

WHERE HAVE YOU GONE, JOE DIMAGGIO?

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In the wake of the scandal that forced Eliot Spitzer to resign as Governor of New York, the Worship Committee and I began discussing the topic of integrity.

We spent a little while together discussing the many questions that could be explored on this topic.

We started abstract: What does it mean to have integrity? Is there an absolute standard by which “integrity” or “authenticity” can and should be judged? Does the notion of being true to oneself include the bad things we’re tempted to do? Can an over-emphasis on integrity lead to limiting our potential for self-growth? It was heady stuff.

And then we discussed some of the specific questions we were struggling with: Which was worse: for Eliot Spitzer to have acted in violation of what our society presumes his marriage vows to have been, or for him to have created in our minds an image of him as the law-enforcer only to violate the very laws he was trusted with upholding? It’s not like he didn’t know better, right?

We quickly got to what for many of us was the most troubling part of this (and many other scandals): how could he have violated the trust put in him by the public?

To be sure, we were mad at him. It’s not like any of us were his wife—we were (most of us at least) citizens of the state he was elected chief executive of. But because he had been entrusted with a larger good, his dalliances were more than just trysts. Because he had presented himself as Mr. Law And Order before becoming Client #9, his lawbreaking was more than just a victimless crime.

Let’s face it: he was cheating on the State of New York.

How could he have done this to us?

But it’s not like we thought we elected a super-human, did we? He was and is, after all, a fallible person entitled and expected to make mistakes. In that light, then, we had to ask ourselves if it is realistic (or even desirable) to expect public figures to behave beyond reproach?

Is it realistic (or even desirable) to hold them to a higher standard than the guy next door?

Is it realistic (or even desirable) to expect such standards from someone seeking to hold that much power?

Throughout the conversation (especially after we all agreed that exploring this subject would make for a worthy worship service), I heard music. The tune to an oh-so-familiar song from long ago. Doo-da-doo-doo-doo-doo-da-da-da....

It was 1967 when Paul Simon, in a song he was writing about a certain Mrs. Roosevelt, wistfully penned the lines “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you.”

Of course, we know the song better in the version that was released; the one that happened after Mike Nichols asked Simon for a song to be included in his new movie featuring a Mrs. Robinson.

In his song, Paul Simon looked back at a day when heroes could be heroes, and not complicated human beings with glaring faults.

“Why do we do this even as we know the attribution of heroic characteristics is almost always a distortion? Deconstructed and scrutinized, the hero turns out to be as petty and ego-driven as you and I. We know, but still we anoint. We deify, though we know the deification often kills, as in the cases of Elvis Presley, Princess Diana and John Lennon. Even when the recipient's life is spared, the fame and idolatry poison and injure. There is no doubt in my mind that DiMaggio suffered for being DiMaggio.

“We inflict this damage without malice because we are enthralled by myths, stories and allegories. The son of Italian immigrants, the father a fisherman, grows up poor in San Francisco and becomes the greatest baseball player of his day, marries an American goddess and never in word or deed befouls his legend and greatness. He is “the Yankee Clipper,” as proud and masculine as a battleship.

“When the hero becomes larger than life, life itself is magnified, and we read with a new clarity our moral compass. The hero allows us to measure ourselves on the goodness scale: O.K., I'm not Mother Teresa, but hey, I'm no Jeffrey Dahmer. Better keep trying in the eyes of God.”

In that 1999 column, written in the midst of our national sex scandal—between President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky—Simon concluded with these thoughts:

“In these days of Presidential transgressions and apologies and prime-time interviews about private sexual matters, we grieve for Joe DiMaggio and mourn the loss of his grace and dignity, his fierce sense of privacy, his fidelity to the memory of his wife and the power of his silence.” (Paul Simon, “The Silent Superstar,” *The New York Times*, 3/9/99, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F05EFDC113FF93AA35750C0A96F958260&sec=&spn=&pagewanted=1>)

Perhaps, suggests Paul Simon, what we long for are not the days when our heroes were actually super-human, but instead for the days when private things stayed private and we could pretend they were. He seems to be suggesting that we were better off for having unassailable heroes in our culture. Leave it to a professional storyteller to suggest that the myth is more necessary to our society than the human.

I'm not so sure.

Now, I tend to agree that sometimes we, as a society, suffer from TMI: too much information. But, like it or not, information is here to stay, and pretending someone is something they are not doesn't do any of us any good.

Mother Teresa had her faults, too. And I'm sure, somewhere, Jeffrey Dahmer had a good quality, right? Somewhere? Maybe?

So I don't think we do ourselves any good by inventing heroic personalities and projecting them onto public figures, be they politicians, sports stars, humanitarians or actresses.

I don't believe it does us any good to hold ourselves to an unattainable goal, be it some notion of purity and innocence that is smashed every time an affair is uncovered, or even the glorified myths that have become our notions about great religious figures. Jesus, after all, was a human too.

The Gospel of John tells us a famous story. There, it is written:

Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:2-7, RSV)

Now, you'll notice Jesus didn't pick up a stone himself. I think that's telling. We might strive to understand his teachings, we might strive to live a life that challenges power and promotes equality, we might strive to love everyone around us. But striving to emulate Jesus, even, doesn't mean wanting perfection. No, Jesus was a human too. It's just that no one wrote much about the things he did wrong.

I guess it's a good thing there wasn't an Internet in the year 30.

Which brings me back to this tricky notion of "integrity."

What does it mean to have integrity?

Some would argue that it means being true to some unwavering standard we set for ourselves. Some would say it is our attempt at coming as close as possible to some absolute moral ideal.

I agree with philosophers who see integrity as a delicate balancing act, involving our ever-changing relationships with others.

Philosophers Damian Cox, Marguerite LaCaze, and Michael Levine, in discussing the concept of integrity, write this:

"...we argue that integrity is a virtue, but not one that is reducible to the workings of a single moral capacity.... We take 'integrity' to be a complex... term. One gains a fair grasp of the variety of ways in which people use the term 'integrity' by examining conditions commonly accepted to defeat or diminish a person's integrity. Integrity stands as a mean to various excesses.

"On the one side we have character traits and ways of behaving and thinking that tend to maintain the status quo even where acting with integrity demands a change. These are things like arrogance, dogmatism, fanaticism..., preciousness, sanctimoniousness, and rigidity. These are all traits that can defeat integrity in so far as they undermine and suppress attempts by an individual to critically assess and balance their desires, commitments, wishes, changing goals and other factors.

“Thus, refusing to acknowledge that circumstance in a marriage, or one's passionate desire to write a novel, have dramatically changed (for whatever reasons) may indicate a lack of integrity—a giving in to cowardice for example, and a refusal to acknowledge new or overriding commitments....

“On the other side, a different set of characteristics undermine integrity. These do not undermine the status quo as much as they make it impossible to discern stable features in one's life, and in one's relations to others, that are necessary if one is to act with integrity. Here we have capriciousness, wantonness, triviality..., mendacity, hypocrisy, indifference.... The person of integrity lives in a fragile balance between every one of these all-too-human traits.” (Cox, LaCaze and Levine, “Integrity,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/integrity/>)

And some of those philosophers also call us back to an understanding of the heroic.

Philosopher Charles Taylor, argues that individualism is one of the three “malaises” eroding our social fabric. In his work *The Ethics of Authenticity*, he argues that we are losing our sense of connection to one another, and that this can have tragic consequences. Taylor asks us to judge ourselves not by internal standards of goodness or integrity, but by relational standards of how our lives are oriented towards others.

“According to Taylor, the loss of ‘a higher purpose’, of the ‘heroic dimension of the human life’ is connected with an extensive and integral reduction in a wider vision of the mission of mankind simultaneously connected with a new focus on ‘individual lives.’” (A. Schtulmann, “Book Summary: The Ethics of Authenticity,” found on-line at http://www.iadb.org/etica/Documentos/tay_etica-i.pdf)

Taylor argues that in focusing on individual integrity—the integrity found within oneself—our society is losing touch with our call to do something greater for all of humanity—something heroic.

And, ultimately, I think this is what is so shameful about the scandals plaguing public officials. Eliot Spitzer, Vito Fossella, Bill Clinton, whoever. What is so shameful is that they were thinking solely of themselves. The selfishness inherent in the things they did is what, ultimately, they should be judged by. How could they do that to us, indeed.

My integrity is not bound in some inviolable and unchanging notion of morality. It is based in how my actions affect the people I am in relationship with. My partner, my family, the congregation I serve, my community. And I'm OK with that.

We can and should judge ourselves by that standard. We can and should expect at least that much from those who claim to serve us, who claim to represent us, who claim to teach us, and who claim to want to create a better world.