

Morality Stories

Morality Stories

Dilemmas in Ethics, Crime & Justice

FIFTH EDITION

Michael Braswell
Kyle A. Burgason



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To Joy Pollock

*For her contributions to this book and her
friendship and example over the years.*

To Jeff Walker

For providing the education, guidance and support.

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Acknowledgments

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For the fifth edition, we want to thank Beth Hall and the CAP staff for their help. It is a pleasure working with them. We want to thank Susan Braswell and Daphne Burgason for their help in getting this edition ready for press. We also want to acknowledge that while historical and news events may have inspired aspects of some of the stories, the stories and characters depicted in them are fictional.

Foreword

From the second and third editions:

I read the stories in this collection over the course of several evenings, while sprawled comfortably on my living room couch. I found that I was taking the themes of what I had read to bed with me, staying awake longer than I cared to and wondering about the likely outcomes of this or that story, pondering what I thought might be the “correct” resolution and then imagining what I myself might have done—or not done—had I been faced with the same set of circumstances. I was particularly intrigued by my response to “Rosy,” the portrayal of the border patrol trainee who finds an extraordinarily *simpatico* girl of about his own age in the poor Mexican family that he has been assigned to live with in order to improve his Spanish. I was at first certain that I would have behaved differently than he did, but, thinking about it some more, I wasn’t certain. The stories have that kind of effect; they fuel self-examination.

The events portrayed in *Morality Stories* will fascinate persons concerned with human goodness and human evil. The book’s moral is translucent: “An evil act doesn’t necessarily make a person who committed it evil,” the authors declare in a thematic statement. I found the stories exceptionally interesting and provocative. Often the writers deliberately tease us by raising questions and letting them hover unanswered. In “Stray Dogs,” for instance, we wonder what the preacher has in mind when he doubts Laney’s claim that he threw the bricks at the display window of Cook’s Dimestore Dream because he wanted a warm place to stay on Christmas Eve. What might the “true” reason have been? And why does the preacher say that the Dream deserved that brick and more?

What is the meaning of Sergeant Hollis Rivers' cough? Is it serious and does it influence his actions? And what words were written underneath the picture that Laney tried to read but could not see clearly enough to make them out?

I was intrigued by the fact that in a number of stories it is a throwaway observation of strangers that sets in motion reactions from those who hear the words and then reflect on how they apply to their own situation. A waitress, adept at jollying customers, suggests that "sometimes you gotta do something risky to make sure you're still alive," and her homeless customer, down and out, makes a move that at least holds some hope for turning his dreary life around.

These are artfully constructed portrayals of people who come across as real folks with real problems and, for some, immediate ethical dilemmas that require resolution. At times, there is a change of pace in the stories with the recital tending toward understatement, such as in the moving description of the prison inmate who receives a gift from a totally unlikely source. The donor is asked why he did what he did; the question puzzles him (as it puzzles us as well) and he can offer only a laconic uninformative response before dropping the subject and moving along.

The prison stories are a sub-group of tales. They are marked by an exceptionally clear-eyed rendition of the aura and the undertones of life on a cell block and the verbal thrusts and jabs of the prisoners. The lesson is that even among some of those who appear to be the worst, there are human beings who are decent, even admirable persons. In several instances, prison guards, who have close contact with inmates, come to understand their humanity and to forgive the awful deeds that brought them to where they are. The "Mercy Seat" demonstrates that the death penalty can catch in its lethal embrace persons who have earned the opportunity to remain alive. The story brings to mind the wisdom of Winston Churchill: "The mood and temper of the public with regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country."

I would be hard-pressed to decide which story I liked best. Each in its own way set me to thinking, but I suspect that it was the riddle of the grandfather who refused to open doors for others or to allow others to open doors for him that made the deepest impression. The tenderness between the old man, the boy grandchild, his namesake, is conveyed

with great sensitivity and the moral power of the story leaves indelible memories. Life is made up of choices, and the vital ones that we make will mark us for the remainder of our time on earth.

Science and morality often are said to exist in distinctively different realms. Science seeks objectivity and presents a façade of detachment and neutrality. This façade has been satirized by one writer who wondered whether if her husband and a grizzly bear were locked in mortal combat, she was required to say: “C’mon husband, c’mon bear.”

Many scientists say that the application and the consequences of what they learn is the business of others, perhaps one of those touchy-feely people who deal with concepts such as goodness and decency. Such ideas faded in the wake of construction of atomic weapons. The scientists who had unraveled the mysteries that led to the production of the atomic bomb began to wonder how much responsibility they ought to assume when their invention was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, producing thousands of civilian deaths. The horrors produced by the atomic bombs were brilliantly brought home not by sterile medical reports or long-term longitudinal studies of the results of exposure to radiation from atomic fusion. The fiction and non-fictional portrayals, such as Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* and John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* provided much more compelling accounts than those found in the medical and social scientific probes. Similarly, to read the opening pages of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* is to experience the Italian army’s retreat at Caporetto in a manner that no scientific inquiry could convey.

The stories that follow, written by Michael Braswell, Joycelyn Pollock, and Scott Braswell, are of a kind with these classics. They put you in touch with important life experiences of people, sometimes people like yourself, who are confronted with situations that require a degree of moral and ethical courage. *Morality Stories* allows you to share their experiences, debate within yourself and with others the issues that are raised as they relate to your life and your hopes, ideals, and expectations.

Gilbert Geis

University of California, Irvine

Preface

“Imagination and fiction make up more than three-quarters of our real life.”

Simone Weil

“The Possible’s slow fuse is lit by the imagination.”

Emily Dickinson

Our goal in this edition of *Morality Stories* is to continue the tradition of telling stories about experiences where personal and social justice meet, often in the context of criminal justice. Gandhi wrote, “I have always felt that the true textbook for the pupil is the teacher” (Maggio, 1997: 34). It is the teacher then, who translates the insights and truth found in the big ideas and stories hidden in both fiction and nonfiction writing. The literature of criminal justice, criminology and sociology whether found in academic textbooks, novels or short stories offer fertile ground for unexpected lessons that draw us into the mystery of what justice is and is not—and how it squares with consequences, compassion and redemption on a personal, social and systemic level.

The story is the thing. The lessons that need to be learned are embedded in the byways and tall weeds more often than on the main road. And the truth of the matter often slips in through the back door, sneaking up on us from behind and surprising us with delight, horror or both at once. In the best of circumstances, there is a kind of transparency on the bridge of learning between student and teacher where both contribute insights to the questions and possible solutions a story offers. As Gil Geis alludes to in the “Foreword,” such an experience enables both student

and teacher to become more than the stories they tell, filling them with a conscious sense of wonder—of questions that can never be fully answered, but only lived out through one’s best intentions put into action. Questions like “what is justice?”; “what does it mean to be a just and moral person?”; “what should we do with the ‘least of those’ in our society?”; and “where does justice meet mercy and compassion?” haunt us as we wrestle with the choices we make as individuals and as a society.

We offer eight stories new to this edition. Themes include the impact of friendship on racism and loneliness in school settings; an old man facing justice for war crimes; the pressure and consequences of a high school girl coming out as being gay; the effects of three women who reach out to veterans and their wives, helping them to deal with PTSD; how an act of compassion from a law enforcement officer saved a distraught citizen’s life; and a blue chip athlete struggling whether to go with his heart or his head in deciding which university to attend and play for.

Given all the questions and possibilities a meaningful and creative narrative provides, a good story never really ends. More than that, the teacher in charge is not just teaching students about criminal justice, criminology and social justice, but about the larger landscape of life itself—about how they can make a difference in the world around them.

Michael Braswell
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