

The Importance of Character

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Readings

from “Character” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

published in 1866 (when Emerson was 63)

(with apologies for the gender exclusive language that was of that time):

When a man is born with a profound moral sentiment, preferring truth, justice and the serving of all men to any honors or any gain, men readily feel the superiority. They who deal with him are elevated with joy and hope; he lights up the house or the landscape in which he stands. His actions are poetic and miraculous in their eyes.

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Character is the habit of action from the permanent vision of truth. It carries a superiority to all the accidents of life. It compels right relation to every other man...

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There is no end to the sufficiency of character. It can afford to wait; it can do without what is called success; it cannot but succeed. To a well-principled man existence is victory.

from *Integrity* by Stephen L. Carter:

When I refer to integrity, I have something very simple and very specific in mind. Integrity... requires three steps: 1) *discerning* what is right and what is wrong; 2) *acting* on what you have discerned, even at personal cost; and 3) *saying openly* that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong. The first criterion captures the idea of integrity as requiring a degree of moral reflectiveness. The second brings in the ideal of an integral person as steadfast, which includes the sense of keeping commitments. The third reminds us that a person of integrity is unashamed of doing the right.

Sermon

When our children were, well, children, we (by which I mean “I”) were sometimes late in acquiring our Halloween pumpkins. This meant that perfectly shaped, unblemished specimens were in short supply, or not available at all.

We did the best we could, and then I did my best to salvage the situation by affirming that what our pumpkin lacked in so-called perfection it had instead in abundance... character!

To my surprise this clever ruse worked! And from that time forward pumpkins with character were not only acceptable, but (within reason) were preferred. (Even better news, there was a spillover effect when it came to choosing the family Christmas tree a couple of months later.)

Character.

Well, what is “character”? On one level it is an utterly neutral term. Whether a pumpkin or a person, character is just the collection of traits that make a particular pumpkin or a person what it or he or she is, for better or worse.

As for the various traits that make up a person’s character... you could make a long list, as some have done.

A couple of years ago I shared with you from a little book edited by Rev. Edward A. Horton, our minister for a few years near the end of the 19th century. It was called *Noble Lives and Noble Deeds: Forty Lessons by Various Writers Illustrating Christian Character*.

Each of these “lessons” illustrated one or another trait or virtue of *good* character, or what Horton called “Christian” character, through brief character sketches of well-known figures. *Forty* traits of character!

Self-Control (illustrated by Washington); Honesty (illustrated not surprisingly by Lincoln); Perseverance, Justice, Duty, Honor, Courage, Gratitude. All recognizable traits of good character.

Stephen L. Carter, in his book and in that second reading, highlighted integrity. This is arguably high on the list of good character traits, and though in the territory of honesty, it is more than just truth-telling. In Carter’s understanding integrity includes having insight into right and wrong, acting in accordance with that insight, and being open about all this, “unashamed of doing the right.” So integrity in his view includes what we could name moral discernment and moral courage.

Emerson, in that essay on character written when he was in his sixties, connected character with precisely that, with moral discernment, or, to use his phrase, a “profound moral sentiment, preferring truth, justice and the serving of all men to any honors or any gain.” In this Emerson hints at another of Horton’s qualities of good character, what Horton called “self-forgetfulness” – in other words putting the larger good higher than one’s personal gain or benefit.

So, we each have different character traits, many of which are more or less neutral when it comes to any moral judgment – but when we talk of “good character” we *are* focusing on this moral dimension, on moral discernment, integrity, and so forth.

This said, many of our other traits – various as they are from one person to the next – can be in service of what we might call the moral measure of character.

Promptness, to give one such example from among the traits Horton lists as dimensions of Christian character, is in itself a morally neutral character trait. The writer on promptness in Horton’s book, Kate Gannett Wells, acknowledges as much, noting that

Napoleon, for example, was known for promptness, but was hardly to be considered, in her words, as “the type of a noble man.”

Yet in the service of higher ends, promptness becomes not just a neutral character trait, but a virtue. “Don’t put off being kind to people,” Wells writes. And “if any attention is to be paid to a friend or a stranger, do it at once.” That is promptness in daily life in service of higher ends.

Okay then: It is easy enough to say that our lives ought to be in service of all life, to higher moral good than so-called “mere” personal gain or honor or purposes, and that those who live in such a way are of good or high moral character.

Yet when it comes to our actual lives and the decisions and choices we have to make... it is sometimes easier said than done.

Some of you may have watched the PBS program this past week *The Sharp’s War: Defying the Nazis*. This Ken Burns’ film tells the story of Unitarian minister Rev. Waitstill Sharp and his wife Martha Sharp. Waitstill, the minister of the Wellesley Hills Unitarian Church, and Martha, were asked by Unitarian leaders to go to Europe in 1939 in the midst of the growing and deeply alarming refugee crisis provoked by Hitler.

The Sharps’ initial mission would be, in concert with others, to help Jews escape from Czechoslovakia, providing relief, documents, arranging transportation, and so on. It would be dangerous work. Seventeen others had already been asked and declined.

Well, the Sharps had two young children, Hastings and Martha Content. Anyone would understand if the Sharps had declined as well. But they felt called to go and do this work, which they did, and did with skill and courage, dedication and perseverance (good character traits!) – first for several months, then, after returning, before long for another tour. Each time leaving their children in the care of trusted friends and family... but leaving them without their parents.

The Sharps rescued or helped to rescue hundreds, including many children – some of whom are still alive and remember the Sharps with undying gratitude. With all this in mind, we can certainly affirm that their work in Europe at that time not only represented some of the best of our Unitarian tradition of seeking justice and fairness and peace, of helping others in need, but also said much to praise about the Sharps’ character.

Yet even so, how do we judge their decision to leave their children for long periods of time, even in service of a moral purpose to be sure? Does this decision also say something about their character – and if so, what?

And what about the seventeen who declined? What does that say about their character? Well, they no doubt had good and worthy reasons, likely no less morally or ethically based, having to do with service of their families or communities.

After all, what would I have done? What would you have done?

So... does the story of the Sharps teach us anything about character?

Well, if nothing else it illustrates how complex is this territory of character, if by “good character” we mean ethically responsible and morally grounded.

The Sharps were indeed fine human beings in many of the ways in which we judge character: honest, kind, compassionate, dedicated to the betterment of others. And whatever we might think about their choices, they agonized over this decision to leave their children.

Here then is one lesson about character that I glean from this story of courage, heroism... and really hard choices: A person of good character, a person who strives to live according to moral truths, kindness, justice, will not always be certain as to what course to take in a given situation; he or she in fact sees maybe more clearly than most the complexity of situations and choices, sometimes agonizes over the right action – and in the end sometimes may feel he or she has made the wrong choice, failed in some way or another – and then learns from it.

In other words, when we are talking about someone of good character we're not necessarily talking about perfect human beings who always make the so-called right choices.

Which is why the best among us may often end up with character written upon their faces as vividly as one of those Read-Brown pumpkins, creased and worn, not smooth or without blemish.

Well then, can we put any of this in the context of politics and elections?
Emerson did.

He actually wrote two essays on character. In the first, written when he was about forty years old, he included, as it happened, a few thoughts about character in relation to elections. He wrote that the people “know that they need in their representative much more than talent, namely the power to make this talent trusted.” Even more they want someone who “was appointed by Almighty God to stand for fact.” Whoa – what's he mean by that? Well, I simply take Emerson to mean someone who acknowledges a higher power or principles than his or her own private ends. We could simply call it conscience.

And in the much later essay, though Emerson writes nothing about elections, he focuses more acutely, as we've heard, on the moral or ethical dimension of character – which we are free to apply to elections and candidates.

The first line of this later essay is, “Morals respects what men call goodness, that which all men agree to honor as justice, truth-speaking, good will and good works.”

And: “Morals is the direction of the will on universal ends. He is immoral who is acting to any private end. He is moral... whose aim or motive may become a universal rule, binding on all intelligent beings...”

So... judging candidates on the question of character? Here's what I get from Emerson (as well as from Stephen Carter in that second reading): Anyone can say anything he or she wants when it comes to positions and policies. And quite naturally we will initially gravitate to a candidate who has positions and policies that reflect our own opinions on all sorts of questions.

But we also judge, and ought to judge, the *character* of candidates not so much through their words only (though I don't want to gloss over the place of words too quickly, for words too are often tellingly, sometimes appallingly, reflective of character, as we have seen again and again this year), but beyond words, we also must look at whether over the course of their careers and lives, their lives and deeds reflect what might be fine sentiments and positions.

Maybe it is as simple as that. Truth telling of course. Kindness and compassion yes. And then adding this consonance of moral sentiment with deed – deed done often with courage and perseverance and a measure of self-forgetfulness.

I suppose promptness would be nice, but not essential.... and it might not hurt if the somewhat dry-sounding moral qualities were leavened by such traits Horton also lists as cheerfulness and courtesy.

In any case, we can choose to vote for candidates who most closely live up to high standards of character – or at least, if not perfect (remember no one is perfect) higher, sometimes far higher than the opponent.

Indeed, we must – and this year perhaps more than ever.

Finally... meanwhile... we ought not let ourselves off the hook!

We can and ought strive every day towards good character and worthy goals and aims, beginning by remembering that we are indeed part and parcel of the larger community of humanity and of life – and so we are not in this for ourselves only.

And then striving a bit every day to look at ourselves honestly and choose to strengthen one or another trait of good character, one or another trait that might help us to put our high ideals into our lives.

Including what I'm calling those supportive traits, as simple as promptness or courtesy which are ways of respecting the needs of others. And cheerfulness, which can be more than a superficial air of smiles and laughter... can instead be a way of lifting the spirits of those around us. Maybe simplicity of lifestyle, another trait on Horton's list, which can be a way of bringing more justice to the world, in the spirit of Gandhi, who reminded us that there is quite enough in this world for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.

Yes, we *must* vote for those candidates we deem to be of high and good moral, ethical character – or at the least, higher than the opponent; *and*, daily we can choose to strengthen our own character and presence in the world – in the spirit of that young man Emerson mentored, Henry David Thoreau, who affirmed in *Walden* that “to affect the quality of the day is the highest of arts.”

So may it be.