

Personal Integrity and Integration: A Moral Matter

by Richard Higginson



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This was the opening talk at the Wholeness at Work conference at Ridley Hall, given on 11 April 2008.

Four years ago at Ridley Hall we ran a conference on *The Virtues of Business*. Note the word: virtues not values. I was recently asked if I would speak at a conference on ethics that is 'Principled and Values-Driven'. What a horrible phrase! I said I didn't much like the title but I would be happy to talk about virtues. The sort of qualities covered under each heading may be much the same, but there are three reasons why I prefer the word 'virtues'.

First, the word 'values' is in danger of being de-valued! Values can easily end up as qualities we prize simply because of their financial value – we give a value to them because they have a pay-off. Alternatively, they may simply be statements of what we like, concepts that represent our preferences and priorities. Second, virtues are more personal: they are embedded in character and developed in community.

Third – and paradoxically – virtues are more objective. Maybe the word virtue sounds a bit dated, but that's because it is rooted in a tradition – actually two traditions, a classical tradition and a Christian tradition, that came together – and from which there is much that we can learn.

In this tradition seven virtues have been given particular attention: the four so-called cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, moderation and courage and the three so-called theological virtues of love, faith and hope. In 2004 we talked about the relevance of these qualities to the tough world of business, and discovered they were highly relevant, even ones that don't get much mention in business like prudence and moderation.

People like me who favour the virtues approach to ethics do not pretend that this list of seven virtues is a comprehensive list. There are other virtues pressing

for inclusion. The virtue I want to discuss here is not one of the seven classical virtues, but it does receive frequent mention in business today. I discovered that in the 1990s when companies were into developing mission statements and codes of ethics in a big way. Some people collect stamps or paintings; for a time I became an avid collector of corporate codes of ethics! I carried out an analysis of these statements and discovered a word that came up with monotonous regularity:

- Cadbury Schweppes: The quality we aim for in all our dealings is *integrity*
- NatWest Bank: Our first priority is *integrity*...
- BP: We are committed at all times to *integrity*
- British Aerospace: Care must be taken in the selection of agents and consultants who should be persons of the highest *integrity*

And the two most breathtaking:

■ Hewlett Packard: We conduct our business with uncompromising *integrity*

■ Ford Motor Company: *Integrity* is never compromised.

The same pattern is also found in smaller companies. In February, I



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spoke on 'Business and the Virtues' at the Centre for Entrepreneurial Leadership which is based in Trinity Western University on the edge of Vancouver. Its Director, Rick Goossen, has compiled three volumes of interviews of Christian entrepreneurs in which they reflect on their experience and offer home-spun advice. I read the third volume carefully, looking for the qualities commended by these entrepreneurs that they held in common.¹ Two words stood out: *passion* – you need to be passionate about the product or service you are developing to be an entrepreneur – and *integrity*. Integrity was cited by 8 out of 12

interviewees, e.g:

■ Fred Fleming, Director of Ritchie-Smith Feeds, provider of bulk feeds for the poultry and livestock industries: 'We look for integrity, honesty and kindness. We aren't interested in people who use questionable methods to make a sale or get information.....Don't lose your integrity for short-term gain. It's so tempting to ignore integrity in the pursuit of money.'

■ Peter Legge, CEO of a publishing company: 'An important success factor in business is that you build a positive

reputation by following through with the deals you make. Integrity is crucial.' 'Make sure you guard your reputation and focus on your integrity. Everything else comes out of integrity; it is the key to making your life a masterpiece.'

Another book I've read recently is *Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy*, by Michael Smith.² This comprises stories of entrepreneurs from all over the world, people who

have developed successful businesses and maintained their integrity, often in very challenging circumstances. Two cases particularly impressed me. Suresh Vazirani is an Indian Christian who is MD of an award-winning company Transasia Biomedicals, which makes high-tech blood diagnostic machines. Transasia now exports to over 50 countries. He has taken a dogged and courageous stance against corruption which has often cost him in terms of irksome delays in getting supplies through customs or legal battles with government officials. Ian Robertson, meanwhile, is a Scottish scientist who teaches agriculture at the University of Harare, and has developed a business selling 'born again' sweet potato plants – born again because they have found a way of removing the virus which plagues these crops. It is not an easy time for a white man supplying farmers in Zimbabwe. But Ian and his wife Valerie have stayed there because they believe that doing so is a part (a small part) of God's plan for humanity in

general and Africa in particular. Ian's Agri-Biotech company has a strict policy of integrity. For him it means 'no cheating on expenses, no ghost journeys paid by the sponsors, no lies to farmers'. It means that the company delivers the plants when



promised; shares ideas on hopes for the future; lets the farmers know what the company is earning; and 'above all gets the job done whatever excuses are available'.

Robertson's testimony is particularly helpful because it goes a long way towards fleshing out and defining what we mean by integrity. What is integrity? I think it contains three key ingredients:

■ **Honesty** – being straight with people so that they know where they stand.

And yes, I do believe that includes honouring your commitments – if you say you'll do something, you do it.

■ **Transparency** – being as open as you can. There are limits on this – sometimes there is information held in confidence, or commercially sensitive information, that you should not reveal. But the first instinct of someone with integrity is to be open, to share knowledge, rather than to conceal.

Transparency includes what I call public defensibility – a readiness to make defence of what you do in public, notably when

you've taken decisions that arouse criticism and controversy. The person of integrity is able to do this without embarrassment



Robert Maxwell

or awkwardness, to defend without being defensive.

■ **Consistency** – having set out your stall, you stick with it. Unlike someone like Robert Maxwell, who was frighteningly random, you don't surprise people with arbitrary decisions.

Consistency also means congruence between what you do in private and what you do in public. One intriguing – and very challenging – definition of integrity is how you act when people aren't looking! Christians have the advantage here of being conscious that God sees all.

Robert Solomon has written a very interesting half-chapter on integrity in *Ethics and Excellence*. He says 'Integrity is not so much a virtue itself as it is a complex of virtues, the virtues working together to form a coherent character, an identifiable and trustworthy personality.'³

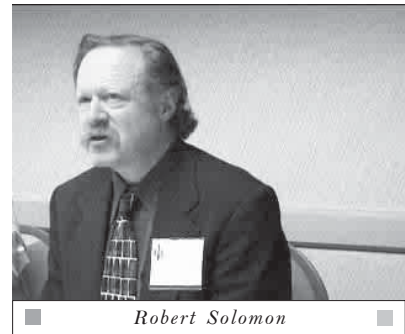
Integrity appears to be different from other virtues in that it brings them all together.

Integrity suggests, logically enough, a life that is well integrated. Integrity and

integration both come from the Latin word *integer*, meaning 'whole', 'entire', or 'pure'. Hence the appropriateness of starting a conference on the theme of

wholeness with some reflections on integrity.

In Psalm 26 the word 'integrity' recurs. 'Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity' (v.1); 'But as for me, I walk in my integrity; redeem me, and be



Robert Solomon

gracious to me' (v.11). Twice the psalmist strikes the note of *walking* in one's integrity. The picture perhaps is that of a path or channel, a settled groove within which the good man operates, or a godly ambience or atmosphere which surrounds everything he does. Integrity becomes the air you breathe or the ground you tread.

At this point you may have had enough and want to object. Isn't all this a bit too good to be true? Integrity is all very well as an ideal, *but*. Exactly. We need to take the force of that *but* seriously. It is time to step back for a moment from these statements of lofty ideals (not abandoning them, but stepping back) and infuse the discussion with some solid realism. This realism is needed in three different areas.

First, there are complex situations where it's hard to know what is the right thing to do.

Working life offers many dilemmas that have no easy answers. Some dilemmas entail a creative tension between different virtues. We may feel torn between love and justice in knowing how or whether to discipline someone. We may feel torn between courage and prudence in knowing whether to take some bold initiative which might turn out a flop. Earlier I mentioned Suresh Vazirani's stand



Suresh Vazirani

against corruption. However, this is not a straightforward issue. While the payment of outright bribes can be declared unequivocally to be wrong – because it has the effect of distorting the judgment of someone making a crucial decision – some intermediate forms of payment are more ambiguous. These range from generous acts of hospitality to payments made to agents. It takes some carefully nuanced moral distinctions to work out a corporate policy of integrity in this area.

Second, the fact is that most corporate cultures settle for something less than the lofty ideals that they proclaim in public. This doesn't mean that they act in

blatant contradiction of the company code, for the most part, but they dilute and qualify it. Individuals experience strong pressure to follow the prevailing practices and fall in with the corporate culture realities. Certainly, anyone with integrity needs to be prepared to take a moral stand, but considerable wisdom is needed about the issues on which one does make a stand. Some battles are not worth fighting over. Integrity is compatible with an astuteness which distinguishes between compromises that are moral cop-outs and compromises that make sound strategic sense.

Third, and this is the one I want to concentrate on: it's also hard because of the sort of people we are. The issues may be problematic, the culture may be problematic, but let's face it: the biggest problem is often ourselves. The fact is that we have flawed personalities. We may display integrity in many aspects of our lives, but not all. We may suffer from sudden outbursts of temper, cravings of lust, or a tendency to be economical with the truth. We have our blind spots, our weaknesses, our inconsistencies. We may play host to various saboteurs: things deep inside us which subvert or frustrate the fulfilment of our high ideals. These may be a love and craving for power, a desire to be popular with everyone, or a tendency to interpret everything as an attack on ourselves. We are not the gloriously whole people we would like to be. During the last month I have been through a phase when I've felt rather out of sorts with myself: fragmented,

flawed, and struggling to the point where I felt rather a hypocrite running a conference on wholeness!

But an important part of integrity is that we face up to aspects of disintegration in our lives. The fact that we're conscious of a lack of integrity doesn't mean we have to abandon all hopes of integrity, or that we are without any integrity at all. Pastoral theologian Alastair Campbell writes: 'the person of integrity is first and foremost a critic of self, of tendencies to self-deception and escape from reality, of desire for a false inner security in place of the confrontation with truth which integrity demands.'⁴

And this, of course, is where we need God's help. We cannot practice the virtues in our own strength. We cannot become more whole by our own efforts. But there may be ways in which we can be more effective in opening ourselves up to God, in drawing on the resources that God has to offer. This is what the next talk will explore. ■

Richard Higginson is Director of Faith in Business and Co-editor of Faith in Business Quarterly.

Notes

- ¹ Richard J. Goossen (ed.), *Entrepreneurial Leaders: Reflections on Faith at Work Vol.3*, Trinity Western University, 2007. See especially chs. 3 and 6.
- ² Michael Smith, *Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy*, Caux Books, 2007. See especially chs. 3 and 9.
- ³ Robert Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business*, OUP, 1992. p.168.
- ⁴ Alastair Campbell, *Rediscovering Pastoral Care*, DLT, 1986, p.27.