

## Passage 8

The Thin Grey Line by Marya Mannes

"Aw, they all do it," growled the cabdriver. He was talking about cops who took payoffs for winking at double parking, but his cynicism could as well have been directed at any of a dozen other instances of corruption, big-time and small-time. Moreover, the disgust in his voice was overlaid by an unspoken "So what?"; the implication that since this was the way things were, there was nothing anybody could do.

Like millions of his fellow Americans, the cabdriver was probably a decent human being who had never stolen anything, broken any law or willfully injured another; somewhere, a knowledge of what was probably right had kept him from committing what was clearly wrong. But that knowledge had not kept a thin grey line that separates the two conditions from being daily greyer and thinner—to the point that it was hardly noticeable.

On one side of this line are They: the bribers, the cheaters, the chiselers, the swindlers, the extortioners. On the other side are We—both partners and victims. They and We are now so perilously close that the only mark distinguishing us is that They get caught and We don't.

The same citizen who voices his outrage at police corruption will slip the traffic cop on his block a handsome Christmas present in the belief that his car, nestled under a "No Parking" sign, will not be ticketed. The son of that nice woman next door has a habit of stealing cash from her purse because his allowance is smaller than his buddies'. Your

son's friend admitted cheating at exams because "everybody does it."

Bit by bit, the resistance to and immunity against wrong that a healthy social body builds up by law and ethics and the dictation of conscience have broken down. And instead of the fighting indignation of a people outraged by those who prey on them, we have the admission of impotence: "They all do it."

Now, failure to uphold the law is no less corrupt than violations of the law. And the continuing shame of this country now is the growing number of Americans who fail to uphold and assist enforcement of the law, simply—and ignominiously—out of fear. Fear of "involvement," fear of reprisal, fear of "trouble." A man is beaten by hoodlums in plain daylight and in view of bystanders. These people not only fail to help the victim, but like the hoodlums, flee before the police can question them. A city official knows of a colleague's bribe but does not report it. A pedestrian watches a car hit a woman but leaves the scene, to avoid giving testimony. It happens every day. And if the police get cynical at this irresponsibility, they are hardly to blame. Morale is a matter of giving support and having faith in one another; where both are lacking, "law" has become a worthless word.

How did we get this way? What started this blurring of what was once a thick black line between the lawful and the lawless? What makes a "regular guy," a decent fellow, accept a bribe? What makes a nice kid from a middle-class family take money for doing something he must know is not only illegal but wrong?

When you look into the background of an erring "kid" you will often find a comfortable home and a mother who will tell you, with tears in her eyes, that she "gave him everything." She probably did, to his everlasting damage. Fearing her son's disapproval, the indulgent mother denies him north-

ing except responsibility. Instead of growing up, he grows to believe that the world owes him everything.

Today, no one has to take any responsibility. The psychiatrists, the sociologists, the novelists, the playwrights have gone a long way to help promote irresponsibility. Nobody really is to blame for what he does. It's Society. It's Environment. It's a Broken Home. It's an Underprivileged Area. But it's hardly ever You.

Now we find a truckload of excuses to absolve the individual from responsibility for his actions. A fellow commits a crime because he's basically insecure, because he hated his stepmother at nine, or because his sister needs an operation. A policeman loots a store because his salary is too low. A city official accepts a payoff because it's offered to him. Members of minority groups, racial or otherwise, commit crimes because they can't get a job, or are unacceptable to the people living around them. The words "right" and "wrong" are foreign to these people.

But honesty is the best policy. Says who? Anyone willing to get laughed at. But the laugh is no laughing matter. It concerns the health and future of a nation. It involves the two-dollar illegal bettor as well as the corporation price-fixer, the college-examination cheater and the payroll-padding Congressman, the expense-account chiseler, the seller of pornography and his schoolboy reader, the bribed judge and the stealing delinquent. All these people may represent a minority. But when, as it appears now, the majority excuse themselves from responsibility by accepting corruption as natural to society ("They all do it"), this society is bordering on total confusion. If the line between right and wrong is finally erased, there is no defense against the power of evil.

Before this happens—and it is by no means far away—it might be well for the schools of the nation to substitute for the much-argued issue of prayer a daily lesson in ethics, law,

and responsibility to society that would strengthen the conscience as exercise strengthens muscles. And it would be even better if parents were forced to attend it. For corruption is not something you read about in the papers and leave to courts. We are all involved.

## Questions

**Question 1:** The author's "thin grey line" refers to an imaginary difference between all of the following except:

- A. bribery and extortion
- B. right and wrong
- C. conscience and dishonesty
- D. lawful and lawless

**Question 2:** A witness who leaves the scene of an accident without giving a report is cited as an example of

- A. forgetfulness
- B. a failure to uphold the law
- C. weakness
- D. cowardice

**Question 3:** The author argues that a once thick black line is blurring because of

- A. permissive parenting
- B. social change
- C. bad role models
- D. too much prosperity

**Question 4:** The cabdriver who growls at cops who take bribes—"Aw, they all do it," he says—is describing a serious social problem. The solution, according to the author is

- A. better law enforcement
- B. less political corruption
- C. better civic education
- D. for each person to accept responsibility

**Question 5:** "Morale" in the context of the passage (line 56) means

- A. pride
- B. encouragement and trust
- C. a spirit of teamwork
- D. a strong work ethic

**Question 6:** The nice kid's father crosses the thin grey line by

- A. an admission of impotence
- B. arguing in favor of school prayer
- C. padding his income tax returns
- D. swindling criminals to balance the scales

**Question 7:** Americans who fail to uphold the law suffer from

- A. a fear of involvement
- B. a fear of reprisal
- C. a fear of "trouble"
- D. all of the above

**Question 8:** The author argues that if the line between right and wrong is erased, the consequences will be

- A. defenselessness against the power of evil
- B. the rise of the corporation price-fixer
- C. that nobody will really be to blame
- D. that society will border on total confusion

**Question 9:** When the author uses the phrase “honesty is the best policy,” she is being

- A. hopeful
- B. ironic
- C. prescriptive
- D. patriotic

**Question 10:** According to the author, indulgent mothers deny their children

- A. heroes
- B. opportunity
- C. excuses
- D. responsibility

### Answers

1. A 2. B 3. A 4. D 5. B 6. C 7. D 8. A 9. B 10. D

### Commentary

In Question 1 you need to recognize that “bribers” and “extortioners” are both listed as being on the same side of the grey line. Turn “bribers” and “extortioners” into “bribery” and “extortion,” and voila—you’ve got your answer. Question 2 can be answered by looking back a few sentences to the beginning of the paragraph—everything that follows is an example of “failure to uphold the law.” Question 3 requires you to group a variety of examples of how mothers and fathers baby their children or take illegal short cuts as “permissive parenting.” The answer to Question 4 asks you to look from the very beginning of the passage (the cab driver) to the very end where the author makes her point. But you also have to reverse the statement. The author says, “No one has to take any responsibility.” By inference, we can conclude that she means “everyone must take responsibility.” For Question 5, replace these words in the passage, “a matter of giving support” with this part of the

answer—“encouragement”—and “having faith in one another” with “trust.”

Questions 6, 7, and 10 simply require a careful reading of the passage. Question 8 is more difficult because choices A and D are both true. Choice A is correct, though, because it’s a “consequence” of the “total confusion” mentioned in choice D. Question 9 demands an understanding of the tone of the entire passage. You should consider “irony” as a distinct possibility whenever it appears as an answer choice. Authors often use irony to make a point. Remember that.