

## **Living by Conscience: The Key to Transformation**

By Dr. Xavier

As I describe in my book *Fulfilling Heart and Soul: Meeting Psychological and Spiritual Needs With Conscience*, my studies on conscience and experience in my psychiatric practice for 27 years have convinced me that living by conscience is the key to transformation. Mahatma Gandhi used his conscience--his "inner voice"--to make good choices, and stimulated the consciences of great many followers and adversaries to make personal and social transformation. Martin Luther King followed Gandhi's example. By using the guidance of conscience properly in making choices we can transform ourselves and help others to do the same.

Albert Einstein had noted that all our thoughts and actions are connected with human needs. We make choices to deal with various needs, and in that process we may use the guidance of conscience or "superego" or just feelings connected to one or more needs. Often, there is confusion between one's innate conscience and socially programmed "superego." Conscience, described by St. Paul as the "law written in the heart," uses reason and the Golden Rule to judge good and bad. But, superego shaped by social conditioning may or may not use reason and the Golden Rule in its judgment.

The Biblical story of a group of men who caught a woman committing adultery illustrates the difference between conscience and superego. The men took her to Jesus to test Him and reminded Him that by the Law of Moses she should be stoned to death. This was their superego judgment. Jesus calmed these men (who were probably fired up by sexual, aggressive and religious passions) by being calm and by bending down and writing on the ground, a calming distraction. Then He asked the one who had not sinned to cast the first stone. They left, each convicted by his own conscience--a transformation by using conscience. Calming strong emotions is usually necessary to make good decision. Meditation and other relaxation techniques help us to be calm.

Regarding the Golden Rule, it is important to remember Bernard Shaw's view: Do not do to others as you would have

them do to you for their taste may be different. Our tastes are related to our needs which are far more important. To apply the Golden Rule and to use reason in our choices, we have to have a good perspective on human needs like esteem, identity and power. Much human suffering--including abuses and addictions, break ups and break downs, violence and wars--result from attempts by individuals or groups to meet needs evading or contradicting conscience. Extremists are often misguided by their unreasonable or unfair superegos. Racism, sexism, religious and nationalistic extremisms are examples. Being members of society, superego has its reasonable place in one's life. Problem arises when superego contradicts conscience. In trying to meet our psychological and spiritual needs, the best approach is to keep the superego in line with conscience, using conscience as the master guide.

There are four steps in using conscience: awareness, decision, action and reevaluation. Open-minded awareness of choices and their consequences give useful input into conscience to make good choices. And healthy willpower and discipline work to implement the choices. Then, we need to reevaluate the merit of the choice by the outcome. Often, people with personality disorders would blame others or circumstance, ignoring their role in the undesirable results. Communities also can get into such a pattern.

Blaming others is one of the games we play which can be self-defeating. Sigmund Freud described several psychological defenses which are unconscious mechanisms to keep our comfort level in balance. When a person with multiple personality switches from one personality to another, it is the unconscious defense called dissociation. But when somebody consciously cons his or her conscience, as Dr. Jekyll did in the Jekyll and Hyde story, I call it spiritual defense. We turn a deaf ear to the "still small voice" of conscience at our own peril. The important point here is to pay attention to conscience, not tune it out as people with addictions often do.

Shakespeare, in five lines in *King Richard III*, pointed out five common ways people use spiritual defenses: Using angle of argument instead of true perspective, distorted values such as "might is right," acting without reflection, false appeal to virtues like courage and group support for doing wrong.

Unlike Abraham Maslow's concept of human needs, I don't approach it in terms of a hierarchy of needs, and I address our time-oriented needs--to integrate the past and to have present balance and future direction. Besides our biological needs like food and sleep, we have many needs related to the complexity of our lives as psychological, social and spiritual beings.

The best way to meet our need for esteem--both self-esteem and esteem from others--is to live by and judge by conscience. Regarding identity, conscience promotes both authentic individuality and a sense of belonging which transcends narrow sectarian boundaries. People of conscience relate in cooperative/creative ways and develop and use the power with love and wisdom. They integrate their past, cutting off bad influences and utilizing the wisdom from past, maintaining balance at present and moving forward with a healthy direction for future. Also, they enjoy healthy pleasures including spiritual joy. Using conscience one can enjoy sexuality with discipline and view sexual issues with compassion and wisdom. Those who are guided by conscience would show depth in their secular and spiritual meaning.

Thus, we can see that living by conscience which involves a good perspective on human needs, is the key to spiritually and psychologically healthy transformation of life individually and collectively. More information about my book including the first chapter is on my website: [www.nsxavier.com](http://www.nsxavier.com). [Modification will be made in this paper for a power point presentation]