LETTER *from the* PRESIDENT

January 2000

Dear Friends:

Ethics is not a luxury or an option. It is essential to our survival. To support that point, let me give you three assertions, two definitions, and one conclusion.

Here is the first assertion: We will not survive the 21st century with the ethics of the 20th century.

Why do I say that? Well, a few years ago, in 1989, I discovered myself one Monday morning in March standing a few hundred yards from the wall of Reactor Number Four at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union. Looking back later, and checking the clips to see what else had been written on that subject, I discovered that I was probably the first western journalist ever to get that close to Chernobyl. I was taken there in the company of two members of an emergency response team who had come in right after the accident on April 26, 1986, to help clean up the mess. The fallout from that disaster was detected in every country in the world capable of sensing radioactivity in the atmosphere. The explosion and its aftermath killed thousands of Soviets.

Why did it happen? That night in 1986 there were two electrical engineers–not *nuclear* but *electrical* engineers–in charge of the control room. Perhaps the most charitable way to put it is that they were "fiddling around" with the reactors. They wanted to see what would happen as they performed an unauthorized experiment. According to Soviet accounts, they were trying to see how long the turbine would freewheel if they took the power off it. In order to take the power off, they had to shut down the reactor. To do that, they manually overrode six separate computer-driven alarm systems. Each system would come up and say, "Stop! Don't do this! Terribly dangerous!" But instead of shutting off the experiment, they shut off the alarms. When my friends got in there, they discovered there were valves padlocked in the open position so that they would not automatically shut down and turn off this experiment. That is how deliberate this whole thing was.

Now, the question this raises for me is, What was going on in the minds of those electrical engineers as they did that? Obviously, these were bright people. Jobs at Chernobyl are plum jobs, and they go to the equivalent of the Russian 4.0 grade-point average, the 800 on the SATs, the Phi Beta Kappas of the Soviet Union. These two knew what they were doing: If knowledge alone were all that mattered, they would have been doing fine.

So what went wrong? It seems to me that before they could have overridden a single computer alarm system, there must have been an *ethical* override. Somewhere the conscience had to shut down before the alarm systems could be turned off. They could not have been unaware of the possible consequences of what they were doing. What blew up Chernobyl was not a lack of *knowledge.* It was a lack of ethics.

That's a crucial point for the 21st century. There is no machine you could have put those engineers in front of in the 19th century and said, "Do the most amoral thing you can to this machine," that would have produced the damage of Chernobyl. Or, to change examples, what

could you have found in the 19th century that you could have loaded into the biggest ship available, put a drunken captain in charge, and run it aground in Prince William Sound in Alaska to do the damage the Exxon *Valdez* did? Or where in the 19th century could you find a private financial system as large as the American savings and loan banks, put it into the hands of a Charles Keating, and had it produce the kind of widespread damage of the multibillion-dollar S&L crisis?

The point here is that the very scale of our systems, the scale of our technology itself, is leveraging our ethics in ways we never saw in the past. And that is a new phenomenon. Every managerial system, however large or small, rises in its structure to the apex of one or two decision-makers. What is going on in the conscience of those individuals directly determines the use of that system. So, however large and powerful the technologies, what governs them is the ethics of those in charge.

In the 21st century, Chernobyl and the Exxon Valdez and the S&L's will be small potatoes. Imagine the scale of our future technologies. Then imagine the ethical sophistication needed to manage them. That is why it seems to me we will not survive the 21st century with the ethics of the 20th century. Something significant has to change.

That brings me to my second assertion, which is that we are not in good shape to promote such change. What's the reading on the nation's ethical barometer? Well, there are some good signs. According to Dartmouth College researcher Deni Elliott, an examination of the *New York Times* index from 1969 to 1989 shows that there has been a 400 percent increase in the number of stories indexed under the word "ethics" in that 20-year period. And when the Gallup polls over the last decade have asked how important it is that people have "a strict moral code," they found 47 percent of the public saying it was very important in 1981–and 60 percent in 1989. In other words, there is increasing interest in the question of ethics, and increasing evidence of wanting stronger ethics.

But while we're interested in ethics, there is a serious concern about whether we're doing anything about it. That's especially evident as you look at our educational institutions. A survey a couple of years ago by the Pinnacle Group in Minnesota found that 59 percent of the high-school students surveyed would willingly face six months probation in order to do an illegal deal worth $10 million. Sixty-seven percent of them said, "Yes, I plan to inflate my expense account when I get out in the business world." Fifty percent would pad insurance claims. Sixty-six percent said they would lie to achieve a business objective. Another survey, done for the Girl Scouts by the Louis Harris organization, found that when you asked high-schoolers, "Would you cheat to pass an important exam?," two-thirds of them said yes. And in a 1992 poll sponsored by Shearson-Lehman, 37 percent of 18 to 29 year olds named "corruption" and 39 percent named "deceit" as important ways to get ahead.

Or look at a survey of almost 16,000 students at 31 top universities by Professor Donald McCabe of Rutgers University: 76 percent of those planning careers in business admitted to having cheated at least once on a test. Nineteen percent admitted to having cheated four or

more times. In addition, 68 percent of future doctors, 63 percent of future lawyers, and 57 percent of future educators admitted to having cheated at least once.

You may think we are only talking about students. We're not. We are talking about America's middle managers in the year 2020–and about the CEOs, the senators and representatives, the heads of major nonprofits in the year 2030. We are talking about the people who are going to be piloting your airplanes while you sit back wondering, "Does this guy really know how to fly, or did he just fake his way through his exams?" We are talking about the people who are going to be managing *your* pension funds.

Why do our students feel this way? There's some insight hidden away in another question-and-answer in the Girl Scouts Survey. The students were asked, "What do you think is the most believable authority in matters of the truth? What do you term 'the truth'? What is 'the truth'? How do you know 'the truth'?" Only a handful said "the media" or "science." A few more said "my parents" or "my religion." Most of them said, in effect, "Me. There is no authority for truth beyond myself. If I don't think that something is true, there is no other place I can turn to find out what truth really is." It's a sad commentary, I think, on the state of the humanities and the state of education in general–a sad misunderstanding of the fact that education has to do with the life of the mind, the best that is known and thought in the world, and the capacity to learn from others and from history.

Is the fault with the kids? I don't think so. There was a story reported in one of the New York newspapers a while ago about a ten-year-old child who found on the street a wallet full of money, full of credit cards, and full of identification. He reportedly took the wallet to school, where he could find no one–no teacher, no administrator–willing to tell him what was the right thing to do with that wallet. Essentially they all said, "Gee, I can't impose my values on you, kid. I mean, if I *told* you what to do, that would not be right. You have to sort it out for yourself–otherwise it's my ethics and not yours. Besides, you're poor and this guy is obviously rich. Your mother might be mad I told you to send the wallet back. No, you figure it out for yourself."

I raised this example at the dinner table at a small liberal arts college in California, telling the story and asking the students what they thought. All of them, to a person, said, "Those teachers and those administrators were absolutely right. There was no way you should impose your values on that kid."

What's going on? Why do they feel this way? Why has our educational system delivered us into a situation where even the most fundamental concepts of honesty, responsibility, and respect for others are not being taught?

That question prompts my third assertion, which is simply this: The difficulty we are up against is what the philosophers describe as *ethical relativism.* It is the notion that there are no absolutes, no common values, no core set of moral ideas out there that can be shared and understood. It is the notion that all ethics is situational, negotiable, fluid, intensely personal.

Let me give you an example of where it surfaces: a school committee meeting. Let's say the board members get thinking about the big issues facing the world in the next century and how to shape an education system so the kids are best prepared. Pretty quickly someone realizes that we've been teaching kids mostly about the facts–of the environment, or of math, or of history. And they realize that that's good, but it's not enough–that we will not survive the next century without a better ethical sense. So someone proposes that we teach character and ethics. And no sooner is that said than somebody else in the back of the room stands up and says, "But whose ethics will you teach?" It's a question intended to squelch further discussion. What is behind it is this notion that there is no ethical commonalty–and that, if you dare to teach ethics, you are imposing your values on my kid, and I won't have it!

So let's examine this issue of ethical relativism further. That, after all, is the subtext of many of the arguments you will hear when you raise the question of ethics these days. Start talking about ethics, in fact, and oddly enough up pops the name of somebody who would be horrified to see himself used in this way: Albert Einstein. "See," people are fond of saying, "Einstein proved that everything is relative. There are no absolutes out there in the physical world. So how do you expect there to be absolutes in the moral realm? This is the 20th century: We no longer believe in absolutes and constants."

Well, the next time you run into your friendly neighborhood physicist, ask her what would happen if when she went into her laboratory tomorrow she said, "Okay, everything is relative. Today I think we will set the speed of light at sort of at . . . well, about here! And we'll say Planck's Constant is this, and Avogadro's number is that, and the acceleration due to gravity is right about here for today." Ask her how successful she's going to be in physics if she genuinely believes that Einstein was saying that all things are relative and that there are no constants.

Don't fall for that argument. There are constants in the physical realm. But are there any constants in the moral realm? A friend of mine who teaches at Stanford, when his students raise the issue of ethical relativism, says, "Okay, I am going to parachute you into some country, and you do not know where it is. When you get out of your parachute, walk up to the first person you see, take away what that person has, and run away with it. And see what happens." With the possible exception, he says, that you have landed in front of a Buddhist monk and taken away his begging bowl and he says, "Ah, that's karma!," you will have run squarely into property laws. We summarize them in the Ten Commandments as, "Thou shalt not steal." But you will find them in any culture into which you drop.

It would appear, then, that there is at least one universal moral element out there: Culture by culture, people by people, there is profound agreement that stealing is wrong. That constitutes, it seems, at least one solid piece of ethical common ground. Yet much of the so-called "ethics" taught in the last 30 years was done in ignorance of this apparent fact. It was done under a regime described by educators as "values neutral education." The teacher, in this regime, is supposed to have no particular point of view–to be a sort of moral blob who leads the students into "clarifying" their own values without in any way suggesting that there are sets of values that the teacher himself or herself holds and operates under or that are widely accepted as standards.

The fact that we have produced an educational system in which our teachers have regularly been told that it is not correct for them to take a stand on some of those fundamental moral principles suggests the depth of the problem we are facing. Gary Edwards of the Ethics Resource Center in Washington has a good phrase for it. "With that kind of ethics teaching and a gun," he says, "you can rob the 7-Eleven."

What's needed, then, is a recognition that there is a core set of values that can be and must be taught. What are they? We've found one–the idea of not stealing. Are there others? Well, what about the Golden Rule? Who said, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them, for this is the law and the prophets"? That was Jesus. But who said, "That which you hold as detestable, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole law: the rest is but commentary"? That's how the Talmud puts it. Islam says it this way: "None of you is a believer if he does not desire for his brother that which he desires for himself." Or, as Confucius said, "Here certainly is the golden maxim: Do not do to others that which we do not want them to do to us." And so it goes, down through Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and the rest of the world's great religions. Common ethical ground? I would say so! Teachable? Certainly!

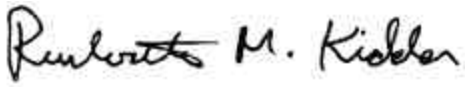
Now, I promised you two useful definitions of "ethics," so here they are. The first one resides in a phrase we used as the subtitle for the recently published report on ethics prepared by Independent Sector. It is a phrase from Lord Moulton, a British jurist in the 19th century, who described ethics simply as "obedience to the unenforceable." Obedience to the *enforceable*? That, he said, was merely law–an important part, but only a small part, of the reason we behave as we do. Obedience to the *enforceable* is what prevents us from driving 65 miles an hour in a school zone: You get caught. Obedience to the *un*enforceable, however, is what keeps you from going into a supermarket and, just as a little old lady is about to put her hand on the last shopping cart, elbowing her away, seizing the cart, and running off down the aisle with it. There is no law that says, "Thou shalt not steal shopping carts from little old ladies." You don't do it because people don't do those things–because of the very real but ultimately unenforceable canons of society.

This concept of ethics as obedience to the unenforceable helps explain some of the things we see going on around us in the regulatory and legislative climate today. We clearly will be regulated one way or another–that is the nature of the human experience. Our choice is only whether to be self-regulated or to be regulated by externalities. When I was growing up, we didn't throw litter out of the car window because "people don't do those things." Now you don't throw litter out of the car window because there is a $500 fine. Why? Because it was discovered that people did do those things. As the ethics of self-regulation dropped away, in other words, the law rushed in to fill the void. And that will ever be the case. If you ask yourself why we are such a litigious society, regulated by vast bodies of law at every turn, is it not largely because our ethics has dropped away and the law has swept in to replace it? What used to be obedience to the *un*enforceable has become obedience to the *enforceable.* What used to be regulation by our own good habits has become regulation by the will of the legislators.

The second definition I want to share with you grows out of our concern over dictionary definitions of the word *ethics.* They usually talk about ethics in relation to the difference between right and wrong. Frankly, for most of us, most of the time, ethics is the battle of right versus *right.* Few people, facing an ethical dilemma, say to themselves, "Here, on one hand, is the great, the good, the wonderful, and the pure and, on the other hand, the awful, the evil, the miserable, and the terrible–and here I stand equally torn between them." We don't do that. Once we define one side as evil, we've pretty much dismissed it. It really doesn't cross our minds, for example, that the way to resolve a problem we have with the chairman of our board is either to go talk to him or to go poison his chowder.

Now, I also promised you a conclusion, so here it is. After all we've talked about, it may not surprise you to learn that there really is no such thing as "nonprofit ethics." Neither is there any such thing as "medical ethics," or "business ethics," or "legal ethics," or "journalism ethics." There is only ethics. It applies to all kinds of ways, and it applies across the board. Don't be under any illusion that somehow one can be unethical in personal financial matters but ethical as the manager of a nonprofit. Don't be under any illusion that a corporate executive can be a cad in family matters but a paragon of virtue at work. Don't be under any illusion that an elected official can say, "Oh, that is my private life. You should not take that into account. Judge me as a politician." The public no longer credits that line of reasoning–as our politicians keep finding out. There is no dividing up ethics into compartments: There's only ethics.

Sincerely,



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This essay is based on a keynote speech presented to the Human Services Council of Northeast Florida, an organization of nonprofit entities.