

Of Shepherds, Sheep, and Little Lost Lambs

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Of all of the parables I remember from my early days in church, the one that had the greatest impact on me was the story of the Shepherd who left unattended his flock of 99 sheep and went searching for the lamb who had wandered away from the flock. I couldn't decide whether I admired the Shepherd for his concern for the one lost lamb, or thought him a fool for risking the lives of the 99 other sheep by leaving them unattended, or both. Now, many years later, having been at different times the Shepherd, one of the sheep, and the little lost lamb, I have a new perspective.

Too much time spent in Truly Screwed Up organizations has convinced me that one of the more difficult challenges in Life is the development, care, and maintenance of a healthy social organization. Each healthy social organization has two characteristics, neither of which is easy to create or maintain, and both of which are relevant to the parable of the 99 and one.

The first characteristic of a healthy organization is the presence of a clear mission, concrete core values that tell people how to act to fulfill the mission, policies and procedures that reflect the core values, and a pattern of actions that reflect all of the above. What you get in a healthy organization is what my grandmother termed "human logic," the sense that what people say and do is reasonably consistent, that the written rules and the real rules are pretty much the same, and that there is no hidden agenda. You get sheep who are calm when the Shepherd is around, and who don't panic when the Shepherd has to leave for a metaphorical minute or two. In fact, in such an organization, many of the sheep are quite capable of being Shepherds themselves and often act like Shepherds without being asked to. A sense of calm and purpose, which encourage the proliferation of Shepherds, are infallible signs of a healthy flock of sheep. Calm and

purpose are to a group what an engine is to a car.

The second characteristic of a healthy organization is that the group accommodates, with a reasonable degree of success, the contradictory tensions between individual needs and the needs of the group. However difficult or impossible this might seem to some philosophers, most of us have been in at least one group that translated into action the wisdom of a former student of mine, who said, "It's actually pretty simple: sometimes you got to Take One For the Team, and sometimes the Team Has Got To Take One for you."

The way to see how well or poorly a school manages characteristic number two is to observe when the school gives up on a kid and/or what causes a school to give up on a kid. The answers determine the level of trust that kids and adults have for each other, and the presence of a high level of mutual trust is the second infallible sign of a healthy flock of sheep.

Several years ago a parent who had recently moved to Seattle and was investigating SAAS as a option for his son gave me a great example of an incident that had produced such a high level of distrust that the parent had withdrawn his son from a high-profile east coast school: some students used drugs at a school event; the matter became known; the faculty and administration asked many students if they had been involved; some admitted participation; others lied; those who admitted guilt were judged to have violated the school's "zero tolerance" policy and were expelled, including a number of first-time offenders; nothing happened to the students who lied, one of whom, according to the parent grapevine, was the school's major drug dealer. For some adults, the parent told me, this administrative action was an appropriate, "quick and clean" response of "natural consequences" for an



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infraction, one that Taught a Lesson That Needed To Be Taught. For others, including this parent whose son had not even been at the event, the penalty was an inappropriate response to the nature of children, who often insist on making the same mistakes that their parents made, and taught no lesson except "Tell the truth and suffer; lie and prosper."

In his own way, this parent expressed the same conclusion I had come to: if you can't trust the Shepherds of your group to go after the Little Lost Lambs, then you can't trust, period, especially if your group is a school, because the odds are that most children have been, are, or will be, at least for a while, a Little Lost Lamb.

As a young and more foolish man I was drawn to immediate "natural consequences" that Taught Lessons, and, as an older and less foolish man, I do recognize that there are times when an individual must be separated from the group, for the group's sake and for the individual's own sake. But for every one of these times, there are ten times when, with a little care and concern and a lot of patience, the Little Lost Lamb can be brought back to the flock, and the beneficiary of this often slow and frequently messy process is not only the Little Lost Lamb, but also the flock itself. A sense of mutual trust is to a group what gas and oil are to an engine. When we save the Little Lost Lambs, we are saving ourselves.

