

CHARACTER OVERVIEW

If you are concerned with character-building in young people, you are not alone, but neither are you in the educational mainstream or general trend of popular culture. Most urban societies seem driven by consumption and lost in relativism. There may be some talk of values—as interesting items to be chosen and affirmed at a personal level. But character, as an underlying moral deposit necessary for good living, is not in vogue. Certainly there seems little agreement or serious discussion on the virtuous life.

One night (when I was a sophomore or immature junior in college) I stunned an older house-mate (a returning war veteran) with a theory on personality and character. "Personality is how a person appears; character is the stuff underneath. Furthermore, good romantic matches are a pairing of one partner with strong character and weaker personality with another who has a strong personality and weaker character." In amazement we passed a good bit of the night analyzing the couples on campus of our small liberal arts college. The theory seemed unerringly correct. We would write a book!

I smile with you at that evening's sophomoric and unsubstantiated musings. Our definitions were influenced by our conclusions, and we were carried away with the apparent clarity of it all. We never even checked a dictionary as I remember it.

How then are personality and character to be defined? According to the Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling (Rodney J. Hunter, et al., 1990)

Etymologically, the word character—a Greek root meaning 'engraving'—thus suggests deeply ingrained structures. Personality comes from the Latin word for mask and often connotes something more superficial than character. Current usage may reflect these origins. Psychologists tend to employ character in reference to the...(more) unchanging aspects of the person, but to use personality to mean something more active, dynamic, and perhaps potentially changeable.

So, that college "bull session" may have stumbled onto a partial truth, but it failed to explore other uses of the terms and deeper nuances. Often the terms are used interchangeably.

J.P. Chaplin's Dictionary of Psychology (1968, 1973, p. 79) defines character as

A consistent and enduring property or quality by means of which a person, object, or event can be identified; the integration or synthesis of individual traits into a unity; the individual's personality considered from an ethical or moral point of view.

It is in this last sense that personality (an individual's make-up) is contrasted to one's character (core values and morals)—and will be used here. A noted psychologist (G. Allport, 1937) defined personality as

...the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychological systems that determine his (unique) behavior and thought.

Families, organizations, and communities, as well as individuals, have character. Dick DeVos discusses the character of his country in his bestseller, *Rediscovering American Values* (1998, p. 2, 3, 13, 293). This book is about the values underlying strong, positive character.

Essentially, this book is about freedom, and the values that provide the foundation of freedom...When I say values, I mean the principles we hold in our hearts and minds that shape who we are, how we live, and how we treat one another.

Before...(any nation) can fulfill its destiny...all...must understand what freedom means. To do that, we must understand the values that provide the very foundation of freedom.

I do believe we are facing a crisis of character that threatens the fundamental integrity of our (or any) nation....We must provide our children, the youth who will serve as our leaders in the new millennium, with the proper foundation: we must teach them the importance of values that make freedom possible.

Character of a society, of its institutions, families and individuals are all related and interdependent. A strong society depends on strong social and economic character, and family character needs to be bred into the character of our children.

Robert Coles (1997, p. 7), who has given much thought and attention to character development in children, gives this definition: "Character is ultimately who we are expressed in action, in how we live, and what we do." And the continuation of this quotation is worth noting:

...and so the children around us know: they absorb and take stock of what they observe, namely us—we adults living and doing things in a certain spirit, getting on with one another in our various ways. Our children add up, imitate, file away what they've observed and so very often later fall in line with the particular moral counsel we wittingly or quite unself-consciously have offered them.

In Highland Park, north of Chicago, Robert Coles (1986, p. 148-149) was discussing character with a group of high school students. Here is what they had to say:

You are the way you act—in the long run. Some people can put on an act. But if you keep your wits, and keep an eye on them, you can find out the truth about them. If they're good people, kind to others, not just wrapped up in themselves, you'll find it out. If they're putting on a production, you'll find that out.

The last person to leave the room, the young woman who spoke least (Coles adds) said that she thought "character meant being kind and good, even when there was no one to reward you for being kind and good."

Robert Coles (1997) uses three situations portraying a lack of moral character. Elaine is a bright young elementary school student from a two-parent professional family. She is cheating, lying about her cheating, and her teacher is unwilling to confront her. The Crowd is a group of bright, wealthy students at a private school who are into drugs and defend their behavior with cynicism, sophistication, arrogance and anger. Their teachers and headmaster are unwilling to confront them. Delia is the fourteen-year-old mother with a six-months-old girl. She and her two friends of the same age see sex and pregnancy as their only course in life. Though very different in their

social, racial, and economic situations, all have suffered the loss of moral instruction from their parents; all have logical reasons for what they are doing; none are being confronted by available adults.

They are...all struggling with mistakes of moral judgment, of moral perspective: lying and cheating; drug abuse and cynical meanness to others; an early sexuality that eventuates in a persistent loneliness, in being, as Delia once described it, 'alone, with nothing to hold on to, no one you'd ever want to hold on to.' This aloneness is not only emotional; it is moral, too. We isolate ourselves from a community, its values, by what we do, then we pay the price within ourselves.

To cheat and lie is to be alone; to knock oneself out with drugs is to be alone; to sleep with men because they want to knock you up, you and a million others on a sexual assembly line that passes for a life, is to be alone, even as to behave like that to women is to be alone; and finally, to shoot to kill in order to survive and prevail (just barely, and so often only for a short time) is to be murderously alone. These boys and girls, these teenagers,...crave a moral strength that is within them, that would enable them a kind of survival that so far threatens to elude them: a survival of goodness, of respect for both themselves and others as against the variations of moral thoughtlessness and heedlessness each of them, in ways, demonstrates. (Coles, 1997, p. 57)

George Eliot (in "Middlemarch") offers hope for a change in character, a change all of us who teach or help young people have witnessed:

Character is not cut in marble...it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing.

It is because of caring mentors, by the examples of adults and peers, and through drama, stories, and discussions, that moral education can bring about that change and the strengthening of character.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How do you react to this article? What do you consider the most important point made above?
2. With what do you disagree or would you restate? Do you agree that character can change, and do you believe in moral education? Why or why not?
3. How would you encourage virtues in your 3- or 4-year-old child? How would you teach moral values to a third grader? What kind of moral guidance do teenagers (15-16 years of age) need? How can children and teenagers help us find the answers to these questions?
4. How do you see the relationship between moral and spiritual growth?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Most people agree that we are living in times of social and personal moral crisis.

2. Moral education and character development is a matter that families, individuals, peers, schools, and a community must work on together.

3. There are resources for the building of healthy and moral communities and kids. (See also Resource List under Community.)

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