Your Money, Your Life or Your Wine

Could offering a cup of human kindness save your life sometime? It helped protect guests from a menacing gunman at a recent Washington, DC, dinner gathering.

Comedian Jack Benny had a famous skit in which an armed robber pointed a gun at Benny, whose comedy often poked fun at his own miserly show business persona. In the routine, Benny told the robber to put the gun down. The robber persisted. "Your money or your life!" demanded the crook, irritated by the delay. "I'm thinking it over," deadpanned Benny.{1}

Quick thinking helped save the DC dinner guests.

Give me your money!

The Washington Post reports{2} that some friends had enjoyed steak and shrimp at a DC home and were sitting on the back patio sipping wine around midnight. A hooded gunman slipped in through an open gate and held a pistol to a fourteen-year-old girl's head. "Give me your money, or I'll start shooting," demanded the intruder.

The guests—including the girls parents—froze. Then one adult—Cristina "Cha Cha" Rowan—had an idea.

"We were just finishing dinner," Rowan said to the uninvited guest. "Why don't you have a glass of wine with us?"

The robber sipped their French wine and said, "Damn, that's good wine."

Michael Rabdau, the girl's father, offered the man the glass. Rowan offered the bottle. The man—with hood down, by this point—sipped more wine and sampled some Camembert cheese. Then

he stowed the gun in his pocket and admitted, “I think I may have come to the wrong house. I’m sorry. Can I get a hug?”

Rowan hugged the man. Then Rabdau, his wife and the other two guests each hugged him. The man asked for a group hug; the five adults complied. He left with the wine glass. There were no injuries, no theft. The stunned guests entered the house and stared at each other silently. Police came. Investigators discovered the empty and unbroken wine glass on the ground in a nearby alley.

“I was definitely expecting there would be some kind of casualty,” Rabdau recalled, according to the *Post*. “He was very aggressive at first; then it turned into a love fest. I don’t know what it was.”

“There was this degree of disbelief and terror at the same time,” Rabdau observed. “Then it miraculously just changed. His whole emotional tone turned—like, we’re one big happy family now. I thought: Was it the wine? Was it the cheese?” The entire encounter lasted about ten minutes. DC police chalked it up as strange but true.

Gentle Answers

An old Jewish proverb says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” {3} I suspect her friends are extremely grateful that Cha Cha Rowan had the presence of mind to offer a gentle reply to the intruder’s demands.

Sometimes the psychological approach can deter disaster. Kindness and hospitality often can defuse tension and help open hearts and minds. Was the robber lonely? Feeling sad or rejected? Weary of his lifestyle? Hungry for acceptance and friendship? Rowan and her friends struck an emotional chord that resonated, apparently deeply.

Brute force and overwhelming arguments are common cultural responses to danger or opposition and, of course, theyre

sometimes necessary. Most of us are glad Hitler was defeated and that legislators outlawed slavery. But could gentle answers improve any disputes—or families, marriages, workplaces, political relationships—that you've seen?

Notes

1. George Grow, "Funnyman Jack Benny Won Hearts Mainly by Making Fun of Himself," Voice of America News, 21 May 2005; at www.voanews.com/specialenglish/archive/2005-05/2005-05-21-voa1.cfm (accessed July 19, 2007).
2. Allison Klein, A Gate-Crasher's Change of Heart, Washington Post, July 13, 2007; B01; at http://tinyurl.com/2q9mjc (accessed July 17, 2007).
3. Proverbs 15:1 NIV.

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Duke Lacrosse: Ethical Reflections

Written by Rusty Wright

The Duke lacrosse story has multiple ingredients for explosive media coverage: sex, race, politics, criminal charges, sports, class, a prestigious institution the list goes on.

Like many Duke alumni, I have personal convictions about the scandal. My Duke experience was and remains positive. So I'm biased. But I'm also realistic. Houston, we have a problem.

As much of the civilized world knows, a hired African-American stripper alleged some white players raped her at a lacrosse party. The accuser attended nearby North Carolina Central

University. The accused maintain their innocence. The lacrosse coach resigned. Duke cancelled the season.

During basketball season, it was often “All Duke, all the time” on America’s sports pages. Through much of the Spring, it became “All Duke, all the time” on the front pages.

Nowadays at Duke, quips one professor, historical calendars are not reckoned “BC” and “AD” but “BLC” and “ALC.” “Before the Lacrosse Crisis” and “After the Lacrosse Crisis.”

I’m glad Duke President Richard Broadhead emphasizes the presumption of innocence in criminal law. Travels in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have exposed me to chilling stories about presuming guilt.

At an April reunion, I found the campus buzzing with controversy. Some students conveyed deep personal pain about race and gender issues. At their national tournament in May, Duke women lacrosse players wore wristbands and headbands supporting the men’s team.

Broadhead commissioned an ongoing Campus Culture Initiative emphasizing responsibility and respect. In my view, he’s handled a difficult situation with exceptional grace, dignity, and transparency.

What ethical lessons might come from this episode? Of course, if rape occurred, punishment should ensue.

But setting aside the rape allegations, what about the ethics of hiring a stripper? What principles should determine how we act in life?

When I was an undergraduate, a friend from the fraternity next door excitedly told me the dean had just given his fraternity permission to host a topless dancer at their Saturday night party in university housing.

Fast forward to 2006. On one television program, a woman

argued that her own stripping had paid her college bills, and besides, it allowed her to exercise power over men.

Suppose you were a Duke student. Should you host or attend such a party? Hiring a stripper broke no laws. Both the players and the young woman could claim benefit. What's the harm?

A pragmatist might maintain, "In retrospect, it was more trouble than it was worth." A libertarian might assert, "Stripping's OK, if no one gets hurt." Some absolutists might say, "No. Never." Feminists could argue either side. Stripping exploits women as sex objects, a negative cultural influence. Yet a woman needs to earn a living.

Duke ethicist Elizabeth Kiss, soon to become Agnes Scott College president, recommends a starting point for answering the classic question, "How should I act?" She notes that the "Golden Rule" appears in various forms in different faith traditions.

Good point. Jesus said, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you."

The Jewish Talmud says, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

Muhammad said, "Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself."

On Duke's main quadrangle sits a plaque containing the first article of the university's bylaws. The statement promotes truth, scholarship, freedom, tolerance, and service. It begins as follows:

"The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God…."

Hmmm. An ethical guideline worth considering?

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