In the Islamic Sufi tradition, there is a legendary figure, the great teacher and trickster, Nasrudin. He was a real person, but he is the subject of many apocryphal stories, sometimes appearing as a fool in order to impart some bit of wisdom.

One time, Nasrudin went into a bank with a check to cash. "Can you identify yourself?" asked the clerk.

Nasrudin took out a mirror and peered into it. "Yes, that's me alright."

That's a pretty typical Nasrudin story. It appears to be a joke. But it's a story from a spiritual tradition, so we know there's more to it. Can we identify ourselves? Or when you look in a mirror, do you see a stranger?

What a powerful question with which to start out a new year. When you behold yourself, whether in your mind's eye or in a literal reflection, do you recognize the person you see? Do you regard yourself with fondness... or disappointment? Have you lost touch with the person you see? These are the very first questions that have to do with our very first theological theme of the new year: integrity.

I love the theme of integrity, but does anyone else also find it a little bit intimidating? I realized I have several different connotations I associate with this theme. One is that integrity is about wholeness. Integrity makes me think of "pan integral" -- that's "whole grain bread" in Spanish. Integral is whole. Integral and integrity share the same root meaning wholeness and completeness.

Integrity is about wholeness and it also has a connotation of morality, moral uprightness. I have a collection of vintage political buttons I inherited from my great grandmother’s sister. Buttons that say things like “Kennedy for President” and “I Like Ike.” But one I don’t have that I wish I did is the one from the 60’s that says “The I in Nixon stands for integrity.”

Integrity. Moral uprightness. And not only uprightness but in my mind on some level I am afraid it has to do with perfection. Integrity’s Latin root means not only wholeness, but also “purity.” “Never compromise your integrity.”
Integrity is something we want and strive to have, and it is something that can be muddied, due to unethical behavior or compromising our values or due to poor judgment. It can be lost perhaps by finding yourself frozen when it was important to react... or maybe you didn’t react enough... it’s often hard to figure out what “enough” looks like, when you were born into a society built upon systems with which you do not agree. But it is possible to return to integrity even if we have failed, even if have let ourselves down.

What does it mean to be humans of integrity? That is the question of the month.

Integrity is something that starts on the inside as a sense of being and radiates outward as a way of doing. It’s much easier to solve the question of “what should I do” after you’ve done some of the work of knowing who you are. I say “some of the work” because we if we are doing this life thing well, then we are learning and growing all our lives. It’s much easier to solve the question of “what should I do” after you’ve done some of the work of knowing who you are. So today we are going to start with the person in the mirror.

Many of us when we look in the mirror see someone who has been trying so hard to please others or to conform to some norm, they have lost touch with true self. This is what Rachel Naomi Remen must be referring to when she says, “Integrity rarely means that we need to add something to ourselves: it is more an undoing than a doing, a freeing ourselves from beliefs we have about who we are and ways we have been persuaded to ‘fix’ ourselves…”

At this time of year, many people make New Year resolutions. I think this is generally a nice tradition. At the beautiful service our volunteer worship coordinators created last week, I plucked the word courage from a wall of new year intentions and placed it where I can see it in my office. A resolution to tend my own spiritual life this year—because that is when I am most courageous—and to let love lead me more than fear.

But sometimes we make resolutions that might be more about pleasing others than about doing something that is meaningful to ourselves. Maybe we resolve to lose weight again—the same weight we’ve struggled with for a long time now—because there is so much pressure to be thin. I remember the women in my family making those kinds of resolutions year after year. But that pressure is something that has been “added” to us. Maybe instead it is time to cut it loose—maybe in truth that pressure is the undesirable weight we are carrying and it’s time to chuck it aside—and focus on feeling like the god or goddess you already are. “Put some glitter on it.” That’s what I say. And then if you want to go for a hike or something, do it so you can enjoy the world and the way you feel when you move in it. Not for any other reason.

Christine Carter writes:
People pleasing, in my extensive personal experience, is a process of guessing what other people want, or what will make them think favorably of us, and then acting accordingly. It’s an often subtle and usually unconscious attempt at manipulating other people’s perceptions of us. Anytime we pretend to be or feel something that we aren’t, we’re out of integrity with ourselves. And anytime we’re doing something that is more about influencing what others think of us than it is about authentically expressing ourselves—even something as simple as a Facebook post that makes it seem like we are having a better day than we actually are—we end up out of integrity with ourselves.ii

She notices that there is a whole new level of performing people do these days because of social media. Everything we post is published next to a “like” button of some sort. It is specifically engineered to encourage people pleasing.

But putting a false self forward to please others isn’t something we learn online. Most of us have known how to do it since before we can even remember. Adrienne maree brown says:

> We begin learning to lie in intimate relationships at a very early age. Lie about the food your mother made, to avoid punishment, as you swallow your tears, about loving this Valentine’s Day gift, about the love you want and how you feel. Most of this is taught as heteropatriarchy 101: men love one way, women another, and we have to lie to impress and catch each other.iii

Addressing women specifically, brown says we are not taught to be emotionally complex powerhouses. I think everyone can agree that men aren’t either. They are taught to act like powerhouses yes. But emotionally complex, no. Girls are socialized to be submissive, diminutive (meaning small) and later “nagging or caregiving.” Boys are socialized to be competitive, stoic, or angry.

Brown goes on to say—and I think this applies to many people of all genders:

> We also learn that love is a limited resource and that the love we want and need is too much, that we are too much. We learn to shrink, to lie about the whole love we need, settling with not quite good enough in order to not be alone. We have to engage in an intentional practice of honesty to counter this socialization. We need radical honesty—learning to speak from our root systems about how we feel and what we want. Speak our needs and listen to others’ needs. To say, “I need to hear that you miss me.” “When you’re high all the time it’s hard for me to feel your presence.” ... “Your jealousy makes me feel like an object and not a partner.” The result of this kind of speech is that our lives begin to align with our longings, and our lives become a building block for
authentic community and ultimately a society that is built around true need and real people, not fake news and [BS] norms.

We’ve moved from pretending not to cry (on Facebook and in person) to fear of being too much and pretending we do not need as much love as we do. We have moved from not speaking our truth about small things, to not speaking our truth about bigger things.

When we are right with ourselves, we are more clearly able to perceive which possible actions are about our integrity, and which ones are about conformity. Let’s consider an everyday, real life kind of example. Say you observe something that requires a response from you. Someone makes a racist comment in front of you. Or you hear a non-trans-gender person say something hurtful to a transgender person. If you are practiced at recognizing your own feelings and values, instead of suppressing them, and if your sense of integrity with yourself is more important than being liked by a particular person in a particular moment, then you are much more equipped and readier to speak up and say, “Ooh, it really pains me to hear you say that.”

Now... what if expressing your authentic self is likely to put you on the receiving end of hurtful comments, or worse? Lindy West tells the story of deciding to “come out as fat.” Those are her words. West is a comedian and the author of the book “Shrill,” which has been turned into a TV show starring Aidy Bryant from Saturday Night Live. But she’s not joking about this.

Lindy West says, “The way that we are taught to think about fatness is that fat is not a permanent state. You're just a thin person who's failing consistently for your whole life.” She got to a point where she basically realized that she had been trying really hard for a long time to be thin, and it hadn’t worked. A lot of people have tried to lose a lot of weight. Only 1% succeed. No one really understands why—not even researchers. So West decided to reject the whole framework. Instead of trying to be thin, she’d put her energy into being happy. And she would convey her new understanding of herself and her direction in life by coming out. As in, no more shaming and struggling to change—no more of that particular brand of damaging “conversion therapy.”

I admire Lindy West. I chose this story because it’s one that on some level so many of us can relate to. Weight-related anxiety—for people of all weights—is one of the most common ways we chip away at our wholeness. And West’s story is definitely one about integrity. It’s also about bravery because she receives a lot of vicious comments and threats just for being who she is out loud. Sometimes living with integrity comes at great risk. What about someone who, say, wants to come out as gay or trans, or atheist or universalist, or [fill in the blank], but is afraid of losing their community or livelihood?
Here we encounter a reminder that we owe it to each other to create peaceful communities that celebrate diversity. That to practice integrity in our lives in such a way as to find the courage to advocate for others—that is a way of honoring the integrity of the whole web of community and of life.

And this is also where we are reminded that wisdom about being human—like, there is strength and growth and joy in practicing integrity—should not be made into commandments. Each of us is navigating our lives, discovering who we are, and making calculations about when to share that and how much. My prayer for each of us is that we do find spaces where we can be whole, and that as we live with increasing authenticity and courage, our lives expand in beautiful directions, bringing us true community, wellbeing, acceptance, and peace. And that we help to make this possible for each other.

And my prayer for us is that when we find we have let ourselves down, when we have not practiced the level of integrity our hearts and spirits long for, that we have the courage to respond to our self-disappointment with the integrity we wish we’d had. Picking ourselves up, looking in that mirror, asking for forgiveness if necessary—from ourselves and others, and giving thanks that we are still alive enough to be learning and growing.

I want to close this morning with another reading. It is called Humanity’s Psalm.iv It’s a longer one and I’ve adapted it a little bit, shortening it. But I think it is a nice image to leave with this morning. It was written by Cynthia Frado.

Creator of Life, Source of All Being
It was from the particles of the Universe that you formed me...
Iron and carbon and phosphorous
Mixed with energy, passion and dreams.

I was made in your image, says ancient Scripture.
Made from the colors of the rainbow,
Shaped with bones straight and curved,
Padded with flesh flabby and lean,
Near-sighted, far-sighted, short-sighted, and long in vision.

I was made in your image, says ancient Scripture.
Made strong and tall, short and stout,
Born with hands tender and fragile,
Aged with hands gnarled and mature.
Large nose, small nose, crooked nose
Who knows the mathematical infinitude of your genetic possibilities?
I was made in your image, says ancient Scripture.
Made to give love and receive love.
Your passion courses through my veins.
And when I touch another human being in love,
It matters not what gender ignites the flame,
It matters only that the fire of life brings its light to the
darkened deadness of a world that cannot exist
without love’s transformative power.

I was made in your image, says ancient Scripture.
But who are you?
I need to know.
I who have eyes that are brown and blue and green and hazel...
I who speak the languages of the world and no language at all.
I who know scientific equations and musical sonatas,
and know only the magic of a daily loaf of bread...
I who am all of these things and more want to know:
Who are you that I am made in your image?

I am, says ancient Scripture.
I simply am.
I am the Light of All-Being,
I am the Divine Spark.
I am the Source of Love,
The most transformative power
In the Universe.
All life is in my image.
I am in You,
And you are in me.
I am in your siblings.
They, too, are in me.
I am in your pain and suffering,
And I am in your compassion and joy.
I am Light and Love,
And Hope and Possibility...
And so are you.

Creator of All Life, Source of All Being
It was from the particles of the Universe that you formed me...
Iron and carbon and phosphorous
Mixed with energy, passion and dreams.
Forgive me. Forgive me.
I forgot that you are everywhere.
I forgot that I am everywhere.
Thank you for reminding me of who I am.
Amen.

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[ii] [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_it_doesnt_pay_to_be_a_people_pleaser](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_it_doesnt_pay_to_be_a_people_pleaser)

[iii] From the introduction to her book *Pleasure Activism*.