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Don't give in to hasty thoughtlessness

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I thought about writing an uplifting story of courage and redemption for this column on ethics. It concerned a teacher who had his certificate revoked for violation of the Texas Educators' Code of Ethics. Like a gunslinger from the Old West turned town marshal, he had pled guilty to felony theft against his brother then turned his life around and devoted himself to teaching. Of course, because he had a previous criminal history, the State Board of Education revoked his teaching certificate, declaring him unfit to teach. But the interesting thing is, this teacher did not quit. He went to trial and presented 14 character witnesses who stated he *was* fit to teach. Unusual circumstances around the theft, character witnesses, and the will to make a new life for himself saved this educator from having his certificate revoked.

Teaching is a highly moral profession; when people talk about ethics and teachers, they do it in a loaded sense that applies praise and/or blame. There are accepted norms of behavior in teaching, and most of us recognize that a conviction for theft is not one of them. But, the story is uplifting and contains elements of moral courage, good versus evil, the triumph of the individual, any number of things moral and ethical. So now the question becomes do you agree with the decision? Would you have allowed this teacher to continue teaching?

I have a friend who would not have tolerated bringing this teacher back into the profession. In discussion of this case, s/he took the high road of ethical absoluteness. But to my mind, rejecting the teacher out of hand is an example of thoughtlessness. Many philosophers have theorized that thoughtlessness is moral failure of the highest calling. Although to be fair, the reality in this case probably has more to do with my friend's tendency for heuristic decision making rather than thoughtlessness because my colleague is a very busy person who is prone to quick decisions because lack of time prohibits thinking too deeply about things. The point is heuristic decision making comes in handy when it prompts you to run from a burning building, but when one is condemning another human being's behavior, more thoughtful action is required.

To do that you have to take into account reality, and most of us can never quite grasp that. We listen to the tapes in our own heads instead of conversations, we ascribe intents when nothing was intended . . . in short we are human and we sometimes see what we want to see instead of what is. Klosterman (2009) realized he was out of touch when while watching a football game, he dismissed running the ball out of the shotgun formation as an idiotic notion. He had played football, written about football, and felt that he exhaustively understood football and knew certain truths. Then while watching a game in which the play was made he realized that his “traditional, conservative football values were imaginary and symbolic. They belonged to a game I wasn’t actually watching but was still trying to see” (p. 163). And over time, he realized that this had happened in almost every aspect of his life.

Reality often moves on and leaves us behind because we do not take the time to be thoughtful. And as a result, we sometimes find ourselves relying on ethics to support our thoughtlessness. As the story of courage and redemption with which I started this column illustrates, ethical human beings have to be both realists as well as idealists.