

Ethics: The Next Generation

Sunday Address, October 3, 2004, Kate Lovelady

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Introduction

Since I'm talking about the next generation today, I want to open with two poems by one of my favorite poets, nine-year-old Sierra Christianna Bush Rester. She is the daughter of a fellow student of the Humanist Institute.

Do You Know Me

Do you Know me?
I am the dry cleaner

Who makes sure your suit is ready.
And I am from Iran

Do you see me?
I am the cashier
That rings up your groceries.

And I am Jewish

Do you hear my siren?
I am the police officer
That keeps your children safe.
And I am from Wakulla

Have you met me?
I am your next-door neighbor
Our children go to school together.
And I am a Republican

If you see me
Smile.

If you hear me
Wave.

If you know me
Say Hello.

Do you Know me?

(Wakulla, the town in Florida where Sierra lives, is disparaged in some circles as “redneck.”)

Look Within

Why can't we have
Peace?

Why? Can't we find joy,
Joy in life?

Why can't we love,

Love other countries

Why can't we listen,
Listen to those who are wise

Why can't we be strong,
Strong, to stand up and say No

Why can't we have
Peace?

I know why . .

Because we haven't
Found,
The peace,
The love,
The joy

The ability to listen
Or the strength within
Our selves

You can have the peace
Look within . . .

Ethics in the Context of Community

Before I get back to the up-and-coming generations and what we can do for amazing kids like Sierra, I want to share my view of how Ethical Culture traditionally has approached ethics. Ethical Societies were created over 125 years ago as communities in which people could explore and practice how to create better relationships, and then use that locally gained knowledge to influence larger groups, and even nations, to relate better. What do we mean by “better”? In general terms, we advocate for and try to practice kindness, fairness, justice. More specifically, we believe in reciprocity: that all people are interdependent, and that humanity is interdependent with the rest of nature. Since I am interdependent with you, I can only improve myself and my life by helping you improve yourself and your life. And vice-versa. We need each other to grow and to learn.

Ethical Culture proposes that truth—the meaningfulness of life, how we should live and treat each other—is not settled for all time but is evolving as humans and human cultures evolve. We discover the highest truth as it exists so far by including as many people as possible in the process of discovery. There is a well-known parable about several blind people touching an elephant, and arguing over the true nature of the elephant, each based on the part that he or she has touched: one feels the side of the elephant and says an elephant is like a wall, another feels the trunk and says the elephant is like a snake, etc. This story is used by many traditions, and usually the “moral” is that none of us can know truth because each of us is like a blind person touching only a small part of the elephant. Often implied as well is that only an omnipotent being or force outside or above this process can “see the whole elephant,” so to speak.

Ethical Culture looks at this parable a little differently, however. To us, the problem is not that each blind person knows only one part of the elephant. The problem is that the blind folks aren’t communicating very well or trusting each other. What is needed in this situation is not an omnipotent being, necessarily, but more blind people touching more and more parts of the elephant and better communication between them. That is, the more people you can involve in the discussion, and the deeper you can listen and the more honestly you can speak, the richer the picture that emerges.

So I think of ethics as an ongoing discussion of evolving societies and an evolving species, learning how to invite more people into the discussion and how to listen better. But evolution isn’t a one-way process of continuous improvement. There are false starts, wrong paths, uncomfortable leftovers like painful wisdom teeth, and so on. It would be nice to assume that things are going to get better, without much work from us, but it’s not a safe assumption.

Generation Y’s View of Ethical Culture

Let’s look at Generation Y, defined as people born after 1985 or so. We all know many exceptions to every “rule” about a generation, and yet there are sweeping trends among nations, cultures, and generations. Have you read *The Tipping Point*? This is an interesting book about how trends catch on. We’ve probably all had the experience of thinking that a fashion is ridiculous, only to find a few months or years later that we’re wearing it, or a version of it, and that it no longer seems ridiculous. Of course we know

fashion is affected by context, that's one of the meanings of the word "fashion." We don't think of ethical behavior as following fashions, yet it seems that it does. In *The Tipping Point* the author reviews several sociology experiments in which the researchers discovered that whether a person cheats or not depends less on their "character" and more on simply whether or not the person has a safe opportunity to cheat.

In a related well-known experiment, seminary students were asked to give a talk on either the Good Samaritan or some dry organizational matter. On the way to give their talks, researchers planted a person in distress. It turned out that whether or not the student stopped to help depended not on students' backgrounds, beliefs, or even whether they were actively thinking about Good Samaritanism at the time; the main thing that affected whether the students stopped was whether or not they were running late. Now, as New Yorkers this should not surprise us; people think New Yorkers are mean, but that's only if we're in a hurry. Unfortunately, we're almost always in a hurry. But when we think about ethics we don't often think about context; we think about values and beliefs, and how to inspire people by using the right words and ideas. Perhaps we need to think more about how to inspire people using context.

I've changed the seating today because I believe so strongly that ethics is about the context of community as much as it is about words and ideas. To say that Ethical Culture is a religion of human relationships and then to sit in this lovely auditorium as if we were in the subway—that is, as far away from each other as possible—is, I think, sending a mixed message. And not only to children (who may not understand the big words, but who know what they see) or newcomers; it also sends a mixed message to ourselves. New York can be a lonely, isolating place, and that context bleeds over even into congregations; we're certainly not alone in being hesitant to sit next to a stranger. But in order to be passionate about ethical humanist "ideas and ideals," as it says in the program, first we have to start sitting next to other humans.

A Culture of Cheating

Now that we're cozy, let's go back to Generation Y, the youth of today. Some data say they're taking fewer drugs than the previous generation and waiting longer to become sexually active. I suspect that, rather than being less interested in sex and drugs, they just don't leave their computers long enough to indulge in nondigital vices.

But one poll I read says that a majority of them are "appalled" by the indecent TV and movies made supposedly for their benefit by older folk. At the same time, youth today support environmental programs such as recycling and buying "green" products, and they're more open to diversity: they're less racist and sexist, and much more supportive of gay marriage, for example, than older Americans. They're much more likely to have friends of the opposite sex or sexual orientation, or a different race or ethnicity, than previous generations. However, Generation Yers are cheating more on tests than previous generations, which barely seems possible. Also, by a huge majority they are illegally downloading songs and movies from the Internet; they don't even consider it stealing, although the people who own the copyrights do.

What I find interesting about this mishmash of data (and I mentioned only a few details) is that it suggests a growing split between private ethics (what people do with their bodies and how they relate to people they know personally) and public ethics (how people relate to institutions: corporations, schools, or government).

What does this split say about our culture? Another book that's come out recently is called *The Culture of Cheating*, and it details the context in which these kids are growing up: whatever you have to do to get rich you'd better do if you don't want to be a "chump." Everyone cheats: Martha Stewart, Ken Lay, the president lied about weapons in Iraq, priests are creepy, reporters make things up, executives fire people while giving themselves raises, and so on and so forth. Two million Americans now have offshore bank accounts to avoid paying taxes. Two million people—when I read that I was shocked. Then I thought, maybe I should get an offshore bank account too. So if ethics are contextual, and America has become a cheating culture, we are in trouble. If we want a more ethical culture, we have to take very seriously the challenge of creating a new context for the coming generations.

I've been thinking about what I can do to change the culture in which children are growing up. One thing I realized is that I complain a lot about taxes, greedy corporations, the government, and I think such criticisms are justified to some extent. But what is the message I'm really sending with all my complaining? Without meaning to, I wonder if I'm teaching the kids around me that it's justified to steal from corporations, or the government, or to cheat on your taxes—that they should be Looking Out for Number One. I worry about Sierra, the young girl who wrote the poems I opened with today. What will happen to her passion for diversity and openness after a few more years of hearing all the complaints and cynicism of adults? There's a lot to complain about, sure, but if our negativity not only saps our own strength, but also causes younger people not to care, who's going to have the motivation to make things better? We need a positive vision, and a strong one, to counter the cynicism.

This cynical theme of Looking Out for Number One seems to run through the split between private and public ethics in our culture. We even sell our moral messages by appealing to enlightened self-interest: don't do illegal drugs because they'll hurt you and get you in trouble, practice moderation for your own good. What about other people's good? What if I got up here and said, "Sure, taking care of your health has benefits for you, but the main reason you should take better care of yourselves is so that the community won't have to spend its resources on your bypass surgeries and instead can wipe out poverty." Would you be more motivated to eat your greens and take the stairs? That's not how we think as Americans. We probably don't even believe that any human beings think that way, since our individualism is so woven into the fabric of our personalities and our culture.

Three Factors that Lead to Ethical Behavior

Given the title of my talk, I have to mention Star Trek. In the future of Star Trek, there is no racism, no sexism supposedly, no poverty, no unemployment, no environmental

problems, no war on earth. A Liberal utopia, with the odd exception that there seem to be no gay people. You don't hear about the ten commandments or any commandments except one, the Prime Directive: don't interfere with other cultures or life forms. There are some good reasons for this: we might make things worse, who are we to judge, and so on. But "Mind Your Own Business" as the number one ethical rule of the galaxy seems to me like radical American individualism writ very large. I wonder, if Star Trek had been created in another country, would it have had the same Prime Directive? So before Looking Out for Number One takes over the galaxy, how can we create new contexts and communities that encourage ethical growth? To answer this question we need to know what makes people ethical.

There is a now famous study done in the 1980s by Samuel and Pearl Oliner. Samuel was a Polish Jew whose life was saved by a Christian who hid him from the Nazis. Samuel became a sociologist, and 40 years later, with his wife Pearl, he undertook the Altruistic Personality Project. Over 700 people who lived in Poland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy during the Nazi occupation were interviewed. The interviewees included those who did and those who did not rescue Jews during the Holocaust. The Oliners wanted to know what it was that had compelled some people to become rescuers—for no money (usually) and in the face of death if caught.

They found that those who became rescuers didn't share any particular philosophy, religion, or belief or nonbelief in god or an afterlife. Rather, the Oliners found that most rescuers had been raised in a certain kind of family and community context. Part of the context included some basic values, primarily to care for and commit to actively protect and enhance the well-being of everyone, reaching far outside the individual's family. The Oliners called these "extensive" values, and they contrasted them with what they called "constricted" values of detachment and exclusivity. Today we might say that these were not "family values," but rather "humanity values."

Learning to Empathize with Others

Based on their research of rescuers during the Holocaust, the Oliners described the social context that is likely to teach these humanity values and to create an altruistic person. I want to share three with you. The first is learning to empathize with others. There's a nice summary of the Oliner rescuer study in the book *Ethical People and How They Get To Be That Way* by Ethical Leader Arthur Dobrin. Dobrin explains that ethical people were raised by caretakers who gave empathic reasons for rules. Their parents said don't hit other people, not simply because it's bad or because that's the rule, but because hitting people causes pain and fear and unhappiness—and treating others kindly makes them happy. Several studies have shown that ethics are emotional before they are rational; that is, if the ability to empathize with others isn't there, a million facts won't make someone care. Ethical Societies are communities and not simply lecture series because ethics are more than words, ethics develop in a caring community that nurtures and feeds empathy as well as presenting information.

Children's Participation in Altruistic Activities

The second and perhaps most important context in creating altruistic people was participating as a child in altruistic activities with family and community. It was not specific beliefs that were taught, but actions by relatives, friends, and community groups that made the difference. Deeds above creeds. These deeds were not necessarily big. Simply watching out for neighbors, taking food to an elderly relative, pitching in with community projects, was enough to create in the children a habit of altruistic activity. It's usually not enough to want to act ethically; humans are creatures of habit and it can be uncomfortable to try something new. At the Riverdale-Yonkers Society where I was the Leader Intern last year, they host homeless men overnight once a week. As the folks who run the shelter here know, it can be difficult to find volunteers; most people feel nervous or awkward around people who seem different, they don't know what to expect. One of the families in Riverdale that cooks and stays over with the men once a month includes six-year-old Nicolas. And when you see Nick helping to inflate the mattresses and sitting down at the table to eat with the men, you just know how confident he'll be as an adult in reaching out and making connections with people. He's very inspiring. Sierra is also part of an ethically engaged family; she and her sisters take part in doing good deeds for neighbors. Sierra recently read her poetry at an antiwar rally in their hometown, and no doubt she's going to help her dad with his next project, to build an Ethical Culture meetinghouse on their property.

Nick and Sierra have fun with their activities, but one of my favorite findings about altruistic people was that although they took part in ethical projects as children, they didn't necessarily like it. We tend to think that requiring our kids to do things will make them hate those things, but in fact requiring altruistic behavior, as part of family and community projects, creates habits that resurface later. I emphasize family and community because children learn a lot more from watching than they do from listening. "Do as I say, not as I do" has never worked. Several Ethical Societies recently decided to accept kids into their Sunday ethics program only if the parents also agree to be an active part of the community. Of course, every once in a while there's an emergency, and some parents work Sundays, but the point is that caretakers need to understand that children learn what we value from what we do. Some parents would rather be home reading the *Times* while the next generation supposedly learns to value ethical community. But kids aren't stupid, they'll know that to their parents ethical community isn't really as valuable as staying home alone reading the *Times*. And more than likely that's what they'll value too when they grow up.

Values Education

The third and final context I want to mention in creating ethical people is values education. Although participation by caretakers and community in action is vital, rules and principles do have an effect, particularly if they are expressed in a variety of ways. Values are transmitted to the next generation if they're a part of the varied fabric of a community, part of not only lessons and lectures, but also songs, plays, stories, traditions, and rituals. (Whenever I'm with people singing together I remember my favorite Arlo Guthrie quote: "If you want to end war and stuff you gotta sing loud.") All the research says that if you want your values to be passed on, you have to do more than talk about

them. You have to explore and celebrate them in as many ways as you can think of. And you have to act on them, visibly and continually, inside as well as outside. The monthly Cultured Comedy Club here and the music cabaret that some folks are thinking about are excellent and exciting programs—not simply because they’re enjoyable and attractive, but because they’re also a form of ethical action, building a context of a strong, vibrant, diverse ethical community.

Will the Next Generation Create an Ethical Culture?

Over the last few decades there’s been a move away from traditional religion, certainly in Europe, to a lesser extent in America. But many “unchurched” people eventually find that the lack of real community in their lives makes it harder to hang onto their ideals, and especially difficult to pass them on to their kids. Some of those people return to their childhood faiths, because even if they don’t believe in the specific tenets of those faiths, they believe in the basic values. Others create entirely new communities and traditions with their friends, though that becomes harder as we all become more nomadic. Still others become Ethical Culturists, and decide together how Ethical Culture should evolve.

Will the next generation help us continue to create a more ethical culture? That will depend on the context we can provide for them. I hope this inspires you and gives you additional energy to keep working in this Ethical Society, in this community, and in the wider culture to promote empathic understanding and communication; to put your values into action as families and friends and as a community; and also to continue experimenting with different and more engaging ways to celebrate our uniqueness and interdependence.