

“In the West, and among some in the Indian elite, this word, corruption, had purely negative connotations; it was seen as blocking India’s modern, global ambitions. But for the poor of a country where corruption thieved a great deal of opportunity, corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained.”

— Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*

A Cigarette Jar and Dirty Hands: The Ethics of Defense

The first class I ever stepped into in college was a small seminar-style class entitled *Ethical Decisions in the Real World*. I began the class with not only a limited knowledge of ethics, but also with limited experience in situations that required me to think deeply about my decisions. I remember sitting in class and finding the strategies and evaluation tools intriguing, but could never see myself needing to utilize them. I had this idea in my head, almost as if I were invincible, that every decision I had made and would make in the future, was and would be clear to me. About midway through the course, we learned about the notion of ‘dirty hands’ As the professor guided us in evaluating the supplementary case studies, he said, “there will come a time, when no matter the decision you make, your hands will be dirty. It is your actions in these moments of decision that determine your ethical beliefs.” This was the best piece of wisdom I could receive; I just had yet to understand its relevance to my life.

In high school, I learned that the name my mother had chosen for me meant ‘defender.’ I could not deny that I had yet to grow into my name; I often kept my opinions to myself, and confrontation made me anxious. Yet, more ironic perhaps, was the notion that I felt I was both incapable of defending anything fully and I also had nothing to whole heartedly defend. I had yet to face a challenge that put me in a difficult ethical situation.

The summer after my freshman year of college, I made the choice to spend the summer in India, working with a local Delhi nongovernmental organization (NGO). I had studied Hindi intensively throughout the academic year and I wanted to continue to learn over the summer months while working with a nonprofit group. I found an NGO online that accepted American volunteers and worked directly with residents living in the Shanti Colony* in New Delhi, India. The colony is historically artistic and famous for its puppetry, but also for its extreme poverty. The NGO commits to running three schools: a kindergarten, an elementary school, and a vocational institute. After researching the projects of the NGO and exchanging emails with one of the co-founders, I booked my plane ticket to spend the next three months in central Delhi. I was apprehensive about traveling alone, but eager to begin a new adventure.

The founder of the organization, Raman*, was a tall, stocky man that had been independently running the projects for two years. His co-founder, an American man, had been deeply touched by the community but permanently lived in the USA. At the time, I did not realize the implications that came with Raman running the organization alone; he had nobody to check him and he could run the projects however he chose.

I remember the first time I saw him steal. The organization generates revenue through offering guided walks in the slum community and accepting donations at the conclusion of the walks. In addition to cash donations, people also give items, ranging from clothing to computers, for the NGO to distribute to families within the colony. In theory, this business model is perfect for the colony as it provides employment for slum resident tour guides and helps artists to network with travelers. In practice, however, Raman was hoarding the donated money and failing to distribute all donated items. The first time I saw his hand reach in the donation box, I tried to justify his action in

** indicates name changed*

my head. I thought that perhaps he was reimbursing himself for a large purchase he had made for the residents or taking out money to set aside for a teacher stopping by. However, as the walks occurred more and more frequently, I started to notice a pattern. When I first came to India, he would only attend parties about once a week. As the donations from walks increased, he would frequent the party scene nightly. Around the same time, the NGO's teachers began to complain that they had not received their salaries in months. I made the connection: he was taking the donation money, that should have been used by the NGO, to pay for his partying.

I also began to suspect that Raman was selling many of the donated items and keeping the money for himself. I did not immediately have the courage to confront him, yet I could not bear to watch the donations sit around until he sold them. The fear I had about standing up to him was compounded by the fact that I was alone. I was defensive in how I chose to act because I was terrified for my own personal safety. I knew he was a Delhi mogul that had close relationships with law enforcement officials and local residents. I was the outsider in this equation, with the odds stacked entirely against me. It would take me hours to fall asleep at night because I could not forgive myself for ignoring his corrupt behavior, yet I did not know the best way to confront him.

Less than a week later, there was a slum walk scheduled for nine o'clock in the morning. The day before, I had visited the Taj Mahal with the only other volunteer and one of the permanent employees, Amir*, as it was our day off. Amir had fallen ill on the bus ride home and was not able to make it to work the next morning. Though I was not nearly as familiar with the colony as he was, I had led over one hundred walks at this point and I could easily navigate through the route. The usual second guide, Kaveri*, was running late when the family of four arrived at the office for their walk. As the family sat in the front vestibule and talked with the other volunteer, Raman pulled me

aside in the back room and proceeded to blame Amir's illness entirely on me. He tried to make me feel guilty and informed me that because neither guide was present at the moment, the walk would have to be canceled. I told him I was perfectly comfortable leading the family through the colony and when he objected, I retorted that he was capable of leading the group as well. Rather than leave his air-conditioned office, he allowed me to take the family to the colony where, shortly after, Kaveri met up with us.

The walk went very smoothly and the family had such a wonderful experience that they donated more than the suggested amount. After they left the office, I saw Raman's eyes turn darker and toward the ground. His hands began to shake as he opened his mouth and screamed at me that everything related to this morning was entirely my fault. However, he did not stop there. He then began to blame me for the slow week we were having, the behavior of his employees, and troubles completely unrelated to me. I could tell he was expecting an apology from me when he finished.

I took a moment to collect my thoughts before looking him straight in the eyes and shouting at a volume ten times louder than he could have anticipated. Until that moment, I had always respectfully agreed to everything he asked and I think he had pegged me as being too meek to stand up for myself. Everything I wanted to say to him came out in the next two minutes and by the end of my heated response, I was heaving and exasperated. I had been livid with him for the past seven weeks, but articulately expressing it was not an easy decision for me. Yelling at anybody had always been difficult for me and my childhood stammer would become evident when I ever raised my voice. However, in those few moments of shouting, I was able to clearly articulate how disgusted I was with the way he treated his employees and stole from the organization. I threatened

to permanently leave, even began throwing my belongings in a suitcase as I screamed, but stopped when I saw him start to react.

In an effort to make me stop yelling, he picked up the glass jar he used to throw his cigarette butts in and cracked it entirely on the front of his skull. I remember my initial thought was: had he just killed himself in front me? Blood ran from his hairline, down his nose, and dripped onto the floor in front of me. Kaveri quickly shuffled to the first aid drawer and grabbed bandages to stop the blood. The cut was far too messy for one person to handle alone and before I could consider what I was doing, my hands were applying pressure to stop the flow of blood from his laceration. I remember being disgusted with him more in that moment than I had in my entire summer there. I would never have left him there to bleed out on the floor of his office, but I did utilize the moments of medical attention to continue to articulate to him how unethical his behavior was. I remember hearing the words coming out of my mouth and before I could consider how to best form my thoughts, I had already said them. I stood up to him in a way I never had before and I was ashamed it had taken me such a long time to finally do it, but relieved I had articulated my feelings at last.

If you had asked me on that day if I had felt brave, I would have immediately said yes. Now, reflecting back on the situation, I do not think I was courageous as much as I was finally not cowardly. I knew for a while that I needed to act this way, to address his inexcusable behavior, but it took me weeks to have the strength to even challenge him, let alone verbally call him out in front of his staff. Some would consider me to be a coward for electing to stay with the organization for the remainder of my time in India. However, as I tried to fall asleep that night I knew I could not leave yet because he would continue to steal donations and I could not leave incoming volunteers to work alone with him.

He never brought up our confrontation again, but the next day, the donation box remained near empty after the walks. I had never felt so helpless in my entire life; Raman had all of my visa and passport information and, given his connections, could claim I should be deported if I rebelled against him. He had previously made these threats with the intention of silencing the volunteers, while he continued to pocket the money from the donations. In my last weeks with the organization, I was stealthy in my approach because I had concluded that verbally confronting him again would not have the impact I desired. When another volunteer wanted to ensure that two laptop donations made it to the slum, I worked with her to devise a plan and cover story. The next morning, she left to transport the laptops for Raman to the NGO's second office. Shortly after leaving, she notified him that the laptops were 'stolen' from her on the train (when they had actually been delivered to the slum). He failed to believe her. I remember looking straight in his eyes and lying in order to convince him her story must have some truth to it. This was a difficult experience for me because I was doing something I had universally disagreed with before venturing to his organization: unapologetically lying. Yet, I was also becoming more comfortable with having dirty hands. It is easy to sit in a class and claim you would always uphold justice; but it becomes real when your life is potentially on the line and you must lie in order to do so. I knew that if I did not outright deceive him, he would trade in the donations for money to party. I decided, in those few moments, that the risk of deportation and legal consequences could not outweigh my commitment to the people in the colony. I had found a home in the community and I was fully dedicated to defending the cause.

I need to make two things explicitly clear. First, the corruption and manipulation presented in my story are not meant to solely be a cultural commentary. I could have worked for a boss on a different continent, with entirely the same persona, just set in a different context. However, my location did affect my approach to handling the situation. It may seem that to correct Raman's actions would be simple as they are morally wrong; it became complicated, though, when he did not agree with me about his behavior. I want so strongly to believe that morality is universal, but I have learned that it is not and we often have to defend decisions that we may see as painfully clear.

Secondly, though Raman was a central character to my anecdote, his involvement in my transformation ends here. He was a negative impetus for positive change. I could not allow myself to run away from the source of the problem, in fact, I had to do better. I had to challenge him; I could not walk away from the colony and pretend I knew nothing about his behavior and manipulation tactics, or else I was unintentionally supporting him.

While Raman was taking a nap one afternoon, I changed my departure date on the team whiteboard and prepared myself to leave a few days early; not from India though, but from the organization. This was in violation of my employment visa as I was not directly working for my sponsor organization. I feared that my boss, no stranger to making deportation threats, would not only be furious with me if he discovered I had lied to him, he would go directly to the Indian government as punishment. Yet, I had to do something to help the people of the colony before I left.

After finding a hotel to spend the next few days, I traveled to the colony through the back entrance. I met with a group of residents and they shared with me the horror stories of the money he owed them and his treatment of resident workers. I remember a widow looking at me and begging me to help the colony start a new project. The residents needed employment and the community

needed extra support. After discussing everything with Amir, we decided we would begin a project in December, when I would return after fall semester. I continued to meet with some residents for the remaining days, darting through the back alleys to avoid any chance of seeing Raman there.

Claiming that I felt emotionally exhausted by the end of the summer would be an enormous understatement. Though I had stood up to him, I still felt that I was not only failing myself; I was failing a community of people that had welcomed me with open arms. The easy solution, and perhaps the safer one, would have been to immediately board my plane to America and never return to the area. I had to do better than that though, not for myself, but for the hundreds of families that were direct victims of a multifaceted corruption scheme. If I boarded that plane without intending to return, I would be avoiding a situation I had the strength to face. Yet, perhaps more critical, I knew that if I did not stand up to the founder of the organization again, nobody else would. The hardest part of standing alone is not the fear of facing defeat, but the constant worry of whether you are making the correct decision.

I returned for a month in December/January and stayed for the entire summer the following year in order to work directly with the residents. On the main road of the colony, we established a library for teenagers to receive English tutoring services for three hours each day. Amir and I wanted to focus on working with teenagers because they often are forgotten in educational interventions. In the three hours each session, they practice English and read books to increase their fluency. The library was entirely their idea and they requested focusing on English because many aspire to have jobs that require English proficiency. The name of the organization, Insaniyat Initiative (insaniyat means humanity in Hindi), directly reflects the sole focus of the organization: the people. The director of the library, Shilpa*, is a strong eighteen year-old with a sharp mind and

a deep commitment to helping the residents. Shilpa lives with her mother and sisters in a section of the community. She has had an education sponsor from a young age who paid for her private school education, making her a phenomenal teacher for her peers. The library receives funding through a similar business plan as the NGO run by Raman. However, the approach is entirely different as the aim is to have a lasting community impact. In five years, the entire project, both the business component and the library component, will be run *solely* by the residents of the colony. The residents are being taught the necessary skills to carry on the organization independently so that it can become part of a sustainable solution to community unemployment and lack of access to quality education. When Raman found out about the project, he was outraged by the threat of competition, claiming he would report me to the authorities for running an organization on a tourist visa. I think he recognizes though that I have every intention of defending the students and he does not challenge me anymore.

Now, some would ask me why I have not gone to the police about his organization yet and truthfully I am not certain I am making the correct decision by not alerting authorities. I am hesitant to go to the police because of the people he employs. Many of his employees are widows and their jobs in the organization are their only sources of income. If his organization is shut down, a dozen people (mostly widows) lose employment. The NGO that Amir and I began does not have the capacity to fully employ a dozen more people at the moment. A small part of me also wants to give Raman the opportunity to change his behavior. I think that having competition is good for his accountability and I pray that it is enough to create some positive change within him. My hands are dirty; if I tell authorities about my experiences, a dozen people will lose employment and he will undoubtedly try to destroy the library in retaliation. However, if I do not tell authorities about his

stealing, am I just the same as he is? I have wrestled with this since I left India the first time, but I can fully defend my decision to protect the employment of the widows and staff workers who would starve without income. Providing him with some competition has already generated positive results; the residents have informed me that he has been better at paying his teachers and staff members in a timely manner.

I remember looking at the smiles of all the students before I left India most recently, and thinking how difficult it will be to one day not be a part of this project. It is challenging for me still, sometimes, to recognize that their being a huge part of my life does not mean I have to stay a large part of their lives. Detaching my name from the organization has been critical for me because I want the students to see the library as strictly their library. I want them to take pride in it as a piece of their community, not to see it as place of foreign aid. The residents of the Shanti Colony have drastically changed my life, but I know I am only meant to be a seasonal part of their community. I think too often service work turns into self-transformation time, and while that is critical and very applicable to my situation as well, it must move beyond just being self-transforming in order to instill lasting sustainable change within the community. Too often we are taught that our self-worth must be measured in terms of our accomplishments that we rush to affix our name to everything to prove to others that we hold value. I know that the change will never be sustainable unless the residents recognize that they are entirely responsible for the positive transformation.

There are still moments when I question my decisions related to the community, but I know this must only make me human. Before I returned home three months ago, I was lucky enough to meet the leader of the entire colony. He gave me a piece of advice I will never forget: “you will never become a good person if you only help groups outside of your home.” Though he was not

speaking specifically about me, I took his wisdom to heart. I would be a hypocrite if I helped a community in New Delhi, India, but failed to acknowledge a homeless man on the streets of Boston. His advice has led me to realize that we set an example for others even when nobody is watching. Our behaviors and beliefs must translate across different pieces of our lives or else they truly cannot be validated.

Ethical situations are easy to define but not nearly as easy to respond to in the moment. I think developing an ethical conscience does not mean you must always make the most utilitarian decision, but rather, that you are aware of how others are affected by your decisions. I recognize that, though my hands may be dirty, it does not mean my decisions are not justifiable. Writing this reflection has made me wonder how I would have responded to my own situation if I had read it in my ethics class two years before. I know my old self would have seen the situation as easily solvable because it had yet to become real. Our decisions to actual dilemmas become complicated when we grasp the gravity of the repercussions. Ethical decisions are not clear cut and concrete, they are painful and consequential. They are holding the hand of a widow and feeling her shake as she cries over her job. They are picking glass splinters out of a wound and trying to remember why you decided to speak. It is far easier to make decisions for another person, one from a case study, outside of your network, and nameless to you. It is far more difficult to make one when you close your eyes and see a montage of all the people who will be affected by how you decide to act.