Huck Finn's moral compass

Ethical reasoning and the importance of diversity

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In Mark Twain's classic coming-of-age novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the title character experiences a crisis of conscience thinking about helping Jim, Miss Watson's slave, escape to freedom: "Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish … who was to blame for (Jim's escaping)? Why, ME. I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way. It got to troubling me so I couldn't rest; I couldn't stay still in one place."

Research supports the following: Like Huck, we begin forming moral values early, perhaps before and while we acquire language. We continue to digest moral information from our environment and develop moral intuitions. As we mature, these environmentally shaped intuitions drive our moral judgments and actions automatically, usually without our conscious awareness. As a result, we gain unwarranted confidence about our moral judging and acting capabilities. The moral standard against which we measure our confidence comes from our acquired moral intuitions. As Huck Finn dramatically shows, sometimes settled moral intuitions (conscience) conflict with new experience, producing moral distress.

This *Madison* celebrates new experience, including diversity (e.g., Valley Scholars, study abroad and CMSS experiential learning) and JMU students and alums engaging concerns in the global community (e.g., modeling democratic practices, student advocacy, political attitudes, history coming alive).

JMU's Ethical Reasoning in Action: The Madison Collaborative uses key ethical questions explicitly to interrogate settled moral intuitions (conscience) to root out or neutralize the moral limitations and blind spots like those that plagued Huck. But equally important to an ethical reasoning strategy is the implicit challenge to moral misperceptions that diversity generates. Experiencing diversity tends to dislodge established moral intuitions. So much more than window-dressing, a diverse learner population—students, faculty and staff—prepares all of us to better address significant personal, professional and global challenges. Experiencing difference, while sometimes stressful, strengthens us. It improves moral capabilities required to solve global problems. By asking the right key ethical questions and by direct encounters with diversity and global experience, JMU's learning community works aggressively to better inform ethical judgments and actions, and, thereby, nurture effective and engaged global change agents. Sometimes things get "all trembly and feverish," but the positive results, as this issue highlights, are worth the effort.

EXPLORING THE CAVE.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *As chair of Ethical Reasoning in Action: The Madison Collaborative, Bill Hawk works directly with faculty, staff, students and administrators to build the conceptual and practical framework for ethical reasoning at JMU and beyond. Learn more at jmu.edu/mc.*