It's dark, cold, and unfamiliar. My stomach aches and my heart races as I'm about to do something that I would never dream of doing by myself. "Hurry!" says my friend's mom, as she opens the door into the dark hallway.

When I was 10 years old, my friend's parent instructed me to sneak into a movie through the side entrance. From a young age I knew that breaking the law was wrong, but at the same time, I knew that disobeying an adult was wrong as well. I was caught between two forces, an adult and my conscience.

Even though I was 10 at the time, integrity held the same meaning as it does now. I believe the word "Today" in the prompt is unnecessary because integrity is timeless. The meaning of integrity doesn't change with age or societies' changes. Integrity means having an objective inner sense of right and wrong—a conscience—and holding true to it, in spite of any rationalization to do otherwise.

My friends at school said the movie was hilarious, so I was excited to see it. In an effort to rationalize what I knew was wrong, I thought, "We probably won't get caught," and "An adult is telling me to do it." Yet, I still couldn't trick my brain into believing these rationalizations justified sneaking into the movie. We were not stealing in the material sense. But it was stealing, in that we gained, through deception, something to which we had no free right . Stealing, in any sense, is unethical, and I knew it.

If we think of integrity on an ethical spectrum, and place integrity on one end, rationalization would be on the opposite end. We rationalize in order to justify our actions when they are at odds with our conscience. Most people have a conscience. However, the more we rationalize, the more we lose our objectivity. A tendency to rationalize can quickly become

habitual to the point where one becomes ethically blind. We are all guilty to some extent of some type of rationalization. No one's integrity is pure. Those people with the strongest integrity will not deny their conscience, even in cases when they have betrayed it.

We rationalize in order to selfishly mute the internal voice of our conscience. Having integrity makes one question one's rationalizations. Instead of thinking only of themselves, people with integrity will think beyond themselves and consider the situation as a whole, to include who will be affected and what moral principles are at stake. One does not simply have or not have integrity; their degree of integrity falls somewhere on the spectrum between rationalism and integrity.

We took our seats in the theater. The movie was great, but I don't think I enjoyed it as much as the others. Throughout the movie I kept thinking, "Was this worth it?" and "Why did I do this?"

Integrity is both learned and tested. I feel fortunate that I was taught to know right from wrong. In this case, my integrity was tested, and I failed. I could argue that I was just obeying an adult, and I probably couldn't do anything to prevent it; however, that night, I ignored my conscience and went along with what everyone else was doing. I gave into peer pressure and practiced poor integrity. But this does not make me a bad person, nor does it mean I do not have integrity. The fact that I knew what I was doing was wrong shows my integrity tried to get me to do what was ethically correct. I learned from this experience, and my degree of integrity may have ultimately increased due to the guilt my conscience imposed upon me.

I returned home that night, feeling bad for what I had done. Now, every time my integrity is put to the test, I think back on that moment and remember the guilty feeling I got when I

ignored my conscience. The mother that helped me sneak into the theater thought she was teaching me how to beat the system. Although, from her absence of integrity, I was able to better understand its true meaning.