

Character and . . .

Discomfort

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The Oxymoron of “My Comfort Zone”

Beth Lindquist McCaw

Abstract

Common human needs combined with external forces in contemporary society can groom an individual to pursue personal comfort as a primary aim in life. In this article I argue that unchecked, the central pursuit of personal comfort displaces our love for neighbor, and renders us less compassionate and just. Thus love of neighbor needs to be a deliberate commitment. Service learning trips and faith-based missions are used to illustrate the different outcomes between an approach in which personal comfort is protected, and an approach that allows for personal discomfort.

A Life of Comfort (?)

Why did an animated family film, with no dialogue for the first 20 minutes, end up becoming a blockbuster and an enduring modern parable? The 2008 dystopian Pixar film *WALL-E* did just that, grossing over half a billion dollars. Alongside creative artistry, an explanation for its popularity might be that its messages have resonated with growing concerns in American society. The movie begins on earth 700 years after the planet was overrun with garbage, unable to sustain life. The Buy-N-Large corporation evacuated humans to the spaceship *Axiom* and dispatched “Waste Allocation Load Lifters: Earth-Class” to clean up. When the main character of the film—robot WALL-E—visits the *Axiom* and sees humans for the first time, he encounters a scene even more distressing than trashed *terra firma*. Humans are overweight to the point of incapacitation, carried along by hovering chairs, slurping liquid

meals and endlessly engrossed in a multiplicity of entertaining screens while floating through space. For some of the hundreds of millions of viewers, *WALL-E* has become a prophetic narrative about where current trends will lead humanity.

When thinking about how we will lead our lives, many of us are drawn to ideals of love or service. But then each morning we get up and careen through the hours given us, buffeted by various forces within and without. In scarce moments of reflection, we recognize that the sum of our day-to-day lives is not of satisfying substance, growing into a beneficial legacy. So much in our world today contributes to a way of life that is frantic, scattered, lonely, fractured, exhausted—personally, socially, and environmentally. And as we inhabit this context, the innumerable small, real thoughts and acts of our daily lives can sabotage altruistic hopes.


How does this happen? And how can we rewrite the story of our lives with a different trajectory that leads us somewhere other than mindlessly sipping protein shakes on the *Axiom*? One approach in answering these questions is to examine what becomes the governing pole as we move through life. As the cautionary tale of *WALL-E* illustrates, the centering of comfort (as a primary pursuit) in life goes hand in hand with a disregard for neighbor and environment. Ironically, we end up diseased, with our character disfigured. Intentionally re-centering others or “the other” as a primary object of our care is essential for a life that has integrity—meaning both to have moral merit, but also to result in a life that is whole.¹



Disney's WALL-E depicted a dystopian future with humans focusing on comfort as their primary pursuit. Illustration by Evelin Ortiz.

The Centripetal Draw of Comfort

Charles Nodier describes comfort as “a state of convenience and well-being that approaches pleasure and to which all (people) aspire” (qtd. in Pezeu-Massabuau 18). This kind of comfort includes things that are pleasing, entertaining, flattering, agreeable. The other part of the pursuit of comfort is the avoidance of discomfort or challenge. This could include things or practices that are soothing, relaxing, restful, escapist—maybe delivering a hit of serotonin or cocooning us in the familiar. At first glance it would seem that no rationale or defense is needed for the human tendency to avoid distress and seek pleasure. Then we watch *Wall-E* with dismay and wonder why we let those tendencies hold sway to the point of toxicity.



Re-centering others or “the other” as a primary object of our care is essential for a life that has integrity.


Inner Forces There are many forces at work that push us to repeatedly and reactively make our own comfort the first thing we reach for in the circumstances and choices of our daily lives. Some of them are internal. Consider, for example, the basic human need for belonging and acceptance as a good that can go wrong. Being wired for relationships is good. That capacity can become twisted into dysfunctional neediness, void of mutuality and exploitative of others—cliques, cults, peer pressure, manipulation. Anxiety, currently at epidemic levels in North America, is another internal reality that constricts our awareness of others and our ability to relate to them in attentive and healthy ways. Our vision narrows and we move into defensive and self-preserving postures. Addictions of all sorts tragically rewire our brains to crave particular satisfactions at the expense of relationships and healthy engagement with the world. And the Christian faith holds that each person has a spiritual bent toward self-centeredness that grows into selfishness apart from the workings of love.

External Pressures At the same time that internal dynamics draw our attention to “me,” there are cultural and societal influences operating in concert. Consumerism grooms our never-satisfied

appetites for ever-refined experiences of pleasure. The prized values of individualism and autonomy—with endless opportunities to personalize our points of contact with the world—take us on a bypass around the voices and interests of others. Convenience, too, has become enshrined in North American culture; we enjoy our favorite goods and services anytime and anywhere, and have the trash carted off. Automation makes possible 24/7 self-service in lieu of dependence on another. Our relational energy can be siphoned off by a pseudo-social life—robocalls, electronic billboards, peripheral social media contacts that hound us until we feel strangely and sadly exhausted of interest in people.

As we attend increasingly to our needs and wants, gravitating too much toward whatever soothes or distracts or affirms or excites, something paradoxical happens. Trying to live on the couch, on dessert, or on QVC shopping

binges leaves us feeling queasy and unsatisfied. But there is more to the problem than our queasiness. As we focus increasingly on superficial personal comfort, others are moved to the periphery of our care in life and the moral and vocational fabric of life starts to unravel.



To disconnect ourselves from the discomforts that come with relationships is to develop callousness.

Displacing the Other by Centering Comfort

If centered comfort displaces “the other”—someone(s) other than ourselves—as the object of our sincere and interested care, then we have a problem of character. As illustrated above, our singular pursuit of personal pleasure leads to isolation from our neighbor, which leads to a lack of compassion. The Latin roots of “compassion” speak to “suffering with”—interpersonal connection accompanied by vulnerability to one another’s experience, including pain. To disconnect ourselves from the discomforts that come with relationships is to develop callousness. That callousness to others then becomes a foundation for injustice. Making direct connections between personal comfort and injustice might seem startling, but the orientation toward personal comfort as primary is so influential that it will steer our thoughts and actions in directions that contradict our professed values.

The Pursuit of Comfort in Service Trips To illustrate how implicit the pursuit of comfort can be—undermining even our deliberate attempts at other-centeredness—consider as a case study the contemporary phenomenon of the mission or service trip. One and a half million religious adults from the United States participate in international missions annually (Howell 26). Add to that domestic destinations, participants under the age of 18, corporations building Habitat houses, and high schools and colleges engaging in service learning, and a significant movement of millions of Americans serving annually is represented. Common to both religious and secular manifestations are professed goals of learning to see and serve one’s neighbor—outreach.




Even mission trips that aim to serve can be undermined by an unchecked drive for comfort.

As a leader of short-term teams working in cross-cultural partnerships, I have watched this movement with interest. As I began researching literature and interviewing leaders of varied communities about their experiences in hosting work groups, I was unprepared for the high proportion of negative responses in host communities. One African leader named his “outrage” that teams were prepared for novel vacations but not to serve. A missiologist observed that “short terms have increasingly taken on the character of a standardized religious service offered to a new generation of consumers anxious to find meaning in a borderless world” (Slimbach 429). A field facilitator lamented,

Today (visiting groups) are much less concerned about the impact they will have in Mexico and more concerned about the impact Mexico will have on them. The growing number of organizations that bring groups to the border combined with the shift in focus has begun to have a negative effect on the Mexican churches. (Palmatier 228).

Clearly, there was a gap between the mission statements for service trips that were commonly philanthropic, and the perspectives and practices with which many participants engaged in them.

Missing the Other in Pursuit of Personal Comforts Such testimonies led to examination of the implicitly and explicitly expressed motivations and goals at each stage of varied mission and service trips—those I led myself and those of others I interviewed. It was like putting on x-ray glasses that revealed innumerable threads of consumer appetites woven throughout a pleasant Norman Rockwell scene: Service application essays describing a desire for tourism. Volunteers articulating hopes for personal transformation. Accommodation and transportation preferences eclipsing concerns for the needs of those being served. Rushing to the familiarity of McDonald’s on arrival in a foreign country. Complaining about the quantity or quality of local food. Jesting about civil infrastructure, within the hearing of nationals. Talking artisans down to rock-bottom prices in order to multiply souvenirs. Agonizing over the amount of a small personal donation after fundraising thousands for airline tickets. Assuming expertise for projects in which one has little training or earned authority. Scaling back time in community in order to take in attractions. Upon returning home, presenting stories and images that showcase the volunteers, and sometimes feature hosts as foils—grateful beneficiaries or the bedraggled poor. Evaluating the success of the trip more by the enthusiasm of those sent rather than by any benefit expressed by the hosts.



The orientation toward personal comfort as primary is so influential that it will steer our thoughts and actions in directions that contradict our professed values.

Beneficence, it turns out, can be deceptively self-serving. Even in endeavors framed as helpfulness, the pursuit of comfort for the body or the ego can linger in disguise. Sadly, the disguise is thin to many host communities, which may feel obligated to humbly ignore power differentials and accommodate tourist expectations in order to be hospitable and maintain some semblance of relationship. A veteran

missionary in Honduras observed, "North Americans often come seeking the emotional rewards of hands-on involvement rather than a way to make an investment in long-term empowerment" (Jeffrey 5). When personal desires govern the approach and conduct of volunteers, there is diminished likelihood that the relationships or even the work will benefit the receiving community. In fact, harm can be done, represented in the indignation of the leader who pointed out that his home community was used more than served.

Missing the Other in Pursuing Personal Experiences Interestingly, unchecked "self-serving service" can stall the growth of compassion or empathy in volunteers. A celebrated 1990 study of short-term mission included data that was initially interpreted as demonstrating that volunteers gave more generously and prayed more for the world after their travel service experience (Peterson and Peterson). However, subsequent analysis that accounted for the natural increase in income that accompanies the move into adulthood debunked the conclusions. While volunteers may have felt that they had grown more generous or spiritually engaged in the world, their practices were unaffected (Priest et al. 439).² There may have been value in the participants' deepened sense of personal gratitude and warm regard for others. But is that value negated by the net effect of service travel if it led participants to more deeply cherish their material comforts or overrate their interest in others? The belief that one has become more generous, without having done so practically, is lost ground in terms of the formation of character and compassionate relationships.

Another study examined in depth how the heightened expectations youth held for their own formation made their mission trip particularly powerful. However, a side note—this personal existential interest also shaped their views of those they had set out to serve in mission (Linhart). Developing a sense of identity and enjoying formative experiences are good. But personal motivations and a lack of time and support for growing true knowledge about the people they met contributed to an ethically problematic aspect of their service. In fact, much of what the youth concluded about their hosts was not true. Linhart observed, "When students essentialize and generalize the observed gestures of others to hold significant meaning, they reduce their knowledge of the 'Other' to that particular encounter" (455), and

the (ethical) “problem comes when the ‘raising of awareness’ results in no action and people only *feel* connected to missions, or that they have performed their duty but continue in normal cultural patterns without a nod toward a new direction for service and mission” (454). He noted that the group was primed to focus on their own becoming, but not to gain “new knowledge about cross-cultural communication or about the culture” (454). Without intentional preparation and re-orientation to the other, such missions are at risk of becoming tourism, and participants might be moved toward entrenching stereotypes (458) and celebrating self, rather than relating authentically to others with an engaged sense of compassion or justice.

Riding the Escalator Up and Away The examples given may reflect the importance of cross-cultural education, guidance toward maturity, or thoughtful coaching by leaders of service trips. And the research examines the formation of identity and worldview. But among other conclusions, these illustrate how a governing assumption that ease, fun, or even personal formation be requisite elements of service would skew perspectives and practices. Though it be called “outreach,” the flag of personal wants is still firmly planted as the desired destination.

David Brooks in *The Road to Character* traces the narcissistic shift in recent generations to “the big Me” as being “from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe” (6). This shift means that in our contemporary context, rather than staying grounded and significantly engaged with the people who surround us, we are increasingly likely to remove ourselves as we pursue ever-refined self interests. It is like stepping onto the department store escalator to be lifted up, up, and away from the crowd. As we are transported to the quiet music and cushioned sofas of the second floor, we might look down and observe others, but their voices grow indistinct and we are removed from them as we step into the home furnishings displays.

So What?

Service should not remind us of Goldilock’s quest—to eat the porridge that is neither too hot nor too cold but just right, and settle down for a

nap on the bed that is neither too hard nor too soft but just right. Preoccupied with finding the most pleasing conditions in her personal expedition, she gave passing or no thought to the bears whose porridge she had eaten, whose chair she had broken, and in whose bed she had napped. The story concludes with her running away, afraid. It is strange that common "morals" to the story might be to cultivate discriminating taste, or to stay closer to home, or to not engage in breaking and entering. But there is also the lesson that her quest was all wrong.



Service is not about finding the most pleasing conditions for one's work.

Human beings are not constituted to seek personal comfort as an existential end. Any attempt to cultivate a satisfying sense of self when detached from significant relational commitments will lead to a dead end. It is granted that unless we have basic needs such as food and shelter and safety, we cannot attend to deeper pursuits of meaning and purpose. Assuming the need for and

right of each person to such necessities of life, to what end then are we designed to spend our lives?

We Were Made for This

An excellent ultimate mission statement from the Judeo-Christian tradition would be Jesus' summary: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength; and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (NRSV Luke 10.27). Martin Luther King Jr. put it this way: "Love is not emotional bash; it is not empty sentimentalism. It is the active outpouring of one's whole being into the being of another" ("King Quotes on War and Peace").

It is telling that this call to relationship—named "love" even—is identified as fundamental by prophets of diverse faiths. Mahatma Gandhi said, "The purpose of life is undoubtedly to know oneself. We cannot do it unless we learn to identify ourselves with all that lives. . . . The instrument of this knowledge is boundless, selfless service" ("Purpose of Life"). Muhammad is quoted in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: "None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbor what he loves

for himself” (Elias). And the Dalai Lama describes that “[u]ltimately, the reason why love and compassion bring the greatest happiness is simply that our nature cherishes them above all else. The need for love lies at the very foundation of human existence. It results from the profound interdependence we all share with one another.” Regardless of one’s faith perspective, how can we expect anything to end well in the absence of love among people?

So here is the problem with comfort-seeking as our basic aim—it does not merely distract us from our neighbor. Unchecked, it ultimately turns us against our neighbor. Orchestrating life toward this end, we will inevitably need to push our neighbor away—either out of our way as a nuisance, or behind the scenes to support our pursuit. We become agents of marginalization or even exploitation directly or in larger systems. Our singular pursuit of comfort costs others fullness of life. Joyce Rupp observes, “The greater the gap we put between ourselves and others, the less likely we will empathize with their situation and act on their behalf” (105). On the other hand, if we are willing to build relationships with others and engage in community with commitment, identification and empathy and solidarity are able to grow. Compassion and justice become natural fruit, but they require the relational commitment that we have been calling love. A very simple definition of justice could be *lovingly doing right by others*.

The Paradox of Finding Our Selves as We Love Others As we turn to the other and spend ourselves in that relationship, the queasiness that attends grooming “the big Me” starts to pass and we feel stronger on the level of the soul. The Bible describes that to lay down one’s life for God and others is to find one’s life. Father Boyle is a priest known for his love and sacrificial work among gang members in Los Angeles. He observes, “It should not surprise us that God’s own dream-come-true for us—that we be one—just happens to be our own deepest longing for ourselves. For it turns out, it’s mutual.” The Dalai Lama puts it this way: “From my own limited experience, I have found that the greatest degree of inner tranquility comes from the

A very simple definition of justice could be lovingly doing right by others.

development of love and compassion. The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of well-being becomes.”

Pushing Back—To Make Room

Disempowering all that would erode devotion to community can be as simple and as demanding as becoming conscious of the desire(s) holding center stage in our lives. This allows us to then make the guiding question of each moment not “What do I want?” but “How can I love?” This is not about extroverted sociability but about deliberately pushing something(s) out of the way to make room for a worthy center of gravity for our lives.

The Place of Self-Care Claiming love of others as central to our vocation, or life purpose, does not require that we forego being true to self or the practice of self-care. If we do those well, we then have something to offer others. The loving, compassionate, just person does care for self, and considers: “What is needed to live with faithfulness as the person I am meant to be? What would those who love me wish in order for me to be whole and to meet my potential and purpose? Does a particular choice build me up—for the good of all?”

The Place of Comfort What if the comforts of life were put in their place—to provide support, refreshment, energy, celebration—for the main substance of life, a life in which comforts *serve* our vocation rather than *become* our vocation? Again, the governing question for daily thoughts, choices, and actions is no longer “Do I like this?” or “What do I want right now?” but rather, “What serves love?” or “What makes me and others whole?”



A life centered on others is guided by the question, “What serves love?”

Just as self-neglect is not our aim, neither is discomfort the goal. Rather, love for others or community should dethrone comfort as our primary pursuit in life. In seeking the nurture of good relationships as a life

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calling, there will be comforts and pleasure, and there also will be discomforts and suffering. But without dethroning comfort as a primary determinant of our way of life, we will never get to community. And without being willing to sustain some discomfort along the way, we will never find our neighbor.

In the Bible, an early Christian leader describes such acceptance of both comfort and discomfort for the life calling he experienced from God: “. . . I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need” (Phil. 4.11-12). This insightful wisdom guides us to not make an idol of particular circumstances.

The Place of Discomfort Re-centering others in our commitments does not leave us stationary—we are not inviting others to orbit around us (“I’ve even invited those people into my home!”). Re-centering will send *us* out to others—true outreach. This will lead us to the margins in our communities and our world.

Committing ourselves to our neighbor makes us vulnerable in ways fulfilling and painful—the “shared suffering” of compassion. Common commitments of love reveal that compassion is part of love. The love that leads people to the altar results in couples not making claims but promises—to pour themselves out for the care of the other in times of sickness and health, wealth and poverty. Parents continue and will continue to choose to bear and adopt children with whom they will share delightful moments and happy days, but also times of helpless pain, and aching sacrifices. People do not marry or bear children in the pursuit of comfort, but rather in the pursuit of loving relationships, accepting the accompanying pain.

Commitment that risks and even assumes pain can be extended in other relationships, even and perhaps especially in regard to injustices sustained by callous divisions. The truth that commitment to another makes us vulnerable to both pain and joy, challenge and growth, holds in the small things of life as well. There is both cost and promise as we spend ourselves toward others—forgiving rather than resenting, giving

rather than hoarding, listening rather than telling, apologizing rather than blaming, stepping alongside rather than running away.

Hope: This Can Be Done

In choosing to turn to others, we allow our experience to be influenced by that of another in a way that grows compassion and informs justice. Joyce Rupp quotes Gail Straub in observing honestly and beautifully, "The gift of the awakened heart is that all suffering in some way belongs to all of us. Here we experience the mysterious intimacy that connects us to everything that lives" (165). Some might value the spiritual connection included here. Most should appreciate the worthwhile experience of awe that comes with beholding and belonging to something greater than one's self. But there is a practical manifestation of this connection that holds great promise for the development of just character in individuals and just practices in society.

Settling Love at the Center With personal comforts sidelined to a supportive role with particular entrances, and discomforts received as having a necessary role also in our commitment to relationship, love can take center stage. Being willing to experience both comfort and discomfort in the commitment to others greatly expands the means by which we arrive at our human calling. We are freed to take risks, endure some pain, accept suffering even. It may sound odd to describe the acceptance of discomfort as freeing, but how small our perspective, our experience, our agency in the world become when confined within the



Volunteers and hosts in the Dominican Republic rehearse a song together to present to children at Vacation Bible School.

bounds of the comfortable. It becomes isolating, suffocating, even anxiety-producing when every discomfort is framed as a threat to be avoided or eliminated, or refining our experience of life requires successive purges of the discomforts that our neighbor and the world might cost us.

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It is possible for us to re-center—to deliberately and routinely free up bandwidth in our hearts and minds to attend to and care for others. Some of the same researchers who documented the false starts in empathy and regressions in ethnocentrism in volunteers also demonstrated that deliberate formation—accompanying engagement with the other—can lead to growth (Priest et al. 444).³

Intentionally devoting ourselves to relationships and embodying community will start to order our choices and make our commitments to others more routine—compassion, justice, even love can become more and more our habit.

Returning to the case study of service trips and short-term mission, we can find encouraging examples of re-centering others and growing increasingly just as engaged members of community and the world. Anthropologist and missiologist Hunter Farrell has documented the workings of justice resulting from a significant “Joining Hands”



Community members and volunteers make a powerful impact when they jointly address the community's needs.

relationship between 19 churches in the United States and 15 churches in Peru. Together they have addressed development and aid in the face of poverty. Invited to witness a pressing concern, partners from Lima and the U.S. came alongside leaders and community members in La Oroya in the Andes. A U.S.-owned mining operation was generating pollution that was dramatically poisoning the community with lead. Ninety-seven percent of the children were affected and some measured off the charts.

The partners who traveled to La Oroya moved into a relationship in which they took to heart the needs of “these children” as “our children.” This kind of compassionate relationship and understanding of missional vocation led to significant shared action that made a difference. Volunteers from the U.S. did not file away their travel

experiences like photos in personal scrapbooks. Rather, with a committed sense of relationship over several years, they engaged in activism to successfully compel the corporation based in their home country to engage in cleaner practices that would not poison the mine workers and families with whom they had "joined hands." Many factors contributed to the powerful impact of this shared movement for justice (Farrell). But for our purposes it is a powerful story of turning toward the other and standing with the other in a way that promotes justice and wholeness on multiple levels—for the individual, community, world, environment. It is a story of the volunteers' de-centering their comfort, embracing the discomfort of encountering injustice and responding in love.

In my own research and coaching of short-term mission and service-learning participants, I have seen enduring shifts to other-centeredness manifested in daily practices of justice during and beyond "the trip": Negotiating justly with local artisans. Owning personal weakness and blind spots. Shifting daily personal practices. Participating repeatedly in hunger relief efforts in hometowns. Becoming restless about racism to the point of listening, speaking, acting. Exercising consumer power for the good of laborers and the earth. And practicing the very small bits that are in the cement of habitual other-centeredness—staying behind to wash dishes, stopping to listen to the answer to "how are you" — while habitually asking, "What serves love?"

Back to the Ship *Axiom*—Or Not?

At first glance it may seem odd to devote an essay to the argument that it is important to try to love our neighbors and our world. But the alarm that was sounded by *WALL-E* is justified when we take time to examine where our inner susceptibilities, along with the tides of our culture, can carry us. It is encouraging and helpful to realize that we *can* choose God and neighbor as the objects of our life's devotion. But there is *trying* involved, sometimes uncomfortable or even painful trying—in the sense that we must exercise our commitment rather than be carried along passively by currents that swirl comfortingly around the self. If we do not, these currents will churn endlessly until love is wrung out of us and we are bundled onto the shuttle for the *Axiom*. Each day we can determine: "What will be the center around which the rest is arranged?"

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What will be the default consideration as we go through our days? Will we give up the avoidance of discomfort and the endless pursuit of personal comforts in favor of re-centering love?”

As we start weaving threads of relationship, we are drawn into experiences of empathy, solidarity, justice. And as the tapestry takes shape, there is a particular kind of satisfaction. Not of appetites, as with a filling meal. But on the level of the soul. An experience of wholeness—spirit and character whole. Maybe touched by moments of awe. Because we are created for relationships. We flourish along with the flourishing of those we are inescapably, necessarily, and blessedly connected to. Rather than losing ourselves, we discover who we are in relationship with others. The mutuality of needs and strengths, the variety of gifts and skills, the expansion of our worldview help us to understand who we are and the unique contributions we can make to the world we share.



We flourish along with those we are connected to.

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Thank you to Evelin Ortiz, Wendt Character Scholar, for the illustration, p. 10.

Photo credit pp. 17, 19, 21, 22 24: Beth McCaw

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Notes

¹ The Latin root for the word “integrity” is related to wholeness.

² “[W]e found . . . no statistically significant difference in missions giving between those who had participated in STM and those who had not” (Priest et al. 439).

³ “[T]he sheer fact of encounter with cultural difference is as likely to increase ethnocentrism as decrease it. But when the immersion experience is connected with the right sorts of orientation and coaching, significant change is possible” (Priest et al. 444).

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