

ACTIVE INTEGRITY

by Peter Sheldrake

A few years ago, Stephen Carter, a Yale University professor of law, published a book titled 'Integrity'. In it, he set out a series of steps that defined what he considered to be the essential attributes of integrity:

“(1) *discerning* what is right and wrong; (2) *acting* on what you have discerned, even at personal cost; and (3) *saying openly* that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong.”

The more I have reflected on this definition, the more persuaded have I become of its value, and especially the *active* element that this entails: that real integrity requires that you both 'talk the walk and walk the talk'!

There are many people who have acted with integrity, in the terms that Carter sets out, but let me use as my example Nelson Mandela. The following extract comes from the court testimony Nelson Mandela gave when 'accused number one' of 11 people on trial for complicity in over 200 counts of 'sabotage aimed at facilitating violent revolution and an armed invasion of the country.' Faced with the possible sentence of death, he stated:

“Having said this, I must deal immediately and at some length with the question of violence. Some of the things so far told the court are true and some are untrue. I do not, however, deny that I planned sabotage. I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by whites.”

This extract comes from a remarkable speech, which is reproduced in full in 'Long walk to freedom' in which Nelson Mandela carefully examines what is right and what is wrong, decides on a course of action that was recognised as illegal, and accepted as such, and was willing to state all of this in court, fully aware of the situation in which he was placed.

It is a graphic example, but, of course, it is also an extreme one. Not many people find themselves in a situation where they are dealing with such momentous issues, nor called to account in such a significant manner. However, we all face situations of a less dramatic kind where leading an ethical life demands *active integrity*. Let me give some examples.

My first comes from work. Imagine the following situation (it's not hard to imagine, it happened to me many years ago). A work colleague is filling in a petty cash slip for the reimbursement of expenses, and includes a claim for a business lunch - whereas he was, in fact, taking a friend out to lunch at the company's expense. You demur - and he points out that "it's not a problem, everyone does it". What does integrity demand?

At the time, I believed that integrity was simply about doing right: I thought about what I had seen, and determined that I would not do such a thing. Now, today I would call that passive integrity. It is an approach that - in part - meets the first two of Carter's criteria.

Active integrity is much more demanding. Adopting active integrity would mean that you should do two more things. First, at the time I should have made it clear to my colleague that, if he persisted, I was going to tell the appropriate person that the claim was a misrepresentation - after all, my colleague was defrauding the company (and, incidentally, the Australian Taxation Office). Second, I should have told people that this was the case, and that I would do the same thing if I saw any other such claims being submitted. However, let me add that, even at this relatively minor level, these are very difficult things to do: it is hard to buck a company culture, especially if it is deeply embedded, and, further, in Australia we have a long tradition of not 'dobbing in one's mate'.

Perhaps another case study will make it clear how embedded views can make active integrity challenging. Many people are asked to provide references for people they know - it is a major activity for any manager, teacher, doctor, etc.. The difficulty is not in discerning what is right and wrong - usually, you know the person well, and have a reasonably good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses - but rather in being able to act on that knowledge, ie. give a truthful reference. Now, it is easy to respond at this point 'but everyone knows that references are always written in a positive fashion, but they are written in *code*: the code tells you what the real assessment is'. There are two difficulties with this. First, if *everyone* knows the code, why bother to use it - just tell the truth? Or, if this is not the case, how do you know that the recipient of the reference is able to 'decode' what you have written?

Again, let me quote from a real example. Some years ago, I received a reference for a candidate for a senior position, and the applicant was based overseas. It was a very positive reference, and, in addition to quoting the person's intellectual and work attributes, noted that he was "fond of good food and wine", as I am, too. He was an outstanding candidate, in due course he was appointed. To my chagrin, it took me some six months or more to realise he was an alcoholic. I did not know the code.

Another approach I have heard proposed is that you only mention the good points - so that the reader of a reference has to deduce that there may be some areas in which a person is less than ideal (or are they things you forgot to address in your reference?). This latter approach is not passive integrity, by the way, it is simply misleading.

Active integrity is, again, quite demanding. We should provide references that tell the recipient, as best we know, what we can say about the strengths and weaknesses of an applicant, and we should tell would be applicants that this is our policy. It is an approach I have tried to follow in recent years - but one from which it is easy to slip.

Let me finish by exploring one more area of application of the idea of active integrity, both to emphasise its importance, and to underscore the challenges that leading a life of integrity can confront. In our interpersonal lives, especially between partners, active integrity is central to developing sustainable long-term relationships. One of the most important acts that many of us perform is to decide to marry, and to commit to a relationship until parted by death. To marry with integrity is to make that commitment knowingly, on the basis of considered reflection, and then to be willing to lead a life that demonstrates that commitment.

Active integrity in marriage does not just mean 'telling the truth'. The key phrases in Carter's definition are "discerning what is right and wrong", and then "acting on what you have discerned, even at personal cost". A marriage is an arrangement of mutual interdependence, and so assessing what is right and what is wrong, and then deciding how to act requires that you examine the situation both through your own eyes, and those of your partner. Again, let me give an example.

The prototypical example in this area is one of the partners in a marriage having an affair. Clearly, that action was in itself wrong: it is an action that is damaging to the relationship between husband and wife, and it is an action that is demeaning to the 'innocent' partner. It is neither sufficient nor acceptable to just 'tell the truth'. A response of integrity would be one where there was a real attempt to heal the breach that has been caused, and restore the relationship between the two people concerned. You will notice that I did not suggest that the person who had the affair should leave, and get divorced - that is an undesirable outcome, and only to be the result in the extreme. However, it is not enough, either, just to try and patch things up 'for the sake of the children' (as is one commonly stated approach): the demands of active integrity are not met by appearances - they require that you act, and say you act, on the grounds of what is right to do.

In advocating these views, incidentally, I do not want to give the impression of being some kind of paragon of virtue. At times I write nice references, and do not give the task the time and reflection it deserves. I do break the speed limit in my car from time to time (though less so as I get older). However, I try very hard to follow the rules of active integrity, and, even if I fail at times, I keep on trying to do better. Active integrity is unflinchingly demanding, but, to misquote from Tawney (whose theme was equality - not integrity):

*"It is true, indeed, that even such **integrity**, though the conditions on which it depends are largely within human control, will continue to elude us. The important thing, however, is not that it should be completely attained, but that it should be sincerely sought."*