Reflection for  
*Leadership and Self-Deception*

A couple of folks in the class had an “aha” moment reaction from reading this book. I did not have one of those reactions. Not that the principles in the book are not relevant, but it was not the first time I have been presented with these themes. What the book, and this reflection paper, did was make me remember those books and talks I had heard on similar themes. It was good to refresh my brain on principles I would like to say are guideposts in my life. Not that I always follow them, but they are always present in my life journey. I am going to go through the reflection questions first and if I fail to mention my previous learnings alluded to above, I will address those at the end.

Self-deception is a cop-out; it is a way to rationalize selfish decisions. Putting yourself in the right, now matter if this actually aligns with your belief of right and wrong. I am not sure when, or from whom, I learned how to rationalize my decisions when they went against my own moral compass. I do know that I have plenty of examples from the past of rationalizing and a few I struggle with currently. These acts of rationalizing allow me to deceive myself, or in the words of the book, commit self-deception. When we deceive ourselves and sellout to whatever rationalization we have constructed, it is hard to back down from that position. Pride kicks in and defends the fortress we have built. It does not seem to matter if this fortress is made of paper or worse yet, just a smoke screen, once pride takes up the guard position, it is very hard to admit failings. It reminds me of the old saying, “what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.” This saying is usually applied to lying to others, but it has equal truth in lying to ourselves.

Self-betrayal is closely connected with self-deception. There are times when our personal moral compass urges us to help others, to act in an altruistic way. At that moment we have a choice, either honor that decision or deny it. The denial is the self-betrayal. Let’s say my moral compass is an actual compass and while sailing I decided against all the signs telling me to go a certain way (i.e. the wind, current, water-depth, etc.) and I go a different way. As I struggle against all those things that would have been helping me reach my destination, I find myself becoming angry not with my decision, but with the wind, current, and whatever elements I have defied with my decision to go off course.

There have been many times in my life where I have committed self-betrayal. These include not pressing the open door button for someone on an elevator, not picking up James when I have time and heading in the same direction if I see him riding his bike, not helping a lady out at a bus stop next to where I was having coffee when I overheard she needed money for the bus, not letting someone go ahead of me in line who had a lot less items, and not talking about my faith for fear of being “labeled” and rejected. I typically feel a sense of shame in not responding to the choice in accordance to how I would like to live. Unfortunately, many times I find some way to rationalize my decision not to act.

Collusion is the food for self-betrayal and rationalization. We create a set of negative attributes and behaviors for people. When their behaviors correspond to the set we have created for them within our self-betrayal, then we use them as confirmation for our negative thoughts about a person. If a person does not act in accordance to our misconceptions of them, we twist their behavior in our minds to make it fit. We need their actions to fit into the square hole we created for them. If they act as a circle, we mentally squish the sides to make it a square. The example in the book about the kid who got home a minute early was a great example. Instead of
using that moment to build that person up, the mother choose to satisfy her need to protect the paper fortress she built in her mind.

Each person in our group has amazing gifts and talents that work together to make a rich learning environment for each of us. Last semester there were plenty of times where these gifts and talents were poked at in a joking manner. We could probably each give you epithets for each other. The problem of collusion occurred last semester when those characteristics became the person. Expecting a certain behavior from another member of the group based on previous experience is not necessarily a bad thing. We are told to do this in areas of risk management in order to predict future events with better certainty. But to place a person within boundaries in our minds without the chance to grow and change, that treats a person as an object. The amazing thing about people is that they are unpredictable and full of depth and potential. The only clear example I can give from last semester is the group’s attitude towards the boundaries Jeff would give us during trips. Collusion was most evident when we switched facilitators from John to Jeff. We already knew that boundaries would be tighter and teaching styles would be different. When Jeff began making boundaries there was a significant shift in the group mood as a whole because he fulfilled our negative expectations. This next semester I would like to learn more from the talents of each of my classmates. I would also like to work on expecting the unexpected and being more invested in the improvements of my classmates. I hope they will do the same for me.

We get out of the box by changing our view on life. Instead of being me focused, looking at helping/serving others. When we are focused on building others up then we can create a culture around us that has less negativity. There is one person whom I interact with on a regular basis that I could focus more on helping them, rather then just expecting negative behavior. This person seems to enjoy being in the box, but that does not mean I need to be part of perpetuating that mentality. I finished writing that last sentence and immediately wonder if they actually do like being in the box, or if they do, the known entity is preferred over the unknown.

Living this material is about viewing others as people; people with struggles, past experiences, and joys that I may not be privy to. Hugh Black (1898), one of my favorite authors, wrote:

If we wonder what another man sees in his friend, it should be the wonder of humility, not the supercilious wonder of pride. He sees something which we are not permitted to witness. Beneath and amongst what looks only like worthless slag, there may glitter the pure gold of a fair character. That anybody in the world should be got to love us, and to see in us not what colder eyes see, not even what we are but what we may be, should of itself make us humble and gentle in our criticism of others' friendships. Our friends see the best in us, and by that very fact call forth the best from us.

Many times this is how we view people. We must remember that we may not be given the gift to see them in their full dignity, but we must remember it is there.

I mentioned at the beginning that the concepts in the book are not new to me. Authors like Friendship and The Thrill of the Chaste both address this idea of viewing people with the dignity that God gave them, easier concept to grasp then to put in practice. Another concept I have read about is the idea of having a life ethic. In the beginning of Friendship and the Moral Life the author uses the philosophy of Aristotle to discuss this idea. The author claims that today
most people live by a situational ethic, or crisis ethic. We assess situations in the moment. Aristotle would say we needed to live by a life ethic. It is not what do I want in each situation, but what is the goal of my life? By what set of principles or ethics will get me to my goal. The example I like to use to explain this is an incident I had driving. I was on a highway where the lanes where merging down to one. A car came up to the last possible point and then wanted in front of me. I was stuck with a decision whether to let the car in or not. My situational ethic would have led me to the latter since I was angry about this driver’s apparent entitlement issues. My life ethic would have let the driver in because in the grand scheme of things, it was not worth the stress of being angry with him and it would align more with my life ethic of treating people with justice.

Another place where I was first introduced to some of these concepts was at a talk I went to on John Paul II Theology of the Body. The speaker, Christopher West, was explaining JP II’s interpretation of one aspect of what happened before and after the Fall. It will be helpful to note that Theology of the Body was a set of Wednesday addresses given by JP II in the 1970s explaining the Church’s teaching on human sexuality. West said that before the Fall Adam looked at his own body and then looked at Eve’s and said, “I want to give myself to her.” Eve did the same. After the Fall both of their reactions were now changed to “I want that.” I believe this interpretation is at the heart of what the concepts in Leadership and Self-Deception are pointing to. When we are more concerned with fulfilling our desires in a selfish manner and using others as a means to the fulfillment then they become objects. When we focus on serving others and building them up, then we treat others as people.

Like the characters in the book, I am constantly working on living out these principles. It would be great if I could live my life in a way that always treated others with the dignity given to them by God. This does not always happen. I am hopefully growing and becoming better at catching my self-deception before it happens. I also know that pride is a hard guard to fire.

Books Referenced

