

Saints and Sinners

The mental battle that defines our character

Marshall Clement Sanford was an Eagle Scout—literally.

The son of a respected Florida family, in his younger years he was a proud member of Boy Scout Troop 509 from Pompano Beach. But these early years weren't all campfires and fishing trips—becoming an Eagle Scout was hard work, both physically and mentally. Besides learning how to tie knots that would hold your weight, mastering the exacting science of log cabin construction, and figuring out which way was north based on the position of the sun, being an Eagle Scout also constituted, as Marshall would later say, an important and arduous developmental voyage—a voyage “of character, leadership, and persistence.”¹

For him, it was a voyage that appeared to pay off. Marshall did well for himself. After high school, he graduated from Furman College at the top of his class. He went on to complete an MBA at the University of Virginia's prestigious Darden School of Business and a summer internship at Goldman Sachs. Marshall was rising fast, widely admired for his skills, for his smarts, and for being a straight shooter. That summer of his Goldman internship was also the summer he met Jenny Sullivan at a party in the Hamptons, and when he returned to New York City that fall to take a high-profile job, he promptly asked her to marry him. Although they both had promising careers in the big city—Jenny was a vice president of a large investment firm—they soon decided to move back to South Carolina (where Marshall's family had moved his senior year of high school), where they could live a more traditional life.

Once settled back down South, Marshall headed up a real estate company and Jenny raised their four boys in what everyone agreed was the picture of family harmony. Although her husband could be quirky and often a bit stoic, she admired him for his honesty and integrity. As Jenny would later say, “He cherished Galatians 5:22: ‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,’ ” and he lived accordingly.² But Marshall was also ambitious and passionate about serving his community. So the beloved native son, the very embodiment of strong moral character and good old-fashioned American values, decided it was time to run for public office.

Okay, we know what you're thinking: good character and politics aren't usually two things that go together. But Marshall was not your average politician. He wasn't in it for the prestige, the perks, or the power. He liked to describe himself as a “citizen legislator” who was in it to do the right thing by South Carolinians—to be a champion of the people. A political neophyte with

a fresh face and a boatload of enthusiasm, his straightforward and earnest demeanor catapulted him to victory in his first run for Congress in 1994, where he served three terms. Those terms weren't tarnished by scandal or ego or disgrace, as they are for so many in his line of work; instead, he was widely seen as a staunch advocate and strong voice on issues of both social and fiscal responsibility. But he didn't just vote his values, he lived them. He not only fought wasteful spending during the day but was just as judicious with his own money—and the taxpayers'—at night. With little interest in the material excesses or extra curricular dalliances of the Washington, D.C., party scene, he spent his nights in the capital on the futon in his office, accommodations he preferred to renting an apartment on the government's dime. Conservative both in lifestyle and in politics, his straight- arrow persona made him a conservative favorite back home in the red state of South Carolina, and as a result, by 2003 he, Jenny, and the boys found themselves moving into the governor's mansion.

It was a welcome change for the family, as living apart had been difficult, with the frequent separations limiting the couple's time for deep conversation and sharing the ups and downs of daily life. But now everything was again falling into place. "Though we were both incredibly busy, we'd been living under the same roof at last, and with that proximity," Jenny said, "I'd fallen in love with him all over again."³ And so, it seems, had his constituents. From the very outset of his term, Marshall was trumpeted both in his home state and in Washington as a new kind of politician—a man of virtue. Even if you didn't agree with his policies, there seemed to be no question that he was a good man.

Yet on June 24, 2009, Marshall "Mark" Sanford's life changed forever. Upon arriving back in the United States from a trip to Buenos Aires, he was met by a reporter who, like many South Carolinians, had spent the past week wondering about Sanford's whereabouts. The governor had gone AWOL, offering his staff, his family, and his constituents only the flimsy lie that he was hiking the Appalachian Trail. But as we now know, he was actually in Argentina with his mistress—or his "soul mate," as he would later call her. It turned out that the seemingly levelheaded and loyal governor had been penning erotic love letters to Maria Belén Chapur for months. Evidently he had just returned to the States with more material about which to write.

Mired in a tug- of- war between his firmly held convictions about what was "right" and his desire for the woman he now claimed was his once- in- a- lifetime love, Sanford, in a tear- filled press conference later that day, begged forgiveness for his moral transgression, admitting that he had crossed the "sex line" and apologizing for the pain he had caused. But it was too late. On that day Mark Sanford's image suddenly changed forever. He was no longer a paragon of virtue, and his political ambitions, along with his character, were

consigned to the junk heap.

The good and bad in all of us

Cases such as Sanford's—and the many others like it that regularly grace the headlines—fascinate us. The idea that a person seemingly living a life of propriety could commit such shameful acts, along with the suggestion that we could be so easily fooled by the pretense of goodness, shatters our confidence in our ability to judge others—or even ourselves—accurately. Whether the transgressor is a politician touting family values while carrying on an affair with an international mistress, the next-door neighbor who “seemed just like everybody else” until he committed an act of terrorism as a member of a radicalized political group, or the admired and upstanding hedge fund manager who turned out to be the perpetrator of a multibillion-dollar Ponzi scheme, when people act in a way that violates our expectations and beliefs about their character, we—both as individuals and as a society—are often shaken to our very core. To compensate for our errors in judgment, we convince ourselves these people must have been wolves in sheep's clothing—inherently nasty individuals who may have managed to hide in plain sight for a time, but whose true colors have ultimately been revealed. Hindsight, after all, is 20/20. We tell ourselves that Sanford's fall from grace must have been long in the coming. He must have had some flaw in his character that lurked there those many years, hidden behind that Eagle Scout badge, something that Jenny (and the rest of us) just couldn't see. If we had just looked closely enough, maybe there would have been clues, windows that would have let us discern who Sanford really was as opposed to who he presented himself to be. How else could a man who once seemed such an exemplar of good character have turned out to be a lying, cheating philanderer? How else could we all have been duped?

These are good questions. But the answer, we'll argue, is not that we missed some telltale signs or that we are gullible fools. No, it's not that we misjudged his character; it's that our understanding of the *concept* of “character”—what it actually is and how it works—is fundamentally wrong.

Character—what *Webster's* defines as “the complex of mental and ethical traits often individualizing a person”—has long been almost universally agreed to be a stable fixture. People believe that it is formed at an early age through learning and experience, and that it becomes internalized and solidified into a deep-seated disposition that guides their actions over the course of their lives. In fact, the word *character* itself comes from an ancient Greek term referring to the marks impressed indelibly upon coins to tell them apart. And since that time, the term has been used to describe the supposed indelible marks pressed upon humans' minds and souls that “reveal” their true nature. Character is the currency we employ to make judgments about

people—to determine who is good and who is flawed, who is worthy and who is not, who is saved and who is damned. Character, quite simply, is who we are, like it or not. Everyone believes this to be a fact; even *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Ethics* says that character traits are fixed, deeply ingrained features of personality.

But if this view is correct, some things just don't add up. If character is stable, how could Mark Sanford and others like him fool so many people for so long? How could they have concealed their moral shortcomings from their families, friends, colleagues, and communities year after year? It's hard to imagine that most people are capable of such an elaborate ruse. As Tom Davis, one of Sanford's closest friends for thirty years, put it: "I've known Mark, and the opinion I've formed of him, I never would have expected something like this. This is not in character for Mark Sanford."⁴ Virginia Lane, one of Jenny's close friends, echoed the view: "Mark's the last person on the planet we thought this would happen to."⁵ And Jenny herself was the most shocked of all: "I always believed that Mark and I had no secrets. After all of these years in the public eye, our lives were open books to one another, let alone the public."⁶ "It never occurred to me that he would do something like that," she said upon reflection. "The person I married was centered on a core of morals."⁷

But in a way, our responses to situations like these aren't entirely logical or fair. Should a single moral failing erase a lifetime of good behavior? Why does a single transgression seem to give us license to brand someone with the indelible mark of a marred character? One explanation is that because these single events are so shocking and so memorable (not to mention so beaten to death by the media), they eclipse all else. But if you buy that view, then why isn't the reverse true? Why doesn't a single good deed, even a memorable one, ever seem to be seen as a mark capable of defining a person's true colors? Ever heard of Farron Hall, the homeless alcoholic who lived under a bridge in Winnipeg, and who in May 2009 risked his own life by jumping into the Red River in a heroic attempt to save a drowning teen? Probably not. That's because despite risking his life to save a total stranger, he was never hailed as a role model, never awarded a medal of honor or invited on the talk show circuit to discuss his moral bona fides. Instead, he was patted on the back by local officials and quickly forgotten. In society's eyes, this one good act wasn't nearly enough to redeem Hall from a lifetime of "degenerate behavior."

It seems that wolves may masquerade as sheep, but sheep just don't masquerade as wolves. We rarely view one good act as proof someone had good character all along, yet most of us are ready and willing to do the reverse. Those marked as "bad" can do something nice now and again and our opinion of them doesn't change, but all it takes for a person of seeming

high virtue is one slip for us to claim that his or her character is inherently flawed.

This double standard may not be fair, but it's also not particularly surprising. As work by the psychologist Paul Rozin has shown, humans possess a fundamental tendency to accentuate the negative.⁸ Drop a fly into a bowl of delicious soup and the soup suddenly becomes inedible. Yet placing a drop of delicious soup in a bowl of dead flies hardly makes for a tasty treat. This may be an extreme example, but the point is that, rational or not, for the mind any sign of contamination—physical or moral—is hard to ignore.

History has borne this tendency out over and over. In one particularly egregious example, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was accepted in many southern states that a single drop of “black blood” in one's ancestry rendered one legally black, therefore tainting and making one ineligible for all the civil rights that applied at the time, whereas the reverse didn't apply. In short, the things we deem “bad” consistently seem to hold more weight than those we deem “good.”

This very fact provides a bit of a problem for the commonly held view of character as a stable phenomenon. Think of it this way: if you believe that character is fixed, you have to accept that an instance of behaving “out of character” is one of two things: (1) an aberrant event (like Hall's heroic act) or (2) a window into the person's “true” and yet hidden nature (like Sanford's indiscretion). But in reality, which one we choose seems to depend on whether the person in question was a “saint” or “sinner” to begin with. An even bigger problem for the fixed view of character is that acting “out of character” isn't a freak occurrence or something restricted to the famous few. As we'll see throughout this book, it's actually much more commonplace than most people think. There lurks in every one of us the potential to lie, cheat, steal, and sin, no matter how good a person we believe ourselves to be. Combine these two problems, and the view of character as a stable fixture begins to crumble.

This is not to say that character doesn't exist or that our behavior is completely unpredictable. A random system like that wouldn't make any sense either. If the mind worked that way, our social world would be chaos—our actions at any moment in time would be reduced to a simple roll of the dice. No, character exists. It just doesn't work the way most people think. In the chapters that follow, we'll show you that hypocrisy and morality, love and lust, cruelty and compassion, honesty and deceit, modesty and hubris, bigotry and tolerance—in short, vice and virtue—can coexist in each of us, and that the behavior or decision that emerges in any given moment or situation isn't necessarily the one we intend. Yet the decisions we make and the actions we take aren't haphazard; they're the product of dueling forces in our minds. As

with most duels, however, there are a set of rules that guide the moves of the combatants. But to fully understand these rules, and to learn what you can do to guide the outcome of the battle, you first have to be willing to give up everything you thought you knew about character—what it is, how it is formed, and how it works.

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