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Whistleblowers and Team Players – an Islands in the Clickstream

It was only after whistleblowers came out of the closet during the Great Deflation that Time Magazine honored the practice of what team players call “ratting out your pals.” Conservative magazines like Time may give lip service to whistleblowing in the abstract but never champion whistle blowers until after they have sung. Instead they support the conditions and practices which make whistleblowers a threat in the first place.

Whistleblowers are a reminder that ethics must be embodied in real flesh-and-blood human beings who put themselves on the line. Unless our deeper beliefs and values become flesh, they are words words words designed to make us feel better, rationalize misdeeds, and send distracting pangs of conscience straight into space.

If you have never known a real flesh-and-blood whistleblower, see the film “The Insider” for a good portrait. The film confirms the conclusion of a Washington law firm specializing in whistleblower cases that lists motivations for whistleblowing – money, anger and resentment, revenge, justice – and eliminates all but one as sufficient to carry a whistleblower through the abuse they will face. Only acting from a pained conscience will sustain a whistleblower through the ordeal.

During a recent speech for accountants about ethics, our Q&A moved quickly into the gray areas where accountants spend much of their time. Outsiders think accountants live in a black and white grid with simple answers but in fact they wade through a swamp of maybe this or maybe that.

Accountants are paid whistleblowers. Accountants are intended to be in the corporate culture but not of it, to use company books like mirrors to reveal the truth and consequences of choices. That’s why it is so difficult to do the job right.

The tension comes from the fact that only an individual can have a conscience. An institution or organization can develop a culture that supports doing the right thing only when a leader pursues that objective with single-minded intensity. Left to themselves, all cultures are based on survival, not telling the truth. Cultures reward team players, not whistleblowers. In all my years as a teacher, priest, speaker and consultant, I have never seen a culture with a conscience.

A cop friend reminds me that the first time a rookie cop sees his partners beat someone up in an alley or notices that money or cocaine doesn’t always get back to the station, he is closely watched. The word goes out quickly that "he's OK" or "watch out for him." Those that are OK move up. The cop is a practicing Roman Catholic and noted that recent scandals in the church are symptoms of the same dynamics.

Institutions usually encourage disclosure only when it no longer matters. Operation Northwoods – the desire by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1962 to eliminate Fidel Castro by sinking refugee boats from Cuba, attacking our own base at Guantanamo, and planting terror bombs in American cities – was revealed by James Bamford in his book “Body of Secrets,” but nary a peep of outrage greeted revelation of the treasonous scheme. When the Church apologized to Galileo for torturing him four hundred years after the fact, it raised the question of how an institution had so lost its moorings that someone might think an absurd gesture like that had meaning.

In Wisconsin a friend was nominated to head an arts board at the state level. His work on behalf of the party in power and his passion for art collecting made him a natural but he was passed over. I asked a confidante of then-governor Tommy Thompson why.

“He’s not a team player,” he said. “He isn’t predictable.”

The guy who told me this was a team player. He was faithful and steady and worked tirelessly to raise money for the party. When friends were “naughty,” as he called it, he looked the other way. He called recently to tell me he was now a million dollars richer, having been compensated at that level for three years on the board of an energy firm. He had been recommended for the position by his friend, now-Secretary Tommy Thompson.

Thus has it always been. Thus will it ever be.

Why are so many of your heroes, I was asked, people who were assassinated? Why do names like Jesus, Lincoln, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. keep showing up in your conversation?

I think it’s because they embody what it takes to make a stand on behalf of the truth. They were all human but found the courage to blow the whistle on the cultures of death our institutions create. Their reward was getting whacked.

Make no mistake, those who articulate or embody an upward call always inspire ambivalence. A disciple of Gandhi said that even those who loved him most were secretly relieved when he was murdered because for the moment the pressure was off. Jesus as icon is malleable in the hands of his institutional custodians whereas Jesus the Jew in the street was a real pain.

In an era characterized by increasing secrecy by the government and the gradual but progressive surrender of our rights, it’s only a matter of time until some malevolent design ripens and bursts into the sunlight because some whistleblower just can’t stand it another minute. Some team player, their motives mixed but their conscience pricked, will tell the truth. That’s the only way to have accountability when those with power and privilege remove transparency from the processes of government and business.

When a mainstream Midwest woman asks how she will tell her grandchildren what America was like before the Great Change, how she will explain openness and

disclosure, the Freedom of Information Act, guarantees in the Bill of Rights ... then I know that we don't need a weatherman to know the direction of the wind and see the firestorm on the horizon. Signs of the times grow on trees like low-hanging fruit, ripe for the picking.

We are all team players, all of us some of the time, some of us all of the time, but we each have our own particular crossroads where we must decide if our words will become flesh. It is never easy and there are always consequences. Only integrity will see us through to the bitter end and none of us really know if we have it until it is tested.