

July 2003

Dear Friends:

As I write this letter, the Institute has just completed its thirteenth year. I want to talk to you about the next thirteen. But first, some history.

We began in a tiny fourth-floor, walk-up office on Elm Street in Camden. We had one-and-a-half employees, funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and a private donor. And like most entrepreneurial nonprofits, we began with more passion than planning. But we knew two things: There was a growing public yearning for ethical clarity, and there were frameworks of thought that could help resolve ethical dilemmas. How to connect the two—how to build a language of public discourse that frames tough issues in moral terms without turning off listeners—was still to be sorted out.

But the sorting was essential. In 1990, ethics was just lifting its head above the mist of moral relativism. For nearly three decades, the widespread notion that ethics was situational, personal, and fungible had made it all but impossible to discuss character and values in classrooms, corporations, or government entities. It was a problem that I'd seen in my earlier work as a journalist. Again and again, in my conversations with citizens' groups here and overseas, people would raise the big global issues: environmental collapse, economic disparities, belligerent militarism, population overruns, racial tensions, gender biases, religious hatreds, and the rest. Again and again, as groups groped for solutions, they'd fasten on education as the answer—not just an education of the mind that builds literacy and numeracy, but an education of the heart that builds character, goodness, civility, and values.

And then, as surely as night follows day, someone would pop up and, with the slightly sneering tone of the ultimate put-down, ask the predictable question. "Well, that all sounds very nice," they'd say. "But *whose* values will you teach?" With that one phrase, the conversation would collapse onto the rubble of moral relativism. "Gosh, that's right!" the group would respond. "Everyone's values are different. How can we possibly teach values without imposing our views on others? Better not even try." And there, in that conceptual dumpster, the conversation sat for some thirty years.

Our first task back in 1990 was to answer a single overarching question: Is there a core of shared, moral values? Is there some undergirding framework so common to humanity that you don't have to *impose* it, but instead can *find* it? Thirteen years later, you know the answer: There is indeed. The Institute's research has made it apparent that, wherever you go in the world and ask, What are the most important moral values for you and your future? you're apt to hear the same five answers: compassion, fairness, honesty, respect, and responsibility.

As members of the Institute, you also know that the hallmark of our work is the recognition that the toughest ethical questions arise when two of these core values come into conflict. Sure, we need to address issues of right versus wrong. People *will* slide into dishonesty, disrespect, irresponsibility, unfairness, or a lack of compassion, and that needs to be addressed. But the most wrenching dilemmas—the ones that spark the sternest mental battles and demand the most moral reasoning—are the right-versus-right ones.

Looking back, it's clear that our work on right-versus-right dilemmas has been effective in proportion as we've used practical, down-to-earth examples. If you've been through one of our Ethical Fitness® Seminars, you know we don't rely on canned case studies. Instead, we ask every participant to bring along a tough, right-versus-right dilemma from his or her own experience. Since those early days on Elm Street, an estimated 18,000 people have gone through our seminars. That means we've heard at least 18,000 down-to-earth, authentic dilemmas, not one of which we could have invented.

Now, as we contemplate the next thirteen years, we're clear on one thing: The secret of our success has been this genuine, pure voice of ethical experience—your experience. More than anything else, the dilemmas we've heard have allowed us to silence the cynics, deflate the relativists, and create a practical language of ethics that is intriguing, profound, and directly relevant to the lives of our listeners. These examples have helped us demystify ethics. They've made it clear that ethics works—that it matters, that it's practical, and that it's not difficult to grasp.

With that as background, let me share with you two fine pieces of news—and ask your help in providing us with even more examples. The first is that the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, having watched us prosper during these years, has given us a \$150,000 grant to let us create a strategic plan for our next decade. That plan, on which we're already hard at work, will build on all we've done since 1990—here at headquarters in Camden, and through our affiliated operations in the United Kingdom and Canada, and now through our newest office in Washington, DC.

One clear theme in our planning will be moral courage. Here again, you've watched that theme grow in our work. It started with my President's Letter in the summer of 2001. It moved on through our commentaries surrounding 9/11, the post-Enron collapse of trust in corporate America, and most recently the war in Iraq. It's been underpinned by our White Paper on moral courage, which we made available on our Web site several years ago, becoming the most-downloaded file we've ever posted.

That leads to the second fine piece of news: I'm just now signing a contract with William Morrow (the original publisher of my earlier book *How Good People Make Tough Choices*, and a division of HarperCollins in New York) to do a book on moral courage. They're so delighted with the idea—and see it as so timely—that I've agreed to have the manuscript to them by January 1.

That's where I need your help. The point that must come through to the reader is that moral courage is not merely a once-in-a-lifetime action that a few great people undertake. It's an ongoing condition in all kinds of lives. In that sense, I see this book as the inevitable sequel to *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. That book was about a framework for deciding to do the right thing. This book is about what happens once the right thing has been decided. Does the decision sit limply on a shelf, neatly tied up in impeccable moral reasoning but incapable of making a difference? Or does it actually get implemented by someone who has the courage to

make it happen, sometimes against immense resistance?

For answers, I'd like to turn to real examples. Just as *Tough Choices* came to life because of your authentic experiences, this next book will sing in exactly the same ways. Your own examples of moral courage, shared with me as candidly as possible, can make an enormous difference in the quality and character of this book. If you're game to help me—and I hope you are—let me say a bit more.

- What is moral courage? Courage itself consists of two elements. As General William T. Sherman put it, courage is “a perfect sensibility of the measure of danger and a mental willingness to endure it.” To know the danger and run away is cowardice. To do something risky with no sense of its danger is foolhardiness. Courage lies in the balance.

Moral courage adds a third element: the matter of principle. Simply put, it's the courage to be moral—to take a stand on matters of integrity, to put conviction into action, to walk the talk that's implied by those five core values. It's the courage to be honest, responsible, respectful, fair, and compassionate.

Moral courage is not simply about risking life and limb in the face of mortal danger—though it may include that outcome. It's about risking reputation, self-confidence, or position because of moral convictions. It's not about whether you have the guts to go bungee jumping. It's about whether you dare confront your boss about his bigotry, your daughter about her disrespect, your nation about its unfairness, your peers about their prejudices.

- What characterizes moral courage? It seems to involve several key attributes: a willingness to risk rejection, to bear personal sacrifice, to exercise tenacity and persistence with no assurance of success, to refuse to compromise on a comfortable way out, and to understand the importance of ethics in a world that often doesn't.

And while moral courage doesn't always win all of the prizes in the game of human life—as many a whistle-blower will tell you—it lets people look themselves in the mirror each morning and know they've done the right thing.

- What kind of personal examples are most helpful? The book most needs stories that illustrate a principle-based action that wasn't easy. While these stories may be similar to the kinds of ethical dilemmas retold in *Tough Choices*—in that they set forth a tension over doing right things—they will be more than stories about right-versus-right ethical issues. They'll be stories not just about tough *choices* but tough *actions*.

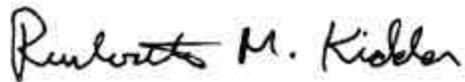
All of us, in ways large and small, find ourselves faced with the need to express moral courage. As you think back over your lives, I suspect you'll find a few occasions where you had to take a stand—and, perhaps, a few when you should have, but didn't. Both kinds of examples are instructive: We sometimes learn more from a candid consideration of failure

than from a clear example of success. Please share these with me. And please be assured that I'll treat these examples anonymously. Unless you give me permission to do otherwise, I'll plan to change names, adjust geography, and even alter background details—telling the reader I'm doing so, of course, and always remaining faithful to the characters, the narrative, and the defining ideas and motives in the tale. That way you can feel free to be explicit.

What other examples are helpful? I'll also be most grateful for contacts you can give me of people I should interview or whose stories I should know. Some will be famous whistle-blowers. Others will be local folks known only in their communities. Some will be able to think deeply and conceptually on the topic of moral courage. Others may have little to say, though their actions speak reams. So don't hesitate to share newspaper clippings, magazine articles, commencement speeches, and even names of individuals.

So ask yourself a simple question: What kind of book would you most like to read on this topic? I suspect it would be rich with the detail of human experience, where characters come to life on the page and share real tales of moral courage in risky situations. You'll want to read about people whose names you recognize and about others who, in the unheralded privacy of their own communities, perform hazardous acts of significant grandeur. Here's your opportunity to make this the kind of book you'd like to read. Thanks so much for helping in this way.

Sincerely,



Rushworth M. Kidder

P.S.: To facilitate feedback, we have enclosed a return envelope for you to use when submitting ideas and stories. To reach us by mail or fax, see the contact information on this letterhead. To reach me by email, please use rush.kidder@globalethics.org.