



CHARACTER

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Best of CHARACTER: 1992–2008

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Reflections

by Nancy Turock, MSW

When asked to be a part of the panel to select articles for republication in your upcoming anniversary edition, it was hard for me to believe that 20 years have passed since the first issue of *Character!* While considering each article, I was struck most by what is common to all of them, despite their different content, approach, writing style, and so forth.

Over the past two decades, the discipline of character education has matured. It has emerged as a separate and respectable field of study and has become accepted—at least theoretically and, increasingly, practically—by schools and parents as an important part of the educational process. Unfortunately, it is true that other professions have been brought under the rubric of “character education” that do not actually teach virtues or address how character develops. Within the discipline, though, there is a cohesiveness, a certain baseline of acceptance and agreement about the major tenets of what character education is (and is not), and how it can be taught.

As anyone who has ever been a student knows, character education is already in every classroom. An important way that students learn character is by experiencing the way a teacher treats others, their teaching style and personality, and how they address the ethical issues that inevitably arise. In practice, many successful formal character education programs recognize this. They have not focused on making large curriculum changes or additions—which is difficult for many schools because of budget and time constraints—but have instead consciously woven character education into the fabric of everyday classroom life, whatever the subject being taught. Formal character education programs and materials can help make students more accountable, assist teachers by

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How Do We Care? Let Us Count the Ways

by Bernice Lerner, EdD

Spring 2007

We teachers (ideally) care about our students, our respective subject areas, and managing our time well. More specifically, we care about that which affects our students: the particular milieus they must navigate and events that shape their lives. We care about how we can best help them learn

and hone skills while upholding high expectations and offering needed support. We try to transmit information that resonates and to develop rich curricula and lesson plans. We search for methods that suit our temperaments and those of our classes, and that reflect good practice. Many of us care about our professional development, our career trajectory, attending to the various demands in our lives, and taking time to recharge. Rarely, however, do we stop to reflect on the ends to which all this caring is aimed. In Aristotelian terms, what is the “telos”—or ultimate goal—with which we are concerned?

Our work-related endeavors shape, in part, our destinies. Having chosen a noble profession, we have opportunities to regularly practice (and model) wisdom, justice, and compassion; in other words, to lead good lives. Must we not care about helping each of our students make strides toward this same overarching goal?

Lest such caring seem esoteric, listen to the voices of educators who work in an extreme setting—an urban, public high school in Boston. In this school, eighty-five percent of the students qualify under federal law for free lunch. The students’ parents, a number of whom are single moms, struggle to earn a living, and few earn more than \$24,000 a year. Many of the teens are exposed to crime, violence, and drug addiction. Some feel they live in a “war zone,” with school being their only haven. Some carry knives—which they hide around the school’s grounds—to protect themselves.

Such students must be vigilant, know “the code,” never squeal, and know how to steal and manipulate to get what they need or want. They have low expectations of themselves and others, and low self-esteem. Others fare well, and are engaged in their classes and work outside of school. Many own the standard fare of American teens—cell phones, iPods, and coordinating sneakers and clothes.

How do the educators of these students aim to help them lead good lives? In three ways: 1) By enabling them to discern right from wrong; 2) By fostering in them the desire to do what is good; and 3) By encouraging them to take responsibility.

Caring principle #1: To lead a good life: Discern right from wrong

The most troubled of the high school’s students bring with them to ninth grade a horrifying history. They have had difficulty in school settings for years and lack basic skills. One counselor notes that parents are “the whole key”—if they neglect to think about their children’s needs and do not consider education important, the teacher must impart fundamental lessons:

Part of my job is to teach what is right and what is wrong. Moral education... that’s what it’s about. [Students] need to make their own decisions. So you have to teach them how to make the right decisions. I call [what I do] ‘milieu therapy.’ For example, something happens—there is a fight in the hallway. And then the kids are all excited... it’s like watching a soap opera. So then you process it with



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Staff

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them, right then and there. One fight we had, the kids were watching it, so my job was to get them back into the classroom. I promised to tell them the whole story; all the details. Everyone would say, 'Oh, you should have let them fight, you should have done this, you should have done that.' We just talk about it. Sometimes what they are saying is "right" is what would get them results that they want... that's why they consider it right. But then, you flesh it out, asking, How would that be if you were the other person? You don't [tell them] the golden rule. You have to actually let them talk and you have to listen to them... they trust a person who they feel comfortable with, who listens to them.

This counselor describes how within certain groups' mores it is expected that boys will sexually harass girls; that girls beat up boys; that fighting between girls is vicious. She explains that students lie to her because they fear they will otherwise get into trouble; that she has rewarded those who tell her the truth for an entire day by taking them to Twin Donut. She has found that when she treats students with kindness and respect, they respond accordingly. And that she must also be "incredibly strict." She will not tolerate swearing or burping in her presence. Her students must say "please" and "thank you" or they will be asked to leave.

Caring Principle #2: *To lead a good life: Desire the good*

At the time of this writing columnists are discussing the behavior of Wesley Autrey, the man who leapt in front of a New York City subway train to save the life of a stranger who had fallen into the tracks. Why the fascination with this selfless, courageous deed? I believe we need exemplars of human goodness to inspire us to want to act well. We need to be shown what is within the realm of human possibility.

A Career Pathways program at the Boston high school puts before students choices they would not otherwise be exposed to. Between menial jobs and roles

dramatized on television are a host of positions in areas such as "law and government" and health care. Students who wish to contribute to society and live a solidly middle-class lifestyle indeed have realistic aspirations.

Beyond schoolwide initiatives, individual teachers try to foster in students the desire to do well. After 9/11 one teacher was disturbed that the majority of his students felt that the attack did not concern them—it touched no one in their neighborhoods. He hopes that students will register his own deep appreciation of history and its lessons, that some will want to expand their horizons. He tries to "work toward their interests as much as [possible] given the nature of the curriculum," and to give them the opportunity to discuss sex, drugs, jobs, and other topics about which they need honest information. Perhaps most importantly, he—and other of the school's teachers—debunk myths. They tell students who are disinclined to participate in extracurricular activities or to put effort into their schoolwork (because that's "acting white") that they are making a huge mistake. Minority teachers in particular serve as authentic role models.

An English-as-a-second-language teacher fears for her students who are recent immigrants. Though integration is desirable, she does not want them to adopt the unseemly behavior typically seen in the school's hallways. She has observed that those who come from countries to which they cannot return put great effort into their studies. She names and reinforces positive habits. She cares that her students desire the good.

Caring principle #3: *To lead a good life: Take responsibility*

It is not unusual for abusive and/or lawless parents to blame the system (e.g., uninteresting lessons) for their children's lack of effort or suspensions, perpetuating a cycle of apathy and self-destruction. And when parents are satisfied with report cards full of *Cs* and *Ds* (as they had not done better themselves) teaching responsibility falls on school personnel.

One counselor finds that she must give concrete instructions. Sometimes this means making clear to students and their parents that teenagers must be provided with an alarm clock and breakfast, be in on weeknights at a reasonable hour, that there are expectations regarding handing in homework and consequences when a student breaches school rules.

Of course, there are many situations in which parents desire what is good for their children and where students assume responsibility. One special education teacher is proud of a boy whom she believes will lead a good life:

Once somebody wants something and then you give them the formula to get it, and they have the strength and the perseverance [to go for it], they can succeed. We have one boy we think is going to be successful. He's got low intelligence, tested almost borderline... His mother is low-intelligence and doesn't understand the system. So here he is. Low intelligence, no support, but he wants to own his own business at Fenway Park, be a hotdog vendor. He'll probably make it. The teachers say he's such a nudge. He always gets what he wants. He goes after it and goes after it and goes after it.

I would argue that the ways in which these Boston high school educators care apply to all school communities. No matter where or what we teach, the goal to which our efforts should be aimed is to help our students lead good lives. Toward this end, we must care that they know right from wrong; desire what is noble; and exercise their will to act. ❖



Teaching Children Values in School

by William Damon

December 1993

There is nothing unrealistic about the idea that schools can teach children good values. Nor should this idea seem controversial to us. By their very existence, schools present students with important values such as orderliness, respect for others, honesty, and responsibility. Beyond this implicit values agenda, schools also introduce children to many of the values necessary for constructive participation in a democratic society—values such as equal rights, freedom of speech, and respect for legitimate authority. By teaching children the social and historical context of such values, schools prepare young people for full citizenship.

Many wonder whether it is appropriate for public schools to take positions on human values. “Whose values?” and “Shouldn’t a public school teacher be ‘value neutral?’” are questions often raised. The results of value neutrality have not been good. Children have not come away with improved understanding, firmer beliefs, or better conduct, but have become confused or cynical about the school’s message (or lack thereof).

Values neutrality is unnecessary and misguided because there is widespread concern among civilized people everywhere about the importance of core values such as truthfulness, respect, kindness, and responsibility. In a democratic society such as ours, there is also widespread endorsement of values such as liberty, equality, and justice. When schools force their efforts on teaching these core values, there is little cause for disagreement or concern. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that public schools have no business proselytizing about controversial matters of religious or political ideology—nor need they do so in order to teach children good values.

The enterprise of teaching children values in schools is often an indirect one. Where core values are concerned, teachers often communicate more by their manners than through explicit messages. A habit of being scrupulously honest with one’s students is far more powerful for teaching the value of truthfulness than a thousand lectures on the subject. Students are acutely aware of times when teachers are shading the truth, when they are favoring some students over others, and when they are turning a cold shoulder on students in need. Students are equally aware of their teachers’ efforts to be honest, fair, and caring. Such efforts are the surest and most lasting means of communicating good values to children.

Sometimes the feisty life of the classroom itself provides teachers with unexpected opportunities to demonstrate core values. Ethical dilemmas often arise suddenly and with little warning. A teacher may overhear students exchanging racial epithets, or catch one student helping another cover up a fake absence excuse, or observe unreciprocated acts of kindness or cruelty. A teacher’s moral response to such classroom problems can galvanize students’ attention and imbue them with moral awareness.

The curriculum itself also may be used to communicate values. Each discipline has moral and ethical issues imbedded within it. Literature is full of interpersonal problems that can be examined in terms of the core human values that they express. History can be viewed in light of how people struggle for rights and determine the responsibilities of citizenship. Science raises moral issues such as truthfulness and ethical ones such as the future of biomedical technology. A good teacher will be quick to draw students’ attention

to such issues when they arise naturally in readings or classroom discussion. Such discussions of values need neither dominate the curriculum nor detract from its integrity. Rather, they can enhance it by revealing another key dimension in the subject matter’s significance for human affairs.

Generally in my writings I have proposed the following guidelines for teaching values in schools:

- Stick to the basics, the central core of values endorsed by the community of responsible citizens.
- Have the confidence to take a position on what is right. Do not try to be “value neutral.” Children need firm adult guidance about right and wrong. Too much equivocating can make them cynical and demoralized.
- As ethical dilemmas arise spontaneously in your classroom, use them for purposes of moral instruction.
- Use the curriculum by highlighting the values and moral choices of character in literature, history, and science.
- Above all, act in the manner you are advocating. Pay attention to the quality of the relationship that you are establishing with your students. Be honest—don’t shade the truth with them. Be fair. Be kind. Be consistent. Be firm, while explaining the reasons behind your actions.

And remember—children need models, not saints. You don’t need to be perfect or infallible. When you are wrong, admit it. ❖

“How Can I Matter if I Don’t Win?”: Coaches, Parents, and Character Development in Sport

by Amy Baltzell, EdD

Fall 2005

I’ve been asked to write about the connection between character and sport. When most people hear this topic, they think about the character of young athletes themselves. Instead I’m going to focus on the character of parents and coaches, particularly those who focus on winning at all costs. Granted, there are many excellent coaches and the majority of parents love their children. They do all that they can so that their children will thrive. However, all too many coaches and parents have come to believe that a win-at-all-costs attitude will lead to success on the playing field. As a sport psychologist, I’ve seen that this attitude can have a devastating effect both on athletes’ performance and character development.

If an athlete internalizes the attitude that only winning matters, that athlete will quickly conclude that she only matters if she wins. I have had a number of athletes tell me how much their parents were invested in their sport. Winning was the good side of things. When they won or played well their parents would be elated and would shower them with love and appreciation. When they lost, however, their parents would not speak to them. Some would start to complain about all the time and money they had sacrificed. Even more commonly, I encountered athletes who were devastated by their coaches’ attitude toward winning. Many coaches showered their attention on their better players. They got more involved in their lives. Even a young star athlete could be ignored, however, if he or she went into a slump. And when a better

player came along, coaches commonly would radically change how they treated their former star player. What the athlete experiences is a deep inconsistency. Athletes who matter are those who are currently winning. I have seen dozens of athletes who are in great angst because they believe that their coach simply doesn’t care about them as human beings.

Why do I say that such attitudes have an impact on young athletes’ character development? Without believing that you matter, it is difficult to believe that others matter. To be able to develop good character habits one must be able to treat oneself and others with respect. When athletes believe that winning is the only thing that matters, they become willing to hurt themselves or others for a victory. Consider the seemingly benign case of ten-year-olds playing tennis. In youth tennis, line judges are often not available. The young players themselves often have to call balls “in” or “out.” Within this system, it is easy to cheat. In closely contested matches it is tempting to call a ball out for one’s advantage. Many kids are taught that if an opponent cheats by calling an “in” ball out, then it is okay to match the cheating and do the same to the opponent, to “level the playing field.” Many other seemingly small temptations eventually lead to the loss of moderation, and thereby the development of poor habits. These poor character habits can lead to extreme behaviors, such as children starving their bodies to meet the illusive ideals of sports like gymnastics, using steroids to be bigger and stronger to

meet the demands of sports like football, or using violence in any sport to dominate an opponent. At the core of such acts is lack of respect for self and others; a loss of mattering.

When one is looking at a group of fourth-grade soccer players happily running down the field, these may sound like extreme statements. But caring too much about winning is insidious. We all are at risk for celebrating and valuing winning too much and thereby not sending a consistent message to our kids that they matter, regardless of whether they win or not. We all want to win. Some parents and coaches begin with simply wanting their kids to win so the children feel good. We want our kids to be proud of themselves. But this attitude can exacerbate the win-at-all-cost attitude perpetrated in our sport culture. And this can lead to our kids ultimately developing the habit of not caring for or considering others. Our kids can’t learn good character habits if they don’t think about and act on issues that concern the greater good.

What does the win-at-all-costs attitude do to our children’s athletic performance? Some might think that it even helps with performance by providing motivation. To the contrary, I see an overwhelming number of athletes who simply are not enjoying what they are doing. They are so burdened with the desire and expectation to win that they have lost sight of why they began to participate in the first place—because they enjoyed it. And I know that this leads to kids leaving their sport,

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Character Education Through Buddy Reading

by Margaret Halacy

September 1997

The fourth and first grades at Webster Elementary School have been participating in a Buddy Reading program since 1995. First-grade children are paired with older students to share books twice a week for about 20 minutes.

Preparation

The students prepare for the first encounter by practicing reading out loud to one another and to someone at home. They also participate in a mini-class conducted by our reading specialist on how to share literature with younger children.

Reflection

After the first Buddy Reading session, the fourth-grade students gather to discuss what worked and what needed to be changed. It is important to meet regularly to share experiences; problems can be handled right away before they become unmanageable. This is also an excellent time to note students who have gone beyond the required and done something special for their buddy.

Role Reversal

As Buddy Reading sessions progress through the school year, the children in both grades gain confidence in their reading abilities as evidenced by the number of books read and the increased use of voices and expression used in reading aloud.

Usually by the middle of the year the roles reverse. The first-graders want to do more and more of the reading. This calls for increased patience on the part of the fourth-graders as they relinquish their "teacher role." Most students handle this

by taking turns with the reading. Certain students have the ability to not only be patient listeners but also to gently encourage and praise the fledgling reader.

Incidents Showing Character Growth

Several of the fourth-grade students (especially only children and youngest children) were really unsure of how to deal with younger children at the beginning. They would sometimes look to those students who were older siblings in their families for advice on how to act. One boy who was very bossy with his buddy at the beginning of the year became much more sensitive and caring as the year progressed. Another student who was known as a high achiever developed greater patience and the ability to listen and praise his beginning reader.

Hard-core behavioral problems seem to change as the students' role as "teacher" becomes more secure. One boy who was later removed from our school for behavior problems was very gentle and caring while reading to a disabled student who could not read at all.

The first-graders would often be heard to say with pride, "That's my buddy," when encountering them anywhere in the school. Many of the buddies exchange handmade gifts or drawings throughout the school year.

The Buddy Reading program helped develop many good character traits, including:

- Compassion: Students became increasingly able to "put themselves in the other person's place." Fourth-graders were often asked to remem-

ber how it felt when first learning to read—what if someone had ignored them when they really wanted to read a story out loud. Being happy for someone else's success was a new feeling for some of these students. This feeling was discussed and encouraged during reflection time.

- Cooperation: Working to complete an activity together without "taking over" took much practice. The fourth-graders were used to cooperative learning activities with peer groups or partners, but this was different. It involved paying more attention to the process and the final outcome as well as to the feelings of the other person.
- Patience: This trait seemed to be needed more and more as the year went on. As the first-graders became more confident in their reading and writing abilities, many wanted to spend the whole session "being listened to." It took patience on both sides to make this work.
- Sensitivity: Being aware of someone else's moods and weaknesses taught many students how not to take every remark as something personal. Fourth-graders were able to see how praise encourages someone to do more than they think they can accomplish.

In his book *The Moral Child*, William Damon writes, "for the optimal development of moral character, a child needs to experience the responsibilities and rewards of genuine service while still young." The Buddy Reading process gives

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Making Room for Moral Questions in the Classroom

by Katherine Simon

Spring 2002

In one of my first years of high school teaching, I asked my students to memorize and recite lines from *Macbeth*, which we were studying. On the day the memorization assignment was due, one of the students called out the following lines from her seat:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.*

I then did what I understood to be my job as an English teacher: I helped the students understand the definitions of the words “struts,” “frets,” and “signifying.” I asked them to comment on the central metaphor, in which “life” is compared to an actor. We pounded out the rhythm of the lines on our desks, noting that the first, fourth, and fifth lines do not fall neatly into iambic pentameter and discussing why Shakespeare might have departed from his norm for these lines. We had a passably interesting discussion about the meter and the words.

Neither I nor my students, however, thought to discuss the heart of the passage, the real questions being raised here: What are we to make of human pain and suffering? What meaning does life have? I knew that English teachers were supposed to teach about figures of speech and vocabulary, and I knew how to do that. I was neither equipped nor expected to explore what it means to be human. And so our discussion stayed safely out of the realm of meaning and morality. Focusing on the play's external structures rather than on its existential core, I unfortu-

nately ignored the very elements of the play that I myself find most important and exciting and that I believe might have held the most interest for my students.

The approach I took to teaching *Macbeth*—“teaching” the technical aspects of the subject rather than exploring its significance for me and my students—is all too familiar to anyone who has spent time in middle and high school classes. What John Goodlad reported over a decade ago remains true: the preponderance of classroom activity involves “listening, reading textbooks, completing workbooks and worksheets, and taking quizzes—not discussing important issues.” Across the curriculum, students are graded on the recall and feedback of memorized information.

As we attempt to make sense of and respond to the tragedies of September 11 and the current war in Afghanistan, we see more clearly how much we value the ability to think deeply about moral and existential questions. We see more clearly the importance of our children having the tools to grapple with the questions that occupy us now—and that have always formed the core of the subject matter we teach. But though we cherish the ability to deliberate thoughtfully, most teachers, myself included, have not conceived of our role as “facilitators of explorations of moral and existential questions.”

We have not seen ourselves in this way partly because it is not immediately obvious that big, morally charged questions do form the core of the subjects we teach. Indeed, much of the context of schooling promotes the idea that school subjects are essentially lists of things-to-know. As Arthur Applebee asserts in his critique of

the current curriculum, curriculum planning usually begins “with an inventory of important skills and concepts.” In this model, teachers must be deliverers of information, focused on “covering” material; focused on particular facts and skills. In the past few years, teachers have been pressed to deliver information ever more quickly and efficiently to help students pass ubiquitous and fateful standardized tests.

But if it is true, as so many have said, that everything is different now, then let us use this moment to reflect on what constitutes a meaningful education; on what it means to be an educated person. The truth is that the most important intellectual and moral achievements require the development of habits of mind—such as empathizing with people whose experience differs from our own, seeking out multiple strategies to resolve conflict, the ability to collaborate, knowing where to find more information, asking original questions, and reflecting on and learning from experience—which are not being fostered by the rush to cover the contents of our textbooks and syllabi.

We need not continue to conceive of our curriculum as a long list and of the role of teachers as the couriers of the list. Applebee suggests conceiving of curriculum as conversation; Dewey urged us to connect the record of humanity's great inquiries—the curriculum—to the curiosities of the child. I would put our challenge this way: *For every subject we teach, we must continually search for how it matters to our lives; how it links to the questions of morality and meaning that students, like all human beings, perennially ask.* Many of these are the same questions

of morality and meaning that have taken on special poignancy and urgency in these grief-filled days, and are questions that should guide our class discussions. As horrific and shocking as the events of September 11 were, the questions they raise should have been explored as a part of education for a democracy. As justified and inevitable as the American response seems to many, it too, raises questions that all American citizens should explore in depth as part of their education.

Now, when things don't seem as certain as they once did, we have an opportunity to create a different kind of curriculum built around questions that would simultaneously promote rigorous intellectual work and the ability to grapple with moral issues. Questions like these could frame our curriculum: Is killing justified when the killer believes he/she is pursuing a higher good? What is the difference between "war" and "terrorism"? What is race and how does it matter in our society and in the world? What are the tensions between freedom and security? Are there scientific advances that are simply too dangerous for us as a society to pursue? Investigations of such questions might include very wide-ranging content from history, literature, and science.

Whatever the particular sets of content studied under such overarching questions, these explorations would demand careful garnering of evidence and would provide practice in its interpretation. They would help students come to see the difference between having an opinion and having an informed opinion—and the difference between learning history, literature, and science and learning *from* history, literature, and science. We have an opportunity to think about all of our teaching—far beyond conversations about the current crisis—as the way in which our society helps young people deepen their understanding of themselves as human beings and develops their capacity for moral deliberation and action.

I am not making an argument in favor of relevance over content knowledge, nor about merely providing room for students

to express their feelings and opinions about these events, as important as that is. I am arguing that we have operated in schools under the illusion that we can separate neutral, academic, intellectual content from controversial, complex, morally charged questions about life. And this separation doesn't work—it undercuts the intellectual life of schools even as it leaves us ill-equipped to deliberate about moral issues.

Educators have spent so much time in recent years working on curriculum standards, in many cases laboring over exactly which topics are worthy of being covered by everyone. Certainly, in the textbooks written from now on, the attacks of September 11 will be included. But if they are taught as most of our history is taught, students of the future will memorize the date, the number of people who died, the names of the attackers, and perhaps the name of the president in office in 2001.

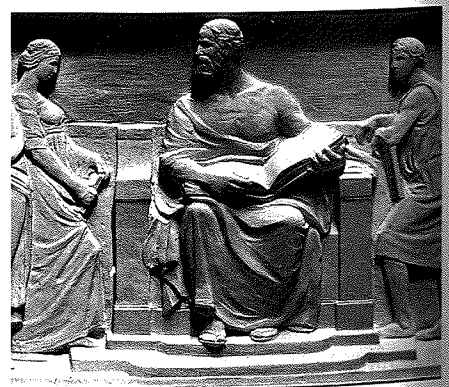
Using what Ted Sizer has called "essential questions" to frame courses is not a new idea. But what seems more clear than ever is that the questions essential to an understanding of the subjects we teach are largely moral and existential questions. This means that teachers must be ready and willing to delve into moral matters, far more than I was when I taught *Macbeth*. A brief story highlights the point:

In a ninth-grade English class I visited, the students were studying Elie Wiesel's *Night*, a memoir of the author's experience in a Nazi concentration camp. A student named Gary raised his hand to ask, "How can Wiesel still believe? How is it possible for anyone to believe in God after the Holocaust?" The teacher told him that it was a very important question—and he should bring it up with his clergyperson. The teacher went on to point out the symbolism in Wiesel's work. The class had a few minutes at the end of the period to continue reading.

The emphasis in this literature class was clearly on recognizing and being able to name themes from the text, not on

grappling personally with those themes. The teacher did not see it as her role to discuss in a more personal way Gary's and Wiesel's implied questions: Why do human beings hurt and kill one another? What does this imply about God? What does it mean for me as I witness cruelty and suffering? What does it mean for me as I grapple with understanding my own connection, if any, with my "enemies" and God? English class has been the forum for analyzing literature, not for examining one's own beliefs.

Teachers are not clergy—they neither have special training nor generally consider themselves experts in the problem of suffering in the world or in other moral questions. It is not surprising that teachers would be reluctant to tread this ground—especially in the public sphere, and especially when there are tests to prepare for. But if we care about supporting students to use their minds *well*, we must face the irony of avoiding hard questions and sticking only to the facts at school. Our task is to find a way to conceive of subject areas so that teachers—in their capacity as thinking, feeling human beings with a love and understanding for their disciplines—feel comfortable engaging themselves and their students in these questions. It is a moment for us to get more serious about what education means. We—all teachers, students, and citizens—want to understand this wrenching, frightening, beautiful, awe-inspiring world. School could be a place where, wrestling with questions that matter, we begin to make sense of our lives. ❖



Caring: At the Heart of an Educator's Role

by Kristen Fink

Spring 2007

Although I have been out of junior high and high school classrooms for almost a dozen years, I found myself sharpening pencils and buying notebooks for no particular reason this past September. The poignancy of the season was particularly heightened for me as both of my daughters, just two years out of their masters' programs in business and communication, decided to make life-changing career moves and become teachers. I began sifting through dozens of teaching resources, articles, lesson plans, and curricula, hoping to extract for them what had mattered most from my thirty-three years of education experience (and knowing full well that they had to discover it for themselves).

When I arrived for my first day of work in my junior high classroom at the tender age of twenty-one, I was ill-prepared for what it meant to be a teacher. Oh yes, I had taken all of the teacher certification courses and knew how to put together a good lesson plan, complete with behavioral objectives and anticipatory sets. I knew fifty ways to teach literature, and had collected more than one hundred coasters from a local coffee shop for my school bulletin board that said, "We're Glad You're Here!"

I remember going home physically exhausted my entire first year of teaching, and that I eventually had an epiphany: teaching was not about lesson plans or bulletin boards—it was about the quality of my character and the moral ethos of my classroom. What mattered were the caring relationships and sense of community that both my students and I were experiencing.

Slowly, as the days unfolded, I realized that caring was so integral to the work that no other goal could be accomplished

until those trusting relationships developed. Indeed, my students' development, their sense of safety and community, depended on the climate we established together. As I learned to work effectively with parents, I also recognized their critical role in fostering their children's character development. I learned, too, that I needed to involve my students in a variety of activities with the greater community. Learning to teach became for me a series of epiphanies.

Gordon Vessels, an Atlanta psychologist and outstanding character educator, said:

The moral growth of children... occurs when adults strive to be the type of people that children need for them to be, when children have many sustained relationships with socially responsible adults, and when children are provided with a network of supportive relationships or community.

I was discovering that my students needed competent, caring adults around them, and they also needed moral exemplars throughout the curriculum to inspire them with the ways in which people have contributed to a caring community. In short, they needed clear examples of the kinds of people they might aspire to become. I discovered that children want caring adults to help guide them and teach them how to negotiate life's challenges, and to help them discover their own unique potential and purpose. A few years ago, I came across a Father's Day card that reminded me of this. The card said: "Dad, you tried to teach me patience... I constantly tried yours. You set limits... I pushed you to yours. You made the rules... I made every effort to

break them." The inside of the card read: "Are we a great team or what?"

I found myself exploring biography in a variety of ways in both my theatre and English classes, asking students to comb through stories and distill great individuals' most outstanding accomplishments and contributions, and the core values they embodied that supported their contributions. When I taught Shakespeare I was discovering that my students wanted to discuss his insights into moral character and how they shaped people's lives. I remember one performance in which my ninth-grade acting company staged a dramatic presentation for our yearly awards ceremony intended to celebrate the importance of striving for excellence and accomplishment. Their presentation consisted of meaningful quotations from among hundreds they had sifted through, in the form of a choral reading set to music.

My 1957 New Jersey kindergarten report card, which I found a few years ago in a tucked-away box, included not only "Growth in Skills and Information," but categories such as "Growth in Habits of Work" and "Growth in Habits of Living with Others." Indicators such as "refrains from laughing at others' mistakes," "works independently," and "takes turns cheerfully" also reveal that we have long known that the development of good character is integral to one's positive human development. Character development is an age-old goal of education, identified as core across all times and cultures.

Albert Einstein said that "the most important human endeavor is striving for morality." It is hopeful to know that character education is currently embedded in virtually every state's learning standards. Most have woven it into their state's core curricula, considering attitudes, disposi-

tions, and “character principles” integral to subjects and learning. The important point is that when broad groups of people get together to talk about what is critical for students to know, be able to do, and “be like” (to use a term by Ivor Pritchard, senior researcher at the U.S. Department of Education), character development is very likely to be part of the conversation. Research is converging today to suggest that a comprehensive, high-quality character education initiative may not only help students’ overall positive development, but may be a highly effective approach to the prevention of a variety of negative behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, bullying, school failure, and teen pregnancy. (Go to www.character.org to see the Character Education Partnership’s position paper by Dr. Victor Battistich on “Character Education, Prevention, and Positive Youth Development.”)

This idea of caring and character development has even greater reach—it includes schools caring about and nurturing their civic mission. Last fall I attended a U.S. Department of Education conference at which Lee Hamilton, the

co-chair of the 9-11 Commission, gave a presentation. The topic of the conference was: “What Do We Owe Our Children?”. As Mr. Hamilton explored that topic, he said we owe our children three things: first, we owe them safe schools—the horrific school shootings we have experienced speak volumes about how right he is; second, we owe them civic education, so that they will understand our nation’s principles, values, and ideals; and third, we owe them character education, so that they can become the best kinds of people they can possibly become, and contribute to their communities, their nation, and their world.

Here, then, is another kind of caring. Our country’s founders realized that the health and future of the nation depended on cultivating citizens committed to service and the common good. Public schools were to be charged with fostering in our children an understanding of our nation’s important civic mission and democratic vision.

And so, as I revisited my own teaching career and tried to convey to my daughters what matters most as they begin their

own teaching journeys, it came down to this: Tracy and Brittany, you are engaged in the world’s most important work—that of inspiring young people to discover meaning and purpose, and work that is about passing on the best of civilization. Think deeply about your roles as teachers, and about the personal qualities and caring you bring to the classroom. Diligently plan for how you will develop caring relationships and a sense of community in your classrooms—how you will make certain every single student feels that their worth and dignity is valued and affirmed. Include in your array of best practices effective strategies for weaving character development across your curriculum—perhaps by highlighting values in your daily lessons or by planning service-learning activities to give students opportunities for civic engagement. And, perhaps most important, involve students in setting up a caring classroom, rooted in excellence, respect, and responsibility. ❖

Reflections

from p.1

providing more deliberate and focused methods, and encourage greater consistency within and across grade levels.

Of course, every field of study needs to refine and even redefine itself periodically, develop new approaches, and question, address, and advance its theoretical underpinnings. But the challenge of the twenty-first century is to take what we have typically found to be workable and successful ways to teach character education and expand them into every school in the nation. Although this may seem grandiose and impossible to achieve, successful formal character education pro-

grams have already been implemented in school systems around the country with minimal cost and no additional time slots, in diverse locations and grade levels, with varying amounts of teacher training and types of assessment, and so on.

Formal character education programs are especially important in geographical areas where the schools themselves represent the best hope for those children to learn the virtues and practice the habits that develop good character over time. When every teacher and every student is an active participant in character training and development, the desired result of the educational process is much closer to being achieved: a better life for everyone. ❖

Character Education

from p.6

children the chance to experience “genuine service.”

The program will be continued in our school with plans to expand. Field trips, science projects, and nursing home visits are some of the ways that the two grades will work together next year. I think that through this process we have all become better teachers and learners. Character education was an added bonus. ❖

On the Homefront: Ten Tips for Navigating the Odyssey of Adolescence

by Karen E. Bohlin, EdD

Fall 2003

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, and a desire to change the world and 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, individuals of integrity, caring spouses and parents, good friends. This is a wor-

thy 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 child demands *time and attention.* This is the resource we seem to be lacking most these days. We are on the go, stressed, overworked, overwhelmed, invaded by e-mail, faxes, voice-mail, and our intrusive cell phones. It's difficult just to enjoy each other's company. And when we're home, we with-

draw into our rooms and our separate television programs, CD players, or phone conversations.

Love means setting limits. Love means saying, "I made a mistake" or "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 make sense of and learn from difficulties, suffering, and disappointments instead of allowing them to escape into sham comfort or self-destructive behavior.

Fourth, help your children cultivate a talent, hobby, sport, or skill. Be aware of how your children spend their time, energy, and talent. This is very important. Adolescents 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—not their teachers—for their own academic performance. 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 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 and to acquire a healthy indignation in the face of exploitation, degradation, and violence.

Eight, cultivate the art of communication when 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 *chose* 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. ❖



On the Homefront: Life Lessons in Art

by Barbara Israel Bortniker

Fall 2006

In education, as in love and friendship, the most unplanned circumstances sometimes yield the most satisfying results. A perfect example of this occurred recently when my son and I unexpectedly found ourselves with a free afternoon. My son's cancelled social plans coincided with a glowing newspaper review of the Andrew Wyeth retrospective at the Philadelphia Art Museum. In a moment of inspiration, I suggested that we hop in the car and take a two-hour drive to see this celebration of a unique American master at the pinnacle of his career.

Granted, "fifteen year-old boy" and "art museum" are not two phrases often found in the same sentence, and rarely are teenagers seen with their parents in public, except in compulsory situations preceded by significant grumbling. Nevertheless, we have always insisted on maintaining a certain balance in our family's calendar, including visits to some appropriate adult venues along with the more usual youth-oriented activities. We believe that in areas of social life and culture, children of every age need parental guidance and standards if they are to learn flexibility, respect for others, and open-mindedness. Difficult as it may be sometimes, parents and teenagers who can find ways to enjoy each other's company strengthen family bonds and gain a broader perspective on life.

Although my son was hardly enthusiastic, he agreed to come along after some negotiation involving our driving him to a concert the next week and his choice of snacks for the trip. Plugged into his iPod during the entire ride, he began to perk up once we passed the impressive fountains and climbed the massive stairway to the museum. Despite his predetermination that this day would be endured rather

than enjoyed, he surveyed the statuary and friezes adorning the buildings and entranceway of the museum with awe.

"Wow!" he said in wonder and surprise.

What caught his attention were heroic male and female nude sculptures in the Roman style. Neither of us was uncomfortable in our joint presence of such nudity, however, as we might have been under different circumstances. These sculptures, like the painted figures we saw later, were dynamic, depicting struggle and triumph; or emotionally evocative, resonating with pathos. How different from the aggressive, exploitative images constantly bombarding youth in advertising and music videos, I thought. Here was an opportunity to view human nudity as natural, with dignity and respect.

The rest of the afternoon was an unparalleled experience which we both thoroughly enjoyed. At the Wyeth exhibit, we took headphones (a natural accessory for teenagers) and listened to an audio tour that explained the symbolism and background stories of the paintings. Many of the works feature time-worn, commonplace subjects imbued with serene beauty and emotion. We were struck by the artist's incredible attention to detail and the discipline required by his time-consuming technique. The cumulative impact makes viewers slow down, observe, and really appreciate our surroundings and the uniqueness of each human being.

Most importantly, the themes of the paintings prompted discussion about issues that parents and teenagers rarely mention: loss, death, and responsibility to one's family and community, among other things. For example, Andrew Wyeth's primary mentor was his father, famed illustrator N.C. Wyeth, who had a profound influence on his art and life.

Describing a painting done—after his father's death—of a lone figure in a canvas dominated by a large, desolate hill, Wyeth says that the hill itself is a portrait of his father. Only after his father was gone did he feel that he had become a true artist. We talked afterwards about the paradox of this comment, about love and grief, and about respect for one's parents and teachers versus the natural desire for independence.

In the museum café and all the way home, my son kept the iPod stowed as he pursued our conversation. We discussed the artist's lifetime devotion to his old friends, his modest and private lifestyle despite significant wealth and fame, and the extraordinary time he invested in perfecting each painting, some involving innumerable studies and revisions. My son raised interesting questions laden with ethical and legal issues: Why do patrons choose to become philanthropists, and why support the arts? Why is American and European art so different from that of African, Asian, and Islamic societies, and which is "better"? What happens if art is stolen from individual owners, from museums, or from other countries?

The impact of our museum visit extended to realms that conventional education and planned curricula could not begin to reach. Museums, whether dealing with art, science, or history, represent permanence and an appreciation for the enduring achievements of the past. These institutions and their collections are monuments to the generosity and visionary wisdom of the patrons. The most valuable part of the museum experience, however, is the chance to spend time together with family members, talking, learning, and sharing ideas with each other and with some of the wise people who came before us. ❖

The CAEC would like to extend sincere thanks to the panel of readers who helped choose the articles that appeared in this newsletter. Without your effort and feedback, this issue could not have happened.

Margaret Allen, Academic Dean, Tilton School, Tilton, NH

James S. Berkman, Head of School, Boston University Academy, Boston, MA

Rachel Bronstein, School Social Worker, Fair Haven Public Schools, Fair Haven, NJ

Philip Brown, Director, Center for Social and Character Development at Rutgers University, NJ

Elisabeth Carter, Creative Writing Workshop Leader, StudioWriting, Waltham, MA

Roger Claff, Assistant Scoutmaster, Boy Scout Troop 1570, Herndon, VA

Sandra Copman, EdD, Program Developer, Boston Public Schools, Boston, MA

Donna Crawford, EdD, Educational Consultant, Calgary, AB

Paul Errickson, Head of Middle School, North Yarmouth Academy, Yarmouth, ME

Mary W. Favro, Parent and Former Curriculum Coordinator, Pinewood School, Sunnyvale, CA

Sue Gilligan, Director of Communications and Marketing, Crescent School, Toronto, ON

Steve Gilpatrick, English Department Head, Tilton School, Tilton, NH

Claire McCaffery Griffin, VP of Education Programs, Bill of Rights Institute, Arlington, VA

Lisa Johnson, MEd, Preschool Intervention, W.J. Fraser Elementary, North Charleston, SC

Joscelyn Lee, Vice Principal, Presbyterian High School, Ministry of Education, Singapore

John Marston, PhD, Character Education Coordinator, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, VA

Mary H. McCarthy, Director of K-12 Teaching and Learning, Hudson Public School District, MA

Margaret G. Miles, High School English Teacher, Saddle River Day School, Saddle River, NJ

Laura Mullen, Second-Grade Teacher, J.L. Mulready School, Hudson, MA

Madonna Murphy, PhD, Professor of Education, University of St. Francis, Joliet, IL

Kathy Neuhaus, Roseville, CA

Jane Newblom, Assistant Principal, Sheridan Middle School, Sheridan, IN

Victoria Price, Head of Middle School, Crossroads Academy, Lyme, NH

Stephen Rensink, Character Development Facilitator, York Region District School Board, York, ON

Zita Samuels, Grant Writer and Program Evaluator, Brookline, MA

Lawrence P. Schultz, JD, EdD, South Lancaster, MA

Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán, PhD, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Valdosta State University, GA

Tonya M. Taylor, Associate Extension Specialist, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA

Val D. Turner, PhD candidate in Educational Psychology, University of Missouri, St. Louis

Nancy Turock, MSW, Parent, Summit, NJ

Judy Van de Geer, Monson, MA

Cindy Woodruff, Director of Libraries and Archives, Gilman School, Baltimore, MD

...If I Don't Win

from p.5

getting burned out, or simply learning to hate their sport. Before competitions, many athletes are consumed with fear or dread. Many will say that they just wish the big meet or competition was over—and that they had won. This lack of enjoyment paired with fear leads to a decrement in performance. If they are not able to focus and do the best that they can, moment-to-moment, in both practice and competition, their performance will suffer over the long run. Instead of thinking about their technique, strategy, or how to push themselves physically,

they are fearful of being evaluated by their coaches, teammates, and parents.

Our children need to be treated like they matter. Our love and care for them cannot be based solely on how well they played goalie in a soccer match or how many points they scored on the basketball court. Our kids will value what the adult mentors around them value. If we concentrate on their focus, effort, and respect for others, they, too, will begin to value such virtues. When our children feel that they matter as human beings and that their teammates and competitors matter as human beings, regardless of their performance in sport, they are freed up to enjoy what they are doing and at the

same time are building a foundation for good character.

Isn't happiness what we want most for our children? For our children to be able to enjoy their endeavors, to actually derive happiness from sport, they must at once be developing good character habits and learning to strive to do their best on a daily basis. As Aristotle writes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, "It is clear that happiness is one of the most divine things, even if it is not god-sent but attained through virtue and some kind of learning or training. For the prize and end of excellence and virtue is the best thing of all, and it is something divine and blessed." ❖

TO OUR READERS

We want to hear from you!

The strength of this newsletter depends on your active participation. Our readers want to learn what is happening in your school or community—that's what our "From the Trenches" section is all about.

We welcome submissions of any kind, including letters, articles, and anecdotes. What has worked in your classroom, home, or school? What has inspired your dedication to char-

acter education? We also encourage recommendations for our Selected Bibliography, Movies, and Character Quotes.

Our next 20th-anniversary issue will spotlight "The Future of Character Education." Please submit articles to caec@bu.edu. The deadline for submission is **April 3, 2009**.

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