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June 17, 2016

Ethical Practices in Leadership & Policy

This I believe now…

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The Reverend Father Patrick Flanagan cited what he described as the best definition of justice he has encountered stating “Justice is learned through the experience of injustice” (P. Flanagan, personal communication, May 28, 2016). I believe this to be a profoundly accurate definition. I believe it can be challenging to see injustice through a privileged lens. Having a child with a life-long disability, has taught me about justice through the too frequent experience of injustice. I have learned through Julian that there are in fact clear distinctions between what is legal, what is moral, and what is ethical.

While there is lack of consensus as to how we define morality and justice, I believe the quest for justice is what’s important and that as leaders, it is our responsibility to seek injustices in organizations and in society and to and work diligently towards creating more just organizations and a more just society. Coming into this class, I think my beliefs leaned more towards utilitarianism, and in particular consequentialism. While I still believe that as leaders we need to carefully consider the consequences (and unintended consequences) of policy, I no longer believe that the consequences of an action are the only standard of ethics, morality and justice.

I believe that Kant was correct in his assertions that justice starts with respect and dignity for all human beings. This is in part why I reject the strictly utilitarian view of the greatest good for greatest number. I now believe in Kant’s practical imperative. Kant asserted we should "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end." (Immanuel Kant. Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals. – get this actual citation/date). Perhaps in part it is because of my experiences with my son’s disability and the injustices associated with him fitting into a world where the greater population (e.g. the greater good) is often frustrated with having to accommodate those with special needs. I still believe as I noted in our first class, that it is not the responsibility of those with less to make those with more comfortable. If a child with autism makes noise, then your world is noisier. If an older person slowly crossing the road holds you up, then you’re late. I believe we need to do better than satisfying the normal distribution curve. If things work really well for some, but not for most, then they don’t really work well. I believe tolerance is about actions, not words. While I believe in considering consequences, now I believe that morality and justice are also tied to duty. I believe we have a duty to those with less; the poor, the disabled, the elderly, and those who need a helping hand from time to time. Everyone matters and we can’t leave some behind so that most can flourish. I’ve heard Genesis 18:16-33 many times, but after this class, I see it in a new way.

Then the Lord said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”

The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?”

“If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.”

Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?”

He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.”

Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?”

He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”

Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?”

He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”

Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?”

He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

In other words, while the “greater good” may benefit from abolishing Sodom and Gomorrah (which was arguably unethical and bad for humanity), still, the mean did not justify the end. People are not the means to an end. This I believe now.

In my original This I Believe paper, I wrote that I believe we can change our circumstances with hard work, optimism and faith. It’s harder for some and we should help those who need it, but we also need to help ourselves. I came from poverty and dysfunction and I have worked hard to change my circumstances. After studying Rawls, I believe now that this may be an oversimplification. I believe in opportunity, but where I once believed in equal opportunity, I believe now unequal opportunity exists for many. As Rawl’s emphasizes, we can’t bear all the credit or all the blame for our circumstances. I do still believe we can change or circumstances with hard work, but I believe now that I am blessed with the drive, optimism, faith, and social conditions to a degree, to have changed my circumstances. Many have obstacles that I will never face in their efforts to change their circumstances. As leaders and policy makers seeking just environments and a just world, we need to be honest with ourselves about the opportunities that are afforded to all and whether or not our policies serve all versus the serving the majority and leaving far too many behind.