

Address by Mr. Justice Melville Baird
Chairman, Integrity Commission
Secondary Schools Poster Design Competition Award Ceremony

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Why must integrity begin with me? Integrity is a very delicate commodity and it needs as many advocates as it could possibly get to champion it so that it might be capable of developing and prospering in society. If therefore each member of society could truthfully say: "Integrity begins with me", where integrity is accepted as being moral wholeness, then we would have an extraordinary society in Trinidad and Tobago. Students, teachers, parents, government officials and workers, business people, the self-employed, professionals, if each one of us could sincerely say, "Integrity begins with me" then we would well be on our way to being an exemplary and corruption free society.

Now, when I look at the excellent poster designs on integrity that the students have submitted here this morning and the profound rationale accompanying each of the poster designs I can safely say that the journey towards that corruption free society has unquestionably begun.

With one glance at these poster designs one can conclude that these artistic creations came from the minds of young people who undoubtedly have a firm command and understanding of, not only the virtue of integrity, but also the evil of corruption. And it is the knowledge of these two opposing qualities that would form the common thread that would bind the lives of these young people, the future Trinidad and Tobago.

Students, your goal, your objective, viz the cherishing of integrity and the rejecting of corruption must be pursued without fear but with determination. You will persevere in the struggle- and it will indeed be a struggle- as you grow into adulthood.

You will learn that integrity can take various forms, but all the forms will have one common base - moral wholeness.

Let us briefly take the environment by way of example. Do not be misled; do not be deceived; you will hear false stories but the absolute truth is that our environment is a treasure beyond price; it is a precious gift to us. Your care for, and protection of, the environment therefore would be a singular form of integrity. You cannot hold yourself out as a person of integrity, if you are abusing the environment; your claim to integrity will be hollow if at the same time you are violating the environment. Desecration of the environment is not compatible with integrity.

The influence of integrity must be immense and beyond measure. You must never permit yourselves to be placed in a situation where conscience goes one way and conduct goes the opposite way. You must never find yourself in circumstances where conscience said 'No" and conduct says "yes". Conscience and conduct must always be in a mutually advantageous association.

You must be conscious of integrity at all times. And a simple way in which you can be assisted in keeping integrity ever present in your minds is by from time to time, considering and reflecting on stories that applaud integrity and at the same time condemn dishonesty.

At this juncture therefore I would like to share such a story about integrity with you. The form integrity takes in this story is the more conventional form and is slightly different from the form it took in respect of the environment. But as I have said the base foundation for all forms of integrity is moral wholeness.

The story is fairly well known and I am certain that some of you will be familiar with it. But it conveys such a powerful message that I am confident that there would be no objections were I to repeat it here this morning. I asked those who already know the story to bear with me.

The story was referred to in the Report of the Integrity Clubs Assembly of St. Joseph's Convent, San Fernando. And indeed we have here this morning Integrity Champion teachers, integrity ambassadors and integrity student champions from the schools that participated in the Integrity Clubs Pilot Project. I therefore take this opportunity to let them all know that they are doing an outstanding job, we are very proud of them and we urge them to continue to forge ahead making a difference in their schools.

And now for the story.

There was once an Emperor in Ancient China who had no children and he needed to choose a successor. He selected a village from amongst the many villages in his Empire and invited all the children from that village to come to his palace; when they got there he told them that he was going to choose one of them to be his successor. However he wanted to make a proper assessment of each of them so that he could make an informed decision as to his successor. Therefore, he gave each of the children a seed; he told them to return to their village, plant the seed in a pot and tend it for a year. When they return in a year's time, he would judge their efforts and name his successor.

Among the hundreds of children, there was this boy named Ling; Ling received his seed from the Emperor and returned to the village. He got a pot; put some soil in it and planted the seed. Ling watered his pot every day.

Once a week the children of the village would get together to compare their pots. After some weeks, there were signs of plant life and seedlings in all the pots, except Ling's. Ling's pot was lifeless. He continued to water his pot every day.

The weeks passed into months and Ling continued to water his pot every day. But his pot remained lifeless.

After a few months, the pots of all the other children really came to life; some had plants that had started to grow; some had flowers; some had leafy shrubs. Ling was the only one who had nothing growing in his pot.

This caused the children whose pots were growing to make fun of him. Ling continued to water his pot every day.

A year passed and it was time for the children to return to the Emperor so that he could judge their efforts and name his successor. Ling was scared because his pot showed no signs of life; he thought that the Emperor might think he was lazy and had not watered his pot; he thought he might be punished. He was considering not going back to the Emperor at all. He was very discouraged.

Ling's parents however, who had been encouraging him all along, seeing his distress, told him he should not be afraid. They told Ling to tell the Emperor the truth. He would tell the Emperor how he watered the pot everyday but despite all his efforts the seed did not grow into a plant. Ling received great comfort and reassurance from his parents and plucking up courage he left for the palace with the lifeless pot.

By that time the pots of the other children were looking luxurious, some filled with tall plants with a large amount of leaves, some filled with plants with beautiful flowers. In all the pots there was abundant life except Ling's pot. Ling was embarrassed as the other children looked at his lifeless pot and laughed.

The Emperor came out and started making his way through the crowd, looking at the impressive trees, shrubs and flowers that were on display. The Emperor came to Ling, saw the lifeless pot and asked him what had happened. Ling explained truthfully that he watered the pot everyday but nothing ever grew. The Emperor moved on, and after a few hours he completed his assessment.

The Emperor then addressed all the children.

He told them that it was clear that they desperately wanted to be Emperor and would have gone to any lengths to make that happen.

He said there was a boy he wanted to point out as that boy came to him with nothing. He then called Ling. Ling nervously went to the Emperor clutching his lifeless pot. The Emperor held up the pot for all the children to see and the children all laughed.

The Emperor then continued stating that a year ago he had given each of them a seed, told them to plant the seed and return with their plants in a year's time. He then revealed to them that before he gave them the seeds, he had boiled the seeds until they could not grow; the seeds he gave them had all been boiled until they were no longer viable; they could not grow.

But he was seeing before him hundreds of plants and only one lifeless pot – Ling's pot.

Of all the hundreds of children Ling was the only one who showed integrity and honesty. All the other children, when they realised that the seed the Emperor had given them was not growing – although they did not know the reason the seed was not growing – each one of them substituted another seed for the seed he had been given. And the new seed grew into flourishing plant.

Each child then presented the Emperor with a growing plant with the intention of deceiving the Emperor into thinking that the seed the Emperor had given that child had grown into that plant and therefore, that child was worthy to be named the Emperor's successor.

Each of those children lacked integrity; each of those children acted dishonestly with the intention of receiving personal gain.

Not Ling. It never crossed Ling's mind to do anything dishonest; he continued to water his pot every day for a year. Ling's mind was so full of integrity and honesty that there was no room for dishonesty and corruption; integrity was part of Ling, it was in his blood. Ling was integrity and integrity was Ling, so he did the right thing always and without effort. And so Ling was made the successor to the Emperor.

Students, I urge you to be like Ling. Your minds must be so full of integrity and honesty that there would be no room for dishonesty and corruption; integrity must be part of you; it must be in your blood.

You must be integrity and integrity must be you, so you would do the right thing always and without effort. In this way, integrity would not only begin with you; it would continue with you.

You would maintain your integrity whether you are in an agreeable situation or you are in a difficult one; whether you are being seen or you are not being seen.

It is very good when you can stand up for integrity when everybody is watching you. The acid test comes however, when no one is watching you.

If you observe your integrity when all eyes are on you and the moment no one is watching you begin to backslide, to abandon your high moral principles and to descend into dishonourable conduct, then, not only would that be hypocrisy, it would reflect no credit on your character whatsoever. This would not happen however, when you are integrity and integrity is you.

As I said earlier you must pursue your goal fearlessly. I say this because I know that as you enter the work place – as in due course you will – your integrity will be severely tested; your integrity, in some situations, might be the object of mockery and ridicule. I remind you of the way the children, in their dishonesty, were laughing at Ling in his integrity. Furthermore, in some instances, your stand for integrity might be viewed as you “rocking the boat”.

You will be ready for all this; you will not do what the ninety-nine percent is doing if what that ninety-nine percent is doing is wrong; you will stand firm in your convictions; you will not compromise your principles; you will be courageous as Ling was courageous. And let the stronger ones help and encourage those who might be willing but weak and might be showing signs of being overwhelmed by this offensive tidal wave.

I assure you that in the end virtue will triumph over vice. It always does.

Students, I entreat you, when you become adults, do not let us down. Do not put a monetary price on your integrity. Because if you, the young people of this country, become corrupt adults, then Trinidad and Tobago might never recover.

Let my words echo in your minds. Do not let my words go in one ear, make an about turn and exit the same ear they entered. We are really depending on you. It will be a heavy responsibility I agree, but I am confident that you will come through for us.

And now on behalf of all the members and staff of the Integrity Commission I congratulate the winners of the Poster Design Competition:

1st Place: Charissa Payne of North Gate College

2nd Place: Stacy Ricomas of Sarawati Girls Hindu College

3rd Place: Faatimah Mallah of St Augustine Girls High School.

I also congratulate the winners of the special prizes and of honorary mention:

Keshav Seecharan of Naparima College

Alyssa Lezama of Goodwood Secondary School

I hasten to add however, that although they are the official winners, each one of you is a winner in your own right. There are no losers here this morning; each one of you is a model of excellence. The artistic standard was so very high and the rationale that each student provided was so penetrating and intense that no student got lower than 75 points. The judges had a very difficult task.

Further, I was absolutely overwhelmed by the enthusiasm, the commitment, the patriotism each one of you showed in getting your poster design completed and then having it submitted. As I have said, you are all winners here this morning.

In light of this therefore, it is fitting that each of you be given a small memento that would mark and record today's ceremony; this memento would also be testimony to the vital contribution each of you made to the success of the competition.

At the end of the ceremony I would like to have a picture taken with the winners of the competition; but I would also like to have a group picture taken standing with all of you, because you are all winners and I thank you all very much indeed.

In a very special way I thank the principals of the various schools that participated in the competition. It was their unqualified fiat that enabled their respective schools to be in, and contribute to, the competition. The passion and interest they demonstrated were transmitted in no uncertain

way to their teachers and students, resulting in this explosion of creativity. I thank the principals.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the art teachers. The guidance, support and inspiration they provided their students manifestly bore abundant and significant fruit. Their contribution to the competition was crucial and substantial. And I also thank them.

And keeping the best for last, I thank the parents without whose consent and co-operation, this competition would not have been possible.

As I see it, the presentation of such outstanding work on integrity by the students, means that their parents would have been inculcating in them, on an ongoing basis, these noble values and principles; it means that their parents themselves are exemplars of integrity and ethics; it means that the children are growing up in an atmosphere of moral wholeness. These parents therefore are exactly like the parents of young Ling in China.

Parents, I beseech you, without looking left or right, but looking straight ahead, continue with this praiseworthy moulding of your children.

In the same manner in which the nation depends on your children, the nation depends on you, to guide and inspire them. Do not let us down.

In closing, what I say to one I say to all: let integrity begin with you and continue with you.