Morality: the Finest Mirror
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Light eclipses dark. The hero dupes the villain. The good wolf pounces upon the bad wolf. Growing up, we learn to perceive all conflicts as battles between opposite and unrelated forces. When we find ourselves faced with challenging ethical decisions, we visualize a boxing match between our lofty ideals and our personal inclinations. However, we forget that our ideals are, in fact, deeply personal as well, shaped by the intangible aspects of our lives. Thus, each of us defines and pursues morality differently.

In the third scenario, Lieutenant Saunders finds herself faced with the decision of whether or not to state grievances against her commanding officer. The ethical gray area presented by her situation calls for a humanistic and psychological, rather than a merely situational, exploration of what truly comprises morality in order to arrive at a resolution of integrity.

Perhaps the greatest influences upon our individual codes of ethics are the power structures in which we - intentionally or not - exist. In an interview, psychologist Jennifer Finlayson-Fife notes that we often view integrity as obedience to the values imposed upon us, for better or for worse, by sources of higher authority, and that once internalized, those values become our morality (Haglund). Finlayson-Fife, whose studies focus on the Mormon community, raises the Church as an example of such a higher authority, noting that "there’s definitely a generalized framework in the Church of obedience—obedience being a way to prove your goodness" (Haglund). We naturally connect power with correctness; it is how societies form hierarchies, how governments create and enforce laws, how children find and emulate role models.

In the given situation, the military definition of moral rightness likely plays the most imminent authority role in Lt. Saunders' decision. Specifically, the Shipman's Creed emphasizes
"Honor, Courage, and Commitment" (navy.mil), the Soldier's Creed stresses the importance of "[serving] the people of the United States" (army.mil) and the Airman's Creed highlights the "[guardianship] of freedom and justice" (af.mil). By speaking at the grievance hearing, Lt. Saunders would adhere to the overarching ethical standards of the military. She would display courage by challenging the CO's self-centered call for loyalty. She would serve the people of the United States in bettering their defense system by means of identifying its wrongs. She would set an example of free speech and impose justice upon her CO's attempt to manipulate by pointing out his qualitative faults. Heeding the risk of a damaged reputation and an unfavorable performance evaluation, then, would place Saunders in violation of these moral values as she considers the course of her own career over the ideals of a serviceperson and the benefit of her company, the military and, ultimately the nation.

Yet the complexity of the human mind suggests that more than obedience influences the making of moral decisions. Allegiance to an institution's beliefs can neither uproot nor negate the power of personal experience in defining morality. According to Paul Lauritzen, a professor at John Carrol University, "the appeal to experience functions as an effort to reach moral bedrock." This is because we recall and tell the events of our lives in the form of narratives, which contain the irreplaceable power of authenticity (Lauritzen). With time and contemplation, the lessons reaped from those narratives register as moral truths.

My parents grew up midst China's Cultural Revolution, an era during which "anti-revolutionaries" faced grave punishments ranging from public humiliation and forced labor to torture and death. At the peak of the Cultural Revolution, citizens were expected to write dazibao, or public posters criticizing and shaming officials, professors, and other citizens whom
they deemed "anti-revolutionary," lest they themselves fall into that category and its ensuing consequences. In actuality, many of those criticized and punished had done nothing wrong; at most, they stood at political odds with the faction in power. While we cannot assume the details of Lt. Saunders' past, we can agree that one who has experienced an era of history such as the Cultural Revolution would hesitate, for valid reasons, to speak against a higher authority. Even I, placed in Saunders' shoes, would shudder to commit such an act, however benevolent its intentions, due to its reminiscence of the horrifying stories my parents tell me at the breakfast table, on car rides, in the most everyday of moments. What if the accusations subject the CO to undeserved punishment? What if my words lead to a cycle of scapegoating and finger-pointing, divisions and insecurity within the unit? What if history repeats itself? Morality, indeed, exists as a function of experience.

Now we find ourselves internally conflicted as we strive both to live up to military ideals and to avoid hurting the delicate relations within the unit. In a non-military setting, in which we have not pledged our allegiance to a creed, we may choose to value group dynamic over a code of moral conduct. However, Lt. Sauders has, in joining the military, pledged herself to institutional ideals. I believe that her best course of action lies in proceeding with the grievance hearing but openly communicating her intentions with her unit beforehand. While remaining loyal to her military ideals, she also prepares her fellow officers for the possible consequences of the hearing (i.e. her unit seen in a negative light). Additionally, her presentation of her perspective may help mollify the harsh biases against her that could result from hasty judgments.
Ideally, that would conclude our process of discernment. But wherein lies the merit of strict ethics and sound intentions alone? In the end, our integrity decides the morality of our actions and the quality of our character.

Unfortunately, try as we might, perfect and constant integrity will forever stray from our grasps. A study performed by Meredith Greene and Kathryn Low, professors at Bates college, highlights that integrity fluctuates based on momentary self-evaluation. Via the moral licensing effect, those primed to see themselves in a morally positive light will more likely commit or allow an ethically questionable act, such as cheating and stealing. On the other hand, those who think about their moral deficiencies respond in the opposite manner, as if to prove or reestablish their integrity. (Green & Low). Much of our moral decision-making exists in the subconscious. Integrity may rely just as much emotion and spontaneity as on discipline and reasoning, and it is entirely possible that Lt. Saunders changes her mind and abandons her ethics at the last minute. Because of this, it is imperative that we wholly invest ourselves into the shaping of our morals, making sure that our motivation for our chosen course of action arises from active discernment rather than a simple fear of punishment or yearn for glory.

Perhaps, then, the prerequisite to integrity is authenticity - we must be true to ourselves to become true to our values. Because our very doctrines arise from human minds, we must not estrange our pursuit of those lofty ideals from our personal experiences and emotions as we navigate moral gray zones such as the one Lt. Saunders faces. In the end, while true morality is selfless, it is still deeply connected with the self.
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A Standard of Perfection

Admiral Callaghan Essay Contest 2018
“The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office.”

- President Dwight D. Eisenhower

How do we evaluate someone’s integrity, and why must we expect a higher level of integrity from members of the military? Integrity can be best assessed through the lens of accountability: do we hold ourselves responsible for acting honestly, respectfully, and compassionately at all times? Do we also hold others accountable for this type of behavior, even if doing so comes at personal cost or consequence? Or do we forego this self-awareness out of fear of consequences, embarrassment, or retribution? Indeed, lack of accountability reflects not only a failure to critically examine one’s choices and actions but also a desire to live a life where one is free to act without concern for the repercussions of those actions. And, avoiding consequences is certainly an enticing prospect in the moment; however, that first instance of sidestepping accountability is simply a gateway to the next. Doing so ultimately establishes a permission structure that enables larger, more significant transgressions. For a military officer, living a life of integrity is even more consequential, as the officer is responsible for maintaining the safety of others and for carrying out missions that help ensure national security. While character matters for us all, it matters more for the service member whose choices have ramifications that extend well beyond themselves.

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1“Why Integrity Remains One of the Top Leadership Attributes.” The Economist.
In a perfect world, integrity would be easy to achieve. If everyone held themselves to the highest standard of honesty and moral purity, we wouldn’t even need a word to label a quality shared by everyone. In this idealized world, we would all exercise accountability in every instance; we would readily admit to wrongdoing, report the wrongdoings of others, and help others see their choices more clearly and honestly. However, this is not a perfect world and integrity is a rare quality, rare everywhere except in the United States Military. Integrity in the United States military is commonplace, as every man and women who takes the oath of office holds themselves to a standard: “my standard will remain perfection….” These five words, taken from the Sentinel’s Creed of the United States Army, epitomize the level of professionalism expected of service people not just because we want our services to feature honorable soldiers but because we depend on soldiers’ honor when we give them missions that have ramifications worldwide. When a soldier dons their uniform, complete with silver-plated U.S. collar devices or the Marine Corps globe and anchor, they join a long, historic line of patriots who share a common duty: to uphold the ideals and values of the United States through their own behavior and choices.

Even in the United States military, living a life of integrity is a challenging practice. It takes courage to remedy a breach of honor and integrity because doing so requires us to expose our weaknesses, cede power to others, and perhaps even relinquish our standing. And the only mechanism that can ensure integrity within the armed forces is each member’s commitment to holding themselves and others accountable. When we fail to hold ourselves or our fellow brothers and sisters in arms to the highest standards of accountability and integrity, we start down

a crooked path from which it is hard to return: “you no longer can stand on a favorite principle because you have strayed from it.”3

This lens of integrity and accountability would be the framework that I would use to evaluate my decision in this situation. The most alarming breach in these circumstances is the criminal one. Jordan has disclosed that he has engaged in criminal acts; is the military leadership aware of these transgressions? If so, I would defer to the command’s decision about how best to handle them. If not, then I would feel obligated to confront Jordan and establish that if he does not report his criminal wrongdoings to his CO, then I will on his behalf. This includes his questionable interactions with women, which may or may not be criminal in nature, but certainly unbecoming of a Marine Corps officer. Reporting Jordan, or demanding that he do so himself, will certainly make me unpopular and could lead to fateful personal consequences, but if one member of our unit cannot be trusted to act honorably, then the whole unit is indicted.

I would then look at the breach of privacy, again executed by Jordan. In this case, Jordan has violated the trust and privacy of the CO. Not only does this lead to distrust within the unit as a whole, but it is a clear violation of the command structure whereby we agree to defer to and invest our trust. On the battlefield, questioning and challenging the leadership of the CO would compromise the safety of us all. In order to best resolve this issue, I would confront Jordan about this breach; ideally, he would report his own behavior to the CO and show an accountability that suggests at least a desire to act with integrity. However, if he does not report his behavior, then I would be obligated to do so.

3“Character Tie-Ins For Green Belt.” Samuel Johnson.
The next issue that I would feel compelled to address is the XO’s disrespect for the CO. Criticizing the CO within the unit suggests that command is not a guiding necessity but rather a soft suggestion that anyone can surmount if it serves their purpose in the short-term. However, in acting, it is important that I not supersede this leadership structure as well, so I would be deliberate about approaching the XO to explain how this “bad mouthing” compromises our command structure and therefore the cohesiveness of our unit. Again, the standard is accountability. My hope is that in holding him accountable, he would then evaluate his own behavior through that same lens and choose to behave as a true leader: someone able to defer to a higher authority while simultaneously guiding those below him.

The last issue relating to the conduct of Lieutenant Jordan is his intimidation of the fellow officer who confronted him about his behavior. The phrase “Semper Fidelis” (Latin for “always faithful”) separates “the few, the proud, the Marines” from the rest of the military branches, as it embodies the idea of unconditional trust. This principle is key for the life-and-death nature of battle, which depends on cohesive, seamless teamwork: men and women within a platoon need to trust one another with their lives. This camaraderie enables people to take risks and make sacrifices without concern for whether they will be backed up when doing so. The fact that Lieutenant Jordan “verbally and physically intimidate[d]” his fellow officer, merely because he was appropriately holding him accountable for his poor behavior is unacceptable. I would include this too in my discussion with Jordan; again, I would give him the option of first reporting his own behavior, and if I cannot achieve this outcome, then I would

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4“Our Values.” United States Marine Corps.
approach the officer he intimidated in order to evaluate next steps in going up the chain of command.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola is the patron saint of soldiers, and his insights illustrate the importance of prioritizing integrity above all else.5 While ego, status, power, and reputation can be compelling deterrents, we must prioritize our honor and that of our team by putting aside these concerns and truly acting as men and women “with and for others.”6

5“St. Ignatius Loyola.” Catholic Online.
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A House Divided Cannot Stand
When I think about integrity, I think of a house. A strong, sturdy house built to accommodate and protect families and their belongings. But what makes a house strong? What makes a house reliable? It all starts with the foundation, the beginning steps. If there are any issues with the integrity of the foundation, like gaps or fractures in the concrete, then the house will be assembled on a weak base and therefore will not stand as the strong, reliant home it could once have become. Similarly, a strong and honorable career requires the same integrity from a person as a house needs from its foundation. If Ensign Parker failed to tell the truth about his history of smoking marijuana, his career in the Nuclear Power Program would start off upon a weak base -- his foundation would be flawed. Although the consequences may not be obvious in the beginning, it is crucial that Ensign Parker tells the whole truth to avoid building his own house, or career, on a foundation of lies.

Acknowledging the wrongs of the past is no small challenge, but a flawed foundation left unattended can cause a massive fracture in its concrete. We have witnessed the ongoing pain of such omissions throughout our nation's history. More than 240 years after the Declaration of Independence, our country still struggles to erase its moral stain of slavery. The infamous Three-fifths Compromise codified a census in which slaves, usually not even considered for voting rights, were only counted as three-fifths of a person, and the inhumane acceptance of the slave trade and its evil byproducts split the foundation of the country until the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation tried to repair the lasting damage.
As recently as last year, when a white nationalist rally turned violent in Charlottesville, Virginia, people started to finally demand the removal of Confederate monuments scattered around the nation. These monuments, built to honor and commemorate the Confederate generals on the wrong moral side of slavery, stood for the treasonous and racist principles of the Confederacy that today seem repugnant to contemplate. The fact that these statues, memorials, and monuments were not removed sooner clearly illustrates the deferred maintenance of America’s own foundational history. However, removing these statues is not enough to fix the wrongs of our nation’s history, just as denying the use of marijuana wouldn’t free Ensign Parker from the lasting damage of his lie.

Ensign Parker could deny his history of smoking marijuana to preserve his spot in the submarine and protect his job -- after all, it does not seem like a big deal (especially as it is now legal in many states). It is a small infraction that could be justified in his own mind. But, this simple decision would lay a dishonest base to his future career. And sometimes, even the smallest flaw can cause the largest system failure. For example, in 1986, a small flaw in the space shuttle Challenger, a faulty “O” ring that would seem inconsequential to anyone except the system itself, caused the catastrophic disaster of the shuttle as it exploded into the sea. In a similar way, the complex system of a submarine and its crew needs to operate flawlessly together, including a high level of trust and communication among the crew.
It is therefore Ensign Parker’s duty to himself and his crew to acknowledge the mistakes of his past -- to admit them and build a new beginning. It becomes the basis of his own integrity. In fact, admitting the wrongs of the past is taught as a path to moral virtue in one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church: Reconciliation.

Reconciliation allows those who have sinned to come clean about past mistakes and reconcile with God and with themselves. It is clear throughout the New Testament and many other works of literature that confessing the truth about the past is the ultimate beginning, the path to a fulfilling life. Proverbs 28:13 states, “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” Without confession, those who have sinned must live their lives with the constant guilt from the inability to tell the truth about their pasts.

Living with personal guilt is surely not the only repercussion of being dishonest. In many cases, the initial lie, no matter the size, will end up forcing more extreme actions in order to preserve the cover. Victor “Brute” Krulak, for example, was a decorated United States Marine Corps officer during World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Korean War. Krulak was an extremely successful general who was known for his bravery, ingenuity, and leadership in training and in combat. However, before Krulak gained his high position, he was asked about his religious beliefs at the Naval Academy and then afterward at the Marine Corps. Krulak was born a Jew, yet he knew admitting this would damage his career, so he denied his own heritage and claimed to be Episcopalian. Later, Krulak completely disowned his entire family in order to remove all
Jewish connections and preserve his newfound, acceptable religion. Looking back, it may be understandable that Krulak had to protect himself and his future from the anti-semitism and prejudice in those days. He most likely would have never been allowed to ascend the ranks of leadership had he shared his true heritage. But how far is one willing to go for their career? Even at the end of his life, his biographer Robert Coram, in an otherwise complimentary book, focused repeatedly on Krulak’s renunciation of his own religion and family, suggesting it may have revealed a character defect that remained with him throughout his career. Krulak’s denial of his religion, understandable as it may have been at the time, still served to undermine his character in the end.

Ensign Parker must recognize that he, too, could face other consequences if he lies about his past. His dilemma is a test of his moral character and a question of how he wants to build the ultimate foundation of his career in the Nuclear Power Program.

So, what would I do if I were Ensign Parker? I would speak the truth. The whole truth. I would look my commanding officers in the eyes and tell them exactly what happened, that I had smoked pot twice in high school. I would say that I tried it and regretted it afterward, and I would give my word that I would never do it again. I would explain that because I am able to share this information, to come clean about a regrettable event in my past, I would expect the members of my crew to know my true character, to see the integrity in my confession, and to understand that my admission spoke to the seriousness of my commitment to my shipmates. With integrity comes trust, and trust is the cornerstone of successful relationships and mutual respect. After I told the truth, I
would hope that my commanding officers would recognize that my house, my character, had officially started on a foundation of strength, dependability, and integrity.

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