

February 2009

# Virtue In Action

Honest Abe's Relevance in Today's World

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

*“Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.” – Abraham Lincoln*



**STEALING  
LYING  
CHEATING**

*Most of us immediately know such actions are wrong. But a recent survey conducted by the Josephson Institute of 30,000 U.S. high school students revealed surprising findings about young people's actions regarding these basic moral decisions.*

# Do honesty and integrity matter anymore?



**S**tealing. Lying. Cheating. Most of us immediately know such actions are wrong. But a recent survey of 30,000 U.S. high school students revealed surprising findings about young people's actions regarding these basic moral decisions.

Approximately 30 percent of students admitted stealing from a store within the last year. Another 83 percent admitted lying to a parent about something important, and 64% admitted to cheating on a test in the past year. But perhaps the worst statistic was 93 percent.

That is the staggering number of students surveyed who said they were satisfied with their personal ethics, despite the amount of dishonest acts they admitted to in the 2008 survey conducted by the Josephson Institute. These findings are particularly disappointing as we approach the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birthday on Feb. 12. Our 14<sup>th</sup> president – who came from humble beginnings—embodied many of the virtues and was especially known for his **honesty**.

Lincoln famously stated: "I have always wanted to deal

*"Character is what you do when nobody's looking." – J. C. Watts*

with everyone I meet candidly and honestly." Through this lesson, we will examine the importance of honesty and the related virtues that help us to be honest, including fortitude, courage and prudence.

## **Stealing**

Not only did students admit to stealing from stores, they acknowledged stealing from friends and relatives. Approximately 23 percent said they stole from parents or a relative. Another 20 percent admitting they stole from a friend, though boys appeared twice as likely as girls to commit such an act. What do these findings say about our society?

Apparently, many young people are willing to take things that do not belong to them, even from those who have their trust. For those who steal, there is likely always a

**23%**  
STOLE FROM PARENTS  
OR A RELATIVE



*“He who permits himself to tell a lie once finds it much easier to do it a second and a third time, til eventually it becomes a habit.” – Thomas Jefferson*

reason, from wanting an item and not having the money to pay for it, to simply seeking the thrill of seeing if they can get away with it. Although these temptations are real, it is sad that so many young people admit to giving into them and not having the **fortitude** to resist temptations.

The costs of stealing are obvious in terms of the economic loss for store owners, and the loss of trust from friends and family whom find that someone they trusted has stolen from them. What may not be as obvious to us now as teens is that if we allow our ethics to slip with activities like stealing, even small things, then we are much more likely to become an adult willing to steal or cheat others and the harm can become much greater.

A recent example is the case of investment manager Bernard Madoff. Madoff told his clients for years that their investments were earning them high and consistent returns, when in fact he was simply taking new investors' money and giving it to those who invested earlier. Madoff was basically stealing money from new investors and giving it to others, and in process, collecting hundreds of millions of dollars in management fees for himself. As long as new investors kept coming in, he could continue the lie. The losses from Madoff's scheme may reach as high as \$50 billion, and sadly many of his clients who have suffered significant losses include charities for children, universities and foundations that pay for medical research.

It would be interesting to discuss with people who have stolen if they gave any consideration to the harm their stealing causes others. Hopefully, a little **prudence** in thinking through the implications of a harmful act can help us all make better decisions.

### Lying

About 42 percent of surveyed students said they lied in order to save money. That, on its face, may not sound like a horrible reason to lie. Some may think it isn't a big deal to switch the prices on two items to pay the less expensive price; however, the act of lying itself has serious negative consequences for ourselves and others regardless of the motivation. Some may get away with the acts of deception for a while; however, this often leads to additional lies that end up ruining lives.

One recent high-profile example is movie star Wesley



Snipes (left), actor of the Blade trilogy fame. Last year, Snipes was sentenced to a maximum three years in prison for failing to file approximately \$15 million in tax returns over a 10-year-period.

In our own lives we know the cost of not being honest in losing the trust of friends and family. Sometimes we may feel tempted to lie to avoid an embarrassing situation, or because of peer pressure to lie to our parents to cover up activities that we know are wrong. During those times, it often takes **courage** to overcome our fears and a commitment to being honest, even if it means acknowledging a failure or standing up to peers who want us to lie. This sense of commitment to live up to our highest standards and values, especially in the face of temptation, is the essence of **integrity**.

### Cheating

According to the Josephson Institute survey, about 64 percent of students surveyed cheated on a test during the past year, with 38 percent admitting they cheated more than twice. Another 36 percent acknowledged plagiarizing from the Internet. Cheating on a test is basically a lie in that we are proclaiming that the test is a reflection of our knowledge of the subject, when in fact it is our knowledge plus the answers of others. Cheating also brings up important issues of **justice** as those students who aren't cheating are placed at an unfair disadvantage. Additionally, in asking someone else to help us cheat on a test we are pressuring them to participate in the lie, and tempting them to undermine their own character.



It's important to ask whether a true friend should place another friend in that situation.

Recently, there have been high profile examples of authors and athletes engaging in cheating, ruining their careers and turning their fans against them. One particularly sad example is former women's track star Marion Jones who served six months in jail for lying to federal investigators about her steroid use during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Jones' actions caused the U.S. Olympic Committee to strip the other eight members of the U.S. Sydney team of the bronze medals they won with Jones in team relay events.

"The decision announced today by the International Olympic Committee Executive Board illustrates just how far-reaching the consequences of doping can be," USOC chief executive Jim Scherr told the Washington Post at the time of the decision. "When an athlete makes the choice to cheat, others end up paying the price, including teammates, competitors and fans."

Often, the motivation to cheat comes from fear – a fear of not doing well on a test, or not succeeding in a sport or other profession. It takes courage to face these fears and maintain our personal integrity.

### **The Truth about Dishonest Acts**

Contrast the examples of wrongdoing in this lesson with the actions and beliefs of Lincoln. Before he entered the world of law and eventually politics, Lincoln worked an assortment of jobs, including as a storekeeper in Salem, Illinois. One night, Lincoln was doing his bookkeeping after a day's work and realized that he had overcharged a customer by 6 cents, according to an account in "The Children's Book of Heroes."

Though night was falling and he had no way to make it to the customer other than by foot, Lincoln decided he had to correct his error immediately. Through the night he walked 6 miles roundtrip in order to return the money, an act that might have earned him the enduring nickname "honest Abe." Later in life, Lincoln famously stated: "Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow." The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing." Lincoln's **integrity** served him well later in life as his character earned him the respect of political allies and adversaries alike.

Lincoln's attitude is one we can adopt in order to act in such a way that we – and those around us—can be proud. Lying, cheating and stealing may appear prevalent in our society, but if they are, we should work to change such behaviors. We must never become satisfied with a lower code of morality, as the students in the survey seemed to in admitting that they lie, cheat and / or steal yet are satisfied with their personal ethics.

Fortunately, there are also many present day examples of teens choosing to do the right thing and living lives of integrity. Last April, four teens - Kyle Coenen, Brad Stankowski, Jason Kaczowski, and Nathan Hammernik-were vacationing in Florida when they came across a wallet washed up on the beach. Amazingly, the wallet had \$2,500 of cash in it. According to the account of the story in Marconews.com, the boys admitted that keeping the wallet did cross their minds. "We joked about it a little bit, but we all knew we would never feel good about it, never feel right," Kyle said. These 4 teens were likely able to make the right decision because they had already made a commitment to live according to higher standards. When the moment of significant temptation came, they were ready to choose the right course.

We may be tempted to think that we can engage in wrongful activities now and then, and that these actions won't determine the type of person we become. Wrongdoing, even in small amounts, can lead us to make bigger mistakes and miscalculations later in life. Like Lincoln and the four teens on the beach, we should not be as concerned with the shadow our actions cast, but with the tree, our commitment to living lives of **honesty, integrity, prudence** and **courage**.

### **Vocabulary**

**Honesty:** truthfulness; free from deceit or fraud

**Prudence:** thinking through the implications of our actions and decisions

**Courage:** the capacity to meet danger without giving way to fear; to have the courage of one's convictions; to be willing to put one's opinions into practice

**Fortitude:** mental and emotional strength in facing difficulty, adversity, danger, or temptation

**Integrity:** steadfast adherence to a moral or ethical code

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## Honest Abe's Relevance in Today's World

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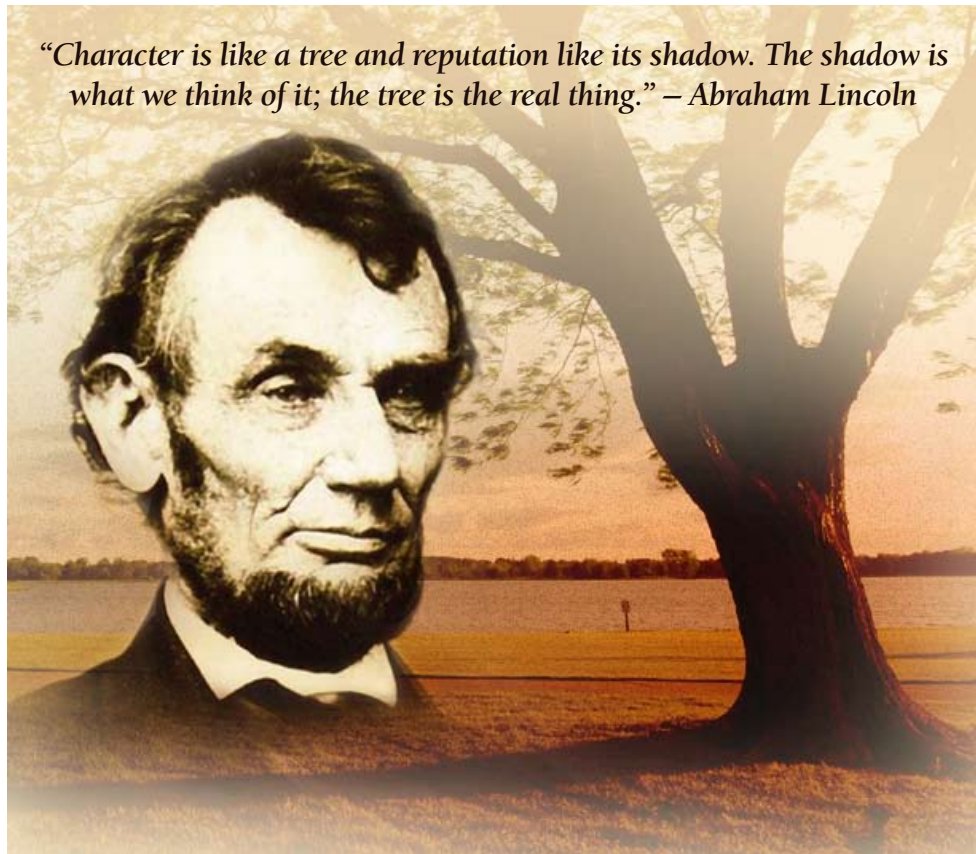
### Highlighted Virtues:

Honesty, Prudence,  
Courage, Fortitude,  
Integrity

### Lesson Goals:

- Help students to realize the degree to which our youth is being dishonest in test-taking, lying, and theft
- Encourage students to consider how the virtue of honesty is relevant to various aspects of their lives
- Help students to more fully understand the virtue of honesty, and inspire them to live it out in their lives
- Develop understanding of how the virtues of prudence, courage, fortitude and integrity help us to live a more honest life
- Develop awareness of the negative consequences of being dishonest for ourselves, our family, peers and larger community
- Help students to realize the benefits of living a life of honesty and integrity both from the historical example of Abraham Lincoln and current examples

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### Discussion Question Options:

1. What did the survey reveal about the degree of cheating, stealing and lying among teens? Do you think these percentages are generally accurate in our school and community?
2. What do you think are the underlying motivations and reasons for teens to lie, cheat and steal?
3. Let's evaluate a realistic scenario in our community where students are tempted to lie, cheat and steal, and then discuss the specific virtues that can help us to make the right decision.
4. In addition to the stories in this lesson, what examples can we think of and share where friends, family members or famous people have made decisions that affirm honesty and integrity?
5. Does lying, cheating or stealing among people in high-profile positions – actors, writers, or other public figures – make those acts seem less wrong? Why or why not?

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**42%** LIED TO  
SAVE  
MONEY



**23%** STOLE FROM  
PARENTS OR A  
RELATIVE



**83%** ADMITTED LYING TO  
A PARENT ABOUT  
SOMETHING IMPORTANT

6. Do you think our society is getting worse in the areas of lying, cheating or stealing? What do you think could make these actions less common, especially among young people?
7. How did the students surveyed feel about their moral character? Do you agree with their assessment?
8. How did athlete Marion Jones' cheating hurt others? Do you think the penalty she and her teammates received was fair?
9. If Lincoln were alive today, what do you think his reaction would be to the results of the Josephson Institute study?

**Journal Writing Option:**

Write about an incident where you lied, cheated or stole something. After describing the incident, write out the effects the action had on others and on you. Finally, write about how you would now handle the same situation, and how specific virtues would help you make the right decision.

**Extended Learning Activities:**

1. Give each student a category: lying, cheating or stealing. Ask them to find an example – other than in the lesson-- of this behavior in the newspaper that week. Explain how the action hurt the individual who committed the act, as well as others around them.
2. Have the students break into groups and find an example from Lincoln's life—other than the lesson – that demonstrates his honesty. Have them act out that scene.

**Internet Resources:**

**Josephson's Institute: The Ethics of American Youth Survey Results:** <http://charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard/index.html>

**"As Another Memoir is Faked, Trust Suffers,"** New York Times, Dec. 30, 2008: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/31/books/31opra.html>

**"Jones's Running Mates Told to Return Medals"** Washington Post, April 11, 2008: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/04/10/AR2008041003272.html>

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