

Rotary International George R. Hensel Ethics Essay Contest 2006

A knight from the Middle Ages, a monk living in a Buddhist temple, a journalist writing for the New York Times, and a teenage student attending suburban San Marino High School—all four individuals make decisions in their everyday lives based on a code of ethics. Ethics form the foundation of a fulfilled lifestyle for people of all backgrounds and occupations. A code of ethics serves as an invisible force field that guides the lone trekker at every fork in the road, propelling one to take the path mankind believes is right, good, and just. One aspect in which ethics comes into play most intensely is in the motley realm of business. Man, far from being perfect, is tempted by the lure of such enticements as money, fame, and power. Moral policies are thus strongly needed in the business world, especially to regulate the amount of harm an individual can perform on another, or even himself, while blindly stumbling into the snare of greed.

For teenagers who are just embarking on their journey into society, moral values branded deeply into their childhood are the only guidelines they possess to help them "make the right decision." However, unlike in the carefree days of youth when lemonade was fifty cents a cup and you gave your neighbor the correct change no matter what, business relationships and dealings in the "adult world" are not black and white. That thin, gray line between right and wrong is sometimes so hazy that one faces a true moral dilemma. Ultimately, one must take all factors of the situation into account and make a decision based on the motivations of the conflicting parties, existing conditions of the situation, and consequences of following a certain path. Fair play commences when a level head and proper ethics are employed in decision-making.

Nadine Kinomoto, studious, hard-working movie-aficionado enjoying the last few months of her senior year by taking a side job to pay for college expenses, faces a moral

dilemma. Saving every penny she earns for her college tuition, the enthusiastic young lady not only baby-sits three mischievous children after school for her "single-mom" neighbor, but also helps the swamped Ms. Harcliff tidy up the house. She is paid twenty dollars every day she works, each workday consisting of approximately three hours. Lately, however, Ms. Harcliff has asked Nadine to run extra errands around town and to stay late into the evening because the elder lady has taken up longer shifts at work. Despite all this, at the end of the week, Nadine is not compensated for the extra hours she works, nor the gas she uses while running errands about town. After arriving home one Friday evening, Nadine notices an extra two hundred dollars folded up in the envelope that normally holds her weekly salary. She realizes that her extra labor over the past month certainly deserves this extra cash, but she is unsure of whether or not Ms. Harcliff meant to give her the money. Should she quietly accept the extra pay she deserves?

Considering the motivations of the conflicting parties, the money Nadine makes is devoted completely to her education, a cause championed by one and all and surely a cause worth saving money for. Ms. Harcliff is also obligated to pay for the services she has been provided. As for the existing conditions of the situation, Nadine certainly has the right to take the money long due to her. Ms. Harcliff, however, does not come by two hundred dollars very easily; the money she makes is barely enough to support her three growing children. Nadine also faces the consequences of taking the money silently; if Ms. Harcliff had not meant to give her the money, Nadine would essentially be stealing from the lady. If Nadine returns the money to Ms. Harcliff, she may never get paid for all her extra work. In effect, the question is: What does Nadine value more, the benefits of the additional cash or the ethics of returning money to its rightful owner?

I believe that the decision can certainly be qualified. The first step should most definitely be to bring the money back to Ms. Harcliff, since one has a moral obligation to be honest and fair when in possession of another's belongings, but Nadine should not be resigned to her fate of

losing the money. Like a dignified businesswoman, she can approach Ms. Harcliff with the money, remarking that she found the extra two hundred dollars in the envelope and wondered if it was really meant for her. Should Ms. Harcliff exclaim that the helpful teen deserves every bill enclosed tightly in that envelope, Nadine would find herself in a win-win situation. However, if Ms. Harcliff remarks that she had, in fact, made a mistake, Nadine should pipe up by asking the lady politely whether she had noticed the extra work Nadine has done. Alerted to the situation that Nadine must take off from her own life to help the ever-busy Ms. Harcliff, the elder lady would most certainly realize that Nadine has earned the extra money.

The key to Nadine's actions is to approach Ms. Harcliff in the attempt to return the extra two hundred dollars to her. The young girl should follow a proper code of business ethics because her morals are what make her a worthy student with whom to conduct business. One must succeed at life first before attempting to succeed elsewhere. Succeeding in life entails being a trustworthy, hardworking, honest, and just person. The code of ethics shouldn't, however, force one to be a doormat, to be walked on by those who take advantage of one's morality. The business world harbors many instances in which one must be either predator or prey, with nothing in between. However, I firmly believe that if one sticks to one's moral code but still stands up for what one believes in, an individual can survive and prosper. As in Nadine's case, all situations and problems are negotiable. As long as one sticks to a code of ethics, one can succeed despite the corruption greed threatens to leave in its wake.