

A still small voice

Is conscience, that still small voice that delineates right from wrong, but a hollow word in modern civilization? Is guilt so out-of-fashion that neither adults nor children will tolerate being held responsible for their own actions?

Have we swung so far from those moral standards established over hundreds of generations which preceded ours that we dismiss wrong-doing, both in ourselves and others, with shrugging shoulders?

Is the price to be paid for building a great nation... one in which opportunity awaits all who seize it, one where concern for the needy, the aged, and the handicapped elicits open-handed response not only from caring governments but also from a generous private sector... is the price we pay disintegration of our moral values?

Have our riches, our enormous powers, our resources, developed in us a presumption that we are somehow entitled to be better endowed with material possessions than any other peoples on the face of the earth? Have our advantages made us so hedonistic that we feel disciplines need not apply to any of us? Do we delude ourselves that because we are blessed, we are somehow exempt from codes of conduct, and that for some unknown reason we are authorized to do whatever appeals at any given moment, regardless of consequences?

While it is undeniable that there has never been an era in which there were no sinners, where some people did not take advantage of their positions, power, or wealth to exploit those who lacked status, influence, or riches, there have been few periods of history when so many people felt comfortable about flaunting convention, ignoring ethics, and doing whatever is tempting, whether or not others are harmed.

Distinctions between right and wrong are apparently no longer made easily, or heeded. Duty has become an expletive. Responsibility has been superceded by achievement at the price of integrity. Ends, however, selfish, justify means, however venal.

Morality is winked at, Fidelity is disdained. Virtue is despised. At individual levels, people abdicate responsibilities and turn their backs on tradition. At the highest level of government, policies disguised as programs to aid the nation's citizens are subverted to enrich the "haves" and devitalize the "have nots." Perpetrators of crime receive protections under the law while victims suffer losses and harms.

Consciences are salved with excuses. "Everybody does it." "There are no real heroes; only myths." "People are only human." "He marches to a different drummer." "Talents outweigh faults." "We police ourselves." "The business of business is profit." "Smart money rides on the slippage."

Whatever happened to "Virtue is its own reward"? Or: "A peace above all earthly dignities, a still and quiet conscience"? "Sweet are the slumbers of a virtuous man"? Or: "Trust that man in nothing who has not a conscience in everything"?

Disraeli said, "The world is wearied of statesmen whom democracy has degraded into politicians." Today, he might rephrase his remark to, "The world is wearied of a people which democracy has degraded into politicians."

By definition, democracy is government by the people; if self-governing people abandon virtue, principle, and conscience, bestiality shall surely follow.