The Role of Ethics in America

In nearly every society throughout history, no matter what type of government and no matter what the intention of that society was or is, there have been social stratifications of citizens—the "haves" and the "have nots." Stratifications may be defined in societies in many different ways: money, gender, race, religion, tribe, common or aristocratic bloodlines. Classification lists can go on and on, depending on social trends and morals of each society at any particular moment, and may be subdivided by nations, communities, and even families. After all, the "black sheep" of the family has often been considered the "different" one—maybe the troublemaker, the one who doesn't fit in, or simply the one who doesn't look like the rest of the family—and sometimes is not treated the same as the other children. Status in society may be achieved or ascribed by inheritance, but stripped of any superficial titles or wealth, at the end of the day, we are all just human, and the core of our humanity is our ethics. It is our ethics, both individual and societal, that determine how we ourselves treat others and where we will draw the lines on how we will treat others within our own communities or societies. These ethics define who we are.

The recent fiscal battles between liberals and conservatives have highlighted these class wars. One of the most prevalent places these issues are played out is in the forums of news outlets and newspapers, and on social media sites. Angry voices declare in the "Comment" sections that they don't want their hard-earned money going to slackers and lazy slouchers through welfare, healthcare, or other taxpayer programs. There doesn't seem to be any differentiation between those who do abuse our social welfare programs and those who are genuinely incapable of caring for themselves or have fallen on hard times. However, in difficult economic times, the general majority would prefer to be able to take care and provide for their families but are not able because of unemployment or disabilities. In one of the richest countries in the world, and undoubtedly the most powerful, children and the elderly go without meals; others die because they couldn't afford to go to the doctor, or when they did go,
couldn’t afford to keep up with medicine or treatment costs. Welfare recipients are assumed guilty before receiving aid, and are tested for drugs, which may be more a reflection of the pressure from the “I don’t want my money going to slackers who don’t work” attitude than a need seen through statistical data. Imagine the humiliation of a hard-working single mother who is raising three children alone after her husband cheats on her and leaves for another woman, then doesn’t pay child support, when she is made to feel like a possible drug user in addition to suddenly having to accept a hand-out from the government. Or the elderly man who outlives his savings after putting in years of work and maybe even military service to our country.

There is nothing wrong with capitalism. It is the American dream, and we are told we can all achieve it. Work hard and you will be rewarded. America lives by democratic principles and you can be and do anything you want. But we are also a society, and we must live by societal principles as well. We must stop looking at ourselves as simply achieving individuals and begin to remember that we are united and interconnected. This does not mean that we cannot earn and achieve or “keep up with the Joneses;” rather we must remember that we must also contribute to the society that we also receive from. We all know that taxes go to schools and infrastructures and military spending and government buildings, but a society—a nation—is made up of more than that. We are a nation of people: human beings of different genders, races, ethnicities, and different abilities. We are united by more than common boundaries. We are united by common goals, and our strength and resilience as a powerful nation, a great nation, and as good global citizens of an even bigger world, depend on what we can achieve together.

Theodore Roosevelt said, “This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a good place for all of us to live in.” We have the privilege of earning potentially limitless amounts of money as individuals, but we have the responsibility as a member of a larger society, to also
contribute with time, talent, or money to help maintain that society and to lift those who are unable to help themselves. How we care for others within our communities may be the greatest test of any society, for powerful civilizations have fallen on that alone throughout history. As institutions such as slavery or aristocracy have drawn class lines, revolutions have taken place and governments have been overthrown. We should not receive the benefits of living within our society without also contributing. It is important to recognize that we should be talking about helping those who genuinely need assistance, because those who are able to contribute should contribute, and abuse of the system, whether by individuals able but unwilling to work, or unscrupulous doctors bilking the system for millions, must be stopped. Taking advantage of the system or of the kindness and generosity of others is, in itself, unethical.

As a nation, we must look at what it means to be “a good place for all of us to live in.” It is certainly much more than wealth or power, and our ethics are critical to the determination of what defines “a good place.” Some of us pull our ethics from religion or beliefs, and some from our upbringing and what we are taught, but we each have a moral compass that directs our ethics. Ethics might be easily described as “doing what is right,” but ethics almost always paints the picture of “goodness.” This “goodness” is important within a society, for the alternatives are rarely helpful. If we can, as a nation, find the goodness within our boundaries, each contribute in a meaningful way, and lift the weakest among us, we can be a strong nation capable of weathering whatever storms come our way.

Certainly, “a good place to live” would require the basics of food, clothing, and shelter as important for all, for without these items, nothing else really matters to an individual. People should not be hungry in a wealthy nation. Government aid (through taxation of a fair share for all) helps, but private donations matter as well. We have more than enough to go around and the key is giving and sharing.
Other components of “a good place” that go hand in hand with the basics would include prosperity and autonomy. Not everyone will earn the same amount of money in a capitalistic society, but hard work should provide at least the basics. Regardless of what welfare naysayers say, most people would prefer to be able to provide for themselves and their families. Everyone should have the autonomy to do so if they are able. Earning power should not be determined or limited by gender, race, or ethnicity.

One aspect that can affect earning power is access to a good education, and this should be available to all. Education may be the strongest building block to a strong economic nation and lack of education by a large portion of our society can undermine our place in a global economy. We must find ways to encourage and support those who face obstacles in getting an education, such as the child whose mother can’t get him to school on time because she is hung over from the night before, or the child who doesn’t go to college because she was never even told it was a possibility. The significant high school drop-out rates affect us all in a number of ways: less earning power, higher crime, more prisoners, more need for welfare, fewer participating in democratic processes such as voting, and the continuance of all of these as a cycle.

Healthcare, wellness, and preventive medicine also helps determine “a good place to live.” Access to healthcare should not be just an option for the wealthy. There are untold numbers of people who cannot work because they have medical issues that will go without attention. Some cannot work because of injuries, pain, or diseases that will go undiagnosed and untreated because they cannot even afford to see a doctor, let alone pay for any treatment or medicines the doctor recommends. There are also those who cannot work because of untreated mental health issues, from the businessman who loses his job because of deep depression to the homeless on the street with schizophrenia. It is ethical to be compassionate, but there are also economic rewards to doing the right thing as a society. When
we have a stronger nation both physically and mentally, we will have a stronger nation economically because more will be working. With more working, more will be spending, and the economy will be more robust. It does the nation no good to deny healthcare to anyone, and the consequences are that we all pay one way or another. Affordable healthcare is an issue that continues to divide the nation, but we need to look at the issue ethically as well as economically. With the Affordable Healthcare Act newly passed, it remains to be seen whether we are on the right path and whether it really will provide benefits to not just those who need it, but to the country as a whole.

There are other aspects of society that may not be as important as the basic needs, but that also could be considered important in making this “a good place to live.” Though its importance is often debated when budget talks take place, access to the arts, music, and literature are critical pieces of our culture that should not be written off lightly. Children do better in school when they are exposed to the arts. Music is said to increase intelligence, and we are learning much more about how it affects the brain in a positive way. Literature is, of course, important in many ways: it tells us who we are as a people, it broadens our world, it educates us, and it is an important tool in learning to read. Art, in and of itself, inspires and encourages imagination, which in turn has produced brilliant technology and inventions.

Art is part of the aesthetics of life, just as our environment is. Perhaps Theodore Roosevelt understood the importance of aesthetics in nurturing our souls as he had the foresight to set aside national parks and monuments during his presidency. Maybe he realized that a good life should not be just for high society, but for all society. We must get back to ethics as a critical component of our decision process as a nation and as a society. We are human, and if we use our heads and our hearts to determine with intelligence and compassion not only what will benefit us as individuals, but will make us a stronger nation overall, we can make this “a good place for all of us to live in.” If we are turning our backs on our fellow citizens, we are turning away from being a great society.