



SUSAN HICKS

FIND THE BANANA

moral thoughts of an electrocuted monkey

If what you are doing is not working,
Try doing something different.

Philip Hicks

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Is this book true?

I am writing this as a white, married, middle-aged Englishwoman with an expensive education, a largely grownup family and no need to make my own living. I see the world from a very privileged position. If this book is true for some, still the omissions and blind spots must be the larger truth.

I am writing this as a voracious reader with a poor memory, and a confirmed plagiarist. I am no scholar. Errors of fact in dealing with other people's work are the norm, not the exception here.

I am writing this as a human being who shares the human ability to edit my memories so as to see myself in a flattering light; and as a social being who is hurt by criticisms, afraid of rejection and eager to impress.

I am writing this as convincing pub talker, blagger, and story teller.

Everything in this book is as well crafted as I can make it, hand coloured and polished to the best of my ability; but true? Is poetry true? Are the parables of Jesus true? Is it the truth when I say I love you? Even if I knew what that slippery word means, I would not claim it.

*"All I got is a red guitar; three cords, and the truth.
All I got is a red guitar: the rest is up to you."* *Dylan*

All I've got for you is this book in your hands.

The truth is up to you.

The feel-bad factor

Everyone I have met suffers from an uneasy feeling that they are probably not living quite as they should. For some people this is a disabling universal guilt, while for others it is something they only notice at two in the morning when their defences are down, but I have never personally met anyone who was happy to say,

“Yes, in all possible respects, I am a good person.”

Most writers on this subject seem to assume that this uneasiness indicates that we really are doing badly, and concentrate on telling us what we should change; the unspoken promise seems to be, if we just do enough of the right stuff, we can make the bad feelings go away.

Before you use this book to light your next bonfire, I have no intention of telling you what to do. I consider that to be your job and none of my business. What I hope to do here is to provide a few interesting points of view that you may not have come across before, and some tools that might help you think about the subject. You will have to bring your own content.

The next two sections cover some of the ideas behind my approach to morals. I have been told that they are harder to get into than the rest of the book; if you find them difficult you might prefer to start with ‘Smart as a Rat?’, on page 8.

Human nature

Professional moralists turn up all over the place. We expect to find religious leaders and school teachers moralising, but I have also noticed health professionals, environmentalists, charity campaigners, advertisers, political activists ...and there are probably a host of others that I have not noticed.

All of them make assumptions about human nature, and these assumptions determine to a large extent what advice they come up with. Every one of us has a theory of what people are like and we base our moral decisions on this theory even if we could not possibly articulate it. Most opinions can be located along a line between two ridiculous extremes which I mentally caricature as 'The Dippy Hippy' and 'The Horrible Headmaster.'

The Dippy Hippy holds the view that humans are basically good, loving and creative, and that if they didn't get damaged by their parents and society, the world would be a paradise.

The Horrible Headmaster believes that humans are fundamentally selfish, depraved and competitive, and if they were not held in check by fear of the consequences from parents and social institutions, the world would be a hell.

I have thought and read long and hard about this question, and I think it is only fair to come clean about my opinions so that you know where I am coming from:

- I don't think we know nearly enough to decide the question of what constitutes the fundamental nature of a human, and I suspect that there's no point asking the question, because
- Humans have given their lives for a stranger, and humans have invented extermination camps; whatever human nature is, it is thoroughly contradictory, and
- I personally believe in free will.

Try this...

Can you work out what you think about human nature?

God and the monkey

Imagine a social monkey. What principles of social behaviour will work for the survival of that monkey and her offspring? Well, care for offspring is fairly central. A young monkey has a long childhood, and is therefore dependant on its parent for food and safety for a long period: a mother who gets bored and jettisons her baby after a few weeks is not going to have many offspring, and her genes will die out. So our monkey shows nurturing behaviour for her young, however much trouble it is to do so.

Now imagine a God. I imagine the Christian God because he's the one I whom I personally follow, but I expect you could rewrite the following paragraphs for your deity of choice. So what moral behaviour does God ask for? Mine talks a lot about care for the poor and children and the elderly; he encourages healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to those in need. He commands loving behaviour that is very similar to the nurturing behaviour of our hypothetical monkey.

I want to suggest that moral behaviour is a human characteristic that can be discussed without reference to any particular belief system: We all seem to have a built in tendency to value those rules or behaviours built on unconditional nurturing, or love, whatever we believe about the supernatural world.

Now let's go back to our monkey. Care for her young is not going to be enough to ensure the survival of her genes: our monkey needs to form bonds with others who will help her spot danger and find food, but not all the other monkeys are going to be equally useful to her. She needs partners who will return the investment, who if she shares food with them today, will share food with her tomorrow; and she herself needs to be a reliable partner in these more egalitarian relationships.

What does our God say about this? Mine says, 'Do not lie; do not steal. Work to support your self and your family, and to have something to contribute to society. Those who hurt others can expect punishment.'

It seems that we also have a built in tendency to value those behaviours or rules built on Justice, or expected reward.

I have summarised some of the characteristics of these two groups of moral behaviour in the lists below, and a quick comparison will show that they approach the question 'what is right' from quite different angles. So different that very often what is right from one point of view is wrong from another. The contradiction is built in.

Think about the death penalty for murder, for instance: Justice suggests an eye for an eye, whereas love prefers medical help and rehabilitation. Or try thinking about keeping alive a child with no brain activity: love says nothing is too much, but justice asks uncomfortable questions about the hospital budget.

LOVE/NURTURING

Emphasises value of individual.

Emphasises collective responsibility for welfare of weak or suffering individuals, children and the elderly.

Fairness seen in terms of quality of life.

Needs-based distribution of resources.

Tends towards forgiveness and rehabilitation of offenders.

Care for everyone; needs met regardless of ability or merit.

Encourages individuals to see themselves in terms of neediness, weakness and disability.

Tends towards economic equality.

In politics, generally left wing.

REWARD/JUSTICE

Emphasises moral responsibility of individual.

Emphasises collective responsibility to treat each individual equally.

Fairness seen in terms of work done and contribution made.

Effort-based distribution of resources.

Tends towards punishment of offenders.

Rewards those who have natural advantages of health, money and education, at the expense of the less well endowed.

Encourages individuals to see themselves in terms of ability, powerfulness and potential contribution.

May tend to generate more overall wealth.

In politics, generally right wing.

It appears that however we conceive of morality arising, it is not going to boil down to a simple matter of 'Do this, don't do that.'

Try this...

Do you have a personal preference for love based behaviors, or for justice based behaviors?

Can you think of situations where these two would conflict?

Are you facing one of these conflicts in your life at the moment

Smart as a Rat?

Once some scientists wanted to test how the learning speed of rats compared with that of humans (well, they had to think of something to do with the research grant...). So they built two mazes, identical except for size, one maze being scaled for rats and one for undergraduate psychology students (a.k.a. 'human rats'). To induce the experimental subjects to run the maze, each group was given an appropriate reward on successful completion of the task – sugar pills for the rats, and for the students dollar bills. The researchers then spent many a long day watching their subjects explore the maze, counting the number of wrong turns taken on each run. As each experimental subject became more familiar with the maze the number of mistakes made decreased, until they went straight to the reward every time.

The scientists made graphs of the number of mistakes plotted against the number of tries, and found that the graph for both rats and students formed the first half of the classic bell curve shape, with very many mistake on the first few runs and a steep learning curve leading to few or no mistakes after a certain number of tries; and they found that the number of runs needed for the curve to level out was roughly the same for both rats and students. In other words, humans and rats are equally smart at learning mazes.

Having still some grant money left, the researchers decided that they would go on to plot the extinction curve for this maze running behaviour. The extinction curve is the other half of the classic bell curve (the two together form a bell shape, hence the name). It is obtained by removing the reward and counting how long it takes for the experimental subject to stop performing a learned behaviour, once it is no longer rewarded. As expected, once the sugar was removed the rats became less and less inclined to complete the maze, first exploring aimlessly then not bothering to go into the maze at all. Not the students! They ran and ran and ran the now unrewarding maze. The scientists, fascinated, kept up the experiment until lack of further funding and the end of term combined to end it, when they went on their holidays with a sigh of relief...although there is a joke in the department that the students are still breaking into the lab at night to run the maze again, just in case the money has come back....

I have a theory about why the students couldn't give up running the maze: I think it may be a side effect of our ability to model the world. The world is unbelievably, incomprehensibly complex, and one of the ways humans deal with this is to model it in our heads, and then manipulate the model. This simplifies a mass of detail into a few ideas which our limited brains can handle without suffering the biological equivalent of what happens to this computer if I try to open three files of images, play music and access the internet, all at once...

*" ??? Grrrrr! *\$** Oh \$*!7. And 3{*<€! "*

< Ctrl – Alt – Delete> !

Modelling the world in this way has enormous advantages. Information can be easily transferred between individuals, novel events can be compared with known events, solutions that have worked in one situation can be transferred to a new situation; in short it saves each individual from having to reinvent the wheel on an hourly basis.

BUT, 'The map is not the territory.' No model is ever an accurate reflection of reality – if it was, it would be as complex as the reality it models and therefore useless. Some times this simplification creates problems of its own. For instance I can imagine that a smart student might model the maze as a set of instructions, thus:

'Enter when the guy in the white coat tells you to,
turn right,
right,
straight on,
left,
left,
straight on,
right,
left,
pick up money,
go to pub.'

That's a model with enormous advantages; the experimenters could change the lighting or the floor covering or the colour of the walls, and the student still gets his beer, but it contains no information about what to do if the money is not there. Even this would not be a problem, *if our student remembers that he is dealing with a model*. If he can remember that his instructions work for

the model of the maze in his head, and that the model of the maze inside his head is different from the real maze outside his head, then when the money fails to materialise he will be able to try a new model.

But we often **reify** our models.

re·ify

Pronunciation: 'rA-&-"fI, 'rE- *transitive verb*

Etymology: Latin *res* thing

to regard (something abstract) as a material or concrete thing

Meriam-Webster

So our thirsty student 'knows the maze', but his 'knowledge' does not work any more. He has reified his model and now confused it with the real thing, and because of this he ceases to respond to the maze outside his head: He has forgotten the existence of the maze outside his head. 'The maze' to him IS his internal model of it. So he does what humans characteristically do when the world fails to behave as expected: he persists. We all know that

Persistence is a virtue.

None of us would have ever learned to walk or to read if we had not persisted with a difficult task; but sometimes

Persistence is just stupid.

The rat/student experiment is fun to read because reification is seldom so obviously ridiculous in its consequences. Most of the time, when a model fails we invent a reason for the failure that does not challenge the model. We see that something is not working, but because we have come to believe that our model of the world IS the world, we look for what is not working in the wrong place. Instead of the difficult-but-possible task of inventing a new way of understanding the world, we give ourselves the impossible and often agonising task of making the world behave like our model.

Usually we attribute the failure to our self, or to other people. In daily life we are more at home with blaming bad behaviour or a bad person than we are with the idea of a bad model.

Faced with a failure, we *try harder*.

*If at first you don't succeed,
try, try, and try again.*

I remember learning this saying at my grandmother's knee, and even as a small child I felt there was something not quite right about it. If trying harder is always the correct thing to do, then there is no way of thinking

'It still isn't working, I'll try something different.'

So if the square peg won't fit into the round hole, it must be because I'm not pushing right, I should push harder. If a solution doesn't work, do the same thing only with more effort; and if that doesn't work, try harder still. The fault, the failure, lies with the person doing the trying.....every failure is your fault.

This is of course immensely destructive to the individual, transforming someone who is simply mistaken about the nature of the world into someone lazy, stupid and lacking moral fibre, a flawed human being. A person who has made a mistake can learn: there is hope. A flawed individual is trapped, doomed indefinitely to repeat the failure and bear the shame.

Try this ...

Think of somewhere where what you are doing is not working (everyone has some).

Can you work out what your model of this situation is?

See if you can collect some different models. Try places you wouldn't usually look, people whose beliefs you disagree with, the sort of books you don't usually read. The models you collect don't have to be true, just different.

Can you get as smart as a rat?

What's in your conscience?

The uncomfortable feeling that we are not doing as well as we should is usually assumed to be the product of our conscience, and it is implied that if we want to be good people we will obey this feeling. To try to think about this I made lists, under a few fairly random headings, of what my conscience says I should do.

LOCAL COMMUNITY

- Entertain more
- Talk less in meetings
- Contribute more to meetings
- Talk less
- Be more polite
- Be more agreeable
- Spend more time and energy on others
- Do more chores to support others individually
- Take more time to listen to lonely
or unhappy people

FAMILY

- Spend more time with son
- Visit daughter in America
- Be more help to married daughter
- Lose weight to be nicer for husband
- Push son harder re. education
- Push son less hard re. education
- Cook nicer meals
- Cook cheaper meals
- Cook healthier meals
- Keep house cleaner and tidier
- Enjoy family life more

THE WORLD

- Recycle everything
- Give more (and more, and more) money to charities
- Give up travel to reduce carbon emissions
- Eat no meat,
because of cruel farming practices and world hunger
- Buy only fair-traded or second-hand clothes, and wear them out
- Reduce standard of living,
to consume only my fair share of world resources
- Support all campaigns against poverty,
environmental degradation and human rights abuse

PERSONAL

- Lose weight
- Stop smoking *again*
- Rest when tired
- Dress better
- Be kinder
- Be more patient
- Work harder
- Be happier

The most interesting thing about these lists is not the contents: it is the contradictions, and the outright impossibilities:

I have contradictions inside a category, where I feel I should change in two opposed ways at the same time

- 'Push son harder', 'Push son less hard.'

There are also contradictions between categories

- 'Visit daughter in America', 'Give up travel to reduce carbon emissions'.

The time required to do all of these things is obviously impossible: I don't think any one person could do this list and still have time left to wash in the morning, let alone sleep!

Many of the items are inherently impossible to finish: 'Give more' and 'do more' are intrinsically unlimited instructions; 'do more' can never become 'done enough.'

Above all there are impossibilities of strength, or you could call it will power or the ability to tolerate discomfort. If I was to seriously try to do all the things on this list I would very rapidly become utterly miserable. I think I can imagine a kind of rigid, fanatical self-righteousness that might make the attempt possible, but I don't imagine that I or anyone who met me would enjoy the person I then became. Nor do I think the attempt would last for very long.

All of which casts an interesting light on the naïve assumption that we should obey the dictates of our conscience. I don't believe it means anything to say that a person 'should' do the impossible: the idea of a duty only makes sense to me in the context of being able to perform that duty.

As it stands, our usual understanding of conscience might imply that we are caught in a tragedy of endless striving for an impossible goal. Or maybe we could stop taking ourselves so seriously and read it as a comedy, fall about laughing for a bit, and then have a rethink?

Try this...

WARNING: if you try this when you are feeling depressed, ill or hung-over, you risk feeling terrible.
I suggest you leave it for a day when you are feeling relatively well and happy (for you).

Grab a few bits of paper and give them headings that cover different areas of your life e.g. work, family.

Now take the first sheet and quickly, without thinking about it too hard, write down whatever things come to mind about which you have that niggling 'could do better' feeling.

When you run out of stuff go on to the next sheet.

Try playing a game of 'spot the contradiction' on your lists.

Think how much nicer you are now, with all your faults, than the person you would become if you tried to do all those things!

What do you want to do with your lists now? Feel free to draw moustaches on them, or burn them...

Learning Power

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Marianne Williamson,
(often incorrectly credited to Nelson Mandela) .

Power has a bad press; the word is often used in the sense of power over others, the power to bully or exploit, but power is in itself a neutral concept. You can use your strength to hit someone, your imagination to make your self afraid and your money for displaying status; but you don't have to. All these things are forms of power that can just as well be used for good ends as for bad.

Power can come from our social status or from wealth, but these are not the most enjoyable forms of power to exercise and they are the easiest to abuse. The kind of power I am interested in is the kind which is learned; it can be understood as skill or knowledge, but I prefer to think of it as power because it increases the options open to you as other forms of power do, and it makes you feel powerful. I keep learning stuff because I love getting more powerful: power feels good.

Watch a small child

Watch him struggle to lift something heavy.

Watch him climb higher in spite of his fear.

Listen to his struggle to say what he means.

He is learning power. We may call it playing, but for him it is a serious undertaking, which is why he gets so frustrated when he fails; there is nothing frivolous about the task from his point of view.

There was a time in all our lives when we knew how to learn, and fought to become more powerful. The drive to acquire ever greater skills, knowledge and strength is built in, but at some point most of us learn that too much power is not for us, and we give up trying to master our world. We accept our limitations, even though for many us in the western world at least, many of those limitations are inside our heads.

There was once a man who wanted to learn the violin, but felt he was too old. He complained to his therapist, "Do you know how old I would be by the time I learned enough to play with an orchestra?"

"Exactly the same age as you would be if you didn't." The therapist replied.

So if power feels good, why do so many of us give up trying to get more?

One reason is that there are a number of people who have a vested interest in our weakness. There is the plumber I have to call because I can't fix my own washing machine, the advertiser who profits from my insecurity about following my own tastes, and of course the politician who introduces laws that exploit me, and which I have no idea how to fight. In short all the experts, the specialists and everyone who has power over me stands to lose some of their power if I become more powerful. None of them are likely to take this lying down. In the exploited countries of the third world, the Powers That Be can rely on poverty to keep the majority of people powerless, or if that fails send in the death squads, but in the West they have to rely on education.

"What? I thought you said you liked learning stuff?"

"Ah yes, but I'm *very* fussy about what stuff."

Much of what goes on under the guise of education, inside school and out of it, is just conditioning in doing what we are told, not asking awkward questions, knowing our place and deferring to the experts. A lot of the information disseminated by business and government is 'economical with the actualité', is 'spin' – in other words, they lie.

'They', those who have power over us in the west, have over the centuries developed and refined a system that not only routinely presents outright lies as truth, but has conditioned most of us into accepting those lies, because they are told to us by experts and authorities - and we have been educated out of believing in our own abilities to find out for ourselves or make up our own minds. And we are the lucky ones: in much of the world they just shoot you if you argue.

If you are reading this, you have learned to read; that's one of the most complex tasks humans have yet invented. What else could you learn? If you start from the assumption that the limits are all in your head, you won't always be right, of course, but my bet is you will do more, have more fun, make more difference to the world and feel a lot more alive than you will if you believe that all the limits are real and can't be moved.

We all live with stuff we hate, from world poverty to a dripping tap; the good news is that changing all of it starts in the same way: by imagining it could be different and that you could be the one to change it.

Try this...

Think of one thing you would like to change

Can you work out what you would need to learn before you can change that thing?

Would you like to?

Guilt is amoral.

The things we think of as emotions or feelings are a mixed bunch. Some of them are clearly the experience of certain bodily states, like fear: When you are afraid your heart beats faster and you breathe more quickly. Blood drains from the skin (making you go white) and flows into your muscles and brain so you move and think faster. Along with this you feel an impulse to look away or run away from the thing that is frightening you.

There are other things we also call emotions which are much more confused – Happiness for instance, which seems to refer to a variety of states. I have heard those emotions that refer to a clear physiological state called ‘primary emotions’ and those that refer to more complex states ‘secondary emotions’. Not because they are less important or less intense than primary emotions, but to indicate that our understanding of them can be further broken down.

The best understanding of guilt that I have found is that guilt is a secondary emotion, and that the emotions from which it arises are attachment (love) and anger. I want to suggest that

GUILT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF FEELING ANGER TOWARDS SOMEONE WE LOVE.

Anger is a proper response to frustration: fight for what you want!

Attachment is a proper response to love: stay close!

When you feel both at the same time, it is very distressing because you are caught in a situation where you can't win: If you fight for what you want, you may lose the relationship with your loved one, and that hurts; but if you draw close to the person you love, that will mean that you have to give up something else that you want, which is frustrating.

For example, when my grandmother had to go into a nursing home I felt guilty about how often I visited. She was a very important part of my childhood and I loved her for that, and I hated the pain and loss of dignity that she was enduring and longed to help or at least to be with her to comfort her, so I wanted to go often. But she was unable to speak, which meant that visits were an embarrassing monologue on my part; and I had two children under three who were wearing me out, so at weekends I wanted to spend time resting, not driving for hours and enduring emotional strain. I couldn't win.

Many moralists regard guilt as a good thing because, they say, without feeling the miseries of guilt when we neglect a duty or commit an offence, we would have less incentive to be good. I began to suspect this idea through observing people who apparently felt a great deal of guilt. They were not the immoral, unpleasant people that this understanding of guilt would imply. They were mostly very helpful and hard working. So maybe they had extra strong consciences then, and felt a lot of guilt because they were trying to reach a

higher standard? Well, maybe, but if so then it was clearly not working: despite their strong feelings of guilt they were not noticeably better people than many others who appeared never to feel guilty. Also those who felt a great deal of guilt seemed to have one other characteristic in common: a suppressed anger that surfaced as bursts of resentment or turned inward to the point of self harm. Their guilt did not seem to be achieving very much except to make them miserable.

I want to suggest that FEELINGS OF GUILT ARE USELESS; if anything they get in the way.

I think the only connection between guilt and moral behaviour lies in the cause of guilt: It often happens that we first feel guilt in the same relationship and at the same time as we are learning our understanding of moral behaviour, and the two can become so strongly linked that they remain so for the rest of our lives.

When I was writing this section I discussed this theory with one of my daughters, who is now adult, and she provided a fascinating example. She said that the only thing she ever feels really guilty about is lying, and that this guilt is so strong that she just can't bear to lie. It was an amazing thing for me to hear, because about the only antisocial behaviour which I really cannot tolerate is lying. For historical reasons of my own, I become afraid and angry and want very much to avoid a person who lies to me. During the period in her childhood when she experimented with lying, I remember being shocked at how much dislike I felt for my own child, and how difficult I found it to go on loving her during what felt like an almost flat learning curve!

Now she can't lie without serious distress, due entirely to my incapacity to tolerate her behaviour when she was younger. I still hate lies. I *hate* lies! But I wish I had not damaged her freedom, even in this area.

Now in most of her life I don't think this guilt is going to give my daughter much of a problem. She is of her own choice a thoroughly moral person and I am convinced she would normally choose to tell the truth even if she felt no guilt over the matter. So unless she is one day in a position where it might be immoral to be truthful (such as that of the European gentiles who hid Jews during WW2), I think that she will probably never feel much guilt.

I'm pleased about that.

But what if the things I am unable to tolerate had included being contradicted, or anger, or sensuality? We were very, very lucky.

Try this...

Do take your time: guilt is a very stressful feeling.

Are there things that always make you feel guilty?

Can you identify how you learned to feel like that?

If you didn't feel guilty, would you want to behave differently?

Are there things happening now in your life that you feel guilty about?

Can you work out where the conflict is in your own heart, between love and frustration?

Be as kind as you can to your self about this subject: Feeling guilty does not make you a flawed person, it's just one of the nasty things that can happen to a person through no fault of their own.

Joining in.

Some people like lots of social contact and enjoy being part of a group regardless of what the group is doing. Some people want to follow their own interests and are happy to do so alone for much of the time. Most of us are somewhere in the middle.

Try this

Imagine a group of mates are going bowling. Fred says he doesn't like bowling and will do something else instead. Jane doesn't like bowling either, but she prefers to go along and join in. I have listed here some ways to describe their behaviour.

JANE

Friendly

Fun to be with

Conformist

Fits in

Good mannered

Spineless

Considerate of others

Helpful

Doesn't rock the boat

Well behaved

Knows her place

Generous

Doormat

FRED

Stroppy

Inconsiderate

Independent

Nonconformist

Rude

Disruptive

Original

Rebellious

Self directed

Difficult

Knows what he wants

Unfriendly

Doesn't care about others

Mark the words that you feel are applicable to each person.

Did you feel strongly about who was behaving better?

Did you choose mostly positive or negative words?

Would you describe your self as more like Jane or more like Fred, or somewhere in the middle?

Those of us who are more like Jane than we are like Fred are likely to be more influenced by peer pressure, because we tend to spend time with people and value harmony within the group, but peer pressure affects everyone and no one of any age is immune or even particularly resistant.

This need not be a bad thing. Although the peer pressure is often cited with disapproval as an explanation for why young people adopt a moral code that is different from that of their elders, the mechanism its self is neutral.

We all need to belong to groups. Most of us belong to small groups of intimate friends and family. We also belong to medium size groups which can be geographically based such as a village or workplace, or they can be ideologically based like a religious assembly or a youth subculture. There are also more notional entities that allow identification with a much larger group such as British Citizen, or Arsenal supporter.

All these groups have protocols, ways of behaving, views that are held by 'our kind of people' and things that we wouldn't think of doing. As part of belonging to these groups we tend to adopt these ways of behaving without thinking about them.

To take examples from my own life, as an adult convert to Christianity I acquired the view that Christians don't smoke, and so gave up smoking; none of the reasons I was given for this prohibition were particularly persuasive, but smoking wasn't done by my newly acquired peer group, so I didn't do it.

In this example I think that the effects of peer pressure were wholly beneficial.

But here's a different example: in the strand of church life in which I found myself, we didn't 'do' politics. Giving to charity was in, investigating the causes of poverty was out. Certain single-issue campaigns, largely right wing, were ok, but when I was forming my identity as a Christian we were at war in the Falklands and the government was destroying the power of the trades unions, and I never heard a single word on either of these subjects.

What I learned from this silence was, 'we don't do politics'.

For the next 20 years I went along with this unconsciously absorbed view, avoiding the news and concentrating on an individualistic approach to everything, with the result that I entered my forties with the political sophistication of a well meaning seven year old.

I do not consider this a positive outcome.

Try this...

Think of a couple of groups of different sizes that you belong to.

Can you identify things that you do or don't do because that is how the group does things?

The cupboard under the stairs.

: conscience

Pronunciation: 'kän(t)-sh&n(t)s: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English, from Anglo-French, from Latin *conscientia*, from *conscient-*, *consciens*, present participle of *conscire* to be conscious, be conscious of guilt, from *com-* + *scire* to know

1 a : the sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good **b** : a faculty, power, or principle enjoining good acts

Merriam-Webster

This definition reflects the complex nature of what we refer to as conscience. It is both a set of principles about what is right and wrong, and a feeling that we should do right. At the level of principle there are a number of contradictions – so at the level of feeling there is a good deal of discomfort. We have to deal with the discomfort somehow, and I have found a constructive way and a less constructive way to do this.

The way I find less constructive is the way most of us use, most of the time: try not to notice; think about something else, do something that occupies all your attention and wait for the feeling to go away.

I don't like this because I find that most of the time the guilt hangs around like a bad smell, and even if I'm not thinking at all about whatever caused me to feel bad, I still feel dragging and uncomfortable with my self. It also bothers me because I find it habit forming: When I am trying to ignore a sore conscience, I have less energy available to think carefully about what I am doing. So the chances are that I will do more stuff that makes my conscience uneasy and, having less strength to think about it, I will probably try to ignore that too. Soon I feel like the cupboard under the stairs, where everyone has stuffed the junk they didn't know what to do with until the door won't close: I can't find things that I know are in there and I know I'm going to have to clean it out one day, but the job has got so big and tangled that I don't really want to start.

The way I prefer to deal with a sore conscience begins with dividing the principle from the emotions. Then I can think about the principle on its own. (I don't consider the emotions unimportant; they will get their turn later.) Thinking about the principle(s) separately, I can ask two very important questions: Are there two conflicting principles here? And is it actually possible for me to do what this principle says? I read a good example of the first question in a novel once, where a woman was justifying having engaged in prostitution to get food in a war torn city; she explained that although prostitution was against her religion, that same religion placed a very high value on the preservation of life. So when faced with the choice of prostitution or starvation, it was right for her to prefer the higher

value of life over the lesser value of chastity. That's a smart bit of thinking, but my bet is that where this has happened in real life, the women involved have still had to cope with some horrible feelings.

The other part of this way of handling a sore conscience is to try to identify the feelings involved more accurately. For instance people caught in a position where, for what ever reason, they have unwanted sex, often feel dirtied. This is as true for the innocent victims of rape or child abuse as it is for anyone else, so this feeling cannot reflect an objective state of having done wrong. I can imagine a woman who had traded sex for food feeling dirty and accepting this feeling as evidence of having committed a moral offence. But I can imagine another woman who had worked out her own moral justification for her conduct, still feeling dirty but resisting the feeling, seeing it as just another kind of war wound. I imagine that the second woman might suffer less or get over the experience more easily.

I have used this 'divide and conquer' method of dealing with an uncomfortable conscience in my own life: I feel strongly that people should be treated with respect no matter who they are, and that part of that respect includes listening carefully to anything that a person is trying to express, but I live in a city and meet a lot of lonely people who long to be heard, and I can't listen to them all. Every time I pass a beggar or cut short the ramblings of an elderly neighbour, I feel bad.

This bad feeling cannot be a reflection of objective wrong doing; if I tried to listen to them all, I would neglect my work and my family and very quickly come to the end of my strength. I am quite happy that I am behaving as well as I currently know how in this situation. After a bit of thought I have identified the bad feeling as sadness: I hate it that so many people are lonely. It hurts them, and I *mind*. I don't want the world to be that way, and it is that way, and that hurts me. Ouch!

This is not a nice feeling, but I can bear it and, importantly, it passes. I find it immeasurably more bearable than dragging the weight of guilt around indefinitely.

Conviction

con·vic·tion

Pronunciation: k&n-'vik-sh&n

Function: *noun*

1 : the act or process of convicting of a crime especially in a court of law

2 a : the act of convincing a person of error or of compelling the admission of a truth **b** : the state of being convinced of error or compelled to admit the truth

3 a : a strong persuasion or belief **b** : the state of being convinced

synonym see CERTAINTY, OPINION

Merriam-Webster

As you overhaul your conscience, you will inevitably come upon things where you have broken your own moral code, and all the analysis of conflicts and investigation of your feelings in the world is not going to make it right. You have offended against your own beliefs, done what you consider to be wrong, and the more you think about it, the clearer the wrong gets.

DON'T PANIC! We all sometimes do what we hate, and there are tried and effective ways to deal with it. When you become aware that you have done something wrong, when you have become convicted (of wrongdoing) before the court of your own soul, it feels *terrible*; but there no need to go on feeling this way for long.

The way out is not to bury the feelings, but to do what you can to put things right, and to seek forgiveness for the wrong done.

for·give

Pronunciation: f&r-'giv, *verb*

Etymology: Middle English, from Old English *forgifan*, from *for-* + *gifan* to give

1 a : to give up resentment of or claim to requital for <*forgive* an insult> **b** : to grant relief from payment of <*forgive* a debt>

2 : to cease to feel resentment against (an offender) : PARDON <*forgive* one's enemies>

intransitive verb : to grant forgiveness

To forgive is not to excuse the offense.

To forgive is not necessarily to forget.

To forgive is to give up the right to get back at someone who has hurt you, to stop holding their moral debt over their head.

If you have broken your own moral code, your conscience is not going to be comfortable unless you make every effort to fix things; so if there is any way you could alleviate the effects of what you did, you will need to do so. It's worth

thinking carefully about this, so that you know that you are not being lazy about something it would be possible to change.

If you believe in a god, you will probably feel that you need to be forgiven by him. If you are a member of a formal religion, there are likely to be prescribed ways of achieving this, which you might want to follow. If you are not a member of a specific religion, or are unsure about the nature or existence of a god, you may still want to ask him (her, it) to forgive you, as you would any other person who had been hurt by what you did.

If you have hurt other people, you will probably need to ask them to forgive you. This takes a considerable exercise of courage, as they might be angry or use the occasion to rub in what they perceive as all your other faults! Of course there is no guarantee that they will be willing to forgive, they could prefer to hold on to their grudge; but I would still recommend asking them.

Most importantly, you have to ask forgiveness of your self. If you have done something that you hate, you are both the person who did wrong, and the person who was hurt by the wrong. You need to ask forgiveness from your self, *and you need to grant forgiveness to your self.*

Try this...

Don't try to think up something that you have done to offend your own conscience, just so you can do this exercise. Leave it until you need it.

Be as specific as you can about what you have done, and which of your own principles you have offended.

Can you do anything to anything to reverse or alleviate the effect of what you did wrong?

If you believe in God seek his forgiveness according to the rites of your own religion, or you would for a person whom you had hurt.

Seek the forgiveness of any other people whom you have hurt.

Ask forgiveness from your self: 'I apologize to myself for... It was wrong and I'm sorry.'

Grant forgiveness to your self: 'I forgive me for...'

Meet the electrocuted monkey

Take a cage full of monkeys, wired so that it delivers an electric shock to all occupants of the cage at the touch of a button. Hang a bunch of bananas from the top of the cage, and every time a monkey tries to climb up to them, push the button. Soon the monkeys stop trying to reach the bananas.

Now disconnect the button. Still none of the monkeys will try to reach the bananas; they have no way of knowing that their cage has changed.

Remove one monkey from the cage and replace it by a new monkey that has never experienced electric shock. The new monkey will go for the bananas...but it will not get them, because all the other monkeys in the cage will leap on it and beat it up, until it stops trying.

Ok, now replace another of the original monkeys with a new one; this monkey will of course try for the bananas, and amongst the monkeys beating it up will be the first replacement monkey.

Continue until all the original monkeys have been replaced. You now have a cage of monkeys who have never felt an electric shock, but who will nonetheless ignore the bananas; and they will all join in attacking any new monkey who does try to get a banana.

Everything an individual does has consequences for the other individuals who make up their family group or wider society, so it is not surprising that we keep a careful eye on one another. Once a group norm like

We do not touch the bananas!

has become established, any deviation from it tends to be greeted aggressively because we have so much power over each other's lives. We are all a bit scared of what someone else might get us into. This is no one's fault. Each monkey in the cage is both the victim of the group and helps to enforce the will of the group; there are no identifiable good or bad guys. I can imagine that if I one day get arrested for refusing to carry an ID card (should they become compulsory), my church might feel a bit nervous about the possibility of negative publicity about 'Christian extremists'. My action would carry with it the possibility of affecting the life of every member of the congregation in ways they would not choose. They wouldn't beat me up, but even if everyone went out of their way to encourage me to follow my own conscience over this issue, I would still pick up from their body language any fear or discomfort they were feeling. I wouldn't find that easy. I am part of the group and want to continue to be accepted as part of the group, even while I am making them uncomfortable. I want to feel loved and

valued not just tolerated, and the slightest threat to that affection is to me a big risk, even while my naturally nonconformist character ensures that I continue to take it.

Conformity keeps us comfortable with one another; but it helps to maintain a status quo in which no one has any bananas. Sometimes it can be to every one's benefit, to let someone else do something that scares us. Sometimes we may be right to do something that scares others, even if they are a bit fierce about it.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

The Bible
NIV, NASV

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

George Bernard Shaw

Try this..

Can you see a banana? Something you think would be a good thing to go for, but perhaps others wouldn't like it if you did?

Rules

A rule is a constraint, an edge we do not cross: we 'keep to the rules'.

The way everyone organizes their behavior can be expressed as a series of rules, although we don't usually think of it like that. 'It's Monday, put on a tie and go to work,' 'walk to the far end of the platform while waiting for the train, so that you leave it in front of the crowd' and 'look busy when the boss comes in' are all examples of rules, and it's not 10.00 am yet.

Rules, both stated and unstated, organize our social relations from the family outwards.

Institutions normally have rigidly enforced rules. In the first formal institution most of us ever belonged to, 'breaking the school rules' was the ultimate crime.

Rules differ greatly in how explicitly they are conveyed. The bodies of rules that constitute the law in the U.K. are very explicit, written down in parliamentary bills and court judgments. The rules in some families are never spoken of; everyone just knows that 'you don't talk about Dad's drinking.'

Rules are arbitrary. They do not describe the way the world is, but how people have decided to behave: you can't disobey gravity, but you can break a rule.

Rules are learned, but we usually forget learning them. Those of you who drive once learned the rule 'drive on the left' but I would bet that few of you know where it comes from* or ever think about it. When you are driving this rule is part of the vast amount of information that your brain deals with subconsciously, leaving you free to think about something else.

Being made by people, rules can be obeyed or disobeyed, contested, thought about, negotiated and changed by people.

*The Highway Act of 1835 specified as offenses...not keeping on the left or near side of the road, when meeting any other carriage or horse.

There are different varieties of rules. I am going to use a dictionary definition as a peg on which to hang a rambling exploration of the subject.

rule

Pronunciation: 'rül *noun*

Etymology: Middle English *reule*, from Anglo-French, from Latin *regula* straightedge, rule, from *regere* to keep straight, direct.

1 a : a prescribed guide for conduct or action **b** : the laws or regulations prescribed by the founder of a religious order for observance by its members **c** : an accepted procedure, custom, or habit **d** (1) : a usually written order or direction made by a court regulating court practice or the action of parties (2) : a legal precept or doctrine **e** : a regulation or bylaw governing procedure or controlling conduct

2 a (1) : a usually valid generalization (2) : a generally prevailing quality, state, or mode <fair weather was the *rule* yesterday -- *New York Times*> **b** : a standard of judgment : CRITERION **c** : a regulating principle **d** : a determinate method for performing a mathematical operation and obtaining a certain result

3 a : the exercise of authority or control : DOMINION **b** : a period during which a specified ruler or government exercises control

synonym see LAW

1 a: a prescribed guide for conduct or action

One question that comes to mind here is, prescribed by whom? Is it someone you trust, a person who knows what they are talking about and who has your best interests at heart? Or is it someone who has not thought about what they are saying? Or someone who is trying to exploit you for their own ends?

What do you think of this prescription? Does it appear to be a smart way to behave? Do you have enough information to be able to decide?

For me the rule 'do not turn the computer off at the wall before you have saved your work' is one I obey because I trust the person who gave it to me to be on my side, and to know about computers. The rule 'do not go on the railway track' makes sense to me because I can see why to do so would be dangerous.

But the School Rule 'attend all lessons' is one I broke repeatedly, because I neither trusted the authority nor saw the point of the prescription.

c: an accepted procedure, custom, or habit

“Eat at Clancy’s! Two million flies can’t be wrong!”

The customs of a group are hard to question because it makes everyone else in the group uncomfortable, and usually it’s fine to go along with things, but sometimes the best thing for everyone involved is if someone says

“Hang on! Why are we doing this?”

The same sort of discomfort happens to us individually if we start to question our own habits; habits come to feel *right*, and questioning them can feel scary; but habits of both thought and behavior persist long after they have ceased to be useful.

Maybe the world has changed. Maybe you can think of a better way.

2 a: a usually valid generalization

I like this one; generalizations simplify the world so I can get my head around it. This book is mostly generalizations. Although it is a good idea to remember that all generalizations are only *usually* valid; every generalization has exceptions.

b: a standard of judgment

I believe that the imposition of standards upon a person who does not share them is an act of violence. It is an act of violence that I believe can be good in certain circumstances. For instance the standard of law that says that murder is not permissible should in my opinion be imposed upon all murderers whether they share it or not. Like all acts of violence I believe that the imposition of standards should be done reluctantly, after much thought and discussion, and as lightly as possible.

I see no reason not to determine your own standards, trying what seems to you to be good, copying ideas that you admire, and changing them if they don’t work. Actually I think that’s close to a description of what we really do anyway. The difference, if there is one, may be in the degree to which I prefer the choice to be a conscious one. I like as far as I can to know *why* I chose to do what I am doing.

Sometimes we accept standards which are not our own; when visiting someone else’s house we may follow a style of table manners that we find archaic; or we might agree to wear a uniform to work even though we find it ugly and do not agree with uniforms anyway. Life is full of compromise, and the more clear and confident we are about our own standards, the easier that compromise is to tolerate.

3 a: the exercise of authority or control.

I am indebted to the work of Erich From for the concept of rational and irrational authority.

A rational authority is one whom you have a good reason to obey; for instance my doctor told me I had high blood pressure and should take a certain medicine, and I obeyed her. I believed her diagnosis and followed her advice because she knows stuff about medicine that I don't, and I believe her to be a good doctor not an incompetent or a mass murderer in disguise.

An irrational authority is one whom you obey solely because of their being in authority. For instance, in the military an officer must be obeyed because he is an officer (unless he orders you to commit a war crime).

I think that irrational authority is immoral in most circumstances, and resistance to it will sometimes be my duty. If this country ever passes the law that would make it compulsory for all citizens to carry ID cards, I plan to break it. I believe it would be an immoral and dangerous law and following my own moral code, I think it would be *wrong for me* to obey it.

Try this...

See if you can identify a few of your own rules.

Can you remember how you acquired them?

Would you like to change any of them?

Build your own conscience

People change the contents of their conscience all their lives, but usually by accident rather than consciously. Many of the preceding sections have concentrated on bringing the contents of the conscience to light, and on making changes that will reduce those contents. I think most of us carry a lot of unnecessary guilt and bad feelings and I make no apology for attempting to reduce the burden, but feeling better is not the whole point of this book. I believe that morals are an intrinsic part of what makes us human, and in this section I am going to look at a different aspect of modifying your own conscience: adding stuff to it.

Don't worry, I am not going to try to give you many new things to feel guilty about. I said at the beginning that I consider your decisions about right and wrong to be none of my business, and I intend to stick to that.

One trouble with allowing our consciences to be formed passively by random influences such as peer pressure or advertising is that we end up feeling guilty about so many things that we find ourselves having to avoid all sorts of situations where this guilt might be increased, just to be able to survive. I think it is a better idea, a better way of being human, to decide for your self what you want to hold as moral values. I hope that what I have written so far has helped you to clear some emotional space to consider what sort of morals you want to have, and to feel that you might have the right to chose in this area.

So what might you like to add?

I suggest starting with what makes you angry. That may sound like a strange idea, especially as many people consider anger to be an intrinsically immoral emotion. I personally do not think it makes any sense to consider any emotion to be immoral in its self: morality is a matter of what you do.

Anger is a good indicator of what we feel to be *wrong*. This could be personal, as in 'you shouldn't treat me like that', but it can also refer to wider issues: it could make you angry when someone is unkind to a child, or you could be angry that we are destroying our beautiful planet.

When you have found something that makes you angry, the next question is why does it make you angry? You need to understand both the situation and your own feelings. You may need to learn more stuff, and you will probably need to talk things out with your friends.

It is always possible that you are mistaken, and as you learn what is going on you find that your anger is a mistake and stop feeling it. You might find that, for reasons to do with your own personal history, you are over reacting and the wrong that is making you angry is smaller than you thought, or even not there at all but a projection of a previous conflict in your life.

Or you might find that something is going on that you hate with good reason.

Try this...

Think of something that makes you angry.

Can you work out why?

Have you found something that is wrong, something you feel shouldn't happen?

Is there something you can do to fight this wrong?

Strategies and losers.

The good of an individual is partially dependant on the good any group to which that individual belongs. We are not solitary beings, and have built up amazingly complex social structures on which all of us depend. Living alone, I might just be able to grow enough food to avoid starvation, and that would be about all. Living in a western city I have my rubbish collected, hot water on tap, food from all over the world, libraries and internet connection available...and time to write this book. I am definitely the beneficiary of the civilisation to which I belong.

I am also the victim of my civilisation. I breathe polluted air and consume more pesticides than are good for me. I cannot avoid hearing the music and the quarrels of my neighbours. My income is taxed to support a war that I want ended.

I live in the affluent first world and am relatively privileged within it; global civilisation bears far more heavily on the poor who work without adequate food or health care, clean water, education or homes. For some people it is questionable whether our civilisation brings any benefits at all.

Besides the global civilisation, all of us also belong to smaller groups, which may be more or less voluntary, including nations, neighbourhoods, workplaces, peer groups, political parties and many others. In all of these groups there are more and less privileged members, those who receive mostly benefits from the group and those who receive mostly costs.

People use various strategies to attempt to get into a position within a group where they receive mostly benefits from membership, and carry as few costs as they can manage.

Possible strategies include:

Become the leader or ruler of the group. This is an option open to very few people even in the smaller groups, but it carries unparalleled benefits. Who ever has the most power in a group can organise the resources of the group to give them privileges beyond the reach of other members. Any comparison of the income of, for instance, the head of a business with its workforce, or of a head of state with the population of that state, will show how well this works.

Ally with a strong leader. This is the position of the military in many states, but the behaviour can be seen in any size group and has been observed in chimpanzees. Individuals who are not able to achieve leadership of a group offer their support to the leader in achieving his agenda, in the expectation that they will receive a large measure of power under his rule. The behaviour of Gordon Brown in supporting Tony Blair after the latter became leader of the Labour Party is a classic example of this strategy.

Form a group with others who are attempting to gain more power and attempt a joint take-over of the leadership. Form a political or revolutionary party. This phenomenon happens just as much in a tiny group such as a shared house, as it does at national level.

Form a subgroup with like minded people and push to influence those in power without trying to assume overall leadership of the group. All pressure groups work this way, from Amnesty International to the faction on the PCC who are careful to tell the vicar how things should be done...

Leave and start again with a group of like minded people. This can no longer be done at a national level because there is nowhere left in the world where the indigenous inhabitants could be displaced as easily as were the native Americans, but more voluntary groups such as religious congregations or casual groups of friends suffer a continual fission as small groups and individual split off and go their own way.

Internalise the conflict. If you can't get away from a group that is costing you a lot, and you can't reduce the costs, you are left with the option of changing your self. You can try to cultivate acceptance of your place within the system, and stop wasting energy striving for what you are not going to get. You might have to internalise quite strong prohibitions to do this, probably about how you shouldn't be selfish or are not smart enough to decide things and should therefore do what you are told.

In the majority of groups there's no-one who could be identified as a complete winner: even the most powerful leaders have to compromise and share some of their power. There are however often clearly identifiable losers, people who can find no escape from a situation where the costs bear heavily on them while the benefits land elsewhere. Losers suffer the deprivation of whatever resources are traveling toward the winners. They also suffer stresses arising directly out of their lack of power, surfacing in symptoms such a higher incidence of illness, premature death, emotional distress and 'self-destructive' behavior such as addiction.

If you want to know who's losing, try looking for the people who aren't coping very well, and see if you can find something to blame other than the victim.

Try this...

Is there a group that you are part of, where you feel that you are bearing more costs than you consider fair?

Can you identify what strategies you are currently using?

Can you find any better ones?

Learned helplessness

If you subject an animal to continual pain which it can't escape, it will stop trying to get away. Even when the pain stops, the dog, monkey or whatever has been tortured this time will be apathetic, showing no interest in exploring new things; he will lose interest in sex, and give up eating; if you measure his vital signs (this is a scientific experiment) you will find that he has accelerated heartbeat, depressed immune system, permanently elevated levels of stress hormones. He is likely to die soon.

The phenomenon is called learned helplessness.

Sit a human in front of the TV. Show her images of pain and starvation; tell her stories of threats to her security. Lie to her – oops, sorry, *put a spin* on the truth – so that she is dimly aware that she does not know what is going on, but is unable to identify what is being hidden. Send her to work in conditions over which she has no control. Subject her to market fluctuations that may without warning take away her home or her ability to support her children. Something is going to give.

As helplessness feels horrible, we try to avoid feeling it. We tend to turn our attention away from the parts of our lives where we feel helpless, and sleepwalk through them with our minds on something else. We concentrate on those things where we can feel powerful, from beautifying our house and garden if we are relatively affluent, to the pursuit of a heaven after death if we are slaves. This is a very good survival strategy, and for many of us it makes a tough life bearable.

There is though one big problem with keeping our attention away from the areas where we have no power: you can't change what you are ignoring. If it turns out that there is a way that you could regain some power over your life, you will only see it if you can remain aware of the areas in which you are helpless at the moment; and situations change all the time, new ideas are invented, and opportunities emerge which could well lead to constructive change if there were people able to apply them.

*“Only two things in life are inevitable: death and taxes.
And taxes are worse, because death only happens once.”*

Many of the things before which we feel helpless are socially created structures like taxes, invented and continued by people; but we feel them to be inevitable, unchangeable, and as inescapable as death itself. The process of inventing and refining social structures is called politics. So is the process of changing or dismantling those structures and replacing them with different ones.

Most of us are involved in politics in a passive rather than an active role; few of us are now members of unions, or involved in any political campaigns and increasing numbers of us no longer vote, but we are dimly aware that a lot of the quality of our lives is determined by politicians who do not necessarily have our best interests at heart, or increasingly by multinational corporations concerned solely with profit. We feel unable to influence these seats of power and turn away from our helplessness into more individualistic concerns.

As social beings we have a built in need to be engaged with our society. I suspect that the increasing incidence of depression, drug use etc. in a society of unparalleled affluence is evidence that burying our heads in the television is not working for most of us. For our own mental and emotional health, and increasingly for our survival in the face of exploitation and environmental degradation, I believe that we have to get involved at some level in the political processes that define our lives.

I started to look at the political dimension of my life quite recently, and mostly by accident: I was unwell and had to rest a lot which gave me plenty of time to read. The more I read, the more I realised that I hadn't had a clue what was going on around me; I was discovering a world of politics that was so different to the way I had assumed it to be that I was shocked. I lost a few of my illusions, and the process was accompanied by mourning and not a little fear, but a strange thing started to happen: although I was finding out that the world is in more of a mess than I had realised, I began to feel more powerful in myself. It was like at last getting down to sorting out a job that you have been avoiding, and realising that it's not as hard as you had expected.

I suspect this experience may be the same for many people; we never really succeed in hiding things from ourselves. The unpleasant emotions always leak back into consciousness even if we are not aware where they are coming from.

Remember the tortured lab dog at the beginning of this section? It's a relief to be at least trying to fight back.

Try this

Take the biggest piece of paper you can find, and draw a line down the middle
On one side, make a list of all the things you can think of about the world, that
you feel should be changed - I suggest you write as small as you can.

On the other side make a list of what you can do. All the things you can do. I did
suggest that you to write small.

Now look for one way to use something that you can do, to change something
that needs to be changed. Draw a line between them.

Go and do it.

Keep adding to both sides of the list, as you think of new stuff.

How often do you want to change the world? Draw a new line that often...

Shame

I have read that if you tie a piece of coloured wool around the leg of a herring gull, the rest of the flock will peck it to death, because it is different.

Guilt is about something you do, but shame is about something you are. People can feel shame about characteristics that appear to make them inferior, such as skin colour or illiteracy, or they can feel a pervasive sense of being ashamed of themselves for no apparent reason.

Shame makes you feel small and it can make you try to be smaller too, so that you stand with your head hanging and sit squeezed together. It makes you take up less space socially, so that you don't venture an opinion or dare to disagree. People who like us often find our shame baffling as they can't see any reason for it.

We were born without shame. Some of us learn shame at home, most of us learn some shame at school, and for many of us social inequality ensures that we continue to learn to be ashamed for the rest of our lives.

Advertising creates a lot of shame both directly by the implication that, for instance, having an elderly car is something to be embarrassed about, and indirectly by bombarding us with images of physical perfection and expensive objects which are not available to most of us.

I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT SHAME HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH MORAL BEHAVIOUR.

I believe that shame is the product of an unequal distribution of power, when the person who has power is exercising it in a way that denies the validity of those they have power over. Sometimes the person exercising power is attempting to make us feel ashamed on purpose (I suspect that the advertising agencies know what they are doing). But often shame is created by people who have no idea that they are doing so; I think most of my school teachers would be horrified if they knew how much their methods of keeping the class 'on topic' have contributed to my feelings of shame by implying, when I did not give the desired answer in class, that I had nothing of value to say.

I WOULD DISAGREE WITH ANY SENTENCE CONTAINING THE WORDS
'YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED.'

I don't think that you should be ashamed:

Not of your looks or of your colour or of your inheritance.

Not of your disabilities or of your abilities.

Not of anything you have done or left undone (though you may feel conviction and need to forgive yourself).

Not of your feelings or your opinions, however unusual or controversial.

I think you are who you are, and you may want to change that, but neither I nor anyone else has the right to make you feel ashamed of it. As you can see, I feel a bit strongly about this subject!

Try this:

Think of the person you know who feels most shame.

Now think of the person you know who feels least shame, one who seems to be comfortable in them selves and happy to say what they think.

Draw an imaginary line between them. Where do you see yourself on this line?

Remember, any shame you feel is not your fault; you did not put it there.

Leadership

The best description of leadership I have ever come across is

'If you look over your shoulder and see people following you, you are a leader.' Most of us are in a position of leadership in some sense, though we don't usually recognise it as such, but if you are a parent, if your friends ask your advice, if you have a position of authority at work, you are a leader. Leaders have power, simply because others will tend to do what they say.

The world is run by those who have power. Being human, the people who have power have of course a moral imperative to look after them selves and their families, which tends to result in injustice. Sometimes there arise individuals with enough resources and enough confidence to imagine the world differently and try to change it so that there is less injustice. If it looks as though they will succeed in making a change, more and more people will join them and so they become leaders of a movement. If the movement succeeds, the new way of imagining the world takes over and the world is changed for the better.

Now the aims of the movement have been achieved, everyone could go home....but the chances are that the power within the movement has concentrated into the hands of the leaders.

<RETURN TO START>

Most of this book has concentrated on thinking about how you can become more clear and confident about what you feel to be right, but the world is rather short of people with confidence, let alone people who have actually thought about what they believe about right and wrong. So I think that it is possible that if you find this book helpful, you may end up with people following you. That gives you power, and unless you want to end up as an oppressor, you will need to be a bit careful about what you do next.

When I first looked over my shoulder, found there were people behind me, and realised that I had become a leader I got a bit worried. I had been thinking that a leader was someone with a programme or an agenda, someone who knew where he was going and could tell people what to do. I didn't have any of that stuff. Also I had come across a number of leaders whom I most decidedly did not admire; people who made those around them feel afraid and powerless and ashamed. I really did not want to become like that. Help!

Then I came across this version of leadership in the writing of M. Scott Peck: "The one mark above all else of a true servant leader is that she empowers others."

And I felt, "That's it! I don't have to know the answers. I need not inevitably end up as a tyrant. I can try to be someone who empowers others."

I don't think I know much about empowering others yet. I learn new stuff all the time, mostly from the pain of someone I have just walked over without noticing.... Here's what I have learned so far:

Appearances to the contrary, I'm not indispensable. Most of the time if I stop doing something, someone else will do it instead – or do something better.

My way is not the best way; it's just the best way I have found yet. Someone is going to come up with a better way one day. Maybe it is this person in front of me. Shall we try their way, and find out?

If I don't want to be a tyrant, I have to spend time serving other people's agendas. How can I contribute to someone else's project? How can I help them feel confident enough to try?

Try not to thoughtlessly do things for others 'for their own good.' If it can possibly be done, ask them what they think about it. It's pretty arrogant of me to think I know what is good someone. I don't want to get into the habit just because it is easier that way.

Delegate and then shut up. Of course someone else won't do a job the way I do: They will probably do it better.

Work on the assumption that all differences between people are more likely to be characteristics than they are to be faults. Even if the individual concerned thinks it is a fault, keep an open mind. Even if it is annoying the heck out of me, keep an open mind.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME? I have to keep my motives where I can see them. There's always something in it for me or I wouldn't bother, but if I'm getting more out of this than I am acknowledging to my self, I am being dishonest and will rapidly become corrupt.

Power is fun. Being able to do things is fun. It feels great to change your insides so that how you live works better. Changing the world is fun, whatever the scale of the change.

The thing I like best is to imagine something and work to make it happen and see at least some of it become real. I don't mean that it is always easy: I get scared daffy and stressed out and look a right idiot much of the time. Not easy but fun, alive, interested.

For me the motive for acquiring skills and learning confidence and changing the world is not money or security, but purely the enjoyment I get out of the process.

Try this...

How do you conceive of leadership?

Can you think of a situation where you are a leader?

Would you like to change anything about the way you lead?

Once upon a time there was a girl who saw a better way of doing things. So she tried it. It worked quite well, but some people were worried by it because it was different.

When people asked her why she was not using the old way of doing things, the girl explained that she had found that the new way worked better, and suggested that some of them might like to try it for themselves and see if it worked for them. At first they told her many reasons why the new way could not possibly work, but she had done some thinking and managed to counter most of their arguments until they felt confident enough to try it; and for many of them it worked.

So they came back to her and said,

"That's all very well, but what about this other problem?"

The girl went away and studied and read things and tried things, and she found a better way of dealing with the other problem. The people were quicker to try her way this time, and for some of them it worked rather better than the way they had used before.

So they said "OK, that worked great. Thanks. But what about this and this and this and this..."

Moral: If you must change the world,
 do it for fun - the pay is rotten.

