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# Mercy in Public Administration

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*Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy.*  
Matthew 5:7

*And what does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love  
mercy*

Micah 6:8

## Abstract

*This paper suggests that mercy is a virtue in the classical secular sense as well as the religious. It offers mercy as a virtue important for those in the practice of public administration and introduces mercy as a way that public employees can serve their clients and one another. It further suggests that those who act with mercy will more completely carry out their role as representative citizens who act on behalf of all.*

To understand how mercy affects actions and outcomes, think a minute about a person in your life who has hurt you or harmed you the most. That person may have insulted you or told untruths about you or took something that was yours or put your job in jeopardy. If you can think of no one who fits this category, you are richly blessed. If you are like most of us, one or two people will come to mind.

As you think of the one who has hurt or harmed you, also think about what they deserve for what they did. Think about what you might want to do to them in return if you could. If you think they deserve to be punished or harmed as you were harmed, you are absolutely within your rights. You are thinking in terms of justice. That's what most of us do. To act justly is a *quid pro quo* behavior. Justice is fairness, after all.

Now I'd like you to think about forgiving the person who harmed you. Once again see that person in your mind's eye, and, in your heart, say, "I forgive you." If you can visualize the difference between a person getting their just desserts and a person bathed in the light of forgiveness, then you can surely know what mercy is. You also know how difficult it is to be merciful. To be merciful is to ask a lot of one's self.

I first got the idea that mercy is important for public administrators when one of my students said, about public administrators, "We are the caregivers. We are entrusted with healing the problems of society and we are responsible for healing the people who come to us for help." If she is right, and I think she is, then public administrators have an awesome responsibility that calls us to examine *how* we offer our services as well as what services we offer. George Gordon (1998) calls public administrators the "fiduciaries of the public trust." We can carry out this fiduciary responsibility bound by the rules of blind justice or we can act mercifully to those we serve and those who serve with us. Yet, We have become a society with little appreciation for mercy. Mercy seems wimpy, passive, even wrong somehow. Let one guy get away with it and the rest will try, seems to be the theory. But mercy . . . is a reminder that a society cannot live by rules alone" (Bourke, 2001: p. 19).

While the word "mercy" appears in the Judeo-Christian scriptures 353 times (Strong), it is not just a Judeo-Christian idea. The concept of mercy is interwoven in scriptures from religions around the world (World Scripture, 2001). In the next section I define mercy. I then explain why mercy is a virtue in the philosophical as well as the religious sense and relate mercy to the practice of public administration.

### *Defining Mercy*

Mercy is defined as "kindness in excess of what may be expected or demanded by fairness; forbearance, and compassion" (Webster, 1983: p. 1126). It is moderate behavior, neither blinded by absolute inflexible standards nor by sloppy sentiment. And, mercy is a courageous action. It is not engaged in lightly. Mercy is an act of the will. On that abstract, invisible scale that measures conduct between persons, mercy seems to be an overlooked golden mean between the extremes of blind justice and passion. It is kindness and clemency.

In the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, mercy is mainly presented as an action of a powerful and loving God who offers mercy to generation after generation. In today's secular society, mercy is most often invoked in desperate cases. We hear of "mercy killing." We ask for mercy for convicted felons. In our worship services we ask for mercy for ourselves. Jews and Christians affirm that the Lord is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness" (Psalm 103:8). Perhaps mercy is an act of humankind at its best for it is an act that emulates God, even as it is doing, as God would have us do.

Basic Judeo-Christian morality calls for performance of acts of mercy, and in so doing further defines it. Isaiah the prophet writes that behavior acceptable to the Lord includes:

*releasing those bound unjustly,  
untying the thongs of the yoke;  
Setting free the oppressed,  
breaking every yoke;  
Sharing your bread with the hungry,  
sheltering the oppressed and homeless;  
Clothing the naked when you see them,  
and not turning your back on your own.*  
Isaiah (58: 6-7)

These are merciful actions. They are actions inherent in the practice of public administration.

Jesus, (in Matthew, chapters 5, 6, & 7) "demands of his followers a standard for human relationships that involves a 'going beyond' or 'more' than the norm of reciprocity...the golden rule of "do what you want done" is not the norm here, but rather 'do as God would do" (Johnson, 1991: p. 112). Thus, to define mercy in the religious sense is to talk of compassion, amnesty, benevolence, charity, kindness, and patience. This kind of mercy calls us to think of humankind as persons of dignity and worth, deserving of respect, rather than as objective means of production "feeling-less" and mechanical.

Just as religious tradition calls us to be merciful to one another, we can identify mercy as one of the virtues imbedded in classical ethical thought. The next section describes mercy as a philosophical virtue.

*Mercy is a Virtue*

Virtue theory, grounded in Aristotelian ethics, is coming back into ethical discussion in both the private and public sectors.

Virtue theory offers a more appealing, practical, unified and comprehensive theory of ethics in business (and the public sector) than traditional approaches. It grounds morality in facts about human nature, concentrates on habits and long-term goals, extends beyond actions to comprise wants, goals, and dislikes, and in general, what sort of person one is and aims to be (Arjoon, 2000: p. 173).

A moral virtue is a highly developed character trait that leads to habitual action designed to promote good or intrinsic value. According to Aristotle “moral virtues are desire regulating character traits, which are at a mean between more extreme character traits (or vices)” (Internet Encyclopedia, Aristotle: p. 8). This mean is not mathematical, but relative, based on the situation and the due consideration of the moral actor. At the heart of Aristotelian “virtue ethics” is the notion of the golden mean, which represents the absence of extreme character traits and the absence of extreme actions. For example courage is a “golden mean” between cowardice and rashness.

The four cardinal virtues, named by Aristotle, are fortitude, temperance, prudence, and justice (Woodward, 1994); but philosophers agree that these are not the only four virtues. We can identify a virtue as the mid-range between two equally inappropriate but polar dimensions of possible response to the same scenario, thus the list of possible virtues is extensive; and once one sets aside the cardinal virtues, there is no need to attempt to prioritize other virtues. By definition a virtue is a good trait worthy of personal development and a good action, which we should habitually choose. Thus, a virtue is a “stable state of character concerned with choice” (Allmark, 1998: p. 468) in which design our choice to bring increased value or goodness into the situation.

We can further describe a virtue as a “human excellence whose possession tends to enable, facilitate, and make natural, the possessor’s promoting, expressing, honoring, and appreciating value; or enhancing, expressing, honoring, or appreciating valuable objects or states of affairs which are valuable” (Swanton, 1995). Mercy meets this definition of a virtue for it is the description of an intellectual choice about one way to act rightly.

Precursors to the idea of mercy as a golden mean in virtue ethics theory are the often-debated ethical ends of justice and caring, as promulgated by Kohlberg (1981) and Gilligan (1982) in the twentieth century. In her frequently cited work, Gilligan argues that the traditional understanding of moral development is male centered and justice based. There's nothing wrong with that, she admits. It is simply insufficient to the understanding of how many women and some men approach difficult choices. From her own studies she introduced the notion of caring as an ethical act, thus providing an opposite extreme to the criterion of judging for dealings with one another.

Now the ethics of caring and judging presume that one reaches one place or the other as a part of moral development and that one can tell the agent's judgment criteria by ascertaining his or her reasoning process. The ability to make reasoned judgments as well as the propensity toward care seem to come about through maturation. The results of one's decision, in this way of thinking, are not as important as the process by which one arrived at a decision, for the process provides evidence of moral development.

Caring might seem akin to mercy, for "Altruism forms the backbone of care theory ... and it assumes that there are two other character traits required for healthy human relationships: sociality and empathy." (Groenhout, 1998: p.177). Many wrote about the ethic of care, especially in feminist literature, but "a major flaw in the ethics of care" is that "it focuses on care and caring as being good in itself. But almost all bad actions as well as good ones arise from care" (Allmark, 1998, p. 468.) For example, "Hitler may well have cared for the success of the German people just as fervently as Mother Teresa cares for the comfort of the destitute in Calcutta. But would that have made him a virtuous man? (Hudson, 1993: p. 344). Thus, we can describe caring as passion or altruism that may or may not result in a greater good.

Mercy, as an ethical act, is the golden mean between the two extremes of hyper-objectivity and caring. The trait of being merciful certainly arises through moral development and leads one to naturally choose mercy as the preferred way to act. Mercy is an end rather than a means. It is an unselfish, intellectual act resulting from the choice to err on the side of compassion. It is a Virtue to which both men and women can aspire.

Offering mercy as a way to recast corporate social responsibility, Arjoon notes that mercy is often pitted against justice. He sees this as a “mistaken view” and describes mercy as “the fullness of justice,” for “Justice is rational and measured. Mercy is immeasurable. Justice can be commanded. Mercy must be freely given” (Arjoon, 2000: pp. 172-173).

Like justice and caring, mercy can only be given to another living being. One cannot be merciful to a pothole or to a computer. One can, however, be merciful to the one who fills the pothole and to the one whose vehicle the pothole damaged. One can also be merciful to the computer programmer and the computer operator. The key to understanding mercy is the desire to do good rather than bad to all whose lives touch one’s own.

Does it matter that mercy is a virtue? Yes, it does, for “virtue ethics” is experiencing a renaissance as scholars and practitioners struggle to return ethical behavior and ethical decision making into the world of work. In the public sector, promoting mercy as a religious value might be suspect. Promoting mercy as a good and appropriate way to think and act might be more tolerable. Philosophical ethics are appropriate to Western society. Religious ethics are often suspect.

A recent *Newsweek* article gives reasons for promoting virtue: “The cultivation of virtue makes individuals happy, wise, courageous, competent. The result is a good person, a responsible citizen and parent, a trusted leader, possibly even a saint (Woodward, 1994: p. 58). Are these not desirable traits for a public administrator?”

The next section examines public administration as a profession that can and should incorporate the practice of mercy.

### *Mercy and Public Administration*

In his work on virtue ethics, MacIntyre (1984) argues that a core set of virtues must necessarily characterize the practice of any profession. Historically the norms of efficiency and effectiveness have been the hallmarks of public administration. At the beginning of this twenty-first century, we need to ask ourselves if that is enough. Certainly, we can argue that the purpose of public administration is more than efficiency and effectiveness. As fiduciaries of the public trust, are not public administrators called upon offer mercy in a world that is rife with merciless circumstances and hopelessness?

Why have we left mercy out of discussions in public administration? I think it has to do with fear. I think people are afraid that being merciful means being unjust to those who paid the taxes. Being merciful implies being humane and forgiving. But public administrators are told to be efficient and effective largely to make sure that government maximizes the use of the tax dollar as much as possible. In public organizations where we equated success with action, competitiveness, and productivity, we see acting mercifully as incompetence. In organizations where reformers reinvent, reconstruct, and generally re-engineer, there's not much room for mercy in that their logic unless it somehow contributes to the better bottom line. However, a more informed reformer knows that there is a great need for mercy.

A recent example of mercy in the public sector is the way the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) handled the 1997 federal law, which limits the amount of help that the state can provide poor families. The law imposes a five-year cap on the length of time a family can receive welfare. No matter what one believes about the rightness or wrongness of public assistance, that law must have been really scary to those who had become accustomed to federal Aid to Dependent Children. It will get scarier as July 1, 2002 approaches. Like other states, Illinois took immediate action to implement the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, but it also made a commitment to be merciful, rather than punitive. The Illinois policy makers acted with mercy, though they may not have named it that way.

The official policy statement reads:

TANF was developed because Congress changed federal law, and because Illinois wanted to help people get off welfare instead of being trapped in it. With welfare reform, Illinois will not only treat its citizens with fairness, the state will go beyond the legal requirements to help people become as self-sufficient as possible. (TANF, 2001).

To “go beyond the legal requirements to help” is surely an act of mercy. The IDHS also wanted to know what happened to people when they stopped receiving public assistance. How many lives did the change in law affect? To what extent would the change help or harm those former on welfare? What kind of services did they need to succeed? IDHS contracted with the University of Illinois at Springfield, Institute of Public Affairs to find out. They learned that only 37 percent of those who left welfare worked continually in the six to eight months after they left and 28 percent of those who left welfare returned within the first year. Problems that kept them from staying employed included childcare, absence of jobs close to where they live, and lack of transportation (IPA, 2000: p.2). One can’t help but wonder what kinds of problems will surface as the five-year cap on benefits comes nearer. One cannot help but hope that mercy will continue to guide the policies and procedures that emerge to deal with the next wave of repercussions from the TANF program.

To develop a theory that places mercy at the heart of public service requires recasting our thinking about the work of government and under what conditions administrators can carry out that work. H. George Frederickson, in his recent lecture on “The Repositioning of Public Administration,” suggests that theories now emerging within the discipline of public administration are “built on assumptions of institution building, cooperation, productivity, structure and leadership” (Frederickson, 1999: p. 710).

I am suggesting that mercy should be ubiquitous in the institutions of government. It should guide the enactment of our laws and the development and implementation of our policies. Mercy can emerge from and contribute to cooperation, productivity, and leadership. Mercy will always be other-centered and an awareness of its power can enhance the image and the practice of public service. It can permeate relationships within the organization and relationships with the citizens served by public administrators. At this point in history, mercy should be as integral to the practice of public administration, as it is to sacred scripture. At the very least it should be included in any viable, developing theory about public service.



Public administrators have many opportunities to be merciful. I invite you now to think of how you might offer what Wordsworth called “little nameless acts of kindness and of love” to those you serve and those with whom you work. Bourke (2001, p. 19) suggests that we all should make a list of everyone who has ever wronged us, name them one by one, and name the injustices we experienced from their words and actions. Then, she asks, “What if we then took that list and offered our own pardons, not because it was fair or just, but simply out of mercy?”

The great, long held, religious traditions of the world all hold up mercy as an ideal way of living (World Scriptures), though none promise that it will be easy.

The Sufi poet, Rumi, calls us to reflect on what we have done with our lives:

**On Resurrection Day  
God will say,  
“What did you do  
with the strength and the energy  
that your food gave you  
on Earth?  
How did you use your eyes?  
What did you make with your five senses  
while they were dimming and playing out?”  
You will not be able to stand when you hear these questions.**

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**This conversation is between you  
and your creator. (Fox, 1995: p. 321).**

I can think of no better answer than the words “I was merciful.” I can think of no better place to bring mercy than into our public organizations.

### *Conclusion*

This paper is an appeal to public administrators to see their work responsibilities in a sacred light so that they bring mercy into all their dealings. It offers the hope that mercy already exists in abundance in each and every government agency. Still for us to discover, though, are either individual administrators or through

merciful policies and procedures where the agencies and situations give mercy. IDHS was offered as one example. Surely there are others.

Still for us to explore is the impact of mercy. Mercy comes out of the wisdom in the world's religious traditions. The implications of what we might call "religious activity" in public service needs to be addressed. There is a need for tough love, especially in education and welfare. How one can apply mercy without causing another set of problems still needs to be developed. If mercy would foster dependency, a sense on poor self worth, and a feeling that "I can get something for nothing," then it too will fail. There is a fine line between being an enabler and being merciful. Where that line is will lie in individual judgment of the merciful actor. Most of us want government policy to help the helpless. However, we are not certain where helping ends and enabling begins. That is the subject for another article.

I encourage readers of this article, to reflect on these questions: What must my organization do in order to show mercy to my clients? What might I do to be merciful to those with whom and for whom I work? How can I be merciful without being an enabler? Can mercy be a part of government policy? Where in my own life do I need to show my mercy? How is mercy relevant to my portion of public service?

"Those who do not abandon mercy will not be abandoned by me" says the *Oracle of the Kami of Itsukushima* in the Shinto religion (World Scriptures). "Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy," promise the Christian scriptures (Matthew 5:7). Whether mercy is a religious ideal or a philosophical virtue, it is a way of dealing with others that offers a new perspective on public administration. Mercy is an inspirational mode of service delivery. It may serve us well in the twenty-first century.

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