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On Building Character

CHARACTER is of vital importance to young people leaving school and university to enter upon their life work. It is by character that they will be judged by their friends, their employers and society.

The term "character" applies in common usage to the distinctive array of qualities setting off one individual from all others. The word comes from the Greek, meaning "a distinguishing mark, impression, engraving." It signifies what nature and our training and our habits and our thoughts have made us. When we say that a person has "character" we pay him a compliment.

Some people say that knowledge is power. It is more correct in this vigorous and complex age to say that character is power. Mind without heart, intelligence without conduct, cleverness without goodness: all these have dangerous flaws.

This is a side of life to which young and old need to pay attention if they are to achieve happiness and peace of mind. The development of character has not kept pace with the advancement of science and technology. Human impulses have remained becalmed and almost changeless while the physical surroundings of human beings have been transformed.

Moral strength and backbone need to be brought up to the level of our increasing intellectual enlightenment and our ever-widening control over physical things.

Some people have a false idea of character. They think of it as being like the angels and cherubs of a great painter like Fra Angelico, portraying goodness without personality. But the person of noble character has validity and actuality; he knows that he is filling a vital need and meeting his obligations to himself and to society.

There is no need to seek examples in remote history. We may see people of character in our everyday lives, among teachers and students, among foremen and workmen, among neighbours, friends and family. They give an impression of completeness, poise and sincerity. They are, or will become, the motive power of society. Our true aristocracy is not of blood or fashion or talent, but of character.

Real, not assumed

The person of character endeavours to be really what he wishes to appear. Character deals with substance, not show. It is complexion, not cosmetic: the outward expression of an inner reality, not something stuck on from outside.

The person of weak character is like a chameleon; he takes on the color of his surroundings. He may not offend profoundly against social laws, but drift serenely because he is making for nowhere. He may, indeed, have many of the attributes of the man of strong character, but his average is dragged down by one or two weaknesses.

A common type of feeble character is shown by the person who credits himself for his successes, but blames his environment for his failures; he is an optimist about himself, and a pessimist about all other people; he admires the superman, and believes that he too could be a great leader if people would only recognize his merits.

By contrast, the person of sturdy character has a good sense of proportion. He is not blown hither and yon by whims, desires and fads. He will not knuckle down under any situation that affronts him until he has done all in his power to change it.

Such a character cannot be manufactured overnight. It is built over a period out of material of two sorts: the solid kind, supplied by observation, reasoning and study; and the lively and livening kind brought by the imagination.

Character, as Goethe put it once for all, grows only in the stream of the world. Everyone has a basic and urgent need for self-realization and satisfaction, but

he cannot attain these in a vacuum. We are not only individuals, but units in society.

A person of good character does not try to evade his duties to society, nor does he allow himself to become negligent of them. He will not drop a lighted match and start a forest fire; he does not leave an obstacle on a highway to menace the lives of motorists; he does not display that abominable form of arrogance of thinking himself above the laws which apply to all other people.

The man of character knows that his greatest significance must consist in his contribution to the lives of others. The more complex, the more highly-organized our society becomes, the more it requires competent, self-respecting, well-rounded individuals to make it work.

Principles and standards

What are some of the features that mark a person of first-rate character? Possibly most important is that he has learned the ideals and facts of life philosophically: that is, so as to discover principles. The habit of his mind is to refer to standards. He discriminates between the good and the shoddy.

Principles act as a sort of psychological gyroscope, keeping us in balance. Everyone will not have the same set of principles, but everyone needs something to which he sets his back and declares "Here stand I; I can do no other."

Part of character is to recognize the imperative nature of duty. Complete freedom to follow every impulse would dissolve character, but inner discipline builds it.

Nicholas Monsarrat sums up duty, obligation and responsibility in his book *Three Corvettes*, telling about war time on the Atlantic: "You're woken up at ten to four by the bosun's mate, and you stare at the deck-head and think: 'I can't go up there again in the dark and filthy rain, and stand another four hours of it.' But you can, of course: it becomes automatic in the end. And besides, there are people watching you."

Broadmindedness

The person of good character is broadminded and tolerant. Great-mindedness is the ornament of all the other virtues. Through it a man reflects the sensitive spirit that is death to the immaturity of prejudice.

What is broadmindedness? It is looking at ideas and facts from all sides, comparing statements, reports, and beliefs honestly and eagerly. When Charles Darwin came upon data unfavourable to a theory he was considering, he hastily made a note of them, because he knew they had a way of slipping out of memory a little more readily than welcome facts.

As to tolerance, a writer tells about attending a dance in a country where there had been a revolution. The lights were turned out during the playing of the new republican anthem, because, as one leader said, "this is a social affair and we don't want to see who won't stand up."

A good principle, found in people of character, is to wait until the evidence is in before passing judgment. We cannot make up our minds intelligently if we judge by single facts wrenched from their context in a man's or a nation's life. Whence came the facts? Have they undoubted validity? Have you tested them against the common sense of your own experience and your knowledge of things in general? Have you considered in a kindly way, as Alan said in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped:* "Them that havenae dipped their hands in any little difficulty should be very mindful of the case of them that have."

If we analyse what we know of the person who has an admirable character, we shall find one of the ingredients to be self-forgetfulness. He is thoughtful of others. He respects other people as persons. He considers not only wherein a friend or an employee has fallen short, but also what that person has positively achieved or endeavoured.

Gentleness

Sometimes we hear people lamenting the chivalry that is gone. They find among the tumbled castles and buried swords of the Middle Ages a code called knightly honour, for which they pine.

The gentle person today is one whose nature has been fashioned after the highest models. He finds that gentleness in society is far more powerful than loudness or force, and far more fruitful. It pushes its way quietly and resolutely, like the tiniest crocus in spring which raises the clod and thrusts it aside by the simple persistence of growing.

Gentleness is combined with strength and authority in the person of excellent character. Great-minded men are not high and mighty toward people of humble stations. There are many tests by which a gentleman may be known, but there is one that never fails: how does he exercise power over those who are subordinate to him?

This gentleness is in the vast field of conduct quite outside legal commandments and regulations. It is an area well known to the person of good character but largely unexplored by others.

Dependability

The person of sound character has not only talent but the power to make his talent trusted.

Trustworthiness is a vital factor in character. The man of character is not constantly reflecting whether

he shall be honest or not; he is honest by habit and as a matter of course. He does not give promises lightly, but lives up to those he does give.

An integral part of dependability is modesty. The man of good character does not allow his head to be turned by the flourish of trumpets sounding his praise. He does not try to give all the answers or to speak as an authority on every topic. He knows that there is truth in Solomon's words: there is more hope for a fool than for a man wise in his own conceit. He measures his achievements by those of his equals and superiors: it is not only false reasoning but stupid to measure by comparison with lesser people.

There was once a Roman general who lost perspective. When he captured a small city he allowed his army to salute him as emperor. His contemporaries laughed, because they said he must despair of a nobler achievement since he made so much of this little success.

But the man of character is not so humble as to be afraid to show his abilities. There is no worse crime against our human heritage than to waste our talents.

All the virtues and principles so far mentioned, and others suited to the individual nature and circumstance of every person, contribute to the self-reliance which is so evident in people of strong character. When a man of character faces a stiff fence he either sails over it or wallops himself over it.

Motive and harmony

How are the principles and virtues co-ordinated so as to form character? It is motive that gives form and intensity to our efforts, and motive is the thought of a desirable end. It runs through our mixing with people and our solitary meditation, our dominance and our shyness, our conformity to conventions and our idiosyncrasies, our affection for things that are good and our ruthlessness against things that are bad.

The habit that results from following our motives is not mere custom, but a way of willing, of deliberate choice. Self-respect, application, integrity — these are not beliefs, but habits. "Could the young," as William James wrote, "but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone."

Character includes a kind of harmony, a sort of Golden Mean by practising which we keep our balance. The most profound need of personality is that the individual should realize himself as a harmonious whole, balancing his qualities and abilities so as to constitute, in the common phrase, "an all-round man."

Harmony should not be mistaken for a soothing, placid condition. Quite the contrary. It is the source of great energy, of active and meaningful participation in the world of reality. It is an attribute of maturity.

A mature person behaves in a reasonable way, observing self-restraint so that restraints do not have to be imposed. He sees through nonsense in politics, economics, science, and the other preoccupations of life, and feels it to be his duty to resist it. He can find new outlets for his energies when they are blocked in any particular direction: it is only the neurotic person who feels "I must have this or nothing."

Can we improve character?

Some people are fatalists, and will seriously question the ability of a person to change his character in any way as a result of conscious effort. That is a doctrine of pessimism. Traits of character are not inherited solely, but are built within our environment.

The opportunity to blame heredity is congenial to persons who do not wish to change. They seem perfect to themselves, and their faults are so lovable to them, that they resent the notion of making a few repairs.

Some people fear to venture out into the broad life of maturity because they cannot tell, never having tried, whether they are sure-footed. Or they may be weaklings who think of themselves as refraining from contact with the world for some exalted reason, whereas the truth is that they stay in the background because they have lame paws.

Intelligent people do not fancy themselves to be perfect, but they are not unduly troubled by the fact that they are not. Perfection is a completion, without growth or expansion, whereas excellent character is the result of many recommencements.

To know where to start is an important part of learning, so it is worthwhile to take an inventory showing where we stand today. It is refreshing to step a little aside, out of the crowd, and calmly take a prospect of things: to give, as Edgar Guest said, "the man you'd like to be a look at the man you are."

What is a man of superior character? Is it not true to say that he is one who pursues the true, the beautiful and the good? For what else is there that is really worth pursuing in education, in vocation, in family life, in society?

Life is movement

The way to build character is not to loiter about old things but to seek and do new things. Good character is not a dwelling upon past excellencies nor a yearning after things as we wish them to be, but an acceptance of things as they really are with a view to influencing them. When the sun goes down, that is

the end of a day, and the man of bold character is already marching into the new day dawning.

Progress in time and knowledge will require progress in thinking. The person of admirable character has learned to revise his concepts of good and bad, beautiful and ugly, what to desire and what to avoid. He is not easily swayed by wishful thinking, but applies his constructive dreaming in action.

What is it that prevents a person of undoubted constructive and intellectual ability from attaining a life of character and accomplishment? One of the most common causes of failure is this: he contents himself with being a Don Quixote in imagination, seeing visions and great causes, but he remains a Hamlet in achievement by debating and postponing.

Excellence of any sort is beyond the reach of indolence. A man must have the spunk and spine to put across his ideas. He needs, as General De Gaulle put it: "that sense of reality which guides audacity." The consciousness of power develops out of effort and the encountering of difficulty. No timid aspirations will suffice. As Milton said in his immortal *Aeropagitica:* "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary."

The man of character has the energy to do things, to score a knockout over inertia. He is glad to write in his diary day after day, as Columbus wrote in the log of his first voyage across the uncharted Atlantic, "This day we sailed on."

Character is not built by storing up abilities and virtues as we might store bonds and stock certificates in a safety deposit box. We must reach outward. The man who is building a self-reliant character would rather play one piece of music than listen to a hundred recitals; he would rather strike out on a corner lot than be a spectator at a world series game.

Persistence in trying is more likely to win out than sitting around waiting for the lightning of inspiration to strike. Byron, despite his club-foot, learned to dance perfectly, the stuttering Demosthenes became a perfect orator, and Beethoven, losing his hearing, fought his way to incomparable music.

We need zest in living. The man of sound character finds his days far from tedious. He approaches new phases of life eagerly, welcomes experience, tempts life to give him as much as he can bear. He has no time for gloom.

To build character requires courage and endurance. Those who enjoy the view from the top of a mountain do not whimper about the scratches they suffered on the way up.

There are various types of courage, and all are part and parcel of character. The wrestler who wipes the dust from his shoulders and grapples again with his adversary; the man who has the courage to live his beliefs; the man who holds in face of every danger the post he has taken up because he is convinced that it is right to do so, or because his chief put him there: these typify the courage of the man of noble character.

A philosophy of life

We do not build character by laying a layer of transcendental thought upon another layer, cemented by a sort of philosophical adhesive. Character is a code of values. A man can be judged only by what he sees value in.

By philosophy of life we mean whatever it is that gives meaning and direction to our everyday affairs. If we have no guidance of this sort, we are still immature. We find ourselves unable to measure our attainments against the possibilities of our environment; we have no inner court to which we can appeal for judgment on our actions.

The philosophy of life of the person of superior character will be something like this: after examining a problem, situation or proposal in a broadminded, evidence-seeking way, he will decide what he ought to like and what he should dislike. He weighs gains against losses, knowing that he can't have one without the other. He knows that it is not concrete words like money and power that give dignity to character and happiness to individuals, but misty words like honour, love, loyalty, trust and faith.

What does the search for distinctive character hold out as a reward? To have a mind that rises above fortune's threats and promises; to accept all that happens as if you wanted it that way; to be neither open-armed nor runaway in the face of danger; to be shaping your fortune instead of waiting for it; to pursue life with clean hands, spurning every opportunity to take advantage of someone else's sacrifice or loss.

The best measure of our success in life, said H. G. Wells, is the ratio of our accomplishments to our capabilities. Abraham Lincoln put it this way: "I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have."

The reward for building character may not be anything of material value, even though being a person of character contributes toward material gains and enhances their value. We should recall that the prize given at the Olympic games of old was only a garland made of the leaves of the wild olive. The Greeks cared more for honour than riches.

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