

The Integrity Wheel—The Informative and Formative Influences on Us



Dedication

To all those, teachers, pastors, students, friends, and family who have contributed to my sense of what it means to have, be, and do integrity.

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Introduction

How is it we have come to be who we are at any given moment in our lives? Particularly with regard to how we act, how we think? And, most importantly, what is the shape of our character, our personality, the “who I am” package of values, attitudes, and actions?

We may respond like Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, “I s’pect I growed. Don’t think nobody never made me.” This perspective has been projected through phrases like “I’m self-made;” “I’ve pulled myself up by the boot straps;” even, “I don’t need anybody else to have a good life.”

The other extreme, of course, is a response something like, “There is no I in team;” or, “Everybody is a participant and contributor;” perhaps, “Ours is a symbiotic relationship.”

To put the idea in ecclesial terms, the world religions have hermit-like personalities move through their history. For the most part, though, a collective, a collaborative, groups of mostly like-minded/acting people find expression in world culture. The history of Christianity, for instance, has moved along with both types. The singular figure extending the Gospel in sometimes peculiar ways to the rest of us becomes more of a rarity the closer we get to our own time. Groups—which are made up of individuals--live, work, worship together through a monastic configuration. Then, we have congregations, which usually reflect their surrounding culture according to the traits that mark their existence.

The self-made person simply doesn’t exist. Every one of us is the product of the coming together of substance, concepts, shaping, contributed first by two human beings. Genetic messages come together with external and internal physical expressions. The influence goes deeper than the cellular levels, too. Molecular disposition, for instance immunity or not, how stress on that

individual's system is registered and what kind of response is given has shaping going on. More and more socio-biologists are able to demonstrate connections of not only physical appearance but ways of thinking that cross generations, cultural and political boundaries.

Indeed, we, each one of us, is the product of lots of contributors to who we are.

Particularly, though, as we become more cognizant of our surroundings, conscious thought, capability of identifying and interpreting what comes upon us, we can be more alert to what things are both informational and formational. And, of course, these two terms are so closely knit we can't determine which is what in many cases and contexts. We read, we absorb, and we are different—we have been informed and formed. A phrase from a course in education years ago still sticks in my mind: "learning is a joyful thing."

Thus, this book intends to draw attention to some of those informative and formative influences in our lives. The perspective offered comes from one who is a Baptist Christian. The influences given attention, however, move beyond any particular faith tradition as they are reviewed in their broadest, most generic states. There is not overstatement in saying these influences have archetypal qualities about them. Thus, the essence of them can be seen across humanity. Such realization can be a helpful idea as to how can we make connection, conversation, even collaboration in our global culture.

I have learned that I cannot assume everyone, especially in theological and congregational settings, understands the two main words of the title *Integrity* and *Wheel*.

Integrity—what is it? The term has come to be used as a moving target. Sometimes overused; sometimes underused. It is derived from the Latin idea of integer—wholeness, completeness.

Often people talk about another as being truthful, has integrity, is humble, is generous with others, has integrity, is kind, has integrity . . .

And, when asked, “Why do you include ‘integrity’ redundantly?” Their reply is, “Well, you can’t say ‘integrity’ enough.” Actually, one can. Equated with any of the value-virtue concepts we know diminishes “integrity.” Integrity is the compilation, the whole package of value-virtues. For Christians, the first reference point of visualizing “integrity” is being acquainted with the life and work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Jesus identified himself and was by others as being the fulfillment of all those value-virtues in the Old Testament.

With this little book, the idea of integrity is explored through some of the major shaping influences in our lives. Each of these shapers can be explored so as to demonstrate how they have facets of value-virtues of their own. Especially the value-virtue component comes to light with each component as biblical-theological themes find not only quick illustration but also core meaning.

The theme of informative and formative influences more than implies that our lives are in process. The use of the term “absolutes,” though quick and easy, gives little help for lives that move in the midst of myriad options and value conflicts. Absolutes has been and continues to be a buzz word. The idea is that life’s choices are this or that, either-or—an easy verbalization for preachers, presenters, writers to make. But, those who are in the contexts of daily life, including those mentioned already who should admit to the advice of either-or being mostly false, know that every day faces us with matters, values, attitudes we’ve seen before and not seen before. Demand, tension, is on us to side, vote, lean toward, make choices in the complexities of these demands.

It is in this demand context where we may feel the least integrated, rather mostly fragmented and drawn to this, that and the other choice. The search for integrity, feeling and being whole is at the core of every theological and ethical system known to humanity.

A wheel—the image, a simple associative device, is one way to demonstrate the constellation of values that move in us, through us, about us, with us, on us.

The genius of the wheel was not necessarily the product of “cave man” technology. Not until the Babylonians came along who imagined the matter of an axle, something for the wheel to move a weight, was what we know as the wheel became productive. Now, all sorts of things reflect wheel and axle technology: turbines, propellers, gears, merry-go-rounds, revolving doors, any kind of wheel on any mode of transportation: bicycles, car, roller blades. In the 21st century, one will have a great deal of difficulty imagining life, in any culture, without wheels.

Admittedly, any metaphor, even the wheel and axle as metaphor, breaks down at some point.

The imagery cannot sustain too many layers for interpretation and application that connects the points, examples, dynamics, concepts.

Another way to describe the idea of a metaphor is that none carry any magical or mystical way of solving conundrums we face. In the case of the wheel and integrity, the wheel and its spokes are meant to be associative devices, visual keys. As well, with the sense of a wheel and axle and their principle of physics in mind, the metaphor can be imagined as in motion—which is how one gets advantage with a wheel, motion. Energy is applied to an axle, which transfers the energy to the wheel through the spokes and the wheel turns—where the rubber meets the road, for example, with a vehicle. Where the rubber meets the road also includes the idea of where,

when, and how we apply the energy of the choices we make, both consciously and unconsciously.

Obviously, then, there is a sense in which our decision making is made in motion, on the fly, even fly wheel, if you please.

The search, the process, the review more than implies that we live out of the impact of these influences as if we have no will or say about them. To some degree, that is the case; but, the individual, the group, the congregation must invest at least five dynamics to gain benefit from understanding these influences. **Identification** may seem to be the easiest of the points of engagement, but layers of enculturation, mis-identification, for instance, may have to be penetrated. **Description**, though sounding a bit like identification, requires further examination of an idea, a concept, a dynamic. Turn the idea so as to examine it from another perspective. As well, **analysis** is somewhat descriptive but moves the process further, deeper, more broadly. **Interpretation** of one's findings to this point calls for comparisons, the variety of meanings, surfacing. Finally, one must **apply** these meanings. Identification, description, analysis, interpretation, and application happen not necessarily in a lock-step fashion. Rather, the movement may be all at the same time coming to the fore, and further sorting is required.

With these thoughts in mind, this little book will be useful for preachers, Bible study groups, and congregation-wide efforts toward finding out a little more about who they are and what they can do about that context. But, the ideas can be considered individually with some self-identity, which no doubt will have import for interaction with others.

The chapters follow a simple outline of the informative/formative influencers in our lives. The hub of the integrity wheel is worship. The first spoke reviewed is calling, followed by heroes-

heroines, memory/hope, place, loss, and blessing. A conclusion will make attempt toward suggestions of how these themes find interface and application in our daily lives.

All the best as you make your way through the content toward identifying the informative and formative influences in life and what they can mean for each and all of us.

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