

Conscious conscience



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The past acts as a tabernacle for experiences and memories. The past not only lives in Henry but also makes up Henry's very nature. Henry is his past. Life's faded memories shape choices. Author Jamie Ford builds the relationship between experience and conscience through Henry, his protagonist, in his novel *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*. Henry reflects on his experiences—with Keiko and with his father during the evacuation—before making difficult decisions. Henry's experiences instruct his conscience.

Experiencing Keiko's humanity forces Henry not only to accept but also to cherish Japanese culture. Henry's acceptance and love of Japanese culture portrays a transformation of conscience. At the novel's start, Henry partakes in the American prejudice against Japanese. The prejudice manifests itself when Henry's childhood antagonist, Chaz Preston, jeers at Henry: " ' Oh, that's right, you Japs don't salute American flags, do you?' Henry wasn't sure which was worse, being picked on for being Chinese, or being accused of being a Jap" (17). Henry's prejudice reflects the era's American prejudice and origin; it stems from ignorance. Never encountering a Japanese until Keiko allows Henry to alienate the Japanese and unconsciously further the prejudice. After spending only one day with Keiko, Henry's opinion metamorphoses. Keiko, and by extension her Japanese culture, transitions from alien to familiar for Henry. Henry's feelings for Japanese culture allow him to establish connections with the Japanese residents of Nihonmachi. These physical and metaphysical connections require an indisputable recognition of humanity, a humanity that renders defending basic rights and respects essential. The connections that Henry establishes force his

conscience to defend the Japanese culture of Nihonmachi. When he sabotages his father's meeting with Mr. Preston, Henry reconciles his actions by reflecting on his experience with the Japanese people: " He'd never disobeyed his father so blatantly. But he had to. He had seen the fires in Nihonmachi and people burning their prized possessions . . . He needed to find Keiko" (90). Ford nurtures conscience's transformation—inspired by experience—by creating new divisions between Henry and his father and opening the doors of Japanese culture to Henry. Henry's priorities have changed; his malnourished experience and intimacy with his father weaken the patristic bond. As a result of the weak bond, Henry's conscience faces no challenge or remorse. Contrastingly, Henry's connections with Keiko, her family, and the Japanese-American population of Nihonmachi are fresh and intimate. These experiences compel Henry's conscience to act in favor of Japanese-Americans. Henry furthers his inclusivity with the Japanese culture when he assumes a Japanese identity to gain entrance into Camp Minidoka. Henry considers the situation: " For once in his life, there was a benefit to Caucasian people thinking that he was one of them—that he was Japanese" (226). Allowing this view, Henry not only accepts Japanese culture, but also appropriates it. Henry ventures beyond his connection with Nihonmachi and connects himself as analogous to the rest of Japanese America. Henry's experience with Keiko makes the strong connection to Japanese-American culture possible.

Similarly, Henry's consistent defense of Nihonmachi and the Japanese culture makes the record's presence at the hotel, along with other remnants of Japanese culture, possible. Henry, his conscience guarding Nihonmachi's

culture, delivers the caveat for traveling to China; his father must impede the sale of the Panama Hotel. Henry learns much earlier that the hotel doubles as a refuge for Nihonmachi's cultural remnants. Henry negotiates: "I'll go, but only on this condition . . . if you can prevent the sale, I will do as you wish, I will go and finish my schooling in China . . . don't thank me, I'm not doing this for you, I'm doing it for me, for the girl, the one you hated so much" Henry didn't know quite why. Or did he? The hotel was a living, breathing memory for him. (251) In stopping the sale of the Panama Hotel, Henry preserves the record and his connection to Japantown for decades. All of Henry's childhood experiences contribute to the pinnacle of Henry's character and conscience transformation. Henry moves from disdaining the Japanese to finally self-proclaiming himself as Japanese: " ' Yes! I'm Japanese.' Henry bobbed his head. ' Of course I am' " (64). Henry's conscience alters his attitude about the Japanese dramatically. Henry loves Japanese-American culture because Keiko is Japanese-American.

Ford further validates experience's power in forming the conscience through Henry's love for Keiko and the physical choices that love impels him to make. Henry's love for Keiko pushes him to make choices that express that love, despite the conflicts those choices may create. This connection between the emotions elicited by Henry's romantic experiences with Keiko and Henry's risky choices emerges at the novel's beginning. Henry meets Keiko at Kobe Park after curfew. Keiko, unable to burn her family's photos, requests that Henry keep them safe. Henry, more than willing to help Keiko, agrees after reflecting on his experiences and his feelings for Keiko: " Henry remembered the horrible scene in Japantown that afternoon, the

photographer from the Ochi-Studio—visibly shaken. ‘ I can hide them in my room. Do you have more?’ . . . Keiko hugged Henry for a brief moment. He found himself hugging her back. His hand touched her hair. She was warmer than Henry had imagined” (95-96). Henry, aware of the danger that comes with abetting Keiko and her family, chooses to hide Keiko’s photos and commits a crime in doing so. His love transcends law’s arbitrary fetters and rests among palpable truths. Henry’s conscience, after connecting the pain of the Japanese people to the pain of Keiko, instructs Henry to help Keiko. Henry cannot bear to think of Keiko, a girl he loves, as a girl who must undergo the same emotional trauma experienced by the photographer in Japantown.

Similarly, Henry makes conscientious choices influenced by his love for Keiko, aware that they may create familial conflicts. Henry returns to his Canton Alley apartment after shopping for Keiko’s birthday. When he walks into his house, he sees that his father has discovered Keiko’s photos. At the climax of this quarrel, Henry’s father throws Keiko’s photos out the window. The images of Keiko and her family falling to the earth flash across Henry’s mind. Henry expresses his love for Keiko: He turned to his father. “ I’m leaving to get her photos. I told her I’d keep them for her—just until she gets back.” His father pointed to the door “ If you walk out that door you are no longer part of this family. You are not part of us anymore. Not a part of me.” Henry didn’t even hesitate. He touched the doorknob feeling the brass cold and hard in his hand. “ I am what you made me, Father.” He opened the heavy door. (185) Henry separates himself from his father and family and binds himself to Keiko and her family—a Chinese boy in a Japanese family,

analogous to the way that Henry grafts and nurtures his Ume tree—a Chinese tree in a Japanese Park. Henry makes this decision thoughtfully—he is conscientious: his senses are heightened and he perceives much. His mind notes the cold brass and the weight of the door. The weight of the door represents the gravity of Henry's choice. Henry's conscience urges him to make a life-changing decision.

Ford culminates the idea that one's experience instructs the conscience by depicting the reconciliation between Henry and his son. Henry's experience with his own father makes him conscious of how he carries on a relationship with Marty, his own son. Henry makes the connection between his behavior and his father's: "[H]e was his father's son, and he could be equally stubborn . . . His father was a horrible communicator. After all the time he'd rebelled against his father's wishes and his father's ways, Henry hated the fact that he wasn't that different from him at all—not where it mattered anyway" (209). Henry, aware of his father's faults, realizes his own. The faults in the relationship between Henry and his father are the same faults in the relationship between Henry and Marty. This reflection moves Henry to work toward mending the problem: " Henry hated being compared with his own father. In Marty's eyes, the plum hadn't fallen far from the tree . . . that's what I've taught by my example, Henry thought, realizing that having Marty help him in the basement might ease more than the physical burden" (84). Henry wants a good relationship with his son. Henry's conscience, longing for good experiences with Marty, urges him to act on experience.

The past that lives within Henry lives within humanity. Henry's struggle to reconcile the past by conscientiously shaping the future mirrors the struggle

of every man. Conscience does not act alone in molding outcomes; it needs an acolyte. Just as the conscience instructs the hands and mouth, something must instruct the conscience. Experience speaks to conscience.