

I Need To Tell You Something

Life lessons from a father
for his teenage children

Bill Franks

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Note from the Author

The title of this book comes from a phrase that my son Jesse first invented and then, unfortunately, my daughter Danielle picked up by watching Jesse in action. It started when they were each about four years old. Whenever one of them was having a tantrum about something, he or she would say over and over, “I need to tell you something! I need to tell you something!” When we’d humor them and ask what they needed to say, it was usually something along the lines of wanting to not be in trouble anymore or wanting to earn back the privilege that was lost. Sometimes they’d cry and scream, “I need to tell you something!” dozens of times. As a result, I thought it would be appropriate to title this book in honor of that phrase.

How this Book Came to Be

In 2009, I began working with a new financial advisor. As we worked through various insurance, retirement planning, and estate planning processes, he had one suggestion that caught me off guard and that I had not thought of. He suggested that my wife and I write a “Statement of Values.” I asked him what that was, and he said it was a document where we would outline views on life that we would want to pass on to our children in the event that we died early and unexpectedly.

The idea seemed a bit morbid, but after some consideration, I decided that it was a good idea. After all, what if I did die? What lessons that I planned to teach them as they grew would my children miss? What things would I not have a chance to tell them? If I didn’t write it down, they would never know.

After more thought on the subject, I realized that a few-page letter just wouldn't do it for me. I had a lot to say on a lot of topics and it was going to take more. In fact, it occurred to me that I would have a book when I was done writing it all down. As a result, I decided to write that book!

Originally, my plan was simply to self-publish a handful of high quality, leather-bound copies for my children and close relatives. When I was in the middle of writing the book, however, I went through the process of writing and publishing my first business book, *Taming the Big Data Tidal Wave*, with John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Based on that experience, I decided perhaps many other parents would like to tell their children the same things that I wanted to tell my children. The result is what you see here.

Who Should Read this Book

The book is first and foremost intended for my children. I plan to give it to them once they are in junior high school. While the book is a good refresher for adults, too, I believe that the highest impact of the material will be achieved for those in the 12 to 22-year-old range. At that stage, adolescents and young adults are still forming their own value systems and are still struggling with who they will be. The more guidance and support that they get, the better their chances in life will be.

My plan is to read the book with my children. Set aside 20 to 30 minutes and select a chapter. Take a few minutes to each read the chapter and then a few minutes to each think quietly about what you've read. After reading and thinking about each chapter, it should be followed by some meaningful parent/child discussion on the topic presented in the chapter. The discussion will offer an opportunity for parents to reinforce the lesson, put their own twist on the topic, and identify areas where their children may need some gentler parental guidance. The chapters are very short so that limited time is required to read any given chapter. This will help keep young minds focused and engaged. It will allow older children to take it point by point during active lives.

Its Value and Purpose

This book is meant to provide life guidance with the opportunity to apply lessons widely across cultures and religions. Children have opportunities to learn about their religion from other sources, so this book doesn't deal with that aspect of many children's lives.

I have also attempted to avoid politically charged topics whenever possible. As a father, I think that there are some important thoughts on politics for my children to learn from me. I have plenty of time to get those thoughts across elsewhere and have tried not to focus on political points in the book. Perhaps my political leanings will come through somewhat in the way I present the content. However, I do hope that the way I present it will be found positive and acceptable to those of all political persuasions.

I do not claim that the book is the ultimate authority on how to lead a good life, how to deal with challenges, or how to raise children. The book simply contains my views that I hope my children choose to follow. Any given parent may differ with me on any given point. Parents can consider the content here as a starting point and a way to begin a dialogue with their own children. Any of the messages can be fine-tuned as readers desire to make it their own.

The Format of the Chapters

Each chapter focuses on a single life lesson. Chapters start with an explanation of the core theme of the lesson and why it is important. Then, I provide examples from my life where I have either seen the lesson applied or ignored. Highlighting both failures along with successes bring home the point that living the right way is a constant effort. The fact is that everyone will have some occasions where they act below their own standards. It is necessary to focus daily on making sure those occasions are few and far between. The chapters end with questions that readers can ask themselves as they consider how they will apply the lesson in their own lives.

I have also tried to focus on examples from my teenage and young adult years when possible so that they will resonate better with the intended readers. Soccer was a big part of my life for so many years. As I wrote this, I realized that I got a lot more than just some sports experience, given that soccer made it into so many examples. I also found the process of figuring out what topics to cover and what examples I would use for each chapter to be a very good exercise for me. I encourage any parent to think through the lessons that would be important to them to pass on to their children even if they don't write it down as I have.

One last comment is that I have made each chapter capable of fully standing on its own. While the chapters are ordered and numbered out of necessity, there is no requirement to read them in order. Any given chapter can be read by itself without issue. The only impact that this fact may have is that at times I provide the same background information in more than one chapter. Given that the chapters are only a few pages each and the background information is minimal, readers shouldn't find this to be a distraction.

— Bill Franks

Chapter 5

Neither Flaunt Nor Hide Your Talents

Everyone has some skills and talents that set them apart from the average person. It might be a high level of ability in sports, in art, in math, or almost anything else. You need to explore and determine what your special talents are. You may not know as you read this what your special talents are, but I am sure you have some. Everyone does.

The important thing is that you find your talents and then cultivate them. You will enjoy the process of honing your skills and the satisfaction that achieving excellence will bring to you. A critical fact to recognize is that whatever your talent is, it may be something another person is unable to do as well. You don't want to gloat, be boastful, or condescending about your talents. That will just drive people away from you and can make them feel bad about the fact they don't share your abilities.

The best thing to do is simply go about your business quietly and discreetly. Those who want to know more about your skills will ask. If you're truly good at something, you won't need to tell

people for them to know. It will be obvious to anyone who sees you in action. We can all tell a talented artist, musician, or athlete when we see them doing their thing. In school or at work, you'll also be able to tell who's great at math, science, writing, or just getting things done in general.

At the same time, you don't want to be embarrassed by your talents and try to hide them. There is a huge difference between actively advertising yourself or bragging and simply doing what you do well quietly and consistently. I've seen people try to hide what they are capable of (such as getting good grades) and it is hard to imagine how that can be a good thing to do. First, you'll never develop your full potential if you try to hide your abilities. Second, people will eventually figure out that you are covering up a deeper level of ability, which negates the effort to cover it up. Last, you aren't being honest and true to yourself if you hide your talents.

It can be a very satisfying and fulfilling process to work on building your talents. The process is a good one for teaching discipline and hard work. It will also lead to skills that you can put to use in life, whether as part of making a living or just a hobby. If you are humble and pursue your talents quietly and earnestly, others will appreciate what you do.

One place where people commonly try to downplay their abilities is at school. Sometimes it isn't considered "cool" to be smart and get good grades. It is much cooler to take a cavalier attitude towards school, get mediocre grades, and be a part of the crowd that doesn't care about education. This is a horrible trap to fall into. The truth is that many kids who appear cool and uncaring about school may actually struggle with it and aren't as able to excel in school as you are. That's ok. What isn't ok is when someone tries to cover up their weakness by acting as if they don't care and are purposely doing poorly. You'd be surprised how many of the kids who act like they don't care are actually putting on a show because they aren't able to do much better and don't want everyone else to know that.

It is equally bad practice not to do well in school intentionally so that you can fit in better. Many smart kids get sucked into this pattern and it is a shame. I challenge you to think of any way that purposely doing worse than you are able in school for an extended period will advance you farther than doing your best. I don't think you should ever hide that you're smart or downplay that fact. Just make sure you don't get too full of yourself and you certainly shouldn't rub it in anyone's face.

One distinction that you must keep in mind when thinking of people's talents is the difference between a lack of intelligence and ignorance. Intelligence is something people have inherently. Ignorance is a lack of knowledge. Most people are reasonably smart. Unfortunately, many don't get the opportunity to get a good education and make full use of their intelligence. The fact that a person doesn't know certain facts or isn't aware of specific cultural protocols does not at all imply that they aren't smart. Often, it is simply a matter of ignorance. They are absolutely smart enough to understand the information you feel they are lacking, but they were never educated about it. Be sure not to assume that having more information than someone makes you smarter. There will certainly be times where you're the one who doesn't know something and you wouldn't want others to think you weren't intelligent as a result, would you?

A Few Examples from My Past

Both my sister and I found ourselves at one point or another trying to hide how well we were doing in high school and college. Luckily, neither of us blew our grades trying to be cool, but we certainly kept our grades and test scores as quiet as possible. Over time, it didn't really work. Honor roll announcements would come out, honorary society memberships would be extended, advanced placement courses would be taken, and college choices would be made. Each of these would reveal information about our capabilities, and our academic capabilities were eventually discovered by our peers.

We both expected some negativity and stigma to be attached to the public recognitions that gave us away, but neither of us really experienced any. As is discussed in other parts of this book, once you get past junior high, 99 percent of people really don't look down on those who do well. They might act as if they do at times, but deep down most will respect those who do well in any endeavor, whether academic or otherwise.

The fact that my sister and I didn't flaunt our grades and achievements doesn't mean that we didn't make a very concerted effort to continue to achieve academic success. People that knew us well were aware of our performance from the start even if others weren't. I recall both in college and in high school various people congratulating me on an academic achievement and telling me that they didn't realize I was doing so well in school. They genuinely were happy for me and seemed to appreciate that I didn't rub it in their faces like some other kids did. You wouldn't want someone doing that to you, so don't do it to others.

From the stories above, you may think that I dodged the temptation to underperform in school completely. This actually isn't the case. In fact, I may owe my mom credit for stopping me from possibly going down a different path through her masterfully executed mental trick. When I was in middle school, I apparently decided that it would be fun to mess around in school and not worry about my grades. According to my mom, I came home with a progress report that had grades well below my normal level. When she asked about it, I acted as though I didn't care and thought it was a perfectly fine set of grades to bring home. She could have argued with me or disciplined me, but she did something else entirely. She knew me well and used my own personality against me.

Knowing how competitive I was, my mom decided to downplay the grades. She said something to the effect of, "I only want you to do your best. If these are the best grades that you are capable of then that is fine with me. I am just surprised that you can't do better than this anymore."

I immediately protested and told her that I was able to do better because I couldn't stand the thought that she'd think the grades were truly all that I could do. She stuck to her plan and told me not to get upset and make excuses. If I was doing my best, that's all that mattered and she loved me no matter what grades I was able to obtain.

Her plan worked. I was so bothered that she'd believe I couldn't do better that I had to prove her wrong. I went back to doing my best in school and never wavered again. I often wonder how far I would have taken my little experiment with bad grades if my mom hadn't handled it as well as she did. It is embarrassing that I was so foolish, but being foolish at times is part of growing up. If I can help you avoid being foolish in this way with this story, I will consider that a success.

One last example is from my first two or three college semesters. I didn't live up to my potential. I didn't purposely do poorly, but I got so caught up in my social life and other activities that I didn't put enough time into my schoolwork. As a result, I got the worst grades of my life. By not keeping focus on my schoolwork, I compromised my performance. I felt bad about it and focused on putting my grades first during my final years of college and also during graduate school. I wouldn't have behaved much differently freshman year if I actually had consciously decided to ignore my grades. The intent to take school lightly wasn't there, but the outcome from my actions was the same. Luckily, I caught myself and made corrections before it was too late.

Taking Action

- Have you ever been tempted to do worse at something than you know you are able to do? Why?
- Have you seen others who fail to live up to their potential? What attitudes seem to have led them to their underperformance?
- Are you careful not to look down on those who don't share your talents? Are you also careful not to be boastful about your talents?
- Do you recognize and keep in mind the difference between intelligence and ignorance when you deal with new people who may have a different background than you do?
- What can you possibly lose if you quietly and consistently do your best at everything?

Chapter 8

Honesty and Integrity

This is one of the most important topics in this book, so please read it carefully. I promise that what you are about to read is right. There is nothing more important to success, to being respected, to getting support when you need it, and to feeling good about yourself than maintaining your honesty and integrity. This seems so obvious that it is odd to be writing about it. However, not understanding this principle will undermine virtually any effort you make in life, personally or professionally. I have seen many people who didn't understand this.

I believe there are no better compliments that someone can make about another person than ones like these:

- “He is an honest person.”
- “She always comes through on her promises.”
- “He has my complete trust and confidence.”
- “If you make a deal with her, she'll live up to it.”

Having others view you as being honest and having a high level of integrity means that you are doing things right. If you lie, mislead, contradict yourself, don't follow through, or otherwise let people down, then it will catch up with you. In today's connected world, many high profile people have been brought down by a single incident from their past that included a lapse in honesty and integrity.

If people believe you to be honest, they'll treat you better. They'll also look forward to working with you and helping you succeed. Of course, there may be times when you'll be taken advantage of by someone who isn't as honest as you are, but that's life. It will catch up with the other person eventually. You just need to worry about yourself. Don't adopt the "All these other people aren't very honest, so I don't have to be either;" attitude. If everyone did that, we'd descend into chaos.

Being honest is often far from the easiest choice. However, just knowing in your own mind that you've played things straight can help you sleep well at night and feel good about yourself. Some dishonest people manage to fool others for a long time, but they are usually found out eventually.

Think about the friends or family you would turn to in a crisis. How many of them lack your trust? How many of them do you not expect to do the right thing? My guess is very few. You might be willing to play sports or go to a movie with someone you didn't think was very honest, but you wouldn't trust them with anything of importance.

What you must do is really quite simple. When given a choice to be honest or not, pick honesty. When given a chance to "practice what you preach," do it. People won't care whether they agree with all your decisions or actions as much as they will care that your decisions are consistent, based on your stated beliefs, and made with good intentions. I have known people that I completely disagree with on virtually everything. I didn't like them and wouldn't live my life in any way like them. In some cases, however, I respected the fact that they were honest about who they were and they lived in a way consistent with that.

A Few Examples from My Past

One of the most vivid memories I have from growing up is of a family vacation. We were entering an amusement park and had to pay for parking. The people working the booth had wads of cash in their hands and weren't ringing up receipts or providing tickets. You simply paid, and were allowed to enter the lot.

At the gate, the attendant gave my dad too much change. Dad told the attendant and returned the money. The attendant seemed shocked. As we pulled in, my sister and I ripped into my dad about why he gave the money back when nobody would know and the attendant didn't even care. His answer was succinct: "There is a fee to park and we owe that fee. The money I got back wasn't ours, it was the park's. Giving it back was the right thing to do."

I've never forgotten that moment. My dad was right and I felt like a jerk for giving him a hard time. I remember that moment when I am faced with similar situations. Several times over the years I have returned extra change when a cashier has made a mistake, just to prove to myself that I was as honest as my dad.

Let's move on to integrity. To me, this means being consistent and standing firm for what you say you believe. For this example, I'll go back to college. I was in a fraternity and we were holding our yearly elections. As part of the process, each person running gave a speech for themselves. Two other members also give a speech on their behalf. The idea was that based on who was willing to speak on your behalf and what they said, people could better determine who was best for the job. We can all make ourselves sound good in a speech, but to get someone else to make us sound good requires them to be sincere.

So what went wrong? A highly respected member also held a major office. Even before this incident, I never had a good vibe about him. However, because I didn't have any tangible reason for my doubts, I kept them to myself. He spoke on behalf of a good friend of mine who was running for an office. Based on who my friend's opponent was, it was clear that my friend was not going to win the election. Despite that, I was pleased that a

person others held in high regard was willing to stand up and speak for my friend. He did a great job with his speech.

Then things took an odd turn. The person who had spoken on behalf of my friend was sitting next to me as we wrote down our votes. Before folding his up, he showed some of us that he was voting for my friend's opponent instead of my friend, even though he had just given a strong speech supporting my friend. He shrugged as if it was no big deal, but I couldn't believe it.

That person lost any respect I had for him at that moment. I never trusted him again and stayed clear of him. What a lack of integrity he showed with his behavior. If he didn't want my friend to win, he could have simply said he would not speak on his behalf. People were known to do that. Once he agreed to speak on his behalf, he needed to vote for my friend. He was dishonest to my friend and dishonest to the fraternity. That incident is one of the clearest examples of a lack of integrity that I have ever witnessed. I swore to myself never to do the same.

To bring it full circle, a year later I agreed to speak on someone's behalf for an office. As luck would have it, the only person I would have preferred to that person later entered the race. However, I was friends with the person I agreed to speak for and did not feel right backing out after making a commitment. From the start of the race, it was expected that he would lose by a moderate margin. When the time came, I gave a strong speech on his behalf, even though I didn't think I would be impacting the outcome of the race. I voted for him as well.

The vote was a tie and we had to have a re-vote. At that point, the thought crossed my mind that I could simply switch to the other person who I somewhat preferred, but I quickly pushed it out of my mind and voted for my friend again. At least one person did switch his vote and my friend lost by a very slim margin on the second vote.

At the time, I believed I acted with integrity. However, the right way to handle it would have been to tell my friend I couldn't speak for him once his opponent entered the race. That would have been uncomfortable, but that would have been right.

Instead, I almost got someone elected who wasn't my first choice, just because I didn't want to hurt his feelings by making the hard choice to back out of my planned speech. Had I not spoken for him, I would have voted the other way and his opponent would have won the first vote. I did not act with full integrity even though I showed some integrity at various points in the process.

As you can see, it is not easy to maintain your honesty and integrity. It takes constant diligence and effort; one major lapse and you can be forever branded as someone who lacks honesty and integrity. I've slipped up at times and sure wish I hadn't. Luckily, my lapses have been minor and not publicly visible. I would have slipped up more often and to a lot larger degree if I hadn't been highly focused on trying to do the right thing throughout my life.

Taking Action

- Who are some role models in your life who you believe display solid honesty and integrity? What can you do to be more like them?
- Have you ever had a lapse where you were dishonest or lacked integrity? What led you to the lapse? What can you do to ensure you do better next time?
- What are some examples where you've seen others show a lack of honesty and integrity? How did you feel about them and their actions?
- When you consider those who you respect and trust in life, how many of the individuals do you feel lack honesty and integrity?
- Have you made a commitment to yourself to always do the right thing even if it is difficult or uncomfortable? Without a strong commitment it will be easier to lapse, so make that commitment now.