

How did we get here? The Loss of Integrity in American Life

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An Address to the Annual Scholarship Dinner Attendees
Pennsylvania State University, Schuylkill Campus
April 22, 2009

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As you know from the introduction, I have a background in philosophy. And as you also know, philosophers love to ask questions. Such as, What is the meaning of truth? How do we decide that an object is beautiful? And of course that perennial favorite that makes fun of philosophers' love of questions, How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? But one question that seems not to interest philosophers—but that I find immensely fascinating—is, How did we get here?

One can imagine a platoon stranded in a sweltering rice paddy in Viet Nam, with one of the soldiers asking, "How did we get here?" Or a couple on vacation, driving for more than an hour after taking a wrong turn, peering out the windshield at alien terrain and asking, "How did we get here?" It is a question that might have been asked by Alice as she fell down the rabbit hole, or by Lucy as she stepped through the wardrobe into the land of Narnia. Or it might be asked by the family whose worldly possessions are on the sidewalk following eviction from their home.

Whatever the context, the question is almost always provoked by a sense of the strange, by circumstances often inexplicable. It is also almost always uttered when one finds oneself somewhere unwanted, usually at a place that might pose danger or insecurity, and often a place where one has never been before and believes he or she should not be.

Consider the example of two friends having lunch, engaged in a robust conversation about the state of world and national affairs. They speak of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, of the dire circumstances of American banks and financial companies, of the rising number of unemployed, the inequities of health care, the precarious position of American car makers, and the apparent decline in American prestige around the globe. After taking a breath following their litany of ills, one of them sighs and asks, "How did we get here?" The question arises because the place they find themselves, and their families, neighbors and fellow citizens, is strange, unwanted, even dangerous. It is like the time portrayed in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, except there is no "best of times;" only a "worst of times."

How did we get here? This is the question I propose to answer this evening. Not in the context of the rice paddy in Viet Nam or the lost couple in their automobile, but in the context of current national and world affairs described by the two friends over lunch. I'm

going to speculate on how we got into the messes we now find ourselves, and why they're terrible enough to lead us to ask, "How did we get here?"

To add even more brazenness to the immodesty of my subject, I have a one word answer to the question of how we got here. Integrity. That's the one word. Integrity. As I write this, I cannot but think of the businessman who led Dustin Hoffman out onto the patio in that classic 1967 film, *The Graduate*. The businessman says to Hoffman, "Son, I have just one word for you. Are you ready for it? Plastics!"

Truth be told, I have four words: The loss of integrity. But I like thinking of it as one word, just as Yale law professor, Stephen Carter, did in his book titled with that same one word, *Integrity*.

As if summing up the answer to how we got here in four words is not bold enough, I propose to make yet another grand claim: Bigness goes a long way to explain the loss of integrity. Bigness and integrity do not rest comfortably with one another. Bigness—whether big business, big banks, big government, big trade, or big money—makes it less likely that we will succeed in redressing the loss of integrity. The bigger an institution or organization, the greater the challenge to both nourish integrity and to have it flourish.

Speaking of big, I've made two big claims so far. Let's see if I can back them up with some argument worthy of your continued attention.

First, we need a working definition of integrity. I know of no better place to look than the book I mentioned a moment ago, Stephen Carter's *Integrity*.^{*} He contends that integrity is virtue of character that requires three steps:

- (1) *discerning* what is right and what is wrong; (2) *acting* on what you have discovered, even at personal cost; and (3) *saying openly* that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong. (p. 7)

Discerning, acting, speaking openly; these three terms are demonstrative of integrity. That is, we exemplify integrity when we *discern* right from wrong, *act* on that understanding, and *speak openly* about our action. Each of these steps deserves a brief description.

Discernment is a word much loved by contemporary moral theorists. One who is discerning is one who has powers of analysis, discrimination, awareness, and judgment. One who is discerning in moral matters is one who can grasp high principles and enlightened traditions, and bring them thoughtfully to bear on situations where one is called upon to act. This kind of discernment comes from acquiring a strong moral

^{*}Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity*. New York: Basic Books, 1996.

foundation, then subjecting it to continuous scrutiny and reflection. It is fostered by parents, neighbors, friends and parishioners who are themselves morally good as well as reflective on their own moral sensibilities.

But it is not enough to simply discern the right and distinguish it from the wrong. To exercise integrity, we must act on the understanding gained from discernment. That is, we must not merely think, we must also do, and this doing must be based on our thinking. While the point seems obvious, it is more often ignored than observed. How

many times have we thought of writing a legislator or newspaper editor, and not done so. How many times have we witnessed unfairness or injustice, and decided to “let sleeping dogs lie.” How often have we railed against such things as the genocide in Darfur or the mass shootings of innocent people in our own cities, but then let them slip from our consciousness without doing anything? How many times have we encountered bias and bigotry, and simply let it pass? True, we cannot, each of us, take on the ills of the entire world. But having said that, we are not excused from acting on those affronts to moral decency that do have meaning and presence in our lives.

I’ll presume that you will not raise too much objection to including the steps of discernment and acting in the definition of integrity, but what about the third step, speaking openly? Where did this step come from? It comes from the fact that integrity is relational. It is a feature of our character that arises in the course of our dealings with other persons. How are these other persons to understand our actions if we do not speak openly of what we are doing? How are they to know our reasons unless we tell them? How are they able to act with integrity toward us if they cannot grasp why we are conducting ourselves as we are?

As good as these reasons are for speaking openly, there are other powerful reasons for doing so. By speaking openly, we “hear” our thoughts, giving us yet another opportunity to consider our position as well as advance the skill of discernment. By speaking openly, we create a public space for our thoughts and actions, a space where they can be discussed, debated, considered and re-considered, especially by those who are affected by our actions.

Perhaps the paradigmatic example, in our time, of speaking openly as a step in the exercise of integrity is Martin Luther King. In fact, King serves as a superb example of all three steps; he was extraordinary in discerning right from wrong, acting on his convictions, and speaking not only openly, but beautifully and compellingly about these convictions.

What I believe we have endured over the last few decades is an erosion in the kind of integrity exemplified by Martin Luther King, where leaders in the multiple sectors of our society have failed to exemplify discernment, right action, and rhetorical skill in defense of their positions. Integrity has lost pride of place to less noble sentiments, such as self-interest, ambition, greed, conceit, and the pursuit of power for its own sake. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in the current financial sector, where the inability to

discern right from wrong and act upon that understanding is so apparent. Of course, the financial sector is not alone in displaying a lack of integrity. Recent revelations about chicanery in the Justice Department and the machinations of the former governor of Illinois indicate that government is beset with its own problems—as is American industry and commerce.

I suspect that what I'm saying here does not come as much of a surprise to many of you. The print and broadcast media have commented extensively on the lapses of integrity across much of society. What may be somewhat less evident, however, is why. Why, for example, did we take that bedrock of the American economy—the home mortgage—and wrap it into one package after another, selling it over and over again until many of them can no longer be traced back to their point of origin? What led us into this world of derivatives, credit default swaps, foreclosures? I believe that no small part of the answer to these questions can be found in the enormous expansions in the size of business, commerce, government, and related institutions.

What's wrong with bigness? The problem with bigness is that it isolates leaders from followers; it creates too much distance between those who are at the top of an organization and those at the bottom. This expanded distance between the top and the bottom relieves the leadership from its accountability to those lower on or outside the corporate hierarchy.

In their isolation from those they serve, leaders are more easily motivated by goals and objectives untempered by moral sensibilities. They thrive in a culture driven by the ambitions of their peers and superiors, not by the interests and cares of subordinates, clients, and shareholders. Notions of accountability are drained of such noble virtues as justice, care, beneficence, and love, replaced by sentiments far more base, such as envy, greed, accumulation, and emerging victorious regardless of harm or hurt.

I'll offer a simple example—although be aware that simple examples of complex problems carry their own inherent dangers. Yet simple examples can often reveal important truths—something I hope is the case in this instance. As some of you know, I have two brothers who have operated a retail business that has been in Schuylkill County since 1857. I'm going to put them forward this evening as exemplars of integrity—an action that some of you who know them well may question (smile everybody, I'm kidding). Because they are businessmen first and foremost, I could see them becoming seduced by the profit motive, trading higher moralities for baser modalities. But part of the reason that has not happened is that it is impossible for them to be at work without encountering their lowest paid employee, witnessing that person's struggle to feed a family, pay credit card debt, or cover college tuition for a child. It is impossible for them to spend a day at work without speaking to their customers, listening to what their clients believe is right and wrong about their business. It is impossible for them to make business decisions driven solely by ambition and conceit because they must daily face the many segments of their community—where they shop, attend church, at Rotary or Lions, and at the parks where their children, and now grandchildren, play.

Much as I would like to give my good brothers all the credit for their integrity, I am advancing the idea that they must share this credit with the absence of bigness. It is their relatively small, close-in setting that nourishes their inclinations to virtue, and that penalizes them for lapses in virtue. It is because they cannot isolate themselves from the lowest and humblest among them, from the least-paid employee, from the everyday consumers of their goods and services, that they find satisfaction, even reward, in being good stewards of their business and good citizens in their communities.

I wish I could press this argument even further, but alas my time is running out. After dinner talks are not radioactive; they do not decay slowly. Rather, as soon as you begin to notice the hardness of your seat, they decay very quickly. So, I shall hasten along, trading the question with which I opened, How did we get here?, with another question, How do we get out of here?

There are likely multiple answers to this question, and most of them are probably quite complex if they are anywhere near sound. Yet once again I'll opt for the simple. Thus my answer will be neither sufficient nor profound, but it will, I believe, give you a sense of how we might think about getting out of here to where we want to be.

First, we need to look more carefully at the settings we create, particularly their size. Smaller, more intimate settings carry many of their own corrections for lapses in moral discernment and action. The larger our settings become, the more vigilant we must be to their dangers—and the more we must insert controls and regulations to govern the conduct of those who administer them. Where we can, we ought to nurture smaller settings and oppose bigger ones, perhaps by writing policies and laws that favor smaller settings over larger ones. At the same time, we know that larger settings can be advantageous and highly beneficial; where this is clearly so, we must devise ways to keep these settings accountable to their core purposes and their ethical obligations.

Second, we must look to nourishing integrity in individuals. We do this with good parenting, good communities, and good schools. Given the institution that has brought us together this evening, I would like to focus on the role of good schools in nourishing integrity. In elementary schools, teachers do it through teaching moral lessons and making clear to children the rules of conduct that govern their relationships with others. In secondary schools, teachers typically do less by rules and homilies and more by example and deed, and by holding high moral expectations for their students. And in higher education, it is done with courses in ethics, with explicit attention to the moral dimensions of the various fields of study, and again with setting high expectations for morally sound behavior on the part of students.

Alas, the conditions I have just mentioned are too often absent from our schools and colleges, supplanted by such objectives as being economically competitive, getting high paying jobs, competing with other countries for top scores in science and mathematics, and earning high scores on standardized examinations. It is, I believe, terribly unfortunate that schools have largely abandoned the moral dimensions of education. In

a recent poll at one of America's premier research universities, students were asked how often their instructors explored the moral and ethical features of their subject matter. The students reported overwhelmingly that instructors almost never touched on these aspects of their subjects. There is a very simple rule in education that we do not learn what we do not study; thus it should come as no surprise that we are not learning our moral lessons.

That is something we must do if we are to get out of here. Our capacity to move to a higher plane of political, economic and social life depends on that nexus between us as persons and the settings we inhabit as we earn our living, raise our families, fulfill our civic obligations, and pursue the good life. The answer to how we get out of here, to where we want to be, lies in the restoration of integrity and the settings that nourish it. It lies with the cultivation of discernment, the encouragement to act on our convictions, and the fostering of skills for public speech. These are tasks for which our educational institutions are well equipped. What they need is public encouragement and support to rank these aims among the very highest of those to be achieved.

Those of you in the audience this evening who have served as sponsors of scholarships, and those of you who have given support in other ways, are to be commended for what you made possible. You exemplify the spirit I speak of this evening. You are making it possible for the recipients of your support to raise the question, How did we get here? as well as the follow-on question, How do we get out of here?

Now the recipients of your support—the collegiate setting, its faculty, and the good students assembled here—are charged with seeking answers to the questions others have made it possible for you to ask. It is to you that we now turn to better understand how we got here and how we get out of here. If I have offered anything of value this evening, your answers will note the central place of integrity and how it is nurtured or impeded in settings of various kinds. You will, perhaps, agree that individuals and settings interact, such that good individuals can be stymied by bad settings, and otherwise good settings can be mismanaged by bad persons. I hope you will seek out and cultivate the skills needed to be persons of integrity, at work in organizational settings that nourish the highest virtues of which we as a species are capable.

That is how we will get out of here.