

Right and Wrong

Somerset Maugham reminds us in many of his stories that "people are not all of a piece." Just as we think we have come to know someone, he surprises us with an action which is completely out of character.

When I read in the April 5th National Post that George Jonas thinks that "Ratting is villainous" I was shocked. Furthermore, I couldn't believe that one whom I consider a right-wing, law-and-order stalwart would approve of Mateo Falcone killing his 11-year-old son for exposing to the police the hiding place of a fugitive: "I prefer Mateo Falcone's world, barbaric as it may be." Mr. Jonas makes it clear that he hates a "snitch."

What is the world coming to? Is this really April 1st after all, or am I a fool to think that exposing wrongdoing is the duty of every upstanding citizen? I never thought it wrong for the comic motorcycle policeman to hide behind a billboard in wait of a speeding motorist, but everyone else seems to; they say it is unfair for the policeman to hide, not that it is wrong for the driver to speed. When no one at a party will "rat out" the culprit whom they saw shoot or stab the victim I am baffled at such a warped sense of loyalty to a criminal. Why is it right to protect wrongdoers, and wrong to snitch on them?

I assume that snitching is an attempt to right a wrong, to put people back onto the straight and narrow, to prevent an innocent from being hurt, to avenge a victim and punish a perpetrator, to uphold the law. Why are those intentions wrong?

Would Mr. Jonas report to the pilot of an airliner in flight a passenger trying to set off a bomb? If so, is he not guilty of situational ethics, deciding right and wrong for himself according to the situation instead of according to the laws of the land? In answer to my question, "What would be your response when told that your longtime friend is a longtime thief?" graduate students in my seminar at the University of British Columbia wanted first to know from whom he stole. They were cautious to avoid condemning a friend who stole from the telephone company, or the McDonalds hamburger chain, or some other large institution. They felt he was wrong only if he stole from a Mom-and-Pop grocery store, or an equally small enterprise.

Is anyone besides me frightened by the trend to decide right and wrong on a case by case basis? Are we content to let each individual decide right and wrong for himself regardless of the law? Do we condone the protection of criminals by otherwise upstanding citizens? Is it okay to conceal evidence from the police to avoid being considered a snitch? Do we no longer know the difference between right and wrong?

Ted Scott, April 2008