

CHAPTER I



Images of Integrity

Living “Divided No More”

Jack pines . . . are not lumber trees [and they] won't win many beauty contests either. But to me this valiant old tree, solitary on its own rocky point, is as beautiful as a living thing can be. . . . In the calligraphy of its shape against the sky is written strength of character and perseverance, survival of wind, drought, cold, heat, disease. . . . In its silence it speaks of . . . wholeness . . . an integrity that comes from being what you are.

—DOUGLAS WOOD¹

❧ Into the Wilderness ❧

Every summer, I go to the Boundary Waters, a million acres of pristine wilderness along the Minnesota-Ontario border. My first trip, years ago, was a vacation, pure and simple. But as I returned time and again to that elemental world of water, rock, woods, and sky, my vacation began to feel more like a pilgrimage to me—an annual trek to holy ground driven by spiritual need. Douglas Wood’s meditation on the jack pine, a tree native to that part of the world, names what I go up north seeking: images of how life looks when it is lived with integrity.

Thomas Merton claimed that “there is in all things . . . a hidden wholeness.”² But back in the human world—where we are less self-revealing than jack pines—Merton’s words can, at times, sound like wishful thinking. Afraid that our inner light will be extinguished or our inner darkness exposed, we hide our true identities from each other. In the process, we become separated from our own souls. We end up living divided lives, so far removed from the truth we hold within that we cannot know the “integrity that comes from being what you are.”

My knowledge of the divided life comes first from personal experience: I yearn to be whole, but dividedness often seems the easier choice. A “still, small voice” speaks the truth about me, my work, or the world. I hear it and yet act as if I did not. I withhold a personal gift that might serve a good end or commit myself to a project that I do not really believe in. I keep silent on an issue I should address or actively break faith with one of my own convictions. I deny my inner darkness, giving it more power over me, or I project it onto other people, creating “enemies” where none exist.

I pay a steep price when I live a divided life—feeling fraudulent, anxious about being found out, and depressed by the fact that I am denying my own selfhood. The people around me pay a price as well, for now they walk on ground made unstable by my dividedness. How can I affirm another’s identity when I deny my own? How can I trust another’s integrity when I defy my own? A fault line runs down the middle of my life, and whenever it cracks open—divorcing my words and actions from the truth I hold within—things around me get shaky and start to fall apart.

But up north, in the wilderness, I sense the wholeness hidden “in all things.” It is in the taste of wild berries, the scent of sunbaked pine, the sight of the Northern Lights, the sound of water lapping the shore, signs of a bedrock integrity that is eternal and beyond all doubt. And when I return to a human world that is transient and riddled with disbelief, I have new eyes for the wholeness hidden in me and my kind and a new heart for loving even our imperfections.

In fact, the wilderness constantly reminds me that wholeness is not about perfection. On July 4, 1999, a twenty-minute maelstrom of hurricane-force winds took down twenty million trees across the Boundary Waters.³ A month later, when I made my annual pilgrimage up north, I was heartbroken by the ruin and wondered whether I wanted to return. And yet on each visit since, I have been astonished to see how nature uses devastation to stimulate new growth, slowly but persistently healing her own wounds.

Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that human wholeness—mine, yours, ours—need not be a utopian dream, if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life.

Beyond Ethics

The divided life comes in many and varied forms. To cite just a few examples, it is the life we lead when

- We refuse to invest ourselves in our work, diminishing its quality and distancing ourselves from those it is meant to serve
- We make our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when survival does not absolutely demand it
- We remain in settings or relationships that steadily kill off our spirits
- We harbor secrets to achieve personal gain at the expense of other people
- We hide our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict, challenge, and change
- We conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned, or attacked

Dividedness is a personal pathology, but it soon becomes a problem for other people. It is a problem for students whose teachers “phone it in” while taking cover behind their podiums and their power. It is a problem for patients whose doctors practice medical indifference, hiding behind a self-protective scientific facade. It is a problem for employees whose supervisors have personnel handbooks where their hearts should be. It is a problem for citizens whose political leaders speak “with forked tongue.”

As I write, the media are filled with stories of people whose dividedness is now infamous. They worked at such places as Enron, Arthur Andersen, Merrill Lynch, WorldCom, and the Roman Catholic Church, to name a few. Surely these people heard an inner call to wholeness. But they became separated from their own souls, betraying the trust of citizens, stockholders, and the faithful—and making our democracy, our economy, and our religious institutions less trustworthy in the process.

These particular stories will soon fade from the front page, but the story of the divided life will be in the news forever. Its drama is perennial, and its social costs are immense. The poet Rumi said it with ruthless candor eight hundred years ago: “If you are here unfaithfully with us / you’re causing terrible damage.”⁴

How shall we understand the pathology of the divided life? If we approach it as a problem to be solved by “raising the ethical bar”—exhorting each other to jump higher and meting out tougher penalties to those who fall short—we may feel more virtuous for a while, but we will not address the problem at its source.

The divided life, at bottom, is not a failure of ethics. It is a failure of human wholeness. Doctors who are dismissive of patients, politicians who lie to the voters, executives who cheat retirees out of their savings, clerics who rob children of their well-being—these people, for the most part, do not lack ethical knowledge or convictions. They doubtless took courses on professional ethics and probably received top grades. They gave speeches and sermons on ethical issues and more than likely believed their own words. But they had a well-rehearsed habit of holding their own knowledge and beliefs at great remove from the living of their lives.

That habit is vividly illustrated by a story in the news as I write. The former CEO of a biotechnology firm was convicted of insider trading and sentenced to seven years in prison after putting his daughter and elderly father in legal jeopardy by having them cover for him. Asked what was on his mind

as he committed his crimes, he said, “I could sit there . . . thinking I was the most honest CEO that ever lived [and] at the same time . . . glibly do something [wrong] and rationalize it.”⁵

Those words were spoken by an expert at “compartmentalizing”—a much-prized capacity in many lines of work but at bottom no more than a six-syllable name for the divided life. Few of us may share the speaker’s fate, but many of us already share his expertise: we developed it at school, where ethics, like most subjects, tends to be taught in ways that leave our inner lives untouched.

As teenagers and young adults, we learned that self-knowledge counts for little on the road to workplace success. What counts is the “objective” knowledge that empowers us to manipulate the world. Ethics, taught in this context, becomes one more arm’s-length study of great thinkers and their thoughts, one more exercise in data collection that fails to inform our hearts.

I value ethical standards, of course. But in a culture like ours—which devalues or dismisses the reality and power of the inner life—ethics too often becomes an external code of conduct, an objective set of rules we are told to follow, a moral exoskeleton we put on hoping to prop ourselves up. The problem with exoskeletons is simple: we can slip them off as easily as we can don them.

I also value integrity. But that word means much more than adherence to a moral code: it means “the state or quality of being entire, complete, and unbroken,” as in *integer* or *integral*. Deeper still, integrity refers to something—such as a jack pine or the human self—in its “unimpaired, unadulterated, or genuine state, corresponding to its original condition.”⁶

When we understand integrity for what it is, we stop obsessing over codes of conduct and embark on the more demanding journey toward being whole. Then we learn the truth of John Middleton Murry’s remark, “For the good [person] to realize that it is better to be whole than to be good is to enter on a strait and narrow path compared to which his [or her] previous rectitude was flowery license.”⁷

Living “Divided No More”

A jack pine “solitary on its rocky point” is one of the loveliest sights I know. But lovelier still is the sight of a man or woman standing with integrity intact.

Speak the names of Rosa Parks or Nelson Mandela—or other names known nowhere but within your own grateful heart—and you catch a glimpse of the beauty that arises when people refuse to live divided lives.

Of course, wholeness comes more easily to jack pines than to human beings: *Pinus banksia* is unable to think itself into trouble! We are cursed with the blessing of consciousness and choice, a two-edged sword that both divides us and can help us become whole. But choosing wholeness, which sounds like a good thing, turns out to be risky business, making us vulnerable in ways we would prefer to avoid.

As I was working on this book, *Time* magazine published its 2002 year-end issue, naming Cynthia Cooper, Coleen Rowley, and Sherron Watkins its “Persons of the Year.”⁸ They were honored for confronting corruption at WorldCom, the FBI, and Enron, respectively, honored for turning their consciousness toward living “divided no more.” They took their inner truth into the outer world, reclaiming their personal wholeness and helping our society reclaim some of its own.

Sadly such courage is not universally admired. Sherron Watkins has been reviled by some of her ex-colleagues at Enron, who believe that if she had kept her mouth shut, they could have saved the company and their jobs.⁹ Since much of the evidence suggests that Enron had become a massive shell game, their criticism tells us less about a good business plan than about how unpopular integrity can be. “There is a price to be paid,” said Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom. “There have been times that I could not stop crying.”¹⁰

In the wash of information that surrounds us, the stories of Cooper, Rowley, and Watkins will soon be swept away. And yet I have to wonder, is information overload our problem, or did we *want* to forget how these three witnessed to the real-world possibility of an undivided life? That three ordinary people refused to live a lie means the rest of us could do it, too—if we were willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole.

But we cannot embrace that challenge all alone, at least, not for long; we need trustworthy relationships, tenacious communities of support, if we are to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. That journey has solitary passages, to be sure, and yet it is simply too arduous to take without the assistance of others. And because we have such a vast capacity for self-delusion, we will inevitably get lost *en route* without correctives from outside of ourselves.

Over the years, my own need for community has led me to collaborate with others in creating settings where there is mutual encouragement for

“rejoining soul and role.” One result has been a national retreat program for public school educators who face daily threats to their personal and professional integrity—threats that, if they go unmet, will imperil our children’s well-being.¹¹

As word of that program spread, people in other arenas—parents and politicians, clergy and physicians, community organizers and corporate executives, youth workers and attorneys—began to ask where they could get similar help. In response, the program was expanded to help people from many walks of life bring their integrity more fully into the world.¹²

So this book is not a theory in search of applications: the principles and practices explored here have been proven on the ground. Now they seek even wider use, wherever people want to live undivided lives that are joined to the needs of the world. The first half of the book explores the sources of our dividedness and of the call to live “divided no more.” The second half offers guidance for creating settings where people can support each other on the journey toward an undivided life:

- Chapter II diagnoses the divided life, examines its personal and social consequences, and tells stories of what integrity looks like from infancy into adulthood.
- Chapter III lays out evidence for the claim that we arrive in this world with a soul or true self and looks at what happens when we ignore, defy, or embrace our own truth.
- Chapter IV explores a paradox: our solitary journey toward rejoining soul and role requires relationships, a rare but real form of community that I call a “circle of trust.”
- Chapter V names the preparations required if that inner journey in community is to take us somewhere worth going.
- Chapters VI, VII, VIII, and IX describe in detail the practices necessary to create spaces between us where the soul feels safe enough to show up and make its claim on our lives.
- Chapter X makes the case that the principles and practices explored in this book can help us walk the path of nonviolence in our everyday lives. Can we learn to respond to the mounting violence of our time with soul-honoring and life-giving ways of being in the world? Much depends on the answer.

