Ethical Dilemmas

"How Good People Make Tough Choices
Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living"
by Rushworth M. Kidder

Truth vs. Loyalty

As a professional working for a large defense electronics firm, Stan found himself riding a roller coaster of concern about layoffs. Every few years, it seemed, top management slashed jobs as work slacked off – only to hire again when things started looking up. So when Stan and his team members noticed that the executives were again meeting behind closed doors, they suspected the worst.

Stan's boss however, was a good friend – and also a voluble talker. So Stan felt no qualms asking him about the future. His boss explained the contingency plan at length -- mentioning that if layoffs were needed, Stan's team member Jim would be slated to lose his job. He also made it plain that Stan was to keep that information confidential.

Not long after that conversation, Jim approached Stan and asked whether he could confirm what the rumor mill was saying: that he himself would be the target. That request landed Stan squarely in the truth-versus-loyalty dilemma. Because he knew the truth, honesty compelled him to answer accurately. But he had given his word to his boss not to break a confidence, and felt a strong loyalty to that relationship.

Whichever course he chose, then, would be "right." And he could not choose both.

Individual vs. Community

In the mid-1980's, the administrator of a residential care facility in California received a letter from a nearby university hospital, where his elderly residents typically went for medical attention. The letter reminded him that five of his residents had recently had surgery at the hospital. It also informed him that the medical staff suspected that some of the blood used in their transfusions may have been tainted with the HIV virus. While making it clear that the probabilities of infection were low, the letter asked him to call the hospital immediately and arrange further testing for these five.

That letter, he recalled, presented him with a stark and direct question: what should he tell and to whom should he tell it? Given the public and professional ignorance about AIDS _- this was remember, the mid-1980's, when the disease was little understood and legal regulations offered him no clear guidance – he felt certain that, if he told his staff, their fear would be so great that they would refuse to enter the rooms of those five, making it impossible to deliver even minimal care to them. But suppose he did not tell the staff and one of them contracted AIDS: Surely he would be culpable.

As it happened, none of the five ultimately tested positive, but that crucial fact was unknown at the time. What was he to do? He knew it was right to honor the individual rights of each of those five residents – the privacy of their medical histories, the expectation of high-quality care at his facility, their dignity as individuals. It was, in other words to say nothing.

On the other hand, he knew it was right to protect the community from disease. The staff had not signed on for hazardous duty. Most of them saw themselves as unskilled hourly workers, not members of a life-endangering profession to which they had been called by noble duty and prepared by intensive training. Never mind that they might all phone in sick the day after the announcement: They deserved protection so they could continue to deliver care, with full regard for safety, to the many other residents who were **not** among the five. So it was right to tell them.

Both sides were right, and he couldn't do both.

Short-term vs. long-term

When he graduated from college with a degree in science, Andy had found a solid job in his profession, married, and had two sons. Twelve years later, he moved to another company that promised steady advancement within its managerial ranks. A devoted family man, he admired his wife's dedication to raising the boys. But he also observed that his sons, approaching their teen years, benefited greatly from his fatherly friendship and counsel--especially as they approached what he and his wife realized could prove to be a difficult transitional period in their upbringing. So he made a commitment to spend plenty of time with them, playing baseball and helping with their schoolwork.

But he also loved his work, and did well at it. And it quickly became apparent that, to advance rapidly up the managerial ranks, he needed an MBA. A nearby university offered the degree in an attractive evening-and-weekend program that would allow him to continue full-time employment. But it would soak up the next several years of his life and throw most of the family activities into his wife's hands.

Andy's dilemma set the short-term against the long-term. It was right, he felt, to honor his family's short-term needs--to stick close to his sons at a time when a father's influence seemed so important. Yet it was right to build for the long-term needs of his family--to equip himself with an education that would make him a better provider in the coming years, when he would presumably need to pay college tuitions.

Both were right, and he couldn't do both.

Justice vs. Mercy

As feature editor for a major daily newspaper, I found myself in charge of a broad array of different departments. Like most newspapers, ours ran features on education, books, science, and the arts--as well as on cars, chess, stars, gardening, and food. I quickly learned that what makes any of these departments sing is the skill of the writing--and that even in areas where I had no discernible interest, a well-crafted story could seize and hold my attention just as well as a breaking front-page sizzler. So we always sought to hire young staff members who, whatever other talents they might have, were good writers.

We had just such a young woman on the food page. She had come to us from one of the nation's finest colleges, and had progressed rapidly to the point where, as assistant editor, she wrote regularly. So one summer day, when I noticed that she had submitted a story on Maine blueberries, I was pleased to see it in the queue, awaiting publication in several more days.

The next day I looked up from my computer terminal to find the food editor herself--a woman with decades of experience, one of the best in the business--standing silently in front of my desk. In one hand she held a copy of her young assistant's story on blueberries. In the other hand she held a battered, tan cookbook some thirty years old. She laid each on my desk. And there, on the pages of that cookbook, was our young friend's story, printed word for word.

Among the few cardinal sins of journalism, one stands supreme: You don't plagiarize. Nothing should be drummed more insistently into the minds of young journalists; nothing destroys a career more rapidly; nothing defrauds your readers more egregiously; and nothing is more difficult to detect. This was no right-versus-right ethical dilemma. For our young friend, it was a pure and simple case of right-versus-wrong moral temptation--and she had chosen wrong.

For me, however, it **was** an ethical dilemma. I found myself torn by two conflicting desires. Half of me wanted to lunge from my desk, brush past the senior editor, and make a beeline for the assistant's desk--whereupon I would overturn it, scatter its contents across the newsroom floor, grab her by the scruff of her neck, heave her out into the street, and call out after her, "Never, **never** come back--and never

let me hear that you are working in journalism anywhere else!" The other half of me wanted to walk over to her desk, quietly pull up a chair, and say, "What on earth has come over you? You know better than that! Is there something going wrong in your personal life that I haven't been aware of? Let's go have a cup of coffee--you and I have to talk!"

Half of me, in other words, wanted to see justice done in no uncertain terms--punishment swift and sure, the example emblazoned forever into the annals of American journalism--despite the fact that, were I to take such a course, half the newsroom might well line up on one side muttering, "Hard-hearted fascist, too rigid to care!" The other half yearned to be merciful, to extend the hand of compassion in a situation that seemed so desperately to need it--even though, were I to do so, I could foresee the rest of the newsroom lining up on the other side and muttering, "Bleeding-heart liberal, soft on crime!"

It was right to be merciful. It was right to enforce justice. And I could not do both at once.