

Ethical Action in Challenging Times

Kim Strom-Gottfried, Ph.D.



UNC

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Ethical Action in Challenging Times

A Lecture By
Kim Strom-Gottfried, Ph.D.
Smith P. Theimann, Jr. Distinguished Professor
for Ethics and Professional Practice
October 12, 2006

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL
School of Social Work
CB 3550, 301 Pittsboro Street
Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-3550
(919) 962-1225
<http://ssw.unc.edu>

©2006 Kim Strom-Gottfried, Ph.D.

About the Author



Kim Strom-Gottfried, Ph.D., L.C.S.W.

Dr. Kim Strom-Gottfried received her B.A. from the University of Maine, her M.S.W. from Adelphi University and her Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University. She is the Smith P. Theimann, Jr. Distinguished Professor of Ethics and Professional Practice at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she teaches in the areas of direct practice, communities and organizations, and human resource management. Dr. Strom-Gottfried is an active scholar, trainer and consultant in the field of ethics. She has written numerous articles, monographs and chapters on the ethics of practice and is the author of two forthcoming texts on the subject, *Straight Talk about Professional Ethics* and *The Ethics of Practice with Minors*. Dr. Strom-Gottfried is also the co-author of the texts *Direct Social Work Practice* and *Teaching Social Work Values and Ethics: A Curriculum Resource*.

About the Professorship



Smith P. Thiemann, Jr.

The Smith P. Thiemann, Jr. Lecture is sponsored by the School of Social Work and the Smith P. Thiemann, Jr. Distinguished Professorship for Ethics and Professional Practice, held by Dr. Kim Strom-Gottfried. The Thiemann Professorship is the School's most recent endowed professorship, established by the estate of Smith P. Thiemann in honor of his contributions to the field of social welfare and his support of the School of Social Work. The Lecture was established to highlight scholars working in the field of ethical social work practice. Smith, who received his bachelor's degree in sociology in 1942 and his master's degree in social work in 1944 from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was a social worker in Charlotte, N.C. for 15 years, working in the Mecklenburg County Department of Public Welfare and the Veterans Administration. He moved to Maine in 1958 and worked in the social service unit of the Veterans Administration Medical and Regional Office Center, where he provided care for psychiatric patients until he retired in 1982. Prior to his death in September 2004, Smith made a gift of \$100,000 to establish a scholarship fund for students at the School.

This professorship is both a blessing and an honor. I am grateful to all who were part of bringing the gift to the School and in selecting me for the opportunity to serve in this capacity. I also want to thank everyone who worked so hard to put tonight's event together and those of you who are attending. I hope it is just the first of a lifetime of opportunities to reflect on and consider the place of ethics in our daily lives.

I feel particularly lucky to have known the man for whom the chair is named. In honor of his inspiration, I dedicated my new book to him. The inscription reads, "To Smith P. Theimann, Jr., who lived the values of service, humility, respect, compassion, excellence and integrity."

His example provides an apt bridge into tonight's topic, that of ethical action. Not only was Smith a man of virtue, he lived those virtues. For the rest of us, too often the challenge in ethical action lies not in solid values, or a capacity for good decision making, but rather in the ability to act when the moment presents itself. The difficulty translating intent to action is not confined to the dilemmas that social workers face — or corporate leaders or scientists — it affects all of us in our work and in our civic life.

Several years ago, I was in a supermarket and saw a mother viciously strike her child. I was stunned. Her behavior was so clearly over the line that there was no question of right and wrong in this situation. Nevertheless, I went through a series of mental gymnastics as I calculated what to do. Picture the

little angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other: “That child is defenseless. What must this mother be doing at home if she can be so out of control in public? Somebody in authority should do something. What if I make it worse? What if she hits me? But what will the child think about all these adults standing silently as he cowers?” As I stood paralyzed in inaction, the opportunity to act passed, but my regret about it did not.

My research on ethical action has introduced me to many remarkable people, some famous whistleblowers, and some everyday people who reflexively respond when the moment for ethical action presents itself. When I ask, “Why did you do it,” the answer is always, “It was the right thing to do.” And when I ask about the price they may have paid for their outspokenness, they invariably say, “I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

So, how do we go from equivocators and calculators, as I was in that supermarket, to people of action? What keeps us from being our best selves, and from fulfilling the promise of a just and civil society? Those questions will form the basis for my work in this professorship. For tonight though, I’ll share with you a snapshot of what I have learned so far.

The key to ethical action is moral courage. Kidder (2005) refers to it as a readiness to endure danger for the sake of principle. Miller (2000) defines moral courage as “The capacity to overcome the fear of shame and humiliation in order to admit one’s mistakes, to confess a wrong, to reject evil conformity, to renounce injustice, and also to defy immoral or imprudent orders” (p. 254). However, John McCain (2004) said “Too great a distinction is made between moral courage and physical courage. They are in many instances the same. For either to be authentic, it must encounter fear and prove itself superior to that fear” (p. 88). In addition, J. K. Rowling (1997), whose Harry Potter books are no doubt the best-read series of contemporary ethics texts, gives us Dumbledore’s observation that

“It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends” (p. 306).

When we uphold ethical principles, even at the risk of condemnation, litigation, or alienation, we are acting with moral courage. The world is full of opportunities for ethical action. The daily news is crowded with examples of the harms that accrue when people, individually and collectively, fail to act. Let me share just one example: William Aramony received his social work degree at Boston College in 1951. From 1970 to 1992 he was the visionary and charismatic leader of the national United Way. He led the organization to unprecedented growth, innovative partnerships with the NFL, the infusion of minority stakeholders, and the cultivation of new corporate leaders who previously had had little interest in the nonprofit sector. However, if we know Aramony’s name, it is probably for his excesses, and not his successes. In 1992, he was sentenced to prison on 25 counts of various fraud and tax evasion charges. Moreover, the court of public opinion indicted him for executive hubris for his lavish lifestyle and the misuse of donor funds in adventures with his mistress. It would be too easy to isolate this as an example of one man’s failings, but we must also look at the people around him. The United Way Board was charged with a fiduciary responsibility for the organization, yet the members deferred to Aramony’s charm and certainty. It appears that they, like the Enron Board in a more recent example, developed a culture of groupthink, of nondissent, where being a team player was more important than being a steward of the organization’s well-being.

We must also look at the United Way staff. How many were silenced by loyalty, careerism, or job security? Or was it simply the desire for the boss’s approbation that kept them from reining in Aramony’s excesses and rescuing the reputation they had all worked so hard to build? Could one, two, or even a handful of individuals have stopped the runaway train?

Could they have said, “How will this trip on the Concorde, this limo, this night at the Ritz appear to the steelworker from Pittsburgh who has a hundred bucks deducted from his paycheck to support our causes?”

We will never know. Aramony served his time, but the United Way and other charitable causes face an indeterminate sentence as a result of his example. They must rebuild the trust and respect that the scandal destroyed, and that is an exceedingly slow process. Today, nearly 15 years later, nonprofits struggle with a crisis that was not of their own making. The greatest of the tragedy is for the clients, the final beneficiaries of charitable giving, who now pay the ultimate penalty for Aramony’s ethical lapses and the donor mistrust that followed.

If the opportunities for ethical action are plentiful, so too are the reasons not to act. We know better than we do. So, what gets in the way? Tonight, I will address five reasons we fail to act.

The first is discomfort. No one likes to be the skunk at the garden party. No one likes to be the one, when the meeting is winding down and committee members are packing up for lunch, to say, “Perhaps we haven’t considered all the alternatives.” Few of us would find it easy to say, “I’m uncomfortable with that” after one colleague treats another disrespectfully or makes an offensive joke about a client. Yet these daily acts of courage help us train for the big event, the time when acquiescence is not an option.

When I asked about the discomfort of speaking out, some of the whistleblowers I have interviewed said they are just geeks who are not as attentive to what others think as the rest of us. Whatever the reason, ethical action sometimes demands that we defy conventions, create discomfort, split off from the pack. Let me give an example.

Nate Haasis was a 17-year-old high school quarterback in Illinois when, in the last play of his last game of his senior

year, he threw a 37-yard pass to set a personal and state record. He later learned that his coach and the opposing team had arranged for the defense to back off to facilitate the winning play. When he learned of the arrangement, Haasis asked that his name be removed from the record because the way he achieved it “did not represent the values of the athletes on this football team.”

The opportunity for ethical action appeared and Nate Haasis rose to the occasion. Several things make his story remarkable, particularly the nature of the wrong he was trying to right and the culture within which he was acting. There were plenty of reasons not to act. It would have been easy to minimize the deceit. Nate himself had done nothing wrong. No one was harmed, except for the previous record holder. Nate’s coach and the opposing team had good, though misdirected, intentions. Speaking up might have been perceived as disloyal or ungrateful. In addition, in a high stakes, win-at-all-costs, “it ain’t cheating if you don’t get caught” sports culture, Haasis chose integrity, *and the discomfort of standing up for integrity*, over the hollow glory of a fraudulent award.

The second barrier to ethical action is the presumption of futility: “I’m not going to speak up if it won’t make a difference”; “It’ll go nowhere”; “Nothing good will come of it”; “It’s a no win situation.” We calculate a risk-benefit formula and often decide that if we cannot have the desired outcome, we will not expend the effort to chance it.

I offer the example of Colleen Rowley as an antidote to futility. She was one of *Time* Persons of the Year in 2002. At the time, she was a special agent at the Minneapolis office of the FBI and chief legal advisor to the office. She and other agents raised concerns about the FBI’s lax response to suspicions raised before 9/11 regarding Zacharias Moussaoui, now known as the 20th hijacker of the 9/11 attacks. In the wake of the attacks, Rowley was outspoken about the ways that power

and bureaucracy conspired with inertia and pride to prevent an adroit response to the clues his case provided. Though she and I had corresponded by e-mail, I did not meet her in person until a winter day in 2005 — the day after she retired from the FBI following 25 years of service.

Perhaps Rowley is the poster child for futility. Terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, despite her risks, efforts, and the personal price she paid. Yet she, and the other women featured on that *Time* cover, Sheron Watkins of Enron and Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom, are — to a person — glad they “spoke truth to power,” reasoning it was better to have done what conscience demanded and to have failed, than not to have tried at all (Lacayo & Ripley, 2002).

The third barrier to action is our own socialization. A study of British nurses referred to the phenomenon as being “groomed for submission” in explaining why they failed to report medical negligence they had observed. In this country, the recently released Institute of Medicine study on medication errors (Aspden, Wolcott, Bootman, & Cronenwett, 2006) noted the phenomenon as deference to “the authority gradient”: the greater the disparity in hierarchy the less likely the underling is to speak up when an error is observed. But this is not just an artifact of our professional socialization or our societal deference to authority. It is also a result of culture, gender, and social class. It is the result of a thousand messages internalized and lived, such as “if you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all”; “it’s easier to ask forgiveness than permission”; and “go along to get along.”

Interestingly though, some people manage to act on ethics despite their socialization. In a recent study of negligence in health care settings, the American Association of Critical Care Nurses discovered that though 48% to 88% of the 1,800 physicians, nurses, and allied health professionals studied had ob-

served incompetence, troubling errors, or dangerous shortcuts, only 10% had acted on those observations (“Silence Kills,” 2005). Nevertheless, this “skilled minority” had the highest morale and greatest job satisfaction of the subjects studied. Although their happiness is a good outcome, the report’s title, “Silence Kills,” reminds us that there are far greater reasons for ethical action than personal happiness. Inaction in deference to authority can sometimes be a matter of life and death.

The fourth barrier to ethical action is referred to as the bystander effect or diffusion theory. The notion is that the greater the number of people who witness or are exposed to any event, the less likely it is that any one of them will act on it. From the Holocaust, to the Kitty Genovese murder, to the current crisis in Darfur, the group exerts a powerful psychological influence to restrain individuals from action. Group membership mitigates our sense of personal responsibility, it dampens our resolve, it provides us security along with the illusion that someone else will act if we chose not to.

Research shows that people are just about as ethical as the people around them. We judge proper action by the measure that we take of others’ actions. Therefore, inaction breeds inaction. Every time a scandal appears in the news I shake my head and wonder “What on earth were they thinking,” so evident is the wrongdoing. But the people in those scandals did not just wake up one day and say, “Hey, I think I’ll partake of some corporate malfeasance!” They worked their way to wrongdoing one action — or inaction — at a time.

How they got to the scandal can be understood through the “boiled frog phenomenon” or the principle of just noticeable difference. The notion is if we put a hypothetical frog in a pot of cold water, and turn on the heat, the frog will adjust to the gradually heating water, and ultimately boil to death. In contrast, if the same hypothetical frog was tossed into a pot of hot water, he would immediately sense the change in environ-

ment and leap out. We are familiar with this phenomenon as we see it in an array of social problems from the trajectory of drug abuse to the escalation of violence in domestic violence cases. The incremental escalation of harm in those situations desensitizes the participants to the level of risk they face, and how far they've strayed as the addiction or violence progresses. When it comes to our place in an ethically toxic environment — if we collectively and silently agree on inaction — *will* we know when we have crossed the line? Will we know when our moral compass is irreparably damaged? Will we know when *we're* in hot water?

The last barrier I will address is that of personal cost. This barrier goes beyond the social or acceptance cost associated with the barrier of discomfort. Personal cost is about the loss of jobs, security, and personal well-being. I do not dispute that people of courage pay a high price for taking ethical action. I am awed by it every day. But I also honor their contention that we sometimes place an inflated value on the cost of action. One man I interviewed told me that his greatest mistake was in simultaneously trying to keep his job and be an agent of change around corporate wrongdoing. In trying to do both, he did neither well. He lost his job and the company eventually went under. But he said, “My greatest fear was the best reward. Losing that job was the best thing that ever happened to me.” He had overestimated the job's value while underestimating the toll he was paying for keeping it.

This is a powerful and important phenomenon. While we worry about the cost of action, as I did in that supermarket, we fail to consider the cost of inaction — what the literature refers to as moral cowardice. We fail to consider the price we pay for not being our best selves, for being the kind of person who looks the other way in times of moral crisis. As John McCain (2004) puts it, “Remorse is an awful companion. Whatever the unwelcome consequences of courage, they are

unlikely to be worse than the discovery that you are less a man than you pretend to be” (p. 70-71).

In Rush Kidder’s (2005) book on moral courage he describes a story relayed to him by one of his workshop participants. The woman tells of an experience her father had years before she was born. He was in a military when a young, gangly, naïve, recruit joined the unit. We’ll call him The Bumpkin. Though the woman’s father had befriended him, this fellow was lonely, homesick, and ripe for derision by other members of the unit. One night the men in the unit decided to play a cruel practical joke on The Bumpkin. They invited the woman’s father to participate in the prank, but he refused, and the joke took place without him. That night, as he was getting into his bunk, her father saw The Bumpkin dejectedly getting into his bunk. The young recruit looked at her father and said just two words: “You knew.”

“You knew.” It was not enough for this woman’s father to have avoided active participation in the cruelty. The true violation was the breach of trust by failing to warn his friend. This gentleman’s regret over his cowardice shaped the rest of his life, and evidently those of his children, as the incident became a potent part of family lore.

Regret *is* a poor companion, but it may also be a precursor for action. The disappointment we carry from times of cowardice can strengthen our resolve not ever to feel that way again. It can help prepare us for the next opportunity as we mentally rehearse “what could I have done,” and it makes us appreciate that, whatever we do, at the end of the day, we live with ourselves and our decisions.

Ethical action is not easy, but it can be practiced. It can be taught and it can be reinforced when we see it in others. Colleen Rowley maintains that one of the differences between physical courage and moral courage is that with acts of physical courage, people are glad when you did it. With moral cour-

age, not so much. Or, they may be glad, but they do not want to sit with you in the lunchroom.

As individuals, we can support those around us who do the right thing. We can also demand that our society do the same. It is easy to pick on the media because for all the news coverage we get of scandals and wrongdoers, there are far fewer stories about those who did the right thing, although their stories are no less newsworthy or compelling. For example, most Americans know the names and faces of those who beat and humiliated Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison, but not those of the William Kimbro and David Sutton, the dog handlers who refused to participate in intimidation. Few know the name and face of Joseph Darby, the reservist who turned over the pictures that came to symbolize the scandal.

I cannot speak for the others, but Darby's actions came at significant personal cost. When the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld revealed his name on national TV as the Abu Ghraib whistleblower, Darby was placed in protective custody because of death threats from within and outside the military. When he got back to the States, and his guard asked what he wanted to do next, Darby said, "I just want to go home. And he [the military guard] said, 'You can't go home. You can probably *never* go home'" (Hylton, 2006). And in fact, he could not; it was not a safe option. Darby has been back twice: for a wedding and his mother's funeral. He says, "There are a lot of people there who don't want anything to do with me. Even my brother won't speak to me...they don't see it as me putting right before wrong, but as putting an Iraqi before an American." However, Darby has also said, "I don't regret any of it. I made peace with my decision before I turned over the pictures ... it forced a big change in my life ... good and bad. But I never doubted it was the right thing" (Hylton, 2006).

Darby's story is a parable for tonight's talk. He was not perfect. He freely admits to crossing the line in some of his

actions in Iraq. But he was not willing to let his flaws, loyalty, discomfort, or fear restrain him from action when he felt standards of human decency were being violated.

Let me be clear: Ethical action is a journey, not a destination. Even people with great moral courage have feet of clay. Whether the opportunity for ethical action presents itself in the supermarket or the stock market, the board room or the locker room, the classroom or the dining room, we all have the opportunity, and perhaps even the obligation, to rise to the occasion for our own well-being as well as that of the society, the environment, and the communities in which we live. ♪

References

- Aspden, P., Wolcott, J. A., Bootman, J. L., & Cronenwett, L. R. (Eds.). (2006). *Preventing Medication Errors: Quality Chasm Series*. Institute of Medicine, Board on Health Care Services. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Hylton, W. S. (2006, August). Prisoner of Conscience. Retrieved January 23, 2007 from http://men.style.com/gq/features/landing?id=content_4785
- Kidder, R. M. (2005). *Moral courage: Taking action when your values are put to the test*. New York: William Morrow.
- Lacayo, R., & Ripley, A. (2002, December 22). The whistleblowers: Cynthia Cooper, Coleen Rowley and Sherron Watkins. *Time*. Retrieved January 22, 2007 from <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/personoftheyear/2002/poyintro.html>
- McCain, J. (2004). *Why courage matters: The way to a braver life*. New York: Random House.
- Miller, W. I. (2000). *The mystery of courage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rowling, J. K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the sorcerer's stone*. New York: Scholastic.
- Silence kills. (2005, April). *Nursing*, 35(4), 33. Retrieved January 23, 2007, from http://www.nursingcenter.com/library/JournalArticle.asp?Article_ID=579669