The Unshakeable Witness: Whitaker Chambers and Integrity

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can Whittaker Chambers’ dedication to integrity inspire you to act with more integrity in your own life?

- **Virtue: Integrity**

- **Definition** – Integrity is personal consistency in moral goodness.

- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about the life and actions of Whittaker Chambers. They will explore how his actions embodied the principle of integrity, and through his example, they will learn how they can live with integrity in their own lives.

- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Whittaker Chambers’ actions throughout his life
  - Students will understand how acting with integrity can affect their purpose and identity
  - Students will apply this knowledge to the pursuit of integrity in their own lives.

- **Background**
  - Communism emerged as a philosophy in the mid-nineteenth century with the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. Its popularity grew rapidly with the massive cultural and political shifts in Europe which occurred throughout the century. With the Russian Revolution in 1917, the communist philosophy found a home. Seeking to spread its ideology and undermine potential threats, the Soviet Russia established a massive espionage network. In the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, much of this network was amongst the intellectual elite in New York and Washington D.C. Two members of this circle were Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss. In the aftermath of the Second World War, tensions were building between the Soviet Union and the United States, and communists began to be viewed as a credible threat to the security of the nation. In this atmosphere, government officials who associated with the Communist Party began to be persecuted. One of these men was Alger Hiss. His accuser was Whittaker Chambers.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Communist
  - Philosophy
  - Espionage
  - Ideology
  - Atmosphere
  - Communist Party
  - Communist Manifesto
  - Throes
  - Regime
  - Contemporaries
  - Inevitability
  - Conviction
  - Mentality
  - Testify
  - Vehemently
  - Perjury
  - Reputation
  - Implicate

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
Observation Questions
  - What was Whittaker Chambers’ testimony during the Alger Hiss trial?
  - How are Whittaker Chambers’ actions consistent with the virtue of integrity?

Discussion Questions
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

Additional Resources
Handout A: The Unshakeable Witness: Whittaker Chambers and Integrity

Background:

Communism emerged as a philosophy in the mid-nineteenth century with the publication of The Communist Manifesto in 1848. Its popularity grew rapidly with the massive cultural and political shifts in Europe which occurred throughout the century. With the Russian Revolution in 1917, the communist philosophy found a home. Seeking to spread its ideology and undermine potential threats, the Soviet Russia established a massive espionage network. In the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, much of this network was amongst the intellectual elite in New York and Washington D.C. Two members of this circle were Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss. In the aftermath of the Second World War, tensions were building between the Soviet Union and the United States, and communists began to be viewed as a credible threat to the security of the nation. In this atmosphere, government officials who associated with the Communist Party began to be persecuted. One of these men was Alger Hiss. His accuser was Whittaker Chambers.

Narrative:

Whittaker Chambers was born in 1901 to a middle class family. He grew up primarily in New York, and after graduating from high school in 1919, Chambers worked various odd jobs before finally deciding to attend Williams College. He was only there a very short time before transferring to Columbia University. Chambers thrived in the intellectual atmosphere of Columbia. He began to write extensively and many of his friends believed he was destined to become a great poet.

While attending Columbia, he also began to become more and more convicted in the ideas of communism. Chambers, as well as many intellectuals at the time, believed that Western civilization as it had existed was in the throes of death. He believed that there was inevitability to the progress of history. The old regime in the world was falling, and Chambers and his contemporaries believed that communism would replace it.

Chambers left Columbia after his junior year with the express purpose of joining the Communist Party. Chambers claimed he was drawn to communism by the, “problem of war.” On a visit to Europe, he saw the chaos that had sprung up in the aftermath of the First World War. He believed that this chaos was the precursor to an eventual worldwide communist revolution. In 1925, he became clear in his convictions and decided that he needed not only to believe in them, but to act.

Chambers joined the Communist Party and began to write for the Daily Worker, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party in the United States. He wrote many articles and short stories that promoted the communist worldview. Eventually he was recruited into the ranks of the Communist Underground, a part of the party that actively participated in espionage against the United States for the Soviet Union.

As a member of the Underground, Chambers primarily worked as a courier. He would take files given to him from officials in the government and carry them to soviet contacts who would send them back to Moscow. He primarily worked between Washington D.C. and New York City. It was in this capacity that he became involved with Alger Hiss. The two worked close enough together to develop a mutual liking and friendship with one another, a friendship that would be greatly tested in time.

After some time, however, Chambers’ belief in the communist message began to wane. His opinions began to change rapidly as he heard stories about the Great Purge committed by Stalin in the mid-1930s. This, as well as hearing reports of fellow associates being killed or made to “disappear”, made him doubt the “ends justify the means” mentality that the Communist Party supported. Chambers knew it was time to leave.

In his book, Witness, Chambers says of his departure, “Two things made that break and that flight possible. One was the devotion of my wife—devotion of a kind that asks only danger, trial and great hazard to prove its force. The other was a faith that, if I turned away from evil and sought good, I would not fail; but whether or not I failed, that was what I was meant to do, at all costs, without measuring of consequences.” Chambers recognized the
dangers on hand, but knew that to stay with the Communist Party could mean death for him and his family. He had to risk the break.

Chambers was able to break with the Communist Party in 1938, and for ten years his life was more or less tranquil. He began working at *Time* magazine as a writer and editor and excelled. Chambers tried to put his past behind him. Many of those he had worked with in the Communist Party were his friends and he had no desire to see them in prison.

Troubled by the growing evil of the Stalinist Soviet Union, however, he felt he had to act. He contacted the federal government about his past associates a few times, but nothing came of it. That was until 1948, when he was called to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

While testifying before this committee, Chambers made the claim that Alger Hiss was a communist who had actively participated in espionage against the United States. This was a bold claim. Hiss was a high-ranking government official who was well respected within the administration of Harry Truman.

Hiss vehemently denied the accusations. He stated that he had never been a communist, nor had he ever participated in any espionage activities. He even went so far as to deny that he knew Whittaker Chambers. He and his defense team also attacked Chambers' character. They brought up pieces he wrote in college to show that his own views and trustworthiness were questionable. In order to prove his case, Chambers had to incriminate himself. He produced a set of papers and microfilm, including several hand-written notes from Hiss that he had stashed away while they worked together and presented them to the committee.

These documents blew the Hiss case apart. Not only did they implicate him in espionage, but they proved that he had lied while under oath. Although the statute of limitations had passed for the espionage case, Hiss would be brought up on the charge of perjury and convicted.

Whittaker Chambers' journey to the witness stand was one of great integrity. He saw the evils of the Communist Party, and while he had made many friends and his life there, he knew he had to leave. It was these friends that he would, in the end, have to turn against in order to show the world of the dangers they posed. Whittaker Chambers gave up his own reputation and position for the sake of honesty.

In a letter to his children, Chambers outlined his reasoning in the case. He stated on the trial, "Two faiths were on trial. Human societies, like human being, live by faith and die when faith dies. At issue in the Hiss Case was the question whether this sick society, which we call Western civilization, could in its extremity still cast up a man whose faith in it was so great that he would voluntarily abandon those things which men hold good, including life, to defend it. At issue was the question whether this man's faith could prevail against a man whose equal faith it was that this society is sick beyond saving, and that mercy itself pleads for its swift extinction and replacement by another...the two irreconcilable faiths of our time—Communism and Freedom—came to grips in the persons of two conscious and resolute men." Whittaker Chambers was that man, and through his actions, he helped advance the cause of freedom.