ARE WE MORE UNETHICAL TODAY?

Are we more unethical today than we use to be, or do we just *know more* about the bad things that have always happened? Is it just increased media attention, or have we really lost our way?

Almost daily I am asker questions like these—by reporters looking for a quick perspective on The lates headlines, by business executives repairing the damage of scandalous actions they didn't authorized or intend; by ordinary, disheartened citizens trying to understand how the best and brightest could betray our trust and their sacred elected office.

But, aren't our concerns about unethical overwrought?

Surely meanness, deceit and avarice have been with us for ever and, almost as surely, they will endure as long as the human species. And so will courage, love and compassion. The balance between good and evil, and between the vices and virtues in our individual lives, is constantly shifting. As individuals, we work out the balance by habits of thought and actions, by striving continually to be one kind of person rather than another. And our character is truly the work of a lifetime.

But a society is more than the sum of the character of its citizens.

Like the air we breathe, our society sustains us, not with oxygen but with wisdom—with the lessons learned by generations before, the more perspective to which everyone of us Contributes but no one of us fully achieves. Such wisdom in a society is captures and borne Across generations by its institutions—by family, religion, government and education.

It is these that now fail us, And this family is what troubles the reporters, the business Executive and the rest of us.

In some inchoate way we sense that things really *are* different now, that the balance is lost

And may not be restored. Our institutions decay and the moral memory of wisdom wanes,

Leaving us with the growing anxiety that if things are not worse now that they have been,

They soon shall be.

For Ethics at Work, this is Gary Edwards.