

## “On Cheating...and How Not To”

May 21, 2017

Today I shall be preaching on cheating...and how not to. Now by cheating I mean cheating in general, not infidelity—which is cheating of a specific kind. What I’m trying to say applies to every kind of deliberate dishonesty, marital faithlessness included. I’ll be asking three questions:

- What is cheating?
- Why do we cheat? And
- how can it be stopped?

I began focusing on this subject 20+ years ago as a middle school parent trying to help my child grow into a good kid with her emotional and psychic integrity in tact. We were living in those days half way between Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts. One summer articles began appearing in *The Boston Globe*—they were picked up by the wire services so perhaps some of you saw them—involving allegations that the Dean of Boston University’s School of Communications, Joachim Maitre, had plagiarized lengthy portions of his commencement address. Less well publicized than last summer when Melania Trump’s GOP Convention speech plagiarized from Michelle Obama, but commensurate in every way. As with Melania’s scribbled convention speech, ironies abounded...and for many reasons.

Joachim Maitre was and is a genuine intellectual with an unusual academic past. The son of a WWII German SS officer, he’d been trained as a fighter pilot in East Germany. In the early ‘50s he defected to the West, studied at the Universities of Bonn and Innsbruck before earning a Ph.D. from McGill in Montreal. His field of expertise was military journalism. Along the way, he became an ally and protégé of BU’s hard-nosed and irascible President John Silber. And he’d become involved in just enough reporting from Third World hot spots (or was it pro-Western, pro-military propaganda? Particularly in Afghanistan...?) such that many believed he also worked for the C.I.A.

In any case, Joachim Maitre was an outspoken conservative. His commencement address—on the breakdown of ethical standards and its destructive effects on American culture—was typical of his work: decrying moral relativism and pleading for a return to the rock-ribbed values of yesteryear.

The speech was well received. Videocassette copies were selling briskly at the BU Campus Bookstore. Summer vacation began and soon Dean Maitre was off to Southeast Asia conducting a feasibility study there for a major business and media group when, slowly at first and then with increasing speed, allegations surfaced declaring that Maitre had cheated. That fifteen whole paragraphs of his text had been lifted—nearly verbatim—from an article written by Santa Monica cultural critic Michael Medved and published in *Imprimis*, an obscure scholarly review. Unfortunately for the Dean, *The Reader’s Digest* had picked up the piece, with

readership in the millions. And the next thing you know, Joachim is flying back from Kuala Lumpur with egg on his face.

In the end, he admitted what he'd done: ignored the very standards he so imperiously—and hypocritically—extolled. Such irony! In a gesture of gracious generosity to a longstanding ally, President Silber, while relieving Maitre of his Deanship, let him keep his tenured position on the faculty—where he remains to this day.

Perhaps it's because as a minister I'm involved in writing papers—and bound to similar ethical guidelines concerning plagiarism—that this incident so caught my attention. Maybe it's the well-deserved comeuppance we vicariously feel whenever a rigid moralist is hoist by their own petard. Whatever; I couldn't stop thinking about the whole affair. Was such cheating typical? Or rare? How much cheating *is* going on? As Maitre was a scholar, I started there.

- In recent years large-scale cheating has been uncovered at some of the nation's most competitive schools, including Stuyvesant High School in NYC, The Air Force Academy, and Harvard.
- Studies of student attitudes and behavior show that *a majority* of students violate standards of academic integrity somewhat, with high achievers just as likely to cheat as others. There is evidence that the problem has grown worse over recent decades.
- Internet access makes cheating easier, helping students quickly connect with answers and find articles from which they can plagiarize. This confirms generations of research showing that a major factor in unethical behavior is simply how easy or hard it is to get away with it.
- If a student is too busy to copy or plagiarize in the typical way, no problem; term papers can be easily purchased whole cloth. In fact, the selling of such papers has become a minor industry in itself: the more scientific the subject the higher the purchase price. Ethics papers, ironically, remain fairly cheap.
- Cheating has become easier and more tolerated largely because both schools and parents have failed to give students messages regarding what's allowed and what's not—and then following through with consequences for misbehavior.

More and more teachers, it turns out, are cheating too. Fact fudging in scientific research, long a forbidden subject in academia, is now recognized as a real problem. In a 2012 article in the journal *Nature*, research scientists found that findings in 90 per cent of the important cancer papers published in top medical journals could not be replicated, even with the help of original scientists. Elsewhere, scientists reviewed 67 projects, covering four years of the pharmaceutical giant Bayer's work in oncology, cardiovascular disease, and women's health and found results from internal experiments matched up with the published findings in only fourteen projects (<21%), and were highly

inconsistent in forty-three (64%). "People take for granted what they see published," John Ioannidis, an expert on data reproducibility at Stanford University School of Medicine, wrote in a 2011 article in *Nature*. "But this and other studies are raising deep questions about whether we can really believe the literature, or whether we have to go back and do everything on our own." Some of the un-reproducible results are probably due to sloppy research, but much of it appears to be the result of deliberate cheating.

Having learned the ropes in college, young graduates enter the workplace. But first—in order to land a job—they'll need a résumé: up to 30% of which, states *The Wall Street Journal*<sup>1</sup>, are rife with bogus information. Résumé fudging is common among would-be corporate lawyers, according to recent studies quoted in *The National Law Journal*<sup>2</sup>.

Within business, dealing in trade secrets and industrial espionage is common practice: last January, Tesla Motors here in California filed a breach of contract lawsuit against three former employees associated with their self-driving technology for "stealing hundreds of gigabytes" of confidential Tesla information. Across the business world embezzlement, fraud, and corruption are growing problems with abuses reaching their pinnacle in commodities and securities markets. Late last year Ireland convicted and sent to jail three former executives at the defunct Anglo Irish Bank for concealing the loss of billions of euros, contributing to Ireland's 2008 economic collapse. And who can forget Bernard Madoff, the founder of a prestige Wall Street investment firm and former NASDAQ Chairman who admitted in open court that the wealth management arm of his business was an elaborate Ponzi scheme. Also well publicized were the insider trading scandals of Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky all the way down to former Angels third baseman Doug DeCinces—convicted nine days ago in Santa Ana on thirteen federal violations for insider stock trading that earned him more than a million dollars...and, it now appears, many years in prison doing time.

With their tailored suits and impressive connections businesspeople somehow seem too respectable to be criminals. And yet:

"Ah, that deceit should steal  
such gentle shapes," wrote Shakespeare,  
"and with a virtuous visor  
hide deep vice."<sup>3</sup>

Shakespeare knew, too. That quotation was from *Richard III*. I remember studying it as a schoolboy, along with a half dozen other histories and *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. I remember, too, the dark intrigue and sordid pursuits of so many of Shakespeare's ruling characters as having puzzled me. As had the equally nefarious behavior of so many Biblical kings and potentates. People in power don't really lie and deceive like that, I thought.... Do they? Ah, but...I was just a schoolboy.

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<sup>1</sup> May 27, 1988

<sup>2</sup> November 12, 2009

<sup>3</sup> *Richard III*, ii, 2

In the Reagan Administration alone (so highly extolled by modern-day GOP myth makers) over 100 top-level appointees were investigated for graft and corruption. The HUD scandal, the Bank of Credit & Commerce International, the Savings and Loan mess: bailed out—by you and me—at a cost, thanks to sweetheart deals negotiated by the Resolution Trust Corporation (who were charged with straightening out the mess), of 1.4 trillion dollars.

Not to suggest that it's only Republicans who cheat. I always considered Whitewater small potatoes, but at the very least then-Governor Clinton and his wife did mighty well by virtue of some sweetheart deals none of us will ever be invited to cash in on. It's appropriate, I suppose, when considering the idea of "cheating" to mention Bill Clinton's infidelity while in office. The urge to act out sexually—or any other way—increases with opportunity, which in turn corresponds to one's power and money—as the mess at Fox News reveals for the umpteenth time! But back to politics: there has been plenty of malfeasance on both sides of the aisle.

And then there's cheating in sports. Lance Armstrong won the Tour de France seven consecutive times from 1999-2005; in 2012 he was banned from sanctioned Olympic sports for life as a result of long-term doping offenses. Tom Brady and the whole "deflategate" controversy didn't surprise Carol or me: the Patriots and their coach are notorious rules benders. And now people are talking about voting to enshrine Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, and a half dozen other steroid injecting partners-in-crime into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Horrors!

What's wrong with this picture? The Communications Dean plagiarizes his commencement address. The President of NASDAQ busted for running an elaborate Ponzi scheme. Acknowledged cheats lobbying for admission to the Hall of Fame. And most frightening of all—though thoroughly in keeping with the "cheating's perfectly OK as long as you win" mentality that's becoming more and more pervasive in our culture—most frightening of all: serious questions have been raised about possible collusion between President Trump's campaign staff and officials from Russia, a hostile foreign power. I hope and pray that Robert Mueller, the newly appointed Special Prosecutor and former FBI Director can speedily get to the bottom of this—which, *if* the allegations turn out to be true, amounts to treason.

Still,

- What is cheating?
- Why do people do it?
- And what can make them to stop?

My favorite dictionary<sup>4</sup> defines *cheat* as "to defraud or swindle; also to deceive or beguile with intent to elude detection."

To help answer my second and third questions I consulted three experts.

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<sup>4</sup> *The New Century Dictionary* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, NY, 1956, two volumes.)

First: Jeb Magruder. At thirty-five a Special Assistant to the President; at 39 in jail for his involvement in the Watergate burglary and subsequent cover-up. Magruder had always intrigued me as a kind of double, or *doppelganger*. We went to similar colleges and I was amazed to discover he was good friends with a hero of mine, William Sloan Coffin. Coffin, as Dean of the College Chapel at Yale in the '60s and later Senior Minister of NYC's Riverside Church, was a powerful spokesman for anti-war and peace movements. Magruder had actually baby-sat for Coffin's children! When Jeb Magruder was released from prison he went to seminary and became a minister (another connection)—a moderately liberal Presbyterian with a long, honored pastorate in Columbus.

I borrowed Magruder's two-part autobiography<sup>5</sup> from the public library and read it with my questions in mind? Why do people cheat? What can get them to stop?

In Magruder's case, it was initially *devotion to individuals as opposed to process* that got him embroiled in Watergate. He believed in Nixon—strongly. And he was devoted to John Mitchell. He loved these men and was all too willing to please them however he could. That was the beginning: caring more about certain individuals than a certain process—in this case the *democratic process*. This confirms the findings of Colorado psychologist Kevin Murphy. In his book, *Honesty in the Workplace*, Murphy found that there are essentially two types of people who cheat at the office. The first group includes those with minimal commitment. They perpetrate acts that are against the organization, from calling in sick to get a day off all the way to embezzlement. The second group includes the overly committed types: employees who, for instance, defend unsafe products, approve fraudulent tests or cover-up inspection reports. These kinds of cheating acts are done by people—people like the diesel engineers at Volkswagen who rigged their engines to beat smog detectors and like the incentive-driven bank managers at Wells Fargo telling subordinates to sign up clients for the purchase of accounts never requested—basically, people who think they're altruistically helping the organization they work for.

For Magruder, whether it was misplaced loyalty or half-baked idealism that *initially* started him cheating, once the cover-up began his motivation changed. Now *peer pressure* became a factor...and an increasingly powerful one in keeping the cheating ongoing. He was now part of a conspiracy. Clearing his own conscience was complicated by the fact that, if he tried to come clean, he'd also automatically implicate everybody with whom he worked: his team. Day by day, he got deeper and deeper into the whole mess: burning documents, lying under oath. At this point *fear of exposure* fueled a willingness to lie and cover-up even more. Once you've gotten in so far, you're stuck. Coming clean gets harder and harder to do. In the immortal words of Sir Walter Scott, "O, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

And yet...in his autobiography Jeb Magruder writes of Watergate in a positive light (for him) as it forced him to recognize the moral dimensions and consequences of the choices

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<sup>5</sup> *An American Life, '74 and From Power to Peace, '78*

he made every day of his life. Which led him away from the world of power and deceit and into ministry. Why do people cheat? What will stop them? For Jeb Magruder the answer to the first question was

- Devotion to heroes
- Peer pressure
- And fear.

His answer to the second question (How'd he stop?) was a return to religion. Not fundamentalism either, but (in Magruder's case) liberal Protestantism, as exemplified by William Sloan Coffin and others including virtually all Unitarians, a faith that demands of us an acute awareness of the ethical dimensions to every here-and-now choice we make.

I asked two other people why we cheat and how to stop, and each, in their way, also zeroed in on religion. First: my daughter, Meredith, when she was about twelve years old. We were returning from her orthodontist when the conversation kind of naturally led into my query: "Is there a lot of cheating going on?" I asked.

"Oh yeah," she replied, with a natural certainty in her voice that rang pretty true.

"Why?"

"People cheat because there's something they want, something that will make them happy or popular if they get it."

"What'll make 'em quit?" She thought for a moment and then, by way of example, reminded me of a movie we'd seen together in which a father explains to his delinquent son that he loves the boy whether he's good or bad. Unconditional love, I thought; that's the key! "Let them know that they're loved either way, said Meredith, " and they won't cheat any more. Also, help them set goals, she went on, and help them make it possible to reach the goals." At which time, she nimbly segued the conversation into the wisdom—ethical or not—of raising her allowance.

On another occasion I asked a church member, one of the most dedicated social activists I've ever known, Alice Kidder. Ph.D. economics professor, former director of the local community service organization, active in refugee resettlement, peace, and anti-apartheid efforts, Alice was a person with an incredible capacity for good works. She agreed that people cheat as a short cut to something they want. And the cure? "Inner moral strength and whatever God-like orientation you have. There's an inner gyroscope to leads us to know what's right," she went on, echoing our Opening Words by Immanuel Kant. "While that gyroscope may not be the same in everyone, it's close enough."

So three very different people—

- An ex-big-wig ex-felon become pastor,
- A twelve-year-old schoolgirl,
- A church and social activist—

All agree, cheating is essentially dishonesty. With others, for sure, but most importantly, with oneself. This inner self-honesty is what we get in touch with when we approach the religious. And what the Last Judgment<sup>6</sup> outlined in Matthew 25 is all about. That we're

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 25\_31-46

held accountable. Not to *the letter of the law* as we read in Leviticus, but to *the spirit* of the law, ***ever revealed in our own hearts***, as we read in *Deuteronomy*, *Jeremiah*, and *Luke*.

Franz Kafka wrote, “It’s only our concept of time that puts Judgment Day into the future. Actually, it’s a summary court in perpetual session.” And the judge? The still, small voice within.

An old Hassidic story captures this well, about a father who gives a chicken to each of his two sons and tells each of them to go kill the bird where no one can see. The first brother goes behind the barn and does the deed. But the other brother, after wandering around for over an hour, comes back and says, “Everywhere I go, I can see.”

- Luke’s Kingdom within,
- Alice Kidder’s moral gyroscope inside every heart,
- The still, small voice.

Call it what you will, it’s within, “...gracious and merciful, (as it says in *Psalms*) slow to anger and abounding in steadfast (i.e., *unconditional*) love.”

That spirit is not only inside us but it’s in our midst as well, as the ambiguous translation in *Luke* implies. For the truth, in the words of the radical feminist and LGBTQ activist Barbara Demming, the truth is “we are all part of one another.”<sup>7</sup> Exactly as St. Paul (more of a universalist than Baptists like to admit) wrote in his letter to the church at Ephesus, which was read earlier.

Realize that and cheating falls away. Realize that we’re all part of one another and *the motivation* to cheat falls away. You start treating your brother and sister as yourself because, at the deepest level, your brother and sister *are* yourself.

Traditionally, Unitarian and Universalist theology has pretty much always held that—bottom line—we are loved unconditionally. That *God is love*, and it’s the primary program and the silent pulse at the heart of all things. Most liberal theology also holds that we are judged, too. And accountable to that judgment. But not by some Old Man projected into the sky. No! We are judged by our own hearts and consciences within—the part of you that “everywhere I go, I can see.” The still, small voice. Honesty is the key to accessing that inner voice—looking honestly at one’s self, conducting “a searching and fearless moral inventory,” as step 4 in the 12-step recovery programs puts it.

Honesty, especially with oneself, is the key to accessing that inner sensitivity—and power: the Source, referred to by Luke as “the Kingdom.” A place *here and now* where—

- As Paul wrote to the Ephesians,
- As Immanuel Kant understood,
- As did Franz Kafka,
- And Alice Kidder,

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<sup>7</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition* (UU hymnal) #570, Prayer for the Earth

- And even a twelve-year-old—  
cheating has no value. For here we are all transparent before and within the Spirit of the Universe, the Spirit simultaneously within us and in-our-midst. We are all part of one another. And the urge to cheat falls away. So may it be. Namaste. Amen.

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