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From: Steven Reece <reeces@andrews.edu>
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Improving moral practice: a balancing act
by [Steven Reece](#) - Tuesday, October 16, 2012, 03:55 PM

In listening to the lecture and reading the material, I have come to understand the complexity of relationships within my life. Previously, I realized that tension indeed exists between me, what I wish to do and those around me. However, I have never considered that my relationship with my work and others around me might be categorized, characterized and understood more effectively. Dr. Covrig's tables I found to be very helpful especially as they related to individuals, organizations and social spheres/systems.

In reading the article, I encountered the concept of the "iron law of the common good," which simply states that individuals must submit their needs to what is best for the common good of all. It seems to me that this principle is somewhat inflexible in light of the need for us to be flexible in applying the principles doing good, while caring for society or social needs (what is best for all). An iron law is rigid, but as professional leaders we must have integrity in our dealings with other people by doing what is right while balancing the need of the individual with the demands for what is best for all.

I believe that this is not an easy task and difficult to realize. I remember covering a story about the construction of a new dam in east Texas which would cover thousands acres of farmland with water. The land had been in many families' possession and used to grow crops for more than 150 years. As the day approached for the placing the dam in operation, the paper did a few stories about what kind of impact the closing of the locks and the filling of the lake with water would have on people. One farmer, the reporter and I interviewed, said, "It's the _____ (insert colorful word here). It just ain't right to take farmland away from people and give it over to a city for water. Even if Dallas needs the water, it ain't the right thing to do."

This story illustrates well I believe the point of the tension that we deal with professionally in our various fields of leadership. How do we balance what is best for all versus individual needs? Our how do we balance the demands we face in our professions while dealing with family, employers and society? I think that we should consider what Dr. Covrig suggested and find a way as moral agents to balance the tension that exists ethically in the various aspects of what we do in the context of our relationships with others.

For me two things emerged from the lecture and the reading that I personally think have helped and will continue to help me in leading a non-profit organization:

1. Balance doing good with autonomy

Paternalism is caustic and it places people in a dependent relationship. It also makes me essential in the equation. If I am doing good in order to have some sort of status or gain some sort of influence over someone else, then I am not really doing good and helping the situation. In reality I am doing harm.

I have learned by experience that partnership is better than paternalism. True partnership is sharing resources to do good together, which creates buy in and ownership for all involved. This approach makes me an equal among equals and if done properly, I believe, it becomes catalytic engaging more people in doing good.

2. Balance doing good with justice

All of us want to do good things, but we cannot do it without resources. The lecture ended rather abruptly following this point; nevertheless I considered its implications.

I understand that sometimes in doing the right thing we must weigh the cost. Consequently, I must balance doing good (beneficence) to others, without having the resources to do what is right. I cannot act before I have what I need to do what I would like to do.

In my work in leading the non-profit, I have come to realize even more so now, that I do not have the resources to do what we do. It costs a great deal of money to care for and restore Jewish cemeteries. Our work is not a popular concern that will garner public opinion. I do not have an easy sell. This reality has led me to adopt a rather humble status. I am sincere and humble in my approach others about supporting our work.

I guess what I am saying is that I place myself and what we do in a dependent relationship with our clients, those whom we serve. We are literally at the mercy of others in order to raise funds. I believe that this is a reversal of paternalism. We control nothing and depend on others to realize our work. This reality creates a great deal of tension in our work because I have given my word that we will do what we say that we will do. Despite this fact we are acting as moral agents and are being recognized as such by the Jewish community, which is beginning to offer its financial support.

I think that by doing good and by not being paternalistic in our approach, we have been proven faithful servants with integrity.

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