

CHAPTER **1**

Fundraisers and the Good Life

PAUL C. PRIBBENOW, PHD, CFRE

Some 20 years ago, I sat in a Chicago hotel conference room taking the required examination in order to earn my Certified Fundraising Executive (CFRE) designation. It was a multiple-choice test, intended to measure my understanding of the core areas of fundraising knowledge and practice. I remember vividly the question near the end of the exam that posed this situation: “You are the director of development for a small social service agency in Chicago. You receive a call from the board member who chairs your development committee offering you tickets to the Cubs game that evening. What do you do?”

There were four options from which to choose—and there was a right answer according to the code of ethics—but all I remember is thinking how much I loved baseball. I began to think back on my growing up in Wisconsin and how my dad would take my brothers and me to Milwaukee to watch Major League Baseball games. I remembered fun car rides together, baseball park concessions, and the thrill of seeing big league ballplayers up close. Those memories were about family, about rich and valuable learning experiences, about joy and fun. Those memories were about my moral life.

I chose one of the multiple-choice answers—hopefully the right one, which is that I could not accept the tickets for my own use (though there are ways to accept them on behalf of clients or for the good of the organization)—but what I realized in that moment was that too often

we focus our moral reflection and decision-making primarily on the dilemmas we face in our life and work, rather than on all of the ways in which our values help to create what I want to call “the good life.” Too often, we focus on preventing misbehavior rather than inspiring the richness and joy of the good life.

Why is this? I think it is arguable that one reason for our often punitive focus in ethical deliberation is that the world is a complex and messy place, and the fact is that human beings don’t really like the messiness. We want answers, we want conflicts resolved, we want to believe that if we simply apply the right principle to the dilemmas we face, we will have our answer and resolution. I get that. There are many days on which I would give anything for the right answer to life’s big (and small) questions.

As fundraisers, we face this messiness daily. Our work involves relationships, keeping confidences, serving as links between institutions and individuals, and perhaps most vexing of all, money. And for a whole lot of reasons, it is simply easier for us to believe that we need answers to the ethical challenges we face.

At the same time, I would argue that the nature of our work as fundraisers actually places us in situations and relationships where the overriding ethical consideration is not misbehavior, but the value-laden decisions that donors and volunteers make to further causes they are passionate about by giving of their time, talent, and resources. What a privilege it is to be in those situations and relationships! What a noble profession we have chosen, where we are witness to remarkable acts of generosity and vision and commitment! What a privilege and obligation we have in our professional work to help our donors and volunteers give voice to their values! University of San Francisco professor Michael O’Neill has gone so far as to claim that fundraisers must be moral trainers because we are with people when they are making moral decisions.¹ Now, that is the good life!

So, our dilemma in thinking about our moral lives is also messy. We are human beings and we crave order and resolution. We also often crave having someone else tell us what is right and wrong. (As an ethicist, I often find myself consulting on the moral dilemmas folks face,

and I am quick to remind them that, though I might offer an opinion about how to respond, my primary duty is to help them think through on their own or with peers what is the right thing to do.)

Our humanness is extended by the fact that our primary work as fundraisers involves dealing with other humans in often intimate and personal ways, thus leading to even more complexity and vulnerability in our moral lives.

Our responses as a fundraising profession to these challenges for our ethical reflection and decision making are instructive. More than 50 years ago, when our first professional associations were being formed, our focus was on drawing together the disparate threads of our professional community—recall that the first professional fundraisers often came out of advertising or journalism or community organizing. In those early days, the issues facing the profession were more about identity and public perceptions of the work of fundraisers.

As the profession evolved—and the numbers of self-described professional fundraisers increased—it became important to begin to codify the ethical values and standards that governed the behavior of fundraisers and that also depicted our commitments to being accountable to the various publics we served (organizations, communities, and the wider society). The work of some of our most wise and experienced colleagues to craft a code of ethical principles and standards for the National Society of Fundraising Executives (NSFRE)—now the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP)—is a model of professional reflection and self-regulation. The AFP Code has gone through many changes during the past 50 years, but it remains a comprehensive and compelling statement of our common values and aspirations as a profession.²

The issue is, of course, that when you make the effort to write down such a code of ethics, it can take on a life of its own (think of Moses and the Ten Commandments!). Given our human and professional inclinations, codes of ethics can quickly become primarily the law that helps us respond to misbehavior rather than a statement of the sort of moral aspirations we share for our work and the world.

Over my 30-year career as a fundraiser, I have watched my colleagues become more and more focused on applying the Code to solve ethical

dilemmas. I lead workshops where we review ethical cases and the climax is often giving participants the right answer to the multiple-choice questions. Despite my efforts—and those of many like-minded colleagues—to expand the moral conversation to helping colleagues develop ethical reflection skills and to point to the promise of the good life, we often revert to the legalistic parsing of the dilemmas we face.

But the times are changing! A few years ago the AFP Ethics Committee dedicated itself to developing resources for ethical reflection and decision making that are designed to support this more expansive vision of the moral life for fundraisers. And the timing makes sense, I think, in the context of the evolution of our profession. Our fiftieth anniversary as a professional association in 2010 provided an occasion to say that our important and groundbreaking work on ethics over the decades had now led us to understand the need to help our colleagues not only respond to ethical dilemmas, but to focus as well on their ethical growth and development as professionals. This represents a sea change for our association and profession. The launching of the AFP Ethics Assessment Inventory (EAI) in 2011 created a forum for both individual and common reflection on our moral aspirations, the sorts of people we hoped to be, and on what I might call our public character as professionals and a profession.

What does this mean? What difference will it make to focus on ethical growth as opposed to solving ethical dilemmas? What is the good life for fundraisers—other than following the rules and doing the right thing?

Good questions—and to answer them we need to go back a few millennia to learn from the ancient philosopher Aristotle, whose entire view of ethics is linked to the concept of the good life.³

Not to get too wonky, but just a little bit of philosophy helps. Aristotle believed that the good life is linked to how we define our *telos*, our ultimate end. For Aristotle, the proper end of human beings is happiness. But this is not happiness in our usual twenty-first century way of defining it—the stuff we possess, the relationships we enjoy, the success we achieve. Rather, happiness for Aristotle is something that comes from within, it comes from our making choices that promote

our true nature. For humans, these choices are linked to our particular powers—powers of intelligence and will, the power to make choices, and develop good habits. The good life, therefore, is directly linked to the development of good, moral habits (what are called virtues) and the turning away from bad habits (what are called vices).

The good life, then—at least according to Aristotle, who many of us think got it right—is about the appropriate ordering of our virtues and the resisting of vice. We achieve the good life when we find harmony and peace, controlling our human appetites and perfecting our human powers through the virtues. Perhaps you’ve heard of the four principal (or cardinal) virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. The good life is defined by our capacities to make choices that order these virtues in our thinking and acting, and to develop the habits of living that lead to good character and order.

There is much more nuance and complexity in Aristotle’s ethical philosophy, but I would argue that his vision of the good life is precisely what we are trying to promote for fundraisers as they navigate their ethical lives. We want fundraisers to have the support and resources they need to reflect on their experience, to make choices that bring order to their lives, to develop good and virtuous moral habits, and ultimately to be perceived by others as individuals (and a professional community) seeking to live the good life.

Our good colleague, Albert Anderson, writing in his *Ethics for Fundraisers*, challenged all of us to find in Aristotle the means to consider how “achieving moral excellence begins as a natural bent to gain happiness mainly by discovering and developing a pattern of actions shaped by self-conscious choices that draw the line between too much and too little, the excessive and deficient . . .”⁴ Hardly an easy undertaking—having someone give us the right answer seems so much more expedient in the midst of my busy life—but surely one worth aspiring to as our fundraising profession continues to evolve in its important public work to support social causes and values.

So what does the good life look like for fundraisers—other than meeting goals and closing gifts? The research undertaken in the development of the EAI offers us a beginning point to answer this question.

As detailed elsewhere, the EAI project began by asking fundraisers this question: “Think of an AFP colleague whom you consider to be highly ethical. Describe the behaviors of that person that led you to this conclusion.”⁵ The 2,528 answers received were sorted and categorized by a group of our peers, and ultimately six responses were recommended as of the highest order. We might look at these six characteristics of ethical fundraisers as our professional virtues.

We claim that: “An ethical fundraiser aspires to: *Observe* and *adhere* to the AFP Code of Ethical Principles and Standards (and other relevant laws and regulations); *Build* personal confidence and public support by being *trustworthy* in all circumstances; *Practice honesty* in relationships; *Be accountable* for professional, organizational and public behavior; *Seek* to be *transparent* and forthcoming in all dealings; and, *Be courageous* in serving the public trust.”

Here then are six virtues, if you will, of the ethical fundraiser. Here is the basis for good, moral habits. Here is the stuff of a good life for fundraisers. We observe the rules. We are trustworthy, honest, accountable, and transparent. And we are courageous. The issues are how we define these virtues, how we respond to the challenges to living this way as professionals, and how we support each other in making the choices and developing the habits that bring order and harmony to our professional lives.

Allow me to take each of these three issues in turn as the foundation for understanding fundraisers and the good life.

DEFINING THE VIRTUES

First, defining the virtues. I want to commend my colleague, Robert Shoemaker from the Center for Ethical Business Cultures at the University of St. Thomas, whose article in this volume provides an overview of how the EAI was developed. Once the six characteristics of ethical fundraisers were identified, Shoemaker understood the need to provide an initial definition of those characteristics. In what follows, I borrow from his definitional work⁶ as the starting point for defining the virtues associated with ethical fundraisers. Though Shoemaker offered

his definitions in alphabetical order, I want to argue that there is a certain rank order to the virtues that is important for understanding their integrated role in defining the good life for fundraisers.

Adherence (or Observance)

This is the baseline for a moral life—following the rules and living as if they matter. Ethical fundraisers act according to the highest standards of the profession, not because they have to but because they know it is the right thing to do. The importance of adherence as a virtue is not so much the legal aspects of observing the AFP Code of Ethical Principles and Standards—as important as such observance is—it is the understanding that the Code and Standards reflect a positive depiction of the sort of profession we aspire to be and the sort of world in which we want to live. In other words, what is important in adherence is not simply that I don't do something because the Code says so. For example, the Code says don't take donor lists from one organization to another when you change jobs. I would go further to say that the virtue of adherence says that I so understand and respect the need for healthy organizations, and I appreciate how transience in jobs can potentially threaten organization well-being, that I would do anything in my power to protect the needs of the organization I am leaving. My career decision does not override the need to honor organizational mission and public trust.

Trustworthy

Trust is at the heart of the relationships that fundraisers create and sustain in support of mission-based organizations. We all know what damage can be done to otherwise good and noble work by breaking trust with the mission, values, and constituencies we serve. There are countless examples in our society of individuals manipulating a relationship for their own benefit, and thereby calling into question the trustworthiness of an entire organization (and occasionally, the entire philanthropic sector). I believe that the concept of trust and trustworthiness has various components: it is about trust in competence (and thus, the need for fundraisers to be technically rigorous); trust in interpersonal relationships

(and thus, fundraisers must be particularly careful of relationship boundaries); and trust in organizational integrity (and thus, fundraisers must hold their organizations to a high standard in trustworthy policies and procedures). Trust also impels us to attend to relationships on various levels—from individual relationships, to organizational ties, to the public good and trust. No one individual or organization is perfect, so trust can be strained if not broken, in the course of our hectic and complex daily lives. At the end of the day, broken trust may demand another moral skill that seems in short supply—the ability to ask for and offer forgiveness.

Accountable

This seems so obvious, but often runs counter to the demands of the marketplace and the world in which we live. Fundraisers have multiple accountabilities—in fact, part of the distinctive aspect of our professional work is that we reside on the boundaries of an organization, linking its mission and programs with donors and volunteers and their values and commitments. I think of fundraisers as having a role as consciences of the philanthropic community, being willing to ask tough questions and hold all parties accountable for their responsibilities and actions. We must honor organizational mission and strategy, of course. We also must honor donor intent and interests. We live in a society in which most people wait for accountability to be demanded, rather than pursuing it proactively. As a virtue, accountability demands of fundraisers intentionality for taking responsibility, not waiting to be asked. For example, a recent situation in my organization called into question whether or not we were honoring donor intent in our handling of various restricted funds. When this issue was called to our attention by fundraising staff and others, we were challenged as an organization to take responsibility for circumstances in which we had been lax and to establish policies and procedures to live up to a higher standard. That is pursuing accountability, rather than waiting for it to be imposed.

Honesty and Integrity

Honesty in our various dealings is always the moral path, and integrity in our relationships is grounded in both trust and honesty. Speaking the

truth in the midst of a gift negotiation may be difficult to do. We've all been there in situations where a gift seems so close and when the donor asks that tough question about the program's impact or outcomes, we are tempted to fudge the results and slant the truth. In the end, if honesty is not practiced in all of our dealings, then we will live a lie—whether a small or big lie—and ultimately know that the integrity of our relationships is fragile. Many of us know that public perceptions of fundraisers are sometimes stereotypical—watch your pocketbook when the fundraiser is around, or don't tell that person on the plane next to you that you are a fundraiser for fear they'll clam up. We must overcome these stereotypes, not by continuing to skirt the truth with some self-justification, but by practicing the virtue of honesty in all we do. No matter what the stereotypes may depict, ours is noble work, helping to support worthy organizations and causes, and we are a privileged profession, witnesses to and facilitators of moral acts of generosity and vision. What reason do we have to be less than truthful? Ultimately, a lack of honesty insinuates itself into the very fabric of our communities, leading to a breakdown in the integrity of our mission and work. That is too high a price to pay for not telling the truth, as it undermines the public trust and values.

Transparent

This is rather a “buzz” concept these days, but the fact that it ended up as one of the six virtues of ethical fundraisers strikes me as meaningful and provocative. This is about accountability, honesty, and trustworthiness, of course (this begins to show how these six virtues are interrelated), but it points to an even more demanding standard. Stephen Carter, a Yale law professor, has written about the demands of moral life by outlining three steps needed to live with integrity. First, you must reflect on the values and issues raised by a moral situation. Second, you must act based on your reflections. And third, you must be willing to stand up at the end of the day and be accountable for both your reflection and action—even when it didn't go well. This, for me, is the sort of claim that transparency makes upon ethical fundraisers. Yes, we should be open and clear in our communications and procedures. Yes, we should respect the wishes of donors, providing accurate and complete information about

our organization. But more than that, we should live as professionals who have nothing to hide and who understand that as public servants, we have a special obligation to live our lives out in the open, to not hide behind whatever boundaries or policies or social norms that might otherwise provide cover. Ethical fundraisers are an open book because their work serves the public.

Courage

The final virtue of ethical fundraisers is perhaps the most provocative and unexpected, but in the end, it seems almost commonsensical that those of us called to this work—this work in service to the public trust, this work guided by the values and virtues described herein—will be in many cases, living and working against the grain of the world's norms and expectations. And that takes a huge amount of courage. Following the rules, telling the truth, being open and accountable, and building and sustaining trust in all our dealings, sets the bar high for our professional lives. As a long-time member of the AFP Ethics Committee, I have witnessed case after case of our professional colleagues succumbing to the temptations and demands of the business of our lives—temptations to skirt the truth and manipulate relationships; demands to meet goals and close gifts; expectations to do what is needed to succeed, not what is right and good. Thus, the claims of moral courage may be the highest standard of all, tying together the other virtues to offer a pathway to the good life. No one said it would be easy, only that it was the right thing to do, the right way to live.

OBSTACLES TO LIVING THE GOOD LIFE

With these brief definitions of the virtues of ethical fundraisers in mind, our second challenge is to name the obstacles to living the good life. And they are myriad. Allow me to suggest three primary challenges we face in our lives as fundraisers that seem to me central to our ethical work ahead.

1. **No one taught us how to do this work.** I'm not joking. Perhaps the core challenge to pursuing the good life in our professional work is that we live in a society where we are expected to just get the job done, and there are fewer and fewer opportunities to learn a different path. Perhaps you took a required ethics course in college—or maybe you went to a parochial school where ethics training was part of the culture—or maybe you grew up in a family that took the time to think together about what is important and how we should behave. But more and more, it is the case that we have few training opportunities to practice ethical reflection and virtuous living. I often find myself leading ethics workshops with experienced fundraisers who have never taken the time to think through an ethical situation, to imagine different ways of responding to the situation, and to consider the implications of their actions (or lack thereof). These are good people, good professionals, who often fall into the trap of choosing the expedient or worse, simply because they've always done it that way. Living the good life—thinking about it and making the right choices—takes practice.
2. **Our professional work is often judged by external standards, not internal rewards.** The historic genius of the professions in America is the dynamic between expertise and serving the common good. At their best, professionals understand that they have a technical expertise that is needed by patients or clients or students—or the wider public. They are given a privileged status in society because of this expertise and are expected to live up to a higher standard because of it. Part of that higher standard is the obligation to give back to society, to use your expertise in service to the world, even to take on public leadership. When this dynamic between expertise and service is in balance, professionals find their happiness in the intrinsic rewards they receive, by the sense that they are doing what they are called to do—this is what Aristotle meant by the good life. When, however, as is more and more the case, professionals are defined more by the economic goods their work engenders than by those intrinsic rewards, it is hard to live

a good life. Meeting the bottom line, beating the competition, securing the perks of success in an upwardly mobile career—these are external rewards and standards that are often sources of temptation to cut corners, to manipulate relationships, to do whatever it takes to get more. The good life is difficult to navigate when the standards of success are more about vice than virtue.

3. **Our professional work revolves around relationships and resources that often entangle us in the most intimate aspects of peoples' lives.** Robert Payton once suggested that one of the central challenges for fundraisers is that “the currency of our work is often ‘currency.’”⁷ When we work with donors and volunteers giving so deeply of themselves with time and talent and financial resources, we are drawn into a web of social and psychological dynamics that can be very difficult to navigate. Some of the most vexing ethical dilemmas we face in our work are related to what we know about peoples' lives (think about confidentiality), how we maintain appropriate boundaries in our relationships (think about getting too close to a prospective donor, or coming to think we ought to live in his/her world), and how we balance the needs of our organizations with the needs of donors and volunteers (think of honoring intent or not telling the truth about our organization's fallacies). It is hard to pursue the good life when the very nature of our work places us in situations where our decisions and actions are inextricably bound up with someone else's values and gifts. Virtue requires moderation between extremes. Our professional work often situates us amidst extreme circumstances—and it is hard to avoid the force with which those extremes pull us away from the moral path.

These, then, are simply a few of the obstacles to fundraisers living a good life. But if it was easy, then I wouldn't be writing this essay, and we wouldn't need ethics training or inventories or books. I think it is important for all of us to take a deep breath and admit vulnerability when it comes to the ethical challenges ahead. Humility may be the most helpful virtue we learn to practice. We'll make mistakes. We'll

take two steps back after one forward. We'll be tempted to do just what it takes. And we'll enjoy the rewards we reap from our work, even if they come with a price.

But there are things we can do if we genuinely hope to grow as ethical fundraisers and pursue the good life.

GROWING AS ETHICAL FUNDRAISERS

First, we can find opportunities to *practice* ethical reflection and living the good life. I often tell students not to take on the entire challenge at one sitting. Begin with the EAI and be honest with your answers. When you see your results, reflect on what they may tell you about your own values and those of your organization. Create opportunities to engage in conversation with professional colleagues—either in your workplace or through our professional associations—about ethical situations (not necessarily dilemmas you face) but also how you are perceived by peers, what you hope to accomplish in your professional life, and what sort of world you'd like to live in. Talk about how much you like baseball, even as you consider whether or not you should take the baseball tickets you've been offered. And consider how in your own professional life you might do a better job of following the rules: being trustworthy, honest, accountable, and transparent; and perhaps taking a courageous stand on something that you've always thought you should. Practice is the only path to the good life.

Second, we can *create communities of moral deliberation* in the organizations we serve. The good life is not possible without a network of support for the choices you make and the virtues you seek to live out. I have written elsewhere of specific strategies to create these communities of moral deliberation⁸—involve your colleagues in crafting an organizational ethics statement or use a tool such as administrative case rounds or clearness committees to create safe places for ethics conversations. The point is that this cannot be solitary work. This is why the EAI asks you to share your perceptions of your own ethical situation, as well as that of the organization you serve. The organization

in which you work is not the only community of which you are a part. Other so-called communities of memory—family, religious community, school, neighborhood, and professional association—all play a role in your life and offer important resources for learning about and practicing the good life.

Finally, we can remember that *the work we do as professional fundraisers is a form of public service*⁹; that is, we serve the public trust by engaging people and raising funds in support of the missions of our organizations—missions that reflect the most deeply held values of our society. Whether education, the arts, social service, health care, the environment, or faith-based communities, each of the organizations we serve seeks through its mission-based work to be a force for good in society. We have the privilege to serve those missions with our professional expertise and personal commitment. Our organizations deserve our very best—both technically and ethically. Our noble work on behalf of organizational missions calls us to a higher standard, a standard that I have chosen to call the good life.

We have choices. What will you choose? The good life awaits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul C. Pribbenow, PhD, CFRE, is the tenth president of Augsburg College (MN) and is chairman emeritus of the Association of Fundraising Professionals Ethics Committee and Research Council.



NOTES

1. Michael O'Neill, "Fundraising as an Ethical Act," *Ethics in Fundraising: Putting Values into Practice, New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising* 6 (Winter 1994): 3–13.
2. Association of Fundraising Professionals, AFP Code of Ethical Principles and Standards, Arlington, VA. First drafted in 1964 and updated regularly.

3. Aristotle, "The Nichomachean Ethics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon, ed. (New York: Random House, 1941), 927–1112.
4. Albert, Anderson, *Ethics for Fundraisers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 7.
5. Robert Shoemake, "Assessing Your Ethical Performance," *Advancing Philanthropy* (September/October 2011): 14–18.
6. Ibid.
7. Robert L. Payton, *Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good* (New York: American Council on Education and Macmillan, 1988).
8. Paul C. Pribbenow, "Growing Our Ethical Skills," *Philanthropy Journal* (July 12, 2011), www.philanthropyjournal.org/resources/fundraisinggiving/growing-our-ethical-skills.
9. Paul Pribbenow, "Fundraising as Public Service: Renewing the Moral Meaning of the Profession," *Ethics in Fundraising: Putting Values into Practice. New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising* 6 (Winter 1994): 27–48.

