

Know that the rules apply, admit when you break them

Can you remember the day your parents became human? When you'd finally lived enough to know a flaw when you saw it, and realized your parents weren't immune?

That was a day of reckoning for me, an odd feeling now reverberating after the Tiger, Toyota and other recent sagas took sandpaper to gold-plated individuals and institutions. The net effects are bigger and more toxic than any one iconoclastic event or parental quirk. Taking anything at face value gets harder and harder; as a society, we risk a new, demoralizing, Watergate-style mistrust in leaders, role models and institutions, public and private.

Even after Tiger's Thanksgiving car crash headlines gave way to the tawdry, I held on, tossing off mount-

ing sordid evidence to tabloid speculation, until the heap crumbled under its own weight. Even more so with Toyota: that Camry in my driveway? Couldn't possibly be one of those. But finally, after one too many revela-



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tions, the implication of additional models and Chairman Toyoda's initial reluctance to speak out, my tipping point was met.

I wanted to keep believing, but no longer could.

For me, the message is to live a genuine life:

to be the person we want to be in both personal and business spheres. I don't mean living the impossible: a life without fault. Quite the opposite. Owning and admitting mistakes takes courage and it saps much less energy than covering up and explaining later. You needn't work to

remember the truth like you must a lie.

Each of us is a "brand of one." Brands are about making and keeping promises, building equity and credibility over time. Knowing when to say, "I did wrong, and here's how I'm fixing it" adds to trust in a brand. Tylenol's 1982 rapid recall and tell-all communication strategy is perhaps the textbook corporate example. While we may expect perfection, we'll accept fallibility if honesty and action enter the equation.

Tiger met that standard in his televised mea culpa that I take at face value. What got me was Tiger's acknowledgement that he felt the rules somehow didn't apply to him; that his talent, fame and fortune, and the pressures of playing to insane expectations (his own and others), somehow granted him a free pass on morals.

His language, verbal and nonverbal, told me he meant every word; that he fully understood the damage a "two sets of rules" mentality wrought. He owned his transgressions and asked for forgiveness. He was genuine. Tiger's refusal to use the forum to announce when he'd resume competing (later committing to The Masters) should be taken as message to the "getting back to golf is his best therapy" minions to do some mirror-gazing of their own.

Compare that with Toyota's grudging, drip-by-drip fact disclosure, and perhaps failure to admit to even itself how driving to become the world's leading automaker came at incalculable costs. Not that they weren't doing the math as they went along.

More appalling to me than the initial sticky floor mat excuses were House subcommittee-subpoenaed internal Toyota documents detailing (some who read them said, bragging) how its Washington lobbying efforts saved an estimated \$100 million by successfully "negotiating down" recalls.

What's more, what of Toyota's systemic failure to share information about faulty brake systems from country to country? Was it a sin of

omission, or active suppression? Toyota has me scratching my head, as I never would scant months ago. The most respected and genuine of modern auto brands, now anything but.

Politics of course is littered with Tigers and Toyotas. Two sets of rules? Two words: John Edwards. When the National Enquirer gets Pulitzer-nominated for investigative reporting, you know the world has changed, not for the good. For my money, there's no clearer example of the irreparable damage caused by serial public denial, both personally for Edwards and in the psyches of millions who believed in him. What of their faith in leaders?

I'm no tea partier, but the health-care debacle at times makes me want to throw all (OK, most of) the bums out. They rule, but by whose rules? Forty-five thousand people will die this year because they won't get acute care, and both sides of the aisle play volleyball with an issue until the worst kind of brinkmanship kicks in. We don't all follow golf, or drive a Toyota, but we are all governed, increasingly by a "say one thing, do another" cadre of so-called leaders.

What are newly politically aware 20-year-olds who voted in their first election two years ago, energized and inspired unlike any counterpart dating back 30 years, thinking right now? I'd be questioning what, if anything, in government and those who govern is genuine and effective.

I see hope in another athlete. Apollo Ohno strikes me as genuine as a public personality gets, loving what he does and showing us who he is. Funny how I feel I know him better than Tiger, in the public eye nonstop for 15 years, but who we kind of met for the first time watching him apologize.

Nike stands nearly alone among sponsors who've stood by Tiger. When it comes to living a genuine life, we're wise to follow its longtime mantra: just do it.

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