What really counts

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You remember Sean quite well. He was the salutatorian of your dental school class. Although many of your classmates did not match or were not accepted to specialty programs immediately after dental school graduation, Sean was promptly invited to his first-choice program. He was an intelligent fellow, almost charismatic in demeanor with an apparent warmth that seemed as if it could charm a snake. But his reputation for cheating on exams was legendary among those in your class. This behavior was just 1 example of his predisposition toward dishonesty and deception. For this, despite his charisma, most of your classmates came to dislike Sean. He considered you and your classmates to be potential threats to his class rank. Yet many faculty members who were unaware of his impropriety seemed to admire and fraternize with him.

Sean rose up the lecture circuit quickly through his endorsement by a prominent vendor—an offer made to him soon after completing his residency. The company sponsored him and his wife for worldwide travel to exotic countries to promote the sponsor's new bracket system. And his immediate success in practice was vastly attributed to his ability to charm his father-in-law to transfer the thriving practice to him for almost nothing. He soon prepaid a vast sum of his educational loans, built a summer home at the shore, but was never able to develop genuine friendships with any of his acquaintances.

What defines the perception of our character: intelligence, financial success, personal warmth, or our perception of an individual's sense of morality? Are virtues such as sincerity, courage, humility, kindness, compassion, or self-control the attributes which are evident to others and have predominant roles in how others perceive us? In a survey in which multiple traits of 12 different social and professional roles were identified, the quality of moral character was found to be 3 times more important than personal warmth in establishing another person's overall opinion of character. The survey's profile samples included surgeon, judge, parent, employer, spouse, or partner. The importance of moral values in determining the perception of character was found to increase proportionately, as did the level of social prominence of each of these roles.

In another study, subjects who were blinded to the research objective were asked to read 235 obituaries from *The New York Times*. They were asked to determine which characteristics were most often cited in describing the characteristics of the deceased. Descriptions involving qualities of morality occurred 2.5 times more frequently than any other characteristic listed in the obituaries.[1] Evidently, the moral values perceived by an observer was an outward indication of the inherent good or bad within each person, which led to the judgment of that person's identity and character level.

Sean has reached financial security in the pursuit of his career, but your respect for him is flawed by his deficient level of morality. We are judged by our behavior. What makes us who we are—our identity—is defined by our virtues, our values, our scruples, and our morals. And our virtues are within our control. Those whom we remember most are those that either lack these attributes or exhibit an abundance of them. Often some of the most successful people in the world are those whom we would not trust to treat ourselves or our families because we judge them to have an insufficient level of morality. And nearly every new patient we see applies their own individual litmus test to us to determine if our level of character is worthy of their trust in us.

We do not remember Martin Luther or Abraham Lincoln in the true physical sense. What makes us akin to them lies in the bond we feel through the principles and ideals they taught and stood for.[2]

George W. Hahn (1955)
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Some things never change.

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