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Has The Word Conscience Been Canceled?

By Dr. Arthur Schwartz

A few days ago, a friend sent me an article that included this 1965 quote by Martin Luther King, Jr.: *"We must come to see that the end we seek is a world at peace with itself, a world that can live with its conscience."*

For some reason, I immediately fell into a giant rabbit hole. I couldn't stop thinking about the word *conscience*. Do families use this term anymore? Or schools? Have we canceled the word? And if we have, has another term taken its place?

To find out, here's my interview with this venerable yet contested term.

Arthur: Do you think you've been canceled?

Conscience: Yes, a bit. Okay, a lot.

Arthur: Why?

Conscience: It's complicated. I've lived a long life.

Arthur: Then let's start at the beginning. Where were you born?

Conscience: It was during the trial of Socrates. He told all of Athens that I was his constant companion, his "inner voice" that told him the right course to take.

Arthur: Sort of like a GPS?

Conscience: Yes. Most people think of their conscience as a warning system, for sure. But people also use their conscience to reflect on their behaviors and actions.

Arthur: So, where did you grow up?

Conscience: In the church. Augustine was the first to write that I was a divine voice. More to the point, conscience was the divine speaking within.

Arthur: When did people start using the term "guilty conscience"?

Conscience: Not until the 16th Century. The term was used to make the point that even when no one is looking, your conscience serves as that ever-vigilant witness to your choices. It was during this time when the word conscience was connected to sin, especially to sexual behavior.

Arthur: And then there is Sigmund Freud.

Conscience: Yes. Freud connected conscience to parental authority. He argued that a person's conscience is that gnawing, ever-persistent voice of their parents. A voice that stays with each person far beyond childhood.



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Arthur: Thank you for this brief tour. But let me ask again: Why do you think so many have canceled you?

Conscience: I understand why some people want to move on from a concept associated with a particular religion or a theory of child development that has lost its shine.

Arthur: But...

Conscience: (pause). Can you imagine living in a society where no one has an inner voice? Where families and schools don't encourage children and teens to internalize universal principles that transcend any particular religion or culture?

Arthur: No, I can't.

Conscience: Neither can I.

Arthur: So, what do you suggest?

Conscience: Thomas Green wrote a book in 1999 that is the right roadmap going forward. It's titled "Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience."

Arthur: Why do you like it so much?

Conscience: First, I love his definition. He writes that conscience is our "*reflexive judgment about things that matter.*"

Arthur: I love that phrase...*things that matter.*

Conscience: I do, too. Green argues that there are many voices that form our conscience.

Arthur: Beyond religion or parents?

Conscience: Yes. He writes about the *voice of craft* — or what character educators today call performance character. This voice helps everyone, young and old, to live up to their own standards, whether doing their best to learn a sport or cleaning their room.

Arthur: What are the other voices?

Conscience: Green writes about the *voice of membership*. People learn about the virtues and universal principles by being a member of a family, a school, a team, a house of worship or a youth organization. At the heart of this voice are the relationships people form with others across their lifespan.

Arthur: This voice speaks to me. Years ago, there was a time when my kids were young, and I was having difficulty balancing my work life with being the best husband and father I could be. And then, one night, I got a phone call from a close friend who called to tell me — in no uncertain terms — that friendship is a two-way street (i.e., he was tired of always calling me). I still hear his voice in my head 25+ years later.

Conscience: Green also writes about the *voice of sacrifice*. At some point, every young person, perhaps as early as 12 or 13, will realize it's not all about them. The voice of sacrifice helps kids to know when it's time to turn off their social media because their mom needs them to babysit their younger sister. The voice of sacrifice is about young people *establishing for themselves* their own obligations and sense of duty.

Arthur: What is another voice?

Conscience: The *voice of memory*. For some people, it's the voice of a particular story or narrative from their family's past. For others, it's an attachment to a moment they will never forget (a loved one passing away or the birth of a child). These inspiring memories are the sources and seedbeds that form a person's conscience.

Arthur: Is that it?



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Conscience: There's one more voice. My favorite. *The voice of imagination*. Martin Luther King, Jr. would call this the prophetic voice. A conscience is formed by a person's hopes for a better future. This voice often gives people their noble purpose.

Arthur: Okay, I see why you're excited. But two more questions, if you have the time.

Conscience: I'm ready.

Arthur: The renowned biologist and neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky just came out with a new book saying we have no free will. Care to comment?

Conscience: Funny you asked about his book. Did you know that free will is my first cousin? We spoke yesterday. We think Sapolsky is wrong. People are not predetermined creatures. Their biology and environment do not wholly determine their choices. Every person has free will.

Arthur: I agree. Last question: Where do you see conscience 100 years from now?

Conscience. In a much better place. I envision a future where parents and educators have learned how to equip and empower young people to resist the pressures that tempt kids to discount or dismiss their conscience. A future where school leaders have put together a robust K-12 curriculum that invites students to creatively explore and examine the five different voices of conscience. Finally, society has figured out how to inspire people of all ages to make commitments that bind them to the voices of conscience that mean the most to them.

Arthur: So, you think you're still around?

Conscience: Yes. More useful and helpful than ever before.

Dr. Arthur Schwartz is president of Character.org. He received his doctorate in adolescent moral development from Harvard University. This post was reprinted with permission from Character.org.

Five Takeaways From The International Forum

By Barb Bergseth

Coming away inspired and with a few nuggets of new learning makes a professional development event worthwhile! It had been four years since an in-person conference had been held and Character.org's 2023 International Forum did not disappoint!

Inspiration came from knowledgeable and passionate presenters, and from conversations with colleagues — new and current. Here are five takeaways from the conference:

1. Give young people hope.

Dr. Michele Borba, in her keynote presentation, shared these ideas for a "PATH" to give kids hope:

Purpose – Every kid needs a purpose; It's what helps us feel hopeful and is the best medicine for depression. Help them identify their "I want to."

Agency – The feeling of control over actions and their consequences starts with "why" —Why are you doing this? Why does it matter to you? Why is it important? Support kids in creating an "I can" mindset.

Talents – Be "talent" scouts (tenacity, attention, learning, eagerness, need, tone). Praise kids for their character strengths. Be an alternate mirror. Help kids find their spark.

Hope – Change the image of the world for young people. Give positive mantras as an anecdote to the negative chatter like, "I can handle it," "This will pass," "I'll find a way," or "I've got this."

Five Takeaways from the International Forum . . . continued

2. **Having character doesn't mean you don't make mistakes.**

We all slip up. When we do, how we respond makes a difference. Will you be accountable or try to sweep it under the rug? People of all ages learn from what we model.

3. **Why reinvent the wheel when you don't have to?**

Resources and successful practices abound. Take advantage of what others have learned before you. If your school is new on its character journey, your state coordinator or team member at character.org can connect you with resources.

4. **Community partners can be powerful allies in your service-learning initiatives.**

The team from Tracey Magnet School in Connecticut reminded participants to think about the connections in the community and to make a partnership pitch for your service-learning project. They also shared [six key considerations](#) that contribute to successful service learning. Service learning is different from community service.

5. **Character can change the world.** CBS journalist Steve Hartman has been sharing powerful, real-life stories of how small bits of kindness can make a huge impact through the "On the Road" and "Kindness 101" series. Teachers across the U.S. are using these videos in their classrooms to talk about kindness. "Americans we meet through 'On the Road' every week teach character better than I ever could," said Derek Brown, teacher from Arizona. "CBS News started a Facebook group called [Kindness 101](#) for teachers to share lesson plans and strategies. So far more than 30,000 teachers have joined, creating a "mini movement."

Although Character.org offered a limited virtual option, if you have room in your budget to send staff to the International Forum next year, I highly recommend it!

Barb Bergseth is the state coordinator for the Minnesota Schools of Character and a program administrator for Synergy & Leadership Exchange.



A gift from an attendee who traveled a long way to the conference!

Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently.

— *Maya Angelou*