

Why Character Matters by Thomas Lickona

I was a punk before I came to this school. I used to make little kids cry. When I met Mrs. Brown, I changed. I'm not a punk anymore, because Mrs. Brown taught me character. Drew, 6th Grader

Nothing is more important for the public weal than to train up youth in wisdom and virtue. Ben Franklin

Why does character matter?

A headmaster remembers that above the door to the main classroom building where he went to school as a boy, the following words were engraved:

Be careful of your thoughts,
for your thoughts become your words.
Be careful of your words,
for your words become your deeds.
Be careful of your deeds,
for your deeds become your habits.
Be careful of your habits,
for your habits become your character.
Be careful of your character,
for your character becomes your destiny.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said it simply: "Character is destiny." Character shapes the destiny of an individual person. It shapes the destiny of a whole society. "Within the character of the citizen," Cicero said, "lies the welfare of the nation."

Transmitting values, in the words of the essayist Lance Morrow, is the work of civilization. A glance at history reminds us that civilizations do not flourish forever. They rise, and they fall. They fall when the moral core deteriorates – when a society fails to pass on its core virtues, its strengths of character, to the next generation. The historian Arnold Toynbee observed: "Out of 21 notable civilizations, 19 perished not by conquest from without but by moral decay from within."

More than a century ago in a lecture at Harvard University, Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted, "Character is higher than intellect." Writes the psychiatrist Frank Pittman: "The stability of our lives depends on our character. It is character, not passion, that keeps marriages together long enough to do their work of raising children into mature, responsible, productive citizens. In this imperfect world, it is character that enables people to survive, to endure, and to transcend their misfortunes." "To do well," Stephen Covey says, "you must do good. And to do good, you must first be good."

All of us who are parents naturally want our children to be successful. But we know in our bones that it's their character – their honesty, sense of responsibility, kindness, perseverance in the face of difficulty, courage in the face of danger or social pressure – that makes them human. If they lack these, brains and success don't count for much. The novelist Walker Percy once said, "Some people get all A's but flunk life." In living a life well, as a proverb puts it, "An ounce of character is worth a pound of intelligence."

As a society, we are beginning to recover this age-old wisdom. Schools are taking up the work of character education. We have a renewed concern about the character of our government and corporate leaders, having learned painfully that expertise without ethics is a menace to society. Best-selling books such as *Emotional Intelligence*,¹ *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*,² and *The Book of Virtues*³ are essentially reflections on character and its importance in our individual and collective lives. Life, such writings remind us, is a moral and spiritual journey for which we need a reliable inner compass.

The Right Stuff

Character is having "the right stuff." As parents and educators, we labor to teach kids this – that it's what's inside that counts.

We know good character when we see it. Bob Wieland is a double amputee. After he lost both of his legs in a Vietnam mine explosion, he learned to walk on his hands. On September 8, 1982, he left his California home and set out on a journey – to walk across America on his hands. He got thousands of people to sponsor his trip, with the proceeds going to alleviate hunger in this country and around the world. It took him three years, eight months, and nearly 5 million hand steps to reach his destination of Washington, D. C. When he got there, he said: "I wanted to show that through faith in God and dedication, there's nothing a person can't achieve."

For the past two decades, images of character have come in abundance from the Langley, Washington-based Giraffe Project (www.giraffe.org). This project is dedicated to finding and honoring "human giraffes" – people sticking out their necks for the common good. Co-directors Ann Medlock and John Graham have created a character education curriculum around these everyday heroes. Students read giraffe stories, find and tell stories about giraffes in their own school or community, and then are challenged to become giraffes themselves by sticking their necks out to make a difference. Over the past 20 years, the Giraffe Project has built a bank of more than a thousand stories of giraffes of all ages. Here are just three:

Every payday for more than a quarter of a century, the late Michael Greenburg bought three pairs of gloves. On the coldest days of winter, he headed for the toughest parts of town and talked street people into accepting them. He helped the homeless by doing what he could – over and over again.

Twelve-year-old Craig Kielburger in Toronto read about the murder of a Pakistani child who had spoken out against child slavery in his country. Craig started "Free the Children," a movement dedicated to ending slavery worldwide. He raised money, spoke out, and even went on a global fact-finding trip. After the media picked up his story, several major companies pledged not to buy products made by child labor.

British doctor Alice Stewart has quietly done a lifetime of painstaking research on the effects of radiation. One of her many discoveries was that a single X-ray of a fetus could double the risk of childhood cancer. Thanks to her, thousands of children's lives have been spared. She has ruffled a lot of feathers in medicine and industry but continues her research on public health hazards.⁴

These human giraffes have compassion and courage, but they also have another quality: They find fulfillment and even joy in their work. It feels good to do good. Some years ago, the PBS talk show host Dennis Wholey edited a book titled *Are You Happy?* – a question he put to 40 people, half famous, half not.⁵ In every case, people cited as the source of their greatest happiness the times they made a positive contribution to the lives of others. The world tells our children that happiness is to be found in sexual pleasure, beauty, popularity, wealth, power, or unending good health. They need to learn what Aristotle taught ages ago: A fulfilling life is a life of virtue. You can't be happy unless you're good.

The Content of Our Character

In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. said he dreamed of the day when all Americans "will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

The content of good character is virtue. Virtues – such as honesty, justice, courage, and compassion – are dispositions to behave in a morally good way. They are objectively good human qualities, good for us whether we know it or not. They are affirmed by societies and religions around the world. Because they are intrinsically good, they have a claim on our conscience. Virtues transcend time and culture (although their cultural expression may vary); justice and kindness, for example, will always and everywhere be virtues, regardless of how many people exhibit them.

We can assert that virtues are objectively good – not subjective preferences like taste in music or clothes – because they meet certain ethical criteria:

- They define what it means to be human. We are more fully human when we act virtuously – generously rather than selfishly, justly rather than unjustly, honestly rather than deceitfully.
- Virtues promote the happiness and well-being of the individual person.
- They serve the common good, making it possible for us to live and work in community.
- They meet the classical ethical tests of reversibility (would you like to be treated this way?) and universalizability (would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?)

Ten Essential Virtues

What virtues are most important for strong character?

The ancient Greeks named four. They considered *wisdom* to be the master virtue, the one that directs all the others. Wisdom is good judgment. It enables us to make reasoned decisions that are both good for us and good for others. Wisdom tells us how to put the other virtues into practice – when to act, how to act, and how to balance different virtues when they conflict (as they do, for example, when telling the honest truth might hurt someone's feelings). Wisdom enables us to discern correctly, to judge what is truly important in life, and to set priorities.

The second virtue named by the Greeks is *justice*. Justice means respecting the rights of all persons. The Golden Rule, which directs us to treat other persons as we wish to be treated, is a principle of justice that can be found in cultures and religions around the world. Since we are persons ourselves, justice also includes self-respect, a proper regard for our own rights and dignity. Schools, in their character education efforts, often center on justice because it includes so many of the interpersonal virtues – civility, honesty, respect, responsibility, and tolerance (correctly understood not as approval of other people's beliefs or behaviors but as respect for their freedom of conscience as long as they do not violate the rights of others). A concern for justice – and the capacity for moral indignation in the face of injustice – inspires us to work as citizens to build a more just society and world.

A third, much-neglected virtue is *fortitude*. Fortitude enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulty. The right decision in life is often the hard one. One high school captures that truth in its motto: "Do the hard right instead of the easy wrong." A familiar maxim says, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Fortitude, as the educator James Stenson points out, is the inner toughness that enables us to overcome or withstand hardship, defeats, inconvenience, and pain. Courage, resilience, patience, perseverance, endurance, and a healthy self-confidence are all aspects of fortitude. Teen suicide has risen sharply in the past three decades; one reason may be that many young people are unprepared to deal with life's inevitable disappointments. We need to teach our children that we develop our character more through our sufferings than our successes, that setbacks can make us stronger if we don't give in to feeling sorry for ourselves.

The fourth virtue named by the Greeks is *self-control* (which they called "temperance"). Self-control is the ability to govern ourselves. It enables us to control our temper, regulate our sensual appetites and passions, and pursue even legitimate pleasures in moderation. It's the power to resist temptation. It enables us to wait – and to delay gratification in the service of higher and distant goals. An old saying recognizes the importance of self-control in the moral life: "Either we rule our desires, or our desires rule us." Reckless and criminal behavior flourish in the absence of self-control.

The Greeks covered a lot of the moral territory but by no means all of it. A fifth essential virtue is love. Love goes beyond justice; it gives more than fairness requires. Love is the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of another. A whole cluster of important human virtues – empathy, compassion, kindness, generosity, service, loyalty, patriotism (love of what is noble in one's country), and forgiveness – make up the virtue of love. In his book *With Love and Prayers*, F. Washington Jarvis writes: "Love – selfless love that expects nothing back – is the most powerful force in the universe. Its impact on both the giver and the receiver is incalculable."

Love is a demanding virtue. If we really took seriously the familiar injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself," says an essay on this virtue, would we not make every effort to avoid gossiping about others and calling attention to their faults, given how sensitive we are to such things said about us?

A *positive attitude* is a sixth essential virtue. If you have a negative attitude in life, you're a burden to yourself and others. If you have a positive attitude, you're an asset to yourself and others. The character strengths of hope, enthusiasm, flexibility, and a sense of humor are all part of a positive attitude. All of us, young and old, need to be reminded that our attitude is something we *choose*. "Most people," Abraham Lincoln said, "are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." Said Martha Washington: "I have learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances. We carry the seeds of the one or the other with us in our minds wherever we go."

Old-fashioned *hard work* is a seventh indispensable virtue. There is no substitute in life for work. "I challenge you," says the great basketball coach John Wooden, "to show me one single solitary individual who achieved his or her own personal greatness without lots of hard work."⁶ Hard work includes initiative, diligence, goal-setting, and resourcefulness.

An eighth essential virtue is *integrity*. Integrity is adhering to moral principle, being faithful to moral conscience, keeping our word, and standing up for what we believe. To have integrity is to be "whole," so that what we say and do in different situations is consistent rather than contradictory. Integrity is different from honesty, which tells the truth to others. Integrity is telling the truth to oneself.⁷ "The most dangerous form of deception," says author Josh Billings, "is self-deception." Self-deception enables us to do whatever we wish and find a reason to justify our actions.

Gratitude is a ninth essential virtue. "Gratitude, like love, is not a feeling but an act of the will," observes writer Anne Husted Burleigh. "We choose to be thankful, just as we choose to love." Gratitude is often described as the secret of a happy life. It reminds us that we all drink from wells we did not dig. It moves us to count our everyday blessings. Asked what was the biggest lesson he learned from drifting 21 days in a life raft lost in the Pacific, the war hero Eddie Rickenbacker answered: "That if you have all the fresh water you want to drink and all the food you want to eat, you ought never to complain about anything."

Humility, the final essential virtue, can be considered the foundation of the whole moral life. Humility is necessary for the acquisition of the other virtues because it makes us aware of our imperfections and leads us to try to become a better person. "Humility," writes the educator David Isaacs, "is recognizing both our inadequacies and abilities and pressing our abilities into service without attracting attention or expecting applause." "Half the harm that is done in the world," said T. S. Eliot, "is due to people who want to feel important." "Every virtue turns worthless," writes the philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand, "if pride creeps into it – which happens whenever we glory in our goodness." Without humility, observes another writer, we keep all our defects; they are only crusted over with pride, which conceals them from ourselves. Humility enables us to take responsibility for our faults and failings (rather than blaming someone else), apologize for them, and seek to make amends. The psychiatrist Louis Tartaglia, in his book *Flawless! The Ten Most Common Character Flaws and What You Can Do About Them*, says that in more than 20 years as a therapist he has found the most common character flaw to be "addiction to being right."⁸ ("Do you find yourself discussing disagreements," he asks, "long after they are finished, just to prove you were right?") The key to character growth in therapy and life, he says, is simply the humble willingness to change.

The life of virtue is obviously difficult. Nearly everyone falls short in the practice of these ten virtues at least some of the time. And yet most of us also possess these character strengths at least to some degree. It helps, I believe, to think of each of the essential virtues as a continuum and to focus on making progress in practicing that virtue more consistently.

Every person's character is a constellation of strengths and weaknesses. Some of us may be strong in justice and integrity, but short on patience and forgiveness. For others compassion may come naturally, while courage is difficult. Persons of admirable character may differ considerably from one another. Everyone, however, has room for improvement.

The Two Sides of Character

The ten essential virtues can be thought of as constituting what Aristotle called the life of right conduct. This life of character has two sides: right conduct in relation to other persons and right conduct in relation to oneself. The virtuous life includes other-oriented virtues such as fairness, honesty, gratitude, and love, but it also includes self-oriented virtues such as fortitude, self-control, humility, and putting forth our best effort rather than giving in to laziness.

These two kinds of virtue are connected. For example, we need to be in control of ourselves in order to do right by others. A man with an alcohol or gambling problem often finds his marriage and family life suffering. In a book of personal accounts of sexual addiction, a pastor told of once being in a hotel alone with time on his hands and deciding out of curiosity to visit one of the local strip joints – something he had never done before. He rationalized that he was doing it as a kind of sociological study. The next time he traveled, he went to another strip joint. Over time it became an obsession – and nearly wrecked his ministry and marriage.

What is the Current Condition of Our Character?

Without the virtues that make up good character, no individual can live happily, and no society can function effectively. Without good character, the human race does not make progress toward a world that respects the dignity and value of every person.

If this is true, we have no greater responsibility than to try to raise up people of character. How are we doing as a nation in fulfilling that responsibility?

The evidence is not encouraging.

The country got its first hard look in the mirror nearly a decade ago with the publication of *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*.⁹ Compiled by William Bennett, this index used hard statistics to measure societal changes between 1960 and the early 90s. During that 30-year period, the population grew 41%, the Gross Domestic Product tripled, and total spending by government at all levels increased more than five-fold.

During that same period, however, nearly every indicator of social stability and moral health shifted dramatically in a negative direction. Violent crime increased more than 500%. Teen suicide tripled. The divorce rate more than doubled – becoming the highest in the world. About 40% of children now go to sleep in homes where their fathers do not live; most divorced fathers pay no child support. Fatherlessness is now the leading predictor of nearly every childhood pathology.¹⁰

Between 1960 and 1991, births to unmarried mothers increased more than 400%. They continue to rise; one of three babies is now born out of wedlock, compared to one of 20 in 1960. The percentage of children living in poverty declined briefly during the 1960s but between 1970 and the early 90s increased 40%. More than one in five children now lives in poverty. Since the Supreme Court's 1973 legalization of abortion, there have been more than 40 million abortions in the U. S. – one about every 20 seconds. U. S. teens have the highest abortion rate in the developed world.

Average television viewing per household rose from 5:06 hours in 1960 to more than 7 hours in 1992 and continues to climb. The average teen now spends less than two hours a week reading and more than 20 hours a week watching TV. Between 1960 and 1993, test scores for all students on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) dropped 73 points.

2002 Report Card on American Youth Ethics

More recent data, equally troubling, come from other sources. One is the "2002 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth," issued by the California-based Josephson Institute for Ethics (www.josephsoninstitute.org). First published in 1992, this bi-annual Report Card is based on a national survey of thousands of high school students (more than 12,000 in the 2002 sample). Here are some of the 2002 findings:

- Three of four students admitted to cheating on an exam in school during the past year.
- Nearly 4 in 10 students said they had stolen something from a store during the past year.
- Nearly 4 in 10 said they "would lie to get a good job."

In the 2000 edition of *Who's Who Among American High School Students*; 80% of the students selected – considered the best and the brightest of the nation's youth – admitted to cheating in school, the highest percentage in the 29-year history of the survey. Most said they considered it no big deal. Research reported by Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity indicates that on most college campuses, over 75% of students admit to some cheating.¹¹ More than a third of college students told a 1999 U. S. News and World Report survey that they would steal from an employer (only 6% of those over 45 said they would do so).

Paradoxically, despite high levels of self-reported dishonesty, 76% of all students in the 2002 Josephson survey had high "ethical self-esteem" – agreeing with the statement, "When it comes to doing what is right, I am better than most people I know." Nearly 8 in 10 agreed that "it's not worth it to lie or cheat because it hurts your character." If character is defined as moral values in action, it is clearly not measured by self-opinion or mere espousal of high ideals.

Character in the Face of Temptation: The Lost Wallet Experiment

Our character determines how we act when we think we've invisible to others. Or as an old saying has it, "Character is what you do when nobody's looking."

A few years ago, a simple experiment gave people in countries around the world a chance to reveal their character when they thought no one was watching.¹² Researchers conducting the experiment "lost" more than 1,100 wallets to see how many would be returned. Each wallet contained \$50 in local currency and the name and phone number of the owner. The wallets were left on sidewalks and in phone booths; in front of office buildings, discount stores, and churches; and in parking lots and restaurants. Then the wallet-droppers sat back and watched.

All told, 56% of the wallets were returned; 44% were whisked away. But from one country to another, the results varied greatly. First prize for honesty went to Norway and Denmark, where fully 100% of the wallets were returned. Finishing in the bottom four spots were Italy (35% returned), Switzerland (35%), Hong Kong (30%), and Mexico (21%). The United States placed in the middle range with 67% returned.

If these data are any indication, honesty is more a part of the national character in some countries than others. But cities and towns within the same country also varied widely. Within the U. S. the four most honest communities out of ten chosen for the experiment were Seattle (90% returned); Concord, New Hampshire (80%); Cheyenne, Wyoming (80%); and Meadville, Pennsylvania (80%). Tied for worst place to lose your wallet were Atlanta, Las Vegas, and Dayton, Ohio – where half the wallets were never seen again.

The moral of the story: Culture matters. The character of a community or country – in this case its social norms regarding honesty – influences the character of its citizens (though it doesn't *determine* their character; even in the least honest places, some persons scrupulously returned wallets). There's hope in that: If you can raise the norms of a group (a school, a neighborhood, a community), you can raise the operative character of the group's members.

What Motivates Honesty?

What accounted for the large differences in honesty across communities and cultures?

Clues come from interviews in the lost wallet experiment. Most of the returners, young and old, said their parents had instilled in them the desire to do the right thing.

Some people cited their religious faith as the reason for their honesty. In Malaysia, a 20-year-old woman running a fruit stand said, "Being a Muslim, I'm aware of how to overcome temptation." Lena Kruchinina, a governess in the Russian city of Vladimir, explained: "Several years ago, I could have taken it, but now I am completely changed. As they say, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods.""

For others, empathy appeared to play a key role. The world over, people who looked as if they could really use the \$50 turned it in, while those who looked as if they didn't need it took the money and ran. Canadian Brian Toothill was typical of honest individuals of meager means who expressed concern for the wallet's owner. He found a wallet in a Saskatoon telephone booth and told the interviewer: "The wallet was down low in the booth, so I thought it might belong to handicapped person in a wheelchair. They'd need the money more than I do, wouldn't they?" In truth, Brian himself was out of work and just minutes before had been searching for bottles and cans he could sell. But his values were stronger than his need for cash.

Character in the Face of Evil: The Rescuers Study

Character determines how we respond when someone loses a wallet. It also determines how we respond when a civilization loses its soul.

The Third Reich of Nazi Germany systematically and ruthlessly murdered 11,000,000 civilians, including six million Jews. Many of those who perpetrated this horror enjoyed their work. Adolph Eichmann confessed that going over the death lists from the concentration camps was his favorite bedtime reading.¹³ Rudolph Hess, commandant at Auschwitz, had a window installed in a gas chamber so he could watch the victims die.¹⁴ Nazi guards would sometimes kick prisoners to death or turn loose police dogs trained to eat live human flesh.

When the ghastly machinery of the death camps was revealed after World War II, a glimmer of redemption emerged in the stories of persons who stood against this tide of evil and risked their lives to rescue Jews. What led them to do it? Why did they disobey the Nazi authorities when most of their fellow citizens did not? What kind of families did they come from?

Eva Fogelman, author of *Conscience and Courage*, writes that "a rescuer's life was intricate and terrifying. A careless word or one wrong move could lead to death."¹⁵ Estimates of the number of people who rescued range between 50,000 and a million, the lower figure considered more likely. But even if the highest estimate were true, it would represent less than one-half of 1% of the total population under Nazi occupation.

In 1988, researchers Samuel and Pearl Oliner published *The Altruistic Personality*, the most extensive study ever conducted of persons who rescued Jews from the Holocaust.¹⁶ The Oliners and their research team interviewed 406 rescuers who had lived in Nazi-occupied Europe. For purposes of comparison, they also interviewed 126 nonrescuers, persons who lived in the same occupied countries at the same time as the rescuers but did not get involved in helping Jews.

Rescuers did not consider themselves moral heroes. Again and again, they spoke of simply doing "what had to be done." Most of them hardly deliberated before acting. Asked how long it took them to make their first helping decision, more than 70% said "minutes."

What Motivated Rescue?

The Oliners' study found three kinds of "moral catalysts," sometimes operating in combination, that moved people to rescue. For the majority of rescuers (52%), a *norm-centered motive* – allegiance to the moral code of one's social group – led to their first helping act. Such persons often began rescue work at the request of a person who was an authority figure within their group. For example, Isle, the wife of a German Lutheran minister, initially took Jews into her home because her husband and church asked her to do so.

A smaller percentage (19%) of these norm-oriented rescuers had so strongly internalized a social norm that their helping action appeared to be independent of any authority. For example, a Danish man, part of a rescue group that smuggled more than 7,000 Jews out of Denmark by ferry to Sweden, said:

The basic morality in this little homogeneous country is to be nice to your neighbor and to treat people well. Denmark is a very lawful society. People would stop others from doing illegal things. Even during blackouts, there was no theft. The main reason I helped the Jews is that I didn't want anybody to hurt my neighbors, my fellow countryman, without cause. It was based on good morals and good traditions.

For more than a third of the rescuers (37%), *an empathic orientation*— a response of the heart to people in pain — motivated their first helping act. For some of these individuals, merely knowing that others were suffering was enough to motivate action; for others, a direct encounter with a person in distress led to helping. A Polish woman recounted:

In 1942, I was on my way home from town when M. came out of the bushes. I looked at him in striped camp clothing, his head bare, shod in clogs. And he begged me, his hands joined like for a prayer — could I help him? It still makes me cry. How could one not have helped such a man?

For a small minority of rescuers (11%), their first helping act was motivated by a *belief in universal ethical principles of justice or caring*. For example, Suzanne, a high school mathematics teacher born in Paris, was deeply involved in saving children — hiding them in various schools. While she did not consider herself religious, she saw herself as "a very moral person," which she attributed largely to her Protestant upbringing. She had not directly witnessed the mistreatment of Jews. Asked why she helped them, she responded simply: "All men are born free and equal by right."

Other principled rescuers emphasized an ethic of care — a feeling of obligation to help all people out of a spirit of generosity and concern for their welfare. For example, Louisa and her husband joined the Dutch underground in 1940 and for the next five years hid Jews in their home. She said, "These were people in need, and we helped them." She described herself as very influenced by her Christian religion in her growing-up years.

These three moral orientations — norm-centered (acting in accord with the values of one's group), empathic (moved by another's distress), and principled (committed to a universal ethic of justice or care) — were three different paths to the virtuous act of rescuing. What they have in common, the Oliners believe, is the *capacity for extensive relationships* — a feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others, including those outside one's immediate family and community circle. This extensive disposition stands in sharp contrast to the "constrictedness" that tended to characterize nonrescuers in the study. Constricted people were more centered on themselves and their own needs, reserving their sense of obligation to a small circle of others.

The Roots of Caring

What kind of developmental histories gave rise to rescuers' capacity for "extensive caring"?

Rescuers were much more likely than nonrescuers to describe close family relationships in which parents modeled and taught caring values. Said one woman: "My mother always said to remember to do some good for someone at least once a day." By contrast, parents of nonrescuers were more likely to emphasize economic values ("get a good job," "be thrifty") rather than moral concerns.

Nonrescuers more often described their parents as using physical punishment to discipline — typically experienced by the child as a cathartic release of aggression on the parent's part rather than anything related to the child's behavior. Rescuers, by contrast, remembered their parents as only occasionally punishing and more often "explaining things," telling the child that he or she had made "mistakes" or hadn't understood the other person's point of view.

Rescuers' parents were also much more likely to explicitly teach a positive attitude toward different cultures and religions and the obligation to help others generously without concern for rewards or reciprocity. Said one rescuer: "My father taught me to love God and my neighbor, regardless of race or religion. At my grandfather's house, when they read the Bible, he invited everybody in. If a Jew happened to drop in, he would ask him to take a seat. Jews and Catholics were received in our place like everybody else." Another rescuer asserted: "When you see a need, you have to help. We are our brother's keeper."

As rescuers grew up, distinctions of class and religion were far less important to them than to nonrescuers in choosing friends. Rescuers also developed greater "internal locus of control" than nonrescuers — a stronger feeling that they could shape events and a greater willingness to risk failure.

It was no accident, this study concludes, that when the lives of outsiders were threatened, persons who had been developing an extensive orientation from childhood responded by reaching out. Saving Jews from the Holocaust grew out of the ways in which they ordinarily related to other people. When the war was over, they were likely to continue this pattern. In post-war life, significantly larger percentages of rescuers than nonrescuers participated in community service. Their most common activity was attending to the sick or aged.

The research on rescuers has important implications for both families and schools. Families need to nurture an inclusive caring that reaches beyond the home. Schools must foster that same spirit of inclusiveness and the actual experience of caring community through day-to-day relationships.

Character as Transformation of Moral Self

The rescuer study sheds important light on the nature and roots of character, but it's not the whole story.

As psychologists Anne Colby and William Damon point out in their book, *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment*, not everyone in Nazi-occupied Europe who had the rescuers' personality characteristics (e.g., empathy, a sense of internal control, feelings of responsibility for others) and family backgrounds (e.g., parents who taught tolerance and caring) took the life-endangering step to rescue Jews.¹⁷ Most, in fact, did not. Early experience, like culture, may influence but does not determine adult moral behavior. What other factors help to explain why a particular person chooses to act compassionately and courageously without counting the cost?

To try to answer that question, Colby and Damon asked a group of "expert nominators" – theologians, philosophers, and historians of varying political ideology, religious beliefs, and sociocultural backgrounds – to define criteria for a "moral exemplar" and then to suggest persons who fit those criteria. There was a surprisingly high degree of consensus on five criteria for exemplars: (1) a sustained commitment to moral ideals; (2) a consistency between one's ideals and means of achieving them; (3) a willingness to sacrifice self-interest; (4) a capacity to inspire others; and (5) a humility about one's own importance.

Using these five criteria, Colby and Damon proceeded to identify and interview 23 moral exemplars. Educationally, the exemplars ranged from completion of 8th-grade to M.D.s, Ph.D.s, and law degrees. They included religious leaders of different faiths, businessmen, physicians, teachers, charity workers, an innkeeper, a journalist, lawyers, heads of nonprofit organizations, and leaders of social movements. Ten were men; 13 were women. Their contributions spanned civil rights, the fight against poverty, medical care, education, philanthropy, the environment, peace, and religious freedom.

In the course of their lives each of these remarkable individuals, Colby and Damon found, developed a personal goal that involved a moral transformation. In most cases, mentors and colleagues played a role in the development of this defining goal. In all cases, the goal involved a commitment to a cause or principle that led to a life of uncompromising integrity and service.

As a striking example of this goal-driven transformation, these researchers cite the Russian scientist Andrei Sakharov. Until 36, Sakharov was a pillar of the Soviet Union's Communist establishment. He invented the Russian H-bomb. He was considered both a brilliant scientist and a patriot. He had never rocked the boat.

Then, in 1957 he became concerned about radioactive contamination following Soviet nuclear weapons tests and wrote memos urging caution. A few years later he personally contacted Nikita Krushchev to try to persuade him to halt further testing – and was told to cease meddling in affairs of state. By 1966, he was dissenting publicly, warning against the reintroduction of Stalinism. In 1967 he pleaded the case of two Soviet dissidents sentenced harshly under Soviet law. A year later he lost his clearance for scientific work. In 1970, with two colleagues, he founded the Moscow Human Rights Committee to advocate publicly for persecuted people throughout the Soviet Union. In 1973 he appealed to the United Nations to intervene on behalf of Soviet dissidents sent to psychiatric hospitals. In 1986, by then the target of intense attacks from the state media, he was exiled from Moscow to the city of Gor'ki.

Here, then, is a journey of moral growth in adulthood – from a secure, establishment scientist to a principled defender of human rights willing to risk all. This journey confronted Sakharov with repeated opportunities to decide whether to move forward on the path he had chosen or to withdraw. Each time, supported and challenged by like-minded colleagues committed to human freedom, he chose to move forward. His ethical pilgrimage illustrates how the course of character development may continue over a lifetime – and is propelled not by determining factors from childhood, personality, or culture, but by freely chosen acts in service of a compelling ideal.

The lessons for us as teachers and parents? First, to provide young people with opportunities to think about and set worthwhile goals that will develop their character and give a sense of noble purpose to their lives. Second, to model that process ourselves, so young people have adults in their lives who are visibly committed to high ideals.

The Character of Our Democracy

Character affects every area of society. On a trip in November, 1999, I had a conversation with a woman who was making a transition to university personnel work after more than 30 years in the business world. She had worked for five different companies. When I told her of my work in character education, she spoke of how, in her experience, character profoundly affects business:

If you don't have character in business, then you won't have team spirit. Character affects how you treat your colleagues and how you treat your customers. When there is no character, you get corruption. People look out for themselves only.

Two years later, with the country awash in corporate scandals, her words seemed prophetic. The cooked books, stock manipulations, and insider trading that comprised the corruption within Enron, WorldCom, and other corporate giants emerged as another measure of the moral ground we've lost. The runaway greed that gave rise to these scandals reflected changes in corporate culture, aided by government policies that removed many of the regulatory checks on the lust for money. The result has been a fast-growing gap between the rich and the rest of the country – a gap that weakens families and is altering the very character of our democratic society.

How this is happening is documented in detail in Kevin Phillips's 2002 book, *Wealth and Democracy*.¹⁸ Phillips does not write from the left; he is in fact a lifelong Republican. The growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a small number of Americans, he says, far exceeds anything that has happened in our history. It has profound political as well as economic consequences because money continues to buy political influence and therefore shapes public policy.

- In 1999, the average income (after taxes) of the middle 60% of Americans was *lower* than in 1977. Meanwhile, between 1982 and 1999, the 400 richest Americans increased their average net worth from \$230 million to \$2.6 *billion*. Among the Western nations, the United States has the highest level of income inequality.
- In 1990, CEOs made 85 times what the average worker made. By 2000, they made *531 times* the average worker's pay. In 1981, America's 10 most highly paid CEOs received an average salary of \$3.5 million; by 2000, that figure had soared to \$154 million.
- From 1980 to 1999, the 500 largest corporations tripled their assets and profits. During that period, those same corporations eliminated approximately 5 million American jobs.
- Fewer than half of all Americans have any pension plan other than Social Security. American workers work the longest hours – 350 hours more per year than the average European worker – yet have the least amount of health coverage, maternity leave, vacation time, and notice of job termination of any Western nation.
- The Internal Revenue Service, during the past two decades, has spent more of its time and budget auditing working-class people, including the working poor, than it has auditing millionaires and billionaires, who routinely use tax evasion schemes.

- By the early 1990s, nearly 22% of children in the United States lived in poverty – compared to 10% in Great Britain and 4% in Belgium.

In short, as Phillips and other economic and political analysts have pointed out, our economy is rapidly redistributing national wealth into the pockets of the already affluent and powerful. It hasn't always been this way. In the 1940s and 50s, the middle 60% percent of Americans got the largest share of growth in the economic pie. But our present economy has reversed this. A democratic society, Phillips says, cannot long endure such an imbalance of wealth and its corrupting effects on politics and social policy – and remain a democracy that is responsive to the public interest.

How does the character of the economy affect the character of citizens? For one thing, as the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville observed nearly two centuries ago, greed and corruption at the top tend to foster greed and corruption at all levels. People think, "If those guys are just out for themselves and break the rules to grab what they can get, then I'd be a fool not to do the same."

What's more, close to 30% of the population are poor or near-poor. The most immediate cause of poverty and near-poverty in America is not the lack of available work, nor the inadequacy of welfare, nor the female-headed family, although all of those are contributing factors. The chief cause of poverty is that millions of workers are not paid a living wage.

This puts tremendous stress on families. A few years ago, in our small upstate New York city of 20,000, our newspaper ran a 5-part series on the working poor – including families that were working two or three low-paying jobs and couldn't pay their bills, couldn't buy shoes for their kids, couldn't afford to take their kids to the dentist, and so on. Not only does this mean real sufferings for parents and children and a lower overall quality of life; it also means less family time. A speaker at a Boston conference on economic justice spoke to this issue when he said: "Raising wages is the most family friendly thing you could do."

It isn't just low-income families who are stressed by an unjust economy. Many middle-class parents would like to spend more time with their children but can't because of economic pressures. Says a Chicago editor: "My brother and his wife live very modestly but have been so severely downsized at their jobs that they must work extra and odd hours to make ends meet." As a society, we say we value family (in policy statements, political campaigns, and the like), but then we adopt or maintain social policies that undermine families. If we are serious about building the character of our youth, we will need to get serious about closing the gap between rhetoric and reality when it comes to the family.

Sex and Character

If we are serious about the character of our children, we will also need to take an honest look at the moral condition of our sexual culture.

Most Americans would be likely to applaud the fact that people in general, including parents and kids, are much more comfortable talking about sex than they were prior to the 1960s. Couples having sexual problems in their marriages are more likely to try to do something about it. These are healthy changes. But along with this greater openness have come a sexualizing of popular culture and a sexualizing of children that is disturbing to parents and others across a wide section of the ideological spectrum.

As one reflection of this concern, Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Phil have both recently devoted shows to the problem of oral sex – on the rise, according to at least one national survey¹⁹ – among 13- and 14-year-olds and sometimes even younger kids. Some boys are reportedly demanding oral sex from their girlfriends the way they used to expect a good-night kiss. Some girls say they have performed oral sex on many boys. There are also stories of oral sex parties and oral sex going on in school hallways, at dances, and at football games.

In April 2000, *The New York Times* ran an article titled "The Face of Teenage Sex Grows Younger." It quoted psychotherapists counseling children, usually girls, who were emotional wrecks because of early sexual activity. Dr. Allen Waltzman, a Brooklyn psychiatrist, commented: "I see girls, 7th- and 8th-graders, even 6th-graders who tell me they're virgins . . . but they've had oral sex 50 or 60 times."²⁰ On Dr. Phil's show, a young girl looked into the camera, tears streaming down her face, and said to other kids who might be viewing:

"Don't do this . . . please don't do this. You will lose all your self-respect. Things will get worse for you, much worse . . . "

At a skating rink in a southern city, a father stopped to pick up his 11-year-old daughter. In the center of the darkened rink were 40 or 50 children, all about his daughter's age or younger, forming a circle. As the father drew closer, he could see that in the center of the circle were several boys and girls acting out positions of simulated sex. Several boys made sandwiches of little girls. One boy stood behind a girl, his arms around her and his hands on her genital area. The surrounding circle of kids watched in fascination. The father says that when they saw him approaching, a few straggled away, but most showed no embarrassment. When he reported all this to the rink manager, the manager said that no one else had complained, that "dirty dancing" was not allowed in his rink, and that in the future he would increase the lighting. Then he added, "But it's a different world."²¹

Kids can't be blamed for such behavior. But the rest of us can be. We have created the world they have to grow up in.

The breakdown of sexual morality has spawned a plague of problems – promiscuity, sexual addictions, infidelity, unwed pregnancies, fatherless children, STDs, abortions, sexual harassment, the sexual abuse of children, children acting out sexually, an ever more eroticized media, a huge pornography industry (next to gambling, the most lucrative Internet business), and the damage done to marriages and families by many of these problems. To a large extent, we are still in cultural denial about the cost of sex without social controls. Benedict Groeschel, a Franciscan priest-psychologist-author who works with the poor and lectures worldwide on moral and spiritual matters, challenges us to face the hard truth:

Americans in leadership positions should be aware that much of the world is scandalized by our moral behavior. We export pornography by the ton – literature, electronic pornography, disks, movies. The public media in our country are a septic tank of toxic waste. People have been very anxious that terrorists will poison the reservoirs. They are already poisoned – not by foreign terrorists but by our fellow Americans who bring into our living rooms poisons that destroy the moral lives of children and lead them into sexual relationships that are the furthest thing from a faithful marriage. TV and the Internet have been used to corrupt moral values to such an extent that many of our young people have practically none at all. This has been going on for many years. Why is it that a class action suit is not brought against the media for the corruption of the morals of minors?²²

Everywhere I travel around the world, people resent the corruption of their young by American media. In Japan, traditional sexual morality is fast crumbling as teens adopt the latest fashion of their Western peers – "friends with (sexual) privileges" instead of emotional attachments to boyfriends or girlfriends. In Latin America, educators complained of the same trend. Much is written about the AIDS epidemic now ravaging southern Africa – the number of AIDS orphans is predicted to reach 40 million in the next 10 years – but far less about the moral roots of the crisis. An exception was a speech at the November, 1999 World Congress on Families by Dr. Margaret Ogola, who heads a hospice for HIV-positive orphans in Kenya. She said that for generations in black Africa, religious taboos had been largely effective in suppressing sexual activity outside marriage. But those tribal norms of sexual morality were, she said, "shattered by Western influences" – both the mass marketing of contraceptives and the hedonistic messages of what she called "Planet Hollywood."²³ In Uganda, where an emphasis on premarital abstinence and marital fidelity is the new national policy, significant progress has been made in fighting the AIDS epidemic.

Unrestrained sexual freedom has also led to widespread abortion as back-up birth control. Abortion is a wrenchingly difficult social issue; none is more divisive. But even those who defend abortion as a woman's legal right say it should be rare. Can our country credibly claim that "we respect life and terrorists don't," and can we credibly teach respect for life to our children, while we continue to end a developing human life 4,000 times a day? In his book, *Making Abortion Rare: A Healing Strategy for a Divided Nation*, David Reardon observes that post-abortion syndrome (depression, guilt, nightmares, loss of self-worth) – which half of women who abort say they experience to some degree – can be attributed to the fact that that most women who have an

abortion are conflicted over its morality.²⁴ More than 70% say they think it is wrong – the taking of a human life – but they are choosing *against* their conscience because they feel they have no other choice. Women, Reardon and others argue, deserve better choices: prenatal care for themselves and their unborn child; adequate postnatal health care; help with adoption if they choose that; parental work leave; affordable day care; and adequate housing and employment opportunities. As we work to meet the needs of women, organizations such as American Feminists for Life challenge us – in language reminiscent of the rescuer study – to simultaneously adopt an inclusive social ethic and enlarge our circle of caring to encompass the most vulnerable members of the human family, babies in the womb.

Not all the social indicators, of course, are negative. During the 1990s, teenage sexual intercourse and pregnancy both declined significantly. After September 11, volunteerism rose; Habitat for Humanity, for example, reported a four-fold increase in volunteers in the following year. Violent youth crime is coming down, as is overall violence. Says Karol DeFalco, a middle school administrator with the New Haven, Connecticut schools: "The number of kids who are carrying guns has dropped. The number of kids suspended from school is down. Kids' attitudes toward fighting have also changed dramatically."

We should take heart from these positive trends – while still coming to grips with the fact that absolute levels of most character-related problems remain high, far higher than they were a few decades ago.

The National Character Education Movement

If humility is a virtue in a person, it is also a virtue in a people. It is a tribute to the American national character that we retain the capacity to examine our collective conscience and be galvanized by our moral failures. The renewal of character education in our schools – in some cases in whole communities – is perhaps at least in part a recognition that we stand at a cultural crossroads. Either we will come together to try to solve our cultural problems or we will see social and moral regression proceed with gathering speed.

To be sure, people perceive our moral and spiritual crisis differently. Those on the ideological right are less likely to recognize the corruption of our democracy, and the damage to families, by economic injustices and the accelerating concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Those on the ideological left are less likely to recognize the corruption of both adult and child character by a decadent sexual culture. Most in the vast middle tend not to recognize how much in recent decades family life has deteriorated – at a heavy cost to the young – as electronic media replace family interactions and more than a million children a year see their parents go their separate ways.

We are only beginning to address these problems. However, the fact that we are more aware of the problems and beginning to confront them is cause for hope.

When schools return to their historical mission of developing character, they are often pleasantly surprised by the fruit of their efforts. Lynnwood, Washington's [Hilltop Elementary School](#) undertook character education in the early 1990s because of the increasingly rude and disrespectful behavior of its students – and went on to become a National School of Character. A Hilltop teacher who was initially skeptical about character education comments on her school's turn-around:

I was opposed to doing character education at first. I said, "We have too much to teach already. This is the job of the home." But then I saw the change in the kids. I saw the change in how staff related to each other. We're a different school now. I look forward to coming to work.

Our society's social and moral problems have been many years in the making and will not be easily reversed. They will require systemic solutions supported at all levels, from local communities to the federal government. It is not yet clear whether we have the national will to do what is truly needed to build a more just, caring, and decent society.

Nevertheless, character education is a good thing, an essential thing, for us to do. Focusing on character in our families, schools, and communities will make a difference – has already made a difference – for those involved. If the effort becomes widespread enough, it will make a difference for our whole country and perhaps, to the extent that we become a better people, for the rest of the world.

Endnotes

1. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).
2. Stephen Covey, *The 7 habits of highly effective people* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).
3. William J. Bennett, *The book of virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).
4. *101 giraffe heroes: Ready-to-read scripts about people sticking out their necks for the common good* (Langley, WA: The Giraffe Project, 2001).
5. Dennis Wholey, *Are you happy?* (Cleveland: Houghton-Mifflin, 1986).
6. John Wooden, *Wooden: A lifetime of observations and reflections on and off the court* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1997).
7. Thanks to Spencer Johnson for this felicitous phrase.
8. Louis A. Tartaglia, *Flawless! The ten most common character flaws and what you can do about them* (New York: Eagle Brook, 2000).
9. William Bennett, *The index of leading cultural indicators: Facts and figures on the state of American society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).
10. See, for example, David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America* (1995) and Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Discovering what families do," in David Blankenhorn, (Ed.), *Rebuilding the nest* (Milwaukee: Family Service America, 1990).
11. Center for Academic Integrity, www.academicintegrity.org
12. "The lost wallet experiment," *Reader's Digest* (December, 1995).
13. J. Wechsberg (Ed.), *The murderers among us* (New York: McGraw-Hill).
14. B. C. Andrus, *The infamous of Nuremberg* (London: Fravin, 1969).
15. Eve Fogelman, *Conscience and courage: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).
16. Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York, Free Press, 1988).
17. Anne Colby and William Damon, *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
18. Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and democracy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002).
19. A 2001 survey conducted for *Seventeen* magazine and The Kaiser Family Foundation reported that 55% of high school students said they had engaged in oral sex, compared to 40 % reporting sexual intercourse.
20. A. Jarrell, "The face of teenage sex grows younger," *The New York Times* (April 2, 2000).
21. Kathleen Parker, "Even children corrupted by society's sex obsession," *Orlando Sentinel* (April 1, 1999).
22. Benedict J. Groeschel, *The cross at ground zero* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2001).
23. Quoted in John A. Howard, *Detoxifying the culture* (Baltimore: AmErica House, 2001).
24. David Reardon, *Making abortion rare: A healing strategy for a divided nation* (Springfield, IL: Acorn Books, 1996).

Thomas Lickona "Why Character Matters." Chapter 2 in *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (New York: Touchstone, 2004): 3-30. Reprinted with permission of the author.