

The Difference One Can Make: The Importance of Character By Lawrence W. Reed and Benjamin D. Stafford

Twenty years ago, something quite remarkable happened in the little town of Conyers, Georgia—a town like Joplin in so many ways: full of salt-of-the-earth, self-reliant and patriotic citizens though about one quarter your size in population. When school officials there discovered that one of their basketball players who had played 45 seconds in the first of the school’s five post-season games had actually been scholastically ineligible, they returned the state championship trophy the team had just won a few weeks before. If they had simply kept quiet, probably no one else would have ever known about it and they could have retained the trophy.

To their eternal credit, the team and the town, dejected though they were, rallied behind the school’s decision. The coach said, “We didn’t know he was ineligible at the time... but you’ve got to do what’s honest and right and what the rules say. I told my team that people forget the scores of the games; *they don’t ever forget what you’re made of.*”

In the minds of most, it didn’t matter that the championship title was forfeited. The coach and the team were still champions—in more ways than one. Could you have mustered the courage under similar circumstances to do as they did?

Commencement addresses at both high schools and colleges are full of paeans and platitudes that reduce to one cliché: “You are the future.” Well, that’s an important point but it’s also something we already know because it’s pretty self-evident, wouldn’t you say? So I’ll not tell you in a dozen different ways that the future is yours. I have a different message.

I want to talk to you about one thing that is more important than all the good grades you’ve earned, more important than all the high school and college degrees you’ll accumulate, and indeed, more important than all the knowledge you’ll ever absorb in your lifetimes. It’s something over which every responsible, thinking

The Difference One Can Make: The Importance of Character

adult has total, personal control and yet millions of people every year sacrifice it for very little. It will not only define and shape your future, it will put both a concrete floor under it and an iron ceiling over it. It's what the world will remember you for more than probably anything else. It's not your looks, it's not your talents, it's not your ethnicity and ultimately, it may not even be anything you ever say. What is this incredibly powerful thing I'm talking about? In a word, it's *character*.

Character is what the coach and the players in Conyers, Georgia, possessed. And what an example they set! People like me who have never met them will be telling that story for a long, long time. People who do know them surely must admire and look up to them with great pride and respect. Thank God for people with character. They set the standard and exert a pressure on everyone to strive to meet it.

Here's another example from personal experience: In my travels to some 67 countries around the world, I have witnessed many sterling examples of personal character (as well as the startling lack of it), but this is one of the best.

In 1989 I visited Cambodia with my late friend, Dr. Haing S. Ngor (who won an Academy Award for his role in the movie *The Killing Fields*). In advance of the trip, there was considerable local press attention because I was rustling up donated medical supplies to take with me to give to a hospital in the capital, Phnom Penh. A woman from a local church who saw the news stories called and explained that a few years before, her church had helped Cambodian families who had escaped from the Khmer Rouge communists and resettled in my town of Midland, Michigan. The families had moved on to other locations in the U.S. but stayed in touch with the woman who called me, and with other friends they had made in Midland.

The woman—Sharon Hartlein is her name—said she had told her Cambodian friends about my pending visit. Each family asked

if I would take letters with cash enclosed to their relatives in Cambodia. I said yes.

Three of the families were in Phnom Penh and easy to find, but one was many miles away in Battambang. Going there would have involved a train ride, some personal risk, and a lot of time it turned out I didn't have. I was advised in any event not to return with any money. If I couldn't locate any of the families I was told to just give the cash to any needy Cambodian I could find—and they were everywhere!

On the day before my return home, when I realized I just wasn't going to make it to Battambang, I approached a man in tattered clothes whom I had seen several times in the hotel lobby. He always smiled and said hello, and spoke enough English so that we could briefly converse. He, like most Cambodians at that time, was extremely poor. I told him I had an envelope with a letter and \$200 in it, intended for a family in Battambang. I asked him if he thought he could get it to them and I told him he could keep \$50 of it if he did. He consented, and we said good-bye. I assumed I would never hear anything of what had become of either him or the money.

Several months later, I received an excited call from Sharon. She said she had just received a letter from the Cambodians in Virginia whose family in Battambang that envelope was intended. When she read it on the phone, I couldn't help but shed a few tears. The letter read, "Thank you for the *two hundred dollars!*"

That poor man found his way to Battambang, and he not only didn't keep the \$50 I said he could keep, he somehow found a way to pay for the \$10 train ride himself. Now, that is character! I think I would probably trust my life in his hands, even though I never got to know him and didn't ask him for his address.

To help us understand what character is, let me tell you what the absence of it looks like. Sadly, evidence of a lack of character is in abundance these days.

The Difference One Can Make: The Importance of Character

In 1995, students on the quiz team at Steinmetz High School in Chicago made national news when it was discovered that they had cheated to win a statewide academic contest. With the collaboration of their teacher, they had worked from a stolen copy of a test to look up and memorize the correct answers in advance. Perhaps worse than the initial deed was the attitude of the same students five years later, expressed in the New York Times by one of them this way: “Apologize for what? I would do it again.”

What a contrast to the values on display in the Conyers story—and even more so the Cambodian one! No one would say that the teacher or those students in Chicago exhibited character in the positive sense that I am using the term here today. Assume for a moment that the Chicago students had never been caught. Knowing everything else that I’ve told you in these true stories, which group of students would you most want to be like—the ones in Conyers who walked away from a trophy or the ones in Chicago who cheated to win a contest? If you said Conyers, then you have a conscience. You have character, and hopefully a lot of it. And you know something of the inestimable value of being able to look back on your life some day and know that you tried hard in every circumstance to do the right thing.

I love the words of the Apostle Paul, in prison, shortly before he was martyred. It is recorded in Scripture as II Timothy 4:7: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” He had character, even in the midst of extreme adversity. If he had sacrificed it for short-term, selfish gain, all his good words and deeds would hardly carry the weight they do today, nearly 20 centuries later.

A deficit of character shows up every time somebody who knows what is the right thing to do, but neither defends it nor does it because doing so might mean a little discomfort or inconvenience. I work in the field of public policy, which often brings me into contact with legislators, congressmen, and candidates for public office. Far too many times I’ve heard, “I

know you're right but I can't say so or vote that way because I won't get reelected."

You can blame a politician when he behaves that way but don't forget the voters who put him in that spot. I see character deficits every time I see people pressuring the government to give them something at the expense of others, something which they know in their very gut should come instead from their own efforts and merit.

Perhaps we should ask, "Where does character come from?" or, putting the question slightly differently, "Why is it that when we speak of character, we all seem to know what it is that we're talking about?" Well, theologians and philosophers can speak to this much better than I. But I will say this: There is something in the way that we humans are wired. Down deep within us we have a sense of what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. And when we ignore our wiring, something within us—that voice we call our conscience—cries out to us that such and such is simply wrong. In complex situations, the voice can be difficult to discern, and we can even learn how to dull that voice into submission, but we cannot really deny that it is there. It is simply the human experience. We can argue about its origins, but it *is* there.

When a person spurns his conscience and fails to do what he knows is right, he subtracts from his character. When he evades his responsibilities, succumbs to temptation, foists his problems and burdens on others, or fails to exert self-discipline, he subtracts from his character. When he is so self-absorbed he ceases to be of service to others unless there's something in it for him, he subtracts from his character. When he attempts to reform the world without reforming himself first, he subtracts from his character.

As I've written elsewhere, a person's character is nothing more and nothing less than the sum of his choices. You can't choose your height or race or many other physical traits, but you fine tune your character every time you decide right from wrong and what you personally are going to do about it. Your character is

further defined by how you choose to interact with others and the standards of speech and conduct you practice. Character is often listed as a key leadership quality. I actually think character and leadership are one and the same. If you've got character, others will look upon you as a leader.

Ravaged by conflict and corruption, the world is starving for people of character. Indeed, as much as anything, it is on this matter that the fate of individual liberty has always depended. A free society flourishes when people seek to be models of honor, honesty, and propriety at whatever the cost in material wealth, social status, or popularity. It descends into barbarism when they abandon what's right in favor of self-gratification at the expense of others; when lying, cheating, or stealing are winked at instead of shunned. If you want to be free, if you want to live in a free society, you must assign top priority to raising the caliber of your character and learning from those who already have it in spades. If you do not govern yourself, you will be governed.

Character means that there are no matters too small to handle the right way. Former football star and Congressman J.C. Watts once said that your character is defined by what you do when no one is looking. Cutting corners because "it won't matter much" or "no one will notice" still knocks your character down a notch and can easily become a slippery slope. "Unless you are faithful in small matters," we learn in Luke 16:10, "you will not be faithful in large ones."

Here's an example of exemplary character from a recent movie, Ron Howard's *Cinderella Man*. The film is a masterpiece from start to finish but I especially loved an early scene in which boxer James Braddock (played by Russell Crowe) learns that his young son has stolen a sausage. The family is hungry and destitute at the bottom of the Great Depression. The boy was fearful that, like one of his friends whose parents couldn't provide enough to eat, he would be sent to live with relatives who could afford the expense. Braddock does not hesitate on the matter for a second.

He immediately escorts the boy to the store to return the sausage and apologize to the butcher. He then lectures his son:

“There’s a lot of people worse off than we are. And just because things ain’t easy, that don’t give you the excuse to take what’s not yours, does it? That’s stealing, right? We don’t steal. No matter what happens, we don’t steal. Not ever. You got me?”

His son replies, “Yes,” but Braddock presses the point, two more times: “Are you giving me your word?”

“Yes.”

“Come on.”

“I promise.”

Braddock’s character ascends to new heights later in the film when he does what no welfare recipient is ever asked to do and what perhaps not one in a million has ever done: He pays the taxpayers back. Now that is character! And he certainly knew how to encourage those qualities in his son—both by his words and by his example.

Hollywood turns out so little these days that inspires character, but in 2005 it did produce another movie that I rank among the very best of all time. It’s *The Greatest Game Ever Played*, the true story of the son of an immigrant, Francis Ouimet, who won the 1913 U.S. Open Golf Championship at the age of 20. Buy it, or rent it, and watch it as a study in character. Both the main figure, Francis, and the story’s secondary hero, Harry Vardon, ooze character from every pore. The traits they so magnificently exhibit include professionalism, perseverance, integrity, sportsmanship, loyalty, and honor. You watch that movie and you’ll come away with boundless admiration for Francis and Harry and it’s not so much for their great golf abilities as it is because of their sterling characters.

In history, the men and women we most admire and best remember are those whose character stands out because they lived it 24 hours every day and did not compromise it. They are not like that fictional character played by the great comedian Groucho

The Difference One Can Make: The Importance of Character

Marx, who said, “Those are my principles! If you don’t like them, well, I have others.”

George Washington was perhaps our best president because he knew at every moment that maintaining the highest standards in every aspect of life, public and private, was critical to putting the new nation on the right path. A man of lesser character might not have carried us through such a critical period, or would have put us on a different and more perilous path.

Washington understood the link between character and liberty. Listen to him speaking to the nation in his Farewell Address of 1796:

It is substantially true that virtue and morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?

And Washington was not alone.

James Madison wrote in 1788 that “To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.”

Listen to Thomas Jefferson’s words of wisdom on this issue of character:

Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give up the earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act. And never suppose, that in any possible situation, or under any circumstances, it is best for you to do a dishonorable thing, however slightly so it may appear to you. Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you

would act were all the world looking at you, and act accordingly.

Encourage all your virtuous dispositions, and exercise them whenever an opportunity arises; being assured that they will gain strength by exercise, as a limb of the body does, and that exercise will make them habitual. From the practice of the purest virtue, you may be assured you will derive the most sublime comforts in every moment of life, and in the moment of death. If ever you find yourself environed with difficulties and perplexing circumstances, out of which you are at a loss how to extricate yourself, do what is right, and be assured that that will extricate you the best out of the worst situations. Though you cannot see, when you take one step, what will be the next, yet follow truth, justice, and plain dealing, and never fear their leading you out of the labyrinth, in the easiest manner possible. The knot which you thought a Gordian one, will untie itself before you. Nothing is so mistaken as the supposition that a person is to extricate himself from a difficulty, by intrigue, by chicanery, by dissimulation, by trimming, by an untruth, by an injustice. This increases the difficulties ten fold; and those who pursue these methods, get themselves so involved at length, that they can turn no way but their infamy becomes more exposed.

What those Founders were getting at is the notion that liberty is built upon the ability of a society to govern itself, without government intervention. This ability to self-govern is itself built upon—you guessed it—*individual character*.

Here's a name of which you may not have heard: Fanny Crosby. Fanny Crosby holds the record for having written more hymns than any other human being—at least 8,000—including the popular “Blessed Assurance.” She died in 1915 at the age of 95.

She was the first woman in our history to address the United States Congress. She personally met or knew every president of the United States from John Quincy Adams to Woodrow Wilson, maybe more than any other single person in our country's history, alive or dead. And guess what? She never in her 95 years had any recollection of ever having seen a thing. She was blind from the age of six months. When she addressed Congress, she spoke of how important it was for a person's character to shine so it could overcome any and all handicaps and obstacles. Many who knew her regarded her as a saint of enormous inspiration.

In June 2003, my best friend and business colleague Joe Overton was killed in a plane crash at the age of 43. He taught me more about the importance of character than anyone else I have ever known. He could teach it because he lived it. While composing a eulogy for his funeral, I came across a few lines about what the world needs. I've never learned who the author was so I can't offer appropriate credit, and in any event, I added a lot to it. It not only describes what the world desperately needs, it described my friend Joe perfectly. I share it with you as I close:

The world needs more men and women who do not have a price at which they can be bought; who do not borrow from integrity to pay for expediency; who have their priorities straight and in proper order; whose handshake is an ironclad contract; who are not afraid of taking risks to advance what is right; and who are honest in small matters as they are in large ones.

The world needs more men and women whose ambitions are big enough to include others; who know how to win with grace and lose with dignity; who do not believe that shrewdness and cunning and ruthlessness are the three keys to success; who still have friends they made twenty years ago; who put principle and consistency

above politics or personal advancement; and who are not afraid to go against the grain of popular opinion.

The world needs more men and women who do not forsake what is right just to get consensus because it makes them look good; who know how important it is to lead by example, not by barking orders; who would not have you do something they would not do themselves; who work to turn even the most adverse circumstances into opportunities to learn and improve; and who love even those who have done some injustice or unfairness to them. The world, in other words, needs more men and women of character.

Make this day the start of a lifelong commitment to building character. Be the kind of virtuous example that others will respect, admire, emulate, and remember. You'll not only go to your reward some day with a smile and a clear conscience, you will enhance many other lives along the way. How can any of us settle for any less?

Authors' Postscript

Character saves lives, as the story of Nicholas Winton teaches us. It also defines each one of us as a person and in the process, shapes entire nations and determines their course. This is why the Mackinac Center for Public Policy has devoted talent and resources to the character issue. Though much of our work focuses on specific public policy issues, we know that good policy ultimately derives from good character. That's another way of saying that we shouldn't expect government to be any better than the people it reflects. We hope that these two essays will help spark a revival of interest in the critical role that character plays in a free society.

The Difference One Can Make: The Importance of Character

Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Foundation for Economic Education and Benjamin D. Stafford is a program associate with the Kern Family Foundation.

This article was originally published by the Mackinac Center. Used with permission.