

Pointing Fingers

Hardly a day goes by that newspapers, magazines, TV talk shows, and workplace water cooler conversation do not include some mention of notorious folks who have been accused of actions that are either immoral or unethical, but folks who maintain that I have done nothing illegal. There seems to be no end to the list of folks who wait their turn to point their accusatory finger at folks such as seven-time Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong, former Penn State Assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky, Goldman Sachs Director Rajat Gupta and former New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, to name a few.

I did nothing illegal.

Each of these individuals has concocted a story that allows them to rationalize, justify or deny their immoral or unethical behavior a story each used to absolve themselves of blame or guilt so they could create their own truth and not own their inappropriate behavior. Thus, their I did nothing illegal story or some flavor of it is simply a ploy to evade self-responsibility.

However, there's something more here in the groundswell of the masses who are quick to judge others. What's not being outed among those who aggressively assert their legal non-guilt in order to mask their unethical behavior is that this list does not include another individual, and that is Everyman you and me.

I am you.

From the boardroom on the 52nd floor to the mailroom in the basement, and on every floor in between, there is a me someone who has not taken the moral high ground, someone whose moral compass does not point to True North, someone who has their own story to justify their unethical, illegal or immoral behavior.

When we point our accusatory finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back to me."

When I read about those well-known perpetrators who are behaving immorally and unethically, my gut is to include everyman those among us who are not well-known, famous or infamous, but who are behaving badly nevertheless.

It's not the amount.

For example, folks who steal supplies from the office, pens and towels from hotels, cheat on their income taxes, call in sick when they aren't, spend company time surfing the Internet, refuse to pay vendors with trumped-up excuses," bilk clients out of more fees than they deserve, borrow intellectual property, keep two sets of books at home and the like. Each of these has their story (I have done nothing illegal.) which they tell to rationalize and justify their inappropriate behavior, behavior that is no more or no less egregious than the big-shots who appear in daily newscasts.

If one person steals 50 billion dollars while a number of non-notorious individuals find ways, for example, to steal small amounts, they are no less culpable. Their low road, or moral compass is no less off than the named personalities. It's not the amount. It's the behavior.

And those who say this is an apples-oranges comparison need to question their own thought-process, i.e., their own story about why they need to think that way, separating themselves from those who are behaving badly.

The point here is that these big fish were at one time small fish. When did the inappropriate behaviors they exhibited on the way up begin and how did the degree of inappropriateness increase? Taking their first drink, the alcoholic never dreams of becoming an alcoholic. Eating a first dish of ice cream, the slim never dreamed of becoming obese. Making an initial furtive glance, the innocent never envisioned having an affair. But they all have their stories that rationalize a next drink, a next dish of ice cream and a next glance and more. The way one stolen pen, or dollar, or idea or kiss leads to major acts that are immoral or unethical, perhaps not illegal."

So, for the Lances, the Rays, and for Everyman - you and me - what are *our* stories, and how did we come to create them in order to justify our immoral and unethical behavior?

So, while we point the accusatory finger at these others, at the same time its important that we muster the courage and strength to explore me - at whom we're pointing the other three fingers. What about me?

Integrity is like being pregnant.

Integrity is not a cloak we put on and take off when convenient. On when I accuse others; off - when I need to cut myself a little integrity slack in order to justify why I lie, cheat or steal. Integrity is like being pregnant. Either one is or one isn't. There's no such thing a being a little bit pregnant." or a bit less in integrity.

Many of us are quick to judge and criticize others who act without integrity, without ethics, without morality. But many of us are just as prone to separate from our core values when it's convenient. The question is: "Why?" What does acting out of integrity get me and what is the truth, the real truth about my story (my hypocrisy) I use to rationalize or justify my unethical or immoral behavior? Why am I so quick to point the accusatory finger at the Rays and Rajats, but turn a blind eye to my own unethical behavior?

No single snowflake ever wants to be responsible for the avalanche. Many of us are those snowflakes that contribute to the avalanche of blue- and white-collar crimes, misdemeanors and unethical behavior we are facing in this country. It's not just the Rays, Jerrys and Lances who lack inner moral compasses and choose the load road. As Pogo, said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." i.e., you and me.

Perhaps while standing on line waiting to accuse, we might take a moment and reflect on our own ethics, integrity and morality in how we are dealing with others.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Do you use a "story" to absolve you from guilt, shame or blame when you act out of integrity? How does your story make you feel?
- How do you feel when others who have acted immorally or unethically but not "illegally" state their rationalization or justification?
- Who or what usually takes you out of integrity?
- Does it ever bother you when you're out of integrity? How do you deal with the "bother?"
- Do you use the same definition to define integrity, ethics or morality for yourself and for others? If not, why not?
- How do you respond when others' unethical acts affect you?
- What was your experience around unethical or immoral behavior as you were growing up? How did these experiences make you feel?
- Can you envision a life where you never act immorally, unethically or out of integrity? What would that be like?

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