

Integrity—The Vital Factor

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We are told that integrity is what gives our lives and Life meaning. We are told that it provides us with a sense of dignity and is the core of our personal power, growth and happiness. We “sense” this “truth” of integrity’s importance. We have a “feel” for its qualities. We “know” we would be better off with more of it in our lives. Yet how often do we ignore or justify breaches of integrity—our own and others.

It seems as though we live in a world that largely views integrity as inconvenient, impractical and/ or naïve. However, the magnitude and crassness of recent corporate scandals seem to have brought, quite dramatically, to public awareness the extent and cost of integrity’s lack in society. The scandals have also made poignantly clear that broad-scale individual acquiescence to and toleration of “questionable” actions, allows, if not directly contributes to, these behaviors and costly results.

If we do, in fact, desire more integrity in our lives, what then must we do to manifest it? To use an analogy, author and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Thich Nhat Hahn, when speaking of peace said, “There is no way to peace; peace, itself, is the way.” To paraphrase, *integrity itself is the way*. In other words, if we want more integrity in our lives, we must act with more integrity.

But how do we live and model integrity when few of us seem to understand or appreciate the real cost of its lack; can state with precision what integrity is; or differentiate it from morals, principles, or character? We sense its importance but have trouble clearly defining it.

Dictionaries provide little help, as they tend to define related concepts in terms of each other. We need to take a deeper look at this elusive factor—what it actually is, its qualities, aspects, and impact. Then we will be in a better position to have integrity *itself* be the way.

What Is Integrity?

Integrity is a state of responsible presence—specifically being responsible in the moment. Grounded by core values and an inner sense of what is right—the manifestations of emotional maturity—people of integrity take responsible action *spontaneously*. If it is not spontaneous, the action is not one of integrity but of practicality, influenced by what is deemed socially or politically preferable.

If Great Man avoids Manhood-at-its best, how can we call him such? Great Man does not flee Manhood-at-its-best even for the duration of a meal. Even in haste he must abide by it; even in the most dire straits he must abide by it. —Confucius

There are no shades of gray with integrity. We may be generally people of integrity, but on a particular subject at a particular time, we either have it or we do not. People of integrity seldom talk about it. They just have it, are it, and *do* it.

Integrity is wholeness, being centered and grounded in who we are, at one with ourselves and our environment. It's that wholeness that makes us feel whole and provides the willingness, ability, poise, presence and certainty to deal with the *entirety* of what is. Because of that unity it includes and embraces fear and thus can transform and utilize its energy. When we have integrity, we do not feel dispersed or fragmented—we feel whole, confident, and secure. It is that all-inclusive wholeness that gives our lives depth, dimension, expanded choice, and greater richness.

Every time we compromise our integrity we sacrifice a bit of our selves. The cost is higher than we think. At some level we sense our dishonesty and we suffer, feeling empty, separate, and alone as we play games in a plastic reality that increasingly seems to have little purpose.

Struggling to fill that void, we place increasingly “higher” demands on ourselves and also project them onto others. Those “performances” and “successes,” in whatever form, no matter how extraordinary, *are never enough*.

We wind up feeling inadequate and unfulfilled, regardless of social, political, or financial achievements. Without integrity, we can never feel complete, truly content, satisfied, or happy with ourselves, our relationships, our environment, or with life.

Integrity is a defining vibration. It is a specific energy, and a very positive one at that. When that vibration, that frequency, is added to any system; it necessarily creates a new, more positive resonance.

Everything we do, or not do, has impact. Acting with integrity always has a positive, expansive, and survival vibration and impact. Lack of integrity always has a negative, contracting, and contra-survival vibration and impact. Realize, however, that that impact, positive or negative, may not be immediately obvious as measured by the criteria of the current consensus. Nevertheless, be assured that that impact will manifest.

Integrity is like a smooth stone thrown into a still pond. The simple presence of integrity produces a ripple effect that has impact far beyond the immediate contact point.

Integrity is totally individual and personal. Integrity is not something anyone can give you or take from you—you either have it or you do not. It has nothing to do with popularity or doing that which is deemed politically or socially correct. It's something you have to discover within yourself.

Integrity and morals are often confused. Morals are social codes of acceptable behavior within a particular group. Individuals can be very responsible and act with total integrity but at the same time may violate the social codes of the group to which they belong, especially if their action is considered contrary to the political or social status quo.

Integrity is about you, personally, standing tall and, often, standing alone. In a world frequently lacking in integrity, acting with integrity can temporarily result in being ostracized and, thus, can appear to be quite lonely.

Because a fundamental human fear is the fear of being alone, real integrity is rare in a world full of insecure people doing things in order to be “liked” or “accepted.” Therefore, *integrity demands and develops courage*. Real courage is facing our fears and still acting responsibly.

Integrity is a conscious choice—our conscious choice. Every situation we find ourselves in involves choice of some kind. Will we resist change? Will we withdraw from a confrontation?

Will we celebrate a colleague's achievement even though he or she may not celebrate ours? Will we ask the advice of a coworker, even if it means admitting we do not know the answer? Whether we actively participate in and contribute to a specific situation or life is *our* individual choice.

Even when confronted with difficult situations not of our own making, we can choose how to respond. We may try to convince the world and ourselves otherwise, but at some level we recognize the truth: only we are responsible for our words and actions. Integrity is a conscious choice. Lacking integrity is a conscious choice. It is our choice and depends on nothing and no one except us.

With integrity, we responsibly look at how we created, contributed to, or allowed a situation—positive or negative—to occur. We honestly own our part of it—no more, no less—and do what we can to improve a less-than-optimal situation without blame, self-pity, or regret. At the same time, although we can model this quality and encourage others to take responsibility for themselves, we cannot take responsibility for them.

Taking responsibility for another capable adult creates codependency, which manifests and prolongs a victim stance that always generates self-pity and resentment within both parties. When we have integrity, we recognize that we are responsible for our own words and actions and we respect the rights of others to make different choices.

People with integrity have positive control over their lives and over the events in their lives. They have a clarity and certainty about what they want and will allow. They do not see life as “happening to them” but rather they make life happen. When we are not true to ourselves, we are open to being controlled or manipulated by others. Without integrity, control (the ability to start, change and stop things under one's own determinism) becomes a huge issue, and its distorted form becomes a need to manipulate people, things, or situations, either overtly or covertly.

True integrity is spontaneously choosing to act on our values and spontaneously taking responsibility for the consequences of those choices. Either we choose to grow and become more of who we are, or we choose to contract, becoming less and less of what we were meant to be.

Each day we choose between actions that lead to fulfillment and peace and those that lead to self-defeat and despair. The power of one choice can completely and instantaneously change our lives.

Integrity is at the very heart of who we are. We cannot create a sustainable reality that exceeds the fundamental image we have of ourselves. In other words, we make choices that naturally resonate with what we believe about ourselves. If we see ourselves as unimportant and incapable, it is impossible for us to make constructive, expansive decisions with any confidence.

Alternately, if we have a healthy, positive sense of ourselves, our decisions, actions, and results naturally reflect this self-image. When we try to make decisions that are at odds with our actual self-image, the outcome will usually be short-lived, reflecting this dissonance. We will unconsciously create or allow circumstances that force our reality to align with our core self-image.

If our goal or achievement is beyond our core self-image, we will sabotage it. This is a reason why so many people who have achieved great success end up destroying what they have built. It is also the reason why so many who appear to be “on the verge of success” somehow muck

it up. Despite all our bluster to the contrary, without integrity we cannot have a positive self-image.

Integrity is the bedrock and the cement of our purpose, principles, and character. From this foundation we develop a sense of value and purpose, out of which comes a vision of what could be. In striving for this ideal vision, we become more of who we truly are. Focusing on vision helps us see possibilities, and enables us to plan with purpose and intention. Without the cement of integrity, we are left distracted, unclear about what to do, ineffective in action, and weighed down by negativity.

Our values, purpose, and vision shape our principles. Principles, in this sense, are our self-chosen boundaries of behavior—of what we will and will not do in maintaining our integrity and moving toward our vision. They provide the framework for our actions.

Our character is the degree to which we adhere to our principles. When we are clear about our principles, we can *respond* rather than *react* to any situation, including a hostile or manipulative one. We can play the game without getting caught up in it. If we are not clear about our principles, we tend to *react* and feel controlled by external sources. We become an effect rather than a cause of the game.

Expediency is often used as a justification for violating or ignoring our principles. We may talk of ideals and principles, but if we are not true to them and do not act on them, no matter how much we talk about them, we are not individuals of character or principle and we will not move forward in realizing our vision. When we have integrity, we spontaneously do the right thing based on values and principles that we consciously own—not on anything “imposed” from the outside.

There is no substitute for integrity. Without the wholeness of integrity as our bedrock, we have no substantive sense of purpose, no noble vision, no clear principles of behavior, and no character.

People without integrity feel a void and attempt to fill it with substitute status symbols (i.e., money, position, and power). This hunger is *always* insatiable. Without integrity, episodes of frustration, confusion, denial, and pretense increase. Integrity is the mortar that keeps our ideals, principles, and character aligned and in place.

Integrity is integral to love, loving, and being loved. Love is about caring, responding, and respecting ourselves and others with honesty and a depth of passion and compassion. Authentic love is the essence of integrity.

“Love,” without integrity, manifests as shallow “relationships” and co-dependencies rife with dishonesty, deceit, invalidation, broken agreements, and generally abusive behavior. Without integrity there is no real love, only glib, shallow pretenses of it.

Qualities That Distinguish People Of Integrity

Qualities that accompany integrity include presence, honesty, humility, and discernment to name a few. Let’s explore some of these qualities in greater detail.

Men and women of integrity exude presence; they are able to be attentive and in the moment rather than distant and distracted. This quality is particularly telling as it indicates one’s ability to *make responsible choices spontaneously*. You cannot be spontaneous without being

in the moment.

People of integrity are honest, authentic, and trustworthy. They are unafraid to look at themselves honestly, can recognize shortcomings in themselves, and are willing to change. They are open to learning new ideas and trying new ways of doing things. They are more able to see others as they truly are and are open to learning and growing. In contrast, people lacking integrity tend to be full of judgment and preconceived ideas, unwilling to be questioned. Where lack of humility creates tension and fear in others, true authenticity inspires confidence and trust. It is authenticity that is the basis of trust.

People of integrity have humility, dignity, discernment, and wisdom.

Humility—the willingness to look at each moment afresh without the filters of fixed ideas or preconceived notions. Only with humility are we fully able to discern, differentiate, evaluate, and reach conclusions that are relatively clear of biases, prejudices, and fixed ideas. Only with humility are we able to truly expand our awareness and sensitivities. Only with humility can we grow.

Humility is the opposite of “being judgmental.” Judgments, *in this sense*, are conclusions reached based on *previously* formed ideas devoid of any real discernment or evaluation of the current situation. They are reactive conclusions asserted *without* present-time observation.

Dignity—*true* respect for others and ourselves. People of integrity consciously respect the dignity of others. They do so while at the same time not tolerating dysfunctional/hurtful behavior. Lack of respect for individual human dignity breeds indifference, intolerance, contempt, abuse, and injustice. People lacking integrity not only have a lack of respect for others but also for themselves. Manifestations of low self-worth and low self-esteem are signs that integrity is lacking.

Discernment—the ability to distinguish, recognize, and prioritize clearly without prejudice or bias. Only with presence, humility, honesty, and respect for ourselves and others can discernment be optimized.

Wisdom—the ability to see and act on the big picture without losing sight of the current picture; the ability to see and act beyond logic and reason without losing sight of logic and reason.

People of integrity are compassionate. Because of the above characteristics, people of integrity are sensitive to the needs, wants, and desires of others. Because they have the courage to face their own fears and suffering, they can recognize, understand, and be compassionate about the suffering of others while at the same time refrain from rewarding victimhood or creating dependencies.

People of integrity also have dominion and enjoy life.

Dominion—power and the ability to share that power with respect and honor. Its opposite is domination or “power over.”

Enjoyment of Life—appreciating and enjoying what *is*. Seeing the humor in life. Appreciating its aesthetics and nuances. Being responsible without being serious—having fun. People of integrity have a passion for life.

Assessing The Strength Of Our Integrity

How do we assess our integrity? We need to first look at what we are actually doing and assess whether it is responsible action that positively contributes to our perceived ideal. The steps to getting there are the same as the qualities of being there. If we want our environment to be a more responsible one, we need to be more responsible in the moment. If we want more love in our life, we need to be more loving. If we want to be heard more, we need to listen more. In other words, how are we at doing what we say we want?

To the degree we wait for someone else to do what we want done, we complain (overtly or covertly). What are your chronic complaints? Complaining is a symptom of integrity's lack. Look where your complaints lie and confront how you've been "passing the buck." You will find not one but two patterns that you do virtually automatically. The first, how you "pass the buck." The second is how you rationalize doing so.

Secondly, we need to assess our follow-through. Integrity is about following through, with intention, on our stated or implied promises. It is about *not* promising what we do not intend to follow up on or deliver. It is about ending, with intention, excuses, rationalizations, and self-defined justifications. It is about choosing honesty over political expediency.

When Integrity Is Absent: Recognizing The Signs

It's important not to confuse integrity and its *qualities* with the *abilities* of charisma, eloquence, charm, organization, efficiency, and/or bottom-line performance. These certainly are desirable abilities and may be very important, sometimes critical, but none-the-less are junior to the fundamental and senior qualities of integrity.

When integrity is not a primary standard for all behaviors, not highly valued for its own sake, when it becomes thought of as impractical or unimportant, when it becomes a joke or "non-issue," we can observe the following well-rationalized manifestations:

- Authenticity and candor is criticized as "naïve."
- "Looking good" becomes more important than being honest.
- Short-term "performance" increasingly becomes more important than long-term sustainability.
- Competition becomes redefined as being "beating the other guy" rather than a mechanism to bring forth our best.
- Respect for human dignity is ignored and shrinks to "taking care of me and only me."
- Vitality and productivity are replaced with pretense and busywork.
- Compromise degenerates into mediocrity rather than flourishing as a synergy of expanded viewpoints.
- Striving for excellence is replaced with insatiable demands for perfection.
- Vision and leadership wither to a focus on how to manage bureaucracy and "issues."
- Compassion becomes "too expensive," or "not our business."
- Polls are used to pander for votes rather than to better understand viewpoints and needs to more effectively communicate, educate, and lead.
- "Loyalty" becomes non-discerning support rather than forthright devil's advocacy.
- The rule of law is used to subvert justice rather than to aid it.

Without integrity, our self-image and self-esteem become dependent on "what other people think." When that happens, we inevitably feel inadequate. We expend enormous amounts

of energy trying to compensate for that feeling of inadequacy and pretend otherwise.

Our considerations of success shift from personal growth and contribution to insatiable measures of being “better than.” We wind up deceiving ourselves as well as others. Our decisions and actions become limited, mechanical, and trite. Our self-confidence degenerates into arrogance or apathy, and our self-respect evaporates.

Without integrity, our character is replaced with political expedience. Concerns about money, “power,” and status dominate and control our actions and lives. Our compassion for and appreciation of the dignity of every human being deteriorates into insincere, self-centered, closed, and unloving attitudes and behaviors.

Without integrity, our dreams and vision lose their compelling energy. Our goals become mere mechanical objectives without power, and our passion for life disintegrates into a compulsive, anxiety-ridden, insatiable need for success or simply deteriorates and dies.

As we view contemporary society, we observe greed, pretense, denials, and lies. We sense the underlying feelings of powerlessness and loss of dignity. We observe the compensations often “assisted” by alcohol, drugs, or overwork. We see how lack of integrity precludes authenticity and thus destroys credibility and trust and devastates relationships and security.

We notice many of our contemporaries who are chronically angry, afraid, defensive, depressed, despairing, apathetic, shallow, “workaholic,” “burned out,” wanting to “drop out,” or who are “leading lives of quiet desperation.” In fact, what we are noticing are all symptoms of a lack of integrity.

Without integrity we are unhappy and far, far less than we could be. When integrity ceases to be a primary standard, the true costs are beyond measure. *Developing social skills and bottom-line abilities can be an important adjunct to, but never a replacement for, acting with integrity.*

Fuel For Powerful Change

Whenever we feel powerless, we need to find where we have violated our sense of personal integrity and correct it. If we feel “caught in the game,” or that “there is nothing we can do about it,” or we “have to stoop to their level to survive,” then realize that all of those feelings are additional symptoms and messages indicating a lack of integrity. In this condition, our ability to view other possibilities is severely restricted. We feel powerless.

Correspondingly, we will blame, deny, feel self-pity, and act victimized. Instead of being responsible, we will be irresponsible. We will justify, rationalize, or attempt to explain away even our most blatant lack of responsibility and *self-imposed* limitations.

People with integrity have a clear, unshakable presence and determination to do what responsibly needs to be done. They do not succumb to playing manipulative games because “that is the game out there.” They do not whine, justify, or say they had no other choice.

If they leave a position, they do so because they choose to, not out of anger, frustration, fear, grief, or apathy, but out of a preference based on recognition of responsibility. They have a sense of certainty and self-confidence. They can and often do have strong opinions and are willing to express them when it is helpful to do so. They have a certainty and self-confidence that is not self-righteousness or arrogance.

Self-righteousness and arrogance, like false power, are compensations born of fear, and they are always used to make ourselves right and others wrong. When we act with integrity, the resulting level of poised certainty transcends any and all current consensus games and standards. Thus, by its very presence, integrity, even without any apparent action itself, is power and creates positive change.

Gandhi's integrity, for example, so empowered him that he had far greater impact than any of the "powerful" politicians of his time. That influence even transcended the hatred of vastly different cultural and religious persuasions.

Likewise, leaders are poised to have far greater impact on others and their organization when they are motivated by and act out of integrity. Integrity provides powerful fuel for appropriate and responsible change.

Putting Integrity Into Practice

Before we can regain or revive our integrity or really change anything, we first have to be willing to honestly face and recognize when we are not living with integrity. This can be hard to look at. We may struggle with self-pity or be inclined to blame others. Blame is a way of projecting our own denials, and it precludes real assessment of responsibility, thus closing the door on constructive decisions and actions.

The first step is to *recognize* when integrity is missing. Where in our life have we been fearful, anxious, angry, or out of balance? These feelings may be indicators of moments when we struggled with doing the right thing and acting with integrity.

Second, we need to take responsibility—and own that we and only we are responsible for our choices, decisions, and actions. We need to fully own what we have created, allowed, or contributed to the situation or condition we find ourselves in.

Third, we need to *forgive* ourselves for having messed up. Maybe we could have done something better, more elegantly, more lovingly, more honestly, or with more courage, but we did not. Wallowing in self-pity and regret never does anything except keep us stuck in the muck. We need to let it go and realize we did the best we could with the awareness and resources we had at the time. We need to drop the self-pity, make the appropriate amends to the best we honestly can, and forgive ourselves. If we do not, we cannot move on to the last step.

Finally, we need to change. Real change means learning from our mistakes *and doing something different*. Such change may be difficult if not impossible to see *now*, but if we *honestly* and thoughtfully work through the first three steps, then we *will* know what to do to bring about true change and act with integrity.

If we are honestly willing to confront our confusions, doubts, and fears, and if we are willing to take action, make mistakes, and view those mistakes as learning opportunities, then progress is not only possible but assured. In this sense, practice *does* make perfect.

Summary

Integrity—More Than A Factor

Integrity is the spontaneous, conscious assumption of *personal* responsibility. It is the wholeness that gives us dimension and makes us real. It is the frequency that creates a positive transforming resonance.

It is our integrity that allows us an awareness of possibilities that would otherwise seem unfathomable. It puts us in touch with our true power and unlimited potential. It provides a calm, certain, unstoppable self-confidence and the courage to face our confusions, doubts, and fears and do what responsibly needs to be done.

It is integrity that generates our ideals and principles and produces our character. It is what focuses and develops our attention, intention, actions, and a self-image that aligns with and supports those ideals and principles.

Integrity is sensitive to, but transcends, moral codes and considerations of limitations. It precludes blame, regret, denial, and self-pity. It creates and demands in us an appreciation of and passion for human dignity. Integrity is the basis of our dignity, grace, and sense of personal value. It manifests profound presence. It assures our honesty, our authenticity, and our trustworthiness.

It is integrity that allows love and happiness into our lives. It is integrity that gives meaning to life. Without integrity we are not whole. With integrity we are responsible, loving, caring, creative, courageous, and empowered.

There is nothing more important than our integrity. Integrity is more than an important factor.
Personal integrity is *the vital factor!*

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