

**Keynote Address by Greta Cohan
To the Rotary Club of White Plains
Business Ethics Award Luncheon
June 10, 2008**

[Ed. Note: Greta Cohan was the recipient of the Rotary Ethics award in 2003]

Since the beginning of recorded history...and undoubtedly before...human beings have been trying to figure out how to live well. They have probed questions of morality and obligation, thought and wrote and talked about our responsibility to others, about our need to take care of ourselves and our families and those closest to us. They have proposed and imposed rules of conduct which they designed to keep their societies strong and maybe even fair, or maybe to maintain power and privilege, or sometimes to propitiate God or the gods. How do we in this fraught century comb the texts of those who came before to try to understand what the "good life" is?

I taught an honors course in Ethics for about twelve years at Westchester Community College, and the title of our text was "Morality and the Good Life" written by the philosopher, Robert Solomon. Some of the thinkers we studied were religious, some not. All tried to find the path to "the good life," and most believed that the good life means a happy life, a fulfilled life, but that it also means a morally good life, a life of doing good as well as being good. Socrates believed that once we know what good is, we act upon that knowledge. However, Aristotle said that, yes, when we know good, we often act in good ways, but that some of us make bad choices despite knowing we're wrong. David Hume had faith in human nature. He pointed out that when we look at members of a family being reunited, we smile with pleasure even when we don't know them. We feel warm inside when we see a mother hold her baby with tenderness. However, when there are people in whom these humane reactions are missing, we must turn to the law, said Hume, to enforce good behavior. Otherwise, we wouldn't need the law. I can go on listing different belief systems, and when I'd add the religious frameworks, we would be here, not only all day, or all year, but for the rest of our lives. I suppose we could do worse than study these questions.

But even with all of this rich background, with even a slight awareness of some of the principles by which people imbued with wisdom and kindness lived and live, we might think we understand what to do when we wish to be ethical. But conflicts arise. One man's good is another man's evil. Cultural differences enter the picture, and what is considered good in one culture is not respected in another. And sadly, there are some genuinely evil people in the world who respond to an act of kindness with cruelty.

So what do we do? How do we make choices? When I was asked to address this audience, I accepted immediately because I love George Koplinka and his wonderful Peg. But I didn't accept because I knew what to say, because I knew exactly how to talk about becoming more ethical, because I could preen and suggest that since I was the recipient of this award five years ago, I am now wise enough to deliver some sage and profound nuggets of insight. No, these are not the reasons I accepted the invitation to

speak. In this room, I venture to guess that we all know what an ethical decision is in most cases. We don't sit and ponder "Should I steal this money? No one will have any idea how it disappeared. I really need to pay that bill. Should I cheat on my wife, my husband? After all, he/she will never know, and it might be fun and exciting. No, I don't think we even consider these sorts of actions as if they were actual possibilities. Decisions have to be made; we make them, hurting others as little as possible, depriving ourselves perhaps in some way of comfort or advantage. People who are religious might say that God wouldn't want them to act immorally, and that heaven will be their reward. People who are not religious might say if this is our only life, we had better make it good for ourselves and for others. Existentialists, both religious and not, suggest that we must give others the same freedom to choose we want to have as long as they accept responsibility for their actions.

What is it in us, in many of us, that wants goodness, love, and kindness to rule? Is it God? Is it genetic? Is it conscience? Is it due to the way we were raised? Aristotle thought that children who are well brought up will behave well as adults. How do we explain our constant search for guidance to a moral life? Perhaps the only partial answer is that there is something in some of us which demands ethical choices, something planted by God, or by a deep sense of humanity emanating from who knows where, or by our parents and teachers, or by literature and philosophy, or by experience, or by the capacity to love. Yeats said, "Love one another or perish."

In one of the Socratic dialogues, the interlocutor makes clear that the man who cheats and steals is often better off than the honest man who refuses to do so. Why do some of us behave well when it would be to our advantage to behave badly (provided that we could manage to do it secretly)? I don't know. I know only that George and Bob Dohn would not spend a minute trying to decide what to do if an ethical matter arose. They would just act ethically; they are simply incapable of doing otherwise. Should we show appreciation for them for doing what they cannot help but do? Well, yes. It is inspiring to recognize those who are good and generous especially at a time when we read so much about contractors who cheat, politicians who lie, billionaires who defraud their companies and their investors, manufacturers who knowingly make shoddy or dangerous products. Sometimes we wonder how many decent people exist in the world. Therefore, it's important to remind ourselves that we know a great many good people, including our guests of honor this afternoon. I suspect that's why the Rotary Club goes through the process of giving awards to those who can be exemplars to all of us.

It is immensely reassuring and comforting to know that such people are in our lives. I feel privileged and I am grateful to have been invited to be part of the celebration of two fine people.