



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Situational Integrity

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"Just how far can I go with what is being done and still maintain my feeling of integrity?"

You ask a good question. You are in a work situation in which your boss wants – expects – you to say and do things that just don't fit with your principles, nor seem wise to you. You feel as if you stand alone in your opposition, or else you are the only one who expresses it in any way.

You would like to resign, but, because of other responsibilities, as well as what you can do on the job, resignation is not a feasible way out. So you have to find a way to stay in the situation, and, at the same time, feel O.K. with yourself. That is the dilemma you face, isn't it?

The stress you feel in your dilemma is reflected in further questions.

"How do I change me so I can keep my head up, and still stay in the situation?"

"The issue of integrity? How do I keep that in perspective when I'm in a position of having to do and say things that are totally against my principles?"

They are hard questions, not quickly nor easily answered. And ultimately, each person answers for him/herself. However, I offer some thoughts for you to consider.

Those thoughts center in the issue of integrity, and I hope that I can respond helpfully to the kinds of questions that you have raised. It appears to me that the key question is, "How do I change me...?"

I start with a definition.

Integrity – A sound, unimpaired, or perfect condition. Quality or state of being complete or undivided. These are the words and phrases used in the dictionary. Among the words used in a thesaurus I have are uprightness, principle, self-respect, completeness, wholeness, coherence. All together, they add up to a single word – intactness. All of one piece, you might say.

So I suggest that integrity means feeling intact and staying intact – retaining my value system – remaining complete and undivided – keeping my sense of oneness – being all of one piece.

What gives me my sense of being complete and undivided? What enables me to feel whole and acceptable? What gives me my values? What results in my being all of one piece?

My sense of myself and of my world for one thing. That which is valuable and worthwhile to me. The right relationship of things. The proper order of things. My

principles. My keystone beliefs. What I consider to be appropriate ways for people to deal with people. That that holds it all together. All these contribute to the structure that enables me to be all of one piece.

When some part of the structure is threatened, the whole is threatened. I am threatened. I feel impelled to take steps to preserve it and keep it safe, and to keep myself intact.

So when I talk about integrity in the face of situations that are against my principles and how I understand things to be, I mean that I am seeking ways to feel intact, and to stay intact despite the situation. I don't like feeling fragmented and torn. I don't like feeling that my structure is threatened. When I do, I look for ways to resolve the situation.

I know you believe you can't stay in the situation you describe, and still feel O.K. with yourself. You are called upon and expected to do and say things that do not fit with your principles, and hence, do not contribute to preserving your sense of integrity. While the immediate solution seems to be to move out of the situation, you aren't free to do that either.

While the situation you describe is specific for you, it seems to me to be a fairly typical one. For instance, I live in the United States and benefit from doing so. At the same time, the way the government is run, and the way in which people interact with each other, is very different from my standards and principles and how I believe it is best for it to be. In this situation I feel rather helpless to say or do anything that will have any significant effect on changing the general situation in this world of which I am a part.

I have a decision to make. I either go along with how things are, or I try to make them different, or I remove myself from the situation. For whatever reasons, I do not want to remove myself from the situation. Neither do I choose to "make waves." That would only stir things up and produce even more of the sorts of situations I would like to change. So I go along with how things are without much protest. And I intend to continue to live in the United States.

"So, how do you keep your sense of integrity under such circumstances?" you ask.

In the first place, I don't want my sense of my integrity to be dependent upon externals. I don't want conformity, nor nonconformity, to the externals to be what determines or declares my integrity or lack of it. I want my sense of being complete and undivided within myself to be the key.

If my sense of integrity is tied to my internal sense of myself, then I can face the situations in which I am, make decisions about how to be involved, and keep my sense of integrity.

"But," you say, "My boss requires that I do and say things that go against my principles. As much as I would like to, I can't resign. And I feel like I will be selling myself short if I conform to his demands. I am forced to follow his orders. How do I deal with that situation and keep my sense of integrity?"

You do have a lot at stake. You need income. You want to be doing what you are doing. You believe that your encounters with those you serve are beneficial to them, and hence, are a valuable service. If you protest and create conflict, or if you simply resign, you don't really improve the situation. You only remove yourself from a work and a service that you want to perform. And you risk the possibility of other unfavorable results.

The only feasible alternative appears to be to do and say what the boss requires.

"Can I do that and keep my integrity?" you ask.

You are nothing if not persistent – and maybe a little impatient with me. I'll try to answer more specifically.

You may not be able to do what the boss requires.

If I believe that the preserving of my integrity means that I must take a stand, then I must take a stand – at whatever cost to me and to those with whom I am involved and about whom I care.

If I see little value in taking the stand, and see mostly damage done, I am free to decide not to take the stand – to avoid creating a disturbance or cancelling my influence all together – and to go about doing what I am able to do within the context of the situation.

I raise the question with myself as to what my real intent is in doing and saying things that are against my principles. Is it because I am afraid of what might happen to me? Is it because I bitterly dislike conflict situations? Is it because I can't stand disapproval? Or is it because I want to stay in the situation and be as influential as I can be?

Maybe I can find a way to make the things that I do and say conform to my principles.

When I was in seminary, I had a class in Reformed Theology. One day, someone in the class asked the professor who was teaching it if he believed what he was teaching. The professor was silent for a few moments. Then he replied, "I am teaching a course in Reformed Theology, not a course in what I believe."

Maybe what the seminary professor said offers a solution.

If I represent the boss, I may choose to take the stance that this is the position of the administration. Therefore, it is my duty and responsibility to maintain that position. My agreeing or disagreeing is not at issue.

What I have suggested is a specific in the work situation. It has implications far beyond that. For instance, I accept the protection of this nation even though I am unalterably opposed to war as a way of dealing with human differences. Even so, I pay taxes, and thereby support the military. Doing so doesn't seem to express opposition to the war.

If I refuse to pay taxes because I oppose war, I only get in trouble. I don't affect the policies of our government. I don't cause wars to cease. I only create difficulties for myself and those dependent on me. And I lose any power I might have to influence anyone to stand against war with me. In fact, I lose the possibility of having any other kind of positive effect on my world. So I choose to pay taxes even though some of that tax money goes to support the military.

Or, to use another illustration.

While I know that I am out of step with much that is the perceived position of the denomination of which I am a member, I choose to remain a member and to go on about my work in full awareness that what I believe is different than the commonly expressed beliefs. Until people get to know me, they assume I hold those common beliefs. I have chosen to be faithful to who I am and what I believe, and express it as a member of the denomination. I do not want to be a protester and demonstrate my protest by ceasing to be a member.

I don't expect to change those perceived beliefs, whichever ones they happen to be. I don't even expect to challenge them in any overt way. Nor do I expect to have any profound effect on the general positions of the denomination. I believe that I would have very little positive influence if I declared my disagreement and, in protest, dropped my membership. I do expect to continue to express my beliefs. I also expect to state the beliefs of my denomination when the situation calls for me to do so. It just may be that I will influence some people, stimulate them to examine their own beliefs, and encourage them to clarify them.

What I have said holds true for me even in the close ties of friendship and family. I face the reality that not even those with whom I am closest see and believe the same as I in every particular. Our principles and our values differ. If I tie my integrity to the requirement that mine be the ones that prevail, no matter what yours may be nor how important to you, I can keep my integrity, but I will surely lose the relationship.

Maybe some adjustments and some accommodation of each other are indicated. Maybe I can make it one of my principles to take the other person and position into account. Maybe I can allow myself to see the wisdom of taking the whole situation into consideration as I decide my response.

In the process, I see what I am doing. I accept full responsibility for the decisions that I make. I function as I function. I adhere to my sense of myself and to my belief in my completeness and my undividedness – in other words, I keep my integrity.

Situational Integrity. I know the beliefs and principles that I am not willing to compromise. I give attention to the components of the situation. I remind myself of my goals and my options. I consider the greater good – what I may, and may not, be able to accomplish. I examine the possible effects of what I am considering doing – both helpful and harmful. I investigate the potential for achieving the goals I have in mind. I decide what adjustments and what concessions I am willing to make – and I make them. Then I get on with my life, secure in the knowledge that I have done what I can to cope with the situation and to keep my sense of integrity.

Let me restate what I have said.

I believe myself to be a person of integrity. I am in a situation that involves much that I do not like, and of which I do not approve. To speak out strongly against it would only create conflict and possibly havoc. I do not have the power to change the elements of the situation that I would like to change – not by speaking out against them. I need and want to stay in this position, both to be successful in the work I am doing and to have the income it provides. Therefore, I will accept that there are some things that I do not like and cannot change. I will also accept that there are things I do like, and do not want to change. By staying, I believe I can make a worthwhile contribution. I will be as clear as I know how to be in my encounters with the various persons involved, and as accepting of them (though not agreeing with them) as I am able to be. In all of that, I am and will continue to be honest with myself about what's going on with me and what it is that I am deciding to do and be, and why.

By so doing, I preserve and feel my intactness – my integrity.

Preserving my integrity in this way may not result in my being at peace with myself. For whatever reasons, I may still hold on to my preoccupation and upset with the situation. This may not be a matter of integrity at all. It may be because I am unwilling to accept the situation as it is. It may be because I have made my sense of myself dependent upon those external factors. If I have, then, intentionally or not, I require that other persons hold my values and act on my principles so that I can keep my views (my integrity) intact.

But other people don't take me into account that way.

How do I turn loose? How can I be at peace with myself when I am in a situation that goes against what I believe and that requires me to conform?

Both peace with myself and integrity are internal factors. Even if I am able to make my external world like I want it to be, my internal world must be intact for me to be at peace with myself.

My internal world is intact when I am aware of what I believe and why. It remains intact and unthreatened to the degree that I am able to keep examining and updating that belief system, and accept that it does not necessarily – and does not need to – conform to anyone else's system. Nor does the other system have to change to conform to mine. My world is intact when I acknowledge and accept myself and others where each of us is without needing to change either of us.

How do I get there? By decision. It sounds simple but isn't easy. I confront my beliefs, attitudes, reactions and requirements. I validate, or change them, based on my own understandings and not on those of someone else, although I take theirs into account. I accord to every other person the right and the responsibility to do the same. I face the reality that we are not necessarily in agreement. I decide that I am O. K. where I am and you are O.K. where you are even though we may be in very different places. I accept that I cannot require you to conform to me any more than you can require me to conform to you. I remind myself that every person's value is intrinsic, including my own. I choose this as my outlook on life and know that it is sound and dependable.

When I choose such an outlook on life, I have established my foundation. I know who I am. I know what I believe. Within what framework, I am able to enter into every situation of my life with integrity, participate as I choose, and be at peace with me. I remind myself, however, that this is not a one-time decision. I must renew it day by day and situation by situation.

This is one answer to your question, "How do I change me...?" Does it make sense? I hope it does. Is it a reasonable answer? I hope it is.