

INTEGRITY

By Jenny Rowe

Of all the Quaker SPICES, I find integrity the most difficult. It starts out sounding simple: speak the truth and be honest in your dealings with others. It gets more challenging: let your life speak. Be consistent in word and deed. But it gets even more complicated when you realize that truth can mean different things to different people. Whenever you are part of a community, you confront those differences.

Integrity as a word has its roots in “wholeness” or “soundness.” So, as I’ve been thinking about integrity, I’ve pictured it as a cloth that gets woven in one’s own life and as a shared tapestry, especially in a school community. It’s about my colorful, sometimes fraying and uneven thread that, as a school leader, I offer to the fabric of a school made up of the unique threads of hundreds of others over time.

As head of three different schools, two of them Quaker, I’ve had a lot of opportunities to experience these pieces as they conflict or coincide.

Galen asked me to talk about the role of school leaders in creating a culture of Integrity. She encouraged me to share what challenges and successes I have found in creating such a culture in a variety of settings. Integrity is called for when a school is facing change, and I haven’t been in a school yet that wasn’t in some sort of transition.

My first director position was at the Monteverde Friends School, which had been established by North American Quakers in 1951 when they settled in Costa Rica, which had only just abolished its military. Fifty years later, the school had gone from serving a handful of white Quaker children to being 85% Costa Rican. It was still English dominant, and North American teachers outnumbered “Tico” staff. In the spirit of equality *and* integrity, faculty meetings, parent-teacher conferences, report cards, even messages in Meeting for Worship were given in both Spanish and English. Faculty were often in the role of being far behind their students in their second language development, so it was important to model learning and laugh when I inevitably made some embarrassing mistake.

There I learned that my truth, or at least my values, might be somewhat cultural. It was a dance between respecting that school started at 8:00 “en punto” and the notion and practice of “Tico time,” where “ahora,” which can be translated most easily into the word “now,” actually could mean “any other time except right this instant.” Kids and adults matter-of-factly called each other by adjectives that North Americans, especially sensitive Quakerly ones, would be uncomfortable using: “Gordo” (fat), “Negra” (black), “Chino” (someone of any Asian heritage). Costa Rican swear words sounded either so much more serious or just plain silly that it was hard for us gringos to know how to deal with a young offender.

So I guess I’m saying that some of my long held values needed to shift for me to be a part of the fabric of the Monteverde school community. This didn’t always work: Costa Ricans want to please, and sometimes this took the form of saying yes and not following through. It was impossible for me not to feel I had been misled when that happened.

It was important for me to model the simplicity and integrity the original Quakers had for the land and in stewarding their resources. I am pretty sure that many children have a permanent image of me reaching my hand into various trash, compost, and recycling buckets to fish out and replace offending items (come to think of it, I think Portland staff and students may have that same image).

The work of a head of school ranges from the most mundane to the impossible.

My strength was tested the morning after a terrible, terrible bank robbery in the neighboring town killed 9 people, many of whom were relatives of the Friends School children. With the steadfast support of the staff, I drew all the courage and peace I had together to help the school community begin to speak about fear, and healing, and trust.

Those times of gritty hard work and intense collaboration and love cloaked me and my family in a strong garment. I wore that with me back to New Hampshire, where a year later I found myself as director of a small, rural middle and high school I had worked at as a teacher a decade before.

My integrity was summoned again as the founding director of the school, who had been dismissed, brought suit against it. I felt my role was to stretch between faculty, who ended up testifying against one another in court. My job was to acknowledge effort and pain without taking sides, but still be responsible for the school's survival. It was also my job to make things whole, fair, and inclusive for students. Encouraging and modeling consensus decision making at All-School Meeting and forming a discipline committee comprised of more students than faculty, were signs of what the school originally stood for.

When I was hired as Head of School at Friends School of Portland, I joined a community that was marked by great integrity and joy. I was stepping into a place where ideals had become reality: a newly created school that sprang up on an island, where not just a founder and board, but a young, energetic staff and bold parents had been pioneers.

From the get-go, I knew I was charged to help the school find a new home when its lease ran out.

The challenge was to keep the core of the school intact as we looked at our options. This involved helping FSP to ask itself: What is at the heart of our school? What setting will best reflect who we are? In the end, we made a choice to move to a forested site that would allow children to continue their essential relationship with nature and to design and build a school that would have the smallest possible contribution to climate change. It's Passive House-certified and net zero.

The new Friends School of Portland building is a pretty great example of integrity. And yet we are still feeling a little overwhelmed by its beauty: How did we deserve this? Will it change our relationship with those who came before?

My colleagues and I have set off on a new journey this year that calls forth our integrity once again. As our schoolwide goal we are asking ourselves: Who are we as a Friends school? What do we stand for? How do we articulate our programs and our connection to place?

In the end, the truth is that a culture of integrity is co-created. Integrity is contagious--I often feel that my integrity is activated by watching my colleagues in action. Their honesty, joy, discomfort, clarity, questioning, and sense of what should be give me courage when I face a messy situation.

As we all practice integrity, the different colors and textures that flow from each of us keep meeting, helping to make us and our school communities whole.