

# CHARACTER

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## The **ROOTS** of **CHARACTER** and the **ROLE** of **COMMUNITY**

by William Damon

*Editor's Note: Dr. Damon presented this paper at the White House Conference on Character and Community on June 19, 2002. He has generously allowed us to reprint his words, with some minor changes, here.*

How do young people acquire good character? What can we, as adults, do to promote their character development? Because of recent advances in research on character development, we now can provide some solid answers to these questions. My purpose today is to summarize what today's research tells us about character development, and about the role of community in educating young people for character.

The first message is that every child begins life with the building blocks of character already present in rudimentary forms. Of course there still is much learning that needs to take place for these building blocks to become mature character, but the basic elements are present from the start. This means that a basic moral sense does not need to be forced down a child's throat like unpleasant medicine – it is part of the human system. To be sustained and expanded, the child's moral sense requires lots of nurturing by parents, schools, and communities, but not force-feeding.

What are these early building blocks of character? Four that scientific studies have identified are: *empathy, fairness, self-control, and self-awareness*. *Empathy* is the capacity to experience another person's pleasure or pain, and it provides the emotional root of caring about other people, the heart of compassion.

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Newborns cry when they hear sounds of crying and show signs of pleasure at happy sounds such as cooing and laughter; and by the second year of life it is common for children to comfort a peer or a parent in distress.

An awareness of *fairness* begins as soon as children begin playing with friends. When a playmate hogs a plate of cookies or refuses to relinquish a swing set, the protest "That's not fair!" is a highly predictable response, because even young children understand that

they have an obligation to share with others. The child's interest in *self-control* can be seen in an eagerness, as early as infancy, to regularize behavior through repetition, rituals, and rules. *Self-awareness* begins as soon as infants notice that their experience is distinctly their own and not the same as that of their caregivers – usually in the first month of life.

For these early moral capacities to become fully formed character, *empathy* must grow into sustained *concern for the well-being of others*; *fairness* must grow into a real *commitment to justice*; *self-control* must grow into a *determination to be a good and honorable person, free from subjugation, and dedicated to noble purposes beyond the self*. This is precisely the kind of character development necessary for sustaining a democracy, because it leads directly to a love of liberty balanced by a commitment to the well-being and rights of others in the broader community.

None of these developments can happen by themselves. Children need certain kinds of support and guidance from adults in their lives if they are to turn their early positive inclinations into the mature virtues that constitute character. Adults can influence chil-

dren in a number of ways and places: first and foremost in the family, but also importantly in schools, in community settings such as sports leagues, libraries, and religious institutions, and in the mass media.

Based upon everything we have learned from research, there are three things that I can say about adult influence on children's character. Adults promote good character in young people under the following conditions:

- When adults communicate high expectations and standards to children, urging children to fully maximize the tremendous potentials that all children are born with.
- When adults from all spheres of a child's life – family, school, community – are "on the same page" with one another regarding the core moral values that they profess to the child.
- When adults encourage young people to develop strong moral identities of their own by setting good examples in behavior, by acquainting young people with admirable examples from history and public life, and by introducing children to noble purposes that inspire them.

Unfortunately, these conditions are not always met in today's society. Adults sometimes have low standards for children and do

not hold them to their responsibilities, out of the mistaken assumption that expecting too much of a child can wound a child's self-esteem. Yet research indicates just the opposite: a youngster builds self-confidence by

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accepting responsibility, even when it is difficult to do so. Adults sometimes present conflicting values to children – such as when a teacher says don't cheat but the sports coach says that breaking a rule is OK if you can get away with it; or when a TV show glamorizes behavior that any parent would disapprove of. Children take values seriously only when they perceive at least a rough consensus on them among the adults whom they respect. Adults do not always make the effort to present admirable examples to the young; nor do they regularly discuss with young people the deep

questions of meaning, purpose, and what really matters in life. Youngsters learn moral truths by seeing them enacted in the real lives of flesh-and-blood exemplars, and by reflecting on how this informs their own search for personal direction, not through abstract injunctions about right and wrong.

These conclusions lead directly to some guidelines for character education in our schools and communities. In a recent book that I edited for Hoover Institution Press, *Bringing in a New Era in Character Education*, my collaborators and I have presented a set of suggestions for an informed, effective approach to character education. Briefly, they include:

In order to present children with coherent messages from all the important people and settings in their lives, character education must be a community-wide endeavor. Of course it is essential that these messages promote core elements of moral character, such as caring, fairness, self-control, and a respect for rights and liberty. Schools should join with all other institutions – family, civic, recreational, religious, media – to create a community where young people can find these consistent standards, high expectations, social support, and opportunities for learning and growth wherever they go. Young people

*continued on page 8*

from the  
a c t i n g **D I R E C T O R**  
Bernice Lerner

On **MODELING** and **GRATITUDE**  
to **EDUCATORS** of **CHARACTER**

Seated on board United Airlines flight 364, en route from Denver to Boston, I am contemplating the emotional closing to our first Pueblo, Colorado Teachers Academy<sup>1</sup>, during which we worked with faculty from two elementary schools, Baca and Columbian. At the end of each five-day Teachers Academy we invite participants to reflect on what they have learned that they will now bring to their vocation. Many teachers speak of particular Academy sessions that deepened their understanding of virtue and choice. Many describe how the week was unlike other of their professional development experiences. But this morning several individuals told personal stories. There were tears. And there was palpable support from colleagues – proof of the strong bonds forged among those who work together closely, who interact daily with children who need them in fundamental ways. (Pueblo 60 School District serves a community characterized, in part, by certain negative effects of poverty. Teachers provide for some children the sense of security and caring they otherwise lack.) These teachers know they need each other; indeed, both veteran and new teachers expressed appreciation for the camaraderie among faculty at their schools.

One soft-spoken teacher explained how after her only brother was killed in an accident, it took all her strength to come to school. Some of her colleagues would enter her classroom and hug her. She heard one child ask another, “Why do the other teachers keep coming into our classroom?” A little girl answered, “Because they are being kind.” This teacher

believes that her students received “the greatest lesson in compassion.” Child psychologist Robert Coles would concur. In his words, “The child is a witness... the child looks and looks for cues as to how one ought to behave, and finds them galore as we parents and teachers go about our lives...”<sup>2</sup>

Children register and recall adult behavior. They imitate even small, seemingly insignificant actions and deeds. (I think of this whenever I see a Little League baseball pitcher on the mound, perfectly emulating his professional hero’s mannerisms.) If they observe individuals who display thoughtfulness, justice, and patience, they are the beneficiaries of good lessons in character. And if the adults in their lives neglect to “walk the talk,” they receive other kinds of lessons. One of my favorites of Aesop’s Fables, “The Mother and the Crab,” shows how instruction rings hollow when it does not come from a credible source:

“An Old Crab said to her son, ‘Why do you walk sideways like that, my son? You ought to walk straight.’ The Young Crab replied, ‘Show me how, dear Mother, and I’ll follow your example.’ The Old Crab tried but tried in vain, and then saw how foolish she had been to find fault with her child.”<sup>3</sup>

Some children, like the Young Crab, are able to respectfully challenge a misguided adult. And some adults, like the Old Crab, are able to realize the error of their ways and display humility. The Old Crab learned a valuable lesson from her child.

We can all learn from individuals we instruct. For one, our students may reflect behaviors we inadvertently model, revealing, in ways, our own strengths and flaws.

Then there are individuals who are positioned, in a more formal sense, to guide us. At the Pueblo Teachers Academy an articulate young woman spoke about an incident that had occurred at one of her first jobs. She was just twenty-six years old when she found her husband dead in their bed – he had committed suicide. When she told the principal for whom she worked, he told her that she had to leave her personal crisis outside school, that she must not tell anyone about it or let it affect her teaching. This principal’s response to a tragedy in her life exacerbated her suffering. She subsequently worked for a principal who nurtured not only students, but faculty and staff. She learned that leaders have a choice of how to respond, and that professionalism and compassion need not be mutually exclusive.

Though not as impressionable as children, adults look to their supervisors, mentors, and more experienced colleagues for information, advice, and cues as to how to act in particular settings. Role models have a responsibility, and an opportunity, to teach not only facts and skills, but to serve as moral exemplars. Character development occurs not only in elementary, middle, and high schools, but also in colleges, graduate schools, professional schools, and work settings. It occurs where children and adults can rely on trusted leaders

*continued on page 4*

On **MODELING** and **GRATITUDE** (continued)

for guidance in answering a critical question: What is the right thing to do in a given situation? This question arises in classrooms, courtrooms, surgical wards, corporate offices, and homes. Answers are not always easily found. As Aristotle argued, "it is possible to fail in many ways... while to succeed is possible only in one way (...to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult)."<sup>4</sup> A person worth emulating will aspire to and enjoy doing that which is rational, appropriate, and noble.

At the opening of the Teachers Academy, we ask participants to think about individuals in their lives who profoundly and positively influenced them. It is with gratitude that they recall honorable and kindhearted relatives, friends, and teachers. At the Pueblo Teachers Academy, a kindergarten teacher wearing an elegant silver braid told the group that she had never heard an encouraging word from any of her teachers until a college professor recognized her abilities. She learned from him the importance of encouraging students, and by doing so, she has enjoyed a rewarding career. And at the week's end, a tall and handsome fifth grade teacher spoke about his bartender father, who listened so compassionately to others' woes. Only after his father's death did he learn that his father had paid for several of his friends' or acquaintances'

funerals, as their families could not afford them. He carries the image of his benevolent and loving father, and strives in his professional and personal life to be like him.

The Pueblo Teachers Academy has reminded me of the gratitude I owe to the teachers in my life – my children, my students, and those I consider role models – family, friends, and colleagues who aim to do what is right, whose ways are worth emulating. I am reminded that I ought not take them for granted – a Teachers Academy participant who had lost her college-aged daughter stressed how each day with a loved one is a gift. And I am reminded that I must forgive moments when they "miss the mark," for this happens to the best of us.

Former CAEC executive director Karen Bohlin asserts that character education occurs in the context of relationships. When we explore the lives of great people, we often learn that inspirational others influenced them. They discern, in exemplary role models, courage, integrity, and self-mastery, and they strive to make such dispositions their own.

*We are indeed fortunate if we have the opportunity to work with outstanding role models. Former CAEC Executive Director Karen Bohlin has modeled good practice and scholarship in the realm of character education. She will undoubtedly bring to her new post, head of the Montrose School in Natick, Massachusetts, her standards of excellence. I know that I am one among many who are grateful to Dr. Bohlin for her rich and enduring legacy, and for her wisdom and compassion.*

Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Over the past thirteen years the CAEC has held Teacher Academies around the country. The Teachers Academy affords educators an opportunity to engage in dialogue about selected great texts, and to reflect upon their roles in classrooms and schools.

<sup>2</sup> Coles, Robert. *The Moral Intelligence of Children*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998 (p.5)

<sup>3</sup> *Aesop's Fables*, illus. Charles Santore, New York: Random House, 1988 (p.37)

<sup>4</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, New York: Oxford university Press, 1980 II.1106629 (p.38)



# On the **HOMEFRONT**

## Ten Tips for **NAVIGATING** the **ODYSSEY** of **ADOLESCENCE**

by Karen E. Bohlin, Ed.D.

Adolescence – that period marked by acne, mood swings, growth spurts, peer pressure, broken-heartedness, and recklessness combined with an utter crisis of confidence – demands a healthy dose of virtue. Call it impulse control or a moral compass. It is also a time marked by high energy and passion, a search for meaning, a desire to change the world and to make something great of one's life. How can parents help their children stay on course?

It's easy for parents to lose sight of the big picture and get mired down by the issues screaming for immediate attention: wondering whether or not you should let your fourteen-year-old son go away unchaperoned for a weekend in New York City with his friends, or why your seventh-grader swings from Ds to As from week to week and seems to be testing her limits at home. Sometimes a parent's vision of her children's lives is limited to stamping out bad behavior or lamenting ubiquitous social problems and trying to protect them from teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, depression, deviance, violence, cheating, and lying.

Parents cannot simply protect their children. They need a bigger vision than that. I am not referring to a vision that includes XYZ High School followed by Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. The *vision* I am referring to is a vision of the *kind of person* you want your son or daughter to become. The kind of person you want them to be *known for* by their family, friends, and colleagues – mature, civic-minded adults, responsible professionals, individu-

als of integrity, caring spouses and parents, good friends. This is a worthy vision. Taking adolescence seriously is about saying to your children with conviction, "*What I care about most is who you are and who you will become.*" How can parents do this?

**First, lead by example.** There's no escaping this. Your children are watching you all the time. Robert Coles, a psychologist and professor of medical humanities at Harvard University, offers the following sage insight in his book, *The Moral Intelligence of Children* (1997):

We grow morally as a consequence of learning how to be with others, how to behave in this world, a learning prompted by taking to heart what we have seen and heard. The child is a witness; the child is an ever-attentive witness of grown-up morality – or lack thereof; the child looks and looks for cues as to how one ought to behave, and finds them galore as we parents and teachers go about our lives, making choices, addressing people, showing in action our rock-bottom assumptions, desires, and values, and thereby telling these young observers much more than they realize. (p. 5)

**Second, love your children.** Children gain enormous confidence from knowing that they are loved by their parents *for who they are, not simply for how they perform.*

Loving your children demands *time and attention*. This is the resource we seem to be lacking most these days. We are on the go, stressed, over-worked, overwhelmed, invaded by email, faxes, voicemail, and our intrusive cell phones. It's difficult just to enjoy each other's company. And when we're home, we withdraw into our rooms and our separate television programs, CD players, or phone conversations.

Love means setting limits. Love means saying, "I made a mistake," "I was wrong." Love also means forgiving and forgetting. Love means keeping your word. Love means caring enough to correct and correcting with affection and truthfulness.

**Third, do not protect your children from failure.** Some of the best life lessons are learned through an in-house suspension or a visit to the police station. Help your children to make sense of and learn from difficulties, suffering, and disappointments instead of allowing them to escape into sham comfort or self-destructive behaviors.

**Fourth, help your children to cultivate a talent, hobby, sport, or skill.** Be aware of how your children spend their time, energy, and talent. This is very important. Adolescents

*continued on page 6*

in particular need to engage their energies usefully and meaningfully; they need to learn how to use their freedom well.

**Fifth, hold your children accountable for their academic performance, not their teachers.** Help your children to identify the study habits and extra help they need. Help them to see that they are not simply victims of circumstance, passive beings thrust forward in this fast-paced world by various forces from teachers and grades, to friends and peers. Help them to see that in fact they can make choices and take action to improve their performance.

**Sixth, foster an attitude of gratitude.**

Remind your children that character and friendship are evidenced in good manners: *Please, Thank you, Excuse me, I'm sorry, You're welcome.* The mark of a true gentleman or lady, however, is not simply following the rules of etiquette – there are some perfectly refined people who are utterly self-centered and arrogant. The secret to real class is putting the needs of others before our own.

Children and adolescents need to be needed. Hold them accountable for the part they play in your family. Give them opportunities to show their gratitude by completing small jobs around the house or helping with a project.

**Seventh, nurture their moral imagination and memory.** Parents have enormous competition for the hearts, imagination, and memory

of their children. Teenagers are a prime target of the advertising industry – marketing the latest fashion, music, popular icons, video games, and cult films. Parents can drown out the negative with an abundance of good alternatives. Pick up some excellent books on tape for your next long car trip. Talk to your kids about the sports team you enjoy, the music you love, and why. Share the lyrics with them. Talk about your childhood heroes and heroines. Help to cultivate their aesthetic sensibilities; take them to the art museum or an opera. Watch television with them. Help them to become critical viewers, to acquire a healthy indignation in the face of exploitation, degradation, and violence.

**Eighth, cultivate the art of communication**

in the car, at the dinner table, around the house, cleaning up or preparing a meal together. Talk with your children. Teenagers don't want to hear a lot from adults as much as they want to be taken seriously. "What did you do today?" or "Whom did you see at the party?" doesn't yield as much as "Tell me about your day." Then parents discover what *their children* have on *their* minds; what adolescents *choose* to talk about reveals a lot.

**Ninth, be generous with your affection.**

Children and adolescents are starved for affection despite the fact that they may recoil when you try to hug them. Fathers especially, hug your daughters. If you don't give them affection, they will seek it elsewhere. Don't be naïve. Parents have to be savvy in providing good reasons and advice. Let your children know what they are worth. Encourage them

to seek friendship and mutual respect. Be frank. Talk to your sons about being a man of respect and integrity; prepare him to face the pressure of locker room bravado and talk of "conquests." Talk to your daughter about her own self-respect and dignity. Let her know that her worth is not dependent on her appearance, popularity, or sex appeal.

**Tenth, don't lose hope.** Hope is stronger than optimism; it is rooted in the conviction that something good, real, and worthwhile lies behind the challenges, difficulties, moods, and even periods of time in our lives (like adolescence, for example). Young people aspire to be their own persons but not with complete license. They *are* eager for direction and to hear our "yes" or "no." They want to know what we think and what we care about. They want to know that there are ideals worth fighting for, sacrificing ourselves for, and living for. They lean on your moral courage and convictions while they are still developing their own.

*Dr. Karen E. Bohlin, formerly the executive director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University and co-author with Kevin Ryan of Building Character in Schools: Practical Ways to Bring Moral Instruction to Life, is now the head of school at the Montrose School in Natick, MA. This piece is excerpted from Dr. Karen E. Bohlin's speech, "The Odyssey of Adolescence," a keynote address given in a variety of school and community settings in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Illinois.*

# From the **TRENCHES**

## **I LOVE** the **VERCHOS**

*by Jamie Sussel Turner*

Each summer, with a pang of guilt, I toss out the little drawings, stories, and notes given to me over the course of the school year. But there are always a few items I just can't part with. This summer it was the tiny scraps of paper given to me by Emily. The bright-eyed first grader had bounced into my office near the end of the school year and handed me a small piece of paper, which read, "to Mrs. Turner. I love the verchos." For a moment I was puzzled. Then, as I read her note aloud, I realized that she was referring to the *virtues* of our character education program.

The following day, she again appeared in my office, this time holding a very small booklet of yellow paper fastened by a single staple. Printed in bright orange on the cover was "Sho these verchos." The following pages listed one virtue per page: "respect, kindnis, persaverins, generasit, and gradetod." The last page read, "I hope you do."

Seeing how our character education program affected this young child was the best gift I could imagine at the conclusion of a very difficult school year. Several members of our community, which is not far from New York City, suffered tragic losses on September 11, an event that affected all of us deeply. Our new character education initiative couldn't have been launched at a better time.

Zooming in on virtues has enabled our school community to focus on the qualities that define a good person and has given us a common language to better discuss, internalize, and exhibit these dispositions. Our character education program is structured around ten virtues, one for each month of the school year,

that were chosen by a committee of parents, teachers and administrators. The virtues are: kindness, respect, generosity, gratitude, cooperation, honesty, perseverance, loyalty, and courage.

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Following the philosophy of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University, we agreed that character education would not be a separate curriculum, but that it would be a strong thread woven into the fabric of the school community. To accomplish this, we decided to tap the power of children's literature. During the summer of 2001, our school library media specialist and I assembled a character education book collection that contained one book in common for every virtue and several additional selections carefully chosen for particular grade levels.

During the school year, each monthly faculty meeting began with a reading of the common book covering the virtue for that month, followed by discussion of how the theme might be presented so that it could be understood

and internalized by our 450 K-3 students. A copy of the book for that month was then presented to each staff member and the library media specialist distributed additional books aligned with the month's virtue.

In the classrooms, following the reading of each book, children reflected upon the virtue exemplified, made personal connections, and captured their thoughts in notebook entries. The school hallways were decorated with sayings, pictures, and essays related to the virtue of the month. As the year went on, teachers began sending the character books home with students as a means of extending the lessons and common language into the home.

Now in our second year of the character education initiative, I am looking for ways to build on our initial success. One thing I have done is to expand the usual basket of books that I keep in my office for children's birthday gifts by adding copies of all ten character education books. I've also added several additional picture books to each classroom teacher's collection from last year. In addition, each staff member was given a stack of colorful cards listing our ten virtues and encouraged to present a card to anyone demonstrating one of the virtues in a manner that is above and beyond what one might expect.

*continued on page 12*

## The **ROOTS** of **CHARACTER** (continued)

do far better in communities characterized by shared moral values than in communities where the young receive conflicting messages – and this is true whether communities are rural or urban, wealthy or modest in means.

Character education must consist of more than skin-deep programs that ask students to merely recite virtuous words such as honesty, tolerance, respect, courage, and so on; such words do little more than pass in one ear and out the other. Character education needs to have a real-life side that engages students in activities, either within the school or in the broader community, that help them acquire

regular habits of virtuous behavior. Active engagement not only ensures that young people will invest themselves in the program; it also nurtures the capacity to make moral choices freely, and the love of liberty, one of the defining virtues of citizenship in a democracy. Character education, in addition to teaching children what *not* to do (don't lie, don't cheat, don't act disrespectfully, and so on) also must have a positive side, inspiring young people to dedicate themselves to higher purposes. In the long run, it is a sense of positive inspiration that sustains good character. A young person who is committed to truly noble purposes does not need external injunctions

to walk the straight and narrow path: as they say in sports, a good offense is the best defense.

Charitable work is one way to introduce students to a larger purpose. Community service programs, especially when combined with reflection about the moral and personal significance of serving others, are powerful inducers of character development. The sort of community service programs that are promoted by the Freedom Corps are excellent examples of this, and the inspirational nature of this initiative sends exactly the right kind of message to young Americans.

*Participants at the 2003 Teachers Academy at Coker College, South Carolina*

*Photo courtesy of Miranda Manning*





Work as a sense of *calling*, a means of contributing to the betterment of the world by using one's personal skills and talents, is another character-inducing source of purpose for a youngster; as is the wish to establish and nurture a thriving family. Faith and spirituality, too, offers young people positive experiences with transcendent purposes. Another transcendent purpose is love of country and a selfless dedication to it. In the case of a country that stands as a beacon of democracy and freedom for the world, this is a noble sentiment. The age-old term for this spirit of dedication is *patriotism*, a term that in recent years has not always been promoted in our educational settings; yet now, when our society has been called upon to combat the

evils of international terror, patriotism has assumed its rightful place as a source of inspiration for the young.

In order to fulfill their character education missions, our schools and communities must make special efforts to provide young citizens with all these sources of inspiration and more, becoming places where all young people can discover their own callings and noble purposes.

*William Damon is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, the director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, and a professor of education at Stanford University.*

The Ryan Library is open 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM Monday through Friday as a resource to the university community and the School of Education, as well as to the ever-widening circle of national and international contacts of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character. *Please come visit.*

## A spotlight on the JEWISH HIGH HOLIDAYS

by Josh Katzen

*Editor's Note: Josh Katzen gave a speech last fall as the father of a student at Roxbury Latin School in Boston, MA. Founded in 1645, Roxbury Latin School is the oldest school in continuous operation in the United States. What follows is an excerpt from Mr. Katzen's speech.*

September 10, 2002 - When Mr. Jarvis asked me to speak to the School during the Jewish High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), in which the focus is on repenting for our sins of the past year, he suggested that I talk about my personal experiences and the relationship between my religious faith and the spiritual nature of these days.

I immediately thought, "This is a dangerous situation." Discussing my personal experiences of sin with a roomful of teenaged boys might be a little risky: a lot of them, perhaps just getting started on looking for opportunities to experience some serious sinning themselves, might be expecting some pretty exciting stories, and that didn't sound like a good idea for a serious speech at the Roxbury Latin School...

Mr. Jarvis has said, "We care most of all what kind of person a boy is. If character education is not the most important thing in a school, then it is not important at all." And the official statement of purpose of Roxbury Latin provides that the School's principal goal is to infuse in its students a commitment to a life characterized by "honesty, simplicity, respect and concern for others."

Mr. Jarvis and Roxbury Latin didn't just come up with this idea of requiring proper ethical behavior out of thin air. It's not like he was watching the Oprah Winfrey show and some-

one was saying "all you need is love" and "you should be good to other people," and Mr. Jarvis said, "That's a good idea. I think I'll tell the boys to be good to other people." No, when your school calls on you to have "honesty, simplicity, respect and concern for others," it's basing its thinking on what's known as the Judeo-Christian tradition.

This is a bigger thing than you may think.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, as applied at Roxbury Latin, holds each person responsible for his own actions; it says that there are rules by which we all must live in this community and that there is a difference between good behavior and bad behavior; that it's up to the individual to change himself in order to become a better person rather than to change the rules to accommodate his needs or political ideals of the moment.

So, we (Jews) have the Ten Commandments, with all that they imply. But they're only the tip of the iceberg: scattered throughout the Bible are another 613 "mitzvot." While the Ten Commandments deal with really big issues, like worshipping only one god and not killing people, the 613 mitzvot are rules – commandments, once again – for how to structure our lives and society. There are rules governing religious practices, diet, legal proceedings, divorce, forbidden sexual relations, business dealings, property rights, the treatment of animals and the treatment of captives in war.

These 613 mitzvot are divided into 248 deeds that you should do and 365 that you shouldn't. The reason there are 365 negative commandments is supposed to be based on the fact that there are, according to Jewish law, 365 bones,

arteries and veins in the human body, and avoiding doing 365 negative things is as important to supporting our souls as the bones and veins and arteries are to supporting our bodies. I don't know if that's medically true, but it's the reason.

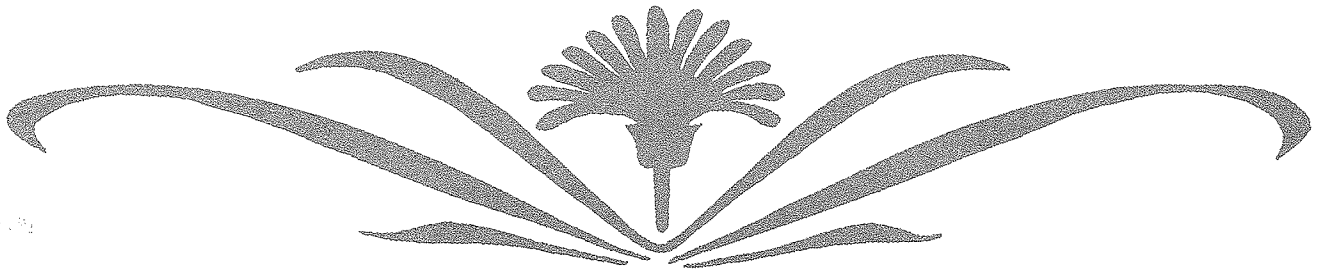
So these 613 mitzvot, scattered throughout the Bible, are the next level of requirements, fleshing out the general ideas set forth in the Ten Commandments and applying them on a communal and societal basis.

Now we get to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which occur over a ten-day period about this time of year every year, and we see that the level of analysis, the types of behavior we start to talk about, becomes much more subtle and personal.

On Rosh Hashanah, we look back over the previous year and think about the rules of personal behavior that we've broken and how we've failed to live lives of "honesty, simplicity, concern and respect for others."

During the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we're supposed to act on the thoughts that we had during Rosh Hashanah and go out and personally ask forgiveness from those whom we've wronged. And on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Jews close the circle by asking forgiveness for those sins from God.

On Yom Kippur, Jews spend the entire day in temple. We don't eat all day; we don't wash, shave or put on makeup; we put away our bodies and concentrate on our thoughts, remembering our sins and asking God to forgive us.



It's a very heavy day.

But the sins we're supposed to concentrate on at this time of year are not specifically the Ten Commandments—although they're certainly important. And we don't solemnly review our compliance with the 613 positive and negative mitzvot, because that's not what we're really concentrating on. Neither, however, is description of our sins left to our own individual imaginations. It's not a free-form contemplation (although during the 11 hours in temple without food, your mind does, and is supposed to, reflect on your own specific life). But the main prayer of Yom Kippur, which is repeated several times over the hours, is made up of a list of 44 sins that we all read and for which we all atone, written out in a prayer called the *Al Chait* ("For the sin").

When we're reciting the *Al Chait*, we're not allowed to pick and choose from among the sins; we have to mention each of the 44 sins by name, strike our hearts with our fist as we recite each one in humility and self-punishment, and ask forgiveness for each of them, because we've all committed each of those sins.

Now, of course, you know that it's not a coincidence that the *Al Chait* prayer contains 44 sins. The reason there are 44 specific sins is because the sins are arranged in alphabetical order in Hebrew — an acrostic: the first sin starts with the first Hebrew letter, aleph; the second with bet, and so forth, through the entire 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The idea is that we're supposed to think about every human sin, from "A" to "Z", or from aleph to tuff, as it were.

The reason there are 44 sins rather than 22 (for the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet) is because the *Al Chait* prayer is actually a double acrostic — there are two separate sins starting with aleph, 2 with bet, etc. This is because whoever wrote the prayer wanted to make sure that if the idea was to cover every single sin, he'd better run through the entire aleph bet (the "alphabet") twice, in order to avoid leaving one out.

And what are those sins? Those of you who've been waiting patiently through this talk, hoping to get to the part about the juicy, lurid sins, described in anatomical detail, are going to be disappointed. The list of the most important sins, recited only on the holiest day of the Jewish year, is remarkably ordinary:

There are the obvious ones, like the sin of wronging a neighbor and the sin of showing contempt for parents and teachers; the sin of baseless hatred (prejudice) or of cheating someone at business. These are clearly wrong things to do.

Then there are some sins that are more personal, like the sin of overeating and drinking too much. Eating is so basic a human activity that a person's true character is revealed by how and what he eats.

A really major category includes the sins connected with speech. The rabbis taught that speech, which is unique to humans, is what sets us apart from animals and is therefore a key to holiness. Speech must be undertaken with respect and used to elevate ourselves and our community. So the prayer lists the sin of harsh speech and the sin of gossiping. That's

because talking about people can damage relationships, families and communities. So we have to be careful.

Idle chatter is also a sin, and so is foolish speech. The opportunity to talk to another person is a gift. You're not supposed to waste time talking about trivial things or negative things; you're not supposed to miss the opportunity to have a good conversation with someone because you're too shy. You have to treat the act of human conversation with a lot of respect.

The sin of being "lightheaded" is in a similar category. Have we remembered that life is short and serious and have we used our opportunity to do something important? Are we pursuing meaningful goals, or are we just watching TV? When we read the newspapers, do we work through the difficult articles and opinions in order to understand the world better, or do we go straight to the comics and sports? Am I a lightweight?

Then there are the sins more directly connected with how you treat other people. The sin of wronging a friend is listed because friendship is recognized as one of the highest forms of human activity. Have we helped our friends? Have we been sensitive to their feelings? Have we taken advantage of someone who trusted us as a friend?

The sin of arrogance is listed because it keeps us from being simple. Did we dress or act in such a way as to call attention to ourselves for the sake of being noticed?

*continued on page 14*

From the **TRENCHES** (continued)

### Going by the book

Because character education isn't directly covered by high-stakes testing, this may give some educators an excuse for excluding it from an already full curriculum. But rallying our community around character education has enriched us all. For children, reading about the perseverance shown by *Brave Irene* in William Steig's timeless children's tale will help a child to keep going when faced with a difficult assignment. Reading about how the little fish worked together to chase away the big fish in Leo Lionni's book, *Swimmy*, will help children

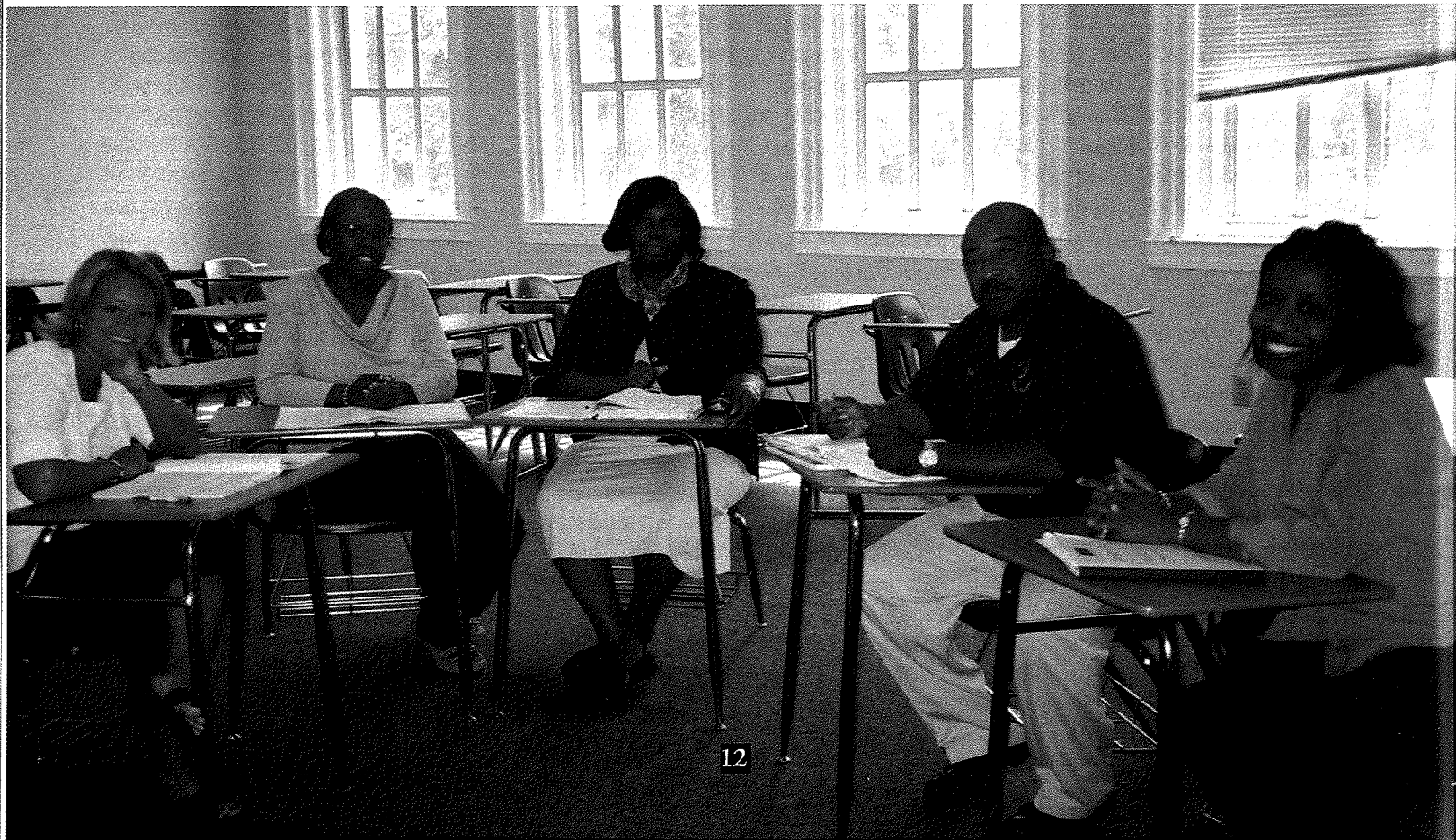
learn to cooperate with one another as they collaborate in solving a particularly challenging math problem. It's not often that the impact of a new initiative is felt so profoundly in its initial year. Emily's note to me was a joyous sign of the lessons our students were learning alongside their reading, writing, and math lessons. We don't need a separate program because character lessons are everywhere, both in and out of school, if we just take the time to find them. Working together to develop our children's minds and habits, beginning with

a focus on these ten virtues, will help us to create a future community of character, reaching all of the other Emilys who will come to love the verchos.

*Jamie Susse Turner is principal of Viola L. Sickles School in Fair Haven, NJ. This piece originally appeared in the January/February 2003 issue of Principal.*

A "breakout" session at the 2003 Teachers Academy at Coker College, South Carolina

Photo courtesy of Miranda Manning



quotes on

## GRATITUDE

"Blessed are those who can give without remembering, and take without forgetting."  
— Elizabeth Bibesco

"Gratitude is not only the greatest of the virtues, but the parent of all others."  
— Cicero

"Silent gratitude isn't much use to anyone."  
— G. B. Stern

"The essence of all beautiful art, all great art, is gratitude."  
— Friedrich Nietzsche

"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant."  
— Max DePree

"If you see no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies in yourself."  
— Native American Proverb

"Gratitude is a debt, 'tis true, but it differs from all other debts; for this it ought always to be paid, yet it is never to be demanded."  
— Anonymous

books on

## GRATITUDE

*Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel,*

Virginia Lee Burton

*Peppe the Lamplighter,* Elisa Bartone

*Thank You, Mr. Falker,* Patricia Polacco

*A Chair for My Mother,* Vera Williams

*The Giving Tree,* Shel Silverstein

*The Gift of the Magi,* O. Henry

*Maniac Magee,* Jerry Spinelli

*Their Eyes Were Watching God,*

Zora Neale Hurston

*Anne of Green Gables,* L.M. Montgomery

movies on

## GRATITUDE

*It's a Wonderful Life* (1947)

*Heaven Knows Mr. Allison* (1957)

*To Sir With Love* (1967)

*Forrest Gump* (1994)

*Mr. Holland's Opus* (1996)

*The Emperors' Club* (2002)

## Upcoming EVENTS in CHARACTER EDUCATION

**October 16 – 18, 2003. Washington, DC**

*Character Education Partnership 10<sup>th</sup> National Forum. Don't miss Karen Bohlin and Bernice Lerner's presentation, "Educating Mind and Heart: Building Character in Schools."*

Contact Character Education Partnership  
Telephone 1.800.988.8081, extension 10  
Fax 202.296.7779  
Website [www.character.org](http://www.character.org)

**November 14, 2003. Boston, MA**

*The Meaning of Courage by Bernice Lerner. A workshop for teachers sponsored by The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum, Inc. 8:30 AM – 12:30 PM*

Contact Jennifer Loff, Executive Director  
Telephone 617.244.5229  
Fax 617.244.5391  
E-mail [jlloff@maxcourage.org](mailto:jlloff@maxcourage.org)  
Website [www.maxcourage.org](http://www.maxcourage.org)

**March 20 – 22, 2004. New Orleans, LA**

*ASCD 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference. Don't miss this intriguing workshop: Bernice Lerner and Karen Newman's presentation, "Building Character in Schools" on Sunday, March 21, 8:00 – 9:30 AM. Karen Newman is the Dean of Studies preK-12 at Montclair Kimberley Academy.*

Contact ASCD  
Telephone 1.800.933.ASCD (2723)  
Fax 703.575.5400  
E-mail [member@ascd.org](mailto:member@ascd.org)  
Website [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org)

**March 26, 2004. Boston, MA**

*"Ethics in the Professions" Symposium. Boston University, 2:00 – 5:00 PM. Presenters: Michael Grodin, M.D., School of Public Health, Robert Zelnick, LLB, College of Communications, Susan Koniak, J.D., School of Law, TBA, School of Management*

Contact Megan Black Uy  
Telephone 617.353.3262  
Fax 617.353.4351  
E-mail [caec@bu.edu](mailto:caec@bu.edu)  
Website <http://www.bu.edu/education/caec>

**April 16, 2004. Boston, MA**

*CAEC Institute, Boston University 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM*

Contact Megan Black Uy  
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Website <http://www.bu.edu/education/caec>

Some of the sins get more complicated. A big one is the sin of improper eye movements: Did we look at a neighbor's possessions with envy? Did we spy into someone else's window at night when the lights were on and it was easy to see in? Did we read something that was supposed to be private? Did we stare at a member of the opposite sex in an inappropriate way? Did we put someone down by rolling our eyes or glaring at him or her?

There's the sin we committed "in public and in private." Did we only do a good deed because we knew someone was watching? Did we do something in private only because we knew no one was watching?

We're clearly talking about very simple, daily types of actions here. And the common denominator of these sins is that they prevent us from doing a good job with the really important aspects of our lives: how we talk to people, how we treat people, even how we think about people. These sins are the things we do to each other – and to ourselves – every day. This prayer is a real guide to human relations. And isn't it true that all of these sins can be summed up basically as "those actions that would be inconsistent with Roxbury Latin's demand that its boys treat each other with 'honesty, simplicity, respect and concern for others'?"

Every Yom Kippur, for 1,600 years, Jews have been asking for forgiveness for the same list of 44 sins, in double Hebrew acrostic form. You'd think that going through all this, sitting in temple all day with no food, asking for forgiveness for having committed the same sins, year in and year out, by now we'd either say, "OK, we've got it, we understand," or we'd give up – we've been trying to get it right for 1,600 years and we still blow it, every year – why should we expect next year to be any different?

But no, the genius of this prayer, and the reason that it's as relevant today as it was in the year 450, is that it speaks to basic human interactions. We can conduct every human contact with respect or we can commit one of these sins, which really are about being disrespectful, of other people or of ourselves. So although it's very hard to be perfect, since you're faced with the decision of how to act towards other people, and what to think, hundreds of times every day, once a year (at least) we can sit down and recognize the choices we've made and how we've conducted ourselves; we can ask forgiveness from those whom we've wronged; and we can try to become better people.

And at the end of the full day of praying and repenting on Yom Kippur, after the last prayer has been said, one person gives a long blow on the shofar. The shofar is a primitive instru-

ment, made out of a ram's horn. It's hard to get a sound out of it, it's almost impossible to change notes and you can't use it to play a song. The sound is piercing and primitive, and it's been said that it symbolizes your soul crying out, summing up all the rest of the thoughts that you can't express, that only God can understand and translate into a plea for forgiveness.

This acceptance of the idea that we can be commanded to follow rules for how we're supposed to act towards other people and towards ourselves; this awareness that life is made up of hundreds of tiny decisions every day and that we always have the opportunity to choose the right one – because there really is a right one; in fact this commandment, this requirement that we do make the right choice all the time, is the other great pillar of the Judeo part of the Judeo-Christian tradition that guides this School.

*Josh Katzen is a member of the Board of Directors for the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA) and the President of the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA).*

# To our **READERS**

We want to hear from you!

The strength of this newsletter depends on the active contribution of its readers. Our readers need to hear what's happening in your school or community. (That's what our "From the Trenches" section is all about.)

We welcome submissions of any kind: letters, articles, anecdotes. What has worked in your classroom, home, or school? What has inspired your dedication to character education? We also encourage recommendations for our Selected Bibliography, Movies, and Character Quotes.

The next issue will spotlight **CITIZENSHIP**. The deadline for our next issue is **December 31**. Please address all correspondence to: Newsletter Managing Editor, Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character, 621 Commonwealth Avenue Boston, MA 02215

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## **MEMBERSHIP** Form

Please use this form to initiate, renew, or update your membership.

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**Note:** \$40 of each Friend of the CAEC membership is tax-deductible. We are a non-profit organization that relies on grants and the generosity of its members. Any additional tax-deductible contribution you make to the CAEC is both needed and greatly appreciated.

Visit our website!

[www.bu.edu/education/caec](http://www.bu.edu/education/caec)



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