

Leader's Message May 2009

Mother Said, "Be Good"

By Richard L. Kiniry

When I was young, and I assume when you were young, children were often told to be good. Then with the arrival of puberty being moral became the issue. In our twenties we started arguing ethical issues. Ethics seems to be an intellectual activity for adults. Since they have accomplished the process of creating a personality with at least a degree of character, adults can discuss and justify varied styles of behavior.

The word ethical in the name of our Society often creates misunderstandings. Are we claiming to be more ethical than others? Are we claiming to be smarter than others, or are we comparable to Jains in India, so concerned with our ethical beliefs that we take them to the extreme?

When faced with those misunderstandings, I usually try to explain that our use of the word ethical refers to our understanding of what human life is all about. To be a conscious human being is to be confronted with choices that affect the lives of those around us. We don't claim to be better than others, nor are we obsessed with moral rules. But we do accept that our behavior can support the life around us and at other times damage that life. That is a natural, even scientific, understanding of ethics and we hope more people find it of use as a foundation of their ethical values.

Of course, that is theorizing about something that is mostly about feelings. Just because we have a clear idea of the origins of ethical feelings does not mean we do a better job of being good. We know you don't have to believe in god to be good but without or with god we human beings are well practiced in confusing good with what we rationalize to be good, which too often happens to be what is good for us.

Occasionally I think we should return to childhood and be more concerned with being good than deciding we are right about the great ethical issues. Our parents probably meant by "be good" to be quiet and do what you were told but they also meant don't steal, don't hit, be nice to people, respect others. If, as sophisticated adults, we decide "being good" means "supporting the life around us," then there are many opportunities for us to think before we act. As an aging curmudgeon I must admit I often find it easier to see the speck in others' eyes than in my own and it is hard to step back from my rationalized, self-righteous stand on what is right to see before me another human being who could use acceptance and support.

"Being ethical" can have an impersonal, issue-targeted feeling to it, but the idea of "being good" recognizes your presence in a relationship. And it is that aspect of "being good" – being someone who supports the good around you – I'm addressing and not the idea of being good as obeying a set of rules. Being good doesn't mean just thinking the right thought but doing something that makes life better, and I'm sure your parents would be proud.

