Part 1

The Perennial Question:
How Should We Live

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**Core Ethical Frameworks**

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<th>Action</th>
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<td>Reputation Based Theories (Virtue Theories)</td>
<td>Relationship Based Theories (Justice/Systems Theories)</td>
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<tr>
<td>An ethical action is one which is consistent with a good character.</td>
<td>An ethical action is one which will sustain integrity-building environments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rights Based Theories (Deontological Theories)</td>
<td>Results Based Theories (Teleological Theories)</td>
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<td>An ethical action is doing one’s duty and following ethical standards of action.</td>
<td>An ethical action is one where the act creates the greatest good for the greatest number.</td>
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* Adapted from Petrick and Quinn, *Management Ethics: Integrity at Work* and Ken Wilbur, *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality*
“...the world we live in, our view of it and the values we attach to it, is shaped by what we know. And when what we know changes, the world changes and with it, everything.

James Burke

Chapter 1
Exploring Ethical Decision Making

The study of ethics concerns the rules and relationships which govern individuals living in community. Throughout history, conversations about the rights and responsibilities of people, both as individuals and as members of a community, have centered around a set of core values: predictability, flexibility, autonomy, and equality. Over history, diverse communities have had varying expectations for the appropriate balance among the four proto-typical core values. Different communities also have had widely disparate notions about what constitutes ethical or unethical behavior. However, even though the specific content of the ethical standards may change (what specific behavior is considered ethical), the conversation and the core vocabulary remains relatively constant.

One thread of the conversation focuses on the rights of individuals vis-à-vis the demands of the community. This dialogue asks when individuals should
be able to assert their prerogative to live their lives as they see fit, and when their behavior should be modified by the expectations and constraints of community norms. A second thread focuses on when individual reflection and community expectations will provide the lodestar for what is right and wrong by setting predictable criteria for behavior, and when our actions are appropriately guided by changing circumstances and emerging goals.²

Each of the core ethical frameworks answers the question slightly differently. The rights/responsibility-focused theories emphasize the right of individuals to determine for themselves the principles which govern how they should best live. The results-focused theories center on individuals choosing goals which will make them happy in light of changing needs and desires. The relationship-focused theories are concerned with when and how community interests should take priority over individual interests in the name of justice. The reputation-focused theories ask how character is shaped as individuals respond to community expectations.

A glance at the history of ethics in the Western world shows that from Plato forward the various frameworks have come in and out of prominence in a relatively predictable sequence. Given that each of the theories balances the excess of another, the pendulum swings as intemperate behavior in the name of one particular theory is corrected by the opposite frame coming into vogue. Current theorists advocate tempering the seeming over-emphasis of the two individual frameworks which have held sway for some two-hundred years to reassert a concern for the community. During the past thirty years, we have seen correction within the teleological tradition. The guiding principle of utilitarianism, finding the act which will provide the greatest good for the greatest number, is moderated as virtue ethics has moved to center stage. The current emphasis on character seeks to correct the excesses of the utilitarian (results-focused) frame which put the goals of the individual above the needs of the community. During the same time frame, the deontological tradition has also been calibrated as justice theories are offered to offset the perceived selfishness and isolation which comes from overemphasizing individual rights.
From the Modern to the Postmodern era

But we’re getting ahead of the story. Let’s go back to the beginning of what is called the Age of Enlightenment and see how we got to this kaleidoscope of opportunities and challenges which define the beginning of the 21st century. While change happens gradually, the watershed years which moved us from what is known as the Medieval Age to the Modern Age (the Age of Reason) are the 1500s, with the birth of the scientific method and the Protestant Reformation. The new idea which emerged from the monastic laboratories was that through reason and research we could find out how the physical world worked. The scientific method was then applied to what came to be known as the social sciences. Theorists asserted that the underlying principles and rules for ethics, economics and politics could be discovered through reason and research rather than through revelation in scripture or traditional teaching.

Philosophers and theologians set themselves to the task of identifying the universal principles that undergird all moral action. Using the tools of the Age of Reason – a scientific, rational approach – the question was whether universal ethical principles could be identified and then made the basis of human action. The spokesman for the deontological (duty based) tradition, Immanuel Kant [1724-1084], offered what he called the categorical imperatives which could be used to determine the universal principles to guide ethical decision making. Kant believed that after determining the principles which delineated our rights and responsibilities, we would be able to choose appropriate goals for our lives. The spokesman for the teleological (ends based) tradition, John Stuart Mill [1806-1873], asserted that the goal was to find what course of action would result in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Mill believed that after determining what goals or ends of life would make us happy, we would be able to identify the core principles of ethical behavior which could guide individuals and policy makers. Conversations about which of these two approaches was correct (and variations on the themes) dominated the discourse about ethics until the last quarter of the 20th century.
Mid-twentieth century scholars began to suspect that the project to find universal principles was going to fail. The implications of the new physics—in particular Albert Einstein’s *Theory of Relativity* and Warren Heisenberg’s *Uncertainty Principle*—shook the certain foundations of science. As Einstein demonstrated that everything is relative to the observer, even time, the belief that science could provide “facts” which were independent of the observer faltered. Then Heisenberg demonstrated that the very process of science was subject to bias. For example, when one conducts experiments to determine the nature of light, if one asks questions about the particles of light, one sees particles, and if one asks questions about light waves, one sees waves. In other words, one sees what one looks for. Thus, everything we believe that we know is limited by the very questions we ask and the methods we use in seeking the knowledge.

Sociologist Peter Berger continued the conversation in the social sciences by demonstrating that every person’s knowledge of reality, our convictions about what is real in our world, is constructed from our beliefs. As we walk through life, our world view is shaped by an elegant intersection of the authorities we find persuasive, the traditions we consider important, how we learn and what we know, as well as our personal experience.

In response to Berger’s work (and that of many other sociologists, philosophers, and linguists), a broad category of concepts named postmodernism challenged the traditional wisdom of the modern era. The underlying premise of the Age of Enlightenment was that if we sought objective knowledge using the tools of scientific inquiry, we could with certainty find and verify “The Truth.” The promise was that by identifying the truth, people could find universal, and thus certain, foundations for ethical action which would withstand the test of time.

As noted by the postmodern thinkers, the understanding that individual and community questions, assumptions, and resulting beliefs shape a person and a culture posited an interesting conundrum for those who were part of the classical school of thought. If the theorists were right that the matrix from
which ethical decisions arise is personal and communal, the enlightenment project of finding timeless foundations was doomed. The insight of the postmodernists was that the world view of individuals and the community (the sum total of their beliefs) provides the foundation for understanding how to live in community, not timeless rules grounded in universal ideals.

Emergence of postmodern thought:

The postmodern conversation thus requires that philosophers, theologians and ethicists redefine their task. If, in fact, the rational foundations for the “universal truths” do not hold, the question becomes whether the appropriate quest is to seek the “ultimate truth.” The other option is for ethicists (and persons in community who want to act ethically) is to attend to the perennial questions as they seek better answers to today’s problems. These questions have no pretense of giving us unshakable foundations for the right answers. However, carefully crafted questions can guide the discussion as well as help us clarify our beliefs and prioritize our core values.

As the notion of postmodern thought has just emerged in the past thirty years, the definition is still under construction. Most philosophers now acknowledge that all truth, everything that we as humans know, is contingent – based on our very best understanding of what is and what should be. As we seek knowledge and wisdom, we take the pieces of our experience that don’t make sense given what we believe and seek more complete answers to the emerging questions.

Postmodernism actually makes intuitive sense for those in the trenches who have to apply ethical theory to the practice of every day living. Rather than straining to find agreed upon universal principles by which to live our lives, we can entertain the perennial questions. By using the analytical frameworks which have informed ethical thought throughout history, we can find the best possible solutions to difficult situations. The task of ethics thus changes from a preoccupation with correctly applying the right rules to using a thoughtful process for finding the best available answers.
In the process of working through a problem, using different templates we may find that two solutions are both ethical as the different lenses emphasize different values. Then we have to choose which set of conflicting values will be given priority. For example, we believe that employers should provide a safe workplace for employees. We also believe that employees should be responsible and work to avoid injury on the job. When deciding whether enhanced requirements for safety should be made law, such as requiring that employers provide their employees state-of-the-art ergonomic equipment, we have to decide whether the value of a safe workplace (even if it will increase the cost of goods and services to the community) should be given priority over employees assuming the risk of injury. In that case, the value we (either as an individual or as a community) believe is most important will determine both what we do and what we will require others to do. As we take responsibility for creatively solving today’s problems, we are encouraged to help fashion a world which provides greater dignity to all humans and allows communities to thrive. The ethical agent gets to ask, “what is the best way to approach ethical decision making if I want to make sense of my life and continue in my quest to ‘be all that I can be’ while building a healthy community.”

As we engage in this new quest, contemporary philosophers and ethicists remind us that we construct our own lives by the way we tell our stories, contextualize our experience, and determine what is meaningful. We can embrace the privilege of becoming fully functioning adults as we use our mind and imagination to make sense of our place in this world and take responsibility for our choices and actions. In the process we develop the skills needed to become mature ethical agents in an emerging technological age – the ability to be effective while assuring that in the future we have a planet and community for our children.

BECOMING A RESPONSIBLE ETHICAL AGENT

While the implications in theory and practice for this new way of looking at
our world are not all known, the immediate question is whether all ethics boils down to radical relativity – we all get to do what we want – or whether we can identify some constraints for unrestrained individualism. History seems to teach that when either the community ignores the legitimate needs of individuals or when individuals abuse their prerogatives, both suffer. The study of ethics invites us to balance the claims of individuals and the community as well as seek balance between the personal and work aspects of our own lives. We learn when to act in our own enlightened self interest and when to overcome our biases and fears to act for the good of the community. We also learn when we need to take a stand against community expectations that seemingly require us to violate our own sense of what is right. In short, we can learn how to be an ethical and effective “person in community.”

The thesis of this book is that whether we call it being ethical or moral, the vast majority of us want to be good individuals and citizens. Researchers in ethics find that all of us seem to have a desire to be ethical and/or to be perceived as ethical. As we look for patterns in the stories of those who have breached the ethical norms of the community, often the problem is that they may not have either the knowledge or the skill to make effective ethical decisions. Thus, to restore confidence in our individual ability to make good decisions and to create an ethical culture, we need opportunities to stretch and move beyond our childhood understandings of ethics and become ethically mature.

One of the difficulties in an ethics text is that theorists have not agreed on the definitions of ethics and morality. In common usage, an ethical person is one who acts from a set of ethical principles and a moral person is one who follows the standards of conduct expected in the community. Another interesting distinction is that morality defines how we as humans use our freedom and ethics is how we think about, reflect on, the appropriate use of freedom. The conversations also distinguish between individual acts which can be considered ethical and in the formation of a moral character. For purposes of this text a distinction is made between ethics, which focuses on
our use of reason to find appropriate rules, and morality, which considers how we blend our reason with our emotional resources and skills. Those who use the term morality as distinguished from ethics tend to emphasize factors such as caring for the other person (e.g., Nel Noddings\(^\text{11}\)), developing our conscience (e.g., Charles Shelton\(^\text{12}\)), or enhancing our emotional maturity (e.g., Daniel Goleman\(^\text{13}\)).

One contemporary philosopher who carefully engaged the question of how to find “better answers” in a contingent world was Bernard Lonergan [1904-1984], a 20\(^{th}\) century Jesuit philosopher who asked how we could be responsible agents given our incomplete knowledge and the uncertainty of life. Using scientific inquiry as his starting point, Lonergan noted that given that everything we know is contingent, our most complete knowledge is still only the best information we have given what we know now. Lonergan observed that as we continue to live and work in this world, we see that pieces of our knowledge and experience don’t fit our existing notions about the world, leaving us with unanswered questions. Lonergan asserted that every person’s core desire is to make sense of the world, to make pieces fit, which he called our unrestricted desire to know. While his work (like that of all good philosophers) is complex, requiring much study to begin to understand all of the implications, he articulated a four step decision making process. His method is easy to use and provides an excellent concept map for those seeking to be a responsible ethical agent who must make hard choices in a complex world.\(^\text{14}\)

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Be attentive.}
\end{itemize}

The hardest part of being fully present in the world is paying attention to what is happening around us, attending to human affairs as we live in our fragile world. The attention that Lonergan envisions involves not only attending to the facts and situations outside of ourselves, but also the process of knowing ourselves, our motives and nature, inclinations and foibles — our very identity. Another facet of being attentive is finding out what we don’t know. When we see a fact or hear an assertion, we need to check whether we can attest to that piece of data or whether we need more information. We
also need to ask what information is missing, what details should be considered that have been left off the table. Thus, the first step of effective ethical decision making is to pay attention to the ethical agent, to the various stakeholders present in the situation who have varying interests and expectations, and the context of the decision.

- **Be intelligent:**

The process of being intelligent requires that we inquire about what is going on. What is the true state of affairs? What is happening around us? What is the most reliable data that we have? In this stage of inquiry, we seek to learn the best available information about how to live well in this world. As we work through this phase, we do not put our heads in the proverbial sand, refusing to see what is about us – even if the information is disquieting.

Being intelligent as we work to make effective decisions requires that we carefully articulate the issue before us. This task demands that the ethical agent have well developed ethical sensibilities and be able to see ethical issues even though flashing neon lights may not boldly announce their presence. The next task is to consider carefully the values in conflict. Ethical issues are always about competing good solutions with individual and/or community values in conflict. Identifying conflicts and prioritizing values is the crux of ethical decision making. The final task is to craft possible options for action.

- **Be reasonable:**

As human beings we must judge among many goods and goals. We must choose among competing values. We must assess the truth or falsity of another’s statements as we discern for ourselves what “is” as well as what we prefer. Those who do not learn to discern truth are at the mercy of the last book they read or the last polemic they heard. Being reasonable includes analyzing what will or will not work, what is or is not feasible. For this step, Lonergan invites us to move towards the greater good, to find the best result.
given what we know about the world and the humans who inhabit it.

Being reasonable requires that the ethical agent work to hone critical thinking skills. We must look carefully at all facets of the problem. Then we can explore the ramifications of action by synthesizing two or more of the ethical and moral frameworks. The more complex the problem, the more valuable a multi-faceted and synergistic approach becomes.

> Be responsible:

A telling critique of many ethics classes is that we discuss endlessly without helping people learn to come to resolution. Yet, every day each of us makes a multitude of small ethical decisions. We decide among competing rights and responsibilities. We choose one set of goals over another. We decide to give up our own prerogatives (or not) in order to maintain relationships with those who are important in our lives. We consider our reputations and what is essential to us. All of these choices are ethical choices. Lonergan challenges us to not mindlessly wander through life but to be intentional and responsible as we decide what to believe and what to do.

Therefore, as we choose to act, we need to correct for personal bias and attend to the common good, a holistic world view which considers and balances the needs and prerogatives of both the one and the many. Because each of us has blind spots and tends to be selfish, the notion of ethics carries with it the expectation that we will become self-reflective and self-regulating persons who can temper our choices to correct for personal and cultural bias.

As we act responsibly, we can seek an answer which most elegantly balances the competing values in the community. For instance, the lessons of the 20th century teach that we are all connected both economically and ecologically. The phenomena known as “the butterfly effect” which states that the flutter of a butterfly’s wing changes wind patterns across the globe, reminds us that the business decisions of people in organizations affect an entire economy.
The decisions also affect the physical well being of our planet. We attend to the common good by finding the decision that will benefit not only ourselves but those around us.

- Returning to awareness: a reprise.

The method articulated by Lonergan provides a useful structure for making decisions. After we act, we have an opportunity to notice again the intended and unintended results. As we move in the world, others decide what our actions mean and the context in which they want to hold the event. We also get to learn about ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses. The process of self-regulation and self-discipline requires noting where we need to restrain our desires and inclinations to reach the goals we have set for ourselves. Thus our world views intersect with each other in a lacework of fractals – seemingly random events that create exquisite patterns of life.

**FORMATION OF BELIEF SYSTEMS**

The reflective process which Lonergan outlines mirrors the process by which we each create our belief system, the world view which we form in childhood and modify as adults. This outlook becomes the lens through which we look at the world – our belief windows. Thus, a belief system is the totality of a person’s ideas.

We go through life and things happen – neutral events from which we get knowledge and experiences, what we call “ideas.” As we name these neutral events, we come to hold certain “truths” about ourselves, our community and our work. We then interpret these events based on what we believe and
know to be true. From our “truth” we make fresh choices which give new results and additional explanations about life.

Some would argue that no such thing as “neutral events” exist. Even the very act of noticing something requires judgment and evaluation. However, the mental discipline of stripping away as much as possible of our preconceived notions which come from bias embedded in our culture and from our personal history helps us open possibilities for recontextualizing an event and giving it a different meaning. We can then respond differently than we may have originally anticipated. For example, those of us who were born and raised in the United States tend to see everything first through a individualistic, market economy lens. Thus, the arrangements that Europeans make for caring for the sick and elderly do not make sense to us. Europeans who tend to see through a social-democracy lens find our arrangements for health care similarly mystifying. If we try seeing with another lens, we may find ourselves becoming more generous than we originally thought as we distribute health care resources.

Knowing how we remember, retell and contextualize the experiences of life (the Heisenberg principle of “when we look for waves, we see waves” at work) makes understanding the dynamics of the workplace much easier. If we believe that most people are out to cheat the system, what we see in the vast majority of cases is people cheating the system. If we believe that most people are basically honest, what we see as we look around are people being honest. A perplexing question is how each of us decides what to believe. What, exactly, is truth?

**Process of forming belief systems:**

The process of observation, reflection and action informs the structure of our belief system. From the moment of our birth we collect information about how we fit in the world. While our first information comes before we learn how to reason, through trial and error we learn how to see and evaluate our surroundings. We first notice something. Then we make a decision about
whether that something really exists, in the sense of whether it has an anticipated particular structure, value, or meaning. From that decision we choose a course of action. That action results in intended and unintended (anticipated and unanticipated) new events. As the cycle is repeated, we form a set of beliefs about ourselves, others and our world. Our total set of beliefs is our world view.15 A poignant example of this process comes from the popular movie *A Beautiful Mind.* The main character, John Nash, suffers from paranoid-schizophrenia. At a critical point in the movie he has to determine whether his companions are “real” or not. He determines that they do not really exist because over the years the little girl has never gotten older. He then has to rework his belief system to reflect that his companions – both good and evil – are not real.

Interestingly, biologists tell us that the action of the brain mirrors the philosophers’ teaching about how belief systems are formed. According to Andrew Newberg, M.D., who has exhaustively studied the way that the brain processes information, the first step of perception occurs when the primary receptive areas which are dedicated to the five sensory systems receive unprocessed data. Then the perceptions move to the association area where the data is matched with the memory and emotional centers as the brain organizes the data. The finished image only becomes accessible to the conscious mind as the image combines with memory and emotion. These steps give the image context and meaning. The final stage comes as the image is assimilated and processed through the visual association area where it is then correlated with information from other parts of the brain.16

Daniel Goleman indicates that sometimes information gets to the emotional circuitry before it goes through either the long-term or short-term memory centers. Sometimes information is scrambled on the way to the memory centers. This scrambling may result in a person responding inappropriately to the data, such as the tragic circumstances where a father kills a child wandering around the house at night. The emotional center registers “unknown noise ➔ intruder ➔ danger” before the parent can note that the wanderer is a child.17 This research reminds us that we need to pay attention
to both rational and emotional data to assure that we respond properly to environmental cues.

**Noticing neutral events:**

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<th>Evaluating a Neutral Event</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Awareness:</strong> She was asked some time ago to give a presentation on spirituality and work at a law school. As she walked in the door, her stomach tightened. A sense of panic came over her. A sign indicated that she was speaking on ethics. Two different groups of people appeared to be vying for the same space for their meetings.</td>
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Let’s explore the choreography in some detail. The dance begins when we notice something happening in our world. Through our senses we apprehend a flower, a sunset, a tone of voice. These events have no meaning in themselves: they are neutral events. Nothing that we see, hear or feel has by itself any intrinsic meaning. The exact same event in a divergent time or an alternate place takes on a different meaning. When I survey my lawn, a dandelion is a pest to be eradicated. When my five-year old grandson brings a dandelion to his grandma, the dandelion becomes an act of love. Same flower/weed – totally new interpretation.

Because so much data is available, we only see (hear, feel, touch) that which we have named or expect to see. During the late 1900's when publishing his seminal work on bacteria and disease, Louis Pasteur was ridiculed by the medical establishment for asserting that disease was transmitted by contaminated hands and instruments. Given that a status symbol in the medical community was how much blood was on an apron, his colleagues contended that because the microbes could not be seen they did not exist. By demonstrating that microbes caused infection, Pasteur changed “the way we frame disease and what we can do about. From this point forward, disease would be framed in terms of specific living causes, an idea that was called the *germ theory of disease.*”18 The practice of medicine changed as a result of Pasteur’s reframing of disease “because what is done about the sick person depends on the conception of what is wrong with him or her.”19
Those in every other profession have experienced the shift in world view which heralded the birth of scientific medicine. Some embrace the reframing of their professions while others are skeptical. Thus, the human tendency to see only what we expect to see gets replayed in the business world as we make decisions based on what we have previously named. As one pundit says, we drive with our hands on the rearview mirror. We look for what we have seen previously; and then we respond to new events based on information stored in our personal historical archives.

One of the primary tasks of an attentive person is to be willing to see what is not expected and thus what is not named. When women began naming their experience of themselves or others being treated as sexual objects in the workplace, those who had never thought about sexual harassment on the job neither saw harassment nor had a name for it. However, once we knew what to see and decided that the behavior was not acceptable, people noticed occurrences of sexual harassment everywhere and began pressing for behavioral change. The difficulty with newly named unethical behavior is that actions which are not sexual harassment may be labeled as such. The challenge is to notice what others don’t see and to evaluate that particular event in light of itself and not be quick to judge in light of past labels or choices – either positive or negative.

The second task is learning to see without judgment, with no value added. This ability to see events as neutral allows us to see what doesn’t seem to fit or make sense, change context quickly and respond to change. Papers are filled with tragic results which come from people not being able to change behavior when they receive new information or are confronted with a unique problem. A stark example of this pattern was seen in Colorado when two young gunmen entered Columbine High School, shot students and faculty and then killed themselves. The members of the SWAT team were trained to move very slowly, making sure that the gunmen, whom they expected were holding hostages, did not kill any others. Even though the reports transmitted via cell phone from inside the high school indicated that the gunmen were dead, the police stayed with tried and true procedures.
The claim is that some who were wounded died as a result of the delay. Should the police be faulted for following established procedure? Should they have been trained to respond to the crisis at hand rather than acting from a script? Everyone who has put in place processes and protocols for action knows the difficulty of that choice. On one hand predictability is essential for uniform action and results. On the other hand, we want employees to respond creatively to an emerging, new situation. Being trained to see an event as a neutral – without inherent meaning or value – and respond from a rich repertoire of actions tends to get better results than acting from prejudged bias or habit.

The final step in evaluating neutral events is to notice that all events are apprehended in two ways: with our emotions and with our mind. The emotional response is our first indicator of danger or safety – to fight, flee, or stay for dinner. For much of modern business history, we have been told to ignore our emotions and pay attention only to our minds. The popular wisdom is that emotions are unpredictable and unstable, even though people talk about following their gut instincts.

At the end of the twentieth century, psychologists began exploring the realm of the emotions, especially as they affected ethical behavior. Daniel Goleman who coined the phrase “emotional intelligence” says that impulse is the “medium of emotion and those who are at the mercy of their impulses, who lack self-control, are morally deficient.” Emerging research indicates that the ability to notice and manage our emotional response to an event is a critical skill. Those who cannot manage themselves often are unable to be ethical in their business dealings. To be ethical, one needs both the skill of self-awareness as well as self-regulation, doing the right thing even when no-one is watching and no-one will ever notice the difference.

**Naming the neutral event:**

The mind, the intellect, knows and names the event and gives it being. The gift of naming is the most important process that we as humans have. It is
no mistake that in Genesis, the first book in the Jewish/Christian canon, after God created the world, Adam and Eve were instructed to name all the plants and animals. Through the gift of naming, Adam and Eve were given power over all creation – and themselves.

Naming an event involves three decisions: (a) does this event exist; (b) what is the value of this event; and (c) what is the meaning of this event. The first choice is to give the event life, to determine whether or not what we see really exists. The naming is arbitrary, based on the intersection of our mind and our physical being. From the moment of birth we continuously compile a personal directory of experience with corresponding judgments about those experiences. These judgments form a data bank for all we know. Each new event becomes a version of the game “one of these things is not like the other.” As we compare and contrast our current experience with previous data, we put the new experience into an existing pigeon hole and then proceed to decide how to value the emerging event.

Putting a value on events is also highly personal. Whether we evaluate an event as good or bad, useful or not useful, changes based on the context in which we place what is happening to us and on personal expectations and roles. Some thrive on the adrenaline rush of excitement and chaos and so find highly challenging events good. Others prefer a much more ordered life with little risk and so embrace much more tempered events. What we seek out and how we name those events depends.
on how we contextualize the information we have received about our world.

The way we value events also depends on our temperament and native abilities, characteristics we have had since birth and the cumulation of our life experiences. Current research indicates that about 40% of who we are is “hard wired,” the way we are born and about 60% is “soft-wired,” a result of our choices and responses to life. What we call instinct is often those gifts with which we were born. Our beginning palette of skills, whether it be mental acuity, empathy, or spiritual awareness, provides the oils with which we start to paint the picture called our life.

Interestingly, research indicates that “nature can only act via nurture.” Our genetic inheritance can only be activated as the gifts are nurtured through the choices we make and the opportunities we have growing up. The most malleable time is when we are children. By the time we are adults where our inherited genes have predisposed us to experience our environment in certain ways, our “intelligence is like personality: mostly inherited, partly influenced by factors unique to the individual, and very little affected by the family” into which we were born.

Thus a person who is born cautious with a skeptical approach to life (the 40% hard wired part) will both be risk adverse and so avoid risky ventures as well as evaluate events as more intimidating than one who is born adventurous and thus embraces challenges. Because who we are is a combination of “aptitude and appetite,” what we prefer influences what we choose to do and believe which then reinforces what we prefer. We can learn to change our response to life (the 60% soft wired part) through making a conscious choice to become more aware and choose new paths as we intentionally change our belief system and actions. This cycle continues over an entire life, not just during the first few years. If we

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How should this be named? As she entered the classroom, she began to examine her panic. First, she was not going to be in the student section and therefore would not be expected to answer esoteric questions nor was any particular case going to hang on her ability to articulate the points of law.
are not aware, we mindlessly reinforce existing beliefs and learned bias. If instead we discipline ourselves to see with fresh eyes, we can evaluate our world more carefully. Through education and practice, change is always possible.

The last decision involves giving the event meaning. What are the cause and effect relationships which are alive and well in this situation? How does this event fit within the fabric of our own lives? We all want to make sense out of our life and experience. We are often tempted to ignore events that do not seem to fit within our belief system. However, if we are attentive, we can evaluate the event and clarify our own world view, thus giving the data meaning and enriching our belief system.

At this point, the strong tendency (which needs to be resisted) is to place the information in a context that makes our own established world view correct. The most important lesson to learn from this section is we choose meanings that make us right, to validate our own preferred world view — even when we may be wrong. Thus when we see an event — something which could be interpreted two different ways, we interpret the event to fit what we already believe to be true about the world.

This bias towards making our world view correct even in the face of inconsistent data has caused untold misery in our community. Whether one
is a Galileo who had the temerity to suggest that the world revolved around the sun and so found himself in the middle of the Inquisition or a scientist who notes that the “O ring” on a space shuttle needs attention and finds himself testifying before a Senate sub-committee, those in positions of power do not like to admit that they may be wrong – often with disastrous results. We replicate that error in smaller ways in our every day life. For example, when we have a conflict at work that could be either attributed to our misunderstanding of the situation or someone setting us up for failure, we tend to believe that someone else is responsible and we are blameless.

A person needs a great deal of integrity and discipline to interpret a problem as a flawed personal belief system. Given that the stakes are very high if we interpret the world around us incorrectly, having a world view that is as accurate as possible is critical. Every situation, every neutral event, emerges from the intersection of at least two sets of beliefs and actions. To both acquire wisdom and be effective in our community, we must be willing to continually modify our beliefs.

Responding to the neutral event:

After we name the experience, we formulate a series of possible responses to the event. The range of options go from ignoring the stimulus to the full engagement of our mind and bodies. When my children were little, my husband and I quickly learned the difference between naming unidentified noise as a problem to be solved or children at play. We agreed that the first person who noticed that something was amiss with the kids had to do something about the situation. As intervention required work that we could

Decision: As she looked out at the students, she knew that she was a gifted teacher. She was prepared (always an antidote for panic) and had confidence in the content of the talk. She believed that what she had to say had value. The only benefit in treating the panic as real was to make sure that she didn’t let her guard down and ignore subtle signals of her audience.

Having a mind that is just a bit unusual, she thanked Panic for showing up and invited it to welcome two close cousins, Excitement and Enthusiasm, to the party. She then suggested that her friend Panic take a seat in the back where it could raise its hand again and speak if the student’s attention began drifting.
not pass off to the other, we became skilled in differentiating between sibling bickering and emergencies which required parental involvement. In the process, we encouraged our children to become responsible for themselves while we discharged our parental obligations.

In choosing among the options, our notions about ourselves and our dreams for the future play an important role in the selection of a preferred mode of being and acting. As we use our imagination, we can begin to explore different potential choices. We can begin to determine which result will be the best for us and fulfill our own dreams. In evaluating our action, if we are thoughtful, we will also include the possible reaction and reasons for action of the others who are involved. The final step is to consider what options will benefit those who will be affected by the choice.

The cycle begins again. Each action results in a response and another action. The results will be both anticipated and unanticipated. Because those who react to our actions will make their own choices based on their belief systems, we can never really predict what someone will do. In any event, we have new information for our belief system, information which will either confirm our world view or require us to adjust it. The next time we act, we will make new choices about what to believe and what to do through the filter of our current belief system and the lens of our core beliefs.

SOURCE OF INFORMATION FOR BELIEF SYSTEMS

We have four sources of information for our belief systems which
correspond to the four principal contextual questions that provide the foundations for the inquiry-based method of ethical decision making: reason, experience, authority, and tradition. When we use the tool of reason, we look within ourselves to determine whether the information we receive is accurate. When we use experience, we use personal action and life events as a test case for our ideas. The tool of authority helps us choose whether or not to accept the ideas of others. And finally, with tradition, we see what others have taught as truth, both in the theory of what is true and the practice of how to be in community.

Reason as a source of information for our belief system:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who am I?</td>
<td>How do I fit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why this choice?</td>
<td>What should I choose?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>Experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first and last source of information about our belief system is our reason – what we choose to believe.²⁴ Reason is the first source because we all make choices regarding what we see and how to interpret the data. As children we get information first through our emotions. As adults, we use complex emotional information to interpret events while using our reason to interpret the data.

We use reason in two ways. First we have the process of reasoning itself. Learning the tools of critical thinking helps us reason more effectively. As we practice the skill of critical analysis we make better ethical decisions. Second we have the content of reason, what we know and believe to be true. As we learn more about our world through study and research we have more information available with which to make decisions.

People who did not know that the Black Plague was caused by rats carrying the disease blamed the deaths on sinful people who had brought down the wrath of God. Today, faced with an epidemic, science tells us what agent and process is responsible for the illness. We can then change behavior (such as
washing our hands) to stop the spread of disease. Reason is key, as the gift and curse of being human is the ability to think with the attendant responsibility of free will. To responsibly exercise our prerogatives of freedom and action, we should assess both rational and emotional information. While we use authority, tradition and experience, at the end of the day our minds determine what data we will consider persuasive and what we will do.

*Experience as a source of information for our belief system:*

Wending our way through this world, we create a data bank of experience from which to evaluate life. As our primary goal is survival, we look at past experiences to let us know whether a particular course of action will keep us alive. This practice is useful as we learn that fire is hot and driving recklessly may endanger our lives. This tendency may be detrimental if the conditions have changed which make past action no longer valid or if we have additional skills with which to navigate the danger.

Experience helps us expand our world view. Those who have never been around people from a different religious or ethnic background find biases dissolving after developing relationships. People who have never been poor have a very different world view of poverty after spending a day or two with someone trying to raise a family on minimum wage. People who have never been sick have a whole new world view after experiencing their own illness or sitting with someone during a critical illness. Abstract concepts such as sick leave, health insurance, and co-payments become very concrete when faced with a medical bill from an industrial accident.

In using our experience as a touchstone, we must be careful not to generalize all situations based on our interpretation of a prior series of events. Because of the limitations of our own experience, we may interpret an event incorrectly. For example, we may see someone making what we think is an absolutely incorrect business decision. However, with more experience or more data, we may see that the decision is, in fact, correct.
We must also be careful not to discount the experience of others. Those who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s have a very different experience of discrimination than those who entered the job market with more equality. A pundit once said that one knows that progress is made when instead of hitting the glass ceiling at 25, women don’t hit it until 35 or 40. Thus, when young women or minorities don’t get as passionate about “the movement” as their parents, we have to understand that their experience of the world of equal opportunity in school and athletics translates to equal opportunity in employment.

Finally, we must be careful to continuously evaluate the naming of our experience. This process can be easier if we are careful about our use of emotion-laden words. One way we socialize children is by telling them that certain actions are bad and wrong while others are good. Hitting other children is bad; sharing toys is good. Often the words come with a disapproving tone of voice or punishment, which makes us feel shame or guilt. As we become adults, we carry the emotional imprint of that early conditioning. Thus, as we decide that certain actions are “good” or “bad,” we may also have an emotional response to the naming. Sometimes evaluating a course of action becomes easier if we name the events as “useful” or “not useful.” So, deciding to always keep our promises is not only “good” because that is what we were taught, but it is also “useful” in building relationships and trust. A belief that asserting ourselves is “bad” because we need to be seen as modest and gentle may “not be useful” if we want to be an effective advocate for justice. Thus, we may choose to change our beliefs through experiencing ourselves as brave and strong.

If we are to become effective ethical leaders, we must be willing to see ourselves as responsible adults who use personal and corporate power wisely. If a decision we made about ourselves and our abilities is no longer useful, then we must discard it. Sometimes we have a set of failures which we attribute to our own shortcomings. Sometimes those events have nothing to do with us. In those circumstances, labeling ourselves as failures is not appropriate. Sometimes we think we are effective even though a strategy that
worked for us before no longer gets desired results. Through the continuous mindful evaluation and reevaluation of our experiences we can set ourselves on a course for maturity.

Authority as a source of information for our belief system:

Our first source of information about life comes from our parents. They teach us their truths of the world, including religious and political views. Their understandings of work shape what we believe is possible for us. Early on we learn what tasks are appropriate for men and women, for people of different races, and for people in “our family.” One particular biological family may relish eccentricities and value those who are neither pretentious nor value people only on appearances. Thus, each generation of that family recounts with pride stories of their grandfather going to pay cash for a car while dressed in his overalls: if a person wouldn’t serve him based on how he was dressed, that person didn’t get the sale.

As we progress through school, we are exposed to other sources of information which we might find persuasive. Over the years, we gather knowledge and consider ideas which are very different than those with which we were raised. At that point we have to evaluate whether to accept these new world views into our own belief system. The difficulty is that we all tend not to evaluate authorities carefully when we agree with them and to be super-critical if we disagree with the premises. Learning to listen to authorities in terms of the soundness of their information, care of reasoning and implications for the ideas is difficult.

One strategy is to “try on” the new information and see what difference the new information or way of looking at the world would make. A colleague described his journey from a closed, Protestant community to being comfortable in a predominately Catholic environment. He found his childhood notions of the world comforting, but not useful for being an aware adult in a complex world. The old biases against Catholics which he had growing up in a blue-collar, prejudiced neighborhood were not going to
be useful if he was going to teach at a Catholic university. He had to critically evaluate his belief that all Catholics needed to convert to “true Christianity” and be “born again.” He also had to decide whether what he was taught about other religions, their ethical structure and their legitimacy in the community, was true. After study and soul searching, he “tried on the idea” that tolerance of other faith traditions made sense because none of us can really claim to have a corner on “the truth.” He found that the new idea supported his sense of himself and helped him be an effective teacher. That decision also opened the door to exploring the possibility of celebrating the gifts of other religious traditions. Although the full shift in understanding took time, each new instance of experiencing the value of other traditions strengthened his new world view. After a while the new way of thinking was habitual and he couldn’t remember thinking any other way. The change also had a bitter-sweet result. His children adopted his new way of thinking, taking for granted the value of religious plurality and tolerance and not placing the same value on organized religion as he did. That which was important to him was not valued by his children. Every change in beliefs results in multi-layered changes, some of which are neither foreseen nor intended.

We have three primary sources of authority which inform our belief systems and which give us plenty of new ideas to “try on.”

- **Philosophical and religious sources:**

For many, religion and philosophy are the most important sources of information about the world. However, because in the United States we are so careful to honor the right of each person to choose which ideas to believe, because our ideas are precious, and because we think of religion as private and business and government as public, we are reluctant to tell people about the religious views we cherish and which deeply inform our sense of self, others and the world. In the past five years a new area of study has been accepted by the Academy of Management, that of spirituality in the workplace. This research explores what difference our faith and longing for
wholeness makes in how we do our work as well as how we treat other people. The research indicates that as we attend to our spirits, minds, and bodies, we tend to be more effective in our work as well as more content. As people increasingly demand that their work be meaningful and fulfilling, conversations about faith and religion crop up around water coolers and employee lunchrooms.

A corresponding concern about giving religion or philosophy too much preeminence in the workplace, is that our faith or philosophical ideologies will impel us to a particular action which we might then force on others. Sometimes the choice has good results, such as the of the owners of Chick-fil-A® deciding to keep their restaurants closed on Sunday to honor the Sabbath. Other policies come from a desire to honor the sacred dignity of each human person, such as making sure privacy policies concerning Internet and computer use are the same for all employees. Other times the decisions are more problematic such as displaying a sacred text, like the Bible, or demanding that all participate in religious services. Wisdom and discretion is needed to discern between using our beliefs appropriately to inform actions and the inappropriate use of personal or corporate power to impose those beliefs or requirements for action on others.

The study of ethics explores the conversation among people of different beliefs and experience to see how they come to a shared understanding about how best to live in community. The study of ethics also provides individuals and groups foundations for asserting that certain actions are appropriate or inappropriate. To fully appreciate the interplay between conversation and convention, we must remember that our faith (whether in God, the Sacred or in humans) and our philosophy provide the strongest grounding for our actions. Being aware of our own beliefs and those of others helps us negotiate the dialogue.

If we disagree with someone on the authority of a particular scripture, we know that the text will not be persuasive for that person in informing belief or action. This truism is often lost. I experienced the narrowness that can
come with ideological purity while standing in line in the San Francisco airport. I struck up a conversation with the gentleman in front of me and we talked of our work. When I said that I was a lawyer who taught ethics, he fell out laughing. Then he said that people didn’t need to be taught ethics, they just needed to follow the Ten Commandments. When I asked about those who were neither Christian nor Jewish, his retort was that they just needed to convert.

In attending to our world, we can certainly find those who share beliefs. If we are courageous, we will also listen to those with different beliefs without demanding that they convert to our world view. The saving grace is that often the same behavior is indicated by different religious and philosophical convictions. So in the every day world we can agree on what to do even when we may not agree on why we are doing it.

The quest to ground ethical beliefs in reason rather than revelation was envisioned as a way around the fact that the authority and meaning of religious texts is contested. Given that we don’t have agreement on what should be considered sacred and what authority should be given to the words, the notion was that if people could use their reason to find the rules of life, we could reach a common understanding about what we should do.

In the intervening 200 or more years since Immanuel Kant wrote *A Critique of Practical Reason* which posited universal foundations for ethical action, we have become more comfortable with the idea that philosophical traditions are just as contested as the religious ones. Our philosophical beliefs are also shaped by what we understand about the nature of humans, the purpose of property and the proper use of power. After centuries of debate and contemplation, no agreement on these three seminal understandings of the world is on the horizon. Philosophers have different understandings of the core questions, which often mirror the view of the theologians. So the two primary strands of ethics, deontology and teleology, contain representatives from both philosophy and theology. As an individual in community, once again our knowledge, beliefs, and dreams set the trajectory for our actions.
• **Social sciences:**

The second source of authority comes from the social sciences such as economics, political theory, history, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Through use of the scientific method borrowed from the hard sciences, these disciplines also explore the nature of humans, how we use property, and the use and abuse of power. Based on the underlying beliefs about the nature of humans and society (informed by theology and philosophy), scholars have put forward theories about how we behave and offered norms, or rules, for how we should live.

Each school of thought offers a description of the human condition based on its observations and experience and then offers predictions of how people will behave in the future. As with any study, the questions we ask and the emphasis we place on the data drives the suggestions. In economics, if we focus on how people who are in charge of their own destiny seem to be more proactive and productive in their work, an argument can be made for an unrestricted free market. If we focus on how people abuse power or how those without access to financial resources may not be able to take charge of their destiny, an argument can be made for a social system which provides resources to those without. Different ways of organizing our political life will have different strengths and weaknesses. Just like theology and philosophy, the social sciences have also not been able to provide any certain answers for how we should live, answers which will satisfy all persons in varying circumstances.

• **The natural sciences:**

The natural sciences provide two important sources of information. The first is data about “what is.” Medical science made tremendous gains when microscopes revealed a teeming world of microbes which profoundly affected our ideas about health. Technology put copper refineries out of business as we discovered that fiber optics were much more effective at transmitting data than copper wires. The experiments and insights of our
scientists provides the building blocks of our enterprises. As we get new information about “what is,” we dream about “what can be.” The hard sciences also let us know what we can know. The modern quest, informed by a Newtonian world view, sought to understand the nature of things, to find the essential qualities which would be the same for all people. Scientists worked to find the physical properties of matter which were not dependent on the observer but on the nature of matter itself.

As scientists began noticing that the person watching the experiment changed the results, they tentatively put forward the idea that we could never with certainty identify physical properties of matter. All of our knowledge about our world is dependent in some small way upon the observer. The promise of Newtonian physics, which would give us certainty about our physical universe, could not be kept. Rather, quantum physics concerned itself with probabilities. Thus, the work of scientists subtly shifted. While scientists still may seek to find universal truth, they know that the structure of the world also involves uncertainty. Our present understanding of the world is always going to be colored by the fact that knowledge is contingent. A scientists are always bringing forth new information and data, we cannot definitively know the unchanging nature of the world. We can only know its current state — our best understanding of its condition right now.  

Tradition as source for information about our belief system:

Culture is transmitted from generation to generation as we adopt the traditions of the community into which we are born or which we join. The earliest traditions come from our families and our national community. Cultural traditions are also part of every business and profession. We can recognize tradition when we hear someone say, “we have always...” An interesting exercise is to ask ten people what makes “Thanksgiving” for them. Many will begin by saying, “we have a traditional meal of...” and then the differences begin. Starting with varying methods of preparing the turkey or goose to selecting all the side dishes and continuing on to acceptable dress, family activities (exactly how much football?) and guest list, tradition
is multifaceted indeed. The links to the past which are established through tradition provide continuity not only for families but also for professions, businesses and communities as a whole. As humans we yearn to belong to a group and to know our place in that community. As we adopt the traditions of our chosen peer groups, we know that we belong.

The difficulty with tradition is knowing when the customs need to be changed to adapt to new needs and situations or when the habits are destructive and impede progress. Often the tension emerges between tradition and knowledge: what can be changed as the culture evolves and what practices are essential to the identity and maintenance of the community. Sorting through the questions provides communities an opportunity to continually redefine themselves.

- **Who belongs.** Controlling membership is a key method for maintaining a community. Whether the criteria is ethnic (Sons of Norway), economic (being able to pay the initiation fee), or testing (passing the bar to become an attorney), those who are part of the group determine the requirements for membership. Particularly for professional and business membership, a certain threshold of knowledge and experience is required to do the job. However, because we like to do business with those we know and with whom we are comfortable, businesses are challenged to assure that belonging is somehow tied to competence rather than who we know because of our social circles. A current conversation about belonging centers around whether universities should admit “legacies,” the children of graduates, even if they have lower test scores and/or grades than other admittees. The question is poignant as programs of “affirmative action” to assure that people of color or those of lesser economic means can be well represented in academe have been rejected. The difference between accepting someone because they are knowledgeable or because they networked effectively and packaged themselves well is subtle.

- **What behavior is acceptable.** While secret handshakes are parodied, every business and profession has a set of acceptable behaviors which may or may
not be shared with the newly admitted member. In academics, each discipline has a carefully nuanced set of protocols for writing papers, presenting at conferences, and critiquing each other’s work. The professions and businesses have their own barriers to entry. A former student recounts that on his first day on the job he cheerfully greeted everyone and introduced himself. He didn’t know that the unspoken (but disliked) rule was that the newbie didn’t speak until spoken to. The CEO was so impressed that he took the new hire under his wing and showed him the ropes, much to the chagrin of his colleagues. If we are lucky, when we take a new position, an established member of the group will help us sort through the protocols and we will be able to understand and implement the suggested course of action. If we don’t have a mentor, we must be very attentive to the unspoken traditions of an organization and make judicious choices about when to push the edges of acceptable behavior.

- **What protocols must be maintained.** Many of the judicial systems in countries who were part of the British empire maintain the protocol of lawyers and judges wearing wigs. Each different style of wig signifies appointment to a different level of court with the more ornate wigs signaling increasing levels of respect being due. American judges and lawyers don’t wear wigs, but one never calls a judge by his or her first name unless one is either also a judge or related to a judge. In universities, an interesting protocol is how long a class must wait for a tardy professor. Traditionally, the higher the rank of the professor the longer the wait. With an emerging sense of egalitarianism between students and professors, that protocol is slipping. Many lament the emerging informality as a loss of respect; others find the changing protocols refreshing. Again, discerning between essential and non-essential (but sometimes wonderful) protocols to maintain the integrity of the practice requires gentle wisdom.

The same wisdom is needed in deciding how to begin new traditions or translate old ones. One of my cousins delivered the dollar from the tooth fairy to his daughter, complete with a personalized certificate of achievement. A few days later, he didn’t have time to do the same thing with
the second tooth. The following morning he had to scramble to placate a distraught seven year old who wanted to know why the tooth fairy hadn’t left the certificate. The next night the certificate appeared, complete with an apology. In the business world, attention must be given to traditions such as welcome and farewell events, award ceremonies and other community building activities. If someone anticipates a certain ritual upon a rite of passage and the ritual is skipped, that employee will be upset, defeating the purpose of the traditions.

- *What beliefs and knowledge must be adopted.* Traditions also have a set of accepted beliefs and knowledge. For example, in order to be part of a religious group, one must attest to a certain set of beliefs about that faith. In order to be an art conservator rather than a repair-person, one must not only be technically competent but also agree to certain beliefs about how to best preserve the historical past. Conservators have lively conversations about whether a patron should be able to see when a piece of art has been restored. For some, the integrity of the art demands that the difference between the original art and the restoration be clear. Others believe that good conservation requires as little distinction between the original art and the restoration as possible. Those in the latter school believe that with good conservation the patron cannot tell where the repair has been made.

The general rule is that we must be accepted into the tradition before we can change that tradition. Sometimes meeting this requirement is difficult if we are a member of a group that cannot gain access to a tradition. A solution may be to appeal to reason and experience to get people to change their attachment to tradition. As the Civil Rights Movement took hold, many who were part of the white-male establishment were persuaded that people of color and women should be granted access to all of the schools and professions. Thus, they worked within the system to help those outside gain access to economic and political power in the United States.

Sometimes those who are excluded from a tradition start their own. Thus, women and minorities who were not welcomed into the existing power
structures started their own businesses, social clubs and networking opportunities to find opportunities to excel. These groups also made the argument that as they struggled to survive in a hostile environment, they should be given certain considerations to be able to get contracts and other opportunities. Their lack of inclusion gave rise to affirmative action and minority set-aside programs which have always been resisted and are now coming under increasing scrutiny.

Another impetus for changing tradition is slow death or irrelevance. As young people refuse to participate in a group or tradition, those who are part of that tradition find that they must change or become increasingly irrelevant. For example, we currently see a trend where young men as well as young women are changing professional traditions as they demand that their work include flexibility to be part of their children’s lives. The story is told of a partner in a New York law firm who was arguing against making a young attorney a partner. Even though the requirements of partnership had been met, the partner asserted that the young man wasn’t “committed” enough. The partner continued by saying “I gave this firm three marriages. I’m not sure that he will do the same.” Others in the room gently asked whether the criteria for partnership should include a willingness to get a divorce.

CONCLUSION

Learning how to make ethical decisions in a contingent world requires a slight but very significant shift of perspective and a willingness to engage in the task of shaping ourselves and our community. The recursive design of the decision making templates allows each participant to engage in the process of reflective action, learning to identify the best knowledge we have about both the nature of the world and its current state. We have an occasion to look at our personal beliefs as well as the beliefs and values of the community in which we work. We have the opportunity to examine the world of organizational ethics to see what works and doesn’t work, what fits
and doesn’t fit. We also look at a variety of problems using different ethical lenses and asking different questions, to see how the vantage point changes with a new focus. Then, we get to act again and see what happens.

Because we make these decisions in relationship with others, we also learn to negotiate among competing values and visions. As we practice, we not only learn to attend to the formation of our belief system, but also the belief systems of others and the community as a whole. With practice we also learn to make better decisions and more effectively communicate our values to others. As we dance the minuet of life together, the community’s culture – its underlying beliefs and assumptions -- change as well, for good or ill.

The chapter began with a quote from James Burke who asserts that “when what we know changes, the world changes and with it everything.” If the physicists who study rocks and light are right that what they know is shaped by the questions, experience, and context of the observer, then our world must change. The implications for those who study ethics is profound: given our understanding of the contingency of knowledge, the focus of ethics must shift. Rather than searching for the external rules which will guide us in our actions, we must turn to the study of the individual ethical agent. How can we each – individually and as groups – better decide the best course of action given our contingent world which is subject to uncertainty. The process of knowing becomes as important – if not more important – than what is known. Given that each of us is shaped by what we notice, how we name that event and then how we respond, learning to become skilled knowers will help us become mature, ethical persons in community.

Continuing the Conversation

1. Find an article in your local paper or a news magazine which deals with a current ethical situation. Read the article using the four steps of Lonergan. As you pay attention, what assertions are made by the author? What information is missing? What viewpoints are not present. Then be intelligent. How trustworthy
is the data? How does what the article asserts fit with your own knowledge and experience. Next, be reasonable. How do these assertions fit with your value systems? What are the implications of the options which are presented? Then, if you had to make a responsible decision, what would it be and why? Compare notes with colleagues to find similarities and differences.

2. Find a neutral event in your life – something as simple as a flat tire on the freeway. See how many meanings you can give the event: how can you change the context to make the event good, bad, the best thing that happened that day, an absolute tragedy?

3. Interview someone you respect and ask them how they formed their beliefs about business ethics. How did they use the four building blocks of a belief system to shape their ideas about ethics? What values are important? What experiences have they had? What authorities are important to them in deciding what is right and wrong?

4. Write a brief description of your own beliefs about business ethics. Again, use the four building blocks. Particularly attend to how your family and birth community have shaped your ethical belief system.

Notes:

2. The central insight for the organization of the four framework model comes from Joseph A. Petrick and John F. Quinn who wrote Management Ethics: Integrity at Work and developed a method for determining which of the primary frames one uses in management settings. A significant difference between their model and mine is that I place the justice theories of John Rawls and others opposite of Immanuel Kant and other deontologists. Petrick and Quinn posit a “systems development ethics,” which includes contemporary system theorists, 45-55. I believe that Rawls fits within that general construct. The other difference is that I renamed the ends of the continua. In particular, I see “control” and “flexibility” relating to economic systems. I believe that the essential conversation for ethics is considering and balancing the competing claims of the individual and the community.


4. For many years the United States Army had the slogan “Be All You Can Be” which aptly describes the plea of developmental psychologists, theologians and philosophers who all enjoin us to become responsible, fully self-actualized” adults.

5. See Keller, From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self, and Shotter, Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language.

7. Daly and Cobb, For The Common Good.
10. See “Christian Character, Biblical Community, and Human Values” by Lisa Sowle Cahill in Character and Scripture, William P. Brown, ed., who distinguishes between ethical acts and moral character. The question becomes whether the ethical person is one who in fact does ethical acts or the ethical person is the one whose character has been formed to be predisposed to act ethically, even if from time to time one may miss the mark and act unethically.
15. This model was developed from the work of Jacques Maritain, a Christian existentialist philosopher. See Maritain, Existence and the Existent: An Essay on Christian Existentialism.
17. Goleman, Emotional Intelligence.
18. Golub, The Limits of Medicine, 90.
20. Goleman, Emotional Intelligence, xii.
22. Ridley, 92.
23. Ridley, 96.
24. “Reason” begins in the lower left corner because it is the question for “individual-reflection.” The questions spiral around the center counter-clockwise which tends to parallel our own quest for self-knowledge. The placement corresponds to Ken Wilbur’s model of consciousness which will be explored Chapter 5.
25. The United States has a bias toward individualism, so everything we do tends to be evaluated against the question of whether or not we should limit the rights of individuals. Other cultures, particularly Asian cultures, have a bias toward the community. Thus, when they balance ethical considerations, they tend to consider whether they should encroach upon the prerogatives of the community. This difference leads to much misunderstanding in international business transactions.
26. Those who believe in one God, the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, are part of what is called Theistic traditions. Those who believe in the Sacred but not one God, such as the Buddhist, Hindu and Wiccan traditions, are part of what is called non-theistic traditions. Those who believe in human reason and spirit to shape our existence together are part of what is called the humanistic tradition (or pejoratively secular humanism).