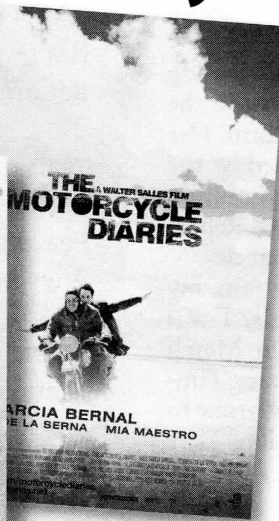
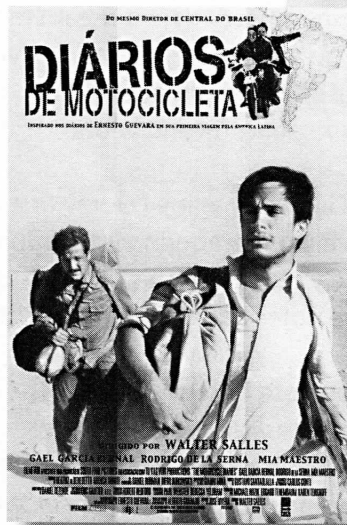


# Reflections on the Testimony of Honesty/Integrity

In 1952, Ernesto Guevara de la Serna set off on a journey with his friend Alberto Granado. They traveled by motorcycle from Buenos Aires, where they lived, to the northern tip of South America in Venezuela. Their journey and adventures are portrayed in the movie *The Motorcycle Diaries*, adapted from Ernesto's travel journal of the same name first published in 1993. Throughout the movie a narrator's voice reads passages from the travel journal. Near the beginning he recites its opening lines: "This is not a story of heroic feats. . . . It is a glimpse of two lives running parallel for a time, with similar hopes and convergent dreams."

The idea of two lives running parallel is an appropriate analogy, for while Ernesto and Alberto share a journey in common, each has his own individual journey as well. Both are influenced by their own objectives for the trip and their personalities. Alberto's goals are clear: he wants to reach the tip of the continent on his 30th birthday and to have sex with women in each country, perhaps even each town, through which they pass. He is outgoing, gregarious, full of humor, and an excellent dancer. He charms, or tries to charm, everyone he meets. But his charm is merely a form of manipulation—to get sex, food, or a place to stay. He has no interest in anyone once he has achieved or failed to achieve one of his three objectives. Consequently, Alberto makes no real connections on the trip. He is the same



person at the end of the journey as he is at the beginning.

Ernesto's goals are less clear. He tells a couple they meet on the road, "We travel to travel," and that seems to sum up his objectives. The trip is a break from his medical studies and a chance to see South America. Ernesto, five years younger than Alberto, is shy, serious, somewhat introverted, insecure with women, and a terrible dancer.

His personality is formed by a significant defining characteristic, revealed early in the trip. Ernesto and Alberto come upon an isolated house in the woods adjacent to a mountain lake, where an elderly couple lives. When the man finds out that they are doctors—a not-quite-true fact that they use to help gain support on their travels (Ernesto is still a medical student and Alberto is a biochemist)—he asks them to look at a lump on his neck. Alberto glances at it and says it's just a cyst, nothing significant, and could they have some food and a place to stay. Ernesto fingers the lump carefully and says it's a tumor and the man should get to Buenos Aires to see a specialist as quickly as possible. Afterwards Alberto complains, "The trouble with you is you're too honest." The statement implies that Alberto is

already aware of this characteristic of Ernesto's and recognizes it as the critical difference between them.

Ernesto's honesty and Alberto's manipulative charm are shown in scene after scene. Their tent gets blown away in a rainstorm and they need a place to spend the night. They approach a ranch house. When the rancher comes to the door he is sullen and asks what they want. Alberto tells a long story of how they are medical doctors traveling across the continent trying to find the cure for an incurable disease. He is charming, or so he thinks, but the rough-mannered rancher will have none of it. "What do you really want?" he asks angrily. Ernesto replies in a simple, straightforward way: "We need a place to stay." The man says he does not like Alberto, but Ernesto he likes, so they can stay in the barn with the field hands.

Later, they stay with a doctor who invites them into his home, shows them around his hospital, and arranges for their passage to a leper colony in Peru they wish to visit. In return the doctor asks them to read his novel, the secret passion of his life. Of course, both agree to do so. As they are about to board the boat to go to the leper colony, he asks what they thought of the novel. Alberto in his obsequious manner says, "No one writes like you do," leaving it unclear to the viewer and doctor alike whether he has even read the book. Ernesto looks serious and then replies that the novel is terrible, that it is unreadable, and the doctor should stick to what he knows best, medicine. For a moment there is a silence as the doctor stares at him. Then he shakes his hand and says, "Damn you, boy, nobody's been this honest with me. You're the only one."

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Telling the truth was the first spiritual decision of George Fox even before the founding of the Religious Society of Friends. It was, you might say, the ground on which his future spiritual life was based. In the opening pages of his *Journal*, Fox describes how at the age of 11 he was led to make a commitment to telling the truth at all times. "For the Lord showed me that though the people of the world have mouths full of deceit and changeable words, yet I was to keep to yea and nay in all things," a reference to the phrase "let your yea be yea and your nay be nay" (Matt. 5:37). Telling the truth at all times was Fox's first step

esty in a court of law, a practice that caused Quakers great difficulty in English courts.

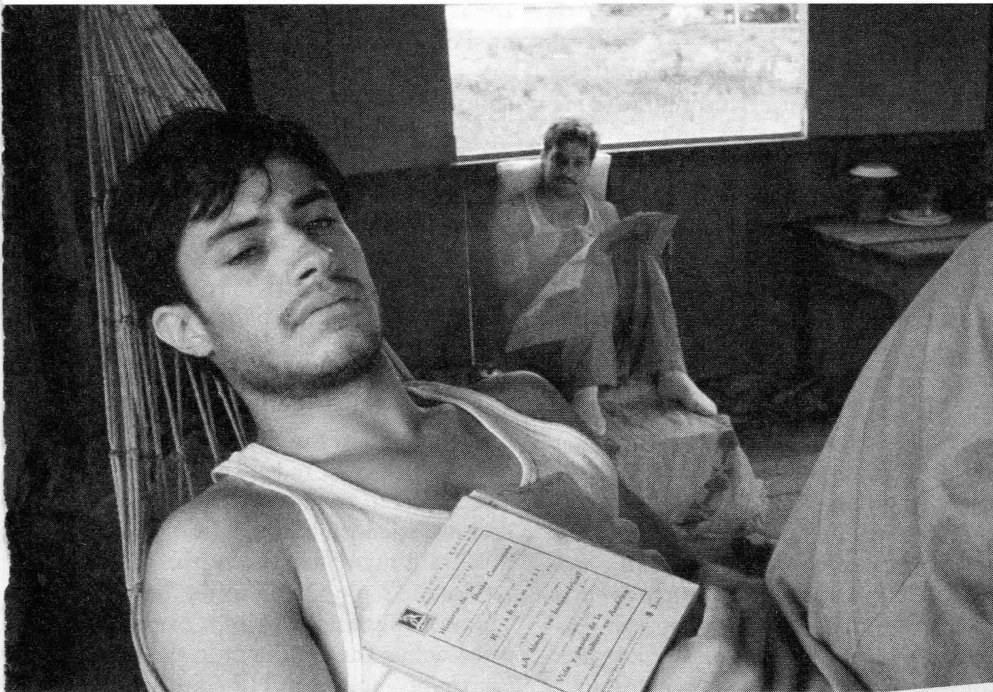
Honesty says something about Friends, and it also says something about our attitude toward other people. Alberto sees others merely as tools to be used to achieve his purposes of food, shelter, and sex. Ernesto sees other people as people with lives and needs of their own. Honesty is a sign of respect for the other. Although Ernesto's truth-telling seems to be a standard he has set for himself, by telling the truth he conveys his respect to all the people he meets. Consequently, he connects deeply and personally

reached Miami—money he had steadfastly refused to give Alberto even when they were in need of food or when Ernesto was ill and needed hospital care. He stares at peasants riding in a boat tied to the back of the more comfortable boat in which he rides. He stops and talks to a man who has been thrown off his land. The plight of people moves him. "Let the world change you," he says, "and you can change the world." He is open to the world, which makes him compassionate, and his compassion leads to generosity.

Ernesto has nothing, but he gives everything he has; he gives away his life to everyone he meets. In a small town they meet two sisters. One of their fantasies is to have sex with sisters. They charm them—even Ernesto charms them. As they are about to head off with the sisters for a tour of the village, one of the workers who has heard that they are doctors asks Ernesto if he will come see his ailing mother. Of course he says yes, while Alberto goes off with the girls, eventually to one of their beds. Ernesto sits by the mother's bed trying to comfort her, knowing there is nothing he can do to help her heal. He gives the woman a bottle of pills, which one suspects is his own asthma medicine.

He never gets the girl—not the girl back home whom he loves, not the woman on the boat, nor the woman in the dance hall, nor one of the sisters: none. Alberto gets them all, but Ernesto leaves a trail of love behind by giving his life away over and over again.

Honesty, respect for others, compassion, generosity—these traits are most fully expressed when Ernesto and Alberto visit the leper colony. Although leprosy is not contagious when under treatment, the nuns who staff the colony require everyone visiting the section where the lepers live—on the opposite side of the river from where the healthy staff live—to wear rubber gloves. Ernesto politely refuses (and Alberto follows). This small gesture creates a different relationship, an honest relationship, between him and the patients. At the colony his generosity is that of the spirit—he gives himself to the patients fully and without reservation. He sits by the bed of a woman talking with her about his own illness, trying to ease her pain. After celebrating his birthday with the staff on



**"The trouble with you is you're too honest."**

toward a spiritual life.

Honesty was the first Quaker testimony, a commitment expected of all persons who joined the Religious Society of Friends, first known as the Publishers of Truth, or Friends of Truth. Honesty really means consistency: responding the same way to everyone all the time. For Quaker merchants this meant charging the same price for their goods to all people, rich and poor alike, a practice not common at the time. For Quakers in general it meant that there was no basis for taking an oath of hon-

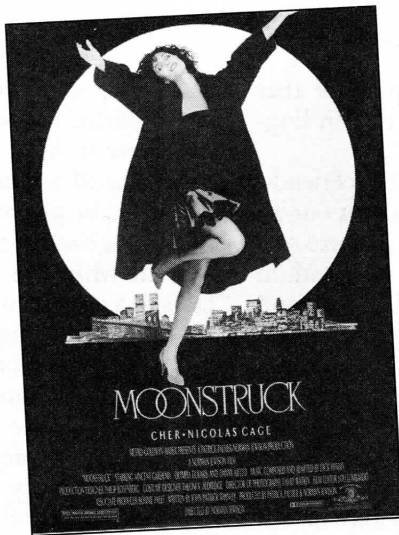
esty with people, and they respond to him in the same way. Honesty and respect open Ernesto's heart to the suffering of others and to a feeling of compassion—a visible compassion that grows as his journey progresses. Compassion is concern translated into action.

On the road at night they meet a couple traveling to find work. They have lost their land because they are communists. Ernesto's compassion is evident in his face as they talk by a campfire. He gives the woman a blanket to keep herself warm. Later we find out that he gave them the 15 U.S. dollars his girlfriend had given him to buy her a bikini if they

the “well” side of the river, he is uncomfortable that the patients are not part of the celebration too. So, in the absence of a boat, he swims the river in the middle of the night to be with them on the other side.

At the end of their trip, while they are at the airport preparing to go their separate ways—Alberto to a leprosarium in Venezuela and Ernesto back to Buenos Aires to finish medical school—Ernesto says: “Wandering around our America has changed me more than I thought. I am not me any more. At least I am not the same me as I was.” He has become aware of the discrepancies between rich and poor, something he had not come into direct contact with while leading a comfortable middle-class life with his family and as a medical student. He began his journey with a rigorous commitment to telling the truth, and he ended it with compassion and generosity that he did not have before, which in turn will nurture the sense of social justice that will emerge in the coming years.

Today the Quaker testimony of honesty is often referred to as integrity. Integrity is a big and complicated word. It certainly includes telling the truth, but telling the truth is a relatively simple matter—each of us knows when we are doing it and when we are not, even if it is only a “white lie” we may be telling. Integrity means a larger commitment to being true to our values in all things. And so it requires a clear understanding of these broader values, a clear incorporation of them into our personality so that all actions are consistent with those values. Ernesto always told the truth, and we might be inclined to say that because of that he was a person with integrity. But it is not likely he would have said that of himself at that point in his life, living comfortably and ignoring the inequities around him and even benefiting from them. Nor would George Fox have referred to himself as a man of integrity at age 11 when he started telling the truth at all times; for him, too, that



would come later.

An interesting insight into the meaning of integrity is given in the movie *Moonstruck*. The story revolves around four characters—a mother and father, their daughter, and the brother of her fiancé. One evening the mother goes out to dinner alone because her husband and daughter are out. Unbeknownst to her, and to each other, her husband

## “I know who I am.”

is attending the opera with his mistress, and her daughter is attending the same opera with her fiancé’s brother, with whom she has just had a sexual encounter. The mother invites a man to have dinner with her after he has had an incident in the restaurant with a younger woman companion. The man tries to be charming, and later walks her home. When they reach her house the man asks if he can come in, and she answers no. Although the house is empty, she says she is a married woman, and then she gives her real reason: She says, “I know who I am.”

It is easy to understand that she means she knows what her values are. She is clear that she is a woman who is faithful to the commitment she has made to her husband. The key factor is not what her husband or daughter might think if they found out she had a sexual encounter with this man; the key factor is what she thinks about herself. She is a woman who sticks to her values whether others are aware of this or not. Her statement, *I know who I am*, implies not only an understanding of her values, but also that she is clear how they influence her actions. She is not tempted, because that is not who she is. To be a person of integrity is not only to have a clear set of values, but also to act in accordance with them at all times.

But the statement *I know who I am* goes beyond an understanding of values and actions. It is also a statement about identity. Identity goes much deeper than just knowing one’s values. It means that those values have been so incorporated into one’s character that they are

no longer a matter of debate or discussion. They are automatic, without thinking or ambiguity. They are not “second nature” as we often say; they are “first nature,” performed without hesitancy, instinctively, without even thinking.

What does it take to reach a point where you can say with confidence “I know who I am?” Ernesto’s and George Fox’s experiences suggest that it comes after a long practice of telling the truth at all times, even when that might seem uncomfortable to oneself or others. The development of a broad set of moral values that is the basis of integrity comes later. But the development of those broader values—whether you call them *ethical* as Ernesto might have, or *spiritual*, as Fox would have been inclined to say—begins with what seems to be a simple act of merely telling the truth.

Can you say that you are always honest—rigorously honest, not even telling the occasional white lie, or giving the veiled response like Alberto’s “no one writes the way you do”? I know that I am not. If a friend asks me out to dinner and I really don’t feel like it, I might say I have another engagement or some work to do. This response seems harmless to me, but I know it is a lie and I know as soon as I utter it that this is not the person I want to be. I also know it is disrespectful to my friend to believe that our friendship is not strong enough to sustain my telling the truth.

Ernesto’s physical journey began in Buenos Aires and took him over 8,000 miles across the continent to the northern tip of Venezuela. His spiritual journey began at the same time, taking him from his commitment to honesty on to compassion and generosity that would eventually become a commitment to social justice that would change his life. Several years later he would travel again and end up in Mexico where, one night, Fidel Castro would invite Ernesto to join him in the invasion of Cuba. Having no clear direction in his life, Ernesto simply says yes, a response that will transform him into a revolutionary leader, known to the world as “Che” Guevara.

Your spiritual journey, my spiritual journey, can begin now or begin anew if we are prepared to follow Ernesto’s and Fox’s example to tell the truth at all times, in all circumstances and to all people. □