

RAISING CHILDREN OF CHARACTER IN TROUBLED TIMES

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I would like to talk this afternoon about character and what all of us—parents, teachers, counselors, coaches, religious educators, community leaders—can do to try to raise children of good character in these troubled times. I would also like to consider two grave threats to our children's healthy character development: one posed by a culture of violence; another posed by the increasingly toxic sexual environment our children are growing up in. Each of these threats puts both our daughters and our sons at risk. What can we do to help them develop the strengths of character that will make them less vulnerable to these cultural toxins? At the same time, how can we try to reduce the poisons—to improve the moral environment in which their character is being formed?

Let's begin with a definition of character. *Good character is knowing the good, loving the good, and doing the good.* Knowing the good is the "head" part of character; loving the good is the "heart" part; and doing the good is the "hand" part.

What is "the good"? The good, the content of character, is virtue. Virtues are objectively good human qualities—qualities such as respect, responsibility, honesty, generosity, forgiveness, perseverance, courage, and self-control.

Here are a dozen things we can do to try to build strong character in our children and our communities.

- 1. We can make everyone, especially parents, more aware of the media's negative effects on the values of children and teens, and we can offer parents ways to exercise greater control over their children's use of media.**

In the wake of the Littleton, Colorado, tragedy, there is renewed national attention to the growing impact of the media on our children's lives.

In his excellent book *A Landscape With Dragons: The Battle for Your Child's Mind* (1998), Canadian author Michael O'Brien observes: "Something is happening in modern culture that is unprecedented in human history. Television, film, and the video revolution dominate our culture like nothing before." Children are especially vulnerable to the power of these images because they are at a stage of development when their fundamental concepts of reality are being formed.

The new media culture, O'Brien writes, is characterized "by a deliberate attack upon truth. Good is no longer presented as good. . . Evil is increasingly depicted as a means to achieve good."

Children's powers of discernment—their ability to tell good from evil, right from wrong—are thereby undermined.

In past societies, the truths about how to live a good life were explicitly taught to the young by Christianity and other great religious and cultural traditions and handed down from generation to generation through story and song. Consider, for example, the role of story in Jewish culture. Author Saul Bellow asserts that the survival of Jewish culture would have been inconceivable without the stories that gave point and meaning to the Jewish moral tradition. One such story, included in a collection of traditional Jewish tales, is called "If Not Higher."

There once was a rabbi in a small Jewish village in Russia who vanished every Friday morning for several hours. The devoted villagers boasted that during these hours their rabbi ascended to Heaven to talk with God. A skeptical newcomer arrived in town, determined to discover where the rabbi really was.

One Friday morning, the newcomer hid near the rabbi's house, watched him rise, say his prayers, and put on the clothes of a peasant. He saw him take an ax and go into the forest, chop down a tree and gather a large bundle of wood. Next the rabbi proceeded to a shack in the poorest section of the village in which lived an old woman and her sick son. He left them the wood, which was enough for the week. The rabbi then quietly returned to his own house.

The newcomer stayed on in the village and became a disciple of the rabbi. And whenever he heard one of his fellow villagers say, "On Friday morning our rabbi ascends all the way to Heaven," the newcomer quietly added, "If not higher."

There is no confusion here about how one ought to live. The lesson is clear: "Here is a good man—merciful, compassionate, and actively helping someone weak and vulnerable. Be like that person."

But today, Michael O'Brien says, "our songs and stories are being usurped." Movies, videos, commercial television, and now the Internet are replacing them. "Most children," he observes, "now drink from these polluted wells. Many grow up never having heard a nursery rhyme, fairy tale, legend, or myth."

Moreover, studies show that 3 of 5 families place virtually no restrictions on the TV kids watch. Parents appear to be equally permissive when it comes to movies. One survey found that the average American teenager sees approximately 50 R-rated films a year.

Many times, parents simply don't have a clue as to the effects of the television and movies on children's minds and behavior. We should raise their awareness. A friend of mine who is a kindergarten teacher says her students now act out soap operas in the housekeeping corner: "'You're pregnant by him,' 'You run away with her,' 'You get shot.'" At a time when their character is beginning to be formed, children watching the soaps are developing warped ideas of what is normal human behavior. Parents should know this.

According to one estimate, by age 16 the average child will have witnessed about 200,000 acts of violence on TV. We should share with parents the fact that hundreds of studies have led the American Psychological Association to assert that there is a *causal connection* between children's watching television violence and the likelihood that they will behave aggressively. (For one overview of this research, see *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 100, No. 3., 1986.) Here is

Brandon Tartikoff, former president of NBC, in a moment of candor with the *New York Times*:

Television did have an effect on me right from the beginning. In first grade, I was a member of a four-kid gang that went around imitating TV westerns. We'd disrupt class to play out scenes, picking up chairs and hitting people over the head with them—except, unlike on TV, the chairs didn't break, the kids did. Finally, the teacher called my parents in and said, "Obviously, he's being influenced by these TV shows, and if he's to continue in this class, you've got to agree not to let him watch television any more." So from first to second grade, there was a dark period during which I didn't watch TV at all. And I calmed down, and the gang broke up.

The violence in films is even worse. There are the Bruce Willis orgies of violence. There are all the horror flicks. In other films, the violence may be only a small part of the movie but still problematic, as is the case with "Basketball Diaries." This is a 1995 R-rated movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Near the end of the film there is a graphic, slow-motion dream sequence in which DiCaprio takes a rifle into his high school, bursts into a classroom, and guns down a half-dozen schoolmates and the teacher. His friends cheer him on as he does so. "Basketball Diaries" was reportedly a favorite film of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who, as we know, carried out a similar murderous rampage in Columbine High School two weeks ago.

"Natural Born Killers," a 1994 release, is wall-to-wall violence. It stars Woody Harrelson and features a glamorous Bonnie and Clyde-like couple who travel the country killing for kicks. "Natural Born Killers" appears to have played a role in more than a dozen copycat murders, according to an article last December in *National Review*. In 1994, a 14-year-old boy accused of decapitating a 13-year-old girl in Texas told police he wanted to be famous like the Natural Born Killers. In Utah, a teenager became so obsessed with the movie he shaved his head and wore tinted granny glasses like Mickey, the main character, and murdered his stepmother and stepsister. Four Georgia youths in their 20s were charged with killing a truck driver and fleeing in his vehicle after watching "Natural Born Killers" 19 times.

You'll find both of these films in your neighborhood video store. Young people in our communities are watching them and other movies like them. In the wake of Littleton, it would be at least a small gesture of social responsibility if stores like Blockbuster and Hollywood Video removed "Natural Born Killers" and "Basketball Diaries" from their shelves. This week I wrote to the presidents of both companies urging them to do just that. You might wish to do the same. (Mr. John Antioco, President, Blockbuster Inc., 1201 Elm St., Dallas, TX 75270; Mr. Jeff Yapp, President, Hollywood Video, 9275 S.W. Peyton Lane, Wilsonville, OR 97070-9855).

Kids who don't imitate TV and film violence are desensitized by it. In one study, kids who watched a violent show were slower to break up a fight between younger children than kids who had not seen the violent program. Said one 11-year-old boy: "You see so much violence, it's meaningless. If I saw someone really getting killed, it wouldn't be a big deal."

How can we help parents to exercise control over the media? They need guidelines. For movies, there's a very helpful resource called PREVIEW (1309 Seminole Drive, Richardson TX 75080; \$34 a year). Published bi-weekly, it gives the moral low-down on the latest films, including a box score with a frequency count for foul language, violence, nudity, approval of premarital sex, etc. PREVIEW also has a web site (www.previewonline.org) with free mini-reviews. We would do well to put copies of this publication in the school office and in the back of our churches.

For TV, here are some suggestions for parents:

- * Set a good example. Parents who are light watchers tend to have kids who are light watchers.
- * Require kids always to ask permission to turn the TV on.
- * Regulate what kids watch. Ask yourself, about any given show, "*Are these the values I believe in and want my child to learn?*"
- * Sharply reduce the amount of time the set is on. A good guideline: *no more than a half-hour a day.*
- * Make television a special event—an occasional show watched and discussed by the whole family—rather than a regular routine.
- * Teach kids to be "media literate," to view television critically—asking, for example, "How is real life different from life as shown on TV?" (One study found that half of teens think that the way TV and movies depict sex—as pleasurable encounters with no serious consequences—is the way it really is in life; not surprisingly, these are the teens most likely to be sexually active themselves.) Teaching media literacy doesn't mean you have to sit down with your child and watch crummy shows on a regular basis. You need only a little bit of television content to do a lot of critical analysis.
- * *Give very serious consideration to eliminating TV altogether.* I have talked to a number of people who grew up in families that did this. They all consider themselves fortunate. Many became avid readers. For a book that makes a very persuasive case for life without TV, I'd recommend Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*.

Schools can also establish parent support groups. These are groups of 8-10 parents that meet in a neighborhood home to discuss issues of common concern: What limits do you put on television and movies? How do you deal with the Internet? What do you do when your child gets an invitation to somebody else's house and you don't approve of the video that's going to be shown? Parents who participate in these support groups gain confidence in their authority.

2. We can take community action to try to reduce the cultural sleaze coming at kids.

If we care about our kids and the quality of our civilization, it's not enough just to turn off our own set while the rest of the community slides down the ethical tubes.

Last Thursday night, I spoke in Binghamton, New York on the topic, "Violence, the Media, and Our Children's Lives" at the invitation of a project called Child Watch. This is a child advocacy effort, much in the spirit, it seems to me, of your Ophelia Project. It is headed by a group of thoughtful and dedicated women. Its current focus is a petition drive to get "The Jerry Springer Show" off the 5 PM time slot when children are most likely to be home unsupervised.

In preparation for my talk, I watched "The Jerry Springer Show" for the first time. It opened with two women who were vying for the same man, who was sleeping with both of them. Facing off onstage, the women hurled insults and profanities at each other. After a few minutes, they rushed each other and began to brawl. Jerry's muscled blue-shirted crew hustled out to pull them apart. Then the two women's mutual boyfriend strode onstage and sat down between them, preening. Next, a friend of one of the women came on and took her part. The man jumped up and

called her a bitch, which touched off another brawl. The audience went wild. By the end of the show, eight more people—former lovers with new partners—had joined the onstage circus and competed for who could make the nastiest accusation against their former lover. One woman gave her ex-boyfriend the finger.

I learned that "The Jerry Springer Show" is now on *five* times a day in the Binghamton area. It is the number one talk show in the nation. It is number one of *all* television shows watched by college students. And it is watched by growing numbers of elementary school children. Teachers say that boys as young as 3rd-grade come to school chanting, "Jer-ry! Jer-ry! Jer-ry!" One of the Child Watch mothers, who is also an elementary school teacher, said to me: "Talk to any teacher, and they will tell you that children today are more aggressive than ever before. Teachers are constantly putting out fires—verbal as well as physical."

Fox Network (Fox Broadcasting Company, P.O. Box 900, Beverly Hills, CA 90213; Phone: 310/369-1000; Fax: 310/584-2024) should be flooded with letters from people who think "The Jerry Springer Show" has no place in any society that cares about its children. We should also notify the sponsors of this and other objectionable shows that we won't be purchasing their products as long as they continue to sponsor such programs.

3. We can encourage parents to spend more time with their children.

Our children learn positive moral values largely through face-to-face interactions with people who love them. And they learn that we love them when we spend time with them. One-on-one time—whether bedtime reading, tossing a ball, or taking a walk—is especially important for building an emotional bond. Attending our children's games and other such events does not replace this kind of psychologically intimate time. To ensure one-on-one time, we may need to schedule it. I know a school superintendent, a father of four, who can show you in his appointment book which child he'll be spending the coming Saturday afternoon with.

When we do have one-on-one time with our children, how can we make it a meaningful exchange of thoughts and experiences? When our older son Mark was 13, I became frustrated with the fact that our exchanges typically consisted of my asking questions and his giving monosyllabic answers. One day, in exasperation, I said, "You know, someday I'd like to have a real conversation. It would be great for a change if you asked *me* a question."

He said, "Okay, Dad, how are your courses going this semester?" It was the first time I ever talked to Mark about my teaching. After that, even if we had only five minutes in the car, we'd do back-and-forth questions: I'd ask him one, he'd ask me one, and so on. It's amazing how much this form of conversation brings out. I recommend you try it with your children.

Television is a great thief of time. The Internet now poses a similar threat. A study sponsored by Apple Computer, Intel, Panasonic, and AT&T found that "spending time on the Internet was associated with declines in talking among family members and an increase in depression and loneliness."

Sadly, the family dinner hour is often another casualty of life in our fast-lane, media-saturated society. We should make a big deal of the family meal. The family meal is potentially an island of intimacy where values can be shared. Marianne Jennings, a professor of ethics at Arizona State University, remembers the kitchen table as the center of her home life:

I cut out my wedding dress at the same place where I memorized my spelling

words. *It was in the same place that I ate Archway cookies after school, and it was there that I prepared for my SAT. Each night during my youth, it was the kitchen table where I was held accountable for the day's events: "When is the next report card? Did you clean up the mess in the basement? Did you practice your piano today?"*

But the kitchen table was also my security blanket. No matter how rough the day's tauntings had been, no matter how discouraged I was over long division, the kitchen table was there every night to comfort and support. As I struggle each night to get dinner on and round up my children from the four corners of the neighborhood, I sometimes wonder why I don't just send them to their rooms with a chicken pot pie. I don't, because I am giving them the gift of the kitchen table.

How can we preserve this legacy in our own families? John and Kathy Colligan tell how they did it in their family. They had five kids. They and the kids often had out-of-home commitments. But they made a decision to have at least four dinners a week when the whole family would be there. That meant some nights they had dinner at 4:30 in the afternoon. It meant that on another night they didn't eat until 9:30. Their children are now grown and have their own families. They have asked each of them independently, "What is something we did that you want to do with your own children?" Every one of the five has said, "The family meal."

Making the family dinner a time for values transmission requires a bit of thought and structure. I encourage families to set manners for talking as well as eating and then have a topic: What was the best part and the worst part of your day? What's something you're thinking about these days? Who has a problem the rest of the family might be able to help with?

In our family, we'd sometimes we'd clip out a letter to "Dear Abby" and read it aloud—but not the answer. For example: "Dear Abby, I'm 15, I'm pregnant, and I'm scared to death to tell my folks. What should I do?" We'd all say what advice we thought Abby should give, and only then would we read her answer. The discussions gave us a vehicle for talking about our values, such as our belief that sex is a gift from God meant for marriage. In the case of the pregnant 15-year-old, we also emphasized that no matter what trouble our kids might be in, we wanted them to come to us for help because nobody loves them more, except God.

Finally, we should encourage parents to read to their children, especially at bedtime. We should supply parents with a list of recommended books that are a source of positive values. One good resource is *Books That Build Character* (1994) by William Kilpatrick and Gregory and Suzanne Wolfe. It contains an annotated bibliography of more than 300 books for kids of all ages that foster virtues such as honesty, love, and perseverance.

Books like *Little House on the Prairie*, C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Bible stories are the stuff from which our children should be fashioning their values and view of life. Unfortunately, as Michael O'Brien points out in *A Landscape With Dragons*, children's literature has in recent years been taken over by the cult of horror—the novels of R. L. Stine, in particular. O'Brien comments about Stine's *Fear Street* and *Goosebumps* series: "For sheer perversity, these tales rival anything that has been published. Each is brimming over with murder, grotesque scenes of horror, terror, mutilation. These shocks are presented as ends in themselves, raw violence as entertainment." Some teachers and parents have defended the *Goosebumps* books on the grounds that at least they get kids to read. But can we afford to settle for that? *What* children are reading, like what they are watching, makes all the difference.

4. We can work to reduce peer cruelty.

There is a lot of emotional violence in our schools. The horrific violence carried out by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold two weeks ago was apparently fed in part by the cruelty of their peers.

In Eric Harris's suicide e-mail message to the Littleton community, he wrote: "Your children who have ridiculed me, who have chosen not to accept me, who have treated me like I am not worth their time are dead." Said one 15-year-old classmate of Dylan Klebold: "He really felt unloved. He wasn't so bad. He was lonely."

None of this, of course, excuses what these two young people did. They committed mass murder. They gave in to hatred and surrendered to evil. But their crime reflects a wider human tragedy.

In the aftermath of Littleton, teachers and students across the country are talking about the need to treat everyone with respect. An English teacher in Seattle, Washington, was quoted in *The New York Times*: "We talked about, what if someone, sometime, had just reached out and said something great to one of these kids? Would it have made a difference?"

We need to create an ethic that it's cool to be kind. It's not cool to put people down, not cool to exclude people, not cool to harass and persecute others, not cool to spread rumors.

High school teachers sometimes feel that you can't do much at that level to affect peer relationships. But that isn't so. Hal Urban is an award-winning high school history teacher in a suburb of San Francisco. He takes 5 minutes at the start of every class to do four things that build a sense of community. First, he asks, "Who has good news?" After a few students share, he asks, "Is there someone in the class you'd like to compliment?" Students become comfortable doing that. Then he asks, "What is something you are thankful for today?" Finally, he has students take a different seat and spend a minute getting to know their new neighbor better.

On the final exam, Hal Urban asks: "What is something you will remember about this course 10 years from now?" Many students say they will remember the way he began each class. Students have a hunger for the experience of belonging to a human community where they feel known and valued.

At the middle school level, the advisory group is an important way to try to meet this need. At Shoreham-Wading River Middle School in Long Island, for example, 8-10 students meet with their advisors twice a day, once at the start and again over lunch. Students form supportive relationships with each other and with a significant adult. Graduates of this school typically testify that advisory was the most important part of their middle school experience. (For information on Shoreham-Wading River's advisory program, contact: Shoreham-Wading River Middle School, Randall Road, Shoreham, NY 11786; 516/ 821-8100.)

Kids who are cruel lack empathy. At all grade levels, empathy training should be a major part of our character-building efforts. When 5-year-old Brian called a Jamaican classmate "Tan Man," his teacher took him aside and explained:

Brian, there are two kinds of hurts: outside hurts that you can see, like a cut or a bruise, and inside hurts that you can't see, like a hurt feeling. The inside hurts hurt more and last longer. When you call John 'Tan Man,' you are causing an inside hurt that makes him very sad. Do you wish to continue to cause this inside hurt?" Brian said that he didn't. (The most recent issue of our Center's newsletter has an article, "12 Ways to Prevent Peer

Cruelty." We'd be happy to send you a copy. E-mail: c4n5rs@cortland.edu.)

Teachers these days also suffer a lot of emotional violence, not only from defiant and disrespectful students but also from parents who are immediately on the phone with their lawyers when their child is in trouble at school. A principal at a St. Louis middle school did something simple but powerful to support her staff: She taped a large manila envelope, labeled "Appreciation Notes," on every staff member's door and invited colleagues, parents, and students to leave thank you's, compliments, and the like. Many did so. Staff morale greatly improved. The faculty said it was the most important thing they had done in 10 years.

5. We can use the power of repetition to build character.

Aristotle taught that virtues are not mere thoughts but *habits* we develop by performing virtuous actions. How do we develop habits? Through repetition. An example of the power of repetition comes from a high school counselor, Phil Caruso, in Maryland. He coaches a college baseball team that won the title last year with an 18-6 record. He says:

I told my players that what I was most proud of was not our 18-6 record, even though it won the championship. What I was most proud of was that we went the whole season without a thrown bat, or thrown helmet, or a profanity on the field. And that didn't happen because I said once at the start of the season, "No thrown bats, no thrown helmets, no profanities." I said it before every game. If you want something to be important to kids, you need to repeat it over and over.

6. We can build character through service to others.

We need to give our children repeated opportunities to be of service to others. This is hard to do in our busy lives but vitally important. A mother remembers her training in helpfulness:

I come from a Quaker background. Somehow I always knew that whatever I did when I grew up, it would have to be, in some way, a service to others.

Both my mother and my father were always involved in one or another kind of community work. And I can remember coming home after school when I was just a little girl and my mother saying, "Susan, Mrs. Flannigan"—an old lady who lived down the street—"has been alone all day, and I'm sure she would enjoy talking with you for a while." I remember asking now and then why I had to do this and other kids didn't. She said that what other kids did didn't matter—that I should do all that I was capable of doing.

Is it too late to do this kind of training with teens? In an article titled "The Healing Power of Altruism" (*Educational Leadership*, November, 1993), Richard Curwin describes an experiment begun in California and now spreading to other states. It pairs alternative-school adolescents—many of whom have been involved with violent gangs—with a physically disabled child in a hospital and with an elderly person in a nursing home.

These teens read stories to the little kids and help the old folks with their exercises. They quickly become attached to the people they help. They listen to their problems and offer advice. At the end of their service, many say they want to go into a helping profession for their life's work. It is this kind of face-to-face helping relationship—and the fulfillment that comes from touching

another's life—that gives service the power to transform character.

7. We can implement comprehensive character education in our schools.

Character education offers one of the most promising responses to the problem of violence in our schools and culture.

Character education is the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue through every phase of school life. Our Center for the 4th and 5th Rs at SUNY Cortland promotes a comprehensive approach to character education. It calls upon the *teacher* to: (1) be a caregiver, moral model, and ethical mentor; (2) create a caring classroom community; (3) use discipline to foster respect for rules and the rights of others; (4) develop a democratic classroom that involves students in helping to solve classroom problems; (5) use the content of the curriculum to highlight character qualities; (6) teach teamwork and perspective-taking through cooperative learning; (7) develop the ethic of doing one's work well; (8) foster self-awareness and thoughtful decision-making; and (9) teach conflict resolution.

A comprehensive character education program calls upon the *school as a whole* to: (1) require or encourage school and community service; (2) create a positive moral culture that upholds the character expectations in every part of the school environment; and (3) recruit parents and the wider community as full partners in promoting good character.

How can we mobilize the peer culture in support of this kind of character education effort? Especially at the high school level, it's crucial to bring students into a visible leadership role. How to do that is illustrated by Brentwood High School in St. Louis County, Missouri. In 1993-94, Brentwood formed a committee of students and parents that came up with the following goals for its character education program: (a) *Personal Goals*: accountability, honesty, perseverance, and respect for self; (b) *Social goals*: abstinence from drugs, alcohol, and sex; caring about others; commitment to family; positive work ethic; respect for others; and service; and (c) *Civic goals*: equality, freedom, justice, respect for authority, and respect for property.

Each quarter of the school year, a different class—first the seniors, then the juniors, then the sophomores, then the freshmen—is responsible for a project promoting respect and responsibility throughout the school. A student task force has organized a Corridor of Respect showcasing students, staff, and community members who have displayed respect and responsibility in exemplary ways. The same student task force has also hosted a Respect and Responsibility Conference and invited students from other area high schools to discuss how they might promote character education in their schools. At Brentwood, faculty and students alike report more respectful attitudes and responsible behavior.

8. We can implement a community-wide character education initiative.

The premise of the character education movement is that all those who touch the lives of the young—schools, families, faith communities, youth organizations, business, government, and the media—must come together in common cause. Every social institution must be held accountable for how well it models and promotes the qualities of good character.

Nashua, New Hampshire (pop. 80,000) is one community that is trying to do this. Five years ago, Nashua's Board of Aldermen passed a resolution calling upon the schools and the

entire community to promote character education. Alderwoman Claire McGrath says: "We felt that unless we could get the city government and our whole community behind this, the efforts by the schools would not succeed."

The Resolution led to the formation of a 25-member Character Education Council. It includes Mayor Donald Davidson, two members of Board of Aldermen, business representatives, members of the police and fire departments, representatives of sports leagues and service organizations, school administrators, teachers, parents, and youth. The Council meets monthly to plan how to promote character education.

The Character Education Council recommended that Nashua promote the following character traits, which were then adopted by the schools; each month focuses on a different trait:

September	RESPONSIBILITY
October	RESPECT
Nov./Dec.	CARING AND COMPASSION
January	PERSEVERANCE AND EFFORT
February	TRUSTWORTHINESS
March	FAIRNESS AND TOLERANCE
April	COURAGE
May/June	CITIZENSHIP

Staff training was conducted in the schools. The Council also conducted training sessions for the Board of Aldermen and various government departments.

Businesses agreed to display the WORD OF THE MONTH and related quotes in their storefronts. Printers have donated the printing. Company newsletters and billboards also now promote the Word of the Month. The Cable TV station has done a series of shows on character.

Mayor Davidson's role has been promoting the character initiative through talks, dedications, and media interviews. He comments: "Character education is a no-brainer; why wouldn't every community get involved in this? It's also opened the eyes of parents to what they have not been doing." Alderwoman McGrath comments: "Theft and vandalism in the schools are down. But the real benefits have been with the adult community. It's made people stop and take account of their own behavior."

9. We can work to make the weapons of death less accessible to kids and to adults.

After the Littleton shootings, *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert wrote: "Welcome to America, a land where the killing is easy." Herbert cited the following statistics: "In 1996, handguns were used to murder 2 people in New Zealand, 15 in Japan, 30 in Great Britain, 106 in Canada, 213 in Germany, and 9,390 in the United States."

"We have a problem," Herbert says. Part of the solution is a public policy called domestic disarmament. This involves removal of arms from private hands and, ultimately, from much of the police force. This is the social policy of nearly all other Western democracies, from Canada to Britain, from France to Scandinavia. Once guns are hard to get and the very sale possession and sale of them are offenses, the level of violent crime drops dramatically. Persons who seek to commit an armed crime, and thus to try to purchase a gun on the sly, are often apprehended in committing this offense long before they can hurt anyone.

10. We can foster in our children a reverence for life.

We should challenge our children—and ourselves—to develop a consistent life ethic that respects human life at all points of the developmental continuum.

Before the wave of school shootings, there was a chain of quieter killings. In the closing months of 1996, one dead baby after another was found in the trash. One was found in a plastic bag inside a bucket in Denver; another in a trash bin outside a convenience store in Knoxville, Tennessee; a third in a conveyor belt of trash in Portsmouth, Virginia; another in a barn in eastern Iowa; still another in a garbage truck in Brooklyn. In the first six months of 1997, there were six more reported cases of "dumpster babies." In one much-publicized case, two college students, Brian Peterson and Amy Grossberg, were arrested for murdering their infant son in a Newark, Delaware motel.

Why this rash of infanticides? One commentator pointed out that had Brian Peterson and Amy Grossberg killed their baby before birth, it would have been an unnoticed statistic: one of the nearly million and a half abortions performed in this country each year. A United Nations report finds that we have the highest teenage abortion rate in the developed world. Abortion is a painful issue, the most divisive moral issue of our time. But intellectual honesty requires us to ask: Can we hope to achieve respect for life in a society that performs 4,000 abortions a day?

It has been said that the measure of any society is how it treats its weakest and most vulnerable members. Mother Teresa called the unborn "the poorest of the poor," the most vulnerable among us. If we are serious about developing reverence for life in our children and our culture, we will have to confront all the areas of our society where the value and dignity of human life are under assault.

11. We can help our children understand the relationship between sex and character.

What is the sexual culture our children are growing up in?

Down through the ages, self-control, including sexual self-control, has been considered a mark of good character. Notions of sexual restraint, however, were swept away by the sexual revolution of the 1960s. The sexual revolution radically changed the sexual culture. It advanced the idea that people should be free to make love with whomever they wished without the strictures of marriage. Commitment was not necessary for sex; love was not necessary.

The sexual revolution promised greater happiness, but three decades years later, it is painfully clear that our society suffers from a plague of problems stemming from the breakdown of sexual morality. Here are a dozen:

1. rape—In a 1988 survey by the Rhode Island Rape Crisis Center, two-thirds of boys grades 6 through 9 agreed with the statement that it is "acceptable for a man to force sex on a woman if they have been dating for six months or more"; 49% of the girls also agreed.
2. teen pregnancy—one of the highest rates in the developed world.
3. unwed births—up from 5% of all births in 1960 to more than 30% today.
4. almost a million and a half abortions each year—a third of them performed on teenagers.

5. an explosion of sexually transmitted diseases—currently 12 million new cases each year, most of them in persons under 25, according to the Centers for Disease Control.
6. emotional and behavioral problems associated with premarital sexual relationships—According to the February 1991 issue of *Pediatrics*, attempted suicide is six times higher among 12-16 year-old girls who have had sexual intercourse than it is among virgins.
7. widespread sexual harassment in the schools and workplace—In a 1993 study by the American Association of University Women, 4 of 5 high school students said they have experienced "unwelcome sexual behavior" in school.
8. children, even in the elementary school years, demonstrating precocious sexual talk and behavior.
9. an increasingly sexualized media and a growing, increasingly perverted and violent pornography industry.
10. the sexual abuse of children—An estimated 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused at least once before age 18, usually by a trusted adult.
11. marital infidelity—Studies over the past decade in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* report that persons who are sexually active before marriage are more likely to be unfaithful to their spouse after marriage.
12. the damage done to families by many of these problems.

Surveying this moral landscape, the artist William Schickel (1991) writes: "Chastity, like honesty, is a civic as well as a personal virtue. When a society loses chastity, it begins to destroy itself." Chastity, sexual self-control, is a necessary human virtue, necessary for all human beings everywhere. How can we help our children develop this character strength?

When I speak to young people about sex, I begin by saying:

All of you here today belong to one of four groups: (1) You have never been sexually intimate with another persons, and you do not intend to do so until you get married; (2) You haven't been sexually intimate, but you're not sure what you think about sexual intimacy before marriage; (3) You've been sexually intimate, and you don't see anything wrong with it; (4) You've had a premarital sexual relationship, but you now consider it a mistake—or you're not sure what you want to do in the future. Whichever of these four groups you belong to, I'd like to offer you a way of thinking about sex—a way I believe will help you make wise sexual decisions, decisions that will help you build a good character and lead a good and happy life.

We can start by helping our children develop clear ethical reasoning that supports abstinence. *Does sex outside marriage carry serious risks?* Yes: pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, possible loss of fertility, and injurious emotional and spiritual consequences. *Does contraception eliminate those dangers?* No, it offers only partial protection against physical consequences (very little against the three leading STDs—herpes, HPV, and chlamydia) and no protection whatsoever against emotional and spiritual consequences. *Is it ever morally responsible to take serious, unnecessary risks with one's own or another's physical, emotional, and spiritual welfare?* Clearly, it's not.

Lots of teens think, "Isn't sex a natural way to express your love?" A pamphlet, *Love Waits*, speaks thoughtfully to that question:

Love is patient, love is kind. Love wants what is best for another person. Love never demands something that will harm you or the person you love.

Love will never cross the line between what's right and wrong. It's wrong to put one another in danger of having to deal with hard choices. . . . choices that could change your lives, your goals, and your plans forever.

Having sex before marriage may feel right for the moment. But the possible costs of an unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted disease—as well as the deep hurts that can come from a broken relationship—outweigh the feelings of the moment. The feelings are temporary; their consequences are long-lasting.

All good things are worth waiting for. Waiting until marriage to have sex is a mature decision to control your desires. If you are getting to know someone—or are in a relationship—remember: If it's love, love waits.

We especially need to talk with our children about the emotional and spiritual dangers of sex outside the committed love relationship of marriage. There is no condom for the heart, mind, and soul. Teens themselves offer the most compelling testimonies to this truth. One girl writes:

Dear Ann Landers,

I am 16 and have already lost my virginity. I truly regret that my first time was with a guy that I didn't care that much about. Since that first night, he expects sex on every date. When I don't feel like it, we end up in an argument. I don't think this guy is in love with me, and I know deep down that I am not in love with him either. This makes me feel cheap.

I realize now that this is a very big step in a girl's life. After you've done it, things are never the same. It changes everything. My advice is, don't be in such a rush. It's a headache and a worry. Sex is not for entertainment. It should be a commitment. Be smart and save yourself for someone you wouldn't mind spending the rest of your life with.

—Sorry I Didn't and Wish I Could Take It Back

Do guys also have these regrets? Many do, although they may take longer to surface. In my graduate course on character education, students read two books and several articles on the topic of character and sexuality and then write a paper. Many are very honest in sharing personal experiences. One young man, in his late 20s and recently married, wrote:

I wish I had somebody preaching abstinence in my ear when I was in high school. That's when my sexual activity started. I don't even want to think about my college years. I wish I had saved this for my wife.

Here is another young husband, talking about the problem of sexual flashbacks, which both women and men can experience. He says:

I've been married to one of the most wonderful women in the world for eight years, but I have never been "alone" in the bedroom with her. I would do anything to forget the sexual experiences I had before I met my wife. When we start having intercourse, the pictures of the past and other women go through my head, and it's killing any intimacy. I've gotten to the point where I no longer want to have sex.

You don't see the psychological consequences of premarital sex depicted on TV or in the movies. You don't read about them in *Seventeen* or *Sassy*. But they are very real.

The College Scene

To help our young people develop a vision of sex, love, and marriage, I recommend Professor Leon Kass's article "The End of Courtship," which appeared in the Winter 1997 issue of the journal *Public Interest*. Kass teaches at the University of Chicago, where he is a member of the University's Committee on Social Thought. He begins his essay by pointing out that people on both the left and the right have come to regard the break-up of marriage as a leading cause of the psychic maiming of America's children. But, he says, we are not attending to what makes for marital success. And we are attending even less to the once-honored ritual of courtship and how it is essential to the cause of marriage.

Not so long ago, Kass says, finding a mate was a goal of a great many men and women who went to college. Today, far fewer young people go to college with this hope or wish. Kass observes that today's college students are "sexually active—in truth, hyperactive." They "flop about from one relationship to another. The young men, nervous predators, act as if any woman is equally good. They are given not to falling in love with one, but to scoring in bed with many. In this sporting attitude, they are now matched by some females. But most young women strike me as sad, lonely, and confused; hoping for something more, they are not enjoying their hard-won sexual liberation as much as liberation theory says they should."

After college, Kass notes, life between the sexes is even grimmer: singles bars, personal "partner wanted" ads (almost never mentioning marriage as a goal), men practicing serial monogamy, women chronically disappointed in the failure of men to commit. "Anyone who seriously contemplates the present scene," Kass writes, "is filled with profound sadness."

What brought about this sea change in the relationship between men and women? First and most devastating, Kass says, was the sexual revolution. "For why would a man court a woman when she may be sexually enjoyed, and regularly, without it?"

With the sexual revolution also came the demise of feminine modesty. (Let me hasten to add that in the service of sexual restraint, young men as well as women should be held accountable to standards of modesty in speech, dress, and actions.) Modesty, Kass argues, made women more powerful, not less so. Modesty "served at once as a source of attraction and a spur to manly ardor, a guard against a woman's own desires, as well as a defense against unworthy suitors. A modest woman understood that giving her body (in earlier times, even her kiss) meant giving her heart, too precious to be bestowed on anyone who would not prove himself worthy by pledging himself in marriage."

Kass's themes are echoed by a recent article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* by Sarah Hinlicky, an editorial assistant at *First Things* magazine. She writes:

I am 22 years old and still a virgin. Not for lack of opportunity, my vanity hastens to add.

My mother taught me that self-respect requires self-control. My father taught me to demand the same from men. I'm enough of a country bumpkin to suspect that contraceptives might not be enough to prevent an unwanted pregnancy or disease, and I think that abortion is killing a baby. I buy into all that Christian doctrine, which means that the stuffy old commandments are still binding on my conscience. And I'm even naive enough to believe in permanent, exclusive, divinely ordained love between a man and a woman.

In college, Ms. Hinlicky says, she was regarded by her peers, even her friends, as a bizarre aberration. They were sleeping with their boyfriends; she was not. They had many regrets about their past sexual encounters, and yet they were puzzled by her virginity. One friend said to her, "You still haven't slept with anybody. How do you do it? Don't you *want* to?"

She offered several reasons for her decision, but when those seemed to fall on deaf ears, she smiled and shrugged, "I guess I don't know what I'm missing." On reflection, she writes, "I could list a lot of things I *do* know I'm missing: hurt, betrayal, anxiety, self-deception, fear, suspicion, anger, confusion, and the horror of having been used."

The dominant feminist ideology, Ms. Hinlicky writes, has misled her generation. This ideology had held that "a woman who declines to express herself in sexual activity has fallen prey to a male-dominated society." This line of thinking, Ms. Hinlicky says, is "a set-up for disaster." The idea that women must be sexually active in order to be "free" has "opened the door to predatory men. . . . Against this system of exploitation stands the more compelling alternative of virginity. It is a refusal to exploit or be exploited."

There is no second-guessing a virgin's motives: her strength comes from a source beyond her transitory whims. It is sexuality dedicated to hope, to the future, to marital love, to children, and to God.

Her virginity is, at the same time, a statement of her mature independence from men. It allows a woman to become a whole person in her own right, without needing a man either to revolt against or to complete what she lacks. It is very simple, really: no matter how wonderful, charming, handsome, intelligent, thoughtful, rich, or persuasive he is, he simply cannot have her. A virgin is perfectly unpossessable.

"The so-called sexual revolution," Ms. Hinlicky concludes, was "really just proclaiming oneself to be available for free—and therefore without value. To choose such 'freedom' is tantamount to saying that one is worth nothing."

The Rewards of Waiting

How might we summarize for our children the rewards of waiting? The medical writer Kristine Napier does an excellent job of that in her book *The Power of Abstinence* (Avon, 1996):

1. *Waiting will make your dating relationships better. You'll spend more time getting to know each other.*

2. *Waiting will help you find the right mate (someone who values you for the person you are).*
3. *Waiting will increase your self-respect.*
4. *Waiting will gain the respect of others.*
5. *Waiting teaches you to respect others; you'll never pressure anyone.*
6. *Waiting takes the pressure off you.*
7. *Waiting means a clear conscience (no guilt) and peace of mind (no conflicts, no regrets).*
8. *Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage (free of comparisons with other premarital partners and based on trust). By waiting, you're being faithful to your spouse even before you meet him or her.*

University of Dallas professor Janet Smith names still another advantage: By practicing the virtues involved in waiting—such as faithfulness, self-control, modesty, good judgment, courage, and genuine respect for self and others—you're *developing the kind of character that will make you a good marriage partner and attract the kind of person you'd like to marry.*

If we are serious about the character development of our children, we will promote character-based sex education in our schools. Character-based sex education teaches a clear message: ***Abstinence is the only medically safe and morally responsible choice for an unmarried teenager.*** Teaching abstinence is therefore the only kind of sex education consistent with character education. Condoms don't make sex physically safe (you can still get sick or pregnant), emotionally safe (you can still get hurt), ethically loving (can you claim to love somebody if you're gambling with their health and happiness?), or morally right.

Recent surveys suggest that students may have a new receptivity to this message. In a 1993 Gallup poll, for example, 6 of 10 American teenagers said that schools should teach abstinence outside of marriage.

12. We can help our children develop a spiritual vision.

One night, at the end of my graduate course on character education, a student stayed to talk. He said he lifted weights competitively but that it was increasingly difficult to compete because so many people in the sport use steroids. "I don't do steroids, and I never will," he said, "but just about everybody else does, and they get away with it." I asked him how athletes can continue to use steroids when everything you read says that steroids can make you sterile, cause cancer, and do other terrible things to your body.

He said, "People know all that, but they don't care." He said that the week before, the professor in one of his physical education courses had shown a videotape which reported the results of a survey of amateur weight-lifters, collegiate and post-collegiate. The survey posed this question: *"If you could take a drug that would guarantee you'd win every competition for five years, but at the end of five years the drug would be certain to kill you, would you take that drug?"* A majority of the weight-lifters said yes.

If we ask ourselves, "How is it that a significant number of young people in our society would trade their very lives for five years of drug-dependent success?", the answer comes back: They are spiritually adrift. As one mother said upon hearing the results of that survey, "Those young men don't know why they're here."

Before their character is formed by the worst aspects of our culture, young people should be helped to reflect on life's largest questions: *Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the purpose of my life?* Certainly, these questions can be engaged by any thoughtful person, religious or non-religious. But historically, religion is the way most people have engaged them. One can argue that without religion's call to the transcendent, most of us are more tempted, as the weight-lifters were, to make gods of something else—money, sexual pleasure, power, or success at any price.

Religion is a natural bedrock for character. There is a significant body of empirical evidence showing that religious faith helps to reduce adolescent risk-taking. Wallace and Williams (1997), in their literature review "Religion and Adolescent Health-Compromising Behavior," report: "Young people who frequently attend religious services, who report that religion is important to them, and who belong to religious denominations that explicitly prohibit drug use on average are less likely to be involved with drugs than are their less religiously engaged counterparts." Similarly for sex: "Attendance at religious services, self-rated importance of religion, and denominational affiliation have all been found to relate significantly to lower levels of sexual involvement."

A cautionary note: Many students, even those who practice a faith, are unfamiliar with their religion's teachings about sexuality. We need to help them make the connection. Many are surprised to learn the striking similarity of major world religions on this issue. Here are three examples I have shared with students:

Rabbi Isaac Frank: "Rabbinic teaching for at least 2500 years has consistently opposed premarital sex. Judaism removes sexual intercourse from any context of selfishness or primitive lust, and enshrines it as a sanctified element in the most intimate and meaningful relationship between two human beings: the sacred marriage bond."

Father Richard McCormick, Catholic priest: "The promise of two people to belong always to each other makes it possible for lovemaking to mean total giving and total receiving. It is the totality of married life that makes sexual intercourse meaningful. This is why the Church refers to sexual intercourse as 'the marital act.'"

Muzammil H. Siddiqi, Islamic teacher: "Islam views sexual love as a sign of God's love and mercy. It is permitted only to those couples who have joined themselves in a lawful marriage."

How else can we nurture a vital faith in our children? Personal prayer is crucial. This is made clear in a small book titled *The Spiritual Hunger of the Modern Child* (Addison, 1985). It reports an inter-faith conference that addressed a difficult question: "Why do so many young people, even those raised in committed religious families, stop practicing their faith—and even believing in God—once they leave home?"

One answer stood out for me. It was that of a British Catholic priest, Father Hugh Thwaites. He said that in his experience, when young persons fall away from the faith, it is because of one or more of three reasons.

The first is sin. Before there is a spiritual falling away, Father Thwaites said, there is usually a moral falling away: "Moral disorder and spiritual disorder are linked together, as cause and effect."

The second reason is that the young person "never personally grasped the meaning of the faith." Religion was for them a set of external behaviors, not a living relationship with the living God.

The third reason is intimately linked with the second: The young person did not have a personal prayer life. "Not praying," Father Thwaites says, "will not, of itself, kill the spiritual life. Only serious sin does that. But the absence of any prayer life will so weaken the spiritual life, that it will be unable to meet the onslaughts of a pagan world."

Those of us who work in a college environment know the intellectual and moral onslaughts that young people face there, even at ostensibly religious institutions. Young people succumb to these attacks and temptations, Father Thwaites says, "through sheer lack of spiritual vitality. What food and drink is to the body, prayer is to the soul." Father Thwaites concludes: "If young people going through a spiritual crisis give up on prayer, they will come to reject their religion."

If we want our children to hold on to their faith, then, we should help them develop the habit of daily prayer—of turning to God for guidance and strength in every area of their life. For further help in combatting the intellectual attacks on religion, we can give our children, before they go to college, the book *God: The Evidence* (1998) by Patrick Glynn, a former atheist-turned-believer who argues that the weight of scientific evidence now compellingly points to the existence of a Creator and the reality of the soul.

These are difficult times, to be sure. The dangers to our children's welfare and the future of our society are great—in some cases unparalleled in history. But there is much we can do if we have the will to do it. I salute you for all you are doing to develop a community of character in Erie, Pennsylvania. May God bless and guide all of your good work.

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