

Ethics can be defined, quite simply, as right and wrong. An ethical life is one lived in such a way that one's actions are always in agreement with one's knowledge of what is right and what is not.

Several years ago, while taking a vocabulary test, I completely spaced one of the answers. I knew that I knew it, but it had slipped from my mind. As I frantically racked my brain, my eyes carelessly flitted to the paper of the girl sitting next to me. As soon as I saw her answer on her, I remembered it. Unfortunately, since there was no way of knowing whether or not I would have come up with the answer in time to turn in my test, I couldn't use it. Instead, I wrote down my first guess.

When my teacher returned the tests a couple of days later, I was distressed to see that there were no answers marked wrong on my paper. I knew that one of my answers was wrong, but I was unwilling to speak up in front of the whole class, and I had to cringe at the thought of coming in after school to point out both my mistake and hers. For the sake of one point on a test, it just wasn't worth such an ordeal. For the sake of integrity, however, I didn't feel that there was much of a choice. Chances were that no one would ever find out, but I—and God—would know that I had taken credit for an answer I hadn't known. Thus, a couple of hours later, I found myself awkwardly pointing out the wrong answer to my teacher. It was not exactly a pleasant task, but when I walked out of that room, I felt light and buoyant. I walked out of that room with my head held high; I knew that I had done the right thing.

There are two lessons to be learned from this experience. First, an ethical life is really the easiest life to live. Although being true to one's knowledge of right and wrong may be—and frequently is—difficult, it is worth the trouble. A clear conscience is much, much preferable to a remorseful one, or worse, a dead, desensitized, unfeeling one.

The second lesson became apparent not immediately after making the decision, but in the months that followed. Once a steadfast decision has been made about what to do in a certain situation, it never has to be made a second time. After I went out of my way to do the right thing once, it became much, much easier to do the same thing in similar situations again and again. If there was any doubt, all I had to do was think back to how I felt walking out of that classroom.

Being human, all of us are going to slip up on occasion, and we can't let that cause us to give up. However, we also can't use that little fact as an excuse not to try, and try hard, to always do the ethical thing. Far too many people in this world have, for some reason or another, abandoned ethics as any significant factor in their decisions. The more people who do this openly, the more people will decide it's an acceptable way of life. Fortunately, the reverse is also true: the more people who set an example of doing the right thing, instead of the easy or convenient thing, the more people will see the effects of that way of life and decide that it is worth emulating. The world may not hear about it when my mother takes dinner to a sick neighbor or runs back into the grocery store to tell the cashier that he gave her too much change, but those actions have a much greater impact on those who know her than any blatantly unethical decision by some actor or athlete. Individual people, living quiet, unremarkable lives, may not make it onto the 5:00 news, but they can make an impression on other individuals, and in that way, they can change the world.