

Randy Cohen, B.A.'71

# The Accidental Ethicist



By Paul Grondahl  
Photography: Michael Paras

As the writer of the column “The Ethicist” in *The New York Times Magazine*, Randy Cohen, B.A.’71, helps advice seekers negotiate society’s ethical minefields.

From synthesizers at UAlbany to David Letterman’s “Monkey Cam” to “The Ethicist,” Randy Cohen contemplates when the next subway train will arrive.

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

## An Ethical Excerpt

From the column “The Ethicist” by Randy Cohen on June 5, 2005 in *The New York Times Magazine*. Reprinted with permission.

I am a 20-year-old college student who was involved in a long-distance relationship with a woman who goes to college in another state. Late last summer, she bought a plane ticket to visit me. I decided to break up with her one week before the visit, which she of course decided not to make. Should I have reimbursed her for her \$200 plane ticket?

— Anonymous, Massachusetts

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 forth 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.

**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 interdisciplinary minor in bioethics.

**For Steinbock's latest essay, on embryonic stem cell research, go to: [www.albany.edu/pr/ualbany-magfall05/magzinew.html](http://www.albany.edu/pr/ualbany-magfall05/magzinew.html).**



considers himself a secular Jew and does not bring religion into his column, nor does he try to offer a kind of *Cliffs Notes* philosophy text. "I'm seriously and truly mortified by the great mass of ignorance in which I swim every day," he said.

Perhaps his own most damning ethical lapse during his UAlbany days was self-delusion when it came to his musical abilities. He had played drums in rock 'n' roll bands as a teenager and, after brief stints at Vanderbilt and Penn State, transferred into the electronic music program at UAlbany with the encouragement of Joel Chadabe, professor emeritus of music.

"Randy was a great student and wonderfully creative. He did a lot of interesting stuff," Chadabe recalled. "He was there at the birth of synthesizers in the second stage of electronic music. By the time he graduated, though, he had decided he was more talented at writing than music."

"My entire music career was a detour, a sad detour. Science is baffled by the series of terrible mistakes I committed against electronic music," said Cohen, who is soft-spoken and lanky, with a shaved head, wire-rimmed spectacles and the deadpan delivery and nebbishy presence of Woody Allen

In his quirkily decorated apartment — dominated by a battered novelty table lamp of Three-Mile Island, the nuclear plant disaster site — Cohen has a poster advertising his 1971 electronic music performance in the University Art Gallery. The portrait of Cohen reveals a bearded hippie with a studied scowl and a cascade of thick hair tumbling halfway down his back — The Ethicist in his Led Zeppelin phase.

Cohen is a chameleon of

the creative arts. After graduating from UAlbany with a bachelor of arts degree in music, he did graduate work in electronic music at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. "I had an epiphany and saw with blinding clarity how bad I was," he said, realizing his best ideas arrived in a verbal mode, not in a musical idiom.

He ditched the drums and synthesizer for a typewriter. Cohen knocked around as a stand-up comic in New York City, with modest success. He had enough chops, though, to get noticed by the producers of "Late Night with David Letterman." Getting hired as a writer for Letterman was "like getting drafted by the Yankees." Cohen spent seven years writing for the show, beginning in 1984, and he created many zany bits, including the "Monkey Cam" — strapping a mini-camera on the back of a monkey and letting it scamper around the set. Cohen later wrote for "The Rosie O'Donnell Show," Michael Moore's "TV Nation" and several TV pilots. He's also the author of five books. *McSweeney's*, the hip literary journal, once proclaimed him "a genius of America," declared Randy Cohen Week and ran excerpts from his humor collection, *Diary of a Flying Man*. Cohen's latest book is *The Good, the Bad & the Difference: How to Tell Right from Wrong in Everyday Situations*. He's also a regular commentator on National Public Radio.

You won't notice the four Emmys in Cohen's apartment at first. They're tucked away atop a bookcase near where he stores his two bikes, one a hybrid and one a road bike. "The trick is to put them somewhere where it's not totally obvious, but people will still see them," he said, reluctantly pulling down the dusty, heavy golden sculp-



Cohen in his apartment with Emmys in the background

**The trick is to put (the four Emmys) somewhere where it's not totally obvious, but people will see them.**

tures for a photo. Cohen writes in a corner of the living room of his two-bedroom apartment. "It's very dull and plodding, like clerical work," he said. He takes a writing break each afternoon to ride a 15-mile loop through Central Park. Cohen is divorced and shares custody of his daughter, Sophie Pollitt-Cohen, with his former wife, the writer Katha Pollitt, a columnist for *The Nation*, who lives just around the corner. Their daughter graduated from Stuyvesant High School this year and

now attends Wesleyan University. Writing is in the genes. Next year, Warner Books will publish *The Notebook Girls*, a Stuyvesant High journal written by Sophie and three friends.

Raising a teenage daughter, the issue of illegal music downloads notwithstanding, is constant grist for the "Ethicist" mill. Sometimes, though, the child teaches the parent. One of Cohen's pet peeves about Manhattan is discourteous drivers who "block the

**Another Ethical Excerpt**

From the column "The Ethicist" by Randy Cohen on June 5, 2005 in *The New York Times Magazine*. Reprinted with permission.

**When employees at restaurants give me little perks that aren't theirs to give, I always accept. I feel a little weird about it, but I figure that the ethical lapse means less to me than the person offering the free coffee, or whatever. I prefer to steal a little, rather than offend someone by refusing a gift. What do you think?**

**I hope you're never offered a freebie at a Mercedes dealership. Or a bank. Your reluctance to give offense, while admirably sensitive, is insufficient reason to profit from employee theft, at least according to Police Department etiquette ... If you feel up to a slightly awkward social moment, ask your server if the boss is O.K. with these perks. If he or she is, I am. But if not, you must courteously decline this lagniappe.**