

## Publishing Photo of Two Men on Ferry: A Question of Right vs. Right

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Journalists and readers could find more respectful common ground on ethical dilemmas if we all read the same book.

It's called *How Good People Make Tough Choices* by Rushworth Kidder. I learned about it from a reader of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, ironically, because the P-I and The Seattle Times made opposite decisions on one of those tough ethical choices. About two weeks ago, the Seattle FBI asked the press to publish a photo of two men so that the public might help in identifying them. It was a rare request, and the newspapers didn't have much to go on at first.

An FBI news release said only, "These men have been seen aboard Washington State Ferries on several occasions and have exhibited unusual behavior, which was reported by passengers.

While this behavior may have been innocuous, the FBI and WAJAC [Washington Joint Analytical Center] would like to resolve these reports."

Neither newspaper published the photo in the first news cycle after the FBI request. Times editors felt they needed more information, and after a day of interviewing law-enforcement sources, decided to run it. The P-I decided against publication, and the differing news judgments became part of the story.

**"...right-vs.-right choices 'reach inward to our most profound and central values, setting one against the other...'"**

A P-I story said the newspaper "elected not to publish the photos, citing civil liberties and privacy concerns, which editors felt outweighed the newsworthiness of the images."

It quoted P-I Managing Editor David McCumber as explaining, "We have no confirmation that these men's behavior was anything but innocuous, and to forever taint them by associating them with terrorism under these circumstances is not consistent with our policy."

A Times story said the FBI wanted to identify the men because they reportedly rode as many as six ferry routes in recent weeks. The men drew the attention of passengers and crew because they went into areas of the boats where passengers don't normally go, took photos of doorways and asked questions about ferry operations.

That story quoted Times Managing Editor Suki Dardarian as explaining, "Further reporting helped us more effectively weigh the potential value — and harm — of publishing the photos. After some deliberation, we decided to publish the photographs, along with as much context as we could bring to the story."

Many readers of both newspapers were outraged but didn't agree on why they were outraged. Publishing the photo was racial profiling. Not publishing it was political correctness. Publishing was fear-mongering. Not publishing was a threat to national security.

Not surprisingly, much of the rhetoric was vitriolic and extreme, which is where the P-I reader comes in. Using the pseudonym "A Thoughtful Person," the reader posted a comment on the P-I's Web site saying that anyone who cares about the discussion should read Kidder's book.

The posting said, "This book breaks open the 'right vs. right' decisions we

see Ferry on back

Ferry - continued from front

are faced with every day. I applaud the managing editor (McCumber) for recognizing this as a 'right vs. right' decision, then for proceeding with integrity, including the public analysis of the decision."

In the book's terms, it was right to be concerned about damaging the reputation of individuals who may be innocent of wrongdoing. It also was right to be concerned about a possible threat to community safety.

The book says right-vs.-right choices "reach inward to our most profound and central values, setting one against the other in ways that will never be resolved simply by pretending that one is 'wrong.'"

Kidder, a professor who founded the Institute for Global Ethics, writes that such dilemmas fall into four clusters:

- Truth vs. loyalty
- Individual vs. community
- Short-term vs. long-term
- Justice vs. mercy

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### Words from the Wise

"I desire to see in this country the decent men strong and the strong men decent, and until we get that combination in pretty good shape, we are not going to be by any means as successful as we should be."

– Theodore Roosevelt

"Call them what you will, these four patterns help us describe the basic issue at the heart of so many ethical conflicts — the clashing of core values that makes it hard for good people to make tough choices," Kidder writes.

"Resolution requires us to choose which side is the *nearest* right for the circumstances," the book says. "This is a book for those who want to address and resolve tough choices through energetic self-reflection."

That is the way journalism should be practiced, and it is how thoughtful readers should critique the work of the media. Seeing ethical dilemmas in terms of right vs. right doesn't make them go away, but it could lead to more civil discourse about them.



"Dickie Wilson attacked my values."

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Much of what is posted on Internet forums or sent in e-mail commentaries these days is shrill, mean-spirited and absolutist. Tough choices come easy for some in cyberspace. Although Kidder's book was first published in 1995, he could have had those people in mind when he wrote:

"Clinging to one value to the exclusion of others, and failing to assess the complexity of the issues surrounding them, they substitute thoughtless moralizing for moral thinking."

His book reminded me of attending one of the late Fred Friendly's ethics seminars decades ago. Friendly was Edward R. Murrow's partner in the "See It Now" documentaries memorialized in the movie "Good Night, And Good Luck." He was played by George Clooney, who also directed the film.

Friendly always opened his seminars by saying their purpose was "to make the agony of decision-making so intense that you can escape only by thinking."

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