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It was a sweltering June afternoon in Manhattan and the subway car was crowded, hot and pungent. A week’s worth of punishing heat and humidity had frayed tempers. People were standing in the aisle as more riders packed into the train at Columbus Circle. We were bound for Times Square. A photographer had posed Randy Cohen, B.A.’71, in one of the only open seats. An elderly woman who had just stepped into the car swayed unsteadily as the train lurched forward. “I’m embarrassed to be sitting here, but he’s taking my picture,” Cohen told her, apologizing profusely. “You can have my seat as soon as he’s finished.” The photographer snapped a few more frames, and Cohen stood up and relinquished his seat to the woman.

Cohen may not be a Boy Scout in real life, but he plays a kind of morality referee for millions of readers of The New York Times Magazine each Sunday as the writer of the column “The Ethicist.” Relinquishing a subway seat may not be a job requirement, but an observer would expect nothing less of the man who helps advice seekers negotiate an ethical minefield each week.

“I make no claims to virtue,” Cohen is fond of saying. Still, he receives a couple hundred e-mails each week from readers seeking his opinion on such matters as the ethics of telling a friend of his spouse’s infidelity; whether it’s OK to grab an umbrella of equal value from the coatroom of a restaurant if your umbrella has been mistakenly taken; and if it’s ethical for a parent to read a teenage daughter’s online diary after stumbling upon it.

“A lot of people like to tell me in their e-mails how wrong I got it,” Cohen said. “It’s not that I consider myself more virtuous, but the argument I present strives for the moral high ground. I’m like the sportswriter who covers the National Basketball Association. He doesn’t need to have a good jump shot.”

Cohen’s assignment as “The Ethicist” — his pithy, carefully crafted responses call to mind a tantalizing blend of Dr. Phil, Ann Landers, Confucius and David Sedaris — grounds him in the prosaic realities of getting along well with others. “Ethics aren’t ethics until there are other people involved. More and more now I see ethics as the practice of civic virtue,” he said over lunch at a Thai restaurant around the corner from his apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, a few blocks from Central Park.

Lest he take himself too seriously, a favorite quote from Samuel Johnson sums up Cohen’s thoughts on his Times persona: “Be not too hasty to trust or to admire the teachers of morality. They discourse like angels, but they live like men.”

Randy Cohen is an accidental ethicist. He never planned to become a moral compass to a nation of Times readers. He’s been writing the “Ethicist” column since 1999 — an eternity in the magazine business and a testament to his popularity.

Cohen, 57, grew up in a Reform Jewish household in Reading, Pa. His father ran the family’s wholesale paper business. His mother was a nurse and the jokester of the household. Cohen

Randy Cohen, B.A.’71

By Paul Grondahl
Photography: Michael Paras


An Ethical Excerpt


You should have paid the $200. Your ex-girlfriend, like all of us, shoulders some risk in a romance, but her understandable reluctance to use the ticket is a direct result of your actions. And beyond this narrow calculation, it is wise to be insanely generous in your romantic life, even when a relationship turns sour. Ethics limns the minimum acceptable behavior, but romance should call for our best. Take the high road here; you’ll be glad you did. Nobody ever looks back on his conduct in a love affair and berates himself for being too kind.
The trick is to put (the four Emmys) somewhere where it’s not totally obvious, but people will see them.

Bonnie Steinbock: UAlbany's Ethics Expert

Meet UAlbany’s very own ethicist: Professor of Philosophy Bonnie Steinbock. Internationally recognized for her expertise on biomedical ethics, particularly in the fields of reproduction and genetics, she draws upon her vast knowledge of philosophy, public policy, law and medicine in assessing such ethical matters as physician-assisted suicide, abortion, human cloning, surrogate motherhood, genetic testing and drunk driving.

Steinbock, a 2005 recipient of the University at Albany’s Award for Excellence in Research, is widely respected for her ability to explain technically difficult topics to the general public. Her 1992 work Life Before Birth: The Moral and Legal Status of Embryos, drew praise from the editors of the journal Bioethics, who noted, “One of the book’s major successes is its simultaneous address of both philosophical and lay audiences.” In addition, Steinbock has written 60 articles—an impressive number for a philosopher—and has appeared on PBS, CBS, Court TV, A&E, the Canadian Broadcasting Company and Japanese Public Television, commenting on frozen embryos, stem cell research and other topical issues.

A University at Albany faculty member since 1977, Steinbock teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in ethics, bioethics and philosophy of law, as well as graduate courses in public policy and public health. She also directs the University’s inter-disciplinary minor in bioethics. For Steinbock’s latest essay, on embryo stem cell research, go to www.albany.edu/pr/ualbany-magfall05/magzinew.html.

Cohen in his apartment with Emmys in the background