

Broken Vows

Reverend Marta I. Valentín
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As writer Stephanie Ericsson discovered, telling the truth all the time is nearly impossible, and sometimes the most innocent of lies get called out by a brown paper lunch bag sealed with duct tape, staples and several paper clips...a story from Robert Fulghum story:

This particular lunch bag has been in my care for maybe fourteen years. But it really belongs to my daughter, Molly. Soon after she came of school age, she became an enthusiastic participant in packing our lunches. ... One morning Molly handed me two bags as I was about to leave. One regular lunch [bag]. And the other one with the duct tape, and staples and paper clips.

‘Why two?’ I asked.
‘The other one is something else.’
‘What’s in it?’
‘Just some stuff – take it with you.’

...I stuffed both sacks into my briefcase, kissed the child and rushed off.

At midday, while hurriedly scarfing down my lunch, I tore open Molly’s bag and shook out the contents. Two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, and thirteen pennies. I smiled. How charming. Rising to hustle off to all the important business of the afternoon, I swept the desk clean – into the wastebasket – leftover lunch, Molly’s junk and all. There wasn’t anything in there I needed.

That evening Molly came to stand beside me while I was reading the newspaper.

‘Where’s my bag?’
‘What bag?’
‘The one I gave you this morning.’
‘Oh, I left it at the office, (I lied) why?’
‘I forgot to put this note in it.’ She hands over the note.
‘Besides, I want it back...Those are my things in the sack, Daddy, the ones I really like – I thought you might like to play with them – but now I want them back. You didn’t lose the bag, did you Daddy?’ Tears puddle in her eyes.
‘Oh no, I just forgot to bring it home’, I lied.
‘Bring it tomorrow, okay?’
‘Sure thing, don’t worry’.

As she hugged my neck with relief, I opened the note that had not got into the bag. I love you Daddy, it said. Uh oh...Molly had given me her treasures. All that a

seven-year-old held dear. Love in a brown paper bag. And I had missed it. Not only missed it but had thrown it away in the wastebasket because there wasn't anything in there I needed.

...It was a long trip back to the office. But there was nothing else to be done. So, I went.... I picked up the wastebasket and poured the contents on my desk. I was sorting it all out when the janitor came in to do his chores. 'Lose something? What's it look like, I'll help you look.' I started not to tell him. But I couldn't feel like any more of a fool than I was already, so I told him. He didn't laugh. 'I got kids too' [he said]. So, the brotherhood of fools searched the trash and found the jewels and he smiled at me and I smiled at him. You are never alone in these things. Never.

After washing the mustard off the dinosaur and spraying the whole thing with breath freshener to kill the smell of onions, I carefully smoothed out the wadded ball of brown paper...put the treasures inside and carried the whole thing home gingerly, like an injured kitten. The next evening, I returned it to Molly, no questions asked, no explanations offered. After dinner I asked her to tell me about the stuff in the sack, and so she took it all out a piece at a time and placed the objects in a row on the dining room table.

It took a long time to tell. Everything had a story, a memory, or was attached to dreams and imaginary friends...I managed to say, 'I see' ... several times in the telling. And as a matter of fact, I did see. To my surprise, Molly gave the bag to me once again several days later. Same ratty bag. Same stuff inside. I felt forgiven. And trusted. And loved... Over several months, the bag went with me from time to time. It was never clear to me why I did nor did not get it on a given day. I began to think of it as the Daddy Prize and tried to be good the night before, so I might be given it the next morning. In time Molly turned her attention to other things, found other treasures... Me? I was left holding the bag. She gave it to me one morning and never asked for its return. And so, I have it still.¹

On a day when I am musing on integrity, why have I begun with a story that includes lying? Well, I think we might all agree, that if you lie, you are automatically out of integrity. And yet, you can be totally honest, and still not be in integrity.

The problem is that we confuse integrity with honesty and truthfulness. We believe that if we speak the truth, whether it's in love or not, it automatically indicates that we embody integrity. But integrity is a very hard thing to possess, although it is not impossible to acquire. A challenge is that because we all think differently, one person's opinion on what is wrong and right varies from another. This makes maintaining our integrity harder and it becomes more than a thing to have, it becomes a verb, an action to exercise, repeatedly. It is not that we climb a mountain called integrity and having accomplished that feat our integrity is never questioned again. Rather, living a life of integrity demands that we constantly look at our actions, much like Molly's Dad. It is more complicated than simply acting based on what we believe, we must look deeply at those beliefs. Integrity therefore, goes above and beyond personal beliefs; it's about questioning our beliefs.²

When we look at the definition of the noun integrity, there are two:

1. The quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness.
2. The state of being whole and undivided.

I will speak to the first one...sharing the thoughts of Stephen Carter:

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.

When I refer to integrity, he continues, I have something very specific in mind. Integrity requires three steps:

1. *Discerning* what is right and what is wrong, which requires a degree of moral reflectiveness.
2. *Acting* on what you have discerned, even at personal cost, brings in the ideal of a person of integrity as steadfast, a quality that includes keeping one's commitments.
3. *Saying* openly that you are acting on your understanding of right and wrong, reminds us that a person of integrity can be trusted.”³

Discerning, acting, saying...

Ok, so back to the idea of lying. I began there because there is a lot of confusion between honesty and integrity. Carter argues that 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. How often have you regretted voicing an opinion that you wished you had thought more deeply about first? Conversely, the problem may be more complex, such as when a man who was raised 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. Obviously, the racist is being honest, he is not lying - he is telling us what he thinks - but his honesty, according to Carter, does not add up to integrity.⁴

One definition of a lie is: “any intentionally deceptive message which *is stated*.” Again, one cannot have integrity without being honest, but one can certainly be honest and yet have little integrity if a belief has never been tested.

Socrates believed the unexamined life was not worth living. But the unfortunate truth is that few of us have the time for constant reflection on our moral views. And yet, if we fail to reflect we

never really know if we are wrong. It is possible to be honest and wrong at the same time. Here ‘wrong’ is an idea or concept that you might change if you gave it some more thought, as in the example of the racist. More than just being honest, and more than just reflecting, integrity is about making sure that your beliefs are right.⁵ Now, I could write an entire sermon about what is right, and I would hope it is closer to what Rumi thought: “When you feel a peaceful joy, that’s when you are near truth.”⁶

When you feel a peaceful joy, that’s when you are near truth.

But here’s the rub, arriving at your truth does not mean it’s true for everyone else. So, although what we have personally deduced as truth, we still must be careful about thinking in absolute terms about that rightness. The work of integrity allows us to come to different conclusions. Sounds very Unitarian Universalist, no?

Question: Since we Unitarian Universalists pride ourselves on the fact that we are about figuring out for ourselves what we believe, does this translate into meaning that we are a people who have a higher sense of integrity? And, are we more “right” in what we believe than other religions?

When I put aside the exploration of lying, truth, and honesty regarding integrity, the common denominator for me is what is coming out of one’s mouth – what are you willing to voice, support, and fight for?

Many years ago, I attended a workshop that had been previously described to me by a friend as, and I quote: “They make you stay in the room all weekend working through your ‘stuff’ and you cry your eyes out, it’s great!” I did not go running toward it, much the same as when I discovered Unitarian Universalism one Easter Sunday at Arlington Street Church through this same friend. Then nine years later, while in seminary, I found myself sitting in this workshop, invited by someone else, and to this day I am grateful. And yes, there may have been tears involved.

One of the biggest lessons I learned was to not just be true to my word, but to stick to it, despite whatever life throws at me. So, this intellectual reflecting I described earlier about discovering what you truly believe, is made manifest when, challenged by a curve ball from life, you *still* manage to fulfill your word. And in pushing the envelope, doing what you thought you could not, you discover who you really are, and what you truly believe. Does it always work? I think you know the answer to that. But there is a deepness that can be developed about one’s own journey and its possibilities and the opportunity to live in profound integrity as a result.

This workshop helped me to see how I lie to myself, whether by ignoring the plain facts, or by deluding myself, which is the loudest lie we tell ourselves.⁷ It taught me how I lied to others, masqueraded as the “little white lie” in spite of claiming utmost honesty, by exposing the facades I used, and showing how deflection and omission are also lies. And it taught me the effect it has on the quality of life I lead.

The opportunity to explore the question: What does it mean to live a life of integrity? is a gift to our hearts, not our minds. Living a life of integrity is living a kind of freedom that only you can define. And as Rumi has intimated, with it comes joy from knowing at a deep, discerning level

what is your truth, today, now. Teaching our children how to live a life of integrity, using the actual word, and living by example will deepen their lives to such a profundity, we can only imagine. Choosing to have a thoughtful conversation about what *is* a little white lie at a time when they have not just engaged in it, is the beginning of opening this road. Don’t get distracted by their question of why it’s white and not red or purple.

What I learned in that workshop was how to slice through all the falsities under which we live and rarely question. Even us UUs. Sometimes with everything that life requires of us, it’s too scary to question what we think we know. And, often it comes down to “Who has the time?” The gift of living a life of integrity asks you to make and take the time. To catch yourself when you start a sentence, “I believe...” and check in with the question, “Is that still my truth?”

Living a life of integrity also gives you a place of forgiveness to fall back on. It is inevitable that whatever we vow to do, there will be times when those vows will be broken. Perhaps, over a lifetime as Rumi has said, “a thousand times.” What the work of integrity and the workshop helps me to remember is this: “I am not that.” I am not a person who breaks my vows a thousand times unless I have chosen that identity by allowing it to happen. I have learned that if I *believe* there must be a way to do what I said regardless of what life has challenged me with, then there is a chance that I will find that way. And constantly finding that way, is what helps me to live a life of integrity.

And then, I can fulfill that second definition of integrity: the state of being whole and undivided.

We break our vows, as hard as we try not to, over and over. But the hope is that in a community such as ours we will be forgiven, and more, loved through our moment of indiscretion and brought back to joy. Or, in the event it becomes more than a moment, but chronic, that we would be lovingly brought to the table of honest truth-telling. In this way we can each help each other to live in a state of wholeness and undivided; in a state of full integrity, much like Molly’s Dad. For “Integrity is telling ourselves the truth. And honesty is telling the truth to other people.”⁸

Y asi es. And so it is. Blessed Be.

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¹ Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down On It*

² <http://sarahisblog.blogspot.com/2011/03/insufficiency-of-honesty.html>, adapted

³ Stephen L. Carter (*Atlantic Monthly*, Feb. 1996, p.74-76); adapted

⁴ Ibid, paraphrased and edited

⁵ <http://integrityconsulting.ca/resources/ethics-prereading/70-the-insufficiency-of-honesty>; paraphrased and edited

⁶ Rumi (<https://www.facebook.com/mevlana>)

⁷ Eric Hoffer, paraphrased

⁸ Spencer Johnson