The Elderly Man I’ve Been Helping Turns Out to Be a Bigot. What Do I Do?

The magazine’s Ethicist columnist on helping someone whose views you find repugnant.

By Kwame Anthony Appiah
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I have been visiting and helping out a solitary older gentleman through a mutual-aid organization. He clearly values our time together. But on a recent visit he revealed repugnant beliefs — that Jews control the world and Black people are genetically inferior to whites. My attempts to disabuse him went nowhere. Does my ethical obligation to help this person override a desire to reject those ideas? Does it even matter if an isolated person believes terrible things? Name Withheld

Let's stipulate that this fellow acquired these beliefs from growing up in a community rife with prejudices. Still, the fact that they came up suggests that they’re central to who he is, just as your recognition that they’re repugnant is central to who you are. “The perfect kind of friendship,” Aristotle said, “is that of good men who resemble one another in virtue.” That’s a wildly demanding ideal, and helping out this gent doesn't require that you be friends — being friendly will suffice. But now that you've gained a sense of his worldview, it may be hard to sustain positive vibes.

We're entitled to direct our special benevolence toward people we consider worth our time.

This doesn’t mean you can’t do anything for him or with him. As you suggest, his odious convictions aren’t likely to be doing much harm; this isn't an “Apt Pupil” scenario. Yet the assistance you're providing him is a matter of generosity, not of duty. The situation would be more complicated if he were in serious need and had become reliant upon you, with nobody else to take up the slack. But that isn’t what your account suggests. We’re entitled to direct our special benevolence toward people we consider worth our time. If you do decide to step back, in any case, you would be treating him with respect if you explained to him why I have a small handmade stuffed doll that was given to me when I was very young by a close friend of my mother's. The doll was made to look like an old African American man. It has gray overalls and a red shirt. Its bald head is fringed with curly gray hair around the side and back like many old men have. The Disney movie “Song of the South” was popular and regarded as acceptable in the early 1950s, so my mother always called the doll Uncle Remus, after a main character in the film. I've always thought it curious that, though my family is of European descent, my mother's friend gave me an African American doll.

We lived in white suburbia; we did not have any Black friends or any other connection to African American culture. My mother kept it in her dresser to protect it, and it was passed on to me after she died in 1977. It could be called a family heirloom.

Now, my issue is what to do with the doll. I’m 73, and I am thinking about how to pass on several keepsakes. The doll conjures fond associations, and while it could be seen as a representation of an elderly person, I know that it could also be regarded as a figure of an enslaved person. I feel ethically responsible not to pass on insensitive stereotypes.

I have thought about alternatives: I could give it to one of my granddaughters as a family keepsake; I could give it to some African American family (though I don’t know any personally); I could give it to the Uncle Remus Museum in Georgia; I could give it to Goodwill; or I could put it in the trash, which would seem a shame. What would be the right thing to do? Mark, South Carolina

For readers not up on their Uncle Remus: He is the fictional narrator of the Br'er Rabbit stories that Joel Chandler Harris published in the late 19th century, drawing on African American folk tales, often with African origins. Naturally, there's plenty to be said about the cultural politics of Uncle Remus. I’m afraid, though, that your doll doesn't have much to do with that fictional freedman. The usual image of Uncle Remus — going by the drawings in Harris's Uncle Remus collections, and
by that Disney movie, too — is of a bearded man in a peak-lapel jacket. The original illustrators, Frederick S. Church and James H. Moser, gave him spectacles, a waistcoat and even a necktie. In the movie, he wears a white button-up band-collar shirt.

What you've got is a doll of — what, an elderly farmer? I expect that younger members of your own white family might be embarrassed by it, sensing in it a tradition of racial condescension. Destroying it, however, would make sense only if it were impossible for someone to enjoy it without participating in that tradition. I don't think that's true. A museum isn't likely to take an interest in this item, unless there's something special about it you didn't mention. But you could sell it on eBay or, yes, donate it to Goodwill; there's at least a chance that it will end up in the hands of someone who will appreciate it in the right spirit.

We are a group of gay men who have known one another for several years. One of the men came out a few years ago. I'll call him John. John recently came out again, now as transgender. John's desire that we call him by a new name (correcting us when we refer to him as John), his need to talk with us incessantly about his transition, his change of clothing, the slow physical effects of the hormones he is taking — all of this has become a challenge for the rest of the group when we hang around together.

But our real concern is that we recently planned a gay tour in Mexico. The tour is very structured, with little personal time. Our group makes up a majority of the tour.

John seems to think that we should all accept his new identity without reservation, with as much cheer and acceptance as he does for himself, not thinking or caring about how any of us might feel.

As superficial as this sounds, we no longer want our friend John to join us. There are reasons that gay men enjoy traveling together, and it's not to hang around with a woman.

Straight people imagine that gay men view trans men/women in the same inclusive bubble as other gay men. We are all, so the acronym implies, part of that big, progressive L.G.B.T.Q.+ umbrella. Not true. In general, gay men (for all of our performances of femininity) do not understand trans identity — we don't commonly socialize together.

The bottom line is that John's presence will spoil a much-anticipated and expensive vacation. Do we just put up or shut up? Should we talk? If so, about what? Name Withheld

You insist on referring to your friend by a male name, representing the one she used before she transitioned. That indicates a basic lack of empathy; “deadnaming” people like this — using the name they used before transitioning — undermines the process of inhabiting the gender identities they have affirmed, and is, in any case, disrespectful. If the other cis men in your group really think of her in this way and resist acknowledging her transition, then joining you on vacation is probably not a good idea for her.

She has obviously done a lot to explain her transition to you. (That’s one of the burdens uninformed cis people impose on trans people.) You should let her know that you’re still struggling with it. Once she recognizes that, she may well decide herself that she doesn’t want to go on a vacation with you.

A word about your vacation plans: People get together on the basis of social identities all the time. There are plenty of travel clubs with names like Black Girls Travel Too, Latinas Who Travel and Shefari. Small social groups, morally and legally, don't have to abide by the rules that govern public accommodations; in “The Little Rascals,” the He-Man Womun Haters Club (which Spanky restarts in a reaction to a boys-excluding party given by the McGillicuddy girls) would properly not attract the attention of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And a female traveling companion would, I grant, be at odds with your objective of having an all-gay-men holiday. (I've also read that many gay clubs in Mexico have been distressingly hostile to trans women.)
Still, your letter suggests that your problem is not so much the presence of a woman as the presence of a trans woman. If so, you have a way to go in treating your friend with the respect she deserves.

Kwame Anthony Appiah teaches philosophy at N.Y.U. His books include “Cosmopolitanism,” “The Honor Code” and “The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity.” To submit a query: Send an email to ethicist@nytimes.com; or send mail to The Ethicist, The New York Times Magazine, 620 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10018. (Include a daytime phone number.)
The Ethicist

How Much Should I Spend to Keep My Elderly Dog Alive?

The magazine’s Ethicist columnist on how to do right by our pets as they reach the end of life.

By Kwame Anthony Appiah
July 26, 2022

I am a 65-year-old single retired woman who has sufficient means to take care of herself, though I need to watch my budget. My 15-year-old dog has been largely healthy for much of his life. I really love him, but I can see that in the next year or two there will be hard choices about how much money to spend on his care as he ages.

I grew up in a farm environment with parents of limited means. We were always kind to our animals, but they were not family members. My entire family believes in quality of life over quantity — so much so that my mom and her sisters chose quality over quantity at the ends of their lives. I also have a strong practical bent, which is why I saved enough for a comfortable retirement during 35 years of working and despite some less happy events like divorce and serious medical issues. But I know the practical doesn’t always carry the day in terms of doing the right thing.

My concern is not just the cost of treatment for my dog but also gauging when his suffering is too much. I can afford to spend a fair amount, in that it won’t impair my lifestyle, but I am not comfortable allocating many thousands of dollars to treatments for my aging dog. However, I am concerned with what I ethically owe this very devoted pet. What do you think is the right thing to do? Name Withheld

Many people think of their relationships with their pets on the model of their relationships with people. They speak of loyalty, gratitude, duty and, as you do, devotion. But there’s a range of opinion, among philosophers and animal researchers, about whether animals are moral creatures in this way, with some notion of reciprocal obligations. Some researchers make the case that there’s a continuity of moral sentiments between human beings and other animals. If you can be good, though, you can be bad. And is a “bad dog” — the dog who chewed your Jimmy Choos and scarfed down your scaloppine — truly bad, morally speaking?

The quality of the life of a dog or a cat is a matter of the quality of its moment-to-moment experiences.

In “Fellow Creatures,” the philosopher Christine Korsgaard maintains that our treatment of other animals is a “moral atrocity,” but she also argues that nonhuman animals are not moral beings; that people are distinctive in being able to reflect upon their moral reasons and considerations and those of others. We’re not just aware of things; we’re aware that we’re aware of them. We’re uniquely aware too that others have independent interests and perspectives that may be worth respecting. So some philosophers will say that people who ascribe moralized emotions to their pets are indulging a sort of fiction.

What’s plainly not a fiction is that animals can suffer. The quality of the life of a dog or a cat is a matter of the quality of its moment-to-moment experiences. They have no projects to complete; their lives have no narrative arc that matters to them. They do not fear death in the way we do: As far as we can tell, they do not have the concept of death. That’s why the sorts of reasons a person might have for going on even after existence has become a source of pain don’t apply to them. We can ask people whether they want to undergo an arduous treatment that might prolong their days by some amount or whether, say, they prefer to enter hospice care. Your mother and her sisters evidently faced a decision like that. That’s not a question you can pose to your dog.
What you owe your dog is a life worth living by the standards that are appropriate to a canine existence, attentive to what matters to a dog. So you shouldn’t organize treatments that will simply extend a period of suffering, even if you can afford to do so without jeopardizing your own quality of life. Some people, hoping against hope, subject their animals to excruciating courses of radiation and chemotherapy in an effort to buy a few more months of companionship. They ought to do what human beings are capable of doing but often fail to do: reflect on their actions. They should think about whom they’re really helping, about whether this costly form of care amounts to cruelty.

If your dog is entering a final decline, marked by debility and suffering, and, out of concern for his welfare, you choose euthanasia, you will not be letting him down. He has no expectations to disappoint. There are no promises you have made to him. His loss will matter a great deal to you. Don’t make the experience worse by thinking that you have done him wrong.

*We are elderly cousins who live spread across the country. One cousin confided to me that home hospice has begun for her. This cousin has a sibling, but they have had an off-and-on relationship throughout their lives. I happen to have gotten closer to the sibling.*

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*When I asked the ill cousin if her sibling would be notified of her health status, I was told not to say anything. To know that the surviving sibling may never be told what happened (when it does happen) breaks my heart. Must I stay silent? Name Withheld*

**When people tell** you things in confidence, you have a reason not to pass them on. Yet that reason is what philosophers call a “pro tanto” reason. It counts heavily against telling what you know, but there may be other reasons that count in favor of doing so, which outweigh it. It’s not irrebuttable. The moral task is to consider the pro tanto reasons in favor and the ones against and then decide what you should do all things considered.

Here, there is, on one side, your dying cousin’s desire that you not tell her sibling, and, on the other, the fact that keeping this confidence will mean that her sibling may not be offered a final chance to seek reconciliation, or at least say farewell.

Your understanding of their relationship is partial, of course, and perhaps if you knew more, you would share your cousin’s attitude. Passing on the news of her ill health might lead to nothing good. But once she is dead, the opportunity for some kind of resolution — an immensely valuable thing — will be gone forever. And you have a good relationship with this sibling, something that entails certain expectations. You could fairly decide that your pro tanto reason for alerting the sibling outweighs your pro tanto reason for withholding the sad news.

First, though, make a serious effort to persuade your ill cousin to let you pass along the message, or even to do it herself. To secure the interests of people you care about, you may sometimes find it necessary to do things that are contrary to the preferences they express. But the respectful thing is to seek their consent before you do.

*I am legally an adult but still rely on my parents for tuition and board. In my late teens, I came out to them as a transgender woman, and they were incredibly hostile and threatened to cut me off from the family.*

*As a result, I hid this part of myself from them and continue to do so. Now that I am about to graduate, I feel that I owe it to myself to transition but am feeling uneasy about committing, as I know that my parents are still hostile and are paying my living expenses.*

*If I can, should I pre-emptively cut them off so that I have the space to be myself? What moral obligations do I have to parents who are otherwise fair but incredibly hostile to my gender identity? Name Withheld*

*I’m very sorry* your parents aren’t more understanding. The fact remains that how you express your gender identity is up to you. So long as you’re dependent on them, you have to take account of their view about your gender expressions as a matter of prudence, but for no other reason. If you’re asking whether you owe it to them not to transition in virtue of their financial
support, my answer is, No, you don't. The obligations between parents and their children don't include the obligation to falsify who one is.

If your parents are intent on making good on their threat, you'll obviously have a practical choice to make. Still, you can decide to go it on your own without pre-emptively cutting them off and so providing them an alibi for their intolerance. If they won't have anything to do with you if you choose to transition, they, not you, will be responsible for severing ties.

Kwame Anthony Appiah teaches philosophy at N.Y.U. His books include "Cosmopolitanism," "The Honor Code" and "The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity." To submit a query: Send an email to ethicist@nytimes.com; or send mail to The Ethicist, The New York Times Magazine, 620 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10018. (Include a daytime phone number.)
I'm Supporting My Adult Son. He Just Gave $1,000 to a Homeless Woman.

The magazine’s Ethicist columnist on when spontaneous generosity affects a family’s finances.

By Kwame Anthony Appiah

Oct. 18, 2022

I have raised two sons without financial help from their father and recently put the oldest through college. He is now 23 and is working a minimum-wage job. He finds it tedious, but he’s stuck with it while he looks for better opportunities.

He lives at home, and I don’t charge him for anything, even though his food, cellphone, car insurance and car-maintenance expenses all add up to substantial sums. I figure he needs to save up funds so that he can eventually become independent and move into his own apartment. (He pays for his gas, work lunches and outings with friends.) His younger brother will start college in two months, so I am preparing for another four years of significant expenses. These costs will strain my budget; although I work full time, I will add weekend hours to my schedule.

We live in Los Angeles and frequently witness the sad plight of destitute people living in tents throughout our neighborhood. Recently, my son drove past a homeless woman with two small children and stopped to give her some money. He had no cash and instead got her cellphone number so that he could send her money through a payment app. He gave her $1,000 — nearly half his savings.

He described this incident to me at the end of the day and said he knew I would be proud of him, “because you’ve raised me to care about people who have less than us.” Holding back tears of frustration, I said I was proud of him for being such a good-hearted person. And I am proud of his generous spirit; I’m also frustrated that he gave so much of his savings, when he could have either saved up or contributed to the expenses that I struggle to cover for him. I felt that while his behavior was kind, it was also impulsive and irresponsible. I felt too that the money he gave away was not entirely his own; he had it only as a result of me working hard to cover most of his expenses. I know this is the wrong way to feel — when you give something to someone, it’s theirs to do what they want with it, right?

I couldn’t sleep that night, wondering whether I was an ogre for resenting his extreme generosity toward those in genuine need of help — or a floor-mat mom who has failed to teach my son a sense of personal responsibility. Going forward, I plan to charge him for 50 percent of his costs, e.g., his car insurance, cellphone and a portion of the grocery bill. I don’t want these charges to seem like I’m punishing him for his kindness, but I worry that he won’t develop a sense of financial responsibility unless he pays for at least some expenses. Should I have reacted differently? Name Withheld

Let’s agree that people who have some resources have a duty of charity and that the duty is what Kant called an “imperfect” one, in the sense that it’s not owed to anybody in particular. Giving a large amount of money to one random stranger, about whose life, needs and struggles you know very little, isn’t necessarily the best way of fulfilling this duty. Genuine benevolence should be guided by conscientious reflection, deliberation and reason.

Your son works at a minimum-wage job, so this money was the equivalent of many hours of work. What he recounted to you, though, was an impulse of spontaneous generosity — he was moved to act, and he acted — and spending more time learning about this mother’s situation could have resulted in a more valuable and lasting gift. One also thinks about the greater good that a more carefully targeted donation might have achieved. That doesn’t end the conversation. In my view, charitable giving needn’t maximize benefits as measured in some objective way; we can direct our benevolence to our own communities (and perhaps also support anti-malarial initiatives in Guinea).
But taking a more local perspective suggests another problem here: As long as he's your dependent, his finances are enmeshed with yours. Yes, it's his money. All the same, there was something disrespectful or, at the very least, heedless about his giving away half his savings without consulting the person who supports him and who is struggling to cope with looming expenses. Being a member of a household carries responsibilities of mutual concern and care.

You're right to worry that this impulsive act suggests that he hasn't learned to be responsible with his resources. The self-admiring way he described the incident to you as he extracted your approbation suggests extravagance as much as compassion, perhaps reflecting a kind of moral grandiosity. Given his incaution about spending down his savings, you can wonder, too, how intent he really is on securing his own apartment and living independently. So it might indeed be a good idea to tell him that you're going to ask him to cover some of his own costs. It could help him gain a sense of responsibility, as you say; it could also help relieve some of the financial burden you've had to shoulder. This may well be a case in which charity properly begins at home.

At a recent memorial service for a 90-year-old friend, 30 people — family, friends, colleagues and caretakers — warmly shared stories and memories about him. We took comfort in the hour of sharing. No mention was made of the fact, however, that our friend was a gay man who had come out half a century ago and had at least one long relationship. His relatives are conservative Baptists and described him as a lifelong practicing Baptist, reading his early notes from his childhood Bible. In fact, a decade ago, my friend dictated a carefully thought-through essay for me to type (he had problems with his hands) about how and why he became an atheist. He asked for five copies of the essay after it was typed by me and corrected by him, which he may have shared with blood family. I'm distressed that untruths were shared at the service and important aspects of his life omitted. I suspect that the Baptist branch of the family knew the truth but preferred to keep their own picture of who he was. Is it ever proper at a memorial service to offer — gently, of course — corrections of fact? Name Withheld

It can be tempting to keep quiet about certain truths in order to avoid upsetting others who think they're shameful, but silence has helped keep this shame in place.

The atmosphere of shame that surrounded gay people when your friend was young was part of a great wrong done to such people in the past, and this atmosphere persists in too many communities today. Nor should there be anything shameful about atheism. It can be tempting to keep quiet about certain truths in order to avoid upsetting others who think they're shameful, but silence has helped keep this shame in place.

There's another consideration that might lead you to bite your tongue. Convinced Baptists may think that a gay atheist was condemned to eternal damnation — an upsetting thought about someone they loved. But Christians are also committed to the importance of “walking in the truth,” as the second Epistle of John puts it. So even if the facts about their relative would have saddened them, it would have been right and respectful to speak the truth about the man you knew.

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Is It OK That My Co-Worker Keeps Her Anti-Abortion Views on the Down Low?

The magazine's Ethicist columnist on withholding the truth when it may hurt you professionally.

By Kwame Anthony Appiah
Aug. 23, 2022

Nearly nine years ago, I befriended a woman at work who, as I learned over the years of our now strong friendship, is staunchly pro-life. For her, the argument is both scientific and religious: Life starts at conception, and abortion is murder (no exceptions). She is morally consistent, though, in also being against the death penalty and in seeking out stronger social programs for families, like paid parental leave. We no longer work together, but we remain close friends and frequently discuss our views on abortion (I am pro-choice). Having a stronger understanding of one pro-life ideology has, I feel, expanded my thinking. I believe she is a good person who cares about the world immensely.

Especially after the overturning of Roe v. Wade, though, I struggle with having a friend who supports what I think is a restriction of my rights to make my own choices about my body. I struggle, too, with what I think of as duplicity: She actively restricts who she tells about her pro-life views, because she fears it will hurt her advancement prospects and could end friendships. She hopes people will see her as a good person and not judge her first on her anti-abortion views. I cannot decide if this is lying. And while I disagree with her views, it is the potential lying that is most questionable to me.

Maybe it’s like being queer and choosing to stay in the closet, but there’s the issue of what is a choice and what is inherent. Is it right for her to withhold the truth, or even lie, to protect herself, for the sake of her reputation and friendships? Is it OK if people do not want to be friends with or work with someone who has views like hers? I struggle with the idea that she is able to protect herself from the fallout of people knowing she is anti-abortion when implementing her views would take away rights that many people see as vital to living a life with dignity. Name Withheld

John Stuart Mill drew a picture I find appealing of a society in which people express their opinions and listen to those who have a different opinion. In the absence of open exchange, he wrote in “On Liberty,” people miss out: “If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.”

These days, some people too swiftly conclude that Mill’s judgment about the value of free expression was itself an error. But vigorous public discussion of contentious issues remains a valuable part of democratic life, and it’s something to which we can all contribute. Speaking up for what we believe may have consequences, and we should be willing to face them — but only if they are the results of actions that are respectful of our rights.

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Vigorous public discussion of contentious issues remains a valuable part of democratic life.

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The difficulty arises when letting your views be known exposes you, wrongly, to the risk of harm — like being denied advancement at work. Employers ought not to penalize workers for views within the range of reasonable political opinion, but they do. While I agree with you that your friend is mistaken about abortion, her position is, as you point out, a coherent and conscientious one, and it is held, often less coherently, by many of our fellow citizens. Your friend’s view on the topic shouldn’t hurt her professionally. (To judge by the philosophial literature on abortion, after all, this is a topic that’s hard to get right.)

That’s why the analogy with the closeted employee in a homophbic workplace is a useful one. Concealing your sexuality is consistent with self-respect if it’s motivated not by shame but by prudence. Nor are our deepest convictions exactly volitional: Could you choose to see abortion as wrong? People can keep quiet about their views concerning abortion when they’re among colleagues — views that are not relevant to their professional competence anyway — and still hold those views with full moral seriousness.

What about the potential fallout with respect to her friendships? In the best kind of friendship, I grant, you wouldn’t hide a fact that would lead a friend to temper or abandon ties. (I notice you don’t seem impressed that she has stayed friends with you, despite your holding views she must deplore.) But — putting aside the fact that “friendship” is a loose and capacious category — it isn’t your job to let her friends know that she is doing this.
Finally, what about your suggestion that she may deserve to be stigmatized, given the effect of implementing views like hers? Try reversing your positions. Imagine that you’re in a workplace where most people think that abortion is murder. A friend of yours knows that you think otherwise and decides to spread the word because, as she sees it, the implementation of your views has led to the death of millions of innocent human beings. (As in the case you are considering, you are not yourself responsible for these results.) Suppose, in other words, that people on either side of this debate adopted the policy of outing, denying job advancement to and severing friendships with those on the other. Would we be able to have the vigorous public discussions on which democracy depends?

My 88-year-old friend is very forgetful. Every time we make a plan to do something, she forgets, even when the plan was made one hour before she was to leave. Like me, she lives alone in a lovely condo. But I am 92 and have all my faculties, and I’m concerned that she’s developing dementia.

I hate to give up any relationship with her; I’ve known her for many decades and remember when she was vital and fun and game to do anything. But it is driving me crazy to have to call her time after time when she has forgotten that we were supposed to meet. She has spoiled my good time by making me the “mother.” When we do meet, she repeats herself over and over. Should I even try to maintain the friendship?

Her son, who lives 2,000 miles away, takes care of her financial arrangements. Should I call him and discuss all this, even though I don’t know him very well? Please help me to do the right thing by her and by me. Name Withheld

As people’s cognitive capacities decline, spending time with them may become more and more demanding. We’ll extend ourselves for people with whom we have longstanding relationships, and we should. But there are moral limits on what friendship requires. So you’re entitled to step back. In doing so, though, you should also do what you can to help your friend cope with her diminishing abilities. Getting her son involved could be part of that.

I am a gay male elementary-school teacher, and I strive to make my classroom an L.G.B.T.Q.-affirming space. I am also in an interfaith and interracial relationship, which I make known to my supportive students, families and colleagues. A good friend recently converted to Orthodox Judaism and teaches elementary children in a Jewish school that intentionally does not present students with examples of gay or interfaith partnerships, as its leaders believe these partnerships to be wrong. For example, they do not have the wide variety of children’s literature that present diverse families, and there are no out teachers in her school. While my friend is personally loving and supportive of my partner and me, she complies with her school’s policies. I find this hurtful and wrong, particularly in light of attacks on L.G.B.T.Q. rights in various states. My friend has asked me to help her set up her classroom for the fall. I would normally be happy to help her, out of both love for her and the joy I derive from setting up a learning space for children. I am hesitant, however, to help her because of the politics of the school. Should I set aside my hesitation and help her or stand my ground? Kevin Hershey, Brooklyn

Refusing to recognize certain kinds of marriages for religious reasons is consistent with respect for the people in them. Denying their existence? Not so respectful. You can think that, as a matter of policy, religious schools of this sort should be afforded wide latitude while preferring not to lend them a hand. Religious toleration doesn’t preclude expressing vigorous disagreement. I’m glad that your friendship has survived the changes in her life, but you should tell her what you’ve told me: that you would have been happy to help — if the circumstances were different.

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Can I Ditch My Roommate So I Can Live With My Friend?

The magazine’s Ethicist columnist on what you owe the person who lives with you.

By Kwame Anthony Appiah
Published Aug. 2, 2022  Updated Sept. 10, 2022

I’d been living in my apartment for a year when my current roommate moved in. We didn’t know each other beforehand, but she has turned out to be a nice person whose lifestyle is very similar to mine. As roommates go, she’s a good one, and I have no complaints about living with her. But I just found out that one of my best friends is moving to my city in a few months (around when my lease expires), and she and I would like to live together in this apartment. The problem is that I don’t think my current roommate has any desire to leave.

In many ways, this apartment is mine. I was here first, the apartment is stocked and furnished with things I bought and my name is the only one on the lease. My roommate wanted to sign a lease, but because my landlord already knew me, he preferred to keep our current arrangement. We ended up just signing a sublease agreement between us. Of course, none of that is my roommate’s fault, and after living in the space for a year, she must feel a certain claim to it. Is it wrong of me to tell her she needs to leave at the end of our lease? And if not, how do I broach that conversation? Name Withheld

Your roommate’s legal rights will be determined by local statutes; I’ll leave that to the lawyers. But the ordinances of morality have a wider bailiwick. So does your roommate have a moral claim to stay on?

As you say, you were there first; you selected her as a roommate and offered her a place; you have the relationship with the landlord. To speak formally, you’re the primary, or “master,” tenant; she is the subtenant. Your sublease agreement comes with a fixed term, an expiration date. This is morally, not just legally, significant, because it sets reasonable expectations, with mutual obligations. And it isn’t as if you’re proposing to break the sublease early.

You can regret certain consequences of a decision you’ve made without regretting the decision.

Suppose that you, as primary tenant, were to marry or have a child. Nobody would think you owed more than fair notice to a roommate who had been around for a year. Simply having held a fixed-term sublease doesn’t create a substantial moral expectation for renewal. If you had both been there for many years, a presumption might develop that both of you had some kind of claim on the place. But she has not been there long, and you have a reason (a bestie, not a baby, but still) for asking her to leave. When it came to formalizing your relationship, you did so in a way that permits you to ask her to move on: She has a sublease that she can’t unilaterally renew.

Given that she has been a good roommate, you owe her as much notice as you can manage, so that she has ample time to find a new place. You also owe her courtesy in explaining the situation. You’ll be better placed than I am to decide how to broach the conversation; it depends on the relationship you have and what sort of person she is. But let me mention a general point: You can regret certain consequences of a decision you’ve made without regretting the decision (“I’m truly sorry I missed your wedding, but my wife went into labor”). In this case, you can sincerely express regret — you feel bad about inconveniencing her — without saying or thinking you are at fault. You’re not wronging her; you are acting without malice and for an intelligible reason.

My bike was stolen a few weeks ago. I have since been scouring online marketplaces for a new one. While I have the means to buy a new bike, I’d rather not spend an exorbitant amount of money on a single purchase.
In my online searches, I came across a bike that fits my criteria, but I believe it is most likely stolen. The bike price is significantly under market value, and the seller is exclusively using the online marketplace to sell low-priced bikes. The seller also told me the bike was a model that doesn’t exist. I feel morally conflicted about buying a bike I suspect is stolen; I don’t want to perpetuate a system of bike thievery. On the other hand, my action (or lack thereof) will not impact his bike-thieving habits, and I wouldn’t feel upset at whoever purchased my old bike under similar circumstances. Is the purchase justified, or is this like any other social issue in which individual action is essential to an overall cause? Name Withheld, Washington, D.C.

A bicycle is a marvelous contraption of sprockets, chains and wheels: in short, a system. To combat the system of bike thievery — I’ve seen it estimated that two million bikes are stolen each year in the United States, and owners seldom get theirs back — we need a contrary system. Otherwise it’s as if we’re pedaling a bike without a chain. There’s nothing unusual about this situation: When it comes to all sorts of social issues, individual action is effective only if it’s a part of a collective action. The full benefits of shifting from a gasoline-powered motor vehicle to a plug-in one will require not just that lots of people give up gas cars, but also that we decarbonize the generation of electricity. So what (aside from better locks!) would a systematic response to bike thievery look like?

For starters, bike owners should register their serial numbers on sites such as Project529.com and BikeIndex.org. It would help if the serial number were discreetly engraved on the bike in more than one location (manufacturers usually put it on the underside of the bottom bracket); it might help too if the bike had a tamper-evident decal advertising its registration — the New York Police Department has a program that does this. Trackers can help, too. And here’s a legislative proposal: We should require that bicycles be advertised for sale only with serial numbers, which can be checked against a database of bicycles reported stolen.

It isn’t that any of these measures is foolproof; for one thing, thieves can always ditch the frames and sell the parts. But when a type of crime becomes riskier and less remunerative, criminals tend to get out of that business. (Think about bank robbery, which used to be common and has become rare.) I wouldn’t be much troubled if you bought the suspiciously inexpensive bike, given that your individual abstention won’t affect the marketplace, but I hope you’ll donate some of the money you’re saving to a nonprofit that, like Bike Index, is helping to promote the systematic changes we need. We won’t get far with this problem unless we’re all pedaling together.

My family owns a rural vacation property, and we’ve had the same caretaker for more than 50 years. I have a transgender sister who came out to the whole family, including the caretaker, with whom she was particularly close, a few years ago. At the time, there were no issues, and she has interacted with him in person since. Recently, they made plans for her to interview him for a story she’s writing, but when she called to confirm, he said: “Are you the one who used to be — ? I want nothing to do with you. Forget everything I promised you.” This came completely out of the blue, and my sister is devastated. My immediate family is furious. As the caretaker is now older and disabled, he doesn’t do much work anymore, but we have continued to support him financially. He is deeply entwined with our whole family, but this seems unforgivable. Do we ask our extended family to cut him off? Name Withheld

I understand why you’re exercised. What he said to your sister gives you a good reason to drop him and to urge others to do so. Yet what you’re reporting as a story of deplorable intolerance could also be a story of disability — an older man experiencing not just physical infirmity but the onset of dementia, with attendant personality changes. Whatever his personal views, after all, it’s wildly imprudent of him to lash out at a member of a family that helps support him. The issue, then, is whether someone who has been employed by your family for half a century should be cut off based on a single phone conversation, distressing as it was. Try to get a clearer sense of what’s going on with him. You owe that much to your sister, to the disabled caretaker and to your extended family. If it does turn out the story is one of straightforward and obdurate intolerance, you may break with him; indeed, you may owe it to your sister to do so.
My Sister Did Me Wrong in Secret.
Should I Tell Her I Know?

The magazine's Ethicist columnist on why we should express resentment when we are wronged.

By Kwame Anthony Appiah
Published June 28, 2022    Updated Sept. 10, 2022

I was the youngest child in a family of three and the only son; my two sisters were one year apart but a decade older than me. When they were young, my father punished them by taking a belt to them. By the time I came around, he had changed his ways. I was almost always treated with kid gloves; he would go out of his way to ensure that he and I never had the permanent falling out that he had with his own father. I also had more opportunities than my sisters, as my parents became more financially stable, and my sisters moved away from home.

My eldest sister was always envious, and as the years went by, she sabotaged me by saying things about me that weren't true. My parents were too conscientious, or passive, to take sides and wanted me to make amends with her, even though I was the one being gaslit. After my mother died, I saw in her journal an entry in which she expressed puzzlement over why my sister treated me so badly (something she never admitted to me while she was alive).

The final act came to my attention several years ago. There was some expense related to my father that my sister didn't want to pay and wanted him to pay. I happened to be at his house when the item arrived, and I signed for it. Shortly afterward, my sister emailed me to ask if I had the bill of lading. I dutifully scanned it and sent it back to her without any text in the body of the email. A few days later, he died. In those final days, he seemed distant, as if he were nursing a hurt.

After his death, I went through his email to cancel subscriptions and services in his name and came across an email that my sister sent to him and my other sister but not to me. It was a forged version of the email that I sent to her with the bill of lading, in which she wrote, pretending to be me, “Can you get Dad to pay this?” She replied, as if she were the hero, “I already paid it.”

This was like a knife through my heart. I would never have quibbled over a bill nor have written about him in that manner. In my mind, he died thinking that I had, in this small way, turned my back on him. I also was appalled to think that my sister so treacherously connived to put a final wedge between us.

I've thought about this nearly every day for years, but I have never confronted my sister about it — have never even let on that I found the forged email. After it happened, I told my other sister what happened and how much it hurt me. Her reply was: “So what? You're still going to get your share of the inheritance.” Which wasn't my point at all.

I've vacillated between keeping this to myself in order to reveal what I know at some opportune moment or letting her off the hook altogether and continuing to carry this burden. (I should mention that we live far apart and speak once a year, if that.) Is it better to tell her that I know what she did or to take this to my grave? Name Withheld

There's a kind of malevolence that looms large precisely because its purview is so paltry. You imagine your sister painstakingly concocting her deception, and for what? A tiny dig at an indulged younger brother? A bank robber has, we may surmise, allowed his greed to overcome his decency; we can wonder whether your stealthy underminer has any decency at all.

Nothing can be done, needless to say, to reset your relationship with your father and correct the false light in which you were portrayed. The relationships you can do something about are with the living. But your relationship with your sister, it's clear, isn't one you want to repair. So what else might you secure by confronting her?
As every village storyteller and every Hollywood screenwriter knows, people do enjoy seeing the wicked suffer.

Here's a simple moral idea: We're entitled, absent special considerations, to feel and to express resentment when we are wronged. Indeed, you aren't treating people as responsible for their acts if you don't respond to them with the appropriate “reactive attitudes,” as the philosopher Peter Strawson called feelings like resentment. Your elder sisters, you note, grew up without the financial stability you enjoyed and experienced the kind of corporal punishment that was once the norm and that you were fortunately spared. Yet these historically commonplace circumstances aren't known to turn people into devious schemers. So your resentment is merited. If your aim is simply, as we say, to get it off your chest, there's no moral reason not to do so.

But you may also wish to tell her because you want to shame her or otherwise cause her distress. Some people think that taking satisfaction in other people's suffering is always wrong, whatever they've done. This position is airily remote from the affective texture of moral life, from the motivating complex of sentiments — whether admiration or abhorrence — that certain actions can produce.

The simple truth is that, as every village storyteller and every Hollywood screenwriter knows, people do enjoy seeing the wicked suffer, particularly if the wickedness has been directed at them or those they care about. The retributive idea that wrongdoing will be punished is what makes Christian and Muslim ideas of hell — and Hindu ideas about karma — morally plausible. (“There's a special place in hell...” we like to say about those with habits that especially rile us.) Perhaps if you confronted your sister, she would pay some emotional cost for her misdeed. I wouldn't condemn you for taking comfort from her discomfort.

Are you reading too much into your father's demeanor toward you, in the light of your later knowledge? Alas, you'll never know: That's part of the injustice that rankles you. Your sister's mischief was on the smallest of scales; its effect — given that it daily preys on your mind — is not. Your reticence, in sum, is misjudged. For you, these bygones are anything but bygone; your decision to brood silently on an injury done to you only magnifies that injury.

*A family member of mine has quite curly hair. She is a white woman and often wears her blond hair in box braids that she does herself. Whenever I see this hairstyle on her, it makes me cringe.*

*I've mentioned to her and to other family members that I feel uncomfortable with her wearing her hair like that, but everyone just brushes it off. I try to explain that it feels very political and a bit racist, but this is quickly dismissed.*

*Is it racist for her, as a white woman, to wear box braids? Should I do anything about it? If it is racist, how do I explain why she shouldn't wear her hair like that? Name Withheld*

*I can well believe that it isn't a good look for her. Box braids, of the kind Janet Jackson popularized, aren't something everyone can pull off. But that's not because any group owns it. Various kinds of close-to-the-scapula braiding could be found, in ancient times, among the vestal virgins of imperial Rome just as it could among the Egyptians and certain peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. There's no reason to think your ringleted relative's coiffure arises from or conveys disrespect. Forms of adornment and their social significance change by the era, the decade, the season. And treating a fashion faux pas as a racial affront isn't a good look for the rest of us.*
THE ETHICIST

Should I Tell My Elderly Turkish Dad That His Grandchild Is Trans?

The magazine’s Ethicist columnist on considerations when delivering news that will be shocking to a loved one.

By Kwame Anthony Appiah
Aug. 9, 2022

We have a trans son who came out to us four and a half years ago. At first our focus was on his well-being, because we found out that he was self-harming. Immediately, we found a gender clinic in our area. As we sought to understand the struggles of our child and worked to get him the mental-health services that he needed, other issues started to pop up, like our child’s social transitioning.

I am from Turkey, and I am married to a U.S. citizen. We moved to the United States 10 years ago. I come from a Muslim family, but I grew up in Istanbul; my family can be considered modern. I am about to travel to my home country without my husband and children.

In the last year, our son began to transition: He had his top surgery this year and started hormones when he turned 18. Everyone in my family knows about his social transitioning — except my father, back home in Turkey. Using my son’s preferred pronouns is not a big deal, because Turkish has neutral pronouns. But now his voice is changing, and he may get a beard soon. My brothers and my mom asked me not to talk to my father about it, as he is a worrier, and he usually cannot sleep at night when he has things on his mind. He is a very healthy 88-year-old, takes daily walks and eats very healthy homemade food, and I know that he will be around for a while still.

I am so torn about making him confused and lost if I tell him about our trans son. During my stay, he can talk and ask me questions, but I know it will be a big shock for him. Because of the language barrier, our kids do not speak to him much if he calls, but he sees them on our video calls. So he gets the news about how they are doing only through me.

The other option is to wait until we all go back a few years from now and he sees a grandson instead of a granddaughter — and most likely has a heart attack. What should I do? To hide it is to essentially lie to him, but I do not want him to get upset. Name Withheld

I am so glad that your son has been able to grow up with a supportive family. Many trans kids around the world are not nearly as lucky. It’s great that you can focus, as a result, on how just one other member of your family can be brought to accept him. You, your brothers and your mother obviously know your father better than anyone, so I’ll assume you’re right about the distress that discovering he has a trans grandson will cause him. Still, you’re denying your father an important truth about his family: that he has a grandson he isn’t aware of. Even if he does have to struggle to accept this, it’s the only way he’ll ever be able to know this young man.

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Don’t think just about how revealing the truth might affect your father; think about how concealing the truth might affect your son.

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And if the plan is for your son to see him in Turkey one day on a family visit? It isn’t a good idea to reveal the truth only then, and not simply because your father would be shocked. He would also learn that the whole family, including his wife, had been keeping something important from him. He’d reasonably feel he had been disrespected. There’s also a concern about acting as if your son were a source of shame, a secret to be hidden from the paterfamilias. That’s not your intention, I realize, but don’t think just about how revealing the truth might affect your father; think about how concealing the truth might affect your son.
Perhaps you and your mother could sit your father down while you're in Turkey and explain the situation to him, allowing him to ask all the questions he will no doubt have. Whatever his response, it's not likely that he'll literally fall ill. You'll be able to reassure him that your son lives in a social and familial world where he can be accorded the respect he deserves. And you'll also be treating your father with respect. For him, it should be worth a few sleepless nights to get a chance to know his grandchild.

Every time I visit my mother-in-law, I become obsessed with worry about her. She's in her 70s but has numerous health problems, including near-constant U.T.I.s and fatty liver disease. Despite that, she drinks almost every night. I don't know how much, because she's not very forthcoming, but a few years ago she was bedridden and asked my husband and me to buy her alcohol. She was drinking about two to three servings of hard liquor a night.

She has had multiple falls and car accidents as well as episodes that seem as if they may be related to dementia. Recently, for instance, she was driving so erratically on the highway that two people banded together to get her off the road. When they confronted her, she was so disoriented that they called an ambulance and the cops. Nothing was found medically wrong with her, and although she was slurring her words and unable to balance, the cop didn't smell alcohol on her, so he didn't give her any kind of test. He did call a relative who lived nearby, because he didn't think it was safe for her to drive. A few weeks later, she got into another accident, which, luckily, didn't involve anyone else. She doesn't seem to remember much about either of these incidents. She later found out she had a U.T.I. and blames it for her confusion.

My husband and I live in another city, but we came to visit her after hearing about these incidents. Since we've been here, his mother has seemed in fine mental and physical health, but she hasn't been honest about either of the driving accidents. And recently when she drove to pick us up, she seemed very drunk — talkative and off balance and slurring her words. My husband thinks it's the effects of a current U.T.I. that she's not properly treating. Either way, she probably shouldn't have been driving, and I took over driving once she arrived.

My husband has a more patient approach of wanting to listen to his mother and gently nudge her toward more healthful choices. I get more exasperated and want to confront her about her drinking and how it's affecting her health. After all her falls, she has had very hard recoveries in the hospital, and I can't help wondering if some of it is withdrawal symptoms. Should I respect my husband's wishes and let him handle it his way? Or should I push for confronting the elephant in the room and getting her the treatment she needs but doesn't want? Name Withheld

You refer to the treatment she needs, so let me stress that you can't be confident about what needs treating. Does she have a drinking problem? Has she been experiencing U.T.I.-induced delirium, hepatic or uremic encephalopathy, a series of mini-strokes? Is it the onset of a neurodegenerative disease, such as vascular dementia or Alzheimer's? Is it some combination of these conditions? Another issue?

What you can be more confident about is that something is wrong with her, and that she shouldn't be driving. She should get a proper work-up to see if she has a neurological problem (which may or may not be connected with her fatty liver disease). Facing that possibility, like facing a drinking problem, can be harder than lurching from one crisis to another. You and your husband have to decide, together, what the most effective way is of getting to that goal. Point out to him that his mother's driving puts her and others in serious danger, and that this matter is too urgent to be dealt with just by gentle nudging.

When you talk with her, you and your husband might emphasize the real possibility that she could be dealing with conditions that can be mitigated or prevented from worsening with proper clinical management. And if you want to encourage her to put away the car keys, you'll need to think too about how to deal with the practical problems that may arise as a result.

In the age of ride-hailing services, for instance, the cost of getting back and forth to do her shopping and socializing, if she plans it right, will be as manageable as the cost of maintaining a car; and these days, many things can be delivered. She'll have one less thing to worry about in seeking medical help if she sees that she can manage without driving — at least until
whatever is causing her episodes of disorientation has been cleared up (assuming, yes, that it can be cleared up). Whatever you decide to do, though, you'll need to make a shared plan with your husband; he has known your mother-in-law longer than you have, but as a loving son, he may also have a harder time seeing the situation clearly.

Kwame Anthony Appiah teaches philosophy at N.Y.U. His books include “Cosmopolitanism,” “The Honor Code” and “The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity.” To submit a query: Send an email to ethicist@nytimes.com; or send mail to The Ethicist, The New York Times Magazine, 620 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10018. (Include a daytime phone number.)
A few years ago, my son died from an accidental overdose when he took a fentanyl-laced pill. When we got the autopsy report, his mother (we are divorced) wanted to keep the cause of his death a secret. I was reluctant, but in the throes of grief did not make a stand for the truth. We lied and said his death was due to a bad heart.

Recently, I read an article about the plague of fentanyl overdoses, and it broke my heart (again); I decided we must tell the truth. My son's sister agrees. But his mother and stepfather prefer to maintain the lie.

I believe we are morally obligated to speak out, even if belatedly, because it may save another family from tragedy. I am ashamed it has taken this long. Can I ethically go public with the real cause of my son's death when his mother and stepfather are against it? Name Withheld

Lying was wrong here, I agree, and it's good to own up to our moral misjudgments. The issue is how you should think about your earlier agreement with your ex-wife. When you joined with her to propagate a lie, it was at least implicitly understood that you'd stick to the story. You'll be breaking that commitment. You'll also be revealing not just that you lied but that she did. This may not do much damage to her reputation — people will understand why she wanted to cover up the truth when she was grieving — but it will be unpleasant for her.

Still, the commitment was to do something plainly wrong. Not revealing how your son died could be defended as protecting your family's privacy. Actively lying about his death goes beyond the defensible. Given that the deception was wrong — and that setting the record straight will harm your wife only insofar as it reveals her to have done this wrong — she is not entitled to hold you to your earlier commitment.

It would be better, all the same, if you could get her to agree — to release you from that commitment. Because you're no longer a couple, it may be harder to work together toward telling the truth. At the very least, however, you and your daughter can explain to your ex-wife what you plan to do and why.

Your explanation shouldn't hang on the possibility of protecting other families, though. Unless you're planning to take part in a documentary or publish an article, the chances of anyone changing paths as a result of your change of story are surely slim. It's clear that lying never sat well with you. Explain what you want to do as a matter of coming clean for its own sake. Not every act need be defended ethically by appealing to its consequences for others.

My wife and I recently took a trip to Morocco. We went with a well-known travel company that we've used previously. We had a guide and driver for one week. Unfortunately, the guide was surprisingly uninformed about issues of interest to us: history, economy, architecture, the political system, etc. He knew the bare minimum. Maybe we had been spoiled by our last three guides — in Ireland, Scotland and Turkey — who seemed to know everything about everything and were constant sources of facts and anecdotes throughout the trips.

The guide in Morocco was a nice person who took good care of us. We liked him and always felt safe and in good hands, and we gave him a good tip. But he spent an inordinate amount of time chatting with the driver, paying little attention to many of our questions.

The issue is what to tell the travel company in its evaluation survey. I would like to be honest, mentioning what we liked but being clear about our disappointment and offering suggestions on how he could improve. My wife prefers not to say anything negative. Before our trip, because of Covid, he hadn't worked for two years. She is afraid a critical appraisal may result in him losing his job. I say it is unfair to the company and future travelers to be dishonest. Richard, New York City
Your wife’s concerns have some basis. In Morocco, where college graduates have an even higher unemployment rate than nongrads, there are likely highly qualified candidates who could replace him on the company’s referral list. In your desire not to harm the prospects of someone you got on well with, you’re focusing on the effects your candor would have on him alone. But by keeping your misgivings to yourself, you may be denying a more competent person the chance to deliver a better experience to the company’s future clients.

I recently took a three-hour domestic flight, and the woman seated next to me spent the entire flight using a vape pen. Despite wanting to remind her that vaping on a plane is a federal offense, I didn’t say anything. I can see the argument for speaking up (vaping is prohibited on planes because the lithium batteries pose a fire risk) and the argument against (it wasn’t bothering me, and a larger conflict could have ensued from my speaking up). People have been behaving especially aggressively since we came out of Covid isolation, so who knows how this woman might have reacted. And because flight attendants have endured so much harassment lately, I hesitated to involve them. Was I wrong not to speak up? Jenny

The scofflaw in the next seat has always presented a quandary. It’s not as if you can have a tense exchange and then go your separate ways. And so, like you, I tend to bite my tongue. Still, I hope you and I would both speak up if someone were doing something that posed a serious danger.

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Violations of reasonable social norms are everybody’s business.

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She probably wasn’t. The federal ban on vaping on commercial flights, instituted in 2016, was meant to protect passengers from unsought exposure to aerosols. Lithium batteries are found in almost all personal electronic devices. What’s true is that the T.S.A. is antsy about some of these batteries than others, and so you can take vape pens in your pocket or as carry-on luggage, but not as checked luggage. The bigger worry with poorly designed lithium batteries is that they might cause a fire buried away in the hold. If you can feel them overheating in your pocket — or in your hand — you can do something.

The fact remains that what this passenger was doing was inconsiderate, even if you weren’t bothered by it. Violations of reasonable social norms are everybody’s business, and, in any case, she was exposing you, willy-nilly, to the aerosol of a poorly regulated fluid — an aerosol that, research suggests, contains more toxic metals than even cigarette smoke does. Besides, nicotine addicts have options (lozenges, patches) that don’t produce effluents.

Part of what makes people comply with rules is that other people call them to account. A disapproving look, a calm but firm reproof: these sort of norm-reinforcing interventions ultimately help everyone who travels, including those of us who shun confrontation in pressurized cabins. In this sense — if, alas, only in this sense — you and I are free riders.

My wife and I are selling our house, which is far too big for us, and getting rid of a lot of stuff accumulated over a lifetime. We’ve had it all appraised, and most of it is virtually worthless (area rugs, silver-plated cutlery, cheap souvenirs, etc.). We could donate it to charities or simply throw it away. However, our middle-aged daughter has begged us not to get rid of our junk but instead to give it to her to put in her storage unit. The trouble is that she has a hoarding problem (she is the first to admit it), and that storage unit is already full of things that she has been meaning to sell for decades but simply can’t bear to part with. Do we give her our stuff, thereby enabling her hoarding addiction, or donate it, thereby presuming we can make choices for our adult child? Name Withheld

Donating the stuff — and accepting a tax deduction of its fair market value, however small — would solve your problem without adding to your daughter’s. Taking her wishes into consideration doesn’t mean capitulating to them. This isn’t a matter of making choices for her; it’s a matter of not letting her make choices for you.
THE ETHICIST

My Birth Father and Siblings Don't Know I Exist. Should I Contact Them?

The magazine's Ethicist columnist on whether to break the silence with genetic kinfolk or keep quiet.

By Kwame Anthony Appiah
Aug. 16, 2022

When I was born, 55 years ago, my birth mother decided to deliver me to Catholic Charities so that I could be adopted. I was lucky to be raised by loving and caring people who never hid my adoptive status from me. They made it a routine part of my story — much like having blue eyes or being lactose intolerant. It was part of who I am while still being essentially a mystery: I do not know my family medical history nor what time of day I was born nor (until recently) what genetic relatives I might have.

Many years later, things have changed. I obtained a legal copy of my birth certificate with my birth mother’s name. A DNA test turned up a close relative. Conversations with the relative revealed that my birth mother was — and is — deeply ashamed of my birth, given her religious beliefs. Her husband, who is very likely my birth father, has no idea that I exist. Nor do three genetic siblings.

The relative has spoken of me to my birth mother, and I have been asked to refrain from any further contact with my genetic family; my birth mother never thought I would be able to learn who she was, let alone find any other genetic kin. The fact that I am a gay man also shame her and conflicts with her deeply held religious beliefs. That she placed a son for adoption and that this son is gay are things she wouldn't want anyone to learn, I've been informed.

In short, I am torn. I worry about making a selfish decision. If I accede to her wishes, my birth siblings and my father will be denied the chance to decide whether they want to engage with me in any way. I would not push my presence on them, but I feel, in some ways, that they should be able to make the choice to have me as a part (however small or large) of their lives.

If I do not accede to her wishes, it feels like a violation of whatever agreement she entered into when she made what was likely a heart-wrenching decision in the late 1960s, a period in which we thought differently as a society about many things.

Is contacting my genetic siblings just a selfish, self-justifying unethical act? Or does my silence amount to complicity in keeping information from family members who might want to know? Name Withheld

Shame is the feeling that you’ve done something that makes you unworthy of respect or, worse, worthy of contempt. But when we conceal things out of shame, that act of concealment may, over time, grow into a far larger source of shame. Your birth mother hid your existence from the people she knows, it would seem, because you were conceived out of wedlock. If what you were told is true, then what she’s determined to keep secret from her husband isn’t that she had premarital sex — they did this together, after all — but that she somehow had their first child without telling him.

When we conceal things out of shame, that act of concealment may, over time, grow into a far larger source of shame.

Keeping from your husband the fact that you had a child with someone else before you married is a big problem, and yet one that a spouse could probably adjust to. But hiding from your husband the fact that you had a child together? That’s of a different order. It means that there’s a very substantial lie at the heart of their relationship. It’s hard to measure the sense of bewilderment and betrayal that her husband and her other children would feel. Is this something you can really come back from?
All this assumes, of course, that the family situation is what you think it is. Without going into details, I'll say that there are certain DNA results connecting you to one of the couple's genetic descendants that could make it highly probable. The stakes would be less if learning about you simply meant that her children learned that their mother — who is, it would seem, devoutly Catholic — had premarital sex. (If she would also feel ashamed that the son she placed for adoption is gay? Well, that's her problem. The Catholic Catechism teaches that gay people “be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity.” So her faith is no excuse.) But the truth that your existence represents would be far more destructive, owing to her profound misjudgment in keeping this secret from her husband, your birth father.

Right now, you have an informant among your genetic kinfolk, someone whose reports you plainly consider trustworthy. This person has spoken to your birth mother and is conveying her position and perspective. So you've already learned that your mother doesn't want a relationship with you — doesn't want to confront the reality of what she did. I can tell you that you are within your rights to open the door to a relationship with your genetic siblings and father. But I can't assure you that, all things considered, it's the right thing to do.

If your genetic homecoming devastates a marriage and a family, the blame will have been hers but the choice will have been yours. Talking to her, by contrast, won't result in irreversible damage, however painful she finds it; she, like the close relative you've been in touch with, already knows the story. Even if she doesn't reconsider her stance, you may be able to learn more from her about your other relatives. You could gain some understanding about why she made the decisions that she made. In the end, you may decide to let this woman, who's perhaps in her mid-70s, continue with the life she built for herself over the decades. There's a heavy burden, certainly, in being the one to shatter this life. Sparing her, you could be sparing yourself, too.

* I was born out of wedlock and given up for adoption at birth. My adoptive parents were unhappily divorced when I was a toddler, and they both believed that it wasn't necessary for me to know about my birth parents. After years of research, I now know my story. My parents were in their teens: my father a visiting university student from Iraq; my mother an American who had just graduated from high school. (At birth I was labeled “mixed race.”) My birth parents are both still alive, though elderly, and both have families who probably know nothing of this episode of their lives.

* I would like to meet them, talk to them, see them, say hello to them. I've had a happy and successful life and am not looking for anything from them, like money or an ongoing parental relationship. But it would mean everything to me to meet/see/hug someone to whom I was actually related by blood. I also understand, however, that they may not wish to revisit this long-ago moment in their lives. I'm curious if you have a perspective here. Name Withheld

**When parents have** a child whom they are not prepared to raise, they have the right to place that child for adoption. But they don't have the right not to be approached by that child as a grown-up. Even if the parents were promised confidentiality at the time of the adoption, that promise isn't one the child was a party to.

And you're seeking only to contact *them*, not to reveal their secret to others. This situation, in short, is utterly remote from the one that I've discussed earlier in this column. Will your birth parents be distressed if you contact them? They may be; or they may be curious, even excited. Any potential negative consequences here would seem to be manageable — and more than offset by the prospect of what could be a valuable relationship for you and for them.

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I come from a working-class family. I have worked very hard in school and graduated college with little debt, so when I was given the opportunity to attend an elite law school, I took it — along with a $150,000 price tag. Some people may scorn me for such a decision, but this was my dream school, and I saw it as a ticket to an echelon of society and opportunity that was otherwise entirely barred to me.

While I entered law school hoping to work in the public interest, I now face the reality of paying back my loans. I took an internship at a big law firm where I am paid very well, and I’ve been invited to work for them once I graduate. The salary would be enough for me to pay off my loans, help my family and establish a basic standard of living for myself — plus maybe own a house or even save for retirement, which would be impossible for me on a public-interest or government salary.

But the firm’s work entails defending large corporations that I’m ethically opposed to, including many polluters and companies that I feel are making the apocalyptic climate situation even worse. Even if I only stay at the firm for a short time to pay off my loans, I would be helping in these efforts for some time.

Basically, I feel torn between two value systems. The first is the value system of my parents, which prizes hard work and self-sufficiency. My parents are very proud of me for working in a high-level job that allows me to support myself. The second is my own personal moral code — the little idealist within me who wants me to drop the corporate angle in order to help as many people as I can, even if it results in a difficult life for me.

I know it is selfish to take this corporate job. But is it unforgivable? Will defending polluters, even for a short time in a junior position, be a permanent black mark on my life? Name Withheld

Congratulations on your achievements thus far — and on asking hard questions about how to use the skills and the qualifications you’re acquiring. Decisions like the one you face are complicated. You will have been taught in law school that everyone accused of a serious crime is entitled to legal counsel. The situation is different when it comes to civil cases and to corporate defendants. (The details here vary with the types of cases and with jurisdictions.) But corporations are generally required to represent themselves with properly licensed lawyers, in both civil and criminal proceedings. And the principle remains that representing a malefactor isn’t, ipso facto, an act of malefaction.

In the earning-to-give approach, people set out to earn lots of money and give a great deal of it to humanitarian causes.
Now, we're rightly concerned when corporations do damage to the environment, and so to humanity as a whole. But it's hard to see how the world would be improved if such corporations couldn't find legal advice and representation. Is a corporation really going to behave better if it doesn't know what the law is? More than that, the world would most likely be made worse if corporations could only find lawyers who were indifferent to the wrongs their clients were doing. As with criminal defense, we need lawyers who will work diligently for people and associations whether they approve of them or not. Your job, whatever your feelings about your clients, would be to give them what they're entitled to. That includes effective and committed legal advice and guidance; it does not include helping them to break the law or lie to the authorities. Indeed, you have a duty, as an officer of the court, to tell them they can't do these things and to refuse to assist them in doing so.

Even if what your clients are doing is legal, you may still feel uncomfortable supplying guidance and representation, because the activities shouldn't be legal. We ought to have laws and regulations that treat the climate crisis with full seriousness, and we don't. Refusing to take the corporate-law job does disconnect you from the wrongs these clients do but wouldn't deprive them of legal assistance. After all, the firm isn't going to stop serving them if you decline to join it. But you don't suggest that your career choice will make a difference to what these clients do. You simply don't want to be involved in helping them to do it. That's why you speak specifically of a “black mark” on your life.

I'm not sure that this form of moral accounting makes much sense, though. Again, for an adversarial legal system to function justly, there have to be lawyers who are willing to serve clients they disapprove of. If that's a demerit, it has to appear on somebody's moral scorecard. But surely it can't be both good that somebody does it and a demerit for the person who has done it. (You can regret having to do something as part of your job, even if that something isn't itself wrong.) And, on the bright side, not all of your clients are likely to be evildoers; your company will also be doing some pro bono work for people you may actively enjoy working for.

Some analysts, notably those associated with the effective-altruism movement, might even suggest that the high-paying track could be the morally best one for you to take. In the earning-to-give approach — explored in the philosopher Peter Singer's book “The Most Good You Can Do” — people with the requisite skills may set out to earn lots of money and give a great deal of it to humanitarian causes, helping the world more than they would have had they devoted themselves directly to doing good. You might, in this scenario, pay off those loans, help your family and then, as a richly remunerated partner, give a big chunk of your earnings to saving lives in the developing world or supporting causes that will advance climate security and justice. You'll have passed up the low-paying job at the public-interest center, but your generous donations will fund three such positions. If your aim were simply to help as many people as you can, you might conclude, after a careful assessment, that going for the big paycheck was the right thing to do.

Still, one party who matters here is you. Selfishness isn't a matter of taking your interests and those of your loved ones into account; it's a matter of giving those interests more weight than they deserve. Getting money to escape debt and help your family is a perfectly reasonable aim, consistent with being an ethically admirable person. But so is taking satisfaction in your work. If much of your time is spent in the service of corporate nogooodnks, you may well end up being unhappy. That's not a choice you can be obliged to make. On the other hand, if you do become a partner in a firm like the one at which you're interning, you may be able to change the balance of cases that the firm accepts. Or you could plan on switching jobs later to better align your livelihood with your values, defending the environment rather than those who ill use it. It's altogether possible that your having worked at the high-paying law firm will give you valuable insight into how corporate polluters operate.

The calculus here involves all these conflicting considerations. Whichever way you go, I suspect, you will be able to do good. Your letter suggests that the “little idealist” within you won't be taking early retirement; staying on the course you're now on doesn't mean that you'll forget about the causes that matter.