

ETHICS, YOUTH, AND THE MORAL BAROMETER

By Rushworth M. Kidder

Over dinner with a group of college students in California not long ago, I repeated to them a story—said to be true—of a ten-year-old in one of New York City's roughest sections. On his way to school, he found a wallet packed with money and credit cards—and full of identification. Taking it with him to school, he could find no one there—no teacher or administrator—willing to tell him what was the “right thing to do” with that wallet.

“We can't tell you to keep it or to return it,” they said in essence, “because that would be imposing our values on you. Besides, you're poor and he's pretty well-off: What would your Mom say if we suggested you return the wallet? She might be very upset. No, you'll have to figure this one out for yourself: We can't help you.”

When I asked the students around that dinner table what *they* thought should have happened, they all agreed: The school officials were absolutely right. There is no way you can impose your values on others. There's no way even to help instruct the young into a clearer sense of right and wrong. That child, they concluded, would simply have to learn his values for himself.

Wherever I share this example, it raises troubling questions about the nation's moral barometer. Yes, people agree, children need to learn ethics for themselves; no, it's not right to impose values on others. But is that *all* we can do? Are we, as a nation, so hopelessly locked into a slow slide into moral neutrality that values must go untaught and all morality must be deemed relative and situational? Or do the dozens of ethics organizations growing up around the nation, the hundreds of executive ethics seminars presented each year, and the thou-

sands of students now sharing in the new “character education” movement in schools tell us something else—that there is rising concern about ethics?

A scan of the moral barometer suggests that both are true.

Growing Attention and Concern

On the positive side, we're talking more about ethics, it seems, than ever before. The word has become an integral part of the language of public discourse. No week goes by without *ethics* figuring in the blare of our headlines and on the lips of our commentators. So pervasive is the idea that, as Dartmouth College ethics expert Deni Elliott has noted, the *New York Times* index from 1969 to 1989 reveals that the number of news stories indexed under *ethics* grew in that 20-year period by 400 percent.¹ Few readers of the *Times* would attribute that change to an idealistic editorial staff bent on preaching purity to an unregenerate world. The reason is much simpler: This is a group of savvy newspaper executives who prosper by giving the public the stories they want to read. Today, we want to read about ethics.

What we read under that heading, of course, is not uniformly encouraging. It is typically a rich broth of scandal, corruption, and vice. Sometimes the stories on ethics have to do with personal tragedies; other times, the fall of individuals from high places. Financiers Ivan Boesky and Michael Milken, politicians Jim Wright and Gary Hart, evangelists Jim Baker and Jimmy Swaggart, athlete Pete Rose, hotelier Leona Helmsley, clergyman Bruce Ritter—the list goes on and on. Sometimes those stories have to do with entire nations, as in the corruption scandals that have wracked Italy, the ongoing issues of political intrigue and million-dollar kick-

backs in Japan, and the revelations of a knowing use of AIDS-tainted blood for transfusions in France in the 1980s. Sometimes, too, ethics reaches the headlines as we frame the debate over the agonizing issues of our time: How western nations should respond to “ethnic cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia, what guidelines to erect concerning the use of “heroic” medical technologies to keep alive the seriously ill, how to think about euthanasia and abortion, how to balance the pressures against violence shown by the media and freedom of expression, whether to distribute condoms in the schools.

Yet today's ethics stories are not all generated from some sad human failing, or from grueling choices between two wrongs. Some of the headlines applaud the moral compass of single individuals who, like community college student Roger Wardell, found a satchel containing \$6,100 in cash in a Tempe, Arizona parking lot and gave it back—because, he said, “It's just a matter of principle...My parents brought me up to be honest.”² Other stories focus on the willingness of teenagers to behave unselfishly: A 1991 survey by Independent Sector, for example, found that 61% of American 12-to-17-year-olds regularly do volunteer work, contributing an average of 3.2 hours of time each week to a charitable activity of their choice.³

Other stories highlight the dawning recognition of the importance of ethics for our future. When Korn/Ferry International and the Columbia University School of Business polled 1,500 executives in 20 nations in 1989, they found that “personal ethics” came at the very top of a list of characteristics said to be required in the ideal corporate chief executive officer in the year 2000.⁴

Still other accounts center on the attitudes of entire sectors of society, who when asked whether ethics matters, respond: "Yes, indeed."

- In polls by the Gallup Organization, the number of people insisting that a "strict moral code" is "very important" has risen from 47% in 1981 to 60% in 1989.⁵

- In 1991-92, when the Josephson Institute surveyed US students, 78% of the high-schoolers said that cheating on exams is wrong, and 90% of the high-school and college crowd said that "being kind and caring" is very important.⁶

- When the Center for Business Ethics at Bentley College in Massachusetts surveyed *Fortune 1000* corporations in 1992, one-third of the respondents said they had set up a formal "ethics officer" position in their corporation. Nearly half of these positions had been established since 1989.⁷

- When the Chicago-based management consulting firm of McFeeley Wackerle Jett asked 4,000 upper-level executives in 1987 whether "good ethics is good business in the long run," 90% strongly agreed.⁸

And there's plenty of anecdotal evidence. A colleague of mine tells of taking his grandson to watch a lift-off of the space shuttle at Cape Canaveral. With the countdown in progress, the boy noticed a watch on the ground beneath the bleachers. Slipping through the seats, he retrieved it—a genuine Rolex, set about with diamonds. With the lift-off finished and people rushing to the parking lot to beat the crowd, he apologized to his grandfather for slowing them down, but insisted they take the watch to Lost and Found. On their way, the owner of the watch and her husband caught up with them, identified the watch, and, greatly relieved, offered the boy a reward. He refused. They insisted, explaining that he had done a rare and highly moral thing. He still refused. Why? Because, he explained, "I'm a Boy Scout." Ethics, to him, was not a rare and unusual exception. It was a proper and customary duty.

Unfortunately, any serious reading of the moral barometer also reveals a number of sobering signs. Among the most telling are the views that Americans take toward that very barometer—the kind of "how are we doing?" assessments that register the nation's attitudes toward itself. "By a margin of 63% to 33%," says a September 1992 report in *Knight-Ridder* newspapers, "Americans believe the

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United States is in decline as a nation. The decline is not military—we are still the only superpower—but economic, moral, and spiritual."⁹ That last category—a moral and spiritual decline—received a "yes" vote from nearly two-thirds of those responding. Similar comments surface in other places as well. Asked about the ethical standards of people today, 59% of the upper-level executives polled by McFeeley in 1987 indicated dissatisfaction.¹⁰

Are We Failing the Young?

Perhaps the most serious evidence of a barometric decline comes from the numerous surveys that ask individuals to assess their own response to certain ethical situations. The challenge is especially acute among the rising generations, who are destined to provide the ethical leadership for the nation in the 21st century. How are *they* doing?

- In a Louis Harris and Associates survey conducted in 1989 for the Girls Scouts of the United States of America, 65% of the high-schoolers said that, faced with an important test for which they aren't sufficiently prepared, they would either try to copy answers from a good student nearby or glance at that student's paper for ideas.¹¹

- That figure is roughly equivalent to the one reported in a 1991-92 survey by the Josephson Institute, which found that three in five high-schoolers "admitted to having cheated on an exam at least once while in high school."¹²

- A 1989 survey by the Pinnacle Group, an international public relations firm, found that, when they got out into the world of business, "a total of 66% of students [in the United States] said they would consider lying to achieve a business objective." About the same number said they would "inflate their business expense report."¹³

When these same students finish college and head for graduate school, their ethics apparently goes with them. Rutgers professor Donald McCabe, surveying more than 6,000 students in 31 colleges and universities around the nation during the 1990-91 academic year, found that over two-thirds "indicated that they had cheated on a test or major assignment at least once while an undergraduate."¹⁴ The lowest percentage of admitted cheaters was found among those heading for the nation's schools of education. That fact ought to comfort today's parents and educators—until they realize that the "low" number is 57%. The proportions saying they had cheated among those planning to enter other specialties:

- Laws schools, 63%
- Arts programs, 64%
- Public service and government programs, 66%
- Medical schools, 68%
- Engineering programs, 71%
- Graduate schools of business, 76%

The presence of an honor code, apparently, had little deterrent effect: Of the 31 colleges and universities surveyed, fourteen have long-standing honor-code traditions. Asking why they cheated, Professor McCabe was led to conclude that "many students felt that some forms of cheating were victimless crimes, particularly on assignments that accounted for a small percentage of the total course grade." You have only to ask who engineered the bridge you are about to cross, or where

your doctor got his or her training, to begin questioning whether a widespread propensity for cheating among professionals—and the consequent danger of unleashing into the world a cadre of individuals who don't know what they are doing—is in fact a “victimless crime.” And one has only to sit in the corporate hiring chair, watching the parade of bright young MBA's coming for interviews, to contemplate the statistical probability that three out of four of them cheated at least in some limited fashion to get through your door in the first place.

When these people finally enter the workforce, do attitudes change? Not according to a Roper Organization survey done for Shearson Lehman Brothers in 1992.¹⁵ When 18-to-29-year-olds were asked to identify the most important factors in getting ahead in the world, 89% said “who you know” and 69% “playing politics.” Those responses could be innocent enough, if translated into less provocative terminology such as networking and being politically astute. Unfortunately, there are no mitigating translations for two other “get ahead” factors—“corruption” and “deceit”—cited as important, respectively, by 37 and 39% of the young adults.

Are the not-so-young adults any better? There is some comfort in a 1991 Roper Survey reporting that three-fourths of Americans say it's wrong to tell an insurance company that “their car is kept in a location with lower insurance rates than where they actually live.”¹⁶

Searching for Trends

From the profusion of such data examining the moral barometer, two trends are discernible. Both are troubling, and both are significant. The first points to an ebbing of moral attitudes as children get older:

- A 1992 write-in survey by *USA Weekend*—admittedly unscientific, since the 126,000 teens estimated to have responded were not randomly selected—found that while 70% of the 13-year-olds said they would return an extra dollar mistakenly

given to them in change, only 55% of 17-year-olds said they would do the same.¹⁷

- More systematic are the results of the Girl Scouts survey, showing a similar pattern of ethics declining as age increases. In that survey, 65% of high-schoolers reported that they would cheat to pass an important exam—while only 21% of elementary school children and 53% of junior high students said the same.¹⁸ The inference is clear: For every year that our students stay in school, the willingness to contemplate cheating as an acceptable behavior increases.

What, then, is the moral barometer telling us? Its current reading suggests a complex pattern, with tendencies toward moral decline married to evidence of rising concern.

- A similar and perhaps more discouraging figure comes from studies of college athletes. Assessing scores on moral reasoning tests given to incoming freshmen, various researchers note that the athletes generally score lower (indicating less proficiency in ethical awareness and analysis) than the non-athletes. More disturbing, however, is the fact that when these same tests are given later in the students' careers, the non-athletes' scores improve—while athletes involved in intercollegiate sports actually *decline* in their moral-reasoning abilities.¹⁹

If ever there were an old chestnut about a well-rounded education, it is the notion that sports makes the whole person, builds character, inculcates strong values, and generally creates ethical individuals. Yet intercollegiate sports, as currently played on the competitive, televised, and money-sodden fields of many of today's campuses, apparently does just the reverse.

A second trend worth noting involves the comparison of past and present ethical ages:

- When the Josephson Institute asked the out-of-school set (dominated by the over-thirty crowd) about their own past, they found that only 25% of them said they had cheated in their senior year in high school.²⁰ The figure for today's high-school students in the same study stands at over 60%. The response of the older people might only reflect, however, a rosy haze of nostalgia, or a less-than-candid willingness to speak the truth even in an anonymous survey.

- Less open to question is another of Josephson's findings, which is that while some 75% of college students agree that “most people will cheat or lie when it is necessary to get what they want,” only half as many in the over-thirty group agree.²¹

- Watching trends over the past several decades, University of Georgia professor Fred Schab found that in 1969 more than 80% of high-schoolers agreed that “honesty is the best policy”—a figure that had dropped to 60% by 1989. Asked whether they had ever signed their parents' name to an excuse, nearly half the students in 1989 said they had—up from 26% who said “yes” in 1969.²²

- When upper-level executives were asked by McFeely Wackerle Jett whether “during the past twenty years people have become more ethical, less ethical, or stayed about the same,” 56% said “less ethical” and 36% said “about the same.”²³

Searching for Explanations

There are, of course, innumerable explanations for these twin trends of declining ethics as students age and as history unfolds. Many observers point to the breakup of the family, where most people still feel values are best taught. Others point to a decline in religious commitment, the fracturing of the community, the influence of television, a more sexually permissive age “liberated” by birth control and abortion, an upsurge of cynicism, a decline in unselfishness, a glut of greed, a dearth of compassion, and so forth. A curious fact unearthed among the college students surveyed by McCabe,

however, suggests yet one more candidate: growing affluence. "Those from families with incomes over \$150,000," he reports, "are 50% more likely to be regular cheaters than those whose parents earn less than \$25,000."²⁴ His finding, sadly enough, gives new relevance to that old descriptor *poor-but-honest*.

What, then, is the moral barometer telling us? Its current reading suggests a complex pattern, with tendencies toward moral decline married to evidence of rising concern. Reading the barometer to discern trends—asking into the state of the nation's youth, for example, as a predictor of the future—suggests a more poignant picture. America's young people are deeply confused about issues of right versus wrong. To their credit, however, they seem to know it. Cheating is wrong, they say, even while they go on cheating. As for what to do about it, they have none of the resistance to learning sound values that adults sometimes attribute to them: Asked whether the public schools should "teach basic values such as honesty, fairness and responsibility," 80% of the respondents to the 1992 *USA Weekend* survey said, "yes."²⁵ But then, even the nation's business executives feel that way: By a margin of 84%, they either "strongly" or "somewhat" agree with the proposition that "companies should provide employees at all levels with some type of education or training in ethics."²⁶

"There can be little debate that the character of youth is an increasingly seri-

ous problem for the United States," writes Professor James S. Leming, a specialist in ethics education at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. The experience of schooling, he says, is one of the few constants for all children in an increasingly fragmented and unstable environment. We as a nation cannot afford to continue the serendipitous character education of youth. The schools must begin to address this issue, for if we as a people fail to effectively pass on to our youth the character traits that have made the United States a great nation, then the future of both our youth and the society are in danger.²⁷

Endnotes:

¹Deni Elliott, "In Tomorrow's News...Ethics Will Be a Frequent Story Subject," *FineLine*, March 1990, p. 6.

²Christopher Heredia, "Good Samaritan Did Right Thing—Twice." *The Arizona Republic/Phoenix Gazette*, July 17, 1991.

³Virginia A. Hodgkinson, Murray S. Weitzman, Stephen M. Noga and Heather Gorski, *Giving and Volunteering, 1992: Volunteering and Giving Among American Teenagers 12 to 17 Years of Age* (Washington, DC: Independent Sector, 1992).

⁴Korn/Ferry International, Board of Directors, *Sixteenth Annual Study* (Los Angeles: K/F International, 1989).

⁵Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of January 24-26, 1989.

⁶Michael Josephson, "The Hole in the Moral Ozone: Ethical Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors in American Schools." *Ethics: Easier Said than Done*, December 1992, pp. 35-45.

⁷Judith B. Kamm, "Ethics Officers Gaining Acceptance at Many Firms, Survey Reveals," *Ethikos*, January/February 1993, pp. 7-10.

⁸Clarence E. McFeely, Frederick W. Wackerle, and Charles C. Jett, *The McFeely-Wackerle-Jett Survey on Ethics* (Chicago: MWJ, 1987).

⁹Survey by the Gallup Organization for CNN/Knight Ridder, August 28-September 2, 1989.

¹⁰McFeely, Wackerle, and Jett, loc. cit.

¹¹Robert Coles and James Hunter, *Girl Scouts Survey on the Beliefs and Moral Values of America's Children*. (New York: Girl Scouts of the United States of America, 1990), p. xvii.

¹²Michael Josephson, loc. cit.

¹³Pinnacle Group, Inc., *Business Ethics Survey* (Minneapolis: Pinnacle Group Inc., 1989).

¹⁴Donald L. McCabe, "The Influence of Situational Ethics on Cheating Among College Students," *Journal of Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 1992, pp. 365-374.

¹⁵Shearson-Lehman Brothers, Inc. "Life in America," Survey Series. No. 1, 1992.

¹⁶Survey by the Roper Organization for the Insurance Research Council, May 11-18, 1991.

¹⁷Survey by *USA Weekend*, May 1992. Results published in the August 21-23, 1992 edition.

¹⁸Coles and Hunter, loc. cit.

¹⁹For a brief survey of research suggesting that "the longer...[the individuals] participate in sport, the less moral their actions become," see Jennifer M. Beller and Sharon Kay Stoll, "A Moral Reasoning Intervention Program for Student Athletes," *The Academic Athletic Journal*, Spring 1992, pp. 43-57. The quotation is found on p. 52.

²⁰Josephson, loc. cit.

²¹Ibid.

²²Fred Schab, cited in Michael Josephson, op. cit., p. 40.

²³McFeely, Wackerle, and Jett, loc. cit.

²⁴McCabe, loc. cit.

²⁵*USA Weekend* survey, loc. cit.

²⁶McFeely, Wackerle, and Jett, loc. cit.

²⁷James Leming, "Should Character Education be taught in Schools?" *Insights on Global Ethics*, April 1992, p. 8.

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