

## Preface

This book raises questions about how reliably we act with integrity—not because we are not good people or because we don't want to “do the right thing,” but because a multitude of distortions—what I call illusions of moral competence—undermine our intention. To identify these illusions and act with integrity more reliably, we require special tools of discernment. This book will propose them.

This book refutes the usual definitions of integrity. It does not treat integrity as something you just do, as in a Nike commercial, a quality that you just “have” or a skill that cannot be learned and practiced. Conforming to these breezy characterizations, people often equate *instinct* for “the right thing” with *knowing* “the right thing” and take their integrity for granted: Do you know anyone who doesn't think he or she “has” integrity?

When we take integrity for granted, a false confidence distorts our decision-making. We stride confidently in the moral direction we deem obvious, like a hiker in dense woods following the compass needle he thinks points true north, but unaware that a compass needle does not point true north. It points to the center of the earth's magnetic field: magnetic north. Without knowing the difference between true north and magnetic north, and how to compensate for it, a hiker will not reach his destination. Without knowing the difference between instinct, impulse or intuition, and discernment, either will we.

So what is our destination? What is the value of integrity in our lives? Integrity is valuable because it reflects authenticity about who we are, not as the culture defines us, or ensnares us, but as we know ourselves to be, or aspire to be. Integrity reflects thoughtful and comprehensive understanding of our role in the world.

If integrity is not that—an understanding of our truest nature as human beings participating in and contributing to our relationships—then it is no more than a collection of techniques to avoid embarrassment, a way of dabbling in the moral realm without commitment and therefore without authenticity. This explains why for many of us, relationships seem utilitarian, our workplaces are venues for pursuing gain without accountability, and our nation's politics remain dysfunctional.

This book will identify breaches of trust in the corridors of power and systemic injustices within our culture. These have come in to sharp relief in our polarized political landscape. But there is a wider point to be made, one that has compelled me to write this book after many years in public roles: how, as individuals and as a nation, we can embrace truthfulness as a resource to help us to live authentically, in both small and big ways, and how the big breaches of integrity we see all around us—and which we tend to blame on others—can be addressed by the practice of integrity in our lives, one small step at a time. I believe this is a pressing challenge to anyone troubled by, and seeking to ameliorate, the raucous political climate of our time.

Trust is the foundation that supports the big changes we seek in our relationships and in our institutions. This book will demonstrate how to practice truthfulness in order to build trust and to create a habit of integrity that can transform our lives and our nation. Like any journey, it begins with a first step, a small step. So let us begin, first with an exercise to orient ourselves to the world of small things.