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Doing the Right Thing, Whatever That Is

By ALINA TUGEND

I RECENTLY found myself in a position where I had some moral qualms about a writing assignment. No, it wasn't for this publication, and no, I wasn't being asked to make up quotes or leave out pertinent facts. But I was being asked to phrase things in a way I didn't feel totally comfortable with.

I spoke to the editor without much luck. I debated what to do. Should I withdraw the article, though it would cause considerable problems to the editor at this late date? Should I ask for my byline to be removed?

In the end, I decided to let the story run. But I vowed I would never write for the publication again.

The incident made me reflect on how things can seem so black and white when you're outside a situation, and yet so difficult when you're entangled in it. How do we find a framework for addressing ethical issues in our everyday lives?

First, it's important to know what ethics are not, said Judy Nadler, a senior fellow in government ethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University.

"They're not, 'Well everyone else is doing it, so it must be O.K.,'" she said. [The Web site for her center](#) lays out other things ethics are not: they aren't the same as feelings, because many people feel good even though they are doing something wrong. And often our feelings will tell us it's uncomfortable to do the right thing if it is hard.

They're not just following the law. Laws can become ethically corrupt, and there are things strictly allowed by law that we would consider unethical, like some of the activity on Wall Street that led to the financial crisis, Ms. Nadler said. "I always say the law is the floor, not the ceiling."

So how do we determine if we're acting ethically?

"If, at the end of the day, can you say, 'I got all the facts, not just the ones I agreed with?'" Ms. Nadler said. "Can you say you looked at all the options, not just the convenient ones? If I did all those things and answered them honestly, then I can say I did my very best."

Most of us know the situation where we're asked by a boss to do something that makes us uneasy. And these situations can rankle us for years.

My father still remembers an incident back in 1979 when he worked, as he did for most of his professional life, as a science writer and communications director at the University of California, Los Angeles.

A small research nuclear reactor on the campus became the focus of a group of student protesters, whom my father said he "instinctively sympathized with." And he had some social connection with the parents of the leader of the group.

"On the other hand," he said, "there were the professors and administration with whom I worked day by day and whom I generally respected, who assured me that the reactor was completely safe, had passed all inspections and was needed to train a generation of future nuclear engineers — then thought to be the world's solution to the energy problem."

My father, who didn't have the technical background to know what was right, wrote the news release quoting a nuclear engineering professor stating that the reactor was safe.

He loved his job, was putting two children through college and had one in high school. Yet the episode still bothers him years later, and in retrospect, put in the same position today, he said he might have at least discussed his reservations with his boss and perhaps asked if someone else could be assigned to deal with the media on this issue.

My father's instinct — that he should have talked about his ethical qualms — is a good one, said Susan Dwyer, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland.

“I think people have a great deal of difficulty being honest and straightforward,” Professor Dwyer said. “I’m an Australian and I find Americans are really coy about saying, ‘This is an uncomfortable situation and I don’t want to do it.’ ” That’s true in personal and well as professional relationships, she said.

You also have to be aware that if you work in a place where the culture implicitly or explicitly encourages unethical behavior, you’re going to face the same quandary over and over, said Thomas White, professor of business ethics at Loyola Marymount University.

“You have to ask yourself, even if I get through this situation, is it going to come up again? If the message is, ‘Make those numbers no matter what,’ if you find yourself in a moral dilemma, you want to be ruthlessly realistic with yourself and start developing an exit strategy,” Professor White said. “You’re just kidding yourself if you think it won’t happen again.”

But Professor White also acknowledged a hard truth: It’s easier to have higher ethical standards in good economic times than bad.

His department’s Web site offered helpful ways to think through an ethical problem. Analyze the consequences: Who will be helped by what you do? Who will be hurt? What kind of benefits and harms are we talking about, and how does this look over the long run as well as the short term?

But don’t make the mistake of assuming that people who have strong principles and never compromise are necessarily “better.”

“We often admire this kind of backbone and we are apt to attribute courage to those who run considerable risks in sticking to their guns,” said Professor Dwyer, who teaches moral philosophy focusing on issues like abortion, pornography and assisted suicide. “But some people might stick to their guns — act on their principles, come what may — because they are cowardly. They simply don’t want to think through the complications of particular cases and reach for a rule or principle. This represents a refusal to honestly engage with the messiness of human life, while at the same time allowing the person to bask in self-righteousness.”

And of course, ethics change. Randy Cohen, who wrote The Ethicist column for *The New York Times* from 1999 to 2011, said that when he first started, he was asked by a woman going out on a blind date whether it was ethical to Google her date.

“How the world has changed,” he said. “Now, no one wouldn’t think of not Googling a blind date.”

The most common ethical question he was asked about over the years concerned a “duty to report.” That is, you find out a friend’s spouse is having an extramarital affair. A college roommate is cheating by downloading papers from the Internet.

Do you tell?

In terms of the friend, he said, it depends on whether you’re getting a strong message that the friend wants to know. If not, be silent, he said.

With the roommate question, Mr. Cohen, the author of “Be Good: How to Navigate the Ethics of Everything” (Chronicle Books, 2012), said he liked the rule some universities had come up with: You have a duty to act.

“You can talk to your roommate. You can go a professor or department chair and say there’s cheating going on without naming names. But you can’t do nothing,” he said.

So how do I feel now about my ethical quandary? The best I can do, I believe, is use what I’ve learned as a guideline for how I will address the next moral issue I will inevitably face.

As Mr. Cohen said: “We can’t ask people to be perfect. But we can ask them to strive to be good.”

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Notes

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/22/your-money/doing-the-right-thing-whatever-that-is-shortcuts.html>