

## **It's 7:45 am Do You Know Where Your Character Is?**

Along the main road I run in the morning there is one side street on the right that runs through a winding residential neighborhood. If one takes that side street, one can get to another through-street much more quickly than staying on the original road for another half-mile, and then taking a right to get to the same through-street. Oh, and, by the way there is a sign just before this side street that says, "No right-hand turn between 7:00 and 9:00 am." You can't miss the sign.

From time to time, I stop my run, pausing at this intersection and sign just to watch with curiosity. Most recently, I stopped for a 15-minute period (7:40-7:55 am), during which time eleven cars came by - seven made the right turn.

What piques my curiosity is what these folks are thinking, assuming they are, as they make the right turn. I'm sure we all can muse about their reasons, excuses, stories, rationalizations and justifications.

### **Character**

One definition of character is: who you are at 4:00 am in the dark when no one is watching. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "People seem not to see that their opinion of the world is also a confession of their character." How we are in the world - at work, at home, at play, even while driving is a reflection of our character, or lack of it. Character is a type of internal guideline, a moral compass that operates 24/7, 365 a compass that one cannot tinker with to change its bearings or setting. It always points to true north. Always. A flawed character has been tinkered with, like fooling with the odometer of an automobile, to give it the "appearance" of authenticity.

### **What muddies character?**

In a word pride, an inordinate sense of self-esteem, which often morphs into hubris, an exaggerated sense of self-confidence. What really happens when we become immersed in a sense of pride or hubris? Separation - separation from our True Self, our authentic self. And when we separate from our true and authentic self, we abdicate responsibility for accepting responsibility for how we live our life. When we abdicate responsibility for how we live our life, we lose our sense of self-respect. And when we lose our sense of self-respect, it follows we lose respect for life so rules of right conduct, right living and right relationship don't matter.

The Buddha writes: "The thought manifests as the word; the word manifests as the deed; the deed develops into habit; and habit hardens into character. So watch the thought and its ways with care, and let it spring from love born out of all concern for all beings, as the shadow follows the body, what we think, so we become."

When our pride - our ego - is in charge, our "thinking" often becomes warped and self-centered and our character suffers. Over time, as our character suffers, so does our reputation and we become known as one whose orientation to life and work is self-serving, self-centered, egocentric, and uncaring about others, doing what we need to do to "get by." It's all about "ME!" So, from this place, we circumvent the rules, we ignore principles of right living, and right loving, and assume inappropriate, and perhaps even illegal behaviors, with the justification that it's okay "as long as I don't get caught."

### **The one and the many**

So, that's one person - perhaps me. What happens when this one person, lacking true character, becomes ten, then 100, or more?

The strength of a team, or an organization, is represented by its character, the character of its people

(think Enron, AIG, WorldCom). What happens when a team, for example, loses its character? It begins to atrophy, to become dysfunctional, to engage in in-fighting and sabotage. It loses its way. The one and the many suffer. Its character has become corrupted.

Character is a reflection of moral purpose, or the lack of it, and reflects those classes of things that an individual, or group, or team either chooses or avoids. That is, one's character is constructed from what one does, or does not do.

### **Character and values**

There are basic principles of effective living for example, in the way we allow our True and Real self, honor and respect others, think rationally, help others succeed, listen with our heart, collaborate and cooperate, embrace diversity, protect the environment, see the meaning and value of work, treat others with respect, and act in moral alignment with compassion, integrity, justice and fairness and true character means integrating these principles into how we live our life, even at 4:00 a.m. when no one is watching. Character is determined by how closely we choose to allow our value system to integrate into, and affect, our lives - in every moment.

The foundational building blocks of character are integrity and courage. Once we become dishonest, even when no one is watching, then we lose all sense of character. Then, mistrust, lying, and deception define who we are. The toothpaste is out of the tube. Once we compromise our values, it is well-nigh impossible to regain or reestablish our reputation, credibility or integrity.

In the end, moral shortcuts, cutting corners, and "turning right at 7:45 am" will always - always - find a way to catch up. The Universe insures there is always payback for inappropriate and indecent behavior.

### **Blaming and excuse-making - "making the turn at 7:45 am"**

"But, I'm late for work."

"But, I didn't see the sign."

"I had a spat with my spouse and was distracted."

"A friend said it would be OK."

"I have an important meeting to get to."

Blaming and deflecting self-responsibility are art forms in our culture. Only now we're using the adult form of "my dog ate my homework." Doesn't wash. Our obsession with blaming and excuse-making is simply an indication of how we've become a nation of narcissists, victims and adult-children. Emotionally and spiritually mature adults are self-responsible, make conscious choices, and do the right thing. As Helen Douglas said, "Character isn't inherited. One builds it daily by the way one thinks and acts, thought by thought, action by action."

Every one of us faces issues and challenges every day - some complex, some simple - at work, at home, at play, in relationship, even on the road. Our character is tested when we make split-second decisions and choices about what to do, and not do, and why.

So, practically, or metaphorically, when you come upon the sign that says, "No right turn between 7:00 and 9:00 am," and it's 7:45 am, where is your character?

### **So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- What matters to you?
- What blocks you from acting in integrity?
- What do you most want in life?

- "Do the right thing" vs. "Do things right" - which drives your everyday actions?
- Do you believe you have character? What would your colleagues, friends, spouse/partner, and neighbors say?
- Have you lied, cheated or stolen recently? What was your rationalization or justification? How about running a red light, stop sign or a sign that says "no right turn...?"
- Do you use a different measuring stick to judge your inappropriate behavior from others' inappropriate behaviors?
- Who are you at 4:00 am in the dark when no one can see you?
- When did you first know you had character?
- What was "character" like in your family as you were growing up?
- Can you visualize a world where everyone operates with character?

*"Character is the foundation stone upon which one must build to win respect. Just as no worthy building can be erected on a weak foundation, so no lasting reputation worthy of respect can be built on a weak character."* - R. C. Samsel

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