

Playing with Karma

I once lied to a teacher that my Aunt Diane had passed away. She hadn't, thankfully, but I said she did to get out of turning in a paper the week it was due. I emailed and spoke to the teacher about my "problem." Then I asked if she needed anything from me and told her I would be gone from Wednesday's class. The next week, I made sure to not go so far as tears, but to avoid speaking as much as possible and pout in the corner. If this were an acting class, I'd have looked like a graduate student, but it was Communication Studies, and the more painful experience was telling my Aunt Di that I actually major in that field — one in which admission into the program is easy and job placement is low. I had much worse thoughts about how much detail I could provide about her "death," but she had bought it. And I had saved myself from a late assignment.

"Karma is gonna slap you in the face so hard," my roommate said when I bragged. "She's a bitch. But let's head to the bar now, drinks for your Aunt Di."

So I went to the bar that night, then turned in my paper nearly two weeks late. I followed up on assignments as would be normal, and received an A on the paper by the end of the class. It didn't take long to sell the lie, and my teacher never mentioned the incident to me again. No questions asked, no documentation required and no suffering in the end with my grade. I was willing to kill off my Aunt Di like a Game of Thrones character to make up for a busy week of writing and working and sleeping that I had put off long enough. I still slept for a solid eight hours and woke up the next day in one piece and as healthy as any other day. But somewhere, in a mythical land called, 'My conscience' I had betrayed my teacher's trust and cheated the system.

But I thought back to my roommate's comment about Karma. I thought about this weird word that gets tossed around and the idea of karma — not for too long, though, since I had to write that paper, after all. I thought about waiting for my day to come — when I would have forgotten about my deed and something truly terrible would happen. Something like my Aunt actually passing away, losing an arm or having to sit through a Keanu Reeves film.

But I wasn't going to leave this up to Karma. I opted to test the idea — the social construct, not the religious one — in the upcoming week using the most well-constructed plan in the most scientific data: lying some more. I would live my life testing the limits of what was right and what was not for the sake of finding out the truth.

Because, ultimately, I wanted to keep believing the concept of karma is bullshit.

Day 1: I decided that to see what would happen to me that wouldn't require something as drastic as claiming an Aunt of mine, or any other person for that matter, died. Instead, I began the week by lying to a friend at lunch that I didn't have money to pay for a bag of chips, drink and a toasted sandwich for myself. But I had the cash in my pocket, fully prepared for lunch from the bank before.

"I'll pay you back," I said. "I just haven't had a chance to stop at an ATM. But I will soon, don't worry."

"Absolutely fine, man," my friend responded. "I trust you."

I watched each ingredient being placed on my sandwich to see if my meal was made by some sick person or if the restaurant was out of some ingredient, but nothing gave. I ate the sandwich and enjoyed the conversation, believing that if there were a thing as Karma, it wouldn't hurt me yet.

I wondered, then, how karma would come back to get me for this lie? Would I be forced to pay for someone else's meal, or pay for someone's drink at the bar? Would I not be able to afford my next meal? Would they close down Chipotle? Or would I suffer from some debilitating disease that made it hard to even eat? Would my punishment, if at all, be small or large? It would have to be small since this wasn't a serious offense, right? Or would it be large if it didn't come back to get me right away?

To be fair, I think my definition of karma refers to the concept of "what goes around comes around." I'm not sure if that's the proper way to think of it, since Wikipedia told me karma means an "act, deed, action or work." But everyone's heard of the classic type of Karma at some point — the one used so frequently in social settings. Merriam-Webster's English Dictionary called Karma "the force created by a person's actions that is believed in Hinduism and Buddhism to determine what that person's next life will be like." For now, I'll think of it as a punishment for bad actions and a reward for good actions.

But even all of that was too confusing to think about at lunch. Not when I was too paranoid that at any moment my friend would call me out in the restaurant for cheating him out of \$9. It was silly, because I knew nothing would happen, and it didn't. I think.

Day 2: I sat at home to do more research on where the concept of karma comes from and its etymology. I couldn't be the only one out in this big world curious about Karma's origins, right? Perhaps I'd be able to debunk this belief through science or through some other method that would show I wasn't (completely) crazy.

I was scared something I hoped wouldn't come back to bite me, and stuck to Wikipedia to research. I had searched scholarly journals on Karma, those returned little that was useful and

the people at the Zhen Buddhist temple weren't exactly easy to reach about doing an interview. Anyway, Wikipedia says that Karma comes from the word *karaman*, which means, "to do, make, perform, accomplish, cause, effect, prepare, undertake." Apparently, the root *kr* or *kri* is very common in ancient Sanskrit literature, and is "relied upon to explain ideas in Rigveda, other Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, the Epics of Hinduism." But the root "kri" also appears in the word Sanskrit, to imply that a language that is "well made". The word *Kárman* and Karma both appear in Rigveda — a scripture of Hinduism. But Wikipedia also says Karma is similar to "verbal proto-Indo-European root *kwer- to make, form."

All of which is important to note, but boring and confusing as hell (remember, I'm a Communications major, so expectations are low). It still didn't tell me enough. I had lingering questions and could no more poke a hole through it than I could through anything cooked at Papa Johns. Turns out the word Karma wasn't popular in social settings until 1960's, for reasons I can't explain. But between 1940 and 1960, the use of the word in English corpus of language grew by 120%. It's gone up nearly 200% from 1940 until today. Whatever it was, I felt better knowing that it wasn't until recently the word was used. If it wasn't used since the dawn of time, then clearly this idea didn't carry much weight.

That same day I was assigned a surprise paper for a class. It'd add to an impressive load of homework that included a group project meeting and was steadily accumulating. So I continued to get the ball rolling and told my group I couldn't meet as planned because I was taking care of a sick roommate. It felt wrong to keep lying and testing these limits. I didn't want to screw anyone, but I had to. I had to know what would happen to me. That night I stayed up late finishing much of the homework that had been assigned and wound up with nearly two hours less of sleep. Maybe that was my Karma, then? But it was small and insignificant, which leads

me to believe that it wasn't the case. If it was, I was oblivious to it, and didn't want to think it was related. Perhaps I could put my Karma on layaway, if it existed at all? Or store it like a savings bond?

Day 3: I wished there was a way to expedite Karma. To get it over with so that you knew the negative or positive energy you had put into something was being repaid. So that's why I gave a homeless man some leftover packets of ketchup from my fries today, and nothing else. It was kind of fucked up, as if I said, "Hey, in case you can ever afford that burger you wanted, here's some ketchup." I didn't really get to see the reaction on his face since I was walking away as fast as could after it and straight home to see if I could figure out how bad my Karma could possibly get.

Quick, what else did the Internet have to say about Karma? A bolt of lightning still hadn't struck me, nor had I been attacked by a hit man to grab my money back, so maybe I was safe, but I had this looming fear that it would come soon. I knew where Karma came from, but I was intrigued to see how else it was used. So I went to a reliable source, Urban Dictionary, which said Karma was "When that bitch from high school gains 50 pounds in college," or "what redditors whore themselves out for." But others also said Karma was much worse, a "Smackdown" from the Gods, best used in the sentence: "I kicked a cat the other day . . . today a giant Sabertooth from the depths of time bit me." One said it "was a game of Frisbee with your actions." Most just said it was a bitch.

I needed somewhere more reliable, though, so I went to Twitter. There was @_Macklemore who said, "Karma has no menu. You get served what you deserve," while an MTV host, @AshleighMorgh, said, "She's a beast, I call her Karma." Actually, multiple people referred to this she character, whose name is apparently Karma, as a beast. Again, most just said

it was a bitch. A Twitter search for the words Karma and bitch came up with a few hundred results, and the list only grew.

I think they made a whole TV show based on the concept called “My name is Earl.” I watched part of it where he won the lottery somehow and then everything fell apart. But I didn’t make it through the entire pilot because it was an awful TV show. The same people on the Internet said the show sucked. I’m sure I’m doing everyone a favor by not including more detail.

Still, two days in, a friend I had lied to and a homeless man I gave ketchup packets to later, and nothing had happened. Except for that close call while walking when I nearly waltzed into a busy intersection with my head down. I was glancing at my phone, searching the word Karma. There’s nothing odd about that. I think.

Day 4: I wondered why Karma was always referred to as a bitch. Why not an asshole or dickhead? Not a fucking monster or the always-classic prick? And did that mean that if Karma was a bitch, that it was a female? And then if it’s a female, why is it a female? Did the male get exempt from this, and if so, how?

I took it as a chance to mess with my sister, and not other females, since I figured the Karma from that would be never having a date again. It was the author William Congreve, in 1697, who’s play, *The Mourning Bride*, said that “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” So I texted her to say that she should eat more bananas since they provided energy, and her eyes were looking baggy. I said she could use all the help she could get and asked if she wore makeup. I suggested she would need plastic surgery to prevent wrinkles in the future if she ever wanted to look youthful. And she promptly responded: “Go fuck yourself.” That probably qualified as having scorned a woman, so this should add to whatever’s coming.

Karma is actually in the top-900 names at the moment — all of which are for females. And more surprisingly, its popularity hasn't sprung until the late 20th-century. So did it stem from a man's infidelity with his spouse, only to be punished in the end through pain or death? Was it somewhere in the 1950s that the term was created? Or maybe it's a beast after all, a creature and not a human? But then was I supposed to figure out what they meant when they called Karma a beast after scrolling through Google images? My eyes still can't erase those images burned into my brain.

Women aren't bitches, though. Men could be bitches too I'm sure. Hell, I should probably write another paper on the origins of the word bitch, but I won't for everyone's sake. I do think that whatever it is that earned this title isn't really appropriate.

Day 5: Maybe Karma was entirely religious, and that God would smite me, or deny me access to heaven. Or perhaps there were special Gods to look over everyone and their Karma — like a Karma board of trustees. Each one would have an iPad with documents on each person, typing away at the screen when alerts came up for any person. Then they would make a motion to vote on my case and would use a majority vote to hand down my punishment. After treating both my family and strangers like shit, they were probably receiving notifications about me every minute.

I thought of Karma as this quid-pro-quo transaction, where good acts are returned with good results and bad deeds are punished in negative ways. Theoretically, everything is affected by everything, but sleeping for eight hours every day isn't some positive act that will reward me later on. Sometimes I still feel tired and other times I feel rested, but either way, it's just sleeping. Which is why a transaction of sorts makes sense, because we might deposit good Karma for later use or withdraw some of our Karma for now.

But no matter how much I try to keep religion out and focus on this ‘Street Karma’ it’s impossible to rule out religion. The website *openbible.com* said that there were 73 verses regarding Karma. But that’s a lot and I didn’t care about it enough to do that. Not only did I not have time to go through all of them, but I also didn’t want to get into the idea that it was faith, not another force, that controlled my fate. There are plenty of people out there who don’t believe in God and still claim to suffer from Karma.

At this point, nothing had happened. I hadn’t heard from my friend and I felt fine. I decided I should spend the \$9 on a phone case to see if that would only expedite the process with the Karma Board of Trustees. So I ordered two-day shipping. If my experiment had worked, I’d receive it by Day 7, according to the website. I made sure to tell my friend that loaned me money, that I spent money on a new phone case just for kicks.

Day 6: I littered pieces of paper and plastic along my walk to school today. Stuff that animals could choke on, or materials that would blow all over yards and onto windows. It still didn’t feel like enough, so I knocked over trash cans onto the sidewalks and streets so that other would walk over it or through it. Perhaps the best way to play with Karma was to bring Mother Nature into this (Again with the females!) and hope the forces were somehow intertwined or connected. I tipped over cans that spewed food garbage and random papers and even a video game.

Which made me think about all the times Karma might have actually come back to get me before college. There were plenty of instances for thinking that I had been rewarded for good behavior. Like the time I found someone’s missing Pokemon wallet when I was just 10 years old at the video game store and alerted the store’s manager about it. I beat the *Elite 4* in Pokemon

Blue just two days later, but I figured that was through my talent. But I got a lucky break when my Charzard held on to life at three percent. Maybe it was just luck? These things probably weren't, but I wasn't going to risk jinxing it by talking with someone about it.

But then there was the week I volunteered to organize and work in the food pantry at St. Joseph's church. I helped stock the cupboards and unload the truck on each day. Sometimes I helped keep inventory on items and work to fill out the needs sheet with the official at the Church in charge. I helped served meals from the Church on Thursday afternoon to nearly 50 people and made a lot of people happy in the moment. But I didn't get shit for that, which is probably the point, but I never did that again when I could have been sleeping or watching TV.

I've sure been punished a time or two for my actions. Like the time I stole a bag of chips from the party store, on a Friday afternoon. I was hungry and was already paying more for my bottle of Coke anyhow. I put them in my backpack before I walked out, but by the time I had walked home, they had been crushed between two books and turned into little pieces of cheesy potatoes. I ate them all anyway. Once I tackled my friend during a football game because he had been giving me a hard time the entire game. He hurt his arm in my fit of anger and didn't play the rest of the game – except to tackle me toward the end of the game when he had recovered.

Day 7: I still hadn't been hit by Karma. I had slept fine for most of a week, ate a big meal everyday, checked in on my mother, father, friends and pets. My tires weren't slashed and I made sure to deposit money into my account to make sure that I still could. I treated everyone respectfully and even gave the homeless man outside the pharmacy a dollar.

But on this day, my friend texted me around lunchtime to ask if I could spot him \$10 before he went out to eat. He hadn't called me out and I hadn't brought it up, but we both knew. I looked into my wallet to make sure I had cash — a \$20 bill — and reached for the phone.

“Sorry man, I still haven't made it to the bank,” I said. “I had the English paper due and never got out to the bank in time to get cash. I'll make sure I get out soon and pay you back. I haven't forgotten.”

“No worries,” he responded. “I trust ya, but we'll grab lunch soon.”

I returned home and my phone case still hadn't arrived in the mail yet. It was supposed to have arrived today and I began to get worried.

That evening I called my Aunt Di to make sure my lie hadn't come true. I called after work when she would likely be home, but no one picked up. I didn't want to leave a voicemail, yet. I started to panic, feeling my face turn red and called back immediately, but still, no one picked up. Now I was worried Karma had finally come back to bite me in the nastiest of ways. All this time I had played with Karma and it came back to kill my Aunt. What's worse, I had lived my whole week according to this philosophy that whatever I did was either punished or rewarded. This entire time I was the one being played by something, not the other way around. Karma toyed with me by making me paranoid something awful would happen and then giving me a chance to redeem myself over a sandwich of all things? And then, an hour later after panicking, as if Karma really was some higher power who could say, “Joke's on you, Greg!” my Aunt Di called me back. She had gone out to dinner.

I don't know if Karma is real, then, but I was stuck living a life where I thought about the consequences of every action, instead of just going about my day. And if that's the case for the rest of my time, I sure am fucked.