



Gratz Insider, April 2014 - Story Continuation

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### **Randy Cohen on 'How to Be Good in the Real World'**

Randy Cohen began his career as a writer by submitting stories, essays and humor pieces to various publications. With self-effacing wit, he describes progress as “graduating from a form letter to a more personal rejection letter.” Acceptance letters eventually rolled in too, as Cohen’s pieces were published in *The New Yorker*, *Harpers* and *The Atlantic*.

In the mid-eighties, deciding to try his hand at something different, Cohen accepted a position on the writing staff of “Late Night with David Letterman.” In fact, he was among the writers responsible for creating Letterman’s signature bit, the “Top Ten List.”

Surprisingly, Cohen describes the work environment on “Late Night” as quite different from the pandemonium of creativity one might expect. “It was like civil service work,” Cohen jokes. “We got crummy coffee from a crummy coffeemaker, talked to our colleagues and then went into our offices to write.” Joking aside, Cohen expresses enormous respect for Letterman and for the well-run operation that produced “Late Night.”

In 1999, Cohen was selected to author a newly conceived column in *The New York Times Magazine*: “The Ethicist.” In this column, he responded to ethical dilemmas submitted by readers. During his 12 years as “The Ethicist,” Cohen somehow managed to blend engaging humor with profound moral reasoning in his column. He grappled with questions from across the spectrum of human behavior, including issues of marital infidelity, the treatment of animals, and conflicts between religious beliefs and secular rights.

Cohen was raised as a Reform Jew, but he always examined readers’ ethical questions through a secular lens, rather than a religious one. “I never took a position wildly at odds with my mother and with the kind of household I grew up in,” he confesses, however.

On May 1<sup>st</sup> at the Jeffrey B. Plevan Annual Event, Cohen will bring his professional experience to the Gratz community through a talk dubbed “How to Be Good in the Real World.” With characteristic humor and wit, he will discuss what he has learned from his work and what changes he has noticed in the moral landscape. During a lively Q & A, audience members are invited to raise questions about their own ethical dilemmas, challenges to Cohen’s conclusions and inquiries about any aspect of - what he refers to as - his “curious career.” If the interview for this article was a preview of what Cohen has planned for May 1<sup>st</sup>, “How to Be Good in the Real World” promises to be a great show.

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*The Jeffrey B. Plevan Annual Event, featuring Randy Cohen, will take place at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, May 1<sup>st</sup> at Har Zion Temple, 1500 Hagys Ford Road, Penn Valley, PA. For registration information, click [here](#).*