

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

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Integrity. What is it? Who has it? What good is it? The dictionary defines it as "uncompromising adherence to moral and ethical principles." I like to think of it as "doing the right thing regardless of its impact on yourself or your personal situation."

I listen with great interest to what our elected officials say. Prisoners are affected by government actions to a greater degree than free people so they have (or should have) a greater interest in who gets elected and what policies will be implemented.

So often I hear a Republican telling a blatant lie to further his or her own agenda. I hear Democrats do it too, but not nearly as often or to the extent that I hear it from Republicans. Rep. Paul Ryan's proposal to force the elderly to pay more of their health care costs is a good example. He and his supporters must know the hardships many senior citizens will suffer because they don't have enough money to pay for private health insurance yet they try to present the proposal as a neutral policy change. I agree that social security in its current form is not sustainable. But I am not willing to force the elderly to suffer and die to save money. Perhaps the solution is not to deprive seniors of medical care but to require the health care and pharmaceutical industries to underwrite the costs of that health care from their profits.

Since Scott Walker was elected governor in Wisconsin things have changed. He barely squeaked to victory in a hotly contested race and the only reason he did so (in my opinion) was former Governor Doyle's poor performance. He alienated Democrats so badly that many of them chose not to vote. After seeing the first six months of Walker's administration I am sure many of them are regretting that choice.

Governor Walker has come out with one radical proposal after another. It is curious that what are termed "conservatives" are actually the antithesis of the definition of conservative. Nowadays, a conservative is someone who is willing to disrupt the status quo to implement regressive policies based on an extremist ideology. A liberal, on the other hand, seeks to give everyone an honored place in our society. Too often these good intentions produce bad results.

Many citizens become disenchanted over preferential treatment given to minorities by liberals. What's wrong with treating everyone equally? Why can't decisions be made regardless of race or ethnicity rather than because of it? It is just as racist to award a job to a minority because he or she is a minority as to deny a job because of race. Ex-governor Doyle had a habit of selecting minorities to appoint to government positions just because they were minorities. Governor Walker appoints friends and relatives of supporters just because they helped him get elected. Which is better? Neither, in my opinion. Why not appoint the most qualified person instead? That's where integrity comes in.

I think ex-senator Russ Feingold epitomizes integrity. Yet he lost the election to a man whose primary agenda is to help his fellow millionaires pay less taxes and roll back or oppose laws that protect workers and the environment.

The debate over increasing the national debt limit could use a shot of integrity. Government spending is out of control and needs to be reigned in. But forcing our government to default on its loan obligations is not the answer. There should be a constitutional amendment requiring a balanced budget every year - no exceptions and no more deficits. Then there should be an extra wealth tax on the richest 5% of the population to apply solely to paying off the debt. The U.S. should be debt-free forever. Then let the people vote for the politician who will give them the tax rate they are willing to pay in exchange for the level of government provided. There will be no more making promises of benefits or tax breaks to special interests at the expense of everyone else when every government obligation is paid in full every year.

Let's make integrity the cornerstone of our democracy. Make it a part of our lives and insist that our elected leaders have it as well.

Paradox

Another day in paradise,
Is a paradox
In prison
Where punishing people
Pleases the public.
Poppycock!
Paradise is an emotional state,
Chosen or not, by each prisoner,
Thus making the paradox:
Another day in paradise,
While in prison,
Possible.

Harlan Richards

The Clown

Shirt too small, pants too big,
Looking like red Skelton.
Long gray hair, week's worth of stubble.
Won't work a job, doesn't have a dime.
Got this way, the hard way,
Fists too small, mouth too big,
Knots on his head, bruises on his body.
Too dumb to quit, too proud to surrender.
Just keeps going, in his
Shirt too big, pants too small.

Harlan Richards