

INTEGRITY: THE SOCIAL OUTCAST

"I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and to incur my own abhorrence."

~ Frederick Douglass

What does "being true" to oneself actually mean? If you asked one of the most renowned orators of all time, abolitionist and suffragist Frederick Douglass, he might include the definition of integrity in his answer. As a freed slave in the late 1800's Frederick Douglass spoke about what he believed and became a leader in the movement to end slavery in the United States. Douglass stood up for what he *knew* was right in a time when it was much easier to stay quiet. That's why I could not imagine a better hero of mine with whom to think about integrity; like Douglass, I think of integrity as an honest promise to oneself to never capitulate to social pressure or give up on what one knows is right. To stand tall with one's intrinsic values regardless of the opinions and beliefs of the majority. When living out integrity like this, our lives look different. Douglass may not have been liked by everyone, but he had allies he knew he could trust. I similarly am not the most popular kid in school. I don't have the *greatest quantity* of friends but the quality of my relationships is enviable. Being unwavering in one's integrity may not always bring a person the biggest crowd of friends or supporters, however, it does create positive relationships and as Douglass's life exemplifies, can instill positive change in one's community.

Integrity drives quality relationships that endure through the challenges that life brings. Acting with integrity, or with loyalty to one's values in relationships allows for deep trust in each other. Integrity is the essence of positive relationships and in the absence of integrity, relationships of any kind — professional, platonic, romantic, and familial — begin to worsen. I am so thankful I have not been afraid to act with integrity in my life; in being true to what I value, while I could've surrounded myself with a large group of people who know me for the mask that I put on for them, I instead never have to change who I am based on who I am with. I stay true to my intrinsic values even when they are unpopular, henceforth bringing positive relationships that I know will support me when I need them the most.

Now, this does not mean that relationships are going to be perfect if a person is filled with integrity. Oftentimes, people may see a peer acting with integrity and distance themselves from that person because their integritous actions make others feel bad about themselves. This is exactly what makes a path of integrity daunting. If you begin to walk with integritous action you may begin to lose friendships. As a middle school girl I was known as a "goody two-shoes." I lost friends because my personal values of integrity were seen as obnoxious. These things bothered me, but I knew as long as I was firm in my values, that was all that mattered. In 8th

grade my basketball team stopped at a gas station. One of my teammates grabbed a Kit Kat bar and put it in her pocket. This was my chance to be cool and to not say anything, to be like everyone else, but I found myself tapping her on the back and saying, "why steal a Kit Kat bar it's bad for you anyways." I told her if she put it back no one would hear anything about it, and that is exactly what happened. After that instance, my reputation of being a "goody two-shoes" only increased, but I didn't let that change my intrinsic motivation to pursue integritous action. I did not let go of the inner promise I made to myself. A promise that "even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others," I would always stay true to myself. Living by Douglass's words didn't always make me the coolest kid in school and it certainly impacted the quantity of relationships in my life.

While I didn't have the greatest quantity of relationships, the quality of my relationships have been positively impacted. By being true to my own values and moral compass, my friends, teachers, parents, teammates or co-workers know my actions speak for themselves. Having this outspoken integrity on display throughout my life has brought me relationships unlike any other. In my sophomore year of highschool, I noticed many differences in the treatment of our men's and women's teams. There were many athletes on my team who would've preferred that no one said anything at all, but I insisted. I spoke out about the injustices many of us saw on our team. While the majority may not have appreciated my actions, through this I found some of my closest friends and allies who still — years later, miles apart — will meet up and talk for hours over lunch at Panera. Finding quality, like-minded relationships is one of the many gifts given when we stand up and speak what we know is true.

Although integrity is a noun, it is more suitable to think of integrity as a verb — an action one chooses to prioritize and *do* in relationships. After all, Fredrick Douglass didn't sit back and let injustice happen, he took integritous action standing up for what he *knew* was right. Douglass reminds us all that it is essential to the fate of humanity to act with integrity in relationships regardless of the pressure to conform to societal norms. Choosing not to betray the promise to stay true to our values ensures that our relationships with others are founded in a positive light. In a world of gossip, drama, and cutting corners in pursuit of success, integrity is often the praxis of the social outcast that inevitably propels relationships and community into a forward motion of positive change.

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