

Dear Mr. Fenoglio and Mr. Paulson (c/o Steve Israel),

Over the past couple of months, I have been giving some thought to your e-mail “A Special Announcement from MDSC”, and I would like to share a few perspectives that I hope will be useful. Scouting was a positive influence on me as I was growing up, and as a current adult leader, my hope is to enable others to also benefit from scouting. For me, I feel a special relationship with other scouts and scouters. They are like extended family. As with families, when there is division, there is pain. I feel a similar pain when I see the division that resurfaced recently regarding gay scouts. Hopefully, the perspectives I am about to share will be of value to you as you consider how to proceed.

Unfortunately the current conversation about gays and the BSA policy is framed in such a way as to impede a successful resolution that both sides can accept. This is because this issue is viewed by both sides as a moral issue. As a result, we have an issue where each side believes they are morally correct and the other side is morally wrong. So where does that leave the conversation? Unfortunately, not in a good place for finding common ground. With both sides viewing the other side as morally wrong, there is little chance for compromise or a solution.

The only hope for a true resolution of this issue is to transcend the current discussion to a much broader one. As our society becomes more and more diverse, prescribing the specifics of morality becomes more challenging. There is probably a fair amount of consensus as to what directionally constitutes morality (things like the “golden rule”), but morality can manifest itself in many different ways, and what is perceived as moral behavior by one may be perceived as immoral by another. So if BSA wants to be a force of moral guidance in a diverse society, it will need to shift away from defining the specifics of morality. Instead of thinking of morality as a destination, the focus should be on the journey. Since no one is a perfectly moral being, and hopefully becoming a more perfect moral being is a life-long endeavor, scouting would do well to focus on the journey of moral development recognizing that there are many different paths to that journey. The goal then for scouting is to instill in our youth the importance of morality and to put them on a path of moral development. This includes teaching our scouts that their morality (as it is for all people) is a work in progress and that morality is a critical part of their development which requires dedication and focus as well as guidance from other sources such as their parents, teachers, and religious leaders.

I would like to make a distinction here between being morally straight and the scout law. The scout law describes 12 behaviors. These are behaviors for which there is widespread support throughout many diverse communities. For a focus on specifics, the scout law is very useful. It is especially useful for young people who are beginning their journey of moral development. Eventually, as one’s morality develops, laws become less important since moral behavior will be automatic. In the meantime, for most of us, and especially for young people, the scout law is a very good place for focus on specifics, and for that matter, for evaluation and feedback. The “morally straight” component of the scout oath is best left as an aspiration that inspires scouts to devote themselves to a lifelong journey of moral development with the recommendation that they use their parents, their religious orientation, their communities as well as the scout oath and law for guidance. The scout law provides tangible rules to guide scouts as they work on their moral development.

Since being “morally straight” manifests itself in many different ways, how do we coach our diverse youth when it comes to morality? It is not one dimensional such that it can be defined in terms of one characteristic such as sexual orientation. In reality there are many attributes/threads that make up morality. Each person’s morality is made up of many, many threads which come together to sum up to

the overall morality of a person, and everyone is at different stages of development along each of these many threads. While ultimately, morality lies deep within a person and manifests itself in thought, motivation, and action. Thoughts, motivations, and actions like: how do we treat our friends, parents, siblings? How do we treat our enemies? Do we have enemies? How much do we do for ourselves? How much do we do for others? Are we willing to inflict a little harm on others for significant self-gain? How much do we help or harm the environment? When we take a noble action, what is our motivation? And the list goes on. The point of these questions is not to provide a definitive answer to our youth, but rather to have them reflect upon such questions so that they can begin to lay a moral foundation upon which they can build.

In reflecting upon the many dimensions of morality, it is of concern that the Boy Scouts of America would pick out an attribute such as sexual orientation as a litmus test of morality. This is especially concerning given that there is no consensus that sexual orientation is even an attribute of morality. While some may say it is, many say it is not. After all, there are many churches that permit gay ministers to be their moral leaders.

While many people do not agree with the BSA policy on gays, it is worth reflecting upon why they might feel so strongly about it. It would be one thing if the Boy Scouts of America came out with specific actions/behaviors that they felt were immoral. Things like pre-marital sex, not respecting elders, swearing, etc.. As was mentioned previously, narrowly defining morality in terms of specifics is not wise if one wants to be relevant in a diverse society, but I am willing to bet that such definitions of morality would not be met with such passionate opposition by those who disagree with those definitions. While such ideas about premarital sex, respecting elders, swearing, etc. may appear antiquated to some, those who do not agree with those definitions of morality would probably have an easier time looking the other way.

The reason the BSA policy is met with such strong opposition is that it goes against what has become a strong American value of nondiscrimination of those who are different. Given that both the President of the United States and his opponent from the last election feel that the BSA policy on gays is wrong, it would be hard to argue that the BSA policy is consistent with American values and the best interests of our country. When the Moraga scout who was denied his Eagle for being gay is honored by the State Assembly for his courage and sacrifice in standing up against the BSA policy, Boy Scouts of America has taken a position that our elected officials have determined to be against the best interests of our State and community. Based on the opposition by both federal and state elected officials, BSA leadership should reflect upon their policy towards gays in relation to the section of the scout oath which speaks to "duty to my country". They should also reflect upon what this teaches our scouts when our scouts see The Boys Scouts of America going against the desires of the President of the United States as well as other elected officials? Of course, Boys Scouts of America, as a private organization, has the legal right to its policy on gays just as Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis have the right to create their own policies. This points out that just because an organization has the legal right to do something, that does not mean that it is necessarily moral or consistent with American values.

Where the BSA policy on gays crosses the line that gets it into so much trouble is that it defines morality based on someone's self-identity. People are labeled as immoral based on who they are and with whom they associate. History has many examples where certain populations have been deemed as immoral which ultimately means that such people are not as worthy as those who are considered moral. It happened in the Crusades, the Salem witch hunts, slavery, Nazi Germany, the McCarthy era, Rwanda, and there are many more examples. Never has good come from the marginalization of a particular

population. In fact, it has brought out the very worst in humanity. Ultimately, all such situations of singling out a particular population based on their identity or beliefs has been viewed by history as immoral. While it is easy for us, as outsiders, to say that we would never be supportive of what happened in the Crusades, Nazi Germany, or Rwanda, how do we know? How is it possible that such atrocities could be committed? The answer is that it all began with one population viewing another population as less worthy or immoral, and this is exactly what the BSA policy does. So if we want a peaceful, moral society and world, it is necessary that we recognize the thought process that lays a foundation from which such atrocities arise. If we want our scouts to be positive moral influences in the future, we need to teach them to recognize such thinking in themselves and in others and to confront it before it has a chance to take root and grow. This is why it would not be acceptable to look the other way when it comes to the national BSA policy on gays, and it is why so many people and our elected officials feel so strongly about it.

Hopefully, this narrative has demonstrated the necessity for the Mt. Diablo Silverado Council to take a position against the national BSA policy on gays. I don't see taking a neutral position on this to be a wise course of action not only from a moral perspective, but also for the good of the Council. I am sure you are aware the impact the current situation is having on scouting membership, what it has done to the morale and commitment of your adult volunteers, and what I am sure you will see as the financial impact when it comes to Friends of Scouting this year. To get things back on track, decisive action is needed which would include awarding the rank of Eagle to the Moraga scout. While I can appreciate the desire to be supportive of the scoutmaster in Moraga, being supportive does not mean supporting someone when they take the wrong path. Supporting others means helping them get back on the right path when they have gone astray.

While sexual orientation is the topic of the day, and while we are on the topic of morality and diversity, I want to bring up the other equally perilous area for scouting which is "duty to god". I have noticed in some of the communications about the Moraga scout, that maybe he does not believe in god, and if so, then maybe that would be justification for not awarding him his Eagle based on the scout oath. I would like to point out that this is equally problematic as the BSA policy on gays. Hopefully, the Mt. Diablo Silverado Council can avoid a similar situation when it comes to requiring a belief in god.

While the construct of god is helpful to many, when it comes to being a good citizen and a moral person, it is just one framework that works for some people. It is not universal in nature. My understanding is that even Lord Baden Powell was comfortable removing "god" from the scout oath in countries where it was not a useful concept. There are many examples of outstanding American citizens who were atheists, and I am sure that most ethicists who specialize in morality would say that a belief in god is not essential to being a good moral person.

Ultimately, this is an issue about diversity. A perfect example is a situation I experienced at a new parent orientation when I was serving as a Committee Chair and I was approached by a Vietnamese father who wanted to enroll his son in our Pack. He said that they were Buddhist and as a result, did not believe in god. He wanted to know if that would be a problem with Boy Scouts of America. I was fortunate to have had some background on this since I once had the opportunity to listen to a child engage the abbess at a Buddhist monastery about Buddha. The child said, "Buddha was god". The abbess said, "No, Buddha is not a god." Then the child said, "But Buddha is kind of like a god", and the abbess said, "No, Buddha is not even 'kind of like a god'". Despite this, I went out on a limb and told this Vietnamese father that I was sure that it was not the intent of BSA to exclude Buddhists.

The issue here is that if Boy Scouts of America really requires a belief in god, then Buddhists would not be welcome as well as a number of other religions that do not use god as a construct. If Buddhists are accepted even though they don't believe in god, then what about those who do not believe in god who are non-Buddhists or those who do not associate themselves with a particular religion?

Once again we are confronted with the challenge of providing moral guidance in a diverse society. It speaks to the importance of not defining morality in terms of specifics but rather in more universal terms like the golden rule. Religion and god are very useful constructs, and for those people for whom it is a useful framework, it should be encouraged. For others, the importance of morality should also be stressed, and they should be encouraged to seek moral guidance from their parents, elders, and other sources. As for our jobs as scout leaders, it is to instill the importance of morality and citizenship in our scouts while understanding that our own framework regarding morality, religion, and god, is not the only one, and ultimately, our scouts must find the path that is right for them.

My hope is that the Mount Diablo Silverado Council will also find its own right path. It will not be an easy path, but in the end, I hope you will be able to look back on how you managed this situation with satisfaction knowing that you did the right thing for the right reasons.

If I can be of assistance, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Robert Raffel