

What makes for an undivided life?

True character is only formed over long periods of time.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 2, 2017](#) issue



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Terry Timmerman is one of the finest people I've ever known. Unpurchaseable is how I'd describe him. His integrity was never for sale. A mail carrier, he died of esophageal cancer too young but not before he and his wife managed to raise a couple of thoughtful kids. One time in the hospital, after surgeons had successfully relocated his stomach to just below the clavicle of the shoulder used to carry his leather mailbag, Terry told me a funny story.

His son Jeff came home from sixth grade one day to announce: “Dad, I’m tired of being a goody two shoes. I’m always the odd guy out. All the other kids, especially the popular ones, have all the fun.” Terry listened patiently to his son’s frustration with missing out on the action. He proposed an idea. “Jeff, I think it’s fine if you want to try something different. Try screwing around a bit. Why don’t you give it three weeks or so, and we can visit again about how it’s going at that point.” Jeff thought that was a fine idea.

The next day after school Jeff told his dad that he was done with screwing around. He had thrown a pencil at his teacher when she turned her back to the class. The teacher spun around and demanded to know who threw the pencil. Jeff immediately raised his hand and confessed, “I did it.” The teacher walked over to Jeff’s desk and told him he should not be accepting blame for others’ bad behavior. She then turned to Kyle, who was sitting next to Jeff, and proceeded to haul him out of the room by the scruff of his neck. Kyle spent the rest of the day in the hallway.

True character, which is something one *is* rather than something one *has*, is formed over long periods of time. Often hidden, humble, and unobtrusive, good character evolves through disciplined practices and morally significant relationships. St. Augustine said we imitate those whom we adore. Jeff adored his father and gained many of his dependable and coherent traits from his dependably coherent dad.

To live coherent and undivided lives is hard work. We decide on one kind of behavior, only to act in another way. Sometimes we wrestle with how to live on the outside in a way that doesn’t corrupt the wholeness we’ve come to prize on the inside. Other times we seek to do good only to succumb to something wrong deep within us. The tongue-tying words of the apostle Paul describe this second tendency: “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

The tug of war between wearing a halo on our head and rottenness on our sleeve is hardly an adolescent phenomenon. Many of us look throughout the course of life for that integrative power that will help our mind, heart, soul, and body cohere. Terry Timmerman found that power in God’s spirit, a spirit that has its own way of weaving and holding together the many competing threads within us.

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