

Who's Afraid of Ethics?



ExecutiveSecrets / Many people fear appearing ethically dogmatic, yet issues of trust and fairness are always important. Here, The Ethics Guy takes issue with automated phone systems, false buzz, and taking what isn't yours. / By Nancy Henderson Wurst / Photography by Mark Wagoner

In your freshman year of college, you spot a roommate illegally downloading albums from the Internet. Do you:

- a) Ignore it.
- b) Confront the person.
- c) Report him or her.

Bruce Weinstein, AKA The Ethics Guy, wants to give you the right answer or, better yet, help you figure it out for yourself. A professional ethicist, Weinstein has become the media's go-to guy on subjects such as TV reality shows, regifting, and workplace issues. He appears regularly on CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360* and *Glenn Beck*, pens a Knight-Ridder/Tribune syndicated column, and has written several books on ethics, including *Life Principles: Feeling Good by Doing Good* (Emmis Books, 2005). His comments are popping up on blogs, in chat rooms and education newsletters, and on technology Web sites.

Personable, funny, and quick to point out that he doesn't always practice what he preaches, the 46-year-old Brooklyn native grew up in a family where mealtime conversations often revolved around moral issues. "Although we didn't really identify them as such," he says, "they were about what's right, what's wrong, what's just, what's fair."

The seed for Weinstein's work may have been planted in childhood, but it sprouted during an assignment for a government class in his junior year of high school. When asked to write a book review, he borrowed his dad's handsome volume of Plato's *Republic*. "I was really captivated because I wasn't expecting it to be so dramatic and engaging," Weinstein recalls. "It seemed like I was reading a really good movie script."

Several years later, a course at Swarthmore College convinced him to study philosophy in general, and ethics in particular. There was no turning back. "I just got really excited by the kinds of questions we were asking. Ultimately the question is: What kind of life should we live? And I thought, 'What's more important than that?'"

After earning a doctorate in philosophy with a concentration in bioethics from Georgetown University, Weinstein taught at a medical school for six years, but the restraints of academia left him yearning for more. In 1995, he quit his job, moved to New York City, and began appearing on television programs like *Good Morning America* and *Today*. "When I would introduce myself as an

ethicist, which many people can't pronounce, let alone explain, people would say, 'Oh, you're The Ethics Guy.'" The nickname stuck. "When you think of Bill Nye, even if you've never seen him and don't know what he does, you know he's The Science Guy. Dr. Ruth is forever associated with sex education, Dr. Phil with psychology," Weinstein says. "The word ethics, I think, is an anxiety-inducing word. But it's not something to be frightened of."

It didn't take long for Weinstein to infiltrate the high-paying lecture circuit. At the end of each workshop, he posed the same question: "Why should we be ethical?" He is often surprised by the answer. "Sometimes it's poetic," Weinstein says. "Sometimes it's philosophical. Sometimes it's blunt."

From Alaska to Florida, the answer is almost always self-centered. "I would have hoped that the common response was 'because it's the right thing to do.' But I rarely heard that," he says. Occasionally someone would say, 'So I can get into heaven,' or conversely, 'So I won't get punished.' But the most common responses were 'so I can look in the mirror and feel good about myself' or 'so I can sleep well at night.' The overwhelming majority of people referred to themselves, not to the inherent value of ethical conduct or allegiance to one's deity or even to honoring one's parents." This troubled Weinstein at first. Living an ethical life, after all, isn't about making yourself feel good. Were Americans really that self-absorbed? Rather than try to change their perspective, he chose to incorporate it into his message. These days, after explaining that we should do the right thing simply because it's the right thing to do, he emphasizes the personal and professional payoff. For one thing, taking the high road is ultimately good for business, even if it means losing a few bucks in the short run.

Take, for example, customer service. "The automated answering service may be an efficient invention for businesses, but customers hate it," he says. "There's nothing we'd like to do more than talk with a human being. Think about some of the businesses that have really thrived recently. Whenever you call Land's End it take two rings at most and a human being answers the phone. The kind of loyalty that engenders is ultimately enriching to the business."

Weinstein also criticizes the trend toward generating false "buzz." He cites the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, which encourages viral strategies to stir interest in products and services, such as hiring "satisfied customers" to stand in line at restaurants and give loud testimonials. "What this group is trying to do may work in the short term," says Weinstein. "But the only way to really guarantee, in the long run, not only a loyal customer base but a growing one is for customers to trust you, to believe that you actually have their own interests at heart."

Of course, not everyone embraces The Ethics Guy's admittedly judgmental advice. Seminar attendees have been known to get defensive or accuse him of being too high and mighty. They sometimes write nasty letters, e-mail, and conference evaluations. "I often touch a nerve," Weinstein acknowledges. "What I'm doing is essentially holding a mirror up to everyone and saying, 'Take a good look. This is a reality check. How are you doing?' That's an uncomfortable feeling, and then that gets displaced onto me."

So are we really losing our grip on values? Yes and no, says Weinstein. "It's very easy to draw that conclusion because, for one thing, the news media do a great job of drumming fear into our lives, and if you watch the news every day and read the metro section of your paper, you'd be afraid to even leave your house," he says. "But it's also important to remember that our society has made great

advances. We still have a long way to go, but 50 years ago there were white-only drinking fountains and it was illegal for black people to sit in the front of the bus. You know when women got the right to vote in the U.S.? 1920! It's hard to believe that 80-some years ago women couldn't vote."

Technology has made ethical issues more complicated. Few upstanding citizens would walk into a record store, pilfer a CD, and walk out. "And yet the same people who would never think of doing that have no ethical problem with illegally downloading an entire album that the artist rightly wants to be paid for," Weinstein says. The technological imperative drives a lot of this, the feeling that if we can do something, we have a right to do it. And then the other idea is that, 'Well everybody else is doing it.' Now, these two ideas are not new to this generation. But the information revolution has made it easier to do this privately, and the speed with which one can do it has also greatly increased."

Weinstein may soon have a personal reason to fight piracy of creative works. A lifelong film fanatic who at age 7 was mesmerized by the opening scene in the James Bond movie *You Only Live Twice*, he holds a certificate in film production from New York University and is currently making a documentary about a former Brooklyn mobster who gave up racketeering and now steers young people away from crime.

He's also working on a book about dating (in 2007 he'll get married for the first time) and recently steered his weekly newspaper column in a new direction, posing five ethical questions to movers and shakers in business, journalism, government, sports, and several other professions.

"Mostly," he adds, "I'm just floored by how many people are dying to talk about these issues. If this is any indication, these responses I'm getting, people are really hungry to talk about these questions."

Nancy Henderson Wurst is the author of *Able! How One Company's Disabled Workforce Became the Key to Extraordinary Success* (BenBella Books).