Ms. Harper Lee: The Ethical Right to a Difficult Decision

Aging. The loss of physical and oftentimes mental faculties. It is something all of us will encounter, an inescapable plight of the human condition. However, when in this process do we become incapable of consciously making decisions? This quintessentially human issue underlies the debate concerning the famous author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Ms. Harper Lee. Specifically, the ethical issue raised by this situation is whether or not Ms. Harper Lee had the mental capacity to knowingly agree to a new publication. After being dormant for 58 years, Lee has reportedly agreed to publish *Go Set a Watchman*: a manuscript that was originally submitted to publishers in 1957 that eventually evolved into *To Kill a Mockingbird* after years of revisions (Tucker, 2015).

A firm understanding of Ms. Harper Lee’s physical condition and four primary stakeholders is necessary to comprehend the ethical framework of the publication decision. First, Ms. Lee was 88 years old at the time of publication. She suffered a stroke in 2007, was almost completely deaf and blind, and resided in an assisted-living facility (Tucker, 2015). Thus, the first, and most important, stakeholder is Ms. Harper Lee herself. The second key stakeholder is Tonja Carter. Ms. Carter was Ms. Lee’s attorney and handled all forms of public representation and communication for the elderly author. The third key stakeholder is Andrew Nurnberg. Mr. Nurnberg acted as Ms. Lee’s international rights agent, a position responsible for ensuring the nearly $3 million per year collected from the rights to *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Tucker, 2015). Both Ms. Carter and Mr. Nurnberg stated that Ms. Lee was sufficiently mentally capable of knowingly agreeing to the publication of *Go Set a Watchman*. The final stakeholder is
HarperCollins, the publisher tasked with deciding whether or not to print the author’s original manuscript.

Each of the primary stakeholders stood to profit substantially if *Go Set a Watchman* was published. As mentioned, $3 million of annual royalties were still being collected for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Due to the novel’s immense popularity, *Go Set a Watchman* was reported to be the fastest-selling book in the history of publisher HarperCollins (Trachtenberg, 2015). Thus, the motive of significant financial reward must be considered for each of the respective stakeholders’ stances.

As the publishing company’s executive officer, my foremost goal in a publication decision would be to preserve the organization’s core values: integrity and honesty. In his *Defining Moments: A Framework for Moral Decisions*, Harvard Business School Professor Joseph Badaracco asserts that decisions in defining moments communicate a leadership’s ideals and principles into the future. Actions will then reverberate without you there to clarify (Badaracco, 2002). Thus, when important decisions are made, they guide the future of an organization via the values perceived by others. As such, it is vital to view ethical dilemmas through a variety of lenses. As a publishing executive viewing the decision through this long-term, comprehensive ethical approach, I would elect not to publish *Go Set a Watchman*. I believe this decision would best maintain the organization’s core values of integrity and honesty.

The *Go Set a Watchman* publication decision is well understood through the philosophical principle of utilitarianism. As established by John Stuart Mill, utilitarianism asserts that the right action is that which provides the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people (Badaracco, 2002). The publication of the manuscript would provide a sizable paycheck to Ms. Lee, Ms. Carter, Mr. Nurnberg, and the publication company. Furthermore, the public
would receive further material from the beloved author of one of America’s most famous novels. Thus, the consequences appear to be positive for all parties involved, thereby fulfilling the tenets of utilitarianism.

While utilitarian consideration appears to ethically support publication, it fails to adequately account for a paramount component of the decision: Ms. Harper Lee’s human rights. Of foremost importance in this decision process is whether or not Ms. Lee actually desired to publish her work. Current evidence is inconclusive as to whether Ms. Lee was mentally capable of communicating such a decision. In addition to her stroke, blindness, and deafness, details shared by Mary Tucker, Lee’s friend of fifty years, provided further cause for concern. Tucker stated that she explained to Lee how excited members of the Alabama Writers Symposium were by her attendance at the conference; however, Lee had no recollection of the event the following week (Tucker, 2015). Thus, it is not possible to conclusively determine Ms. Lee’s ability to act in accordance with her true beliefs. Additionally, for 58 years, the overwhelming majority of her adult life, Ms. Lee had been content to forego publication for the earliest rendition of her world-famous novel. Furthermore, Ms. Lee experienced a vast publication drought following the publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird* without seeking to publish *Go Set a Watchman*. What, after 58 years, suddenly changed? It would appear only the chance for financial benefits to be gained by Ms. Lee’s representation have. This potential exploitation of Ms. Lee’s human rights is the primary ethical impetus for my publication firm electing not to publish *Go Set a Watchman*.

Although this decision foregoes the fiscal profit of all stakeholders, I would assert that this ethically responsible decision is in the best long-term interest for each of the stakeholders. The decision to not publish the manuscript preserves the professional character of each of said parties. As previously mentioned, defining decisions communicate a leadership’s principles and
values that reverberate throughout the public (Badaracco, 2002). Thus, the decision maintains the character of Ms. Carter, Mr. Nurnberg, and the publishing company, respectively. While this decision eliminates immediate fiscal benefit, the maintenance of character provides the opportunity for sustained profits for the publication firm and the two professionals in the long-term.

Finally, the decision to forego publication is one of pragmatism. According to Joseph Badaracco, pragmatism can be best understood via Italian writer Niccolo Machiavelli’s quote, “What will work in the world as it is?” (Badaracco, 2002). In reality, HarperCollins is one of the largest publishing companies in America. While seeking additional opportunities for revenue growth is always advised, it is not a necessity for the company’s long-term success. Thus, it is not worth taking ethically irresponsible action to achieve.

In conclusion, the preservation of Ms. Harper Lee’s human rights, each stakeholder’s character, and pragmatism each indicate that not publishing Ms. Lee’s novel *Go Set a Watchman* is the most ethical course of action. Furthermore, this decision maintains the publication company’s core values of integrity and honesty. While immediate fiscal success must be abstained by the publisher, Ms. Carter, and Mr. Nurnberg, the decision ultimately ensures Ms. Lee’s body of work is not manipulated against her true intentions in her declining health.

Aging. We are all humans. It will happen to us all. Under my leadership, the publishing company would have allowed the author of one of our nation’s most heralded novels to complete her life’s journey with her life’s work as she intended it.
References

