

## Standing for Something

When I was a second-year journalism student in Toronto, I had an assignment to write a story that would serve both as a Sociology term paper and a feature for the school's daily newspaper. I chose to research and write about the hippies that congregated in the area known as Yorkville village. It was the spring of 1968.

After many days of following leads from one interviewee to another, I found myself entering the living room of an apartment that was being shared by more than a dozen people my age. Technically, it probably was rented by one or two of them but it was home, at least for the moment, to many others.

The room was literally bare. I recall that there was not a stick of furniture; there may have been posters on the walls, but these would have been so typical of the times that I have no memory of attempts at decorating this rudimentary space.

What I do vividly recall were people sitting or lying on opened sleeping bags, some smoking, but mostly just hanging out and talking. The room became rather quiet as I entered.

I sat among them and began to ask questions about how they lived. Talk quickly became very personal. For each person, there was a story about values and meaning; about disillusionment and about a strange kind of hope that percolates through the shattered dreams of childhood.

One statement in particular lodged itself into my mind so vividly that it rushed at me the other day in connection with Matthew's gospel.

One young man proclaimed with a mix of didacticism and outrage, What I can't stand are the people who live in the burbs in fancy houses during the week and come here on weekends to act and talk like us, to listen to our music and say that they care about what we care about..

That was the year of large antiwar protests in the United States, including violent events at the Democratic National Convention, and of massive riots in Paris, begun by students but joined by many others.

My memories of 1969, the year in which I graduated, are also vivid. That was the year of childlike exuberance at a festival called Woodstock but anger still coloured the not-always peaceful demonstrations across North America and Europe. Like those that I met in Yorkville the year before, in their own misguided but sincere way, these young people were saying that life is about standing for something.

It may be a sign of advancing age. When I am touched by a passage in Scripture, it sometimes reminds me of something that I experienced when I was much younger.

Such was the case when I read recently the story of Jesus comparing two sons being sent out into the vineyard by their father. (Cf. Mt 21:28-32) The first replied that he would not but later went while the second promised that he would go but did not.

The telling of this story to people gathered in the temple, including the chief priests and elder who were challenging his authority, was a pedagogical device for Jesus. He asked his listeners, *which of the two did the will of the father?*

When I read this, a kind of sadness came over me because I am not at all confident that I am a follower of Christ in the manner of the first son who everyone agreed was the one who did most faithfully the will of the father. In fact, I am certain that I have many times simply avoided the tougher things that being a true disciple call for.

People who live on the margins of society are not all saints. Many of the people I met during my research assignment, those swept up by the euphoria of protest songs and rebellious styles were idealists; most naive and flirting with dangers that they could not see. But I believe that most were sincere in wanting to make a difference in a world that revolted them.

Some were like the people that Jesus referred to after telling the story about the two sons. He said, *Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John (the Baptist) came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.*

Righteousness is about right relationship with God but also with ourselves. Its about integrity, which is necessary for living authentically. It makes us effective when we are right and able to correct our actions when we are wrong.

Because our integrity is often compromised, it should not surprise us that some young people are reluctant to attend church as we think they ought to and to speak of God in terms that we think they ought to use.

Too often, they have been confronted to one reality that is spoken and another that is lived. Too often, they have seen the commandments flaunted by believers and the beatitudes buried under a crushing weight of self-absorption or self-righteousness that sometimes masquerades as religion.

On the other hand, music and movie idols notwithstanding, young people are often moved by people who speak with humility and whose boldness is in their actions. They are usually reluctant to act on that inspiration but, unless it is smothered by layers of compromise and rationalization, the lessons of moral courage and integrity endure and eventually these young people are often prompted by circumstances in life to take action in the name of truth and love as Jesus lived these values.

In a speech that was profoundly rooted in scripture, that was given while I was still in high school, John F. Kennedy listed integrity as one of four qualities of sound civic action: He said, For of those to whom much is given, much is required. (Cf Luke 12:48) And when at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each of us, recording whether in our brief span of service we fulfilled our responsibilities to the state, our success or failure, in whatever office we held, we will be measure by the answer to four questions: First, were we truly men of courage? Second, were we truly men of judgment? Third, were we truly men of integrity? Finally, were we truly men of dedication?

It is not hard to imagine these questions being asked by the Just King at the end of our lives. Were we people who displayed the courage to live according to our values, beliefs and convictions? Or did we confess one set of beliefs at church on Sunday and live by another order of values during the week with our neighbours and colleagues?

Were we people who applied sound judgment to the situations that we faced in our lives, in keeping with the wisdom of our faith? Or did we just buy in to what the world was selling at the time, the latest trend or the most popular ideology. Or did we just simply not think about what we did?

Were we people who lived according to our word, particularly the promises we made to God? Or did we accept as a so-called normal way of behaving to say whatever is expected of us and to feel free to act in contradiction with what we say?

And finally, were we people of passion for doing what is right? Or did we live with our heart in neutral gear, running but going nowhere?

To fool others, we must first fool ourselves. We may think we possess lot. This is particular true in wealthy industrialized nations. We have so much. But none of the things that we see do we in fact own. These can be lost in an instant. One only needs to think of the poor people of New Orleans who, without benefit of insurance or wealthy relatives, survived with nothing but the clothes on their back.

Indeed, all we truly own is our integrity. What we do with it will determine who we will be and what we will achieve.

The great 19th century essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, I cannot find language of sufficient energy to convey my sense of the sacredness of private integrity. Integrity is the unity between the person and his or her actions.

It is no wonder that a lack of integrity spells disaster in spiritual matters. The apostle Paul cared passionately about unity between persons.

To the Philippians, he wrote, If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, then make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Paul knew the blessings of unity and the pitfalls of disunity.

Does not unity between a person and their actions merit the same attention? Mind and action must be one for a person to be truly authentic, credible and effective. Words and actions must have the same love, being in full accord.

How often we hear the expression about love, Don't tell me; show me. Words have to mean something.

Each of us must stand for something. Jesus has never told me to my face that he loves me, but he shows me the depth and breadth of his love every day.

Each day, he asks the same of us. Do you love me? If so, then show me. Stand for something. Stand for me. Stand for Truth and for Love. When you do, I am standing by your side.

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