

## Pointing Fingers

Hardly a day goes by that the newspapers, magazines, TV talk shows, and workplace water cooler conversation does not include some mention of Bruno, Bernie and Blago – notorious folks who have been accused of actions that are either immoral or unethical, but folks who maintain that “I have done nothing illegal.” There seems to be no end to the line of folks who wait their turn to point their accusatory finger at Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, New York’s former State Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno and the infamous financier Bernie Madoff.

Each of these three individuals has concocted a “story” that allows them to rationalize and justify their immoral or unethical behavior – a story each uses to absolve themselves of blame or guilt so that they can create their own so-called truth and not own their inappropriate behavior. Thus, their “I did nothing illegal” story or some flavor of it is simply a ploy to evade self-responsibility.

However, there’s something more here in the groundswell of the masses who are so quick to judge others. What is not being “outed” among this list of folks who aggressively assert their “legal non-guilt” in order to mask their unethical behavior is that this list does not include another individual, and that is “Everyman” – you and me.

From the boardroom on the 52nd floor to the mailroom in the basement and on every floor in between, there is a “me” – someone who has not taken the moral high ground, someone whose moral compass does not point north, someone who has driven off the high road – someone who has their own “story” to justify their unethical, illegal or immoral behavior.

When we point our accusatory finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back to “me”.

When I read the daily listing of well-known perpetrators who are behaving immorally and unethically, my gut is to include “everyman” – those among us who are not well-known, famous or infamous, but who are behaving badly nevertheless.

For example, folks who steal supplies from the office, pens and towels from hotels, cheat on their income taxes, call in sick when they aren’t, spend company time surfing the Internet, refuse to pay vendors with trumped-up “excuses”, bilk clients out of more fees than they deserve, “borrow” intellectual property, keep two sets of books at home. Each of these has their “story” (“I have done nothing illegal”) which they tell to rationalize and justify their inappropriate behavior, behavior that is no more or no less egregious than the “big-shots” who appear in daily newscasts.

If one person steals 50 billion dollars while a number of non-notorious individuals find ways, for example, to steal small amounts which, over time, whose collective thefts add up to substantial amounts of money, they are no less culpable. Their low road, or moral compass is no less “off” than the “named” personalities. It’s not the “amount”. It’s the behavior.

And those who say this is an “apples-oranges” comparison need to question their own thought-process, i.e, their own “story” about why they need to think that way, separating themselves from those who are behaving badly.

The point here is that these “big fish” were at one time “small fish.” When did the inappropriate behaviors they exhibited on the way up begin and how did the degree of inappropriateness increase? Taking their first drink, the alcoholic never dreams of becoming an alcoholic. Eating a first dish of ice cream, the slim never dreamed of becoming obese. Making an initial furtive glance, the innocent never envisioned having an affair. But they all have their “stories” that rationalize a next drink, a next dish of ice cream and a next glance...and more. The way one stolen pen, or dollar, or idea or kiss leads to major acts that are immoral or unethical, perhaps not “illegal”.

So, for the Bernies, the Brunos and Blagos, and for Everyman - you and me - what are *our* stories, and how did we come to create them in order to justify our immoral and unethical behavior?

So, while we point the accusatory finger at these others, at the same time it's important that we muster the courage and strength to explore "me" - at whom we are pointing the other three fingers. What about me?

Integrity is not a cloak we put on and take off when convenient. On - only when I accuse others; off - when I need to cut myself a little "integrity slack" in order to justify why I lie, cheat or steal. Integrity is like being pregnant. Either one is or one isn't. There's no such thing as being "a little bit pregnant", or "a bit less in integrity."

Many of us are quick to judge and criticize others who act without integrity, without ethics, without morality. But many of us are just as prone to separate from our core values when it's convenient. The question is: "Why?" What does acting out of integrity get me and what is the truth, the real truth about "my story" (my hypocrisy) I use to rationalize or justify my unethical or immoral behavior? Why am I so quick to point the accusatory finger at the Brunos, Blagos and Bernies but turn a blind eye to my own unethical behavior?

No single snowflake ever wants to be responsible for the avalanche. Many of us are those snowflakes that contribute to the avalanche of blue- and white-collar unethical behaviors and misdemeanors we are facing in this country. It's not just the Brunos, Blagos and Bernies who lack inner moral compasses and choose the load road. As Pogo, said, "We have met the enemy and he is us" - i.e., you and me.

Perhaps while standing on line waiting to accuse, we might take a moment and reflect on our own ethics and morality in how we are dealing with others.

**So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- Do you have a "story" you use to absolve you from guilt, shame or blame when you act out of integrity? How does your story make you feel?
- How do you feel when others who have acted immorally or unethically but not "illegally" state their rationalization or justification?
- Who or what usually takes you out of integrity?
- Does it ever bother you when you are out of integrity? How do you deal with the "bother?"
- Do you use the same definition to define integrity, ethics or morality for yourself and for others? If not, why not?
- How do you respond when others' unethical acts affect you?
- What was your experience around unethical or immoral behavior as you were growing up? How did these experiences make you feel?
- Can you envision a life where you never act immorally, unethically or out of integrity? What would that be like?

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