

BOOK REVIEW

Learning Ethics the Hard Way: A Review of “Integrity” by Egil “Bud” Krogh with Matthew Krogh

By Gregory C. Dyekman

It’s a little hard to believe that it was more than 35 years ago that the Watergate Scandal rocked the foundations of our government, creating an atmosphere of distrust and cynicism from which our country has never recovered. Some will remember the name Egil Krogh as the first Nixon administration official to plead guilty and be sentenced to prison for his role as head of a Special Investigations Unit known as “The Plumbers.”

Krogh was 32 and fresh out of law school after some time in the military when John Ehrlichman asked him to join the Nixon administration in Washington, D.C. He worked on a number of issues, including drug enforcement and gun control, but it was his appointment to head up a special group formed to stop leaks of confidential government information that led to his undoing. A series of leaks to the press infuriated President Nixon to the point that he demanded that action be taken to stop them. His ideas included subjecting hundreds of government employees to lie detector tests (though those tests were not actually administered). The special investigations unit (SIU) included Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, who ultimately came up with the idea to burglarize the office of a psychiatrist in Beverly Hills whose patient, Daniel Ellsberg, was an employee of the Rand Institute and was thought to be the Pentagon Papers leaker. The idea was to find damaging information about Ellsberg. Krogh ultimately approved the break-in and was later shocked to find that not only had serious damage been done to Dr. Fred Fielding’s office, but that no useful information had been found concerning Ellsberg. Liddy told Krogh that he carried lethal weapons during the break-in and would have killed if necessary in the course of the mission, much to Krogh’s surprise and dismay. Krogh eventually helped attempt to cover up the break-in at Dr. Fielding’s office by lying to an assistant United States attorney.

Krogh was caught up in the “national security” justifications for covert actions against American citizens. He was very loyal to President Nixon and took to heart Nixon’s extreme anger over a continuous series of leaks that were viewed as damaging to the Administration and to the national security of the country. This book is Krogh’s apology for letting these national security arguments and his personal loyalties overwhelm his personal integrity, leading to the violation of the civil rights of Dr. Fielding. But more than just an apology, the book is a cautionary tale to all who face serious ethical challenges.

For Krogh, the first step toward personal redemption was to abandon the national security defense to the charge of conspiracy to violate Dr. Fielding’s civil rights and to plead guilty to that charge. He requested from special prosecutor Leon Jaworski that he be sentenced for his

own crime before testifying against anyone else or even telling his story to prosecutors, though he promised to tell the whole truth after sentencing, which he did. He didn't want it thought that he got a lighter sentence because of his cooperation with the prosecutor. Krogh was the first administration defendant sentenced and served a prison term of over four months. It was critical to the restoration of Krogh's personal integrity that he take full responsibility for his actions and that he not try to justify them as other defendants had. Ultimately, he was surprisingly recognized by Jaworski and others for having taken this forthright approach.

The book describes more about Krogh's time in prison, his foray into college teaching, his long, and ultimately successful, battle to return to the practice of law after initially being disbarred in Washington State, and his conversations with former President Nixon after his resignation from the presidency. Krogh specifically writes of Nixon's apparent unwillingness to admit the extent of his own wrongdoing in creating the overzealous atmosphere that led to the creation of The Plumbers.

Krogh's style is not as emotional as might be expected. Instead, his narrative is rational and focused on people and motivations rather than his own suffering. He briefly describes how difficult it was to testify against people who worked for him and for whom he worked, but ultimately notes that his testimony was an important step in restoring his personal integrity.

Ultimately, Krogh ponders the question of why good people make bad decisions that harm those they serve, ruin their careers and even do damage to the institutions for which they work. In essence, his conclusion is that while individuals possess an innate sense of what is right, that sense can be overwhelmed by loyalties, pressures of various types, perceptions that some larger value is at stake, or even by money. Certainly, we are all aware of those who have fallen from their pedestals because of this phenomenon of values warped under pressure.

Krogh's solution is a new paradigm for maintaining integrity. He counsels three questions to govern any important decision with ethical implications: 1) is it complete? 2) is it right? 3) is it good? The first of these questions is an in-depth exploration of not only immediate concerns, but long range implications, not only for those directly involved in the decision and its results, but others who may be further removed but no less affected in the long run. The second question is designed to test the moral value of the decision and its correctness under the circumstances. The third is designed to force decision makers to evaluate the good/evil that their decision will accomplish. Krogh counsels that decision makers must constantly value their own personal integrity and bring it bear upon every decision.

When Krogh first met the attorney who would eventually help him regain his law license, he promised that he would not immediately write a book about his days in the Nixon Administration and profit from it. Now, so many years later, it seems that Krogh felt compelled to share his message about not letting personal integrity take a back seat to other influences because of his concern that those in government and elsewhere have still not learned the lesson. He offers a few recent examples from the Bush administration and notes that the "national security" cloak has once again been used for all manner of ethically questionable decisions by government officials.

Krogh is so serious about his new paradigm that he has developed a conceptual model for making decisions with integrity called The Integrity Zone, which can be explored at

www.budkrogh.com. The concept is that there are a number of threats to personal integrity in any decision making process and they must be dealt with carefully and appropriately beginning with the notions of “comprehensiveness,” “right” and “good.”

This book is a quick read, but is interesting, thought provoking and even uplifting. It is more than Krogh’s personal story of wrongdoing and redemption. It is an attempt to save its readers from making the same mistakes. We can all use a dose of integrity, can’t we?

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