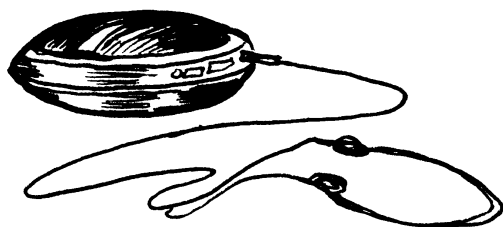


Chapter 17

Conscience: Following Some Good Advice

Mike needed money badly, and when he saw that CD player sitting on the lunch table after the bell, he was tempted to take it. There was no one around—not even a janitor, and the table was hard to see, it was off to the side, by the vending machines. It would be so easy to just stuff it in his backpack. His chances of being caught were almost zero, and he could take it to the pawnshop for some cash after school. He owed 50 bucks to his friend Terry. But that voice in his mind told him not to do it. The conversation in his mind went something like this:



What's the difference? I got ripped off at lunch once. What goes around comes around.

Just because other people steal doesn't make stealing right.

Yeah, sure, but not everyone steals, taking this one CD player isn't going to change the world.

What would happen if everyone thought like that and people went around taking things all the time that weren't theirs?

I guess so, that would stink. But I really need that money, and I never stole anything before, so one time isn't a big deal.

How do you think you're going to feel about yourself if you take it? Just because you owe money doesn't make it right to steal.

Well, if that kid cared about his stuff he shouldn't just leave it lying around.

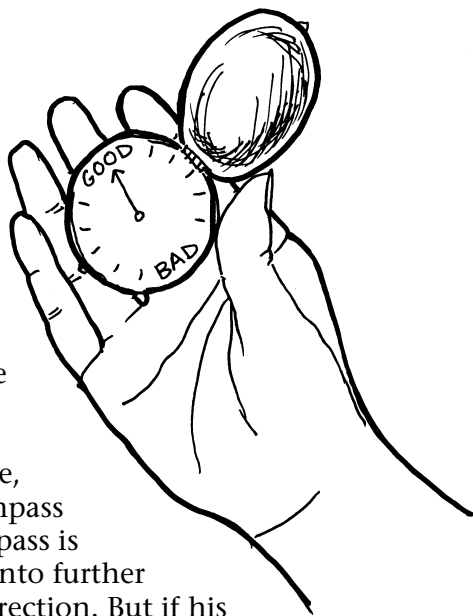
It still is not a reason to steal it. Taking that one thing will make you feel like a loser—even if no one else ever knows about it.

I guess I better just forget about it. But I know a lot of people who would take it without thinking about it.

But you're not one of them, are you?

What is Conscience?

Conscience is that inner sense, and inner voice, that makes it possible for us to distinguish between right and wrong. A well-formed conscience is our teacher, our guide and our best friend because it guides us to do what is right, and what is best for us. Your conscience comes from the goodness within you, and will serve you like a compass. Imagine what would happen if a soldier was lost deep in the jungle. Afraid for his life, he takes out his compass. If his compass is broken he will be lost. If his compass is damaged it may actually lead him into further danger, taking him in the wrong direction. But if his compass is accurate it may be the very instrument by which he can get through the dangers safely and back to his home.



How is a Good Conscience Developed?

Conscience is not formed automatically. Unlike a compass, we cannot walk down to the store and buy a new conscience before a big hike through the wilderness. Our conscience must be formed. Although we hope you are the exception, it's true that for most of us our conscience is not as well formed as it might be. If our conscience is badly formed we may make faulty judgments and hurt others and ourselves. So, it's really essential that we form our conscience correctly.

Our conscience is greatly influenced by the standards and values of the society we live in. Sometimes people are given informa-

tion about right and wrong that is mistaken. Sometimes things that are judged to be right at a certain time in history are later understood to be clearly wrong. Just over a hundred years ago, many Americans thought that it was morally acceptable to own other human beings as slaves—as a free work force. They did not have a bad conscience about owning slaves because it was legal and everyone else was doing it (well, not everyone, but enough people to make it a norm).

It was socially acceptable at the time. Their conscience was wrongly formed. Today, if you came to school and told everyone that your family had slaves, and they lived in shacks in your backyard, your teacher would probably call the police immediately, and the other students would think you were at least a little crazy. Today slavery is understood for what it is—grossly immoral. Although we have made lots of improvements, we do not yet live in an ideal world. What is socially acceptable may be morally wrong, so it's our job to be on the alert, and to make sure that our conscience is formed correctly. This is the only way we can make good decisions about what is right and wrong.

We can see that the problem of merely following our conscience is that people may believe that they are acting in good conscience when, in reality, their conscience is wrongly formed. To develop a strong and clear conscience we first need to learn and understand what is true, right and good. Once we understand basic moral truths, we are on the right road. To travel down that road we have to drive on the “high standard” highway (living by those moral truths), which we will soon see, is also the road to happiness.

Making Sense of It

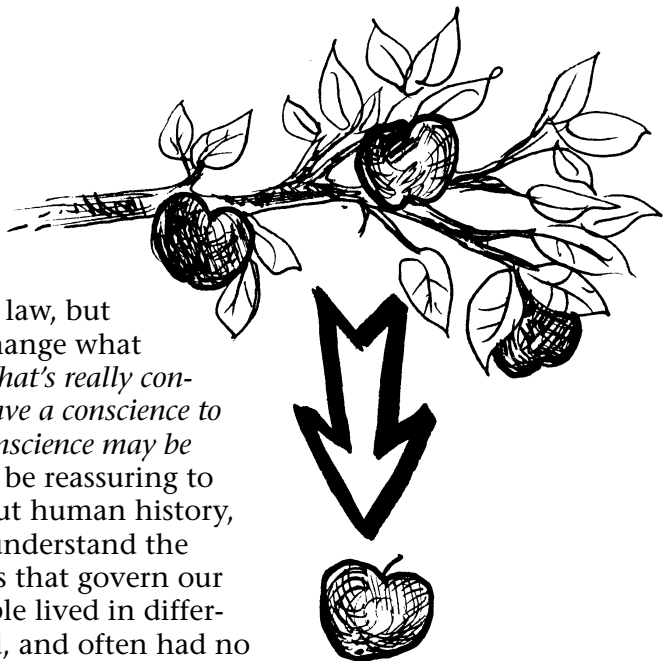
Just as there are natural laws governing the physical world, there are natural laws governing the moral realm of human life. In the same way that the law of gravity exists, whether a person is aware of it or not, moral truths and principles exist. These universal moral laws or principles imply that some things are truly right and others are truly wrong. We all recognize that some ways of behaving are truly better than others: it is better to be generous than selfish, better to be honest than dishonest, better to be respectful than disrespectful, better to be compassionate than uncaring, better to be responsible than careless.

You could argue: *I don't believe in the law of gravity.* But anyone

can tell you: *It doesn't matter if you believe in it or not, it's still true.*

So, you can have an opinion contrary to the law, but your opinion doesn't change what is ultimately true. *Hey, that's really confusing!* You may say. *I have a conscience to guide me, but even my conscience may be wrong sometimes.* It may be reassuring to know that all throughout human history, people have sought to understand the fundamental moral laws that govern our lives. Even though people lived in different regions of the world, and often had no way of communicating with each other, the moral truths that they uncovered were very similar. All the major philosophies and world religions teach these common moral principles.

One well-known example is the value of living for others. *Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor*, as stated in Christianity. Islam says, *the best of men are those who help others.* And the Jainists believe, *rendering help to another is the function of all human beings.* And finally there is the Native American Yamana Eskimo saying, *Grant other people something also. The Yamana do not like a person who acts selfishly.* So we can see that although the world is a large home to people of all cultures, races, languages and environments, we are all governed by the same universal truths. If we form our conscience according to these universal moral principles, then it will become our reliable guide in all of life's complicated situations.



Little Kids and Conscience

It may seem a bit complicated, but let's take a look at how clear these laws can be. If you have a younger brother or sister (or several, for that matter), you may see conscience in action every

day and not even realize it. Even little children appeal to natural moral laws. Do you remember having these conversations as a child: *That's not fair! How would you like it if I did that to you?* Or *I let you play with my toy, now let me play with yours.* Or *Leave him alone, he didn't do anything to hurt you!* Or *Come on, you promised.* The famous author, C.S. Lewis, said that when children say these things they are not just showing their dissatisfaction with another person's bad behavior, they are appealing to some standard of behavior that they expect other people to know about.

Defending Our Mistakes

We may wonder, *should I always follow my conscience?* We should never go against our conscience, but it is not always so plain and simple. When we knowingly do something wrong we are going against our conscience. However, sometimes when we say, *I'm just following my conscience*, we really mean, *it's okay to do this because I don't feel guilty about it*. This is justification for doing something wrong.

For example, we may not feel that it is wrong to cheat on a test or copy someone else's work in class. Of course, none of us like to think that what we are doing is wrong, and so we alter our conscience and justify our actions by doing what we wanted to do in the first place. We may tell ourselves, *it's not wrong, it's normal and everyone else is doing it*. But deep inside we know that we made a mistake and feel guilty. That's why, when someone questions us or suggests that what we did was wrong, we become upset, self-defensive, angry and aggressive.

If we do something that we know is wrong, it is a sign of psychological health to feel guilty. If we put our hand in the fire we feel pain. The pain tells us to take our hand out of the fire, put it under cold water and do not put it in a flame again. Although we don't like to feel pain, it would be very dangerous not to be able to feel physical pain. Guilt is the pain our conscience and heart feel when we do something wrong. In the same way, a person who has no sense of guilt is very dangerous. Guilt is our friend because it warns us that we are going in the wrong direction.

As you work on developing your conscience, it is good to be aware of some of these pitfalls—like justifying yourself. When you realize what you are doing, and that your behavior leads to a loss of self-respect—this makes it a little easier to follow a higher standard.

Bringing Out the Best and Bringing Out the Worst

What we take in through our eyes, and our ears affects us, for better or for worse. If we have good relationships with our parents and other adults and hang out with good people, we are likely to be influenced by them and be good ourselves. If however, we hang out with people who are selfish and dishonest, we are more likely to accept their behaviors as our own.

Some people bring out the best in us, while others bring out the worst. In the same way, some types of books, movies and music appeal to and develop the good part of our nature, while

other types encourage our bad side. This is why we should think twice about what we read, watch and hear. We are usually pretty careful about the food we eat—no one would willingly eat garbage, so why don't we check out what we are reading, watching and hearing to see what effect it has on us? It is important to remember that if we don't form our conscience properly, we are not able to clearly distinguish between right and wrong.



Conscience and Happiness Are a Natural Pair

When we live well—practicing virtues such as unselfishness, respecting other people, being honest, and using self-control, we live happily and in harmony with others and ourselves. But If we choose to lie, cheat and steal, doing whatever we want, whenever we want, at the expense of others, we will continually create problems for ourselves and others. After many years of living like this, we will change the kind of person that we are. We will lead very lonely and empty lives because we won't experience any loving and meaningful relationships since most people choose not to be around such self-centered people. Eventually, we even lose all self-respect and are not able to look back on our lives with any sense of fulfillment.

For these reasons, our conscience can be our most trusted teacher and our best friend. It will always tell us what we need to

hear even if it is not what we want to hear. Heeding our conscience leads us to experience a sense of inner peace. It feels good to be true to ourselves. Deep inside we feel good about our decisions and the happiness we experience is the result of right living. In other words: real happiness only comes as a result of living a good life—which naturally means you follow your conscience.

What Happens When You Ignore Your Conscience?

Imagine that your conscience was strong and healthy. Every time you tried to do something that was wrong your inner voice spoke-up, loud and clear. But after a while you stopped listening to that voice. *Oh, be quiet*, you thought, *who needs you anyway?* Slowly you stopped hearing it and when you were about to do something bad for the fifth or sixth time it was almost totally silent.

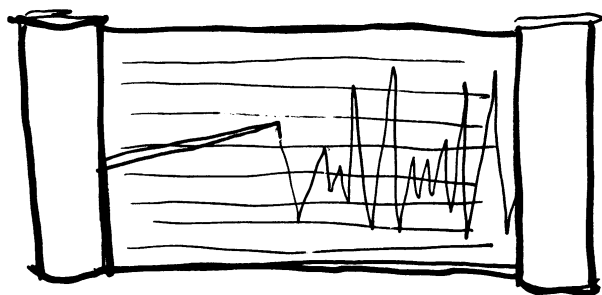
How could this be? What has happened to your invisible friend, your conscience? It hasn't left you, but like a muscle, if you ignore it for a long time and don't exercise, it becomes weak. After a while it is so weak that it can't help you when you need to pick up something heavy. Likewise, in order to strengthen the voice of your conscience, you have to listen to and follow its advice. If you ignore your inner voice it will get laryngitis and while it once thundered, it will become fainter than a whisper.

Carla, a veterinary assistant, told us this story about what happened to her when she went against her conscience when she was a teenager:

When I was 14 a few of my close friends started to shoplift. I knew it was wrong. My mother wouldn't even take an extra dime from a cashier who made a mistake in her favor. My parents were always very honest. My dad told me, "Carla, you can do a lot of stupid things in this life, but always be honest. There is nothing worse than a liar." Michelle, was my best friend and neither of us had much money. We were only in middle school, anyhow. We both had started babysitting the year before, but that didn't pay much. Michelle and another friend, Tamara, started to shoplift. At first they took small things—candy, a magazine, a box of hair bands. Slowly they started to take bigger, more expensive items. After a few months they both had stolen some nice clothes, purses, and even a watch. I admit, I was jealous. "Why should I work so hard for so little, and watch them just take everything they want?" I thought. So, I started to shoplift also. At first it was really difficult. I was terrified. I thought about being caught and what my par-

ents would say. I knew they would be completely disappointed in me. But after a while it got easier and easier, until it became like a game. I was stealing all kinds of things, and I was good at it. I shoplifted for almost a year, and I never got caught. Then I stopped; I just got tired of being dishonest.

When I turned 17, I applied to work in an emergency clinic at night as a receptionist. The pay was fantastic and I could learn more about being a nurse. It was my life long dream to be a nurse. The clinic had a lot of medicine in it—addictive medicine. I had to take a polygraph (lie detector) test before I could work there. The people who ran the clinic



wanted to make sure no drug users worked there. I had never touched drugs. The examiner strapped the test up to me. He put wires around my head, my stomach and my back. Then he began to ask me questions. He asked me if I had ever done drugs, I said no. He asked me if I had ever stolen anything. I said

yes. I was so nervous. I wanted that job more than anything. The needles on the paper went mad. According to the test not only did I steal, but I also did drugs! I was so upset. I didn't get the job. I realized that I had a guilty conscience, and that my seemingly harmless stealing would follow me around for a long time.

Carla learned the hard way what happened when she went against her conscience. She knew it was wrong, but she stole anyway. So, we can see that there are two steps to forming your conscience—knowing what is right and doing what is right. It is often easier to know what is right than to do what is right. Who decides whether or not you do what is right? Only you do. Your decisions belong to you. You cannot blindly follow the ideas of anyone else. You have to carefully and sincerely form your own conscience. Forming a true conscience takes time and effort, but in the end, it will never let you down.



Journal

Can you think of a time when you did not listen to your conscience? What happened?

To Do



1. Imagine that you are Carla's conscience. Write down a monologue of what you would say to her to try to keep her from stealing. If she didn't listen to you what would you say to her after she had already stolen?
2. Speak to your parents and ask them to tell you about a time when they either listened to their conscience or went against it. What happened? How did they feel afterwards?
3. As a class, think of several situations in which your conscience may speak to you. What do you think your conscience would say in each situation? Why is it not easy to listen to your conscience all of the time? Make a list of the short-term and long-term consequences of not listening to your conscience in the situations you listed.

Note: Your class may like to try a variation on this exercise—follow the directions above, but change the situation to a time when you did listen to your conscience. Then make a list of what happened as a result. Sometimes the good results of listening to your conscience are more internal (or go on inside of you)—remember to keep these in mind as well.

For Example:

Dilemma: *Three of my friends are drinking after school. I don't want to drink with them, but I don't want them to think I'm a nerd.*

Your conscience says: *Don't drink with your friends. You know it won't be good for you. You have work to do, and you don't want to mess around with drinking and drugs. Just say, "No thanks, I'm not interested," and go home.*

Short-Term Consequences of not Listening: *My parents might notice that I've been drinking and then I'll be in trouble. I won't have time to study for my math test tomorrow and I need the grade. I'll feel crummy about myself for going against what I know is right.*

Long-Term Consequences of not Listening: *I might continue to ignore my conscience and keep drinking or get into other drugs. My grades will go down. I won't be able to keep up going after my goals. My parents will be really disappointed in me. I'll be disappointed in myself.*

Key Ideas

- ☉ A well-formed conscience will help you make the right decisions and lead you towards a happy and fulfilling life.
- ☉ If you ignore your conscience, after a while it will fade and not be strong enough to guide you.



It's not the greatness of power, or money, or physical strength, or delicious food, or luxurious clothes or other human advantages that bring us joy and peace of mind; it can only be the result of spiritual well-being and pure conscience.

St. John Chrysostom