

Integrity

Winton Beaven

In the operating room of a great hospital, a young nurse had her first day of full responsibility. "You've removed 11 sponges, doctor," she said to the surgeon. "We used 12."

"I've removed them all," the doctor declared. "We'll close the incision now."

"No," the nurse objected. "We used 12."

"I'll take the responsibility," the surgeon said grimly. "Suture!"

"You can't do that!" blazed the nurse. "Think of the patient!"

The doctor smiled, then showed the nurse the 12th sponge. "You'll do," he said. He had been testing her for integrity—and she had it.¹

Integrity—the lost word, the missing ingredient of our society; a quality without which our very existence as a society is threatened.

I grew up in a rural community in upstate New York. My grandfather was a farmer. There were few written contracts. Business was done with a handshake. "A man's word was his bond," my grandfather said. If you agreed to do something, you did it, no matter what else happened.

This kind of commitment is sorely needed in our world today, where looking good and garnering favorable publicity is a universal goal. We are told repeatedly that "image" is everything.

Well, image isn't everything. Integrity is much more important. Without constant attention it tends to wither.

What is integrity, anyway?

It's very difficult to define. There really isn't an adequate synonym in the English language. We know it when we see it, but like the word "love" we have dif-

ficulty explaining it. It means doing what you believe to be right, having the strength of conviction that enables you to be forthright and honest. It is avoiding deception and expediency. It is being trustworthy and sincere. It means being the same person to everyone—and more.

Most integrity in life and society is so quiet and personal as to be unobserved. The motorist who nicks a fender in a parking lot and leaves a note with his name and address on the windshield; the bank patron who gets an extra \$20 bill in change, to which he is not entitled, and who quickly returns it; the parent, who when getting an unpleasant phone call, does *not* say to her son, "Tell them I'm not home." All of these incidents, and hundreds more, are little slices of integrity in practice and at work.

Integrity is not something that is mastered for a lifetime. It can't be stored or bottled. It is a living virtue constantly tested. There is no final examination as long as one lives. Its practice increases its longevity.

A lifetime of integrity can be lost in a moment. Oftimes the penalty is high. Our recent social scene is littered with "Watergate" and "Irangate"; with television ministers without shame or character; with financiers wildly successful, then revealed as grossly dishonest. Integrity once lost is difficult to regain. Often religious conversion seems the only way back, and that can create great skepticism.

Integrity is tied to personal value systems, which develop over one's lifetime. We probably don't examine our own values *enough*, and consequently fall into the most dangerous delusion of all—

self-delusion.

The Christian value system uniformly teaches that, after loyalty to God, our family is of primary importance and should take precedence over most other values, including career and job. Yet how many of us give lip service to that value while blatantly violating it? Neglect of family is omnipresent while we curry success, yet few do anything significant about it.

I have a friend whose integrity was demonstrated to me and countless others some years ago. He was a minister, a church worker, a good husband, a successful leader in his field. But like many church workers he was not omnipresent; he was often "gone." His adolescent sons began to attract more and more attention by anti-social behavior until the police became involved. At that point, he went for counseling to deal with his family problem. The counseling indicated that the greatest need of the sons was a "present" father. Within weeks the father resigned his position, "gave up his career," and moved the family to a totally different environment.

I'm happy to tell you that the move was successful, but even if it had failed, it would have demonstrated great integrity. This man practiced what he preached, accepted responsibility, and kept a commitment.

I am reminded of integrity every day when I go to work. I have an office in the Charles F. Kettering Memorial Hospital. Every day I pass the George Nelson Auditorium and I am reminded that this institution was created on the principle of integrity.

First of all there was the in-

tegrity of Eugene Kettering, engineer son of the great inventor, Charles F. Kettering. He was determined to build a memorial to his late father that would be the highest quality institution possible, a leader in the health care field. When he chose to invite the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be a partner in that endeavor, the church sent George Nelson, superintendent of the Glendale Hospital, to be the founding developer and co-creator of the project.

These two quite different men quickly found a common denominator. It was a devotion to honor and quality, to doing things well, not for applause or recognition, but because they should be done right. A bond of trust quickly developed.

George Nelson had been on the job only a few weeks when Mr. Kettering came by his planning office. He carried a check, which he casually tossed on the desk with the words, "George, I opened an account at _____ bank for you. Here's a deposit. There's more when that is gone." Mr. Nelson thanked him and continued his work. At lunch time he got up from his desk, picked up the check, and looked at it for the first time. The check was for \$1.25 million! and in his name.

Many years later, not long before Mr. Kettering died, Mr. Nelson asked Eugene Kettering why, on such brief acquaintance, he had entrusted him with such a check. Mr. Kettering responded, "George, I trust you even more

than I trust myself."

A life of integrity is the ideal, but everyone occasionally has lapses. Improving on our integrity means pursuing the truth wherever and whenever we find it, standing our ground even if no one else follows. It means not accepting the status quo, avoiding the small lie, not repeating the unsubstantiated rumor. It means giving anonymously, making and keeping commitments, and accepting responsibility.

Improving our integrity means making the telephone call we have been avoiding, striving for fidelity in relationships, and associating with others of high integrity.

A person's integrity inspires others around him or her. Raising our children in the spirit of integrity helps them function honorably in society. Professional integrity often leads to prosperity.

A few months ago I looked at the front tires on my car and decided I needed new ones. I went to an established shop near home and inquired about tires, prices, and other details. The co-owner, who was caring for me, said, "Let me look at your tires," so I escorted him to the car. After a brief inspection he said, "I'd like to sell you some tires, but you don't really need them. If we rotate them, they are good for another 10,000 miles."

Who do you think will get my subsequent tire business? Persons who display integrity inspire trust, respect, and peace of mind in others. We go to the store or person who gave us a fair deal.

Every year each of us makes hundreds of decisions in which the issue of integrity arises. What will be the effect when we are undercharged by an auto mechanic? When we are tempted to take advantage of an associate or customer? When we sell a product as "perfect" when we know it has flaws?

Integrity gives meaning and purpose to life, and conveys enduring values that transcend contemporary fads and follies. It allows for boldness and decisiveness of action and helps to eliminate self-doubt.

Probably no one has said it better than a well-known author, some 90 years ago:

The greatest want of the world is the want of people, people who will not be bought or sold, people who in their inmost souls are true and honest, . . . people whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, people who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.²

NOTES

1. This story was related by Arthur Gordon in a conference in 1986.

2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Cal.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 57, slightly paraphrased.

Winton Beaven is assistant to the president at Kettering Medical Center, in Kettering, Ohio, U.S.A. He has served as professor of communications, as well as dean and president in several Adventist colleges.

Pontius' Puddle

