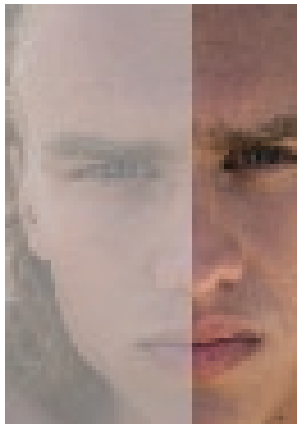
Lyle's Law of Invisibility

The girl studied the marvelous array of candy bars. There were big fat ones with nougat centers and a chocolate coating, thinner ones of pure milk chocolate, round ones with lots of coconut, and some that were crunchy and studded with peanuts. The girl selected two of the most decadent and headed for the checkout counter. As she walked, she carefully slipped one into the deep pocket of her jacket. She paid for the other bar and walked calmly out of the store, congratulating herself at just doubling her money and telling herself, "No one will ever know."

The university student couldn't believe his luck. He had gone to the seat he had been assigned for the test and found himself seated diagonally behind the best student in the class. And he could see her paper perfectly. The test was tough, but, with a few surreptitious glances at the desk ahead of him, the student was able to solve all the problems and get the answers he knew would be correct. He left the classroom with a smile on his face, confident of a good grade and telling himself, "No one will ever know."

The man and woman sat close together in the Manhattan restaurant booth. They had come to the city on business and, after the day's work was done, chosen this secluded bistro for their dinner. It had been a romantic evening, with soft lights, a bottle of fine wine, and gentle background music. As they left to go to the hotel, they knew the evening was about to get even better. The couple were in their forties and were married—just not to each other. But their homes were hundreds of miles away, and they were telling themselves, "No one will ever know."

Four individuals. Three different places and three different times in their lives. But they all have one thing in common; they believe they are invisible. And they probably are. Probably, no one will ever know what they have done. But who are these people *really*? We can get a clue from Lyle's Law of Invisibility: **Who you are is revealed by what you do when you are absolutely certain that no one will ever know you have done it.**



No one will ever know.

To be sure, when it comes to right and wrong, not everything is black or white, and there are clearly several shades of gray. Very few people, however, would say that any of these actions would be considered the right thing to do or even that circumstances may have been such that they can be excused. But why shouldn't these people do these things? Why, indeed?

There are various reasons for people not to do the wrong thing. Probably the simplest and most direct is the Law of the Land. Since at least the time of King Hammurabi of Babylon, almost 4,000 years ago, societies have established codes of conduct that govern the interactions of their citizens. Basically, these were created to help assure that the citizens were secure in their life and their property and to provide a mechanism for settling disputes. Such laws concentrate on wrong doing, providing a reasonably clear description of what the state considers to be wrong and often prescribing the penalty for doing the wrong thing. The citizen's situation is pretty clear: commit a wrong (crime), get caught, and suffer the consequences.

A somewhat more complex motivation comes from religious codes or commandments. It seems that most major religions have a set of commandments or principles that proscribe certain activities and prescribe others. These commandments are considered to be divinely inspired and are the divinity's way of contributing to human happiness and also, in most religions, assuring the loyalty of its adherents. Punishment can range from the trivial to the eternal. What is certain, however, is that you *will* be caught. Has there ever been a god or goddess that is not omniscient? It then becomes an issue of either being forgiven or of doing enough good things to balance out the bad things (sins).

A third motivator comes from what I call the clan commandments. These are the expectations, express or implied, of the groups to which an individual belongs. One such group is the family, both immediate and extended. The rules of family behavior are rarely written, but they are usually well understood. Codes of ethics are written by members

of a profession and are usually provided as guidance, leaving some room for interpretation. Of course, the keepers of the code are generally available to help with that interpretation, but the final decision is usually left to the individual. More specific are the honor codes adopted by some schools, usually something very close to "I will not lie, cheat, or steal or tolerate those who do." Pretty clear. A violator of the clan commandments faces a range of sanctions from experiencing the disappointment or condemnation of fellow members up to expulsion from the group.

". . . unto thine own self be true . . . ."

But now comes the clincher. If a person declines to do wrong for any of these reasons, what can be concluded about that person? Only that he doesn't want to be punished. Not too deep. We can't determine what kind of person he really is. We can determine this only by seeing what he does when he is absolutely certain that no one will ever know that he has done it.

But of course this is not about judging other people, an ungenerous activity at best. It is about judging yourself. You make dozens of decisions every day. What is the basis for those decisions? Do you obey the speed limit because you don't want to pay for a speeding ticket or because there are children around? On the other side of the coin, do you give to a charity because your name will be listed in the annual report or because you believe in what it is doing?

I hope this does not come off as a morality lecture. It is not so intended. My intention is to get each of us to consider what kind of person each of us really is and what kind we would like to be. It is particularly important for engineers because we often act independently and indeed find ourselves in situations where "no one will ever know." Then there is only one person to whom you must answer. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare said it very well.

> *". . . unto thine own self be true and it shall follow, as the day the night—thou can'st not then be false to any man."*

—**Lyle D. Feisel,** Ph.D., P.E., *Iowa Alpha '61*

NEW DIRECTOR OF ENG'G. FUTURES

Russell W. Pierce, *Washington Alpha '70,* was named Tau Beta Pi Director of Engineering Futures effective January 2009 to complete a term ending June 30, 2011. Russ is a former managing partner at Lively and Partners Consulting Network and information technology director for AT&T Wireless in Redmond, WA. Previously, he spent 15 years with Lockheed Martin at the John F. Kennedy Space Center. He joined Lockheed Missiles and Space Company in 1979 at the strategic weapons facility in Bangor, WA, after six years as a project engineer in applied electro-optics research with the Naval Weapons Center in China Lake, CA. Born in England, Russ spent four years in the U.S. Air Force and then earned his B.S. and M.S. degrees in electrical engineering from the University of Washington in 1970 and 1972 and his M.B.A. at Florida Institute of Technology in 1997. He has served as a ΤΒΠ Engineering Futures Facilitator since 1992, Director of Engineering Futures during 1999-2002, District 5 Director during 1995-2000, Executive Councillor in 2002-06, and member of the Financial Development Committee since 2007.

BRAIN TICKLERS

(Continued from page 45.)

prime number, whose birthday was the teacher referring to, and what anniversary was 2006? —Aziz S. Inan

Postal mail your answers to any or all of the Brain Ticklers to Jim Froula, Tau Beta Pi, P.O. Box 2697, Knoxville, TN 37901-2697, or email to *BrainTicklers@tbp.org* plain text (no HTML, no attachments). The cutoff date for entries to the Summer column is the appearance of the Fall BENT during early October. The method of solution is not necessary, unless you think it will be of interest to the judges. We also welcome any interesting new problems that may be suitable for use in the column. The Double Bonus is not graded. Jim will forward your entries to the judges, who are: **H.G. McIlvried III,** *PA Γ '53*; **D.A. Dechman,** *TX A '57*; **J.L. Bradshaw,** *PA A '82*; and the columnist for this issue, —**F.J. Tydeman,** *CA Δ '73*.