

STEPHEN L. CARTER

author of  
*The Culture of Disbelief*

# INTEGRITY

"Carter is the appropriate person to begin this discussion [on integrity]. He wrote with integrity long before he wrote about it."

—*New Republic*

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STEPHEN L. CARTER

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

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Published by arrangement with Perseus Basic Books, L.L.C.

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First HarperPerennial edition published 1997.

*Designed by Elliot Beard*

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The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:

Carter, Stephen L.

Integrity / Stephen L. Carter.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-465-03466-7

1. Integrity. I. Title.

BJ1533.I58C37 1996

170—dc20

95-44538

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ISBN 0-06-092807-7 (pbk.)

11 12 RRD 30 29 28 27 26 25

PRAISE FOR  
**INTEGRITY**

"*Integrity* is graceful and provocative and guaranteed to find an audience well beyond the halls of ivy."  
—*U.S. News & World Report*

"Carter . . . once more ascends to higher ground to discourse with his fellow citizens. The problem is that many Americans lack integrity, mainly because we do not know what integrity is. Masterfully, Carter dissects the word and pinpoints its crucial components: discernment, steadfastness, and forthrightness."  
—*Booklist* (boxed review)

"Carter . . . paints a disturbing picture of Americans all too willing to put short-term gains ahead of the long-term viability of this democratic experiment. His prescient analysis points to the potential of irreparable harm to the republic."  
—*Emerge*

"Well-conceived, well-reasoned, and skillfully executed . . . [Carter's] careful, articulate positions don't have ragged edges. . . . Readers won't be able to put it down. *Integrity* couldn't be more timely and is a must read for anyone interested in today's moral discussions."  
—*Bookstore Journal*

"I warmly recommend this timely and thought-provoking examination of the meaning of integrity and how we can build it into our own character and, by example, into our children's character. In fact, wouldn't it be wonderful if it became a cornerstone of our national life? What a difference it might make in our quality of life!"

—Marian Wright Edelman, president, The Children's Defense Fund

"*Integrity*—citizens rightly expect it of their leaders, who, in turn, promise it to their constituents. However, few pause to reflect on the meaning of integrity and its value in everyday life. In his book *Integrity*, Stephen Carter takes the time to do just that—to explain that victory without integrity is short-lived and that the long-term health of our representative democracy requires citizenship and leadership that act upon what is right, rather than what is popular."  
—Bill Bradley, former United States Senator

"We need virtues. Here is a book that makes a strong, detailed, compelling case for one core virtue. In doing so, it sets a model for others."

—Amitai Etzioni, University Professor, The George Washington University, and author of *The Spirit of Community*

"Stephen Carter's insightful mind and clear prose illuminate our failure to distinguish between the right to do something and the right thing to do. His book is a rare combination of intellectual and moral integrity."

—Newton N. Minow, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and author of *Abandoned in the Wasteland*

"Stephen Carter has written a thorough, insightful, and provocative book about an essential virtue—integrity—that many Americans fear is diminishing in our personal lives, in our culture, and in our politics. He has reinvigorated a necessary conversation."

—Robert H. Bork

"To read *Integrity* is to feel that Stephen Carter has invited you into his mind to discuss with disarming candor those issues about which he agrees with you, those with which he disagrees. He doesn't argue: he tells you what he thinks and believes and why, then seems to listen carefully as you do the same. Had he nothing worth saying, the visit might be a reasonable pleasant way to pass the time. But if he had nothing worth saying, I wouldn't have stayed up all night listening and answering back."

—John Cardinal O'Connor

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**I**T must seem odd to find a book by a lawyer—still worse, a law professor—on the subject of integrity. So let me make clear that integrity is something I only think about, not something I exemplify. I strive toward it, as I am sure most of us do, but I do not pretend to achieve it very often.

This book is written for a general not an academic audience. Although I hope to enrich our understanding of a virtue that most of us talk about and all of us value, I do not pretend to make a formal contribution to the scholarship in law or philosophy, still less in theology.

*Integrity* is the first of three books I plan to write about what I think of as “pre-political” virtues—that is, elements of good character that cross the political spectrum and, indeed, without which other political views and values are useless. First among these virtues is integrity, which gives meaning to all the rest of what we say we believe in.

As the reader will discover, I define integrity with some care, to include discerning the right and acting on it, not simply living a consistent life according to some arbitrary set of principles. In this I am inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s notion of *discipleship*. For Bonhoeffer, discipleship meant an unblinking obedience to God. For our public morality, it means an unblinking obedience to the right.

This is a hard test. Few of us can meet it very often; and I do not con-

sider myself one of the few. Yet the struggle itself is important. Indeed, I am persuaded that nothing but an all-out effort to demand integrity of our political leaders—and of their bosses, by which I mean *us*—will preserve democracy as we have come to know it in the century to come.

I am grateful to all those who took the time to talk with me about my ideas or the draft, especially Akhil Amar, Barbara Bradley, Lisle Carter, Bob Ellickson, Margaret Farley, Ronald Feenstra, George Jones, Paul Kahn, Tony Kronman, Jane Livingston, Jim O'Toole, Loretta Pleasant-Jones, and Reva Siegel. I have had the benefit of splendid research assistance from Yale Law School students Deborah Baumgarten, Kali Bracey, Heidi Durrow, Dina Friedman, and Lewis Peterson. I am also indebted to my editors at Basic Books, Kermit Hummel and Linda Carbone, as well as to my literary agent, Lynn Nesbit. Portions of this book are adapted from lectures I have delivered or articles I have published in scholarly journals. On those lectures and articles, I have been the fortunate recipient of helpful comments and suggestions from colleagues, listeners, and editors far too numerous to mention.

Finally, I must once more thank God for blessing me with a marvelous and supportive family: my children, Leah and Andrew, and my wife, Enola Aird, whose gifts of conversation and critique are of inestimable value and whose life and love continue to be my greatest inspiration. Without Enola, I could never have written about integrity.

*New Haven, Connecticut*  
*September 1995*

One final note: All quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version, with the exception of the quotation from Ephesians in chapter 9. That quotation, for reasons that its context will make clear, I have rendered in a more traditional form.

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# I

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## EXPLANATIONS

*The integrity of the upright guides them.*

—Proverbs 11:3



## THE RULES ABOUT THE RULES

**M**Y first lesson in integrity came the hard way. It was 1960 or thereabouts and I was a first-grader at P.S. 129 in Harlem. The teacher had us all sitting in a circle, playing a game in which each child would take a turn donning a blindfold and then trying to identify objects by touch alone as she handed them to us. If you guessed right, you stayed in until the next round. If you guessed wrong, you were out. I survived almost to the end, amazing the entire class with my abilities. Then, to my dismay, the teacher realized what I had known, and relied upon, from the start: my blindfold was tied imperfectly and a sliver of bright reality leaked in from outside. By holding the unknown object in my lap instead of out in front of me, as most of the other children did, I could see at least a corner or a side and sometimes more—but always enough to figure out what it was. So my remarkable success was due only to my ability to break the rules.

Fortunately for my own moral development, I was caught. And as a result of being caught, I suffered, in front of my classmates, a humiliating reminder of right and wrong: I had cheated at the game. Cheating was wrong. It was that simple.

I do not remember many of the details of the “public” lecture that I received from my teacher. I do remember that I was made to feel terribly ashamed; and it is good that I was made to feel that way, for I had some-

thing to be ashamed of. The moral opprobrium that accompanied that shame was sufficiently intense that it has stayed with me ever since, which is exactly how shame is supposed to work. And as I grew older, whenever I was even tempted to cheat—at a game, on homework—I would remember my teacher's stern face and the humiliation of sitting before my classmates, revealed to the world as a cheater.

That was then, this is now. Browsing recently in my local bookstore, I came across a book that boldly proclaimed, on its cover, that it contained instructions on how to *cheat*—the very word occurred in the title—at a variety of video games. My instincts tell me that this cleverly chosen title is helping the book to sell very well. For it captures precisely what is wrong with America today: we care far more about winning than about playing by the rules.

Consider just a handful of examples, drawn from headlines of the mid-1990s: the winner of the Miss Virginia pageant is stripped of her title after officials determine that her educational credentials are false; a television network is forced to apologize for using explosives to add a bit of verisimilitude to a tape purporting to show that a particular truck is unsafe; and the authors of a popular book on management are accused of using bulk purchases at key stores to manipulate the *New York Times* best-seller list. Go back a few more years and we can add in everything from a slew of Wall Street titans imprisoned for violating a bewildering variety of laws in their frantic effort to get ahead, to the women's Boston Marathon winner branded a cheater for spending part of the race on the subway. But cheating is evidently no big deal: some 70 percent of college students admit to having done it at least once.<sup>1</sup>

That, in a nutshell, is America's integrity dilemma: we are all full of fine talk about how desperately our society needs it, but, when push comes to shove, we would just as soon be on the winning side. A couple of years ago as I sat watching a televised football game with my children, trying to explain to them what was going on, I was struck by an event I had often noticed but on which I had never reflected. A player who failed to catch a ball thrown his way hit the ground, rolled over, and then jumped up, celebrating as though he had caught the pass after all. The referee was standing in a position that did not give him a good view of what had happened, was fooled by the player's pretense, and so moved the ball down the field. The player rushed back to the huddle so that his team could run another play before the officials had a chance to review the tape. (Until 1992, National Football League officials could watch a television replay and change their call, as long as the next play had not been run.) But viewers

at home did have the benefit of the replay, and we saw what the referee missed: the ball lying on the ground instead of snug in the receiver's hands. The only comment from the broadcasters: "What a heads-up play!" Meaning: "Wow, what a great liar this kid is! Well done!"

Let's be very clear: that is exactly what they meant. The player set out to mislead the referee and succeeded; he helped his team to obtain an advantage in the game that it had not earned. It could not have been accidental. He knew he did not catch the ball. By jumping up and celebrating, he was trying to convey a false impression. He was trying to convince the officials that he had caught the ball. And the officials believed him. So, in any ordinary understanding of the word, he lied. And that, too, is what happens to integrity in American life: if we happen to do something wrong, we would just as soon have nobody point it out.

Now, suppose that the player had instead gone to the referee and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I did not make the catch. Your call is wrong." Probably his coach and teammates and most of his team's fans would have been furious: he would not have been a good team player. The good team player lies to the referee, and does so in a manner that is at once blatant (because millions of viewers see it) and virtually impossible for the referee to detect. Having pulled off this trickery, the player is congratulated: he is told that he has made a heads-up play. Thus, the ethic of the game turns out to be an ethic that rewards cheating. (But I still love football.) Perhaps I should have been shocked. Yet, thinking through the implications of our celebration of a national sport that rewards cheating, I could not help but recognize that we as a nation too often lack integrity, which might be described, in a loose and colloquial way, as the courage of one's convictions. And although I do not want to claim any great burst of inspiration, it was at about that time that I decided to write this book.

## TOWARD A DEFINITION

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We, the People of the United States, who a little over two hundred years ago ordained and established the Constitution, have a serious problem: too many of us nowadays neither mean what we say nor say what we mean. Moreover, we hardly expect anybody else to mean what they say either.

A couple of years ago I began a university commencement address by telling the audience that I was going to talk about integrity. The crowd broke into applause. Applause! Just because they had heard the word *integrity*—that's how starved for it they were. They had no idea how I was

using the word, or what I was going to say about it, or, indeed, whether I was for it or against it. But they knew they liked the idea of simply talking about it. This celebration of integrity is intriguing: we seem to carry on a passionate love affair with a word that we scarcely pause to define.

The Supreme Court likes to use such phrases as the "Constitution's structural integrity" when it strikes down actions that violate the separation of powers in the federal government.<sup>1</sup> Critics demand a similar form of integrity when they argue that our age has seen the corruption of language or of particular religious traditions or of the moral sense generally. Indeed, when parents demand a form of education that will help their children grow into people of integrity, the cry carries a neo-romantic image of their children becoming adults who will remain uncorrupted by the forces (whatever they are) that seem to rob so many grown-ups of . . . well, of integrity.

Very well, let us consider this word *integrity*. Integrity is like the weather: everybody talks about it but nobody knows what to do about it. Integrity is that stuff we always say we want more of. Such leadership gurus as Warren Bennis insist that it is of first importance. We want our elected representatives to have it, and political challengers always insist that their opponents lack it. We want it in our spouses, our children, our friends. We want it in our schools and our houses of worship. And in our corporations and the products they manufacture: early in 1995, one automobile company widely advertised a new car as "the first concept car with integrity." And we want it in the federal government, too, where officials all too frequently find themselves under investigation by special prosecutors. So perhaps we should say that integrity is like *good* weather, because everybody is in favor of it.

Scarcely a politician kicks off a campaign without promising to bring it to government; a few years later, more often than is healthy for our democracy, the politician slinks cravenly from office, having been lambasted by the press for lacking that self-same integrity; and then the press, in turn, is skewered for holding public figures to a measure of integrity that its own reporters, editors, producers, and, most particularly, owners could not possibly meet. And for refusing to turn that critical eye inward, the press is mocked for—what else?—a lack of integrity.

Everybody agrees that the nation needs more of it. Some say we need to return to the good old days when we had a lot more of it. Others say we as a nation have never really had enough of it. And hardly any of us stop to explain exactly what we mean by it—or how we know it is even a good thing—or why everybody needs to have the same amount of it. Indeed, the only trouble with integrity is that everybody who uses the

word seems to mean something slightly different. So in a book about integrity, the place to start is surely with a definition.

When I refer to integrity, I have something very simple and very specific in mind. Integrity, as I will use the term, requires three steps: (1) *discerning* what is right and what is 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.<sup>3</sup> The first criterion captures the idea of integrity as requiring a degree of moral reflectiveness. The second brings in the ideal of an integral person as steadfast, which includes the sense of keeping commitments. The third reminds us that a person of integrity is unashamed of doing the right. In the next chapter, I will explain more about why I have chosen this as my definition; but I hope that even readers who quarrel with my selection of the term *integrity* to refer to the form of commitment that I describe will come away from the book understanding why the concept itself, whatever it may be called, is a vital one.

The word *integrity* comes from the same Latin root as *integer* and historically has been understood to carry much the same sense, the sense of *wholeness*: a person of integrity, like a whole number, is a whole person, a person somehow undivided. The word conveys not so much a single-mindedness as a completeness; not the frenzy of a fanatic who wants to remake all the world in a single mold but the serenity of a person who is confident in the knowledge that he or she is living rightly. The person of integrity need not be a Gandhi but also cannot be a person who blows up buildings to make a point. A person of integrity lurks somewhere inside each of us: a person we feel we can trust to do right, to play by the rules, to keep commitments. Perhaps it is because we all sense the capacity for integrity within ourselves that we are able to notice and admire it even in people with whom, on many issues, we sharply disagree.

Indeed, one reason to focus on integrity as perhaps the first among the virtues that make for good character is that it is in some sense prior to everything else: the rest of what we think matters very little if we lack essential integrity, the courage of our convictions, the willingness to act and speak in behalf of what we know to be right. In an era when the American people are crying out for open discussion of morality—of right and wrong—the ideal of integrity seems a good place to begin. No matter what our politics, no matter what causes we may support, would anybody really want to be led or followed or assisted by people who *lack* integrity? People whose words we could not trust, whose motives we didn't respect, who might at any moment toss aside everything we thought we had in common and march off in some other direction?



The answer, of course, is no: we would not want leaders of that kind, even though we too often get them. The question is not only what integrity is and why it is valuable, but how we move our institutions, and our very lives, closer to exemplifying it. In raising this question, I do not put myself forward as an exemplar of integrity, but merely as one who in daily life goes through many of the struggles that I will describe in these pages. The reader will quickly discover that I frequently use the word *we* in my analysis. The reason is that I see the journey toward a greater understanding of the role of integrity in our public and private lives as one that the reader and I are making together.

## INTEGRITY AND RELIGION

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The concept we are calling *integrity* has had little attention from philosophers, but has long been a central concern to the religions. Integrity, after all, is a kind of wholeness, and most religions teach that God calls us to an undivided life in accordance with divine command. In Islam, this notion is captured in the understanding that all rules, legal or moral, are guided by the *sharia*, the divine path that God directs humans to walk. In Judaism, study of the Torah and Talmud reveals the rules under which God's people are expected to live. And Christians are called by the Gospel to be "pure in heart" (Matt. 5:8), which implies an undividedness in following God's rules.

Indeed, although its antecedents may be traced to Aristotle, the basic concept of integrity was introduced to the Western tradition through the struggle of Christianity to find a guide for the well-lived life. The wholeness that the Christian tradition identified as central to life with integrity was a wholeness in obedience to God, so that the well-lived life was a life that followed God's rules. Thomas Aquinas put it this way: "[T]he virtue of obedience is more praiseworthy than other moral virtues, seeing that by obedience a person gives up his own will for God's sake, and by other moral virtues something less."<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, in a famous sermon, was more explicit: "[T]he nature of the covenant of grace gives you no ground, no encouragement at all, to set aside any instance or degree of obedience."<sup>5</sup>

But obedience to what? Traditional religions teach that integrity is found in obedience to God. Moses Maimonides put the point most simply: "Everything that you do, do for the sake of God."<sup>6</sup> And a Professor W. S. Tyler, preaching a sermon at Amherst College in 1857, pointed the way to