

What a Character!

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My friend Marisha says you have all the character you're ever going to have by the age of 35, so you can then stop doing character building activities, you know, those things you don't really like but that are supposed to enhance your moral fiber. For her that means no more gardening. For me it meant no longer reading books I don't like all the way to the end. It turns out that life is too short for perseverance and fortitude in all things. Pick your moral battles.

Having passed the age of 35 a few years ago, I find this philosophy a great relief conferring freedom to choose the activities that make me happy rather than those that mold my character. The twist of irony here is that I've come to believe that that building character is actually my best route to happiness.

There are lots of different attributes that make up and distinguish an individual's character, of course, and having character doesn't necessarily imply having good character, one of moral excellence and firmness. But, then, what constitutes moral excellence is culturally contextual and ever changing. For centuries moral realism has been in conversation with (if not at war with) moral romanticism. Where moral realism tells us that we are innately sinful, moral romanticism sees human nature as innately good. In one time and place humanity is urged to perfection through battling our inner depravity, often tied to the message that we are not capable of this on our own but only through the unmerited grace of God. At other times and in other places humanity's salvation has been seen as an individual affair based on our own capacity for good and our capacity for self-improvement.

Our own religious history is rooted in this dichotomy of inherent fallenness versus worthiness. In response to Calvinism, our New England forbearers developed theologies of self-culture. They said that not only were we not irredeemable, but that we had the wherewithal to redeem ourselves through improving our own moral character. Philosophical discussion, participation in the arts and acts of charity tempered the iron will of character like hammer on anvil.

Along with shifting views of human nature there is an accompanying change in emphasis on the value of a good moral character. Prior to the twentieth century, America lived in what historian Warren Susman called a "Culture of Character," where the quality of your character was your most important social asset. As American society became more industrialized, more geographically mobile, and more affluent we turned from a culture that prized moral rectitude to one that prized popularity, a culture where your ability to win friends and influence people set you apart and above. We became what Susman calls a Culture of Personality.

Others have named this cultural shift in other terms. Tom Wolfe spoke of it when he called the 1970's the "Me Decade," describing an attitude of atomized individualism. New York Times Columnist David Brooks calls it "selfie culture." By whatever name, historians, sociologists and

pundits point to the present day as a time when individualism trumps the communal, when fame, power, and status carry more social capital than qualities of courage, kindness or honor.

You can hear the shift in our language. If you aren't familiar with Google's ngram viewer it is a tool that searches the language used in printed sources published between 1800 and 2012. You plug in a word and the ngram viewer gives you the frequency of that word graphed over the two-plus centuries. If you type in words like "humility," "conscience," and "character" you will see steep declines in their usage from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. On the other hand, words like "individual," "personalize," and "self" rise dramatically. We don't even need Google ngrams. Words like "honor," "virtue," and "bravery" even *sound* old fashioned to our modern ears.

Even casual glances at the self-aggrandizing behavior of modern athletes, the endless bad behavior of politicians or the embarrassing revelations of reality TV will convince you that character is not a strong value in American culture. But are the changes all bad? I don't think they are. I think that to yearn for a day when Walter Cronkite was the trusted, paternal face of the evening news is to yearn for a time when women were cut from opportunities in broadcasting as in most other fields. To wax nostalgic for simpler days of bobby socks and malt shops is to invite a time when you had to be white to be served at the malt shop. Just as Google ngram shows drops in the use of words like "character" it shows increases in words such as "community," "share", "common good" and "diverse." So it isn't really so simple as saying that the shifts our culture has undergone are all bad or that the world is going to hell in hand basket. I generally dislike anything that is all one way or another. Strict dichotomies are often, in my experience, both false and unhelpful. Still, a little character building might not hurt.

In the essay *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explores the qualities of Adam as presented in the first two chapters of Genesis in the Torah. In the first chapter, Adam I, as Soloveitchik calls him, is a man of the world. Given dominion over the earth he sets out to conquer his universe and impose his own ideas upon the world. Adam I's capacity for relationship is utilitarian: building, cultivating and bending the world to his needs. Soloveitchik call this Adam "majestic man."

Adam II, the Adam depicted in the second chapter of Genesis, is rather different. This Adam Soloveitchik calls "covenantal man." This Adam does not aim to subdue nature but to live in harmony with it and nurture it. Likewise this Adam needs companionship. Genesis 2 says "It is not good for the man to be alone" and Eve is created as his partner. This Adam, the lonely man of faith of the essay's title, needs to be in community, connected to the earth and to other human beings.

Soloveitchik does not play favorites between Adam I and Adam II. He says both have their role. The material and the spiritual, the majestic and the covenantal, are both necessary for the wholeness of human existence. This is a view that works for me, and a way of understanding character that acknowledges both moral realism and moral romanticism; that the Culture of Character had its challenges just as the Culture of Personality has its strengths; that nothing in human existence is so very cut and dried.

Let me bring it into more modern language by borrowing the terms that David Brooks uses in his book *The Road to Character*. Brooks says that there are two types of virtues, “resume virtues” and “eulogy virtues.” Resume virtues are those more external qualities and skills that help you build a career. Soloveitchik’s majestic man is a resume virtue kind of guy. He is about skill sets, accomplishments and getting the job done. This is the person who is perhaps most at home in Susman’s definition of the modern Culture of Personality, focused on the material, on power, fame and influence.

Eulogy virtues are deeper, more internal qualities, the sorts of things people will talk about at your memorial service—compassion, honesty, courage, faithfulness and kindness. These qualities inform Soloveitchik’s covenantal man, concerned with relationship, community and cooperation. This person would perhaps have been more comfortable in Susman’s nineteenth century Culture of Character, where the content of one’s character was one’s most valuable asset.

Like Soloveitchik, I am not going to choose one over the other. It can’t be done. No one, not even the most driven corporate mogul, is without some element of covenantal relationship, nor is anyone without the need to get things done. We are all both Adam I and Adam II, majestic and covenantal. Our happiness lies not in choosing one over the other but in integrating these various facets of ourselves into a cohesive and meaningful whole. To be of good character does not mean, for me, to adhere unfailingly to a strict moral code. It means rather to understand the fullness of ourselves so that we can act with authority from our deepest values. It combines both the notion that moral integrity is important *and* that we find fulfillment through doing useful work and being recognized for that. It means maintaining relational qualities of community, sharing and the common good while upholding the right of individual conscience. It is always the both-and over the either-or.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that I’ve come to believe that that building character is actually my best route to happiness, and this is what I mean by building character. Not following a Victorian set of etiquette rules unquestioningly. Not allowing my own desires or needs to control my behavior. But finding a way to integrate all elements of my nature so that I might know, and then live, from my deepest values. As Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, “The beginning of worthwhile living is thus the confrontation with ourselves.”

Now, Fosdick was one of the authors of Christian Fundamentalism so this is probably the one and final place I’ll agree with him, but the fact that I can quote him on this point goes to illustrate what I am trying to say, that throwing out ways of doing something without examination of what good it might offer just lessens our vision. Am I completely comfortable with today’s Culture of Personality that glorifies bad behavior and pushes us toward shallow satisfactions? No. But neither would I have been satisfied with a Culture of Character that silenced my voice because I am a woman and a Latina.

This matter of character building is not an easy thing, and practicing virtues traditionally associated with good character—charity, humility, patience, diligence and so on—continue to be a part of that. Maybe even gardening and reading books we don’t like have their roles, but essentially our task is to make of all that comes our way a cohesive and meaningful whole. This means tending to both our Adam I sides, our strengths, and to our Adam II sides, the pains of life

that can offer us empathy, understanding and deeper connections to others. Nice as it would be to think we are done with it at 35, we know we are not. It is, as our reading this morning said, “obtained through lifetimes of diligent effort to dig deeply within and heal lifetimes of scars.... You can’t teach it or email it or tweet it. It has to be discovered within the depths of one’s own heart when a person is finally ready to go looking for it, and not before.”

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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