

Living an Honorable Life

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Address to School Assembly, October 18, 2017
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Blue Hill, Maine

The last six months have been especially difficult ones for our country and the world. There has not been this much on-going public strife and conflict in forty years. Violence spurred by racism, mass shootings driven by madness, a seeming inability for people to speak civilly and peaceably to one another about difficult things, terrible accounts of sexual harassment and assault that went unchecked for decades, wars. And then there are the natural disasters that have piled one on top of another in an unprecedented way—three devastating hurricanes, and now the wild fires in California. It is all happening at a pace and scale that overwhelms our ability to comprehend. How does any one make sense of such things, what can anyone do to make any of this even a little better? How is one to be a person in such a time, in such a world? For each of you, how do you think about growing up and moving out into such a world? How can you find your bearings?

I do believe there are things one might do, on a small individual scale, that can make a very real difference in at least some of these problems. But today I am going to talk, not so much about what we might do to concretely change circumstances in the world, but, rather, more about how one remains strong and clear-headed in the midst of so many unsettling and debilitating events.

This is not an academic exercise for me. I am as unsettled myself as I am suggesting you might be. I, too, wonder nearly every day at what is going on. I wonder at how I am going to find my way through a time that is so chaotic and unpredictable, when so little of what I once was sure of continues to be so?

I find myself coming back to one idea, again and again, as I think about how to navigate this uncertain, unpredictable world, one place I can find the solace of certainty. The one thing that is always in my control, though everything else spins madly, is the sort of person I am. That is always in my control, because that is always a function of my choices. And I think that is worthy of reflecting upon, because in this truth I think we can find a way through the confusion that swirls around us all.

I imagine that all of you have seen and or read The Lord of the Rings and the ring of power that brought invisibility to whomever wore it. Who is familiar with that story? Well, twenty-five hundred years ago, one of my heroes, a Greek named Socrates, was having a conversation with a young man named Glaucon about a ring just like the one Frodo, Bilbo and Gollum wrestled with: a ring that made you invisible. You probably did not know that such a story was around thousands of years before J.R.R. Tolkien used it in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.

Have you ever wondered what you would do if you had such a ring? Would you want that power? If you had it, how would you use it? Glaucon claimed ownership of a ring like that would be great—because you could do whatever you wanted to do and get away with it. I imagine that was the first reaction of some of you. It certainly was my initial reaction, when I first read this story and thought about it. What could be better than to be able to do what you wanted without fear of anyone knowing or catching you? Think of all the things one might do! Socrates, however, had a different idea, an outrageous idea, a fantastic idea; actually, a dangerous idea, an idea so out of step with what our culture often tells us that you will probably find it shocking. It is also an idea I believe very deeply, and I hope you will consider it carefully. Adopting it or not will determine what sort of person you will be, so the stakes could not be higher.

Socrates spent a good deal of time thinking and talking about the right and the good, about justice, and about how to have the best, fullest life possible: a life well-lived, a life worthy of admiration and respect; in a word, an honorable life. For Socrates, all these in the end come down to fearlessly pursuing and promoting the truth, no matter where it leads. And this is the origin of the outrageous, fantastic, dangerous idea of his I want to share with you. Because Socrates said you ought to pursue and promote the truth even when it does not appear to be in your best interest, even when it seemingly gets you into trouble, even when you can get away with lying and cheating, even when no one can see you. Socrates believed this because, he said, in the end, acting dishonorably in those ways lessens who you are. It harms you, even if you get what you want.

You see, Socrates thought that when you lie, cheat or steal, when you act disrespectfully towards someone, while of course you harm the person you lied to, the person you cheated from and the teacher you cheated towards, the person whose possession you took, or the person you disrespected; but more importantly and fundamentally, you harm yourself, because you harm your soul. Now Socrates' idea of a soul was somewhat different from the one most of us hold, since most of us have grown up and live in a Judeo-Christian culture and Socrates did not. Socrates' idea of the soul was more akin to what you and I would call personality or psyche or identity, to what makes us uniquely us. But that distinction is the stuff of scholarly, academic debate, and not important for us today. What is important is that Socrates believed that when you act unjustly or dishonestly, in a word, dishonorably, you harm yourself in a deep and profound way, and I believe he was right.

So to Socrates' way of thinking, the very worst thing that can happen to someone is for him or her to do something dishonest, unjust or hurtful, *and get away with it*. That is worse than being the victim of the injustice. To put it more starkly: you harm yourself when you act dishonorably, and you harm yourself further when you do not admit it and redress the wrong. Socrates claimed it is better to be the person lied to, than the liar. Now that is an idea that runs counter to nearly everything in our society, which so often promotes winning and wealth at all costs. That is why I call it such a dangerous idea. Socrates claimed that the best life, the life we are called to and created for, is one in which we pursue honor with vigor, admit it when we fall short, and make amends to

those we harm, even if we could have gotten away with acting dishonorably. And I think he was right, all those two thousand, five hundred years ago.

The idea of honor is the idea that self-interest is not the true measure of what is valuable. Being a certain kind of person is. Said another way, the idea of honor is the idea that it is better to have a good character than to have everything you want. Your life is better for being a certain kind of person than it is for having certain kinds of things and certain kinds of experiences. That is the heart of what Socrates tells his young friend Glaucon.

So, I believe that while being an honorable person unquestionably means making a commitment to always doing the right thing and the good thing, being honorable does not mean never making a mistake, never having a moment of weakness, never knowingly doing something you believe is wrong. Rather, being honorable also means owning up to the wrongs you have done, and redressing them. A commitment to an honorable life, then, is a commitment to doing what is right, and to admitting it when you do not reach that high standard.

Let me end with this: you have chosen to be part of a community that has higher standards for itself than most, a community built around that dangerous idea of Socrates: strive to do what is right, and admit it when you don't. A community that says what is best is not to get away with things, but to be truthful about them, and to bear the consequences of your actions. I admire you for deciding to be part of such a community. I know this is hard—no less hard for me than it is for you. That struggle between what we know is right and good, and the temptation to do what is easy, convenient and safe, is fundamental to being human and self-conscious, and it never goes away. I struggle every day with accepting and admitting mistakes, with not seeking the easy way rather than the right way. I struggle every day with always doing what I know is right, even if no one can see me so I could behave differently, and get away with it if I chose. But I believe it is what I must do, because, with Socrates, I believe the prize for doing so is the greatest prize of all—a life well-lived, a life worthy of respect and admiration, an honorable life.

And if you do, you will discover a truth that is also at the heart of being human—that strength comes from knowing that, in spite of all the bad that happens, you are making yourself into a good person; and that strength can carry you through, and give you peace and happiness, even in the midst of a world that can seem very dangerous and uncertain some days.

Please think about all this, and let me know what you think. What would YOU do, with such a ring? Would you want it?