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**Essay – Cultures of Trust for Grades 4-6 (ages 9-11)**

**TRUST**

What makes us trust someone? You might say - someone who keeps a promise, someone who tells the truth, someone who is honest, someone with a good heart, someone you love.

**Promises**

There is a legend from ancient Rome that used to be taught to school children, a long time ago when my parents or even my grandparents were young. It is about a man called Regulus, who had a reputation of never breaking his word. If he made a promise, he would keep it. This was a personal matter for him, but it was also his sense of himself as a Roman citizen. “Shall not a Roman keep his word?” he is said to have declared.

Regulus was a famous politician and general who lived during the long wars that the Romans fought with Carthage, a state in north Africa, in what is now called Tunisia. At the time Carthage had the greatest navy in the world. Nobody was stronger, except perhaps Rome. And for the Romans to be the greatest of all, they knew they would have to destroy the power of Carthage. Even when I was at school, in our Latin classes we learned the Roman phrase, “Carthago delenda est” – “Carthage must be destroyed.”

During one battle, the Roman general Regulus was captured by the Carthaginians, and taken as a prisoner of war. The Carthaginians decided to make him an offer. They said they would let him go home on one condition - that Rome agree to end the war. If they wouldn’t agree, then Regulus must promise to return to Carthage where he would be put to death. The Carthaginians believed Regulus would keep his promise, because he was a Roman, and Romans kept their promises. Regulus made the promise, he was released and went back to Rome.

Now you might think that once Regulus was out of the hands of his enemies and back home, he could do what he liked. What did that kind of promise matter, a promise made to an enemy while he was a prisoner? He was far away from them now. But Regulus didn’t see it like that. He believed in keeping promises, even with his enemies. So when the Romans said they would not end the war, he went back to Carthage and gave himself up. And there, as the story goes, he was imprisoned and then tortured to death.

This is why Regulus remained famous through the long centuries – not because he was a great soldier, but because he was known as a man who kept his word under the worst circumstances, a man you could trust.

Yet Regulus had a wife and children. In the story, they cling to him, they weep and plead with him not to return to Carthage. They love him, does he not love them? But he won’t listen. He says he must, as Roman, keep his promise, even if this promise meant that he was abandoning his family for ever. How could a father think that it was more important to have the trust of the enemy than the trust of his wife and children, to love and look after them? I don’t know the answer to that.

Of course, keeping a promise is meant to be hard. If it was something easy, we wouldn’t ask people to promise. We say, “Promise me!” because we know that the person might not do what we hope. “Promise me you’ll be there!” “Promise me you’ll pay me back!” There is fear inside those words … When I was at school, if you really wanted to hold someone to a promise, you would say “Cross your heart and hope to die”. Or we would hold each other’s’ little fingers and say “pinky promise” as though a ritual and magic words would make it happen. If it was easy, these sort of rituals wouldn’t be necessary.

But what about a promise that you have been forced to make, against your will? There is another story about an ancient promise, one made by the heroic Carthaginian general, Hannibal, when he was a child. The story says that his father made him promise that he would never be a friend of Rome – he would never make peace with them. In one story his father even lifts him over a burning fire to make him swear it.

Nowadays we would not hold someone to a promise like that, because the person did not make the promise freely – it was made under threat of pain and violence. We would also think a promise made as a child is not binding, as a child is not aware of how much you can change your mind about things as you get older. Indeed, you can change your mind about things many times in your life. Should you still be kept to a promise in something you no longer believe? And if you break the promise, because your beliefs or the situation has changed, are you not to be trusted?

**Telling the truth**

You can see promising is not so simple! What about telling the truth? It’s not simple either. We all think, generally, that it is a good thing to tell the truth, and lying is not so good. Lies told deliberately to deceive someone, to harm them, or to save trouble can cause damage and distrust

But there are other kinds of lies. I might tell you that I ate a thousand chocolate frogs last night. We both know that I didn’t really eat a thousand chocolate frogs, it’s just a way of telling you that I ate a lot of them.

Or imagine you stay the night at your friend’s place and your bed is cold, and noisy and a cat comes into the room in the middle of the night and sleeps on your head. In the morning at breakfast, you friend’s mother smiles at you and says: “Did you sleep well?” Most of us in that situation will reply meekly, “Yes thank you”. This is what we call a white lie – we know it’s not true, but we are lying to be polite, not to hurt someone’s feelings.

Sometimes a situation forces us to tell more serious lies. If we are escaping from a war, for example, and we reach a checkpoint, we may have to show false documents and make false declarations to get ourselves and our family to a safe place. Certainly from the point of view of the people at the checkpoint we are liars and not trustworthy. But for the person on the other end, the lie is necessary to survive.

In Homer’s story *The Odyssey,* the hero Odysseus tells lie after lie, and so does his wife Penelope. Some of them are purposeful lies, in order to survive. But some seem merely playful, lying for the sake of it, almost as though they have just become used to it.

In the playground when I was at school, if we told a lie, we would cross our fingers as a sign that what we were saying was not true. At least this showed that we knew there *was* a difference between the truth and a lie. In adult life sometimes it seems that lies can become so ordinary and every day that people lose a sense of what is true and what is not.

Some people even say there is no such thing as the truth, and that it all depends on your point of view, how you look at things. But is that how we behave? In our courts of law, for example, we believe that justice depends on the existence of truth. A witness is asked to put their hand on a holy book and swear - “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” Lawyers and judges argue long and hard over the truth, the facts of the case, to try and work out what really happened.

In the library too, we all understand the difference between the shelves marked “Fiction” and the shelves marked “Non-fiction” and why we separate them. In fiction, we know the author has made the story up. In non-fiction, we trust that the author has tried very hard to make sure what is written in the book is true, that it actually happened. We certainly trust the author not to say something is true when the author knows it is not. If that happened, we would feel that the author has lied to us.

Some books seem to fall between these categories. People who write stories about figures from history might start with facts, but often end out making a lot of things up - conversations, people and places – all sorts of things, to turn the facts into an enjoyable story. Perhaps you noticed at that at the beginning of this essay I did not say there was a man called Regulus who always kept his word. I said “there is a legend,” and other things like “as the story goes”, “there is a story” and so on. I did this so that you would understand that, while Regulus was a real historic character, the story about his famous promise might not be a true story.

Yet because a story can have such a strong effect on our emotions, it can be easy to forget that what we are reading may contain invention. A writer or filmmaker can take advantage of this, and deliberately invent something for a particular purpose, knowing that, inside a story, you might believe it. This kind of lying is known as propaganda. That’s why whenever we read or watch something “based on a true story” we need to remember that what we are made to feel by the author or filmmaker may not be true. We can’t trust our feelings alone. We have to think too.

**Honest**

It is hard to keep a promise and it is hard to tell the truth. It can also be hard to be honest. We might want to be but it is often easier not to be. There are times we need help to be our better selves!

Take the case of a maths exam at school. Your teacher does not hand out the test paper and then turn around and say “Okay kids, I’m going out to play ping pong for a couple of hours. Good luck!” For most of us, the temptation to break the trust in that situation would be hard. It’s not very likely that we would all sit quietly and get on with the test. If we don’t know the answer, we might look at our notes or the textbook, or ask a friend for help. That’s why the teacher stays in the room, and walks up and down the aisle between the desks, peering over your shoulders, to make sure that nobody is cheating.

Of course, in a class of children there will always be some who are remarkably honest and trustworthy at all times and will never cheat. There will also always be some who are the complete opposite. The bulk of us, though, are somewhere in the middle, wanting to be a good person and most of the time managing it.

But while you might accept this kind of surveillance as helpful in an exam, you would not be so happy if it went on in other places. Imagine if at home your parents sat in your room and watched you do your homework, or employed someone to watch you.

Or even worse, without your knowledge stood listening at the door, or set up a secret camera filming you, or put a device inside your computer or your phone so they could know what you were saying to your friends, or what you were reading. That would send you mad. It might send your parents mad too.

People can’t live like this. Not in families, not in work places, and not in countries who are friends. There has to be trust. We depend on trust, to live together freely. Without trust, it is as though we are locked inside that classroom, bent over our desks, hearing the teacher’s footsteps pacing up and down the aisles.

**Chains of trust**

Love and trust often go together. We want to be able to trust the people we love. But we also want to be able to trust the people we don’t love - and who don’t love us!

If we couldn’t, none of us would get up in the morning, go down to the station and get on the train to school or work. We trust the people that drive the trains and we trust the people that check that the trains are safe. We don’t know how to drive a train, we don’t know how to fix them. We give power to the government and trust the government to do this for us, to make sure that the people who drive the trains and check that the trains are safe are doing a good job. When we live together in groups, large and small, we have to operate on a chain of trust.

In my book *The Golden Day* the parents trust the school, the school trusts the teacher, the children trust the teacher, the teacher trusts the children and the teacher trusts the poet. That’s a lot of trust, but sadly, if you read the book, you will see that not everybody is to be trusted.

Children in particular depend on trust. They are small, they are just beginning in the world. If you hold out your hand to a small child, they will automatically put their tiny hand in yours. Children have no choice but to trust. They cannot survive if their elders do not look after them. So the obligation on all adults is enormous, it is at the very heart of life. That is why the fairy tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* is so disturbing, because the wolf abuses the natural trust that a small child must feel for her grandmother, that she will care for her and keep her safe.

After all, it is one thing for the teacher in *The Golden Day* to choose to trust the poet, but she also chooses to trust him on behalf of the children in her class who have not been alive long enough to know who is or isn’t to be trusted. And even if they can make such a judgment, as the character Icara seems to, because she is a child she has no power to do anything about it.

**Too much trust**

If you have read Lemony Snicket’s wonderful *Series of Unfortunate Events* you will remember the character Mr Poe. He is the appointed guardian of the three Baudelaire children, who have an evil and implacable enemy, Count Olaf.

Time and time again Mr Poe is fooled by Count Olaf in his various disguises, and hands the children over to his care. The children, like Icara in *The Golden Day,*  know exactly the danger they are in, and they repeatedly tell Mr Poe and beg him not to leave them with him. But Mr Poe likes to think of himself as a good person, with a positive trusting nature, and reprimands the children for their cynicism. In any case, he’s a busy man, and has a lot of other things to think about.

Mr Poe is very funny character and often makes me laugh out loud. But in a way Mr Poe is almost as terrifying and immoral as the wicked Count Olaf himself. Mr Poe is a person who refuses to see things as they really are because he would prefer bad things not to be true. So he turns his face from the truth of the situation and it is the children who suffer for it.

**Think and Hope**

Loss of trust is a sad thing. The children in *The Golden Day* become sad as they grow older and understand what has happened. They are sad for themselves, and for their teacher.

But it’s not a choice between trusting everyone or trusting nobody. As we grow older, we understand more how to judge people as to whether they can be trusted. We use our powers of observation and our experience and intelligence to decide if we should trust someone or not. And we cannot expect others to blindly trust us either. We have to show ourselves to be trustworthy.

We need to keep hoping that we can trust - we need to hope and trust and love to survive. But we also need to think. If someone lies to us, or betrays us, we can feel angry with the person who has fooled us. But we have to stop and think too, why were we able to be fooled? Why did we believe the lies we were told? We are the other half of the story. Why did we trust so much? Was it because we stopped thinking?

Thinking is hard. It can be complicated. Each time you have a thought, it’s followed by another one, and another and another, and you have to think again and again. But that does not mean that life is a dark road with no solution. Part of our responsibility to ourselves and each other as we grow up is to think very hard about the truth. We have to keep our minds open, but not find answers that are too easy. Sometimes we will make mistakes, and trust people that should not be trusted. Sometimes we will not be trustworthy ourselves, and we will let people down. But we have to keep thinking.

In Alexandre Dumas’ wonderful adventure story *The Count of Monte Cristo* ends with the sentence: *All human wisdom is contained in these two words, 'Wait and Hope’.*

I would change those final words, just a little. I would say:

*‘Think and Hope!’*