will he never learn? In despair, he confides his doubts to his friends and poses the question: “Can people change?”

Roy’s confidants do not leave his question hanging, proposing three different answers.

The first comes from the savvy and sardonic reporter Trent Crimm, a man whose profession is dealing in cold facts: “I don’t think we change per se as much as we just learn to accept who we’ve always been.” It is no accident that this perspective finds expression first. It is a foil to the answers that follow, but also expresses a response common these days. If there is such a thing as personal improvement, it is more a matter of authenticity than of alteration.

Holding on to the notion of human progress after the terrors of the 20th century, whether individually or societally, seems like naive hubris at best. At worst, it seems like an excuse to impose one’s ideology on others in the name of advancement. Trent’s reply is the characteristic answer of our age. The quest for change is a fool’s errand; be satisfied with honesty and self-acceptance instead.

But a second voice pipes up with an alternative—a proposal from a character named Nate Shelley.

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More than anyone else in the series, Nate demonstrates just how radically and suddenly people can transform, both for better and for worse. "Oh no, I think people can change. They can," he insists. As he speaks, viewers conjure up the metamorphoses of his character and of nearly every other major persona on the show. Yet as the scene continues to develop, no one in the room seems quite satisfied with his response. He makes things sound too easy. In this sense, Nate's glib "yes" is no more accurate than Trent's fatalistic "no."

Leslie Higgins, the club manager and sweetly awkward resident sage, takes the third swing at the question. Higgins rejects neither of the proposals on the table but offers a third approach, incorporating insights from both. "Human beings are never gonna be perfect, Roy," he says. "The best we can do is to keep asking for help and accepting it when you can. And if you keep on doing that, you'll always be moving towards better."

In other words: Changing oneself is an uphill battle, where one never reaches the crest of perfection (Trent is right); but incremental advances *are* possible (Nate is right too). The secret to growth is recognizing one's own neediness and accepting help from friends along the way; but we also can't demand too much of ourselves.

This conversation illustrates the ethos of collaborative, incremental improvement that the show itself advocates. Like engineers of a fine Japanese car, the interlocutors finesse the machinery of their response to Roy's question before Ted pronounces the verdict on Leslie's response: "Add that right there to our list of perfect stuff. Ding ding ding." Meaning, this is as good an answer as one can realistically expect—*Yeah, I guess this might well be it*, in other words. But is it?

Roy's question is a timeless one. Over a millennium and half ago, a debate broke out that lends us some perspective.

The Pelagian Controversy takes its name from an earnest, idealistic ascetic who was persuaded that the primary threat to Christian discipleship was that Christians would give up on change. We still have a letter he wrote to a young noblewoman named Demetrias in which he articulates his philosophy of human potential, issuing dire warnings about the dangers of self-underestimation. "Recognize your own strengths," he urges. Don't impose false boundaries on yourself. "It is possible to do anything which one really wants to do."

Zealously intoning these inspiring exhortations to any Christians of his day who would listen, Pelagius was the Nate of the early fifth century.

Trent's conviction would have been Pelagius's worst fear. To believe that change is impossible was, for Pelagius, the kiss of spiritual death. So desperate was Pelagius to avoid fatalism's cold embrace that he risked condemnation as a heretic.

At the same time, Pelagius had more in common with Leslie than

the stereotypes caricaturing him as the anthropological arch-heretic might suggest. Pelagius did, when push came to shove, acknowledge the necessity of help along the way, and especially the transformative power of forgiveness—which is also a crucial theme of *Ted Lasso*. But, as with Nate, Pelagius's focus was not the difficulty of positive change. His opinion was that change was easily attainable, if one but believed. Like Nate, Pelagius stressed the possibility of change over its attendant challenges.

The most famous debate partner of Pelagius was Augustine of Hippo, the North African bishop who, more than any other extrabiblical thinker, went on to shape the beliefs and piety of Christians in the West, both Catholic and Protestant. Augustine has a reputation for being a dour pessimist, the grim yin to Pelagius's sunny yang. If Pelagius was a Nate, so the story goes, Augustine was the ancient Trent, whose bleak theology of sin squelched any hope of meaningful advancement in this life.

Yet just as Pelagius was more complex than his stereotypes suggest, Augustine was more than the inverse of Pelagius. Augustine too thought pursuing change was vital. He vehemently proclaimed the need for change. Christians, he argued in his famous treatise *On the Trinity*, should make "daily advances." They should grow in justice from spiritual infancy to adulthood, he told the faithful. Christians need to pray, but they also need to do more than *just* pray to be made better. They need to get up off their backs and work: "We too have got to do something. We've got to be keen, we've got to try hard," he urged.

So Augustine also preached the imperative of change. But in contrast to Pelagius, Augustine stressed the rockiness of the road to growth and transformation. Pelagius's refrain was *It's easier*

than you think. Augustine insisted, *It’s impossible on your own*. One needs constant help—to consider change, to want to change, to initiate change, and to see a desired change brought to completion. And even then, it won’t be easy.

Augustine, much more than Pelagius, gave an answer in the spirit of Leslie’s. He stuck with chastened realism on the question of how hard it is to improve. And he adopted a maximalist stance on how much assistance from without is required. In these respects, Leslie’s answer and the ethos of the show itself is profoundly Augustinian: Moving forward is hard. One inches along in fits and starts. And it requires help to eke out personal progress.

But Augustine takes the necessity of aid a leap beyond Leslie’s response. Because, for Augustine, self-help alone won’t do—just as all the therapy, friendly encouragement, and camaraderie in the world won’t amount to a lick of good on its own. We need a remedy that runs deeper. In the end, Augustine did not think that lasting—or ultimately satisfying—change would come through the independent operation of any kind of creaturely assistance, as excellent and important as many human forms of help can be.

To change for the better, people need more. They need help that comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, from whom every good and perfect gift comes down (James 1:17). Nate says: Yes, people can change. Leslie tells us how: With difficulty, and by getting help. Augustine identifies the kind of help we truly need: The power of a love that is nothing short of divine.

The ultimate change we long for, Augustine believed, is not only a gift *from God* but is the gift *of* God. The giver becomes the gift itself—God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.

Only when God gives the gift of *God*, pouring out God's very self—God's Spirit of love—into us, are we set free to change in the radical way we long for.

The fullest embodiment of the change we desire—the goodness, truth, and beauty we hope to taste and see in our own lives and encounter in the lives of others—is, in the end, not any abstract benefit we might receive but an actual person who has walked the earth.

We wait to experience this God face to face with groaning and eager expectation (Rom. 8:19-39), but also with the confidence that our transformation can begin now, through God's Spirit who is love.

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