

# MORALITY STORIES



**MORALITY STORIES**  
*Dilemmas in Ethics, Crime & Justice*

THIRD EDITION

Michael Braswell, Joycelyn Pollock  
and Scott Braswell

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*To Jack Higgs and Annis Station,  
where stories came to life  
MB and SB*

*To Greg and Eric, as always  
JP*



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## Foreword

I read the stories in this collection over the course of several evenings, while sprawled comfortably on my living room couch. I found that I was taking the themes of what I had read to bed with me, staying awake longer than I cared to and wondering about the likely outcomes of this or that story, pondering what I thought might be the “correct” resolution and then imagining what I myself might have done—or not done—had I been faced with the same set of circumstances. I was particularly intrigued by my response to “Rosy,” the portrayal of the border patrol trainee who finds an extraordinarily *simpatico* girl of about his own age in the poor Mexican family that he has been assigned to live with in order to improve his Spanish. I was at first certain that I would have behaved differently than he did, but, thinking about it some more, I wasn’t certain. The stories have that kind of effect; they fuel self-examination.

The events portrayed in *Morality Stories* will fascinate persons concerned with human goodness and human evil. The book’s moral is translucent: “An evil act doesn’t necessarily make a person who committed it evil,” the authors declare in a thematic statement. I found the stories exceptionally interesting and provocative. Often the writers deliberately tease us by raising questions and letting them hover unanswered. In “Stray Dogs,” for instance, we wonder what the preacher has in mind when he doubts Laney’s claim that he threw the bricks at the display window of Cook’s Dimestore Dream because he wanted a warm place to stay on Christmas Eve. What might the “true” reason have been? And why does the preacher say that the Dream deserved that brick and more? What is the meaning of Sergeant Hollis Rivers’ cough? Is it serious and does it influence his actions? And what words were written underneath the

picture that Laney tried to read but could not see clearly enough to make them out?

I was intrigued by the fact that in a number of stories it is a throwaway observation of strangers that sets in motion reactions from those who hear the words and then reflect on how they apply to their own situation. A waitress, adept at jollyng customers, suggests that “sometimes you gotta do something risky to make sure you’re still alive,” and her homeless customer, down and out, makes a move that at least holds some hope for turning his dreary life around.

These are artfully constructed portrayals of people who come across as real folks with real problems and, for some, immediate ethical dilemmas that require resolution. At times, there is a change of pace in the stories with the recital tending toward understatement, such as in the moving description of the prison inmate who receives a gift from a totally unlikely source. The donor is asked why he did what he did; the question puzzles him (as it puzzles us as well) and he can offer only a laconic uninformative response before dropping the subject and moving along.

The prison stories are a sub-group of tales. They are marked by an exceptionally clear-eyed rendition of the aura and the undertones of life on a cell block and the verbal thrusts and jabs of the prisoners. The lesson is that even among some of those who appear to be the worst, there are human beings who are decent, even admirable persons. In several instances, prison guards, who have close contact with inmates, come to understand their humanity and to forgive the awful deeds that brought them to where they are. The “Mercy Seat” demonstrates that the death penalty can catch in its lethal embrace persons who have earned the opportunity to remain alive. The story brings to mind the wisdom of Winston Churchill: “The mood and temper of the public with regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country.”

I would be hard-pressed to decide which story I liked best. Each in its own way set me to thinking, but I suspect that it was the riddle of the grandfather who refused to open doors for others or to allow others to open doors for him that made the deepest impression. The tenderness between the old man, the boy grandchild, his

namesake, is conveyed with great sensitivity and the moral power of the story leaves indelible memories. Life is made up of choices, and the vital ones that we make will mark us for the remainder of our time on earth.

Science and morality often are said to exist in distinctively different realms. Science seeks objectivity and presents a façade of detachment and neutrality. This façade has been satirized by one writer who wondered whether if her husband and a grizzly bear were locked in mortal combat, she was required to say: “C’mon husband, c’mon bear.”

Many scientists say that the application and the consequences of what they learn is the business of others, perhaps one of those touchy-feely people who deal with concepts such as goodness and decency. Such ideas faded in the wake of construction of atomic weapons. The scientists who had unraveled the mysteries that led to the production of the atomic bomb began to wonder how much responsibility they ought to assume when their invention was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, producing thousands of civilian deaths. The horrors produced by the atomic bombs were brilliantly brought home not by sterile medical reports or long-term longitudinal studies of the results of exposure to radiation from atomic fusion. The fiction and non-fictional portrayals, such as Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* and John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* provided much more compelling accounts than those found in the medical and social scientific probes. Similarly, to read the opening pages of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* is to experience the Italian army’s retreat at Caporetto in a manner that no scientific inquiry could convey.

The stories that follow, written by Michael Braswell, Joycelyn Pollock, and Scott Braswell, are of a kind with these classics. They put you in touch with important life experiences of people, sometimes people like yourself, who are confronted with situations that require a degree of moral and ethical courage. *Morality Stories* allows you to share their experiences, debate within yourself and with others the issues that are raised as they relate to your life and your hopes, ideals, and expectations.

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