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## Fooling with fortune

By William Loeffler  
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NBC network executives can't be blamed for thinking they must have lived right in a previous life.

"My Name Is Earl," which airs at 9 p.m. Thursdays, is the season's No. 1 comedy among viewers ages 18 to 49, a demographic nirvana for advertisers.

Jason Lee plays Earl, a lowlife and petty thief who undergoes a religious conversion after being hit by a car. While recuperating in the hospital, he watches MTV personality Carson Daly on television. When Daly mentions that his success has come about from doing good for others, Earl takes the message to heart. He sets out to fix his karma by making amends to all those he's wronged, beginning with a geek that he used to pick on in high school. Think of it as "Kung Fu" with tattoos and flannel shirts.

But is Earl's conception of karma wrong? After all, karma isn't a pickup truck whose bad parts you can replace.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines karma as "the force generated by a person's actions held in Hinduism and Buddhism to perpetuate transmigration and in its ethical consequences to determine the nature of the person's next existence."

But, just as Alanis Morissette got the definition of irony wrong in her song "Ironic," the concept of karma has been vulgarized to mean kismet, comeuppance, just desserts, poetic justice, payback, reaping the whirlwind or plain luck.

"Karma is much more complex than these others, because it doesn't give you much leeway," says Philips Stevens, associate professor of anthropology at the State University of Buffalo, New York. "It takes everything that you've done, everything that's been done to you in your entire life cycle, everything you've done to or for everybody else, all the good, all the harm, even all the good and harmful thoughts. ... In karma, all of this is combined into one great web into which you are ensnared. You really don't have much leeway."

Franklin Harvey, professor of philosophy and religious studies at the

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Monroeville campus of the University of Phoenix and Westmoreland Community College, says making a conscious effort to improve your karma defeats the purpose. Harvey has not seen "Earl," but addresses the issues in the show: "If he did wrongs in the past, he should certainly try to right those wrongs. If he has the idea of righting them to improve his karma, he's doing it for selfish reasons, which is minimizing the good that he's going to get from that."

"My Name Is Earl" mocks the fetishism of karma in popular culture, says Jeffrey Robbins, assistant professor of Religion and Philosophy at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Lebanon County.

"It is almost as if 'My Name Is Earl' is making a joke out of some American's notion of what has been termed our 'cafeteria-style religion,' the idea that we can pick and choose between different traditions whatever suits our tastes the best," he says.

Author and stand-up comedian Ed Driscoll, an Upper St. Clair native who has written for Dennis Miller, Billy Crystal and Morgan Freeman, observes the secular rule of karma in Hollywood: Be nice to people on the way up, because you'll meet the same people on the way back.

"I'm not sure that I totally believe in the strict Buddhist sense, which I think says things like if you're a jerk, you'll come back as a toad or something," Driscoll says, "but I've always believed in treating others as I'd like to be treated, and I think that when you're difficult with people, it definitely does come back to cause you problems."

Karma, or its equivalent, is a cosmic force of nature that cuts across religious and secular boundaries. Some examples:

**Judeo-Christian karma:** Old Testament karma: They that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same (Job 4:8). New Testament karma: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap (Galatians 6:7).

**Scientific karma:** One of the laws of motion formulated by Sir Isaac Newton holds that for every action is an equal and opposite reaction.

**Blues karma:** "Further on up the Road," written by Don Robey and Joe Veasey, warns an unfaithful ex-lover: *Further on up the road/someone's gonna hurt you like you hurt me.*

**Hollywood karma:** Make enough good movies, and you'll eventually be rewarded with an Oscar. When Al Pacino received a statuette for the middling "Scent of a Woman" in 1993, many handicappers said he was really being compensated for his overlooked body of work that included "The Godfather" movies. It cuts both ways. The 1983 film "Yentl," directed by and starring the talented but abrasive Barbra Streisand, was shut out of the nominations, a snub many attributed to Tinseltown tit-for-tat.

**Seinfeld karma:** Elaine, George and Kramer seem to have generated a whole lot of negative karma during the hit show's eight-season run. Since the show went off the air, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jason Alexander and Michael Richards have all bombed with their respective television shows. "The Michael Richards Show" lasted for only eight episodes; "Bob Patterson," starring Alexander, ran five episodes; while the Louis-Dreyfus vehicle "Watching Ellie" went 18 episodes before it, too, was canceled. Maybe it's because George accidentally poisoned his fiance with those cheap envelopes.

**Please pass the karma:** You might not be reincarnated as a cocktail fork if you're rude in this life, but bad manners will come back to haunt you, says Peter Post, director of the Emily Post Institute in Burlington, Vt. Good manners can have the opposite effect, provided they're done with the same altruistic spirit propounded by Buddha.

"One of the key considerations in etiquette is that you have to do the things you do with sincerity behind it," he says. "If you don't do it with sincerity, people see right through you."

**Britpop karma:** Oasis, Britain's self-proclaimed inheritors of the Beatles legacy, were arrogant and mean to just about everyone during their '90s heyday. Oasis leader and songwriter Noel Gallagher called INXS lead singer Michael Hutchence "a has-been" at a British awards ceremony. Now that Oasis has been supplanted on the charts by a new generation of groups, Gallagher must know what a has-been feels like.

**Black-and-Gold karma:** The Steelers beat the Seattle Seahawks in Super Bowl XL because the referees gave them the game in order to make up for negating an interception by Steelers safety Troy Polamalu in the Jan. 16 playoff against the Indianapolis Colts. Or so said some cynics, conspiracy theorists and cosmic prognosticators, also known as sore losers.

*William Loeffler can be reached at [wloeffler@tribweb.com](mailto:wloeffler@tribweb.com) or (412) 320-7986.*



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