

This Matter of Honesty

The following article, This Matter of Honesty, was written by Bill W. and published in the AA Grapevine in August 1961.

The problem of honesty touches nearly every aspect of our lives. There are, for example, the widespread and amazing phenomena of self-deception. There are those rather dreadful brands of reckless truth-telling, which are so often lacking in prudence and love. Then there are those countless life situations in which nothing less than utter honesty will do, no matter how sorely we may be tempted by the fear and pride that would reduce us to half-truths or inexcusable denials.

Let's first see what self-deception can do to one's integrity.

Well remembered is the comfort I used to take from an exaggerated belief in my own honesty. My New England kinsfolk had thoroughly taught me the sanctity of all my business commitments and contracts. They insisted that "a man's word is his bond." I delighted in the Lincoln story which tells how Honest Abe once walked six miles to return six pennies he had overcharged a poor woman at his grocery. After this rigorous conditioning, business honesty always came easy, and it stayed with me. Even in Wall Street, where I landed years later, I never flimflammed anyone.

However, this small fragment of easy-won virtue did produce some interesting liabilities. I was so absurdly proud of my business standards that I never failed to whip up a fine contempt for those of my fellow Wall Streeters who were prone to short-change their customers. This was arrogant enough, but the ensuing self-deception proved even worse. My prize business honesty was presently converted into a comfortable cloak under which I could hide the many serious flaws that beset other departments of my life. Being certain of this one virtue, it was easy to conclude I had them all. For years on end, this prevented me from taking a good look at myself. This is a very ordinary example of the fabulous capacity for self-deception that nearly all of us can display at times. Moreover, the deception of others is nearly always rooted in the deception of ourselves.

As further illustrations, two extreme cases come to mind. One shows self-delusion in a very obvious form – obvious, that is, to all but the victim himself. The other depicts the more subtle brand of self-delusion, from which no human being can be entirely exempt.

One of my good friends used to be a safecracker. He told me this revealing tale. Said he; "You know, Bill, I used to think I was a kind of one-man revolution against society. All over the world I could see the 'have-nots' taking it away from the 'haves.' This seemed very reasonable. After all, those damn 'haves' just wouldn't share their wealth. The revolutions that took it away from them were apt to get a lot of applause. But guys like me, who could make those 'haves' share their wealth, got no such glad hand. After a while I figured this out: the plain fact was that nobody liked burglars. Revolutions, yes – but burglars, no. Anyway, I couldn't see anything wrong about blowing safes, excepting getting caught. Even after years in jail, I still couldn't see. When AA showed up, I slowly began to get it through my head that there were good revolutions and bad ones. Bit by bit it dawned on me how I'd completely fooled myself. I could see that I had been pretty crazy. How I could have been that dumb, I'll never be able to explain in any other way."

Now I have another AA friend, a good and gentle soul. He recently joined one of the great religious orders, one in which the friars spend many hours a day in contemplation. So my friend has plenty of time to take his inventory. The more he looks, the more unconscious

self-deception he finds. And the more astonished he becomes at the elaborate and devious excuse-making machinery by which he had been justifying himself. He has already come to the conclusion that the prideful righteousness of “good people” may often be just as destructive as the glaring sins of those who are supposedly not so good. So he daily looks inward upon himself and then upward toward God, the better to discover just where he stands in this matter of honesty. Out of each of his meditations there always emerges one dead certainty, and this is the fact that he still has a long way to go.

Just how and when we tell the truth – or keep silent – can often reveal the difference between genuine integrity and none at all. Step Nine of AA’s program emphatically cautions us against misusing the truth when it states: “Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.” Because it points up the fact that the truth can be used to injure as well as to heal, this valuable principle certainly has a wide-ranging application to the problem of developing integrity.

In AA, for instance, we talk a great deal about each other. Provided our motives are thoroughly good, this is not in the least wrong. But damaging gossip is quite something else. Of course, this kind of scuttlebutt can be well grounded in fact. But no such abuse of the facts could ever be twisted into anything resembling integrity. It can’t be maintained that this sort of superficial honesty is good for anyone. So the need to examine ourselves is very much with us. Following a gossip binge we can well ask ourselves these questions: “Why did we say what we did? Were we only trying to be helpful and informative? Or were we not trying to feel superior by confessing the other fellow’s sins? Or, because of fear and dislike, were we not really aiming to damage him?” This would be an honest attempt to examine ourselves, rather than the other fellow. Here we see the difference between the use of the truth and its misuse. Right here we begin to regain the integrity we had lost.

Sometimes, though, our true motives are not so easily determined. There are times when we think we must reveal highly damaging facts so that we may stop the depredations of certain evildoers. “All for the good of AA” – or what have you – now becomes our cry. Armed with this often false justification, we righteously press our attack. True enough, there may be a genuine need to remedy a damaging condition. True enough, we may have to make use of some unpleasant facts. But the real test is how we handle ourselves. We must be ever so certain that we are not pots who call kettles black. Therefore it is wise if we pose ourselves these questions: “Do we really understand the people who are involved in this situation? Are we certain that we have all the facts? Is any action or criticism on our part really necessary? Are we positive that we are neither fearful nor angry?” Only following such a scrutiny can we be sure to act with the careful discrimination and in the loving spirit that will always be needed to maintain our own integrity.

Now here is another aspect of the honesty problem. It is very possible for us to use the alleged dishonesty of other people as a most plausible excuse for not meeting our own obligations. I once had a spell of this myself. Some rather prejudiced friends had exhorted me never to go back to Wall Street. They were sure that the rampant materialism and double-dealing down there would be sure to stunt my spiritual growth. Because this sounded so high-minded, I continued to stay away from the only business I knew.

When finally my household went quite broke, I woke up to the fact that I hadn’t been able to face the prospect of going back to work. So I returned to Wall Street after all. And I have ever since been glad that I did. I needed to rediscover that there are many fine people in New York’s financial district. Then, too, I needed the experience of staying sober in the very surroundings where alcohol had cut me down. I did receive all these benefits and a great deal more. Indeed, there was one colossal dividend that resulted directly from my grudging

decision to re-enter the market place. It was a Wall Street business trip to Akron, Ohio, in 1935, that first brought me face to face with Dr Bob – AA's co-founder-to-be. So the birth of AA itself actually hinged on the fact that I had been trying to meet my bread-and-butter responsibilities.

We must now leave the absorbing topic of self-delusion and look at some of those trying life situations which we have to meet foursquare and head-on. Suppose we are handed an employment application that asks, "Have you ever suffered from alcoholism, and were you ever hospitalized?" Here, we AAs can assuredly make a good report of ourselves. Almost to a man we believe that nothing short of the absolute truth will do in situations of this type. Most employers respect our Fellowship and they like this rugged brand of honesty, especially when we reveal our AA membership and its results. Of course many other life problems call for this identical brand of forthrightness. For the most part, situations requiring utter honesty are clear-cut, and readily recognizable. We simply have to face up to them, our fear and pride regardless. Failing to do this, we shall be sure to suffer those ever mounting conflicts which can only be resolved by plain honesty.

There are, nevertheless, certain occasions where reckless truth-telling may create widespread havoc and permanent damage to others. Whenever this seems possible, we are likely to find ourselves in a bad jam indeed. We shall be torn between two temptations. When conscience agonizes us enough, we may well cast all prudence and love to the winds. We may try to buy our freedom by telling the brutal truth, no matter who gets hurt or how much. But this is not the usual temptation. It is far more probable that we shall veer to the other extreme. We will paint for ourselves a most unrealistic picture of the awful damage we are about to inflict on others. By claiming great compassion and love for our supposed victims, we are getting set to tell the Big Lie – and be thoroughly comfortable about it, too.

When life presents us with a racking conflict like this, we cannot be altogether blamed if we are confused. In fact, our very first responsibility is to admit that we are confused. We may have to confess that, for the time being, we have lost all ability to tell right from wrong. Most difficult, too, will be the admission that we cannot be certain of receiving God's guidance because our prayers are so cluttered with wishful thinking. Surely this is the point at which we must seek the counsel of our finest friends. There is nowhere else to go.

Had I not been blessed with wise and loving advisors, I might have cracked up long ago. A doctor once saved me from death by alcoholism because he obliged me to face up to the deadliness of that malady. Another doctor, a psychiatrist, later on helped me save my sanity because he led me to ferret out some of my deep-lying defects. From a clergyman I acquired the truthful principles by which we AAs now try to live. But these previous friends did far more than supply me with their professional skills. I learned that I could go to them with any problem whatever. Their wisdom and their integrity were mine for the asking. Many of my dearest AA friends have stood with me in exactly this same relation. Oftentimes they could help where others could not, simply because they were AAs.

Of course we cannot wholly rely on friends to solve all our difficulties. A good advisor will never do all our thinking for us. He knows that each final choice must be ours. He will therefore help to eliminate fear, expediency, and self-deception, so enabling us to make choices which are loving, wise and honest.

The choice of such a friend is an all-important matter. We should look for a person of deep understanding, and then carefully listen to what he has to say. In addition, we must be positive that our prospective advisor will hold our communications in the strictest of confidence. Should he be a clergyman or doctor or lawyer, this can be taken for granted. But

when we consult an AA friend, we should not be reluctant to remind him of need for full privacy. Intimate communication is normally so free and easy among us that an AA advisor may sometimes forget when we expect him to remain silent. The protective sanctity of this most healing of human relations ought never be violated.

Such privileged communications have priceless advantages. We find in them the perfect opportunity to be as honest as we know how to be. We do not have to think of the possibility of damage to other people, nor need we fear ridicule or condemnation. Here, too, we have the best possible chance of spotting self-deception.

If we are fooling ourselves, a competent advisor can see this quickly. And, as he guides us out of our fantasies, we are surprised to find that we have few of the usual urges to defend ourselves against unpleasant truths. In no other way can fear, pride, and ignorance be so readily melted. After a time, we realize that we are standing firm on a brand-new foundation for integrity.

Let us therefore continue our several searches for self-deception, great or small. Let us painstakingly temper honesty with prudence and love. And let us never flinch from entire forthrightness whenever this is the requirement.

How truth makes us free is something that we AAs can well understand. It cut the shackles that once bound us to alcohol. It continues to release us from conflicts and miseries beyond reckoning; it banishes fear and isolation. The unity of our Fellowship, the love we cherish for each other, the esteem in which the world holds us – all of these and products of such integrity as, under God, we have been privileged to achieve. May we therefore quicken our search for still more genuine honesty, and deepen its practice is all our affairs.

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