

MindTree

XLRI JRD T ATA  
FOUNDATION  
FOR ETHICS IN BUSINESS

On Integrity

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Father Casimir Raj, my dear students and members of the faculty, ladies and gentlemen:

The fact that you considered me worthy of delivering the 16<sup>th</sup> JRD Tata Oration is a matter of great honor to me and to MindTree Ltd. When I look at the list of people of eminence who have stood here before me, I feel humble. I am a person from a very ordinary family background. I was raised by a government servant with no great resources. I went to ordinary, vernacular schools and have average educational credentials. These do not give me a sophisticated worldview. So, I stand here to share simple thoughts as they have come.

To begin with, what does the term "integrity" mean? The Roget's New Millennium<sup>TM</sup> Thesaurus tells us that its synonyms are: candor, forthrightness, goodness, honesty, honorableness, incorruptibility, incorruption, principle, probity, purity, rectitude, righteousness, sincerity, straightforwardness, uprightness, virtue. The problem with the term is that it has many synonyms. As a result, we can be lost in the many possible interpretations. Sometimes, it is easier to understand what a term means by looking at the opposite of it. So, if you search for the antonym of integrity ? unlike the many synonyms, you will find just one word. It is "dishonesty".

So, integrity is the opposite of dishonesty.

Come to think of it, it is just an abstract concept. I sometimes wonder why only humans and not plants and animals and other life forms have to deal with the issue of integrity. And in men, why is it that the problem of integrity surfaces with more education, access to better amenities and greater material comfort? It is probably because animals live and die for themselves and, beyond passing on their genetic code, do not worry about hoisting their progeny on time. They rather vanish from the earth, than bribe someone so that their children can inherit it. So, I wonder, why humans have problems understanding the meaning of and practicing integrity, when a baboon or an ant does not have to.

I think it has got something to do with intelligence. When we have intelligence without reasoning, when we have the power to think but are not blessed with the capability to contemplate, we cross the line. It is a disease of the mind that afflicts us, a disease that spreads without physical contact. If I am corrupt, there is a high chance that my child will be.

Among men, those who are more primitive, more rural, less affluent and further away from urban settings, are less likely to be thinking about integrity ? they do not have to. They live in a state of innocence. 220 million people in this country live below the poverty line, they have no access to even the most minimum of health and sanitation and public services you and I consider our entitlement. They have waited for sixty years and would wait some more. They do not have the urgent desire to succeed at all costs. We cross the line because an intelligent urban mind decides to succeed at all costs.

I told you that integrity is an abstract concept. It is just an idea. There is a school of thought that says ideas are like genes. Genes have only one purpose ? to replicate themselves. When they fail, a race can get obliterated. Some genes survive; some do not. Just as genes replicate through DNA, ideas replicate through "memes". So, an idea like integrity requires what we will call "memetic continuity". Whose task is it to ensure the memetic continuity of the idea called integrity?

Traditionally, in this country, it has been the middle-class which has, over the years, been the protector of the particular meme, the genetic equivalent of the idea called integrity. It is easy to understand that. The poorest of the poor have been in a state of poverty and innocence. To the rich and the powerful in any society, integrity is a very optional thing. So, it is the people in-between, who are intelligent and given to contemplation of what is right and what is wrong who have been the custodians. It is they who transmitted the meme from one generation to the other because they had to "uphold the values". In that upholding of values, there was memetic continuity. I see that changing.

Today the same middle-class lives in a scarcity mindset. In this country, historically, there have been fewer resources and significantly more claimants. Take school seats, hospital beds, sleeper berths in trains, jobs in the government offices, residential plots within municipal limits, engineering college seats ? you name it ? for everything, there has been a mindset of scarcity. That makes an intelligent man standing in a long queue afraid. He is gripped by the fear of losing out ? the fear of the door closing just before his turn and someone saying, "Go home; the quota is over". So, he devises a way to succeed at all costs.

At that moment, the person contracts the disease.

The disease afflicts the mind. It suspends all reasoning and makes the individual justify the means for the end. Being intelligent, he conjures explanations that convince him, his family and friends that there is nothing wrong, everyone is doing it in any case and, it is a small price to pay after all! Soon, he becomes an expert at it and it even gives him a new power ? the power to dominate. It becomes a game. It becomes an addiction that creates a high each time the individual gets the satisfaction of crossing the line, of "buying out" someone.

Once the Chief Executive of a world-class manufacturing plant in India was showing me around. I asked the man how he manages relationship with the government. He told me in a matter-of-fact tone that either people in the government listen, or when an individual does not, they simply buy the person out. There was pride in the statement. Like the pride of a hunter. Or, a hit man. Forty years back, that man who joined the public sector steel industry as a graduate engineer trainee, child of a middle-class home, young and probably innocent and he was inducted into the fraternity of the afflicted. He had the choice to opt out but something in it gave him a sense of thrill and he has stayed back ever since. Today, he is diseased and will almost certainly pass on the disease to his children and many of those who come into mental contact with him. Why am I taking on the middle-class with such harshness?

A couple of years back, we selected a young engineer to join MindTree. He was quite obviously a cut above the rest to have made it through our rigorous test. After working with us for two years, he decided to prepare for his masters. He wanted to prepare well, so he decided to take a couple of months off. At MindTree, we have provision for unlimited sick leave. After all, if someone is sick ? he or she is sick. You cannot say, get well in a week because that is all the leave you have in your balance. So, he went to his hometown and sent in a medical certificate that he was very unwell. When the serious news reached us, someone in our People Function got worried enough to call the Doctor to enquire the well being of the engineer. The flustered doctor spilled the beans. She was approached by the engineer, who asked her to issue a false certificate, and she had complied. I requested that the engineer be called to meet me. When I asked him why he did what he did, he replied, "I did not realize I was doing something wrong." I was stunned. He is one of the best educated people on the entire planet; as a computer science engineer, he is one of less than 1% of all humanity in terms of education and exposure. And he was telling me that he did not realize that he was doing something wrong!

I do not know why but I asked him, what his parents did. After all, he was at home with them for months and they would have wondered how he had managed such a long spell of leave. His reply left me speechless.

He told me that both his parents were schoolteachers.



A couple of months ago, I received a letter from a state government official seeking a job for his son. Usually in the IT industry, we do not get too many such solicitations because people by now know that without mathematical and logical reasoning capability, you do not go past the written test. When I saw the sealed envelope of the state, I did not quite imagine what was inside.

Inside, there was the letter on the official stationery of the government. No sense of impropriety, no awkwardness. The man, not sure that the government's insignia would have sufficient impact on me, had gone a step ahead. He had stapled a packet of *mahaprasad* from the Lord Jagannath in Puri. This was the most audacious furthering of a personal agenda, putting the State and the Church together so that the son could get ahead.

My father had served the same State Government for all his life. We were raised to a very different standard. When I was a four-year-old, a government jeep was allocated to him. It used to be parked in the garage of the government quarter. He would not drive the jeep to office ? he told us that the government had not given it for his commute to work. It was for touring the interiors. We were forbidden from sitting in it, except when it was stationery. That man retired when I was in my eighth class and we came to live in my brother's quarter. He was a young IAS officer and was given a residential office. For the first time in our lives, there was a telephone at home. To me, the black rotary phone, connected to a manually operated exchange was mysterious and alluring. My retired father guarded it from my immediate elder brother and me so that we did not ever touch it. It belonged to the Republic.

When he was not guarding the phone, he was guarding the gate. His IAS officer-son was just about 26-years-old and though occupied the Sub-Divisional Officer's bungalow, still needed his protection. So he would stand there to ward off the occasional favor seeker. On one occasion, I have seen my retired father deal with one of them: a man with a large jackfruit and a big fish. He came and sheepishly wanted to leave his offering for the sahib. Father said very politely that he could not accept it, as he was a retired man. Perplexing logic. When the man persisted, father shouted at him, "don't you hear I am a retired man and cannot accept anything for the government any more? If you must leave that thing, leave it as an offering to the mango tree out there."

Away from the driveway, inside the compound was an old mango tree. Unable to get past the doorkeeper and left with the possibility of bribing the tree, better sense prevailed. The man left with his jackfruit and the fish.

From a little distance, the driver, the peon and the chowkidar saw the transaction. Governance was firmly etched in everyone's mind for such time as D.P. Bagchi IAS remained in the services of the state.



After 9/11, most of our clients started insisting on background verification check for people we recruit. Today, we have it as a mandatory process. Last year, we added a thousand people to the workforce. Of these, 700 joined us from other companies. Of the 700, 80 people were asked to leave after coming on board because they had faked employment information. They did not have to. They had qualified through our recruitment tests, which mean that they were technically good. But, somewhere, someone had told them that it is quite all right to fake ? a small gamble to get ahead in the race for an increment, a chance to go overseas, earn a few bucks more.



When we were just a year-old company, one of the senior most technical people, a man with a salary of \$200,000 a year, had fudged his phone bills for all of a thousand dollars. He was competent at work and a very nice person to get along with. When we asked him to leave, many people were distraught. Where, they asked, is the role of forgiveness at work?

To us, breach of integrity is like dealing with cancer.

Cancer occurs at a nanometer scale. It is a mistake in a molecule, an error in the DNA that programs our destiny. If you do not recognize that reality, one day that single cell replicates billions of time over till cancer colonizes the entire body and brings it down. Individually, each cell is no bigger than a nanometer.

We asked the man to leave for another reason.

Forgiveness would mean his continuance in the organization. Each time we would cross him in the corridor, meet him at the cafeteria and the conference room, our eyes would meet and he would know that we knew that he knew that we knew.

We did not want anyone wearing a MindTree badge walking around with a discounted self-esteem.

In our context, small is big. Just the way it is in the context of India today.



Last year, the honor of delivering the JRD Tata Oration was bestowed on a man named Dr. Peter Eigen, founder of Transparency International. This year, the Transparency International has come out with a report on petty corruption in India. Not the big scam. Not the heavy extortions. Small, petty acts of bribery involving the citizenry and government officials. Like the nanometer sized cancer cells, the nanometer sized acts of bribery added up to a neat Rs. 21, 068 crores a year.

I suspect that the number means very little to all of you here. So, let me tell you how much is Rs. 21, 068 crores. What could it buy you? Look at these numbers here.

Rs. 21,068 crores of petty bribery a year is:

- One-fourth of India's defense expenditure
- 10% more than the allocation for Ministry of Human Resources
- 20% more than the total central government receipts from service tax
- 33% more than assistance for central and centrally sponsored schemes
- Double of the plan expenditure on primary education
- More than 8 times of the allocation for Ministry of Science and Technology
- 90% of the plan outlay of Indian Railways
- Twice the total external assistance (net of re-payments) that India received in 2005-06

(This data has been taken from the Union budget and Railway budget documents for FY06 and FY07).

If the quantum has not yet made sense to you, let me share with you the economics of the Golden Quadrilateral project. The Golden Quadrilateral network will connect Kolkata, Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai in a network of 5,846 kilometers of multi-lane roads. This highway will interconnect many major cities and ports. It will help in industrial growth in all small towns along it. It will provide vast opportunities for transport of agricultural produce from the

hinterland to major cities and ports for export. This highway is expected to save 80 billion rupees per year through faster traffic movement, increased fuel-efficiency and improved trade.

For the golden quadrilateral and the north-south-east-west corridor combined, the funding requirements are estimated at Rs. 60,000 crores. Three years of petty bribery would be enough to deliver this project that would make the next seven generations of Indians remember us with gratitude for leaving them debt-free and more importantly, not infecting them with the virus that we have contracted.

No parent would want to pass on AIDS to their progeny. Why do we pass this one virus, deadlier in its impact because it can transmit even without physical contact and most often, infects a loved one?



Some time back, I was listening to three young Indians at a talk on integrity organized under the aegis of CII's Young Indian forum. They spoke with innocence on the subject and I am grateful for that. Each speaker spoke eloquently about how e-governance was the key to making India conquer corruption. Listening to them, I slumped in my chair. Adults had obviously told them what to speak ? they were standing in front of the audience, not to speak their mind but to make their mark. Because the adults who had helped them with their speeches and had intelligently coached them to speak on e-governance, had not told them about the great Indian power to trivialize things. We trivialize things like no nation can. No one told them that e-governance is a just a tool. Computers are dumb things that can do routine things faster. So, you apply them in a dishonest society and they would make it even more dishonest.

The country does need e-governance, but what about character? Is there something like e-character? E-character that could substitute my lack of integrity so that the computer can do e-governance and the golden era could dawn one more time?

Unfortunately, there is nothing like e-character. Governance can be "e-ed"; character can only be "me-ed". The system does not give me character ? if at all, I give it character. Only my family can give me character. Without that, e is an empty syllable.



I am not a social reformer. I am not a statesman. I am an ordinary Indian who has worked his way up doing the right things the right way. I do not know too much about things, I can only tell you what we do in our organization when we assimilate new MindTree Minds. Chairman Ashok Soota meets them in person and gives them a copy of the book, "All about Integrity". We have shared that book with you. And he explains to our people just four precepts:

- In business and personal dealings that affect business, we follow the rules. We use fair judgment where rules do not exist
- When we are in doubt, we actively seek help

- In moments of conflict, we do what is right and not what is convenient
- Our conduct can stand public scrutiny at any time without causing us embarrassment

My young friends, if you really pay attention to the letter and the spirit of what is said in these few words, seldom would you need to worry about your acts and their consequences. But, before I close, I must tell you about two deeply personal realizations and those would be my inheritance in your hands.



Many years back, I met a young woman professional who after many years of association, for some reason, decided to send a mail to me on a deeply personal subject. She wanted to tell about her past ? to just share it with another human being as part of her healing process. From her childhood, her alcoholic father had started physically abusing her. She was the victim of his drunken sexual lust until she was grown up enough to protest. I was speechless. She had never shared this with anyone in the world except her husband who must be a great soul indeed to have accepted her and loved her for who she was.

I knew her all along as an outstanding professional and an outstanding human being. She is a great mother and quite apparently a wonderful wife to her husband. Why am I telling you this story?

If ever life mistreats you and you are victimized, do not justify your loss of morality. Do not do unto others what wrong was done unto you.

Just because someone extorted money from you, held you at ransom and caused you a bruise or a bleed, do not do that to another human being. If ever life throws you in that situation, remember this story of a mother and wife who is healing the world and not spreading the wound. We have been endowed with higher intelligence so that we can see reason and choose our own path even when we are thrown into a dungeon.



Finally, I want to let you know that many times in life, you will wonder as to what you got by walking the right path. Your loved ones may even poke you from time to time, "You talked about honesty, integrity and values and morality. While you lived all that, look at who got all the promotions and the good postings and all the material rewards?"

In this country I find people who are dishonest and sometimes, effective. Then, there are some people who choose to be honest, but become ineffective. What good are they?

I do not believe in passive honesty.

You need to be honest and effective. If that entails struggle, it is the rite of passage. People like JRD Tata, Azim Premji, Narayana Murthy and Ashok Soota have proven that it is

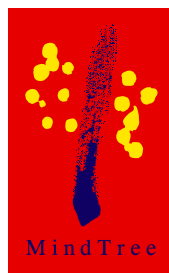
possible to be honest and effective even in a country like India.

At the same time, by leading a life of values, do not always expect the rainbow at the end of the journey. There may be no cheering crowds, no festooned high ground, no decorations ? all these may still be for those who decided to walk a path in which the means justify the end.

If ever that conflict dawns in your mind, know that people like JRD chose to be who they were without regard to the end state. In the end, you only look at yourself in your own eyes. Only you would know that you did not discount your soul.

That, my friend, and nothing else, really matters in the journey of life.

Father Casimir Raj, thank you once again, for bestowing on me the honor and the privilege of delivering the 16th JRD Tata Oration. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.



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