

Draft

Title: Integrity and Advocacy

Paper prepared by:  
Michael J. Kendrick PhD  
4 Bullard Ave.,  
Holyoke, MA 01040  
USA  
Ph/fax 413 533 8071  
Email: [kendrickconsult@attglobal.net](mailto:kendrickconsult@attglobal.net)

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## Introduction

The rise of advocacy, as an institutionalised feature of contemporary formal human services, is a relatively recent development with many jurisdictions not seeing the routine presence of formalized advocacy programs until as late as the 1990's. Not surprisingly, with the emergence of a novel area or phase of human activity, there comes a period in which much is left ambiguous. It seems that the issue of integrity as it relates to advocacy falls into this category. In such instances, one can be tempted into thinking that novelty provides some measure of insulation from the vast prior experience of human beings with sustaining the integrity of themselves and their all too human institutions. This would be illusory, as all human activities are bound by questions of moral and ethical scrupulousness, and advocacy in this contemporary form, should not be exempted from comparable scrutiny.

The question of integrity is actually highly pertinent to advocacy. In advocacy, like all other undertakings that people take on, integrity relates to how virtuous people are when they are involved in doing it. This refers to advocacy done both as individuals and more collectively as groups or organizations. Though it may need to be made clear what advocacy "done well" would look like, one's faithfulness to such an ideal could eventually be evaluated. Integrity would then be bound up in whether a person or group performed as expected given such ideals. Something is usually considered to lack integrity when it is revealed as being contradictory, incoherent and undependable. All people are prone to such failings of conduct and, as a consequence, there has long been admiration for people who behave consistently in an honourable way. People who break shared codes of honourable conduct are, not unexpectedly, thought to be lacking in integrity.

Another meaning or nuance of integrity relates less immediately to matters of personal or organizational character. Instead, the focus is on the unity between expected norms of conduct and actual actions. In this sense, it would mean that advocacy has stayed within its boundaries of being advocacy, and did not become in practice something that might be thought of, for simplicity sake, as being "non-advocacy". In this sense, that advocacy is what it claims to be. Were advocates or advocacy organizations undertaking activities that were essentially "unauthorized" by a generally understood sense of what was a proper purview for advocacy, then that party might be transgressing against the integrity of a particular model of advocacy. The key here is not the legitimacy of the substitute activities, so much as it is their misrepresentation as being coherently within the agreed upon boundaries of a specific type of advocacy. Thus this particular failure of integrity is in the falseness of the characterization of the activities. Such actions in the case of persons, who are unaware of the fact that they have strayed into other roles or

activities, need to be evaluated somewhat differently from instances where the failure to act with integrity was more conscious than oblivious.

Advocacy “done well” constitutes a kind of promise to many parties that a set of functions are to be carried out, or various human interests protected, in good faith. Practitioners ask the public to see them as being what they claim to be, and thereby often undertake their work within the context of an implied public trust. It is certainly true that such a trust or promise may be very amorphous, but it commonly requires of the advocate that they stand as defenders and allies of the group that is being advocated for. For an uninvolved “public”, this creates a sense that their concerns for the vulnerable group are being pursued faithfully and with due diligence. They are then free to believe that the responsible pursuit of the matter has been reliably entrusted to the advocacy group who has created these expectations.

As described here, the achievement of integrity is not a light matter at all, as its realization brings many burdens for the aspirant. This is concordant with any estimable human achievement, in that it exacts a price or cost upon those who would seek to rise to its standard. This is the more ancient meaning of “quality” that refers to recognition of the enduring presence of tested and proven excellence that, (fundamentally more embodied within given persons than institutions), has led to and resulted in distinctive success. The recognition of the inherent difficulties involved in maintaining one’s integrity is part of why we laud those whose track record is not only uninterrupted by lapses of integrity, it may also reflect the maintenance of this standard in particularly challenging times.

It is quite a routine matter for advocates to be privy to many of the shortcomings of persons involved in roles of authority and responsibility. Not uncommonly, these lapses need to be pointed out and challenged, as they harm the interests of the people the advocate may be speaking for or with. Advocates may find themselves having to evaluate and even judge the propriety, motives, and consequences of the behaviour of others. Frequently, this may have to be done in relatively public ways, and may even result in penalties of one kind or another for the offending party. In this way, advocates develop a kind of precision of attack on, and intolerance for, lacklustre integrity. Consequently, in a kind of reciprocal way, advocates may be unwittingly helping to erect the very same standards of coherent conduct against which they could be evaluated, however unconscious they may be of this fact. A compelling standard of integrity would require that the scrutiny of advocates be just as unrelenting as the advocate’s is of others. This is only fair.

What follows here are a selection of substantive dimensions of integrity that advocates might find useful to examine. In each instance, a proposition and justification is made for its inclusion as a possible aspect of desirable integrity. To the more broadly read observer, it will become immediately clear that these recommendations are hardly novel at all, as these have arisen in

countless instances in the past as it relates to integrity. This is not unexpected. While formalized human service advocacy may be novel, the question of human integrity is decidedly not. This observation does not, however, confer on these propositions any greater inherent legitimacy, as they must all be evaluated as to whether they persuasively merit involvement in a discussion of integrity and advocacy.

### **Advocates Need To Have Exacting Principles About How Human Beings “Should Be” Treated**

It is central to the role of advocates that they champion the well-being and interests of people. However this may be construed in particular instances, the well-being of people is impossible to defend or buttress unless one has first made clear what it is about people that constitutes good or appropriate treatment of them. By implication, this would also lead to greater clarity about what is unacceptable or damaging treatment of people. In essence, it is important to have a sense of what is inherently fundamental as to how people *ought* to be treated. The basis for such a set of judgements would have to rest upon various principles or beliefs about what, at its origin, endows people with such qualities or entitlements. This could be their Creator, the Cosmos, Nature, the law of the land, natural law, a constitution or whatever. Nevertheless, the practical result is a set of principles about how people should be treated and thus the means by which poor treatment can be recognized and challenged.

An advocate, (or advocates), who fail to both have and uphold such principles, may be at risk of being unable to properly advocate for people, since they can neither recognize or justify appropriate treatment. After all, they have no standards for doing this. They would be impotent and paralysed to act, since the grounds for their advocacy action remain to be established. In the instance of a person who was being genuinely badly treated, they would fail to act. They would therefore lack integrity as an advocate, since *they had not done what a responsible advocate should have done*. Such an instance is a helpful starting point to begin to illuminate the important role that such guiding principles, about how people should be treated, play in regards to the quality of advocacy and its outcomes.

It is not all that easy to be clear about such principles and how they might apply. Nevertheless, it is good to remember that there exists quite a bit of agreement about what are the rights and dignity of people across many diverse peoples and times, so the advocate need not start from within a vacuum. “Right and wrong” are not always quite as obscure as much of the “hair splitting” such questions arouse. One senses that much of this kind of analytic preoccupation would not actually result in much of an ultimate difference on most matters. Even so, an advocate could not expect to be able to claim they have integrity if they persistently fail to have and uphold some

enduring principles about how people should be treated. After all, they claim to be there to benefit people, and this requires that the basis of such benefit be explicated so that it can be evaluated.

### **The Advocate Should Be Willing To “Bear Witness” To The Dark Side Of Our Nature, Our Communities And Our Social Institutions**

It is commonly the case with disadvantaged, marginal and even outcast people that they face an uphill struggle simply to get their mistreatment recognized by legitimate authorities. Their complaints and testimony are often not taken seriously, or are distorted in such a way their credibility is questioned or reduced. Frequently, few believe them with quite the same ease that those who enjoy social approval and institutional legitimacy seem to experience. This bias towards favouring our established authorities, institutions and even central cultural mythologies, is rarely seen for what it is. It masquerades as an unacknowledged preference for preserving faith in the cherished values and illusions of a society about itself i.e. that it is fair, humane, democratic, rational, and exalted. Nonetheless, all people and communities do have a dark side that is difficult to both fully see and to acknowledge as possibly being “us” rather than “them”.

Scapegoats, and other vilifications of people, serve to shield those who are more truly responsible for the character of our world from having to take responsibility for their conduct. People who are powerless and unable to exert much pressure on the social order can well find themselves as practical and psychic pawns in the hands of others. This hidden bias towards favouring the established, the familiar and the socially established, typically contributes to the mistreatment of people who are none of these things by rendering them to have less value and importance. Their social devaluation becomes the backdrop in which harm done to them is harder to recognize for what it is. It is so easily thought of as somehow more “natural” that what such persons deserve by way of fair treatment need not be taken into account, at least in comparison to people who are more socially favoured.

Socially devalued people are therefore at proportionately greater risk of harm of all kinds, and the ultimate culprit may well be the social order itself. The poor of any nation are much too readily made into human sacrifices for preserving the advantages built into the social order. Advocates may therefore face the unattractive task of having to be the bearer of much too painful news about the true nature of what is going on. In simply advocating for people to be better treated, the advocate must recognize that they are engaged in a re-balancing of social forces in which the morality, credibility and integrity of our communities may sometimes be put to the test. If the advocate is unable to bear this responsibility, because of their own unacknowledged stake in upholding such social, psychological, moral or even economic mythologies, then they may well be unprepared for their duties.

It is not that all advocacy has this dimension. Rather it is that advocates cannot advocate effectively if they are encumbered by the belief that all social appearances are what they seem or claim to be. They must be willing to look beneath the respectable rationales that are proffered in defence of things, to the possibility that something is more amiss than meets the eye. This is not a preference for cynicism or even scepticism, it is simply a willingness arising from a duty to those being advocated for, to go where the facts lead, even if that damages the authority of our social institutions by unmasking their inevitable contradictions. It does require of an advocate that they have the integrity to be able to discern that their principal loyalty as an advocate is to advocate well. In fact, if they are too solicitous of the needs of our social institutions, they might well compromise this obligation. Naturally, such advocates can face the wrath of those who are "found out" either directly or symbolically. Such may be one of the many hard tests of integrity.

### **Advocates Should Clearly Be Acting Upon And Accountable For The Best Interests Of Those They Claim To Speak On Behalf Of**

There is no way to know if the advocate has shown loyalty and fidelity to the people they are to assist, if there is not erected a standard that is sufficiently rigorous so as to determine whether the advocate has done their job. This "job" is normally expressed as being the defence of the person's best interests or overall well-being. This often, but not always, includes the defence of the expressed wishes of the people to be advocated for. To do this, the advocate must acknowledge that such interests exist, that they can be damaged or advanced by advocacy, and that these ought to be able to be independently appraised if needed. To be fair, "best interests" are always difficult to keep clear, but this does not mean that they are not real and have real effects on the well-being of people.

The integrity of the advocate rests on whether they feel bound to act in regards the best interests of people. Even in instances where the people themselves choose to act in ways that promise to harm these interests, it would still be the duty of the advocate to advise against such choices. Such advice is not inherently coercive, as the party being advocated for remains able to act freely, and expressed disagreement with the views of this party hardly rise to the level of a compulsion. For the advocate, the task is to seek to identify and uphold these interests, and to take responsibility for not doing so if it was within their power to do so. It does not oblige them to uncritically accede to the expressed wishes of the party being advocated for, but it does oblige the advocate to seek to clarify "best interests" *with* them.

Such a standard ultimately invites people other than the advocate to evaluate the advocate's performance, by the measure to which those being advocated for had their interests properly defended and advanced. It is a

measure of the integrity and accountability of the advocate that such a transparent evaluation could be done. It may actually never be requested or required that such an evaluation be done, but it is not hard to see that it leaves all of the conduct of the advocate subject to probing scrutiny. Thus the more practical meaning of this standard is that it provides the advocate with a personal or collective obligation against which their judgements and practice must be measured as it is occurring, and as it may be judged from the vantage point of time.

### **The Advocate Or Advocacy Group Must Free Itself From Conflicts Of Interest That Would Impair Their Ability To Faithfully Advocate**

It is almost inevitable that advocacy groups or individual advocates will find themselves in situations where the interests of other parties than those being advocated for come into conflict with those being advocated for. This may arise from "structural" relationships such as when advocacy groups accept controlling funding from the same system they must challenge or when the advocate has personal relationships and loyalties to parties that are involved in the situation where the people being advocated for have their dispute. These sorts of conflicts of interest arise with great frequency and it is quite possible that these will set the stage for decisions and conduct by the advocate that dilutes or harms the kind of principled advocacy the people deserve.

The ideal in this case is that the advocate be independent of any compromising interest that would render the advocate incapable of putting the needs and interests party being advocated for first. Normally, this is accompanied by a sense that not only should there not be a conflict of interest, there should also be the appearance of probity. The very fact that there is reasonable doubt that the advocate is compromised would be justification enough for an advocate with integrity to withdraw from the advocacy role.

### **The Advocate Should Reasonably Persevere**

It would seem obvious that very little will be accomplished where the starting point for advocacy is some manner of short term dabbling in the challenging of injustices. So many things that oppress people cannot be quickly resolved in a matter of hours or even months. Not uncommonly many of the enduring evils that advocates must confront are far more persistent than such "light" remedies would alleviate. Thus advocacy must be taken up within an ethical framework that properly acknowledges the often long-term nature of "best interests" and the forces that work against these.

This recognition does not in any way inhibit whatever necessary actions might be taken in the short run, providing the limits of these are properly articulated. What it does do, is raise the question of whether the advocate shows appropriate and proportionate responsibility in regards to both what is

taken on and how this viewed or presented. The long term may be remote, but it does exist, and it is all too easy to sacrifice it unwittingly in the near term. In a similar sense, the way forward over the long term might well be jeopardized by injudicious short-term actions and thinking. Perhaps a classic instance of this is seen in the indifference of many advocates to what follows for people when they leave institutions into the community. While getting people out of such places may well be ultimately advantageous, it does not make sense if the person enters avoidable and perilous community conditions. As many have pointed out, the person "dies with their rights on". In this sense, the "best interests" problem over the long term is better construed as assuring good community supports rather than be more narrowly defined as simply being liberated from residential institutions.

Such a remedy is clearly more difficult and long term in nature than simply getting people freed from oppressive institutions. For this reason, the more responsible and ethical advocate is likely to be the one that both recognizes this long-term issue and does what is possible about it. Naturally, the advocate cannot settle such matters singularly, but they can take the feasible steps to responsibly persevere where these are needed. There is clearly a matter of proportionality in such a responsibility thus making the discernment of proper advocacy conduct a very challenging question. Nevertheless, the question of what constitutes integrity remains latent in a host of situations where any number of short-term interventions could impair long-term interests. Additionally, the alternative to "dabbling" is not undertaking unsustainable long-term commitments but rather a wise and judicious sense of the limits and enduring consequences of today's actions.

### **Advocacy Is Not About Winning At All Costs With No Regard For Truth And Fairness**

It is easy enough, in the abstract, to see the distinction between ends and means. However, in the heat and passion of dispute and conflict, the temptation to seek pathways that favour one's case, even if they are a violation of truth and fairness, is understandable. We live in a world that seems quite proficient at bending the rules, shading the truth, employing deception, "spinning" appearances, and casting dubious facts as being moral and justified when these can be used to advance one's interests. Hence, the classic challenge to integrity of trying to size up whether the means selected to advocate is as moral as the cause being championed.

It may be easy to strengthen one's case by exaggerating the failings of those in opposition, and by employing clever rhetoric and language. However skilful one is at such things, there still remains a duty for an advocate to know and uphold truth and fairness, otherwise any tactic or stratagem is justified if the end result benefits the aggrieved party. Thus, the more principled advocate ought to try to win but do so in an honourable way. Their methods

should mirror the sleazy ruthlessness of the “hired gun” version of some lawyers but should rather emulate the genuine skilfulness of talented advocates who achieve their victories without a consequent price being paid by truth and fairness to all parties. As partisan as advocacy ought to be, partisanship should not be confused with unscrupulousness.

### **Advocates Should Not Celebrate Conflict And Division But Should Hold Out For Whatever Reconciliation and Restitution Is Feasible**

It may seem to some people that the sign of a good advocate is a willingness to embrace conflict and to risk division in the pursuit of justice. It may even be heard that the advocate must be doing something right since everyone speaks poorly of them and encounters with them are dreaded by people in authority. It may even be the case that some advocates pride themselves on their ability to seed division and conflict. All of these things do not necessarily indicate the actual merit of an advocate, as they merely describe the presence of conflict. It remains to be seen if the actual conflict in question was necessary in the first instance and ultimately fruitful in advancing the party’s interests. One has to look past conflict and division in order to appraise them. This requires some kind of higher order principles with which one could evaluate conflict and one’s integrity in relation to it.

Perhaps a key principle of this kind would be that conflict not be seen as end in itself, but at best as a poor substitute for resolving matters straightforwardly and in a peaceable measured way. In this sense, the ideal to emulate would be to reconcile the differing parties, and overcome, to whatever degree possible, the division between them in accord with the demands of justice and appropriate restitution. In other words that the desirable state for human beings is not conflict but rather some form of “at oneness” if this is possible to achieve. Even if there are conflicts nonetheless, it would be better that these were dealt with this aim in mind. Consequently, conflict may be a necessary evil, and even one in which one enjoys their prowess, but it is a much less desirable state than to craft solutions that lead to greater unity between people rather than division. In such a view, unnecessary conflict and division may signal ineptness or even an underlying attitudinal problem in an advocate as shown in the advocate’s inability to envision and pursue solutions that lessen rather than exacerbate conflict.

This is not an argument for the demonising of conflict, as it is inconceivable that it can be escaped entirely. Merely taking up an issue that polarizes people may lead to conflict. In this sense, the forthright pursuit of valid conflicts may be precisely the kind of healing that is necessary. However, an advocate, acting with integrity must question whether any conflict and division is essential to reconciliation and to what extent. This cannot be answered in terms of conflict itself but must involve some manner of calculation of whether the interests of party being advocated for are indeed

best addressed by pursuing a particular conflict, in a particular way and at a particular time. Thus, again, the merit of things lies not in the conflict itself but rather “beyond” it, in matters of greater importance and weight in a more ultimate or overriding sense.

### Advocates Should Search For Visions Of Authentic Improvement

It is unlikely that the best interests of people can ever be satisfactorily addressed simply by crafting remedies that conform to today’s status quo. It is probable that at least some matters would be advanced only if we create a genuinely better world. To a staggering degree much of human suffering may have to be tolerated because we don’t know how to do better, or even have a sense of what “better” might be. It is not enough to simply solve matters by reference to what the world currently provides, it is essential that people look past today’s possibly inadequate options towards what might someday become a better option. To remain passive and continue operating solely within the realm of the immediately practical may ultimately be a disservice to what people actually need.

What may lie between an unsatisfactory present and a more beneficial future is the presence of a vision that permits proactive forward movement. It is not defensible to simply passively await a better future’s arrival. The advocate must consider the question of whether there is a place for imagining and ultimately pursuing “better”. Oddly enough, the way forward may be most advantaged not by conforming to today’s reality but by forcing oneself to become “sensibly unrealistic” in being willing to look over the horizon at *what should be created* if it doesn’t exist today, and yet is essential to people’s well-being. Advocacy without this commitment is an inverse way to settle for the world as it is. This stance lacks integrity if the advocate is sincere about pursuing people’s best interests.

At the same time, it would be very unwise to assume that any and all advocates can and should fashion themselves as visionaries, since this is clearly utopian and wildly impractical. It is not, however, so outlandish to assume that advocates can show enough integrity in their role that they can recognize that vision is needed, even if they lack the particular aptitudes to develop the vision. Hence, this element of integrity has been deliberately cast *as a duty to search for needed vision* rather than be the source of it. Visions worth the time can be expected to be elusive so the fidelity of the searching matters more than whether the search is always fruitful. Advocacy cannot be a triumph over all shortcomings in the human condition but it can be one of many catalysts to make life’s prospects better rather than worse.

## Advocates Should Know And Acknowledge The Difference Between Their Own Voice And That Of Those Who They Claim To Represent

It is a perennial matter with any arrangement where people claim to speak for themselves or others that they can lose their way. This comes about because an inability to distinguish one's own voice from that of others easily enters unannounced in the heat of the moment, particularly when one is sure that they are doing things for the right reason and with honourable intentions. The reality is far more sobering, of course, since good intentions and confused self interest are often at the root of any number of ethical lapses taken by people who are deeply convinced that they are the "good guys". The amount of moral righteousness one feels does not always equate to actual virtue, even if it feels like it does.

The implications of this dilemma are far ranging but certainly progress will be made the advocate is willing to see themselves as conceivably being a potential danger. This is strengthened if the advocate can see the ethical dangers of substituting one's own voice for that of others as well as being alert to the ways this can occur. Of course, this is a prescription for a kind of ethical scrupulousness. Not surprisingly, it is relatively easy to see how such a quality would assist with the integrity of advocacy. In fact, it is baffling to try to imagine what integrity might be if it were not grounded in ethical scrupulousness.

In practice, the matter is complicated by the fact that there may not be a clear and self evidently crisply defined "voice" for any party. More likely is that a measure of relentless searching for and verification of the authenticity of what is actually people's "true voice" may be inescapable. Thus, the faithfulness and fidelity of the search may be more significant than may initially be apparent. In fact, one might well wonder about those advocates who are uncritically certain that their voice and that of others never get confused. This seems inconsistent with human nature and may well reveal moral conceit and complacency. Such features have a long history of preceding ethical lapses rather than preventing them. In a similar way, self-questioning and a willingness to doubt one's automatic assumed virtue may be a sign of progress.

### Vigilance

The evil that humans can express is continuously innovative whether at the level of persons or at the level of social institutions. It seems a truism that harmful things continuously get portrayed as beneficial, and good things often get treated as if they are the problem. Advocates are continuously thrown into a world in which these claims must be sorted out and the truth of things evaluated. One never knows where harm will come from or what form it will

take. Nevertheless, one can find oneself much better prepared if one has anticipated the enduring, disguised and infinitely nuance way in which various evils take root.

This is not an argument for some sort of paranoia or preoccupation with perversity. Rather, it is a statement about the duty of an advocate to defend people and their interests and this is not well served when the advocate is too ready to take things at face value, or finds it convenient to assume that all things are well simply because an immediate tragedy or travesty is not "in one's face". Advocacy works best when it sees itself as a safeguard up and against that which harms people. To not remain alert to, and anticipatory of emergent menace, hardly seems like the best way to guard against anything. The advocate who is not looking to see it coming will indeed be quite unprepared when it arrives. Thus it is not a large stretch to hold up the standard of due vigilance as a sign of the integrity of the advocate.

### **Conclusion**

As has been indicated earlier, what has been offered here as possible dimensions of integrity for advocates are not new elements as each has a long history in the search for viable ethics for integrity. Nor is it necessary to agree with them simply because they are offered. Nevertheless, it would be wise to not summarily dismiss these kinds of concerns simply because they are unconvincing at the moment. The meditation on these sorts of issues and concerns will, in all likelihood, be fruitful even if other conclusions are ultimately drawn. Perhaps the constant personal struggle for integrity might itself have been usefully added to what is here. Again, it is hard to imagine integrity of any calibre that comes about without personal self-examination and reflection. Such is the nature of integrity.