Morals for your story

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Written by Shira Richman

Dear Moralistas,
A former teacher of mine recently won a teaching award. I didn’t nominate her for the award, though I wish I did.

I wrote to congratulate her on receiving the prestigious award. She wrote back in an email to a group of our friends, thanking me for nominating her. In the email she mentioned that she wanted to show her gratitude to me and another friend (who actually did write a nomination) by getting us something special when we go to her house in a couple of weeks.

Should I tell my former teacher, who has since become my friend, that I didn’t nominate her? Or should I say nothing and let her believe that I did?
--A Too Secret Admirer

Responses

Though it may hurt your friend’s feelings, the morally right thing to do is to confess that you did not write the letter of recommendation. This may result in decreased happiness for yourself and your friend, but this should not be the focus. Rather, your focus should be on honest intentions. If, as Immanuel Kant suggests, we try to universalize this behavior of taking credit for something you didn’t do, we end up with a problem. If everyone took credit for things that are not their doing, praise of this sort would become meaningless as nobody would be sure if that person was worthy of praise. Therefore, we can conclude that not telling your friend about the error would be morally wrong.
--Adam Moore

It seems unnecessary to tell your friend that you didn’t nominate her. If what really matters in morality is intention and you wanted her to win, you should let her believe the conclusion she has drawn on her own. What would be your intention in telling her you didn’t nominate her? To reduce your own feeling of guilt? Which intention is better: to make your friend feel good because she believes you took some time to write a nice letter about her, or to try to make yourself feel better for being unwaveringly honest?
--A Pragmatist (and sometimes anonymity results in the best consequences)

I think you should tell your friend you didn’t write a nomination letter. Doing this will make her respect you more as a person. She’ll realize that she can really trust you, which will strengthen your friendship.
--Preston Beck

I really like Aristotle’s views on ethics and he promoted doing whatever would make you the best person. Honesty is a virtue, but he warned against being too honest. He advocated finding a mean between extremes. I can imagine he would suggest you be honest and tell your friend you didn’t take the time to write a letter of nomination, but I can also imagine he might say that there isn’t a need to go out of your way to tell her. Then again, if she gives you a thank you gift for something you didn’t do, that doesn’t seem right. I guess you have to see what happens next and decide based on whether you are put in a compromising situation—just be sure not to lie or accept an undeserved award.
--Virtually Virtuous