

Conscience means "knowing together"

In worship, our moral compass is recalibrated—with the help of others.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 30, 2017](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by [readephotography](#)

The *New York Times* obituary for former defense secretary Robert McNamara (1916–2009) included these sad lines about his later life: “He wore the expression of a haunted man. He could be seen in the streets of Washington—stooped, his shirttail flapping in the wind—walking to and from his office a few blocks from the White House, wearing frayed running shoes and a thousand-yard stare.”

It took nearly three decades for McNamara to begin to publicly acknowledge the futility of the Vietnam War and his role in it. Although his 1995 memoir directly challenged his own conduct during the war, calling it “wrong, terribly wrong,” McNamara still bore the scorn of critics angered by his slow-to-awaken conscience. He died a tormented man, one who never fully convinced historians or the public that he had come to terms with the moral burden of his actions.

Robert McNamara is a case study in conscience. If a good conscience is like a soft pillow, as Robert Solomon argues in his book *The Conscience: Rediscovering the Inner Compass*, and an unclean conscience is like sleeping on thorns of worry and restlessness, McNamara may have slept poorly for decades.

Regardless of what his sleep life entailed, McNamara's moral wrestling prompts the question: Where does the inner compass of conscience which helps us make moral decisions come from? The word *conscience*, from the Latin *conscientia*, is formed of two words, meaning "knowing together." That's a clue that it's best to think of conscience not as an inner voice but as the ability to think and act with outside help. Parents, teachers, and coaches all contribute to the shape of our conscience. So do formative events. So does God. God in Christ Jesus helps form followers into particular kinds of human beings.

According to the New Testament, our conscience can become weak, faulty, or unclean. When that happens, we lose the ability to judge right from wrong. As a compass can be skewed by local magnetic fields, our conscience can be distorted by negative influences. A good conscience requires maintenance. Paul encourages Timothy to fight for a good conscience. Paul himself strives to keep his conscience clear before God and others.

I'm pretty sure that one of the benefits of weekly worship is the recalibration of our moral compass not as a self-performing exercise but as something we do with the help of others. Fellow believers and the Holy Spirit help repair damaged consciences by renewing hearts and minds in Christ.

Jeremy Sabella in his article ["Realism without despair"](#) notes how Reinhold Niebuhr viewed the awakening of conscience as critical to mending a broken world. That Niebuhrian trumpet blast seems as urgent as ever, lest we become haunted people wearing our own thousand-yard stares. Forget about the cowardice, expediency, and vanity that ripple through too many corridors of government these seasons. It's time to start renewing our own conscience by asking the right questions. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously put it: "Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right?" We have the work of conscience cut out for us in America.

A version of this article appears in the August 30 print edition under the title "Shaping a conscience."