THINK ABOUT IT

Don Meyer, Ph.D.

An Undivided Life

“Character is developed by two small words – yes and no.”
Anonymous

BTK (Bind, Torture, Kill) will forever identify Dennis Rader. Those were the words he chose to describe a string of murders (at least 10) he committed in Wichita, KS dating back to 1974. Though a Scout leader, husband, father and town dog-catcher in a working-class suburb where he had lived more than 30 years, this man will forever be known for his hideous crimes.

“At Christ Lutheran Church,” Patrick O’Driscoll described, “Dennis Rader was known as a caring man, an usher who is president of the church council. He even brought salad and spaghetti sauce to a church supper he couldn’t attend.”

At the time of his arrest one writer asked this haunting question, “How could BTK have juggled two lives for more than three decades?” All of us should think about that question. I realize BTK is an ultimate extreme of leading a double life but how is it possible to become such a person? How can a man function simultaneously in such good and bad worlds and seem on the outside to be normal?

Another church goer recently opened fire on fellow-worshipers near Milwaukee killing seven before taking his own life. Our newspapers are filled with less extreme expressions of people who seem to be one kind of person on the outside but something very different on the inside.

Harry Stonecipher, Boeing CEO, violated the very code of conduct he implemented by having an extramarital affair with a female worker. The USA Today article began “In the end, Harry Stonecipher failed to practice what he preached.” Not only was he forced to resign; his wife filed for divorce before the end of the week.

Even revered Temple coach, John Chaney, revealed a most dishonorable side when he ordered a player to commit hard fouls against St. Joseph’s University which led an opposing player to fall and break his arm. Quite a debate began whether he should resign or be fired.

We all face the integrity challenge to be the same on the outside as we are on the inside. We all make multiple decisions each day that contribute to a divided or undivided life! If we wear a mask too long or too often without realizing it we eventually become the mask.
Parker J. Palmer, a highly respected writer, lecturer, teacher and activist addresses this subject in his book “A Hidden Wholeness; The Journey Toward An Undivided Life” (2004). His words are profound.

“I pay a steep price when I live a divided life – feeling fraudulent, anxious about being found out, and depressed by the fact that I am denying my own selfhood. The people around me pay a price as well, for now they walk on ground made unstable by my dividedness.” He goes on. “A fault line runs down the middle of my life, and whenever it cracks open – divorcing my words and actions from the truth I hold within – things around me get shaky and start to fall apart.”

Palmer describes our inclination to ask of one another, “Is this person the same on the inside as he or she seems to be on the outside?” And when we sense that the answer is “yes”, we relax but when we sense that the answer is “no”, we go on high high alert.

“The perceived incongruity of inner and outer – the in-authenticity that we sense in others, or they in us,” Palmer wisely describes, “constantly undermines our morale, our relationships, and our capacity for good work.”

I realize one small gesture without integrity does not make anyone like Dennis Rader. But even Dennis Rader did not become BTK overnight.

Think about it.

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