

Inside Out

By Justin J. Agoglia
Sitting by the beach, Key West, FL
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During my elementary education, I struggled with school. No matter what I did or how hard I tried, I never seemed to do as well as my peers. I was always below my classmates, but just above passing. You could say I was just average. The sad thing about this was that I really wanted to learn. My mind was active and always asking questions, yet I just didn't know why I couldn't excel as my peers did.

One of the ways I tried to fit in was by acting out. I made my classmates laugh or did something to distract the students. And even though this was inappropriate behavior, it gave me something – acceptance. I wanted to fit in with my friends. I simply acted out so I could feel like somebody or even something for that matter.

In third grade my behavior began to really interfere with the student's learning. My teacher, Mrs. Ricco, sent me home with a note after several failed attempts of trying to get me to comply with the class rules. Getting a note sent home was serious business and I knew it wasn't a good thing.

I brought the note home and as expected, my parents were very disappointed. This was certainly inappropriate behavior and I knew it but, to be quite honest, I really wasn't trying to be a problem in the classroom. I was just tired of feeling like an outsider and I guess, my need for acceptance was greater than my desire to obey.

My father sat me down and clearly told me that if I ever brought home a note like that again for this type of behavior, I would be severely punished and I knew he meant every word he said.

Well, as fate had it, I failed at obeying Mrs. Ricco's instructions. After class was over, she called me to the front of the classroom, directly in front of her desk. She told me that she would be writing a note which I would have to take home and get signed. The

minute I knew I had to take that dreaded note home, a strong sense of fear quickly took hold of me. In looking back at this, there was another emotion I was facing, perhaps a far superior feeling than the fear of my father's discipline, and that was my feeling of failure. Knowing that I couldn't fit in with my peers already made me feel quite inferior but, to now disobey my father, I knew I failed in a very big way.

I recall the day I brought home the note. It was a beautiful spring day. The air was cool and the sun was shining brightly. My mom was outside in the backyard. I quickly ran to the backyard and threw the note over the fence, far beyond anyone's ability to see that there was something behind it.

As usual mother asked how my day was. I replied with a simple, "fine," as if there was no problem. I quickly went inside and had a snack. A few hours later, my dad came home. I decided to meet him outside, hoping that perhaps I could "read" how his day was and what kind of mood he was in. When I first saw him, he was talking with mom. He then turned to me and asked how my day was. With the same response, I said it was fine.

He responded by saying, "Are you sure everything was fine today?"

I said, "yes."

Once again, he replied with, "You know what I've always said to you, 'Always tell the truth and you won't be punished.'"

I said, "I know. Everything was ok."

My internal fear was rising as you can imagine because I was digging a deep hole as my lies were pulling me away from what I knew as the truth. I was acting in a manner that was not in sync with the way I was raised. Yet, I decided to walk down this slippery path even though I knew I would get caught at some point.

Dad shared, "I received a phone call from Mrs. Ricco today and she told me that you had something for me. Is that the case?"

Once again, I acted somewhat puzzled and wondered what I could possibly have for my dad. Foolishly, I lied again. Spiraling from one tree branch of lies to the next, my grip was quickly slipping until I finally fell hard on a cesspool of my own lies. I caved in and I shamefully looked at my father and confessed that I did have something for him. I told him that I received another note.

After asking me where it was, I now had to tell him its location which made my deceitfulness even worse. He then requested that I get the note behind the fence.

Although I know it saddened my father for what I had done at school, I believe what grieved him the most was that I looked directly into his eyes and lied to him. I could see the grave disappointment written all over his countenance. He didn't have to say a word. Already the sting of my transgressions was beginning to be felt. Our relationship had always been founded on trust. I could always count on my father's spoken word. His promises were like gold. Nothing could ever shatter or break what he stood behind. And I knew he trusted my word. However, now I broke that code of honor and instead of just one heart being broken, two were bleeding. As a result, I not only failed in the classroom, but now I failed someone I loved and admired, someone who had always been faithful and honest with me.

With sheer disappointment, my father looked at me and shared that in our home, telling the truth would always be a must in how we related to one another because if we couldn't be honest with each other, we could never be honest with others outside our family. It was clear message in our home: no matter what the offense or how far we disobeyed, if we told the truth, we would never get punished for being honest. Of course, there were consequences for our wrongful actions, but he assured all three of us that we would never be scolded for telling the truth.

As a result of my not telling the truth, my father instructed me to go to my room and wait for him there. Let's just say that from that day forward, I learned a powerful lesson on telling the truth.

I can't help but think that that particular incident had taught me a powerful truth. I learned the hard way, but it was a truth that would protect me for the rest of my life. Over the course of my lifetime, I have seen that principle in action. Now, when I see someone even tell a small, white lie, I know it's going to hurt them somehow even if it seems harmless. Like a boomerang, lies don't move in a linear direction but return at a given moment.

You may find yourself in a position where it appears easier to lie than to tell the truth, and it may even seem harmless at first. You may even tell untruths to your children, thinking it won't harm them. More surprisingly, you may even be lying to yourself. In fact because you've lived a life of deceit for so long, now it's a part of how you live and the way you think.

I'm just curious: how much do the choices we make as young children affect the decisions we make today? When I think about the man who chooses to cheat on his wife, I wonder if the seeds of unfaithfulness were planted when he was just a small boy. What little dishonest choice did he make to set this in motion? What about the CEO who chooses to embezzle funds, thinking it won't hurt anyone, even if it's just a small amount of money? Who modeled to that CEO at a young age that telling a fib was ok?

People are much smarter than you think. Just when you believe others don't know about your dishonesty, someone will find out. Think about the example you're setting for your children, even those little ones who can't even talk. Children are so impressionable. They're watching your every move. Although we teach, "do as I say, not as I do," people will always follow your behaviors over your words. You've heard the axiom,

“actions speak louder than words.” It’s true. You’re behavior reflects your heart. It’s like a barometer.

My parent’s rule of telling the truth was important because it set the tone of my life. Their rule wasn’t so much about changing outward behavior as it was about having a heart that was honest. Changing one’s behavior never starts with outward changes, but inward attitudes. Their model of change was one that was inside-out. Once you dealt with the heart, the outward behavior naturally falls in line.

Today, as I’m confronted with many challenges in business, I find myself returning to this principle of honesty. And contrary to what people think, being a person of integrity isn’t really a difficult thing to live by. I constantly see deceit all around me in business. I hear stories of how people cut corners, cheat the government, get involved with shady schemes, and other unethical practices. When such offers are brought to my attention, it’s not a difficult decision for me and the temptation to stray from what I know to be right isn’t that tempting. Why? Because I had two parents who modeled a lifestyle of honesty.

Not too long ago, this principle was brought to a test. I was with a friend who wanted to treat me to some famous Maryland crabs. I’ve heard how delicious they were and was anxious to try them. We traveled quite a distance to pick up these tasty creatures, but when we arrived at the restaurant, we had to wait a little while. My friend had shared with me that she had a headache and I felt that maybe she needed something to drink. So I asked the waitress for a cup of Coke Cola and shared that I would pay for the drink when we paid for the crabs.

When the crabs were done, my friend paid for the crabs and we got in the car and drove off. After ten minutes of driving, I realized that I had forgotten to pay for the drink which probably cost them 10-15 cents. Realize, the cost of these crabs was way over \$100 so it would seem petty, almost absurd, to worry about not paying for a small Coke.

In my opinion, it did matter. Even if the drink was one cent, that was their sale and their money. I immediately asked my friend for her cell phone and called the restaurant back to explain what I had accidentally done. I shared with them that I would be willing to return to pay for the cup of soda. They shared their appreciation, but insisted it wasn't necessary.

I share that with you because it really is in those petty scenarios that our integrity is tested. It's in these incidences where our character is revealed, but it's the choices that lead up to such occasions where our character is either developed or destroyed.

Although I've made my share of mistakes, and still do, I hope to do my best to live a life of integrity, one that is honoring to my parents and to my Lord.

What choices are you making today?

Principle: Becoming a person of integrity begins with the heart and then moves outward.