

What Does Integrity Mean in Your Life?

There is no doubt that C.S. Lewis was right when he wrote, "Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching." Morality, honesty, knowing right from wrong - who of us would argue that these are qualities of a person with integrity? And yet our faith tradition has always been a little uneasy with leaving it simply at that. When it comes to integrity, the Unitarian Universalist take has always been as much about wholeness as goodness. Embracing the many aspects of ourselves has been more of a concern than perfecting every last aspect of ourselves. Indeed, we resonate with Quaker theologian Parker Palmer who writes, "I now know myself to be a person of weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light. I now know that to be whole means to reject none of it but to embrace all of it." Yes, says our religion, keep working at making yourself better, but along the way please don't allow yourself to get so tangled up in perfection that you feel the need to hide those imperfect parts. This need to hide is what has always worried us UU's the most. Integrity is most surely about honesty, but the honesty that seems to matter the most is the ability to hold an honest view of oneself.

Which also involves enjoying that flawed self. When Palmer talks of "embracing it all" this is not a matter of somber resignation. There is a gladness involved. We can be whole without being perfect! To come to this realization is most surely the goal of any spiritual path.

And there is yet another sense in which integrity calls us to gladness. Here the poet Rainer Maria Rilke puts it best: "May what I do flow from me like a river, no forcing and no holding back, the way it is with children." Here the call of integrity is not "Be perfect" or "Be good" but "Be yourself!" Know your center. Know what makes you uniquely you. And live from that place! Forget the masks. Forget the "shoulds" and the "suppose tos." Just figure out what takes you to that place of deep gladness and to that remain true! This doesn't mean abandoning the task of "doing the right thing when no one is watching," says our faith; it just means that you will know what the right thing is when deep joy accompanies your choice.



Integrity and joy. They are companions on the spiritual journey. May we encounter them both more deeply this month.

"On some questions, Cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it polite?" And Vanity comes along and asks the question, "Is it popular?" But Conscience asks the question, "Is it right?" And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but we must do it because Conscience tells us it is right." Martin Luther King Jr.

Our Spiritual Exercise

Option A: Acknowledging our Quirks

Pick one thing that makes you distinctively you and then resolve to protect, celebrate or live into it for at least this month. Think of it as a “resolution to your integrity.” Consider where this distinctive characteristic comes from and who you choose to celebrate it.

Option B: What's The Big Deal about White Lies?

White lies regularly come up in conversations about integrity. Are they really that big of a deal? Spend this month figuring out the role they play in your life. Monitor when you use them. See what patterns emerge. Do you use them to protect the feelings of others? Or to hide something about yourself? Do they serve your sense of integrity or betray it? Come to your group ensure what you learned?



Option C: Your Personal Model of Integrity

We all have someone in our lives who shaped our sense of integrity significantly. Identify one or more people in your life who have modeled integrity for you. Think about what it was about the person that impressed you and the degree to which you reflect that characteristic in your own life.

Option D: Your Greatest Act of Integrity

All of us have it: that time in our life on the strength of our character stood out and we acted out of our deepest sense of what was morally right or most true to our core. Revisit and re-celebrate that moment. Spend some time reflecting on how that moment of high resolve not only brought you pride but challenge you to live up to it again and again.

Option E: A Personal Inventory

Many of us, but not all of us, have the capability to do more to live our ideals. It is hard to know when we have given enough to others and when we need to conserve, or enjoy our own resources be that time or money. Living with integrity would require that we make such decisions as conscious choices, acknowledging that we could do more, but choose not to. The alternative is to have our allocation of resources, one of the most important decisions we could make, become the result of an unconscious decision making process. How intentional are you in allocating your time and money?



Your Question



No need to treat these questions like “homework.” You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply find the one that “hooks” you most and let it lead you where you need to go.

1. **As a child or young adult, what did watching those around you teach you about integrity?** Were they positive or negative lessons? And maybe most importantly, how has that impacted you today, knowing that young ones around you are also watching you?
2. **Has your integrity grown?**
3. **Does integrity bring you joy? Or does it feel like work?**
4. One of our recommended quotes reads, “There are times in this harum-scarum world when figuring out the right thing to do is quite simple, but doing the right thing is simply impossible.” **Are you facing such a situation right now? As you struggle, are you being kind to yourself?**
5. In her poem, “Now I Become Myself,” May Sarton, writes, “Now I become myself. It’s taken time, many years and places; I have been dissolved and shaken, worn other people’s faces...” **Are you aware of wearing other people’s faces? What’s stopping you from taking them off?**
6. Parker Palmer writes, “I now know myself to be a person of weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light. I now know that to be whole means to reject none of it but to embrace all of it.” **What one thing could you embrace right now to feel more whole?**
7. **Is your workplace a place of integrity? If not, how have you learned to stay true to yourself in the midst of those pressures to do otherwise?**
8. **Have you raised your children to have integrity?**
9. **Does your marriage have integrity?**
10. **Do your friendships have integrity?**
11. **Does your spiritual life have integrity?**
12. Integrity requires that we determine right from wrong based on something other than social convention or religious doctrine. **Do our inhibitions prevent us from honestly exploring our own sexuality? To what degree is the suppression of human rights for GLBTQ individuals the result of a failure in our society to value the idea of honesty and sexual integrity?**



Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. They are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what integrity means in your life.

Wise Words

"I now know myself to be a person of weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light. I now know that to be whole means to reject none of it but to embrace all of it." Parker Palmer

"To be human is to become visible while carrying what is hidden as a gift to others. To remember the other world in this world is to live in your true inheritance." David Whyte, from his poem *"What To Remember When Waking"*

"Everyone makes mistakes, so being a person of integrity does not mean you haven't committed a moral or ethical violation, ever. It means having the strength of character to learn from those 'misbehaviors' and seek continual self-improvement." Eric Kail

"Before we can even embrace the notion of integrity, we need to develop the ability to intellectually wrestle with the urge to rationalize away our underlying faults and the related consequences." Eric Kail

"But there are times in this harum-scarum world when figuring out the right thing to do is quite simple, but doing the right thing is simply impossible..." Lemony Snicket, *Horseradish: Bitter Truths You Can't Avoid*

"I'm an Obliger, for sure! I do really well when other people are expecting me to do something, when I have a commitment with someone else ... but I tend to let myself off the hook if it's "only" a commitment to myself." Leo Babauta

"Return to the most human, nothing less will nourish the torn spirit, the bewildered heart, the angry mind." May Sarton

"You are only afraid if you are not in harmony with yourself." Hermann Hesse

"I believe in integrity. It's a belief that's tested in those gut-wrenching moments when conflicting values pull me in opposite directions. Back in the early 1980s, I was in a training session for mental health workers who were volunteering to provide counseling to cancer patients who had a terminal diagnosis. Each of us was given 16 index cards and asked to write on each the names of people, abilities, things, and values we hold dear. In the course of our imagined cancer, we had to surrender cards or somewhat abruptly have them taken from us. At the end [of the exercise] I had two cards: One read "Integrity" and the other read "My Family." How could I choose between these two; such a choice was unfair and impossible. My initial thought was that I would give up my integrity, because I love my daughters and would want their comfort at my death. But then, I would realize that dying without integrity might be worse."

From NPR's This I Believe

"In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading Presence of God, my heart whispers: Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in fair weather or in foul, in good times or in tempests, in the days when the darkness and the foe are nameless or familiar, I may not forget that to which my life is committed." Howard Thurman

"Whatever games are played with us, we must play no games with ourselves, but deal in our privacy with the last honesty and truth." Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Integrity is doing the right thing, even if nobody is watching."

Jim Stovall and C.S. Lewis

Articles

The Insufficiency of Honesty

Stephen L. Carter

(*Atlantic Monthly*, Feb. 1996, p.74-76)

A couple of years ago I began a university commencement address by telling the audience that I was going to talk about integrity. The crowd broke into applause. Applause! Just because they had heard the word "integrity;" that's how starved for it they were. They had no idea how I was using the word, or what I was going to say about integrity, or, indeed, whether I was for it or against it. But they knew they liked the idea of talking about it.

Very well, let us consider this word "integrity." Integrity is like the weather: everybody talks about it but nobody knows what to do about it. Integrity is that stuff that we always want more of. Some say that we need to return to the good old days when we had a lot more of it. Others say that we as a nation have never really had enough of it. Hardly anybody stops to explain exactly what we mean by it, or how we know it is a good thing, or why everybody needs to have the same amount of it. Indeed, the only trouble with integrity is that everybody who uses the word seems to mean something slightly different.

For instance, when I refer to integrity, do I mean simply "honesty"? The answer is no; although honesty is a virtue of importance, it is a different virtue from integrity. Let us, for simplicity, think of honesty as not lying; and let us further accept Sissela Bok's definition of a lie: "any intentionally deceptive message which *is stated*." Plainly, one cannot have integrity without being honest (although, as we shall see, the matter gets complicated), but one can certainly be honest and yet have little integrity.

When I refer to integrity, I have something very specific in mind. Integrity, as I will use the term, requires three steps: discerning what is right and what is wrong; acting on what you have discerned, even at personal cost; and saying openly that you are acting on your understanding of right and wrong. The first criterion captures the idea that integrity requires a degree of moral reflectiveness. The second brings in the ideal of a person of integrity as steadfast, a quality that includes keeping one's commitments. The third reminds us that a person of integrity can be trusted.

The first point to understand about the difference between honesty and integrity is that a person may be entirely honest without ever engaging in the hard work of discernment that integrity requires: she may tell us quite truthfully what she believes without ever taking the time to figure out whether what she believes is good and right and true. The problem may be as simple as someone's foolishly saying something that hurts a friend's feelings; a few moments of thought would have revealed the likelihood of the hurt and the lack of necessity for the comment. Or the problem may be more complex, as when a man who was raised from birth in a society that preaches racism states his belief in one race's inferiority as a fact, without ever really considering that perhaps this deeply held view is wrong. Certainly the racist is being honest - he is telling us what he actually thinks - but his honesty does not add up to integrity.



“Integrity is telling myself the truth. And honesty is telling the truth to other people.”
Spencer Johnson

Telling everything you know

A wonderful epigram sometimes attributed to the filmmaker Sam Goldwyn goes like this: "The most important thing in acting is honesty; once you learn to fake that, you're in." The point is that honesty can be something one *seems* to have. Without integrity, what passes for honesty often is nothing of the kind; it is fake honesty or it is honest but irrelevant and perhaps even immoral.



DON'T WORRY, DEAR. IF MY AFFAIRS WERE IN ORDER, I WOULDN'T RECOGNIZE THEM.

Consider an example. A man who has been married for fifty years confesses to his wife on his deathbed that he was unfaithful thirty-five years earlier. The dishonesty was killing his spirit, he says. Now he has cleared his conscience and is able to die in peace. The husband has been honest - sort of. He has certainly unburdened himself. And he has probably made his wife (soon to be his widow) quite miserable in the process, because even if she forgives him, she will not be able to remember him with quite the vivid image of love and loyalty that she had hoped for. Arranging his own emotional affairs to ease his transition to death, he has shifted to his wife the burden of confusion and pain, perhaps for the rest of her life. Moreover, he has attempted his honesty at the one time in his life when it carries no risk; acting in

accordance with what you think is right and risking no loss in the process is a rather thin and unadmirable form of honesty.

Besides, even though the husband has been honest in a sense, he has now twice been unfaithful to his wife: once thirty-five years ago, when he had his affair, and again when, nearing death, he decided that his own peace of mind was more important than hers. In trying to be honest he has violated his marriage vow by acting toward his wife not with love but with naked and perhaps even cruel self-interest.

As my mother used to say, you don't have to tell people everything you know. Lying and non-disclosure, as the law often recognizes, are not the same thing. Sometimes it is actually illegal to tell what you know, as, for example, in the disclosure of certain financial information by market insiders. Or it may be unethical, as when a lawyer reveals a confidence entrusted to her by a client. It may be simple bad manners, as in the case of a gratuitous comment to a colleague on his or her attire. And it may be subject to religious punishment, as when a Roman Catholic priest breaks the seal of the confessional - an offense that carries automatic excommunication.

In all the cases just mentioned, the problem with telling everything you know is that somebody else is harmed. Harm may not be the intention, but it is certainly the effect. Honesty is most laudable when we risk harm to ourselves; it becomes a good deal less so if we instead risk harm to others when there is no gain to anyone other than ourselves. Integrity may counsel keeping our secrets in order to spare the feelings of others. Sometimes, as in the example of the wayward husband, the reason we want to tell what we know is precisely to shift our pain onto somebody else - a course of action dictated less by integrity than by self-interest. Fortunately, integrity and self-interest often coincide, as when a politician of integrity is rewarded with our votes. But often they do not, and it is at those moments that our integrity is truly tested.

Error

Another reason that honesty alone is no substitute for integrity is that if forthrightness is not preceded by discernment, it may result in the expression of an incorrect moral

"Whatever games are played with us, we must play no games with ourselves, but deal in our privacy with the last honesty and truth." Ralph Waldo Emerson

judgment. In other words, I may be honest about what I believe, but if I have never tested my beliefs, I may be wrong. And here I mean "wrong" in a particular sense: the proposition in question is wrong if I would change my mind about it after hard moral reflection.

Consider this example. Having been taught all his life that women are not as smart as men, a manager gives the women on his staff less-challenging assignments than he gives the men. He does this, he believes, for their own benefit: he does not want them to fail, and he believes that they will if he gives them tougher assignments. Moreover, when one of the women on his staff does poor work, he does not berate her as harshly as he would a man, because he expects nothing more. And he claims to be acting with integrity because he is acting according to his own deepest beliefs.

The manager fails the most basic test of integrity. The question is not whether his actions are consistent with what he most deeply believes, but whether he has done the hard work of discerning whether what he most deeply believes is right. The manager has not taken this harder step.

Moreover, even within the universe that the manager has constructed for himself, he is not acting with integrity. Although he is obviously wrong to think that the women on his staff are not as good as the men, not justifying applying different doing he betrays both his employees. The problem that enormous one in our practical dialogue that makes democracy because of our tendency to cling not examined them. As Jean borrowing from John Courtney fractured and contentious that *disagreement*. Our refusal to



even were he right, that would standards to their work. By so obligation to the institution that manager to evaluate his the manager faces is an politics, where having the work can seem impossible to our views even when we have Bethke Elshtain has said, Murray, our politics are so we often cannot even reach look closely at our own most

cherished principles is surely a large part of the reason. Socrates thought the unexamined life not worth living. But the unhappy truth is that few of us actually have the time for constant reflection on our views - on public or private morality. Examine them we must, however, or we will never know whether we might be wrong.

None of this should be taken to mean that integrity as I have described it presupposes a single correct truth. If, for example, your integrity-guided search tells you that affirmative action is wrong, and my integrity-guided search tells me that affirmative action is right, we need not conclude that one of us lacks integrity. As it happens, I believe, both as a Christian and as a secular citizen who struggles toward moral understanding, that we *can* find true and sound answers to our moral questions. But I do not pretend to have found very many of them, nor is an exposition of them my purpose here.

It is the case not that there aren't any right answers but that, given human fallibility, we need to be careful in assuming that we have found them. However, today's political talk about how it is wrong for the government to impose one person's morality on somebody else is just mindless chatter. *Every* law imposes one person's morality on somebody else, because law has only two functions: to tell people to do what they would rather not or to forbid them to do what they would.

And if the surveys can be believed, there is far more moral agreement in America than we sometimes allow ourselves to think. One of the reasons that character education for young people makes so much sense to so many people is precisely that there seems to be a

“May what I do flow from me like a river, no forcing and no holding back, the way it is with children.”
Rainer Maria Rilke

core set of moral understandings - we might call them the American Core - that most of us accept. Some of the virtues in this American Core are, one hopes, relatively noncontroversial. About 500 American communities have signed on to Michael Josephson's program to emphasize the "six pillars" of good character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, caring, fairness, and citizenship. These virtues might lead to a similarly noncontroversial set of political values: having an honest regard for ourselves and others, protecting freedom of thought and religious belief, and refusing to steal or murder.

Honesty and competing responsibilities

A further problem with too great an exaltation of honesty is that it may allow us to escape responsibilities that morality bids us bear. If honesty is substituted for integrity, one might think that if I say I am not planning to fulfill a duty, I need not fulfill it. But it would be a peculiar morality indeed that granted us the right to avoid our moral responsibilities simply by stating our intention to ignore them. Integrity does not permit such an easy escape.

Consider an example. Before engaging in sex with a woman, her lover tells her that if she gets pregnant, it is her problem, not his. She says that she understands. In due course she does wind up pregnant. If we believe, as I hope we do, that the man would ordinarily have a moral responsibility toward both the child he will have helped to bring into the world and the child's mother, then his honest statement of what he intends does not spare him that responsibility.

This vision of responsibility assumes that not all moral obligations stem from consent or from a stated intention. The linking of obligations to promises is a rather modern and perhaps uniquely Western way of looking at life, and perhaps a luxury that only the well-to-do can afford. As Fred and Shulamit Korn (a philosopher and an anthropologist) have pointed out, "If one looks at ethnographic accounts of other societies, one finds that, while obligations everywhere play a crucial role in social life, promising is not preeminent among the sources of obligation and is not even mentioned by most anthropologists." The Korns have made a study of Tonga, where promises are virtually unknown but the social order is remarkably stable. If life without any promises seems extreme, we Americans sometimes go too far the other way, parsing not only our contracts but even our marriage vows in order to discover the absolute minimum obligation that we have to others as a result of our promises.

That some societies in the world have worked out evidently functional structures of obligation without the need for promise or consent does not tell us what we should do. But it serves as a reminder of the basic proposition that our existence in civil society creates a set of mutual responsibilities that philosophers used to capture in the fiction of the social contract. Nowadays, here in America, people seem to spend their time thinking of even cleverer ways to avoid their obligations, instead of doing what integrity commands and fulfilling them. And all too often honesty is their excuse.

Two More Articles

Seeing Ourselves in the Hunger Games

by Cynthia Landrum

How do we live with integrity amidst our own dystopian future?

<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/220173.shtml>

Against Innocence

by Rosemary Bray McNatt

Does our political integrity prevent us from compromise?

<http://www.uuworld.org/2003/06/feature2.html>

Videos and Online

The Calm Within

<http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=2568>

Dewey Bozella was locked up for 26 years for a crime he did not commit. This story is about one man's journey to reclaim his life and hold on to his integrity against all odds.

A Christopher Hitchens Memorial

<http://www.upworthy.com/people-were-outraged-by-what-he-said-his-entire-life-but-right-before-he-died-he-was-still-at-it?c=reccon2>

"Deception"

<http://www.radiolab.org/2008/mar/10/>

Lies, liars, and lie catchers. This hour of Radiolab asks if it's possible for anyone to lead a life without deception. We consult a cast of characters, from pathological liars to lying snakes to drunken psychiatrists, to try and understand the strange power of lying to yourself and others.

Books

A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life by Parker Palmer

On Lies, Secrets and Silence, Selected Prose by Adrienne Rich

<http://www.brainpickings.org/2013/07/02/adrienne-rich-honorable-human-relationship/>

Books & Movies for Young Souls

Books:

The Empty Pot by Demi

The Day the Crayons Quit

by Drew Daywalt

Ruthie and the (not so) Teeny Tiny Lie

by Laura Rankin

The Berenstain Bears and the Truth

by Stan and Jan Berenstain

Dear Mr. Rosenwald

by Carole Weatherford

The Story of the Jumping Mouse

by John Steptoe

The Three Questions by Jon J. Muth

Movies:

Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory

Mary Poppins

The Miracle Worker

Brave

Frozen



Movies

Locke

To Kill A Mockingbird

Pleasantville

Constant Gardener

Chocolate

Milk (Check out the UUA study guide: <http://www.uua.org/lgbtq/discuss/125446.shtml>)

The Shawshank Redemption

On The Waterfront

The Mission

Dead Poets Society

Thank You For Smoking

Get Ready for December's Theme: Wonder!