The Practice of Integrity

By Blake Burleson

Blaine McCormick's Ben Franklin: America's Original Entrepreneur concludes that so much is known about "Franklin as founding father, framer, statesman, scientist, philosopher, master of the epigram, and fount of earthly wisdom that it is small wonder we have little room left for recognition of his talents as entrepreneur and businessman" (xiii). If Franklin is America's original entrepreneur, what is his key to making money? Late in life after becoming one of the Western world's most well-known figures, Franklin wrote The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, which became a manual for aspiring young people who desired success. In that book he said that the most important quality one can possess in order to make money was “Integrity.”

Is Ben Franklin right? Is the surest way to find success in life through integrity?

On first glance, we have to question this proposition. When we see successful executives making millions through unscrupulous means, less-than-truthful politicians winning elections, and sports heroes cheating in order to ensure victory, we have to ask if Franklin really understood the American culture. Is integrity really the most important quality a young person can possess on the way to the top? Doesn’t intelligence, good looks, determination, persona, superior genes, skills, and the right circle of friends matter more than integrity on the path to success?

What is integrity anyway? And what does integrity have to do with winning at the academic game? What does it have to do with attaining a degree? Of getting into law school? Or medical school? What does it have to do with getting a first job out of college? Or making a good grade on a mid-term exam?

The American Heritage Dictionary gives three definitions of integrity. First, integrity may be thought of as "steadfast adherence to a strict moral or ethical code." Students and faculty members are expected to follow particular codes that bind them together as members of communities within the larger Baylor family. For example, students living on campus adhere to the "community covenant" which states, “as members of this community we will be known for respect, openness, community, learning, citizenship, and responsibility.” Faculty are bound by various professional standards such as the Statement on Academic Freedom of the American Academic of University Professors which reads, in part, “Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject.” Student-athletes at Baylor are expected to follow coaches’ instructions; if Coach Kim Mulkey’s star Lady Bear isn’t playing hard-nosed, tenacious defense, she will be provided a seat on the bench. So there are various moral and organizational codes to which members of the Baylor family are expected to adhere.

The one code, however, that applies to the entire Baylor community is the Academic Honor Code, which states: “Baylor University students, staff, and faculty shall act in academic matters with the utmost honesty and integrity.” Examples of violations of the
Honor Code include but are not limited to: plagiarism, cheating on an exam, misrepresenting facts about an absence or a disability, altering a transcript or grade report, and failing to report observed cheating. In summary, this first definition of integrity addresses the need to live honestly within our various communities. This is especially the case for an academic community that is founded on the pursuit of Truth.

The second dictionary definition of integrity is: “the state of being unimpaired; soundness.” If we say, “the bridge over the river has lost its integrity,” we mean that it’s not any good; it’s dangerous. We shouldn’t drive a car over a structure that has lost its integrity. A house that has lost its structural integrity will tend to collapse in a violent earthquake. There are many reasons why the integrity of a house might be compromised; perhaps a wall has termites, the roof leaks, or the foundation is shifting. Jesus’ parable about the man who built his house on sand and lost it in a flood indicates a foundation that was not sound. That house had no integrity.

What does it mean to be a “sound” student? In order to graduate from Baylor University with integrity you must possess and successfully demonstrate the skills of one who has attained a liberal education (sometimes called a liberal arts education). What are the skills of a liberally-educated person? First, you must have thought critically about your own religion, nation, and tradition. Your professors are a part of a culture of dialogue, deliberation, and dissent; you must join this culture. Second, you must engender the ability to think as a citizen of the entire world not just your corner of it. You will be asked to rid yourself of stereotypical projections. Third, you must demonstrate imaginative thinking. Liberal education at Baylor will provide you with the opportunity to cultivate empathy for those who are different from you. The bottom-line is that in order to have integrity as a student you must not only be moral, you must be a sound product of a University that values a liberal education.

The final dictionary definition of integrity is: “the quality or condition of being whole or undivided; completeness.” Tag, the Sanskrit root word for integrity, means to be touched or handled. Thus, “tag, you’re it!” While in college you’re being touched, handled, manipulated, and shaped by your professors. Sometimes you might feel like you’re being pulled apart by your professors. The Latin word Integ means untouched or not handled. There is a sense in which we have to be left alone in order to be aware of and maintain our own integrity as a complete person. While the second definition of integrity leads to the conclusion that we must develop as students; that we are in process; that we are becoming; this third definition suggests that we are already complete; that our value is not dependent upon a degree. Thus, we have a paradox.

Each of you brings to campus as freshmen your own peculiar intelligences. There is no other person exactly like you. In order for you to have integrity as a student at Baylor you must not only be moral (don’t cheat), not only develop (become liberally educated) but you must acknowledge and honor your own individual identity (trust in your God-given self). Always keep in mind that academic life is not real life but, rather, a game. A serious game, an expensive game but still a game. Grades, while important, can never ultimately define you as a person. Grades can never be the final measure of the range of your various intelligences-intellectual, emotional, sensual, and intuitive. In short, you will not have integrity if you take the academic game too seriously.
In summary, academic integrity can be summarized in three words: honesty, openness, and trust. Be honest in all of your interactions with others. Be open to the world of ideas. Trust that you are of immense value, just as you are. Was Ben Franklin right about “integrity” being the most important quality an aspiring young person could have on the road to success? I challenge you to test his theory during the next four years.

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