



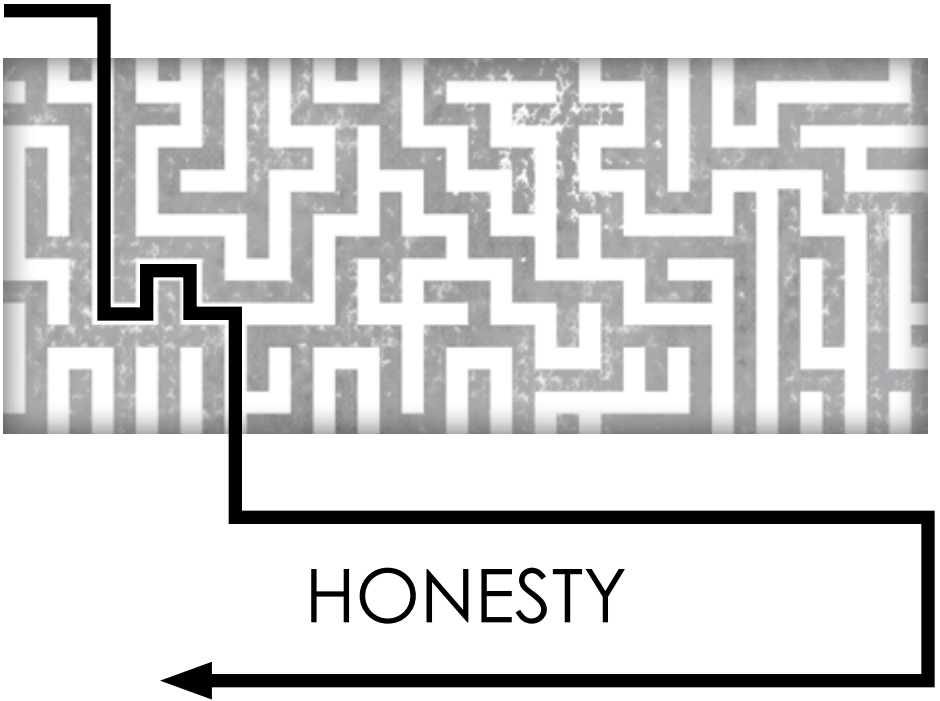
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# Chapter 1

“Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable.  
Be honest and transparent anyway.”

– *Mother Theresa*



## Game Over

Sometimes I think kids today face more pressures than any generation before ours. If you want to be successful at school, get into a good college, or get a scholarship to a good college, you have to make good grades, get involved in after-school activities, possibly take honors classes, make high scores on standardized tests, and volunteer for community service. It gets kind of crazy, feeling like you have to be good at everything – not just one or two things. And, once you get involved in all of these activities, it's hard to pull back or quit – even when you start to hate it.

I worry that all this focus on success is creating a kind of pressure that is unhealthy, especially when it comes to morals and character. Why? Because we're so busy that we do whatever it takes to get ahead. We take on the attitude that anything is okay if "the ends justify the means" and the end is...what? Success as defined by our classmates, our teachers, our school, our parents, but not by us.

I think we should stop, take a breath, and re-evaluate. I know I'm just a teenager, but I already get that life is short; we shouldn't waste our time trying to be the best at everything. Instead, we should try to get involved in things that excite us and mean something to us. Kids should not have to be part of everything in order to be successful. We should try lots of things and then focus on what really interests us. Our passion will lead us to success.

I learned this the hard way. I played competitive sports throughout elementary and middle school. Soccer and basketball were my primary sports. And to be competitive, I played year-round; during my schools' off-seasons, I played in a league called the AAU. By the end of middle school, basketball had become my focus, so when I started a new school in ninth grade, I did what I had always done – played basketball. I was a better-than-average guard, known as a good shooter – three pointers were my strength. Coaches liked that and my offensive play. But on defense, well, I had some weaknesses. Speed was not my best asset.

By the time I was a sophomore, my average day consisted of going to bed at one o'clock in the morning after studying and doing home-

work all night, and then getting up at five o'clock to go to basketball workouts. With only four hours of sleep behind me, I was already exhausted as I headed to my workouts (which we called agilities) before sunrise. I started saying to myself, "Why am I doing this?" That thought was kind of new for me. I had never questioned workouts before.

During 90 minutes of jump rope, sprints, squats, wall sits, hurdles, and more exercises to improve speed (already my weakness), the fastest girl on the team – who didn't really have to do any of this to beat everyone down the court – was next to me. Each day, when I walked into the gym, I began to realize that no matter how hard I tried or how hard she didn't, I'd never be as fast as she was. I was now in a bigger league in a big city and facing a whole new kind of competition. If this was about speed alone, she was going to win my spot.

No matter how hot or cold it was outside, I would feel perspiration running down my legs, leaving puddles when I sat on the gym floor.

After the workouts were over, I was like a zombie, but I still had seven hours of school ahead of me. Throughout the day, I couldn't keep my head up in class. I missed important notes, my body ached, and worst of all, I couldn't get my coach's voice out of my mind. I kept hearing, "You are too slow!" In my head, I answered back, "So what! I don't care!"

On one particular day, when I had to take a history test after lunch, I was so tired that I couldn't concentrate. The questions didn't make sense. I was so ready to be done that I made up answers that at least sounded reasonable. At the end, I knew I had done poorly on my exam and it would hurt my grade in the course – just one more thing to worry about.

Between classes, I was walking with a friend who was telling me about some problem she had with her boyfriend or her mom or something, but I was so tired I couldn't even focus. I knew she could tell that I wasn't really paying attention to her, but I couldn't help it. Since friends mean everything to me, it killed me that I wasn't there for her. I was in my own little world, too worried about sports and grades and friends and a hundred other things, and too tired to think about it all.

Finally the day was over, but only the school day. I still had a two-hour AAU basketball practice.

At practice, we started with stretching and more running. Sure

enough, my coach ran over and laid it on me. “You’re too slow! You gotta be quicker!” This from a guy who was forty-five pounds overweight and couldn’t run a mile to save his life. I tried to muster all the energy I had left, but I didn’t really get any faster. The ridicule continued, and although I was boiling with rage inside, I stayed and took his taunts. I didn’t walk out the door or say, “So what! I don’t care!” All I did was apologize and say I would get better

Then we went into drills: three-man weave and shooting practice. The coach said he didn’t approve of our level of play, so he made us do a running drill. Each person on the team had to shoot two free throws; if someone missed, we had to run a sprint. I think we ran nineteen sprints in that practice – and that’s before the running we had to do at the end of the session.

When it was time to scrimmage, I completely froze. I dreaded this part, knowing I would be the one to mess up. Plus, the girls around me were sweating more than I could drink. For two hours, a dozen slimy, sweating girls bumped up against each other. When I was little I didn’t think about it. Now, something had changed. To me, it seemed disgusting.

Once we started playing, I was nervous. My hands were dripping wet and, of course, I messed up and turned the ball over. The other team scored off my mistake. The coach chewed me out in front of everyone. And, once again, I wondered, “Why am I here? What good is this doing me?”

I knew in my heart that if I continued to play on this team, my self-confidence would be gone by the end of the season. I sat on the bench during games praying that I wouldn’t have to go in; my nerves took over my body. I felt sick to my stomach and broke out in a sweat. If the coach called my name to go in, I started to shake all over. I desperately wanted to tough it out, but I didn’t know that I could.

For me, hanging in there when you feel like quitting requires believing in what you’re doing. To put up with the yelling and the pain and the hardship, it had to mean something... to me. But, at that point, basketball had lost its meaning.

After practice was over, I went home to face three hours of homework: writing a paper, doing forty-five math problems, completing four Spanish workbook pages, and studying for a biology quiz. It was a long

list because the night before I had fallen asleep after practice, and now the homework was starting to stack up. I knew I wouldn't get to bed until after midnight. And the next day, I was supposed to wake up and do it all over again. Thanks, but no thanks. I decided that I was done.

The hardest part came next. I had to tell my parents I wanted to quit basketball. I had been playing for seven years, and they had invested a lot of time and money in it. I didn't want to do it anymore. I was miserable, and I had to figure out a way to convince them that quitting was the right thing to do.

That night, after dinner, I started talking to my mom and dancing around the subject. I finally just told her: I want to quit basketball. She called my dad in to talk with both of us. I was nervous. I explained that I had completely lost my love for the game. It was no fun anymore. My desire was gone.

At first my parents weren't happy; in simple terms they told me to suck it up. They said I had an obligation. They wanted me to be loyal to the school, my coaches, and my teammates. I tried to explain that I needed to be loyal to myself first – before I tried to please others.

They were quiet then. They started to really hear me. I told them that I felt like a constant disappointment when I was playing basketball. When I was younger, I had felt confident on the court, but now the game was drowning me. No matter how many people might be upset, I had to do this for myself. Then my dad said, "If this is how it makes you feel and you don't love the game anymore, there's no sense in playing."

I breathed a sigh of relief; I think they understood that while I loved recreational sports as a kid, I did not have the passion for the level of competition involved in high school. There were just too many other things I wanted to do. I had friends who still loved the game and were driven to go through the agilities and the extra practices. They thrived on the "thrill of victory," which was great for them but not me. So, as hard as it was, I was honest with my parents. Even though it took a while, they accepted what I wanted and supported me and my decision. I slept better that night than I had in weeks.

Next I worked up the courage to tell my coaches of my decision to quit. I met with each and finally got the words out: that I just could not find the drive to do what they and my teammates deserved. Believe it or

not, all went better than expected. No yelling. No scenes. Each listened and reacted respectfully and thoughtfully. My high school coach, who saw me every day in the hallways, really cared about me as person, not just a player and was very understanding.

Every day I am so glad that I made the decision to quit. I have never looked back. Regardless of the reactions from other people, I still believe you have to stand up for yourself. No one else is going to do that for you.

What came next? I had heard a lot about my school's community service and peer leadership programs. In the back of my mind I always thought I'd like to get involved. After thinking it over for a few months, I applied to be a school peer leader. That was halfway through my sophomore year – and a big change for me. People who thought they knew me – and knew me only as an athlete – were seeing something new.

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“Regardless of the reactions from other people, I still believe you have to stand up for yourself. No one else is going to do that for you.”

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Peer leaders helped new students adjust to school. We showed them the ropes and gave them the opportunity to meet new people. I liked doing this; it felt natural to me. Later, I became a retreat leader, as well. I learned to play the guitar and joined the chorus – things I could do because I had the time to spend on the activities I really enjoyed much more than

competitive sports. It all started because I followed my instincts and tried out for something that seemed genuinely interesting to me, not because I was working hard at playing politics and trying to compete with other kids. I didn't feel pressure to rise through the ranks. I don't think I even realized it at first, but these leadership positions helped me rebuild my confidence. Little by little, that feeling of being worthless was fading away; I felt that I had a purpose.

As a retreat leader and peer leader, I could hardly wait for our weekly meetings. Though it was a lot of work, to me it was fun and meaningful, just like competitive athletics may be fun and meaningful for someone else.

I also learned that my coaches, my teachers, and my parents didn't want me to be involved in something that didn't mean anything to me. I thought I was performing for them. They thought I liked what I was doing. And by being honest, I cleared the air and no one was disappointed.

I accomplished more for myself in three months of service work and peer leadership than I did in two years of high school basketball. I didn't do it to build my résumé or impress my parents or win awards. This work honored who I was, not what somebody else wanted me to be. I think rewards come if you find something that fits you, that you're good at, that you want to do. And I don't think you can leave those choices up to someone else. Game over.

## Discussion/Self-Reflection Questions

1. In the chapter, Chandler says, “Kids face more pressures than any generation before ours.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
2. Do you believe young people can have a mid-life crisis in high school? Explain.
3. The chapter begins with this quote from Mother Theresa: “Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway.” What does it mean to be vulnerable? Is it sometimes hard to be honest?
4. What type of pressures do you feel in your own life? What are some ways that you can deal with stress in a healthy way?
5. Chandler talks about finding her passion. What are you passionate about; what excites you and means something to you?

6. What does it mean to be honest with yourself? Why is this important?
  
7. Chandler talks about her peer leadership and service program involvement and shares that it just felt right to her. What tells you that something is right for you? How do you know?
  
8. Do you agree with Chandler that it's okay to quit something if you're unhappy or doing it for the wrong reasons? Explain. Have you had this situation in your own life? How did you deal with it? Are there things you wish you would have done differently? Explain.
  
9. Chandler believes that our morals and character are in danger and says that oftentimes students take on the attitude that anything is okay if "the end justifies the means." Do you believe that anything is okay if "the end justifies the means?" Explain. Where do you draw the line? What are some ways you can keep from crossing the line?
  
10. Chandler shares that it's important to please yourself before pleasing others and to be loyal to yourself first. What does this mean? What do you think about that statement? What are some things you can do to make sure that you are being loyal to yourself? What is your "checklist" for knowing that you are being loyal to who you are?

# Journaling Activity

After reading the story related to the character trait of honesty, define the trait in your own words in the space below:

What key messages or lessons did you take away from the story about honesty?

The story infers that being honest with one's strengths, weaknesses, and desires leads to success. What is your personal definition of success? Are you living up to your definition? Explain.

Chandler writes that she "slept better that night than I had in weeks" when she finally told her parents of her decision to quit basketball and be honest with herself. What helps you or would help you sleep better at night?

## About the Author

Chandler DeWitt is currently a freshman in college majoring in communications. In her free time, she enjoys playing the guitar, writing, and hanging out with friends.

When she was six years old, her parents founded CWK Network, Inc., Connect with Kids – a multimedia education company that produces Emmy® award-winning television programs and research-based curricula on character and life skills. The U.S. Department of Education has named CWK to its What Works Clearinghouse and describes Connect with Kids as an effective program that improves behavior and attitudes.

Chandler says, “Ever since I can remember, I was the test audience for the latest television program or educational video on the life skill or character trait of the month. Through their work, my parents...have read a lot of research and interviewed hundreds of kids and parents about the pressures that kids face and the choices they make, especially when it comes to drugs, alcohol, sex, the Internet, bullying, and all the other things we hear about in school. I used to roll my eyes and moan when my mom would tell me another one of these stories, but to be honest, I was listening...and more than some of them made me think about things a little differently.”

After she graduated from high school, Chandler’s parents asked her to consider writing a book about some of the more difficult personal choices she and other teens have to make. They wanted to publish a book from a teenager’s perspective – something authentic with an honest point of view. *Inside Out: Real Stories about the Inner Choices That Shape Our Lives* is the result of that effort.

## Inside Out

We are all the sum total of our experiences – the stories and choices that change our lives. These are mostly mine, mixed in with some from other kids. The names and places (and some of the details) have been changed to protect those involved. But every story is based on something that really happened to me or to someone else.

There's nothing earth-shattering. No secret revelations or formulas. Instead, this is a book about the real lives of teenagers and the day-to-day independent decisions we all have to make. I hope that I've said something here about being true to yourself and not conforming to what others want of you. And I hope it will help us all take our choices a little more seriously and realize that what we do today can change our lives tomorrow.

This may be bold but I think it's time for us to come together as a generation and stop the intense competition. Grades are important, going to a good college matters, material success is nice. But nothing means anything if we don't know who we are at our core. Because as I am learning...that's what success is: feeling comfortable about who we are, having values that we can hold on to in both good and bad times, and enjoying the things in life that matter most of all.



– Chandler DeWitt