

Christian Cooper's compassion toward Amy Cooper is rooted in his conscience

Good conscience isn't forged in the heat of the moment. It acquires its shape over time.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 12, 2020](#) issue



(Source illustration by MHJ / Getty)

Nine hours before George Floyd died under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer, another incident was taking place in New York City's Central Park. In the now infamous altercation between Amy Cooper, who refused to put a leash on her dog, and Christian Cooper (no relation), who calmly requested that she comply with the leash requirement, Ms. Cooper called the police. Mr. Cooper's video of the encounter gave the world another glimpse of the kind of toxic racial bias that can cause a white person like Amy Cooper to suggest that a black man was threatening her life.

Amy Cooper not only lost her job and reputation for her odious actions, the Manhattan district attorney charged her with filing a false police report. It's the follow-up behavior of Christian Cooper, however, that's of special interest to me. Cooper, who is black, has made it clear that he's not interested in aiding prosecutors. Not only does he fear Amy Cooper's punishment might be

incommensurate with her actual offense, he also believes that giving satisfaction to those eager for a sentence will only allow them to leave their own prejudices unexamined.

In a *Washington Post* op-ed, Cooper said this about his choice not to support the prosecution: “I must err on the side of compassion . . . I know that some people may disagree with my reasoning, and that this decision comes as a disappointment to many . . . but under the circumstances, it’s the only course I can pursue *in good conscience*” [emphasis mine].

Cooper’s beautiful reference to conscience provides an opportunity for us to reexamine what we mean when we refer to that whispering voice within us. Is our conscience some built-in capacity designed by God to help us know the difference between moral right and wrong, or is it a socially developed facet of our lives that begins forming as early as our parents’ earliest influence on our character? There’s reason from both scripture and human experience to be confident that it’s both.

The word *conscience* comes from the Latin *conscientia*, meaning “knowing together with.” Conscience is not just my or your own little inner voice. It’s joint knowledge.

There’s something else about conscience: in the New Testament, the apostle Paul uses the Greek word *syneidesis* almost 20 times to describe conscience as both a guide and a witness to our moral understanding of life. It takes effort to renew this conscience, in part because it’s not always a reliable guide. “I strive always to keep a clear conscience toward God and all people,” says Paul in Caesarea (Acts 24:16).

The business of continually refreshing one’s conscience is something that Harry Truman got straight, according to biographer David McCullough. Truman memorized and frequently recited a prayer that included these words: “Help me to be, to think, and to act what is right, because it is right.” The discipline of that prayer helped keep Truman’s conscience from falling into disrepair.

We can’t know every influence that has shaped Christian Cooper’s conscience. But his persistent kindness through the turmoil of the present situation reminds us that conscience is never formed in the heat of a moment. It acquires the shape of goodness over time—and through disciplined attention to right and wrong.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “In good conscience.”