

Parables of Safety vs. Risk in *Giovanni's Room*

James Baldwin, who wrote *Giovanni's Room*, was no stranger to taking risks for the benefit of others. He was a prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement; a movement in which many African Americans risked their very lives to help end segregation and racial oppression. Baldwin also openly declared his homosexuality at a time when most tried to hide it, especially if they were African American. Baldwin saw that when people took risks, many people benefited from it. Conversely, when people chose to play it safe, their lack of action hurt others. In Baldwin's novel, *Giovanni's Room*, David's relationships with Joey and Giovanni serve as parables about how the refusal to take action and take risks hurts others.

David's refusal to take a risk with Joey resulted in the first example of how choosing safety over risk injures other parties. To begin with, David clearly had a close relationship with Joey. He explained that "he was my best friend" (Baldwin 9). Also, David clearly enjoyed spending time with Joey as he spent a lot of time with him. David said that he "had seen him that summer nearly every day" (Baldwin 13). Furthermore, David obviously was attracted to Joey. While gazing at Joey as Joey slept, David observed that "Joey's body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I had ever seen till then" (Baldwin 11). David also had an emotional connection to Joey. He reported that he remembered the night he slept with Joey "how good I felt that night, how fond of Joey" (Baldwin 9). In fact, David recalled that from his great tenderness for Joey, "came joy, we gave each other joy that night. It seemed, then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with Joey the act of love" (Baldwin 11). Obviously, David desired and cared for Joey and even saw a "lifetime" with him.

Yet, David found that even though he saw hope for a future with Joey, he felt conflicted. While gazing at Joey, David sensed that "the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous.

But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: But Joey is a boy” (Baldwin 12). Social expectations and his father’s desire that he be a man (Baldwin 22) were at odds with the attraction he felt for Joey. He found himself afraid of his interest in Joey and the risk of going against his father that loving Joey involved (Baldwin 12). Due to his fear, David stopped himself from waking Joey (Baldwin 11). The overwhelming feelings and tenderness he had felt for Joey, David now found “dreadful” (Baldwin 11). So, David found himself faced with the choice between the safety of following what was considered normal by society and the risk of going against social expectations and fulfilling his own desires. David explained, “I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how could this have happened in me. And I made my decision” (Baldwin 12-3). David chose safety over the risk. He distanced himself from Joey and “began, that summer, the flight” from his own desires and the risk his desires entailed (Baldwin 14).

However, David’s choice of safety and flight over risk affected Joey as well as himself and hurt Joey. When Joey woke up the morning after they had made love together, David chose not to stay with him, but “made an excuse to go home” (Baldwin 13). Joey knew that David was simply trying to get away from him but “did not know how to protest or insist” (Baldwin 13). Left alone after a night of love, Joey did not know how to overcome the distance David had placed between them. David’s choice of safety “had begun a constriction which neither of [them] knew how to arrest” (Baldwin 13). Joey was abandoned by David after he had given himself freely to him. Moreover, when they did by chance see each other again close to the end of summer, David lied to him about meeting a girl (Baldwin 13). Whether Joey knew David was lying remained ambiguous, but either way, Joey would have been hurt by those words as David continued to distance himself in the hope of safety. Indeed, David did not stop there in his

retreat from risk. As school started again, David “was very nasty to Joey. And the sadder this made him, the nastier I became” (Baldwin 13). It must have hurt Joey to have David be nasty to him after they had been so close and it probably felt like David had betrayed him. Especially, as not only was David deciding that he would rather hurt the person he was fond of than risk going against society's expectations and love a man, but David was also getting rewarded for it.

Through leaving Joey, David “picked up with a rougher, older crowd” that would probably have put him in a more privileged position in the school they went to, which must have been painful for Joey to see as it came at the expense of his friendship and love (Baldwin 13). David's decision to leave Joey, avoid him, lie to him, and be nasty to him all to escape what he was afraid of, clearly illustrate that when one makes the choice to choose safety over risk, another person will be hurt.

A second example, of choosing safety over risk despite the cost to others, is David's relationship with Giovanni. David loved and cared for Giovanni and there were signs that they could have lived happily together. David reminisced that while spending time with Giovanni, he realized that “I really loved Giovanni, who had never seemed more beautiful than he was that afternoon. And, watching his face, I realized that it meant much to me that I could make his face so bright” (Baldwin 121). David not only loved Giovanni, but he loved to make him happy and felt power in bringing joy to Giovanni's features. Indeed, David reported that he “might be willing to give a great deal not to lose that power” (Baldwin 122). Thus, his motivation for making Giovanni happy was selfish in nature as it had less to do benefiting Giovanni and more to do with making himself feel powerful. Still, recalling the night he met Giovanni, David said, “I think we connected the instant we met” and that even after all that had occurred between them, they remained “connected still” (Baldwin 63). Furthermore, within Giovanni's room, they were

making a life together and were even beginning to remodel the room, which brings up the idea of hope for the future and a form of permanence. David related that “Giovanni had had great plans for remodeling the room and there was a time, when he had actually begun to do this, when we lived with plaster all over everything and bricks piled on the floor” (Baldwin 105). Indeed, David explained that time seemed to go at a different rate and hold no meaning when they first lived together for “in the beginning our life together held a joy and amazement which was newborn every day” (Baldwin 109). Within the room, David and Giovanni had a chance at a life together as they both cared deeply for the other. Through this, Baldwin was teaching the lesson that risk can lead to a favorable future. A lesson that is especially powerful when one looks at the risks taken by Baldwin and others in the Civil Rights Movement.

Yet, even as David loved Giovanni, he found himself facing conflicts that made him once again have to choose between the risk of his desires for Giovanni and the safety of conforming to the societal norms that had been drilled into him all his life. A conversation between Jacques and David after meeting Giovanni highlighted this conflict. David was attracted to Giovanni, but he found himself struggling with fear and shame over what their relationship might be. Jacques told David, “You don’t know what he means by friendship but you have the feeling it may not be safe. You are afraid it may change you” (Baldwin 83). Jacques continued by explaining that David could choose the safe way, but that way would lead him to being dissatisfied. Jacques encouraged David to instead take a risk and choose to “love him and let him love you” (Baldwin 83). However, even as Jacques promoted the benefits of risking it with Giovanni, David felt society’s push for conformity. For instance, David’s father only considered that David could be interested in women. He wrote, “Is it a woman, David? Bring her on home. I don’t care who she is. Bring her home and I’ll help you get set up” (Baldwin 133). David’s father expected him to

conform to the social norm of marrying a woman and setting up a family with her. Moreover, David's father was willing to help him financially if it was a "woman." David would receive paternal support and monetary rewards for doing things society's way. Indeed, David found himself longing for that; although, part of the reason he wanted it is that it would leave his "manhood unquestioned" (Baldwin 152). Society told him that he could not have a life with a man, only with a woman, and David internalized this regulation. When someone saw Giovanni and David walking together as a couple, David "felt sorrow and shame and great bitterness" (Baldwin 122). He asserted that even though he loved Giovanni the shame he felt for loving a man in a society that condemned homosexual relationships made him come to hate Giovanni (Baldwin 122). David found that within the room they could enjoy their lives together, but it seemed like the outside world was always encroaching. David related that "sometimes strange shapes loomed against" the window panes that they had obscured "with a heavy, white cleaning polish" (Baldwin 124). Whenever this occurred, David found that Giovanni, wherever he was at, "would stiffen like a hunting dog and remain perfectly silent until whatever seemed to threaten our safety had moved away" (Baldwin 124). So, even though David loved Giovanni, he decided that instead of taking a risk and having a life with Giovanni outside of social norms, he would rather rest in the safety of obeying societies' dictates. He stated to Giovanni, "I—I cannot have a life with you," but "I can have a life with" Hella (Baldwin 208).

It is no hard thing to see how David's choice of safety instead of risk hurt Giovanni. First, Giovanni gave himself to David and risked himself, but David refused to reciprocate. Giovanni loved David and to an unhealthy level tied his happiness and life to David. Giovanni told David, "Before you came I wanted to die, I have told you many times. It is cruel to have made me want to live only to make my death more bloody" (Baldwin 201). David's choosing

safety over risking himself with Giovanni left Giovanni alone once again, but the loneliness was worse as it occurred after the warmth that comes from close communion with another. Baldwin mirrored this in the book itself. Baldwin wrote scenes that lead the reader to hope that the characters would have a happy life together and then dashed them as David selfishly chose to leave Giovanni, leaving the readers sadder than if they had not seen hope in the future for the characters. Another way David hurt Giovanni was by lying to Giovanni about writing his father for money. After Giovanni lost his job, David told Giovanni he would send for money from his father, but he never did. David kept putting it off as “it would have been too definitive an act” (Baldwin 167). David refused to take the risk that writing his father would entail, but he also lied to Giovanni saying that he had sent for the money. This left Giovanni to ask every day with barely suppressed panic if the money was coming, while all along David knew it would not be. This hurt Giovanni, as not only was he lied to by David, but also David was refusing to help Giovanni while they struggled together financially, which left Giovanni stressed. Furthermore, David hurt Giovanni by simply abandoning Giovanni when Hella arrived without a word. Jacques told David, “It seems you left him alone in that room without any food, without any money, without, even, any cigarettes” (Baldwin 186). David left him because he wanted the safety and rewards, like paternal approval, that would only come from having a relationship with a woman and obviously this hurt Giovanni (Baldwin 175). Finally, although David did not directly cause Giovanni’s execution, he certainly helped put Giovanni along the path towards it. If David had risked the ire of society for his love for Giovanni, he would have been able to help Giovanni, and it is unlikely Giovanni would have sought out employment with Guillaume in the way he did, and if he had, it is unlikely that he would have killed Guillaume as he would still have had something to live for. Thus, there would be no reason for his execution. David clearly

saw this as he felt incredible guilt over it. Hella told David, “Don’t act as though it were somehow, your fault. It’s not your fault,” but even as he told her that “*I know it’s not my fault!*” his voice and how Hella looked at him clearly showed that he did think it was his fault (Baldwin 223). Indeed, later he told Hella, “I can’t help feeling that I placed him in the shadow of the knife. He wanted me to stay in that room with him, he begged me to stay” (Baldwin 235). Clearly, David felt that his not risking having a life with Giovanni led to Giovanni not only getting hurt, but also getting executed.

David’s relationships with both Joey and Giovanni show that through his choosing safety over risk other people were hurt and he made a selfish choice. David abandoned Joey, because he was afraid he “would lose my manhood,” even though he said being with Joey, “stirred in me then, great thirsty heat, and trembling, and tenderness so painful I thought my heart would burst” (Baldwin 11-2). David looked at social expectations and what other people would think instead of caring for Joey. He said, “I wondered what Joey’s mother would say when she saw the sheets. Then I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me” (Baldwin 12). Then, later, David had a chance at a life with Giovanni and he knew it. Giovanni had told David that “you know very well...what can happen between us. It is for that reason you are leaving me” (Baldwin 209). David had looked at social standards and decided that he wanted the “legitimate surrender” that came from loving Hella instead of the life he could have with Giovanni (Baldwin 175). A life with Giovanni would have required a risk David was unwilling to make; David chose safety and Giovanni was hurt. These parables remind readers that choosing safety over risk, because one fears what people may say and social expectations, not only leads to others being hurt, but is also a selfish choice as one chooses the rewards society offers over the wellbeing of others. Baldwin chose to risk the contempt of others and not only openly

proclaimed his homosexuality, but fought for the civil rights of other African Americans.

Through his actions and the actions of others who also took risks, African Americans combated successfully the segregation they were facing and homosexuality has gained wider acceptance in a hostile society. Truly, David's relationships in *Giovanni's Room* serve as illustrations of what can happen when people choose to not take risks either in personal relationships or while fighting for Civil Rights.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. Giovanni's Room. New York: The Dial Press, 1956.