

## Reflections -- Fundamental Option and the Virtues of a Provider

The theory of fundamental option considers the moral life as one not lived out in particular acts, but as one that is a unified, dynamic process, an enduring stance towards life. Our fundamental option and orientation is exercised through our particular concrete choices. As a human being, and in particular as chiropractors and health care providers, we continue to question and look towards a deeper fundamental orientation toward the good through our lifelong professional and personal lives.

A fundamental option is similar to the virtues which reflect our most deeply held beliefs. It is where we hold our intentions of who we want to be. How we come to fulfill our basic freedom is to choose what we are and what we will become. It is the way of our heart.

The way of our heart is our fundamental orientation. With this as our focus, it will then be naturally easier for us to be directed towards the good in our decisions because of our direction. The way of our heart is the way of our moral life. It is our fundamental option.

Aristotle believed that moral virtues did not arise in us naturally, but were acquired through education. He believed they needed to be perfected by exercising them through habit, which would reveal our character. We can agree that virtues can be considered to be a reflection of one's state of character and are concerned with one's choices, but they are more than that. In many cultures, the moral life is a virtuous life lived out as the way of one's life, their orientation. It is the same for us today.

What are those virtues that are required of a health care provider? What are the foundational principles in which we base our standard codes of professional ethics? Here are the four cardinal virtues which we used everyday in our practices:

1. Prudence: a quality in a person that allows them to choose the sensible course. Examples of prudence include: discretion, foresight, forethought and resourcefulness (used continually in diagnosing and treatment).
2. Temperance: habitual moderation in the indulgence of the appetites, avoidance of extremes, moderation (needed in personal and professional time management).
3. Fortitude: strength of mind that enables a person to meet danger or bear pain or adversity with courage (needed in making decisions in spite of economic challenges).
4. Justice: administration of what is just, an act or obligation of awarding each their due, equity (used to discern who, how and what to treat -- giving excellent care).

There are other virtues that we should reflect on, consider, internalize, and seek to express:

1. Fruits of the human spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness and gentleness.

## 2. Gifts of the human spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, piety and charity.

Among the issues we need to consider: What is the effect of today's health care marketplace (which is sold as a Wall Street, for-profit commodity), on these long-standing professional virtues? How much of this patient-as-consumer orientation is tearing at the very heart of our human caring and social structures? Is there room for a physician-patient contract bonded in trust, or just a physician-payor-patient financial contract based on profits?

How low will the minimum standards of professional ethics be forced to go? What minimal level of virtues will be expected from a health care provider in today's economic culture? Or will society cry out for maximums in virtues from our providers? Will our personal current underlying disposition and orientation (fundamental option) be able to answer that call? Has the marketplace become so distorted that our personal faith, professional commitments and social contracts are suffocated? How are we going to ensure that our chosen intentions towards the good (fundamental option) come to the surface?

Our deliberate choices flow from our fundamental option of who we model ourselves after. We are moral agents in our bodies and souls. To ensure our survival as moral agents, we need to look to other models in our personal and professional lives. What is required of us as professionals is not just the minimum. We are called upon to do the maximum. Anything less than the maximum is being clinically incompetent, which is fraudulent. Moreover, anything less would be immoral.

Our fundamental option is to choose to do what is right because it is the right, not because we will gain vainglory or financial gain. It is more than a passive self-commitment; it is a passionate self-commitment. It is a way of the heart. Chiropractors truly seek the good and look to become the image of a true physician, a compassionate merciful healer.

The starting point is always our personal internalization of the basic moral imperatives. To be authentic and not just an imitation, we are always seeking the other's good. Our actions are to relieve unnecessary suffering, even in the face of criticism and hypocrisy. The revelation for us today is one of hope in our faith and personal commitments. Our actions will reveal the way of our hearts, which is our fundamental option towards the good.

*Karen Shields-Wright, MS, DC*  
*President, Association for Catholic Chiropractors*  
*Greenwich, Connecticut*

JUNE 1998