

By John Wareham

## Conflicts of Conscience

Sometimes the best lessons come from the unlikeliest sources.

Something is potentially missing from the upcoming mini-Aspen-style weekend seminar to which I've been invited. The moderator is tops: Zygmunt Nagorski, the Polish-educated president of the Washington-based Center for International Leadership. The subject—conflicts of conscience—is fine, and the readings are great: Aristotle, Henry David Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Abraham Lincoln, and Tamar Jacoby's recent *Washington Post* op-ed piece "Whatever Happened to Integration?" The two dozen attendees include business moguls and professionals as well as artists of various stripes, including raconteur Spalding Gray, cabaret performer KT Sullivan, and concert violinist Ani Kavafian. There's also a sprinkling of homemakers and West Palm Beaches.

But not a single black face.

"I have a couple of friends I'd like to bring along," I say to the organizer, Mike Gibbons, senior VP with Estée Lauder. "Graduates from my Rikers Island Jail communications class. One got released two years ago. The

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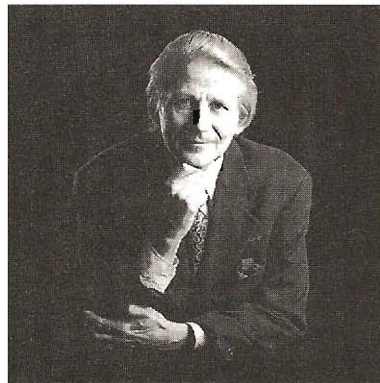
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other, just last week."

"Hey, that would be great!" he exclaims. "Zyg'll be delighted."

We sit in a semicircle, in a sun-filled drawing room overlooking a pristine, autumn-wrapped lake on the grounds of the Sedgewood Club, a bucolic oasis just 50 miles north of Manhattan. Zyg, a Socratic figure whose octogenarian frame is home to a quicksilver mind and a piercing sense of humor, opens with a gravitatic call to confess ways in which we have violated the dictates of conscience. A Palm Beaches confesses to a fleeting qualm for blackballing a social misfit who tried to join a private club. The next in line avows that conscience would not permit the purchase of a sports jacket because the price was too low.

My friend Ken, immaculately attired in grays and tweed jacket, is next. "First, in case it's not obvious, let me confess that I used to be incarcerated. Before that I was in an organization with its own set of totalitarian rules, like that Aristotle fellow wrote about," he says. "A friend confided to me that he had broken one of those rules. Then the gang got restructured, and he was given a more lucrative street to run than me. I brought his transgression to the attention of my superiors. I got the street, but my friend got eliminated."



A hush descends. Zyg jumps in. "Did you know your friend would be, ah, eliminated?"

"No. I just know that he disappeared and no one ever saw him again."

"But you think he was eliminated. And, of course, you were happy to take over his street."

"To be honest, I was delighted. Back then, in the black community, we judged a man by his money and his possessions." Light shimmers upon the lake behind him.

"How does that work?"

"Well, we thought the mark of success was to show off designer clothes and Gucci shoes." A couple of pairs of well-shod feet scuffle uneasily. "And European cars—all that kind of thing."

"Do you have a new philosophy of success?"

"Kind of. I've come to realize that it's what you are on the inside that matters. I could never go back to my previous life. I'd know I was cheating myself. I'd know I could do better."

"Like what?"

"These days I teach poetry to young men incarcerated on Rikers."

"You make a living doing that?"

"I try to."

Ken's presence has raised—

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and perhaps in some eyes lowered—the level of the discussion. But Zyg's delighted, as am I. What might have just been a pretty weekend has taken a memorable turn. We move onto the questions of slavery and integration. In these matters, my two guests suddenly seem to embody the fiery Malcolm X and the benign Martin Luther King Jr. Ken is Malcolm X. "I always wondered how white folks lived," he says. "I always wondered about their world, what they saw. And now I see it for myself." He waves his arm in the direction of the country home of the chairman of the World Bank. "My folks don't get a share of this because we don't get ourselves organized like you white folks. We were the slaves that made America great. I read about how some people are suddenly getting war reparations. And then I think on how my people are getting nothing. In fact, our affirmative-action programs are being taken away from us—and nobody seems to care."

A green-trousered businessman responds. "You people need to learn to be patient. . . ."

Hey! Hats off to Greenpants for unveiling a Limbaughesque notion that's bound to spark a little conversation. Zyg jumps into the profound sucking of air: "About how much patience should Ken display, give or take a hundred years?" Greenpants digs himself in deeper. Ken, a sophisticated veteran of many such discussions, leans back in his chair and lets the liberal minds make his arguments. Something-needs-to-be-done, they chime. But Greenpants is not finished. "America is doing well," he says. "We're in the middle of a rising tide that's lifting all boats."

Zyg smiles his bubble-pricking smile. "But how can we reconcile this vision of America with the fact that at least two of the people in this room right now are living below the official poverty line?"

In the dying afternoon light,

the discussion turns to Abraham Lincoln's 1862 letter to Horace Greeley. Lincoln wrote that freeing the slaves was merely secondary to preserving the Union. "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that." Zyg turns to John. "Is that what you'd have said if you'd been Abraham Lincoln?"

John is shy and outwardly unsure. But he completed my communications class and is a sound debater. "I think Lincoln got it upside down," he says, very calmly and rationally. "I think slavery was the higher moral issue. I think he should have seen that and done whatever he had to do to overturn it—letting the Union disintegrate if necessary." Zyg plays devil's advocate. "You'd destroy the Union for the sake of a comparatively trivial number of slaves? You'd ignore the greater good of the vast majority?" John speaks quietly of conscience and moral rightness. The audience is transfixed as Zyg presses the former felon one last time. "So this is what you say as a black man?"

John pauses. "No. It is merely my response to your question of what I'd have said as Abraham Lincoln." He pauses, then smiles. "As a black man, I would have put it much more forcefully." Greenpants joins the applause.

"A great shame the discussion became so racist and took away from the time we should have spent on Aristotle," whispers a white businessman during the afternoon coffee break. "You'll remember this discussion today, long after you've forgotten Aristotle," replies someone else. "You'll remember it positively, too—those guys were great," another person chimes.

We close out the evening with dinner in my own lakeside home, followed by a brilliant performance from Spalding Gray. Yet such are the virtues of

constructive conflict that John and Ken remain on everyone's minds. John is delighted to find that his communications skills have impressed people who just might help find him a job. Ken confesses to an awakening. "White folks come in all shades and are infinitely more open-minded than I used to think." We know what he means. Never again will anyone in that room jump to judge another person quite so quickly.

Zyg asks Ken to close out the day with one of his poems. The message deals a fatal blow to his rapidly fading image as any kind of two-dimensional activist:

*I made a friend today  
Because I listened  
To every word he had to say  
First he looked me up and down  
Balled his face  
Into the meanest of a frown  
Then he spat upon the ground  
And in a loud and angry tone  
More furious than I'd ever known  
He said, I don't like you.  
And so I say, Begone  
He said, I'm just one second  
From laying you flat  
Cos you walk around  
Like you think you know  
All of that  
As far as I'm concerned  
you're a bum about to be used  
as a floor mat  
Those words I turn within my  
mind  
They bring to my eyes a peaceful  
shine  
In my heart I felt I'd left that part  
of me  
So far behind  
And as he got it all off his chest  
He walked away  
—and then came back  
and shook my hand  
He said grant me a moment  
That I may confess  
How you took all of that I would  
never understand  
But it taught me  
It's more than loud talk  
And size that makes a man  
Please forgive me if you possibly  
can  
I made a friend today  
Because I listened  
to every word he had to say ■*