THE WORLD NEEDS MORE MOTHERS-IN-LAW

By Jim Brown

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"Conscience is a mother-in-law whose visit never ends." Or, put differently, conscience is a continual reminder that we can do better. But doing better requires benchmarks for comparison, and these spring from life experiences as varied as the human condition, and what does "doing better" actually mean? I will explore the uncertainty of innate vs. acquired conscience and the moral ambiguity that springs from this dilemma.

Please don't be misled by the title of my presentation. Mothers-in-law are much more than a convenient stereotype for jokes. At the age of 84 I still have one. She just turned 98, and I treasure her very much. Perhaps Meryl Streep got it right when she said: "Mothers-in-law are like the extra spice in life. Sometimes a little too much, but always necessary."

In February 1972, just after sundown, meaning around 7 PM in the village of Paz de Ariporo at the eastern base of the Andes in Colombia, I was walking along the main street thinking about the next day's geological field work. "Main street" was nothing more than a dirt track wider than most in town. A nearly full moon had just popped up over the horizon, easy to see because I don't think that electricity had yet graced the village. Fifty years ago, this part of Colombia was still fairly remote, accessible from the rest of the country via dirt roads and fords that may or may not have been drivable depending on the state of the rivers. Now there are paved roads and bridges. But I digress.

As I made my way along the darkened street of Pax de Ariporo, I heard hoof beats. Emerging from the dusk came three riders festooned with ammunition belts, pistols holstered and machetes scabbarded., a vision straight from a Clint Eastwood movie. I muttered "buenos noches seniors" and ducted into the nearest alley. But there was nothing to worry about 50 years ago. This was Colombia before drugs and the nearest kidnappings were hundreds of miles away.

But the country wasn't safe for everybody. Soon after I returned to Bogota, the capital of Colombia, the following story appeared in the New York Times, dated July 9, 1972:

Colombia Trial Bares Life (Everyone Kills Indians) on Plains

July 9, 1972

VILLAVICENCIO, Colombia, July 6—Out on the llanos, the vast prairies that stretch across Colombia and Venezuela from the Andes to the Orinoco, law lessness still reigns as it did in the old American West. Swashbuckling, cowboys and primitive Indians compete for life and over notions of right with the fast gun and the flashing Machete.

Evidence that untamed life on the prairies has changed little since the time of the conquistadores was provided in a courtroom here last week when a half‑dozen cowboys charged with murder freely told in horrifying detail how they had lured 16 Indians to their ranch with the promise of a feast and massacred them for fun.

"If I had known that killing Indians was a crime, I would not have wasted all that time walking just so they could lock me up," said 22‑year‑old, Marcelino Jimenez,

who hiked for five days to a police outpost after learning the authorities were looking for him.

“From childhood, I have been told that everyone kills Indians,” said another defendant, who added: “All I did was kill the little Indian girl and finish off two who were more dead than alive anyway.”

And Luis Enrique Morin, 33 years old, the range boss who planned the massacre, asserted: “For me, Indians are animals like deer or iguanas, except that deer don't damage our crops or kill our pigs. Since way back, Indian-hunting has been common practice in these parts.”

Defense lawyers at the trial pointed out that the cowboys, known as llaneros, even have a verb for Indian-hunting— guahibiar a word derived from Guahibo, the name of a prairie tribe.

The defense conceded that the massacre had occurred on a ranch near Colombia's northeast border with Venezuela on Dec. 27, 1967, and that the defendants had done the killing.

The accused, admitted having lured 18 nomadic Cuiba Indians onto the ranch with the promise of meat, rice, vegetables and fruit set out by two women cooks, and said they had attacked the men, women and children with guns, machetes and clubs at a pre-arranged signal from the range boss.

Sixteen of the Indians were killed, but two crawled away and reported the incident to a priest, who notified the authorities. After their arrest, the defendants cooperated fully, supplying investigators with every detail of the massacre.

Noting this in court, defense lawyers contended that none of the defendants — six cowboys and the two women cooks — had been aware at the time they were doing

wrong. The defense also contended that the Government was unfairly trying to apply 20th century laws to ignorant men from a lawless land.

A three-man jury here agreed. After 41 hours of deliberation, they found all eight defendants not guilty on grounds of "invincible ignorance."

The verdict quickly generated an outcry from Government officials, spokesmen for the Roman Catholic Church, newspaper editorial writers and anthropologists. Yesterday, the trial judge, Damaso Marenco Cantillo, rejected the verdict and ordered a new trial, a permissible legal move in Colombia, which does not prohibit double jeopardy.

In rejecting the verdict, the judge declared that the Indians had been killed "solely because they belong to a race of men that, tied to the land from time immemorial through the fault of the state, have not had the road to civilization opened to them," and that, as a result, "they are despised and vilified."

The judge also voted that two other cowboys who took part in the massacre had been tried, convicted and sentenced to 30 years in prison in Venezuela, where the Cuibas had spent most of their nomadic life. Another cowboy accused in the case has not been taken into custody.

Upon reading this account of a repugnant crime, it's tempting to say that the perpetrators had no conscience. We have the expression: "let your conscience be your guide," so effectively explored by our own member Erik Paulson in his talk two weeks ago. Twenty-two-year-old Marcelino Jimenez, who hiked for five days to a police outpost after learning the authorities were looking for him, must have some respect for law and order. But apparently there is no respect for human life. His conscience was shaped by those around him. I'll turn the expression around and contend that every conscience needs a guide. Unfortunately, guideposts can be

flawed. This is why we need robust mothers-in-law who nag us to do the right thing.

“Billy Budd “is a novella written by Herman Melville unfinished at his death in 1891. Upon its publication in 1924, it took its place as a classic second only to “Moby Dick.” Conscience plays a crucial role in the story's themes and conflicts. Billy's instinctive goodness and innocence are juxtaposed with the calculated actions of the other characters, highlighting the conflict between natural virtue and the constraints of society and legal order.

A British man-of-war in need of men, halts the merchant ship *Rights-of-Man,* and impresses just one sailor, Billy Budd. Allegorically he shouts “Goodbye, Rights-of-Man” as he boards the man-of-war. Billy quickly endears himself to his mates and the officers under whom he serves. The captain of the ship, "Starry" Vere, is a quiet, just, and well-read officer. In contrast, Claggart, the master-of-arms, although outwardly placid, is inwardly malevolent and moody. For whatever reason Claggart singles out Billy and is quick to punish him for minor infractions. Eventually Claggart fabricates an incident and reports to Captain Vere that Billy is involved in an attempted mutiny. Shocked, the captain orders Claggart and Billy to come to his cabin. When Claggart faces him with charges of conspiracy, Billy is so dumbfounded he is unable to speak; he can only stammer. To vent his feelings, Billy strikes Claggart so forcibly that he kills him.

Captain Vere, despite his love for Billy and his knowledge that the act was unintentional, immediately calls a drumhead court to try Billy. England is at war. During that same period there have been widespread mutinies in the British fleet. The officers ‘panel finds Billy guilty. The next morning at sunrise he is hanged from the yardarm. He dies with a blessing on his lips — "God bless Captain Vere!"

While returning to join the Mediterranean fleet, the man-of-war encounters a French battleship. In an attempt to capture it, Captain Vere is seriously wounded. The British vessel defeats the French ship and escorts it to Gibraltar, where Captain Vere dies. In his last moments, the captain murmurs, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd."

Melville's tale deals with the age-old confrontation of institutional conscience vs. individual choice. Captain Vere's allegiance to the military code eclipsed his urge to show mercy. The consequences of his choice haunted him to the end.

On 20 December 1943, after a successful bomb run on the northern German City of Bremen, 2nd Lt. Charles "Charlie" Brown's B-17F Flying Fortress *Ye Olde Pub* of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) was severely damaged by German fighters, and had fallen out of formation, left behind by other bombers with two of its four engines running. The mission was the *Ye Olde Pub* crew's first and had targeted the Focke-Wulf 190 aircraft production facility in Bremen. The men were informed in a pre-mission briefing that they might encounter hundreds of German fighters. Bremen was guarded by more than 250 flak guns. Brown's crew was assigned to fly "Purple Heart Corner," a spot on the edge of the bomber formation that was considered especially dangerous because the Germans often targeted the more vulnerable edges, instead of attacking straight through the middle of the formation.

Brown's B-17 began its ten-minute bomb run at 27,300 ft. with an outside air temperature of −76 °F. Before the bomber released its bomb load, flak shattered the Plexiglas nose, knocked out the #2 engine and further damaged the #4 engine, which was already in questionable condition and had to be throttled back to prevent overspeeding. As the damage slowed the bomber, Brown was unable to remain with his formation and fell back as a straggler, a position in which he came under sustained enemy attacks.

The average age of B-17 crews was between 21 and 22, and anyone 23 or older was called “pops.” Chances of surviving the 25 mandated missions, later raised to 35, were only 10 per cent. Americans bombed during the day, and British at night.

Brown's struggling B-17 was attacked by over a dozen enemy fighters for more than ten minutes. Further damage was sustained, including to the #3 engine, reducing it to only half power (meaning the aircraft had effectively, at best, 40% of its total rated power available). The bomber's internal oxygen, hydraulic, and electrical systems were also damaged, and the bomber had lost half of its rudder and left side elevator, as well as its nose cone. Several of the gunners' weapons had jammed, most likely as a result of the loss of on-board systems, leading to frozen firing mechanisms. This left the bomber with only two turret guns plus one of the three forward-firing nose guns for defense. Many of the crew were wounded: the tail gunner had been decapitated by a direct hit from a cannon shell, while another crew member was critically wounded in the leg by shrapnel, Blackford's feet were frozen due to shorted-out heating wires in his uniform, Another crew member had been hit in the eye by a cannon shell and Brown was wounded in his right shoulder. The morphine syrettes carried onboard had also frozen, complicating first-aid efforts by the crew, while the radio was destroyed and the bomber's exterior heavily damaged. Miraculously, all but the tail gunner survived. The crew discussed the possibility of bailing out of the aircraft, but realized one member would be unable to make a safe landing with his injury. Unwilling to leave him behind in the plane, they flew on. Bailing out over German soil meant certain capture and prison camp at best, or death at the hands of enraged civilians.

Brown's damaged, straggling bomber was spotted by Germans on the ground, including Franz Stigler (then an ace with 27 victories), who was refueling and

rearming at an airfield. He soon took off in his Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6, which had an American 50 caliber bullet embedded in its radiator, risking the engine overheating, and quickly caught up with Brown's plane. Through openings torn in the damaged bomber's airframe by flak and machine gun fire, Stigler was able to see the injured and incapacitated crew. To the American pilot's surprise, the German did not open fire on the crippled bomber. Stigler later stated that he recalled the words of one of his commanding officer during his time fighting in North Africa: "If I ever see or hear of you shooting at a man in a parachute, I will shoot you myself." Stigler later commented, "To me, it was just like they were in a parachute. I saw them, and I couldn't shoot them down."

Twice Stigler tried to persuade Brown to land his plane at a German airfield and surrender, or divert to nearby neutral Sweden, where he and his crew would receive medical treatment and be interned for the remainder of the war. However, Brown and the crew of the B-17 did not understand what Stigler was trying to mouth and gesture to them and so flew on. Stigler later told Brown he was trying to get them to fly to Sweden. He then flew near Brown's plane in close formation on the bomber's port side wing, so that German anti-aircraft units would not target it and escorted the damaged B-17 across the coast until they reached open water. Brown, still unsure of Stigler's intentions, ordered his dorsal turret gunner to target his guns on Stigler but not open fire, to warn him off. Understanding the message and certain that the bomber was finally out of German airspace, Stigler departed with a salute.

Brown managed to fly 250 miles across the North Sea and land his plane in England at an RAF base. At the postflight debriefing, he informed his officers about how a German fighter pilot had let him go. Brown went on to complete a combat tour. Stigler later piloted a jet fighter, Hitler's new "secret weapon, until the end of the war. Brown's plane did not return to combat.

After years of effort, Brown was able to locate Stigler. Between 1990 and 2008, Charlie Brown and Franz Stigler became close friends and remained so until their deaths within several months of each other in 2008.

Stigler's compassion was an act of bravery. Had German authorities learned of his actions, he would have been shot as a traitor despite his exemplary record as a fighter pilot. Stigler claimed he acted in response to words he remembered from a former commanding officer. But I think there was a bit of conscience nurtured by a strong mother-in-law.

The foregoing account was the subject of a biographical novel entitled "A Higher Call" by Adam Makos, released in 2012.

In 1987, business took me to the Peoples Republic of Congo, a former French colony in West Africa, not to be confused with the adjacent and much larger ex-Belgium colony called the Democratic Republic of Congo, much in the news lately. My employer maintained a small office in the coastal town of Pointe Noire, the capital of the former French possession. To provide a break from our meetings, our local manager organized a convoy of two Range Rovers to drive north along a dirt track 20 miles to the River Kouilou, where there was a roadhouse presided over by an ex-colonial Frenchman and his pet chimp. Most of our route threaded through a dense forest populated by noisy birds. As we entered a clearing, our surroundings became eerily quiet. One of the drivers crossed himself. Before us

were ruins of stone buildings where slaves had been imprisoned, awaiting shipment to North America and the West Indies.

This brings us to John Newton, an acclaimed English abolitionist, who in 1745 was imprisoned in a similar facility on the coast of present-day Sierra Leone, on his way to being enslaved for three years. An English slave dealer with whom Newton obviously did not get along, gifted John to his wife, an African tribal princess. According to Newton, she abused and mistreated him just as much as she did her other slaves.

It was upon his rescue and return to England in 1748 that Newton had a Christian conversion. He reported that a strong storm off the coast of Ireland contributed. He was 23 years old. But any revelations about the evils of the slave trade lay in the future. Newton returned in 1748 to Liverpool, a major port for the Triangular Slave Trade. Partly due to the influence of his father's friend, he obtained a position as first mate aboard the slave ship *Brownlow,* bound for the West Indies via the coast of Guinea, Africa. After his return to England in 1750, he made three more voyages as captain of slave ships Upon suffering a severe stroke in 1754, Newton gave up seafaring, while continuing to invest in slaving operations. He said that his true conversion to Christianity did not happen until some time later. He wrote in 1764 "I cannot consider myself to have been a believer in the full sense of the word, until a considerable time afterwards." He wrote the words to "Amazing Grace" in December 1772, intending them for a New Year's Day sermon. After Newton moved to the City of London as rector of St Mary Woolnoth Church, he contributed to the work of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, formed in 1787.

In 1788, 34 years after he had retired from the slave trade, Newton broke a long silence on the subject with the publication of a forceful pamphlet *Thoughts Upon*

the Slave Trade, in which he described the horrific conditions of the slave ships. He apologized for "a confession, which ... comes too late ... It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders." He had copies sent to every member of parliament and the pamphlet sold so well that it swiftly required reprinting.

Newton lived to see the British Empire's abolition of the African slave trade in 1807, just months before his death at age 82.

We have explored four examples of how conscience evolved and shaped the destinies of four individuals. For the Colombian ranch hand, who freely admitted to killing other human beings, it's easy to say he had no conscience, because he lacked remorse. But lack of remorse is not a fair criterion in terms of the values instilled by his family and community. Captain Vere, who presided over the execution of Billy Budd, was torn between Vere's innate goodness and the conscience of the institution he served. Captain Stigler, for an instant, placed his innate sense of fairness over duty. It took John Newton decades to acquire a conscience over his role in the slave trade. Conscience is not a static attribute of the human condition. Improvement requires continual critique, either from within, community, or from mothers-in-law.

Franz Stigler