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Rushworth Kidder

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*Rushworth Kidder was one of the first western journalists to visit Chernobyl after the nuclear power plant accident there in 1986. The accident, he was told, resulted from a sort of nuclear game of "chicken" perpetrated by a couple of Soviet electrical engineers. They were doing an unauthorized experiment, shutting off several alarm systems as each was to be activated so that they could keep their experiment going. The result, of course, was the devastating meltdown that will continue to affect that region for generations to come.*

*Kidder would not be telling this story, of course, if there were not an ethical point to be made. It is this: the engineers were intelligent individuals acting in "an amoral domain" where they had not considered the consequences of their actions. Such amoralism is evident in American society, as well, Kidder argues, as technology effects our ethics in ways it has never done before. "If we spend years and years of training to get people acquainted with some of these technologies, and along the way they may have taken one three-hour course that had something to do with ethics, then we've got the mix all wrong. We are building a very dangerous society."*

*Society is not only more dangerous, one might add, but also more confused. American youths - and many adults - have been cut loose from any moral anchorage and are now perilously adrift in a sea of ethical dilemmas.*

*Kidder ponders this predicament daily, trying to understand the contents of our character and our hearts. As founder and president of the two-year-old Institute for Global Ethics (in Camden, Maine), he concerns himself not only with chronicling the moral dissonance that characterizes contemporary American society, but also with identifying and trying approaches that address this discord. He is someone who is troubled by what is, but is full of hope for what can be.*

*A former reporter and columnist for The Christian Science Monitor, Kidder joined the paper as its London correspondent in 1979 after a decade as a professor of English at Wichita (Kansas) State University. He is a graduate of Amherst College and Columbia University, from which he earned a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature. He the author of several books, including An Agenda for the 21st Century. Reinventing the Future: Global Goals for the 21st Century, and Heartland Ethics: Voices from the American Midwest. A collection of personal essays, In the Backyards of Our Lives, was published by Yankee Books this year.*

*Earlier this year, Maine Policy Review visited Kidder and queried him about his work and the state of the nation's political values and institutions. What follows is an edited version of his comments.*

## More than right and wrong

*Although Rush Kidder lives and breathes ethics, he is not one to suggest that there is anything facile about the subject. He will admit that dealing with the myriad issues that arise from the mere mention of ethics is difficult. But he will also tell you that such effort is necessary if we are to survive in the next century. What makes ethics difficult, says Kidder, is that it goes well beyond merely understanding the difference between right and wrong in a very general sense:*

One of the most useful definitions of ethics is that it concerns questions of right versus right. Right versus wrong is pretty easy. If we face an ethical dilemma where it is clear that one side is right and the other side is wrong, most of us are not going to say, "I am equally torn between the two." We are going to say, "I don't want to do wrong. I am going to do the right thing." The problems arise when we look at both sides of the dilemma and say, "This is right and trust that is right. This is right for me and my family; that is right for the community. This is right in the short term; that is right in the long term." That is where the really tough dilemmas arise.

There is another definition that helps, I think, especially in the area of political discourse. A British jurist named Lord Moulton, at the beginning of this century, defined ethics very simply as "obedience to the unenforceable." Obedience to the enforceable, he said, is merely law: You don't do certain things because, if you get caught, there is a punishment. The far larger range of activities for all of us, according to Lord Moulton, are those things that we do because we are obeying the unenforceable but nevertheless powerful canons of society - the kinds of things learned at our mother's knee when she said, "People don't do those things!"

This is a very useful distinction because it allows us to describe the complicated interface between ethics and law. If ethics really is obedience to the unenforceable, it suggests that there is a capacity for self-government within individuals. The moral sense, in fact, is probably the central source of authority by which humanity is regulated - far more important to the social contract than law.

## Regulating ourselves

*There is no need to debate whether or not regulation is needed, Kidder says. But we do need to think about how we accomplish that regulation. The choice, he says, is quite simple: We either regulate ourselves or we create some external mechanisms that will impose regulation. The current level of regulation in the United States, Kidder asserts, is evidence that we have opted for the latter:*

We are over-lawyered. We are litigious to the extreme. We sue each other at the drop of a hat. Is not one reason for that, in fact, because ethics has begun to ebb out of society and the law has rushed in to fill the void? We are going to be regulated one way or the other and we have simply ceded our option for self regulation to somebody else.

I do not see any way to turn that around unless we begin to recapture the turf of ethics and take it away from the turf of the law. Then the law would be less necessary - because we would be doing very well, thank you, with the ethical structures that we share and agree on and obey. The

difficulty, of course, is that this is a genie-back-in-the-bottle kind of argument. Once you have unleashed the capacity of legislators to promulgate laws, can you reverse the trend?

I have wondered whether we might propose a version of sunset legislation and say to legislators around the country, "You may pass as many laws as you wish: That is your prerogative. But the only thing we require of you is that for every law that you put on the books, you take one off. It's a zero-sum game. We're not going to over-regulate ourselves." That would be a very difficult challenge for politicians who think the way forward is to slap down yet another rule.

**The context of ethics**

The problem is that ethics is contextual. It operates within a community. It only exists within a civic entity. So, community really does matter. Community shapes the way that people behave ethically.

I recall seeing a survey a while ago asking individuals within the ranks of corporations what they thought was the most important determinant of their own ethical behavior. Was it what they had been raised with? Was it what their parents had said? Was it what school had taught them? Was it what their wife or husband thought? All of those things made it onto the list. But the item that got the most response was, What does the chief executive officer (CEO) think? The employees said, "If the CEO is ethical, then I'm ethical.'" That is the message that gets sent right down through the ranks.

Now transfer that contextual relationship to the school system. The context in which many schools operate is one that we've come to know over the years as a "values-neutral" educational structure. Teachers have learned to say "I don't have any particular moral point of view. What's more, I cannot honestly tell you, my students, what a moral point of view is because to do that would be to influence you and I don't want to impose my values on you." I recall a newspaper report about a 10-year-old in a poor section of Brooklyn who, on the way to school one day, found on the street a loaded wallet - full of money, full of credit cards, full of identification. There was no question about who owned it. He took the wallet to school and was not able to find anyone in the school - no teacher, no administrator - willing to tell him what was the right thing to do. Essentially, they were saying, "I cannot impose my values on you. If I told you to send it back, your mom might be angry, because she's obviously poorer than this guy. You're going to have to figure this out yourself."

Fortunately, that ethos is beginning to crumble. We are beginning to see more emphasis placed on character education, and some agreement that there must be a basic moral structure articulated in schools. Of course, somebody then asks, "Whose ethics are you going to teach?" - which, more often than not, is meant to be a conversation-stopper. Here in our Institute, we have been trying to answer that question - to understand the shared set of values held by the community - the things that John Gardner, the founder of Common Cause and a member of our Advisory Council, talks about as "pledged values." These are values that you buy into because you have pledged allegiance to them.

People have a tremendous common area of pledged values - shared moral and ethical principles. So this question of what values you teach starts with a question about what values the community holds dear? What would you like to have us teach? Are you going to object if I teach your son to be honest? Your daughter to be fair? We can find the values that accommodate a spectrum of people within a community as long as we don't get into the political realm. If you're talking about integrity, promise-keeping, truth-telling, a sense of equity, a refusal to achieve your ends by force or by fraud, a respect for others, a sense of responsibility, some sense of work ethic - most people will agree on these values. There are dozens of values out there to which any one of us would say, "Carve that above the door of the high school and let's live by it"

**The three-legged stool**

*At the outset of the Twentieth Century, the home, the church and the school were the institutions recognized as the keepers of society's ethics. At the century's close, that "three-legged stool" of ethics has been reduced to a one-legged stool, as the church and family have become separated from their roles as instructors of "the great moral precepts that have come down through time." Churches, Kidder argues, pay a lot of attention to the social responsibility side of ethics, but do not always find ways to give people the tools they need to determine right from wrong in their daily lives and dilemmas. The lifestyles prevailing in the late Twentieth Century American home - including the presence of television and the absence of common meal-times - also have tended to destroy the capacity of the family to deliver the ethical message. That leaves the schools, says Kidder; and the schools, understandably, "have chosen, rather than to sit on a one-legged stool, to sit on the ground," preferring a values-neutral approach. "We have a tremendous amount of work to do to get to where we can begin to understand the importance of character as part of the educational structure and to deliver that message."*

*Kidder believes the community is where the change process must occur if we are to become an ethical society. But the community of today is different, and that fact has made this needed process much more complex and difficult:*

When you had homogeneous communities, when people come out of the same background, it was easier for the community to develop an ethical construct and pass on its values to members. In America, we clearly can no longer call ourselves a "Christian" community. We're simply too diverse for that. We need to understand that diversity. That does not mean that we need to retreat into our own little tribes to find communities of people like us. Every once in a while, I challenge myself to walk down the street to look at everybody going past and ask, "Is he is one of us or he is one of them?" Can I finally say of everyone who comes by, "He is one of us and I am one of him." If so, there is an understanding of the shared ethics and values of the community.

That is the lesson of Los Angeles - this lesson of "us" and "them." I was fascinated and saddened when that situation erupted. As a journalist, I was especially interested in how the media portrayed the riots. In the first couple of days, most of the commentary was about the need for law and order and for more police and more control. Over the next few days that shifted to commentators who were saying, "No, that's not quite right. What we need is a different set of policies. The laws themselves are wrong. We have to get government to sort this out in a different way." By the end of the first week, however, people were no longer content to talk

merely about policy. The words that were popping up again and again were "moral," "ethical", and "values." There was a sense that there needs to be within a community a set of fundamental, core, shared values to make it work.

In the wake of the Los Angeles riots, we suggested a process to begin to build the set of common values within the community and to begin to tap the resources of a community so that it would ultimately say, "These are the values that we share: I am sitting at the table here with an African-American and a Korean and the whole range of people who make up South Central Los Angeles and here's what we have in common." We also proposed the concept of a Values Impact Statement for the legislative process, patterned after the Environmental Impact Statement. What if you could not pass any law until you know the effects of it on the values structure of the community? We would have to ask about any law that was proposed, "What will this do to the moral barometer of the community?" Every law has a values impact, but there's no measure now that registers it ahead of time. We go back later and say, "Look at all the damage this law did. Look at how violent people have become," and so forth. We are sophisticated enough as a society now to make futures assessments: We can determine the impact of decisions ahead of time. Had we done that in Los Angeles, would we have set up the laws that allow the police force to operate the way it did in the Rodney King situation? Would we have a set of laws that allowed South Central Los Angeles to develop the way it did?

**Making community matter**

*One of the great difficulties in establishing ethical constructs in American communities is our historical and cultural aversion to communitarianism. We are individuals above all else. Our founding documents, laws, and institutions pay homage to that belief. Our long preoccupation with the evils of communism, - the political application of the extreme alternative to individualism - has made us even more averse to thinking in terms of community. Kidder suggests that the failure of communism in the Soviet Union may offer a new opportunity for communitarianism in the U.S.:*

There really is not any credibility left in the communist structures of government. With that hobgoblin gone, we will have greater freedom to say, "Community really does matter, and nobody is going to accuse me of being a communist for saying so." When we believed that Communism was a great force of evil, we felt we had to be extreme in our individualism. But that has changed. We will hear more of the concept of communitarianism, the kind of thing that Amitai Etzioni talked about in my interview with him in *An Agenda for the 21st Century*.

In fact, we (the Institute) recently looked at the question of Japan and the United States in this context. The Japanese have a long history of operating through consensus; the United States has a long history of operating through individualism. Whatever policies we arrive at in the future, one of the tests probably has got to be, "Will this make the Japanese more community-minded and the Americans more individualistic?" If so, it's not going to work. We're going to have to find those policies that begin to let a Japanese honor a sense of individualism and that build an American's sense of community, so that each nation moves toward an appropriate balance between individual and collective actions.

**Schools and values**

*It is imperative that we develop an ethical context for life in the Twenty-first Century, Kidder argues. But how do we get at this rather daunting task? One important place to start is the schools. In attacking the emptiness of a values-neutral education, Kidder offers some disturbing statistics:*

In a number of different surveys on academic cheating, the results are very similar. About two-thirds of the current high school students say, "Yes, of course, I would cheat to pass an important exam." By the time those kids enter graduate school, if they are asked, "Did you cheat as an undergraduate to get into graduate school?" you find that a majority in every discipline had cheated at least once. According to a nationwide survey by Donald McCabe at Rutgers University, the lowest percentage of students who answer, "Yes, I cheated at least once to get here" is in the School of Education, where nearly 3 in 5 answered affirmatively. The number rises for law and medicine and peaks in the School of Business, where about three-quarters answered affirmatively.

Why does that matter? Well, if you are an employer, you should be aware that three out of four of the graduates from the nation's finest business schools, who walk in your door seeking employment, will have cheated to get where they are. Once they get into your organization, will they look at your organization the same way they looked at formal education? Will they do whatever is required and cheat their way through to move up your ladder?

We ought to be taking every step possible to reverse this situation. We're not talking about kids. We're talking about the middle managers of the year 2020. We're talking about the governor in the year 2030. We're talking about the legislature, the whole array of individuals who are going to govern us. If that doesn't scare you enough, understand that we're talking about the people who are going to be our airline pilots - so that as we're landing in the fog in Portland some dark night, we can ask ourselves, "Did this guy really take the pilot's test or did he just pay somebody to take it for him? Does he know anything about flying in the fog?"

**Civic obligation**

*One of the legacies of American individualism is our distorted view of citizenship. Numerous studies have revealed that Americans are well versed in the <u>rights</u> of citizenship. Fewer, however, are aware of their <u>responsibilities</u> as citizens. This imperfect understanding of our civic obligation is not unrelated to Kidder's concern about imparting ethics and values in schools and communities:*

I don't think you address civic responsibility through schools configured as they currently are. We have had an interesting debate here in Camden about whether seniors who do not have any first period classes should be allowed to come to school late, whether they should be allowed to leave early if they don't have classes during the last period, and whether they should be allowed to leave school in the middle of the day when they don't have classes, and then come back. Some say, "No, once you get them in school, you have got to keep them in school. They will be wandering all over the place!" If that's your view of what students will do when they leave

school for a couple of hours, then you have a whole lot more problems than simply the question of school rules: You have a question of integrating these students into the community. Are they part of this community or are they not? This gets compounded in some very complicated ways by the economic system. If kids genuinely feel that there is no place for them in the community once they get out - there are no jobs, nobody wants them, they will be hired at minimum wage - that is one of the most debilitating messages a community can send.

I'm sensitive to this because we just examined in our monthly periodical, *Insights on Global Ethics*, the last ten to fifteen years of the Dutch tradition, which has been one of the most liberal and most tolerant of all European social systems. In the past, the Dutch had said, "We take pride in being a generous, dynamic society, and we welcome everyone." But as the economic system in Holland begun to shrink, that tradition of tolerance and liberalism has changed. People are beginning to now say, "It's nice to be tolerant and ethical as long as you can afford it, but it's a luxury that we can no longer afford. Therefore, we can no longer tolerate the Turks, the Muslims, and anybody else who comes here to sponge off of our good nature."

I fear to a certain extent that may be happening in this country as well. "Oh yes, it's nice to have a sense of community as long as you can afford it," we say. But the fact is that as the economy shrinks away, a community's children can come to seem no longer important. They are just there to take over somebody else's job, or to have someone make work for them. It's a terribly damaging view of the world....

If ethical behavior always were rewarded tangibly and immediately, nobody but a fool would be unethical. Everybody would be as ethical as possible. It would always produce great results. Unfortunately, that is not the way the world is structured. In many cases, the reward for an ethical life will not show up for a long time.

Suppose you are walking down the street and the woman ahead of you opens her purse and a ten-dollar bill flutters out onto the ground. What is the right thing to do? Well, in the short-term, if self-interest matters, you take the money and run and nobody's the wiser. In the longer run, if community and trust matter, you give it back. Have you deprived yourself of a certain social benefit, ten dollars worth of goods, by doing that? Yes. But, does your action help create the society in which you want to live. Yes.

**Developing codes of ethics**

*Codes of ethics are often cited as one way to institutionalize values. Kidder acknowledges that codes of ethics are only as good as those who choose to support them. Yet he believes they allow organizations and communities to declare both their values and their aspirations. Much of the Institute's work has involved developing codes of ethics with groups. Although this process clearly points up the difficulty of formulating a code acceptable to diverse interests, it also produces agreement on some shared values, says Kidder:*

I would love to perform a workshop on ethics with a group of strongly pro-choice and strongly pro-life people at the same table. I think you would find that on most issues they shared a wide set of common values: That they both had a tremendous fondness for children; they both thought

it important that women have freedom; that they agreed that women are not to be subservient to men. They would differ over one particular point: the difficult question of when life begins. But that is one issue in many. We tend to forget the many beliefs that unite all of these people.

On a small scale, we are helping to build a code of ethics in a project in Orrville, Ohio. This is an education program that looks at this process of how to build a core of shared values in a community and its schools. As we get together different groups of people in that community, we find a lot of commonality. After we had asked several small groups, "What do you think should be in this code of ethics?" we began to compare their answers and see what they had in common. The agreement is vast.

Orrville is a relatively homogeneous community. I would love to conduct this process in a major city - getting diverse groups to come together and say, "Here is our set of shared values." Unless you do that, you really have no way to determine the direction in which the community wants to move. This is confirmed by some experience that we've had working with a management consulting firm that helps companies with strategic planning and strategy formulation. They confirm that you cannot move forward to formulate strategy until you have spent time defining the shared values of the institution. That is true of communities as well. It's true of states. Unless we identify our common ground, how do we move forward?

In the proposal for educational reform that we submitted to New American Schools Development Corporation earlier this year - the one we're now implementing in Orrville - we argued that school reform had to shift its focus from schools to community. We used as our motto an African proverb that says, "It takes a village to raise a man." You do not simply turn education over to professional educators. Instead, you strive to make the walls of the school absolutely transparent, so that the community and the school begin to interact in all kinds of ways.

School reform has to be values-based. It has to get down to the questions, What is it that we most respect? What is it that matters the most? That is what we are going to educate our kids about. If we think that what matters most is passing tests, then we will educate our kids to do whatever they have to do to pass tests. If we think that what matters most is winning, then we will set up whatever ethical or unethical structures we have to in order to encourage winning.

In Maine, schools reflect what is going on in ethics nationally. But I am very encouraged by the number of teachers we've heard from in Maine who are interested in the ethical domain. There clearly is a hunger among many of them to find politically acceptable ways to address ethics and values. I don't think we have yet developed the kinds of systematic structures we need for getting kids to think hard about ethical issues, but I sense that the climate is changing. And the more we all weigh in on the side of clear, non-political ways to teach ethics, the sooner we'll see the results.

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