Module 9

Acting Unethically

One of my promises to myself is to act honestly, to not harm others, but also so I can rest well at night. If I have done something that unintentionally upsets someone else, I immediately work to rectify the situation. Again, I do this for both of our sakes. So, this assignment is tough in terms of thinking about how I’ve acted unethically to people. I do have one situation to explain, though, from about 18 years ago.

When my daughter was 3 or 4, I took her and my niece (also 3 or 4) to a local professional production of *Days with Frog and Toad* at the Children’s Theater in Seattle. I made sure to pay extra for seats within the first 10 rows in the center section (or something like that) so we could immerse ourselves in the fun. The seats, however, weren’t specific seats, but any seat within that particular section.

We arrived a bit later than I had hoped to. The play was about to start within 10 minutes. Most people were already in their seats and I couldn’t find anything open in the section I had paid for. The ushers were busy ushering and I was with two young children, so I just sat us down in the very back.

At intermission, I went to the ticket box and said there were no seats in the first act in the section I had paid for. She told me that some people ‘cheat’ on that, and that at intermission, all seats become open again. She encouraged me to just see if I could find seats in that section now.

Feeling weird about that, I still went ahead with her suggestion. We found three seats (there were about 6 seats in a row open), sat down, and of course, moments later, two families with 4 children came back to ‘their’ seats only to find us there. They asked us to move, but I told them what had happened to us and what the theater management told me to do. People all around us heard the conversation, and shamed me – a lot! for not moving. I think the children even started to cry because they weren’t going to be able to sit together. I did, however, have my daughter sit on my lap so one of the families could return to ‘their’ seats.

My daughter and niece didn’t hear any of this and to this day have no idea what happened. I, however, still feel bad.

I used the following information (element) to reason through my decision to sit there and stay: I had paid extra for the seats, I spent the first act in terrible seats, I asked theater management about the policy, I acted in accordance to what management told me. I was looking for fairness (the concept of fairness as a standard) in getting what I had paid for. Unless the people who had vacated the seats at intermission weren’t going to return, or were some of the people who didn’t actually pay extra but were sitting in the prime seats, I knew they would feel I was not acting fairly to them. As they hurled insults at me, I did give them one more seat, but I refused to move. I felt justified in staying where I was. Their point of view (element), however, made them rather horrified that I would act in the way I did – even when I explained what management had told me.

If the tickets had seat numbers, solving this problem would have only entailed following a procedure. Instead, because the theater company sold tickets by area, and didn’t take responsibility for checking everyone’s tickets (they used the honor system), the problem became one of judgement. Who should be allowed to sit in open seats at intermission?

Well, ethically, I suppose I could have sat in the very back the whole show and tried to demand a refund of sorts when the show ended. They told me at intermission that they don’t give refunds, but I could have really put up a stink. If I had demanded some compensation, I probably wouldn’t even remember going to that show at all anymore. Instead, I still get feelings of guilt and I wonder if those other families from time to time remember that horrible woman who stole their seats and made their children have to move away from each other.