

Longing for a Moral Society

-Speech to SCC's NM Ethics in Business Awards Dinner, 2010

Thank you for joining us for the Samaritan Counseling Center's New Mexico Ethics in Business Awards. I'm Paul, and I'll be your speaker this evening. Now I'm not an out of state expert, but I am CEO of a growing social-profit business, and I did stay in a Holiday Inn Express last night. Still, wisdom can come from the most unlikely sources, as my daughter, a school teacher in St. Louis, keeps reminding me when she sends me little e-mail morsels. If you don't have a daughter who is a teacher, you have not yet discovered how much wisdom there really is out there. Here are some small pieces she has shared with me called "Great Truths about Life that Little Children have Learned."

Puppies still have bad breath even after eating a tic tac.

When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair.

Don't wear polka-dot underwear under white shorts.

You can't trust dogs to watch your food.

You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk.

Well, maybe I can add a little wisdom to our lives this evening.

Most of Samaritan's work is carried on behind the closed doors of twenty-one therapists who bring healing and hope to the troubled lives of several hundred children, adults, and families each week. It's satisfying work, but confidentiality is essential, so we don't get to talk about it very much. This Awards program, then, is our way of trying to bring greater health to the larger community in which our patients live. Samaritan believes, quite simply, that if society upholds high ethical standards, people's lives will be better. And certainly the money raised in tonight's event will help us provide care for several hundred poor and uninsured people who otherwise would not be able to receive needed help. So thanks for joining us at the dinner table this evening.

Good stuff often happens around the meal table—Seder meals and Holy Communion, Thanksgiving feasts and rowdy family suppers. In the best of these, like our table on the patio last night with our good friends Neil and Sandy, stories are told, manners are taught, laughter lifts our spirits, and high ideals are offered for the days ahead. If I had magic powers to change one thing about the way families live these days, I would insist that families sit down together at least 4 nights a week, turn off the TV, and enjoy a meal together. There is actually some solid research showing that when families do this, children do better in school and get in trouble less often, and everyone's health is improved. So besides those bits of wisdom I offered earlier, there's your counseling tip for the evening.

A couple of mornings each week I sit around a different table drinking coffee with Dennis and Sam and Sharon at the gym after our workout. Friends like to tease us about exercising our elbows as we lift coffee cups to our mouths, but we actually do work out beforehand. We also do something else very important: we share ideas. Oh, we gossip a little bit, and rate the Rotary programs from the day before, and pretend to solve the world's problems. But we talk seriously about big ideas too. Let me tell you why this is so important: The four of us do not see eye to eye on politics or religion. Sure, sometimes we just exercise the ancient family Thanksgiving rules of declaring certain subjects off limits. But I think all four of us believe that if friends who hold conflicting views can't figure out how to still be friends, and even to exchange differing opinions with each other sometimes, our nation is in bigger trouble than we may think.

One idea we have toyed with for several years now grows out of our concern about the awful meanness of today's political landscape. So last week we talked again about launching an organization to foster more respectful and truthful conversation about issues. Since I'm retiring as CEO of the Samaritan Counseling Center, maybe this is my next project—to create the Association for Civil Society. Alexis de Tocqueville would not be surprised at this idea. When he visited the U.S. in the 19th century he was impressed with the way Americans were always forming associations—joining together to solve problems. It's how we Americans made this country great. We talk amongst ourselves, and we help each other out.

So why am I telling you this on this night when we celebrate ethical business leaders? Here's why: Just as Samaritan believes that an ethical society is more likely to foster good mental health, I would suggest that ethical business is nurtured in a moral society. And the first step toward a moral society begins, I believe, with civility. Yale law professor Stephen Carter wrote an important book titled simply, Civility, in which he argues that our great freedom has been terribly abused by those who have used that freedom for selfish behavior that undermines society. Professor Carter's antidote for this tragic situation is a simple ethical goal: we must use our gift of freedom for the common good. And then he goes on to argue that this common good is best achieved by reclaiming civility in our political and business and community dealings with one another.

Civility means more than being polite. At a more basic level, civility is a fundamental attitude of appreciation for others which affirms that my well being is tied to your well being. Creating a civil society is often as simple as loving your neighbor as yourself and doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. So this moral society, sustained by moral

capitalism that values the triple bottom line of people, planet, and profit, begins, I think, with civility.

Sadly, we continue to witness troubling examples of incivility:

- A city councilor sends racist jokes through his municipal e-mail account.
- A local ponzi scheme bilks hundreds of people out of millions of dollars.
- Misleading and patently false reports about healthcare reform are spread by political and civic leaders.
- Talk radio pollutes the airwaves with hateful, uninformed, and inflammatory rhetoric aimed at demonizing our neighbors to build ratings.

Such incidents cause us all to wonder whether our great country that was founded to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity, is in fact coming apart at the seams.

But there's good news to counter this gloomy picture. Whenever our nation encounters a problem, American entrepreneurial spirit looks for a solution. Lately, for example, I've been interested to see several versions of a Civility Covenant going around. The first one, I believe, was put out by an interfaith group of New Orleans religious leaders, and it called upon people to engage in civil discourse. Here's their six-point pledge:

1. *We will disagree without being disagreeable.*
2. *We will affirm the right of the other to differ, as we affirm ours.*
3. *We will debate the issues, not debase the individual who differs from us.*
4. *We will avoid listening to, encouraging, or endorsing those in public and in private life who demean the dignity of others by name-calling and labeling.*
5. *We will not acknowledge or forward electronic messages or videos designed to demonize or humiliate persons or groups.*
6. *We will be examples of civility to those who come into contact with us.*

(East Jefferson Interfaith Clergy Association, Faith Statement on Civility in Public Discourse)

I like the vision this pledge offers for a moral society, and I intend to try to follow the six principles. More important, I like the idea of a group of community leaders coming together to articulate some ethical principles and practices to guide the building of a stronger community for our common good.

Commitment to high ideals can happen in lots of different arenas of life. Take philanthropy, for instance. When I moved to Albuquerque 18 years ago I recall being told that

this is a poor city and you can't raise money here. But did you know that Albuquerque for several years now has led the nation in major donors and percent of growth in giving to United Way? The generosity of this community is overwhelming. I think that shift has come largely through the leadership of United Way whose leaders have helped us change the culture to one that believes in our abundant capacity to give generously.

So here's our challenge. What would it be like if our state's business and community leaders made a commitment, beginning tonight, to make New Mexico a national leader in business ethics? If we can be #1 in the country in generous giving, why not be #1 in ethical business practice? We actually have some amazing assets to achieve this goal. Over the past 11 years, for example, this Awards program has identified more than 50 extraordinary business, nonprofit, and individual role models who demonstrate exemplary standards of ethical business behavior. We also have the UNM Anderson School of Management which is rated among the top 20 business schools in the nation for its teaching of business ethics.

To become #1 in ethics, we must first define what we mean by a moral society. Most of us learned our core values from our families, at church or synagogue, in scouts and on the athletic field. We learned the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments and maybe the Boy Scout law: **A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.** That stuff sticks with you, and it keeps nagging at you, like the mother who follows us around looking over our shoulder even after she's gone (Of course, she's never really gone, is she? So she raises an eyebrow in our minds when we face an ethical dilemma at work or in the community.)

We all have a list of core values that guide our lives, and the priority of each of those values moves up and down the list depending on what's going on in the world. Let me tell you the four core values that are priorities for me these days as a nonprofit business leader, and that I think are critically important to re-building a moral society and achieving the common good:

1. Civility – Perhaps enough said about this already, but the bottom line is this: how can we possibly work together, in business or as a nation, to build a moral society if we cannot for goodness sake be civil toward one another?
2. Honesty – The gaping wound these days is lack of trust. And why wouldn't that be true, considering the deceptive practices and outright dishonesty that led to our devastating economic crisis? Promises of vastly unrealistic returns on investment; the sale of derivatives that conceal or misrepresent the assets from which they were derived; the indiscriminate peddling of what came to be called "liar's loans"—practices like these, deploying what Warren Buffett has called "financial instruments of mass destruction,"

have tainted the marketplace and damaged us all. The Enrons and Bernie Madoffs have extracted a terrible cost in social capital, and as Francis Fukuyama has argued eloquently in his book, Trust: *significantly diminished trust destroys economic progress*.

3. Justice – Justice does not mean everyone gets equal stuff. Our nation is committed to equality of opportunity for all. But when the gap between rich and poor keeps widening, and the highest earning 300,000 Americans in 2005 earned as much as the bottom 150 million, and when that top group, per person, were paid 440 times as much as the average person in the bottom half earned (NY Times, March 29, 2007), one questions to what extent ours remains a just society. As CEO of a nonprofit counseling agency, my concern for justice gets triggered by the continuing deterioration of mental health services. I lost count of the mental health programs in this community that were closing for lack of funding when the number approached twenty. I do understand the deep concerns that have been expressed in reasonable fashion about health care reform. But when I see the growing waiting list of people who need Samaritan’s care because there are so few alternatives, my heart breaks. And when I read books like T.R. Reid’s compelling, The Healing of America, which compares our nation’s poor results with most of the rest of the world in providing health care for its people, I yearn for greater justice in the business of providing health care to our neighbors.

4. Courage – To embrace the values of civility, honesty, and justice, can be, in these touchy times, an incredibly brave thing to do. To go against the grain of the crude and dishonest is not without consequences. Righteous whistleblowers are sometimes summarily fired. Those who demand their friends be more civil may find themselves friendless. Advocates for unpopular justice can find themselves hounded out of office or out of town. Doing business ethically can be, quite simply, heroic patriotism.

So those are my priority values these days. But the real issue is: what are we going to do about it? I’m afraid that a new season of Undercover Boss will not change the culture for the better. Let me suggest, though, four simple actions each of us can take to begin to build the moral society for which we long:

1. Write your version of the civility covenant. You don’t have to follow the one from New Orleans I read earlier. Write your own—and live by it.
2. Nominate someone for next year’s EIB awards. Nomination instructions are on your table. Help us identify and honor exemplary business and individual leaders and expand the role models.

3. Create your own list of core values for your family or business. Yours don't have to be the same as mine, and you can have whatever number you want. Then make an action plan to live by them.
4. Reclaim the family's role in teaching children—which brings us back to having family dinners four nights a week. I believe all the corporate codes of ethics posted on all the break room walls will not get us where we want to be. They help, and we ought to do those things. But character is built early in life; a moral society is built from the ground up. It takes time and attention and love from parents and teachers and preachers and rabbis and coaches who are willing to give children what they really need, not just what pop culture urges them to want.

Culture comes and goes, but core values are eternal. I was reminded of this fact the first time LaDonna and I visited Rome. The Colisseum, the Sistine Chapel, the Forum—the sights are deeply moving, and the photo on my computer desktop of us throwing coins into the Trevi Fountain reminds me daily of our promise to return. The building that fascinated me most was the Pantheon. Built in 126 AD to honor the many Roman gods, it has been a church since the 7th century while remaining a monument to Rome's rich history. The building itself is round with a massive dome topped by an oculus, a hole in the middle, and the entrance is graced by huge granite Corinthian columns that dwarf visitors as they enter. The beauty of the building makes it a perfect resting place for the Renaissance artist Raphael, on whose tombstone are inscribed the words: "Here lies Raffaello who, when alive, Nature was afraid to be won by him, and when he died, she wanted to die herself."

Here's what got me, though. Our guide on that visit told us that those magnificent granite columns were actually quarried and carved in Egypt and then transported across the Mediterranean to Rome because by that time Romans didn't know how to do that kind of work any more. Rome's decline was beginning.

America, too, is a magnificent construction with rich history. It is upheld by sturdy and exquisitely crafted columns named civility and honesty, justice and courage, freedom and industry. My deep fear is that the time may come when we don't do that kind of work any more, and this great land becomes a museum rather than the thriving land of opportunity it still is. We, you and I, leaders of commerce and community, must continue to teach our children how to carve those pillars of virtue, so that the common good may be upheld in glorious splendor.

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