

Closing our eyes to see

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We can tell right from wrong, yet we continue doing what's termed 'wrong', for the sake of convenience. But, isn't choosing right, every time, the right thing to do, asks Shefali Tripathi Mehta.



On a break from work, we were having coffee in the busy Bengali Market. Suddenly, my friend, sitting across from me, facing the parking lot, got up midsentence and dashed outside. Puzzled, I rushed after him and was stunned to see him overpowering an angry, violent man who was hitting the parking attendant.

What would you and I have done? Most of us would have resigned to the situation, walked away and said, 'What can I do?', 'These things happen all the time'. Or, we may have been upset or angered enough to tell some others, maybe even share it on social networking sites, to fuel impassioned discussions and bitter condemnations.

Who are those that are moved enough to act when they come across such situations — unfair treatment, exploitation of the weak, brazen flaunting of power or disregard for rules and social convention? All of us are taught the same lessons in school and at home — to be 'right', always. Yet, tempted by the 'easy way out', we fail in this again and again in life.

These are not life-changing, moral dilemmas, but the day to day looking the other way, indifference, apathy, cutting corners and seeking shortcuts. We can tell right from wrong, yet we continue doing what's termed 'wrong', for the sake of convenience. Breaking queues, cheating, jumping traffic signals, paying bribes, getting out of turn favours, the list is endless.

All of us are tempted in big and small ways to take the convenient way — to bribe and use contacts for favours big and small, to pay the traffic cop instead of taking a ticket, buy pirated CD/DVDs, install booster water pumps in the corporation water lines, tamper with electricity meters, litter when no one is watching, not ask for cash memos, use office resources (fax, phone, scanner, printer) for personal work, look the other way when it suits us, like when someone else is being harassed, someone else's sister/ daughter/ mother/ girlfriend/ wife is being teased, someone's else's child is leaning dangerously out of a window; when neighbours employ children or ill-treat house help.

Silencing our inner voice

Right and wrong have no definite, absolute demarcations. “But if you take the wrong path, something deep inside you will feel twisted. There are times when that will be the only way to know the right from the wrong.” (Inara Scott, *The Candidates*).

We see a person lying on the pavement, seemingly unconscious or hurt or sick, but we are rushing to work, for a crucial appointment, or to catch a train. So we silence that inner voice by telling ourselves that someone else will surely help, someone will call the police or the ambulance, or maybe that person is not really in need of help, maybe the person is just drunk. We walk away, believing what we would like to believe to suppress that inner voice.

Several hundreds of people lost their jobs at a multinational for submitting fake bills for medical reimbursements. Most of us believe that claiming our medical, travel, petrol bills is our right, that our employers owe it to us. But most also assume that submitting forged bills to claim the money that is ‘rightfully ours’ is our right too. This practice is so prevalent that no one stops to think it unethical. There is a queue at the medical stores where for a small fee they provide fake bills. So you can buy talcum powder for Rs 200 and it will be billed against the name of some medicine. But imagine losing one’s job for a few hundred rupees! And our self-esteem for the pittance?

We all know that a wrong does not cease to be wrong if all are doing it, but we also know how much courage it takes to go against the general wave, to stand our ground, to break the circle. To quote Noel Coward from *The Blithe Spirit*, “It’s discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit.” ‘Everyone is doing it,’ is just another way of silencing our inner voice, of remaining in our comfort zones.

Doing nothing

When Baleshwar Mishra of Mumbai saw a girl lying on the railway tracks from his moving train and jumped down to help her even though no other passengers came forward to join him, he was only following the voice of his conscience. It was a random act of kindness and not a premeditated plan to become a hero. He picked her (Roma Talreja) up and carried her, took help from a trucker, got her to a hospital, informed her family, and saved her life.

Doing nothing because ‘no one else is doing it’ is also a form of silencing our inner voice. Traffic curbs due to VIP movement on the road, at airports and hospitals, cause unnecessary inconvenience to other (I desist from using ‘ordinary’) citizens. Instances when someone critically in need of medical help has been denied it due to such traffic restrictions are far too many to recount. It took one Delhi University professor to stand up against this transgression against us which we had silently put up with. “In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing. The worst thing you can do is nothing.” (Roosevelt)

We do everything in our power and within the limited capacity of each to do things in order to get and stay ahead of others. But we fail to assert ourselves where we must. We repeatedly confuse aggression for assertion. When you tell a person who just walks in

ahead of you while you're waiting in a queue, to come in the queue, you're being assertive. But when he turns around to tell you to mind your own business, he's being aggressive. When you try to reason this, or even fight it out, you're still being assertive.

Measure of character

A crime may be punished, but a vice is not, and we all fall for the temptation of 'getting it done'. A parent seeking admission for his son in a prestigious school was faced with a dilemma when the form required the signatures of both parents and the mother was unavailable. The father had lived the dream of sending his son to that school and could have easily forged his wife's signature, but his inner voice told him that it would be a wrong start for the son if he got admission by way of a wrongdoing. So he submitted the application without the mother's signature and it was predictably rejected for being incomplete. The father says he was disappointed, but has no regrets.

We all agree that the measure of a man's real character is what he would do if he knew no one is looking and he never would be found out. But life has conditioned us to live more for a social face than with a sense of fairness or integrity. We, who will not litter or spit in the streets of Singapore for fear of fine or of being caught, will think nothing of rolling down the windows of our cars and disposing an empty bag of chips right on a busy road.

The most effective way of making defaulters pay dues has always been to put out their names on a list for all to see. Loss of face and public shaming is what we dread most. Mostly, it is not a sense of correctness or duty, but the fear or awareness of being found out that stops us from doing what is considered wrong.

We may read out stories of heroes to our kids, but when we lie about their age to get them into an amusement park, it makes children think that cheating is okay. When our child gets more marks in an exam by mistake, how many of us tell them to go back and tell the teacher? How many of us, in the name of help, do their projects and assignments for them? When we pay at temples for a quick darshan to avoid standing in long queues, they learn that shortcuts are fine.

Bad stuff happens to others

A friend feels that if there are no vehicles at the traffic signal, it is okay to not wait for the signal to turn green. But, just like we all feel that 'bad things' will not happen to us, till they do, consequences of these little slipups, these easy ways out, can be life shattering. What if you fail to see the one rashly driven vehicle that suddenly comes from somewhere? What if just as you decide to cross, a pedestrian, seeing the stop signal, is also crossing the road in front of your vehicle?

In driving, flying or performing surgeries, we have seen grave mistakes, great catastrophes unfold due to a small error in judgement. Accidents such as car crashes or house fires happen due to what we would like to believe 'that one time!' But 'that one time' can happen anytime, and with disastrous consequences.

So many people cross the railway tracks daily risking their lives and limb for a short cut. They may have all started out cautiously, then watched others and felt more assured, and with time grown complacent, even careless. Daily, people get killed crossing the railway tracks. Those that meet such fate also believed that bad things happen only to others.

So we continue to ride on pavements, dig and leave sumps, manholes, borewells uncovered, believing nothing will go wrong. Yet, youngsters die of speeding while driving; not wearing helmets and performing foolish acts of bravado. Children fall into borewells abandoned by contractors and their clients who seem to have no concern for others' lives. Two Mumbai boys who were filmed performing death-defying stunts on moving local trains were, contrary to their expectation of being hailed heroes, nabbed by the police for putting their own, as well as other peoples' lives in danger.

People play pranks for a laugh. But sometimes, they may lose sight of the consequences. Pranks can go horribly wrong, like the Australian RJs' prank call to the UK hospital that distressed and may have led to the Indian nurse's suicide. The RJs are regretful and sorrowing, but it cannot undo the tragedy. The Brazilian video of a ghost girl in the elevator, being dubbed as the scariest, most terrifying video, is a rage on social networking sites these days. It is being termed the best prank in the world. Yet, there is a raging debate on its appropriateness, the outcomes that could have been devastating for someone with a heart condition, or if one of the 'victims' had actually attacked and hurt the child who was playing the ghost.

Choosing right, every time

The threshold of right and wrong is never distinct. Why do people, who at the height of success, fame or at the fruition of their lifelong dreams, fall prey to an error in judgement? It is usually not one incident, one slipup, but a gradual silencing of the voice of conscience, the smugness of being invincible, and the short-sightedness of life's purpose.

Why would a young, bright Indian-American, enrolled in Harvard, stoop to plagiarism and be shamed like she was. But Kavya Vishwanathan, whose book was 32nd on The New York Times's hardcover fiction bestseller list, and who was inundated with book deals and advances, was found guilty of plagiarism. Why would a business leader of the stature of Rajat Gupta, the managing director of McKinsey and Co, put his reputation on the line? Yet, he did.

These can be attributed to an error of judgment — that decision that you take while standing at the threshold of right and wrong. The woman who gate-crashed into the London Olympics opening ceremony, marching along with the Indian contingent, regretted the incident and attributed it to an error of judgement.

This is what sets a person apart then — integrity. All our heroes are those that decided voluntarily to do the right thing when faced with a choice. We always have a choice. And we always need to choose the right thing to do in every situation. Unless it becomes a habit, we expose ourselves to a slipup, of falling prey to that error in judgment, and be faced with consequences we do not wish for. There is no ctrl+z on the keypad of life.

