

Editorial

I HAVE TOLD ANY NUMBER of my friends that I like people in the abstract more since I started teaching than I did before. Now, because I teach in a university it is true that I teach a self-selecting group, people who have chosen to be in university (for the most part), as opposed to students who have to be in school by law until the age of 16, for instance. A lot of what makes teaching such a positive experience for me is the sense of trust that is so central to the enterprise. Since no money changes hands, the relationship between professor and student is one built almost exclusively on the agreement that the professor will evaluate the student's work fairly and—to the best of her or his ability—dispassionately, and that the student will do his or her best work and produce it on time and honestly. The relationship of trust that exists between these two parties explains why plagiarism is the major breach that it is. Plagiarism is the student effectively saying, "I don't accept that trust is important to our relationship. I feel it's only about getting a high grade, no matter how I do it." Perhaps students who cheat are not "bad" people, then, but merely people who have internalized the idea of a university education as a commercial transaction between producer (professor) and consumer (student). At that point, the plagiarist is just a consumer who is merely trying to get the best deal possible, trying to pay less with his or her time in purchasing the goods on offer, the grade (and not the content) for the class.

I was recently told by one of our graduate students that an undergraduate who did not like the grade he'd received on an assignment had written on the paper some time after seeing his grade, "I want my money back." This attitude is intensely disappointing, although it doesn't undermine my overall optimism about undergraduates, teaching, or university in general. My confidence in these three facets of my daily life remain intact because, as repellent as this student's sentiment is, it is notable because it is in the minority.

If you have it in your life, trust is one of those invaluable possessions that you can easily start to take for granted, and trust is one of those things that you just know when you have it. I've been thinking about this a lot lately because of a couple of recent, highly publicized breaches of trust.

A quite well-known professional hockey player announced that his former minor league hockey coach molested him during his time on the coach's team. This coach has already served jail time, having been convicted of doing the same thing to another former player in his charge. And a priest from a small Nova Scotia parish was found with child pornography in his computer in an airport while returning from a trip to Germany.

Instances like this matter to us, in part at least, because of our understandable desire to be able to take for granted our ability to trust in the various parts of our lives. And, of course, the stakes of trust need not be so dire. In fact, it normally isn't. Having recently bought a Great Dane puppy, I have spent more time walking on the streets in my neighbourhood in the past four months than I had during the preceding eight years that we've lived where we do. But unless you're a secondary villain in a James Bond movie, you rarely find yourself worrying that a passing car might veer over to the soft shoulder and hit you, whether accidentally or—even more imponderably—on purpose. In fact, the whole traffic system is based on a system of trust. We trust complete strangers on the roads to abide by the rules that we ourselves follow, and—with rare exceptions—they do. They leave the necessary distance between pedestrians and vehicles, and between themselves and other vehicles, just as we trust those people in positions of authority to have our best interests in mind. When there is a traffic accident, it is a notable event because one way or another the detente between strangers has been momentarily destabilized. People who study such things in Britain have begun refusing the term “accident” in favour of “crash,” since the notion of the accident suggests that nothing could have changed the outcome, when in fact most crashes occur in broad daylight, on dry roads, and with sober drivers, suggesting they must have done something wrong, usually driving too fast. But rarely is the crash the result of wilful wrongdoing. Our trust, in other words, is well placed on the roads, and, thankfully, in most of our lives, except in the most extreme of circumstances. And we can't account for those extreme circumstances, anyway. Can we?

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