Realizing the Meaning of Integrity
Francis H. Balcom

The word integrity had no definite meaning to me until I read the essay, "The Luxury of Integrity," by Stuart Chase. Moral soundness, honesty, and uprightness were given as definitions in the dictionary. Only through my experiences can I appreciate these meanings. I was reared in a happy home even though it was not blessed with great material wealth. From the first days I can remember, truthfulness and honesty were bywords in my home. The rural area in which I lived provided a never-ending list of chores. I was taught how to do the work required, and, from that time on, my responsibility was to do the work to the best of my ability. Lessons in Bible school taught me to be honest, to be truthful, and to do my best; and the public school teachers taught the same principles, often with the aid of the legendary "hickory stick." Although I had no knowledge of the word integrity, these teachings were instilling integrity in me.

High school was a new world to me, for I left the rural school and my friends to go to the largest city school. By applying the principles which had been incessantly drilled into me, I found this new world a most enjoyable one. Four years gave me many hours—hours for formulating dreams of the future. As an honor student, I began to have faint hopes for furthering my education; these hopes grew brighter during the summer months; because of an accident, however, they were dashed; and my dream of becoming an ornithologist was put away. I continued to work diligently as an apprentice in the sheet metal business, and I became quite adept. Success in a new kind of work gave me great pride, but soon I noticed that I was not permitted to do my best. Since the customers often desired a piece of work which they could not afford, I was forced to make something from inferior materials or by cheaper construction. When the item was completed, I was unable to look at it with pride and say, "I made it with my own hands." The same situation occurred many times until I finally became discouraged and left the apprenticeship. Thus, I first tasted the forced loss of integrity.

Without previous experience or knowledge pertaining to salesmanship, I accepted a position as a sales clerk in a large store. Many lessons were taught to me, and I eagerly put them into practice. With a great desire to do my best, I became one of the top sales clerks in the store. The Wilmark Service System spied on me and gave me a superior rating. The position of assistant manager of one of the firm's branch stores was offered to me. Needless to say, I jumped at the offer and continued my fine record. Just a few months before the beginning of World War II, I began to feel the need for more money because living expenses had increased. My income was a fixed
salary plus a commission, and to increase my income meant that I would have to make more in commission. All of the lessons I had ever learned about salesmanship were put into practice, and my sales soared to a new level. This practice continued for a number of months, but after I had been with the firm for more than a year, an incident happened which caused me to stop and think. My thoughts were not good as they went back to the past, to the sales I had made, to the inferior products I had sold, and to the customers who had been cheated. I quit my job that same day, but it was too late, for I had already thrown my integrity aside merely to earn a few paltry dollars. Cheating myself was a new experience.

After a few years in the military service, I returned to civilian life. Not knowing what to do with my future, I traveled in the West and went to work in Oregon. Because I was a handy man, I found employment more to my liking on the ranches and in the lumber camps. During my entire stay in that area, I was elated by the integrity displayed by the local residents. Their word was their bond, and they believed in the life they lived. Luxuries of life were not theirs, but they had a feeling of security and an immeasurable wealth, for they were living as they believed. The local storekeeper was also a man of great integrity. In his store were two items of luxury: candy and sodas. Every other item in that store could be considered an item of necessity, for even the usual shelf of patent medicines was lacking, and in its place were a few time-tested remedies such as castor oil, Sloan’s liniment, and Vick’s salve. Will, the storekeeper, was also the local news reporter for the county weekly, and all news was rendered truthfully and accurately, for he feared no one, and he was not a “yes man.” My next stop for employment was a ranch in the north central part of Nebraska. Again I was elated by the integrity of all the people I met. Every man had his code of ethics, his beliefs, and he lived up to them. In this wealthy cattle country, I saw transactions involving hundreds of cattle and many thousands of dollars, but never did I see a legal document or a paper transaction. A man’s word was sufficient. Therefore, integrity is not a luxury for some people; it is a necessity in their environment.

Soon after leaving these two encouraging environments, I re-enlisted in the military service. Within one month after re-enlisting, I had property stolen from me which was valued at more than two hundred and fifty dollars. Integrity was apparently unheard of or was completely disregarded. At the same time, I was forced to be a “yes man.” Not a day passed when I could live entirely as I believed, for I had become a tool of some general or one of his subordinates who were my superiors. My previous experience and diligent performance of duty had been rewarded by many commendations, but now I was not even permitted to do my work as I knew it should be done. For almost three years I was forced to do things
in which I could never believe, and I was forced to be dishonest time and again in order to account for property. During a period of over two years, I marked each day off on the calendar and counted one less, and on the last day I counted hours and minutes. Finally I was released, and I was free to live up to the principles I had been taught many years before.

Long ago, my dream of becoming an ornithologist was put away, but now it has been taken out and dusted off. I learned the meaning of integrity, and I now realize and appreciate its value. Integrity should be instilled in man through teaching; he may be forced to lose his integrity; he may cast his integrity aside for want of worldly possessions; he may have integrity because of necessity. But I believe that life is worth living only when man can honestly and truthfully say that he is living the life in which he believes. The meaning of integrity may then be realized.

Impressions of Keats

Jack Albertson

In the poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" there is a reflection of the character of Keats. This reflection is made more remarkable by his life. He had always known poverty, hardship, and suffering. His health was bad because of his struggle for existence. With this kind of environment one would expect Keats to have a gloomy outlook on life.

But Keats was quite the opposite. His hardship seemed only to deepen his perception of beauty. Note his interpretations of the figures on the urn—a maiden never to lose her beauty, a lover never to lose his love, a tree never to lose its splendor, the musicians never to stop playing their ethereal melodies.

Yet upon closer examination one may detect a certain unhappiness in all this beauty. The lover will never reach the lips of his maiden fair. The tree will never bring forth its fruit and fulfill nature's cycle. And the melodious music of the musicians will never be heard by the ears of mortal man.

It seems as though Keats were saying, "My life has been drab, but I am able to see beauty all around me. This beauty is wonderful to behold, yet it saddens my heart. For how can I attain this beauty, this happiness? It is always just beyond the reach of my fingers, always ahead, driving me on to realms unknown."

However, I think Keats did find happiness. He found it in his search for beauty. He found it by reaching and climbing to heights unknown to other men. He lived in a dreamer's world, and in that world he found happiness and beauty.