Chapter 2: Views, Values, or Virtues?

How can we help students develop the strength of character they need to lead their lives well—to make good choices and honor their commitments? For students to choose nobly, they need some direction. It's easy to say that the schools should help provide this direction, but what approach should they take? Where does character development fit into the curriculum?

People's moral compasses are shaped by a number of different factors, from their family, faith, and friendships to their experiences, such as hard work, suffering, and joy. Some argue that the views we have on an array of different issues provide our moral starting point. Others contend that our values constitute our moral compass. In this chapter we argue that virtues are what orient us appropriately and strengthen our character. These three terms—the "three Vs" of views, values, and virtues—are often used interchangeably, but in reality they serve very different purposes. This, in turn, has led to a great deal of confusion for those trying to implement character education in their schools.

In choosing which one to emphasize in the classroom, we must be aware of where each road leads. As the traveler's axiom states, "You're never gonna get there if you're not sure where you're goin'." Our aim in this chapter is to point educators toward what we believe is the right road, a road that leads to the keystone of character education. Although views, values, and virtues all play an integral part in schooling, only virtues provide the true moral support critical for building character.

The "Three Vs" in the Classroom

We begin with an illustration of character education in three classrooms. All three are eleventh-grade English classes discussing Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. All three teachers are intentionally trying to integrate character education into their curriculum. The classes have reached the part of the novel where the bounty hunters searching for Jim, Huck's friend and companion on the raft, approach Huck to ask him if he has seen
the runaway slave. In what many critics have recognized as an ethical moment of truth for Huck, he decides to lie to the hunters to keep Jim from being captured. With this act he goes against all he has learned from his father and society. Twain has Huck conclude that he is going to "throw his lot in with the Devil."

Scenario One: The Views-Driven Approach

Ms. Hadyn begins the lesson by asking her students to complete the following in-class writing assignment:

Our book, Huckleberry Finn, is increasingly becoming controversial. Many school districts around the country have banned it, and some public libraries have been pressured to remove it from their shelves. Critics claim that the book is filled with racial slurs, insults, and stereotypes that are deeply offensive to African Americans and all people concerned with equality and harmony. Others rebut this claim, stating that the book is not only an American classic but also a biting satire of our country's former racial laws and attitudes. The very fact that Huck would have to struggle to make a decision about whether or not Jim is someone's personal property is a telling reminder of the profound indignities and mistreatment African Americans suffered under slavery. What are your views on this controversial topic of banning Huckleberry Finn? Write a brief argument for your point of view, and state the reasons for your position.

She gives the students twenty-five minutes to write their papers, and when they are finished she starts the discussion. After giving the students some more background on the controversy surrounding the book in various parts of the country, Ms. Hadyn invites them to state and support their positions.

Teacher:  Yes, Sarah?

Sarah: I think it's a racist book. And quite honestly. I've been wondering why we're reading it. I mean, just look at Jim's full name: "Nig"--I can't even say the word!

Teacher: Lots of people are upset about this. All right,
anyone else? Todd?

    Todd:  I agree with Sarah. If I were an African American and had to read this, I'd be insulted. And having to be reminded that my grandparents or great-grandparents were slaves.... Well, it's just too much.

    Teacher:  What do you mean, "too much"?

    Todd:  Well, being in class with white kids whose ancestors owned my grandparents would be hard. It would make me mad and want to get back at them. It's just not right.

    Teacher:  Okay. Larry, you've had your hand up for a while.

    Larry:  Hey, we're going over the top. This is a satire. Twain was on Jim's side. He was showing how crazy slavery was. Those bounty hunters were the bad guys.

    Todd:  That's what you think! Not everyone takes it that way. For some, there's a lot of insults in this book.

    Teacher:  Fine. Thank you. Can we hear from someone else? Rosa?

    Rosa:  Well, I'm Hispanic. And although I can see the discrimination point, I think we're missing the point. Isn't Jim sorta the hero of the story? Isn't he Huck's teacher?

    The discussion continues for the rest of the period, and the teacher keeps a running tally on the board of the various points raised, under the headings "Pro-Ban" and "Anti-Ban." As the period draws to a close, she explains that in a democracy it is important for people to take positions on controversial issues and defend their views. She says that this is particularly true for issues like racism that affect people's lives and futures. One student asks what Ms. Hadyn's own view is on whether the book should be banned. "Well, first of all," Ms. Hadyn says, "I would never have taught it if I believed it should be banned. And though I'm sensitive to the criticisms of it, my own view is that this is an American classic and one that points out for inspection the racism that has been part of our past. I think the good done by this book outweighs the harm." Several
students are eager to dispute her. As she is about to acknowledge them, the bell rings. Students head for the door, many of them still vigorously arguing their views.

Scenario Two: The Values-Driven Approach

Mr. Klopper announces at the beginning of his class that they are going to do a "mind-stretching" exercise today. He tells the class that although they probably all identify with Huck and Jim as they attempt to run away, he wants the class to consider the events around the bounty hunter scene in a different light. "Close your eyes and imagine the following," he instructs. "The bounty hunters are just poor men hired by the equally poor farmer from whom Jim has run away. The farmer is a good man, struggling to keep his own family fed. He was always generous to Jim and his wife and children. Without Jim, the slave he inherited from his father, his whole livelihood is in jeopardy. Furthermore, Jim's wife and children desperately want him back. He never told them he was going to run away. His wife is crestfallen, and the children cry themselves to sleep every night."

After adding these imaginary elements to the story, Mr. Klopper breaks the class down into four groups and asks them to take up the perspectives of Jim, Huck, the farmer/slave owner, and Jim's wife. He then asks the students in each group to put themselves in their character's shoes and discuss what they believe is the right thing for Huck to do. Further, Mr. Klopper instructs the students to give two justifications for their decision. After fifteen minutes of spirited discussion in the groups, the teacher asks spokespersons from each group to explain their group's opinion and how they justify it. The students get quite involved in the exercise, rooting for their character and making light of the other group's reasons.

"Now for the real mind-stretching," Mr. Klopper explains. "We are going to do a little switching around. I want the 'Jim group' to consider the case from the farmer's perspective, and vice-versa. And the 'Huck group' should now consider the situation of Jim's wife, and vice versa. This time you only have ten minutes to prepare." The process is then repeated, with each side again reporting its conclusions.
With ten minutes left in the period, Mr. Klopper announces, "I want you to write an answer to the following question: 'If you were in Huck's shoes, and you were aware of these other three perspectives, what would you do when the bounty hunters came, and why?' You have until the end of the period to complete your response." The students begin writing immediately. After the bell rings, they leave their papers on the teacher's desk. Several students ask Klopper, "Who was best? Which group argued the best?" He smiles and says, "I'd have to say it was a tie." Moans and questions follow. "What would you do, Mr. Klopper? Would you turn Jim in?" As he gathers up his material and glides toward the door, he says with a smile, "No! No! That wouldn't be fair. Make up your own mind." The moans continue as the door closes behind him.

Scenario Three: The Virtues-Centered Approach

Mrs. Ramirez begins her class by asking what her students remember about the purpose of satire as a literary device. Several students offer responses. "It pokes fun at institutions to show their corruption," one offers. A second student recounts Jonathan Swift's use of irony and exaggeration in "A Modest Proposal," which makes the outrageous yet calculated proposal that the Irish consider eating their young children as a solution to the economic depression: "Yeah, Swift shows how cruel the British were to the Irish." After a brief discussion of political cartoons and satire in TV sitcoms, Mrs. Ramirez returns to Mark Twain. "Well, you should know that we are reading not only one of the most popular American novels ever written but also one of the greatest satires in American literature. Although satire holds people, customs, and institutions up to ridicule, it is often driven by a moral purpose. The author is trying to get people to see the absurdity or immorality of something by presenting it in a satiric manner." She tells them that with the passage they are now discussing, about Huck's being tempted to turn Jim in, they have come to a critical juncture in the novel: "Huck makes a moral decision and acts on it. Now I want you to reflect on his decision and write about it. I want you to think about what this decision reveals about Huck, about the kind of person he is becoming. Based on what you know about Huck thus far--that is, he's a young boy, just beginning to grow up--and what you know from our previous discussions about virtues, which virtue is Huck beginning
to show in this scene? Or is Huck simply acting out of enlightened self-interest? Please give evidence from the text to support your response." She tells the class that they have twenty minutes to make their arguments, "so think hard and work fast. When you've finished, we'll read a few and discuss them."

After some head scratching, a bit of staring blankly into space, and some visits by Mrs. Ramirez to a few questioning students, everyone settles down to write. The teacher returns to her desk and writes as well. At the end of twenty minutes, Mrs. Ramirez invites the students to share their papers.

Mrs. Ramirez: What kind of person is Huck becoming?

Deborah: I think Huck is really changing. He stands up for what he believes is right, even if he has to lie.

Steve: Yeah. Huck shows a lot of guts; he's changed a lot from the beginning of the novel.

Mrs. Ramirez: How has he changed, then?

Steve: I'd say he's gained courage.

Danielle: I don't think so. Huck needs Jim, and he doesn't want him taken away. That's all. He's not thinking about the consequences, like whether or not Jim will ever see his wife and children again. I think Huck's acting out of his own self-interest.

Mrs. Ramirez: One could even go so far as to say Huck is being cowardly in not turning Jim in; he's not facing up to the law and its consequences, right?

Norma: No, I don't think he's being a coward at all.

Mrs. Ramirez: Why not?

Norma: For the first time, Huck realizes that Jim is a person, not property. It reminds me of the people who willingly hid Jews in their homes during the Holocaust and
then lied to the Nazis. Huck shows respect for Jim--and courage.

Mrs. Ramirez: Let's look at Huck's situation again. What's motivating him? Is he acting from self-interest, or is something else driving Huck's decision to lie?

The discussion goes on. Students offer additional evidence from the novel to support Huck's showing signs of loyalty and friendship as well as courage. The "enlightened self-interest" case is refuted with the argument that if Huck were really interested in his own welfare, he would not have risked the danger he puts himself in as an accomplice to a runaway slave. Toward the end of the class, one of the students asks Mrs. Ramirez what she thinks Huck shows in this scene. "First, as you have discovered," she explains, "there is no single answer to the question. In one way or another, Huck shows signs of all the character traits you mentioned. But my sense is that the desire for justice is what moved him to action. It dawned on him how unfair it would be for Jim to be sent back. I could make a strong case as well for respect, which has a lot to do with justice. I think what was happening to Huck on the raft was that he was beginning to see what is wrong with the way people around him saw Jim as just a slave, as someone's property. Huck has grown to see Jim as a person, worthy of respect and fair treatment." With that the bell rings, and class is dismissed.

These brief scenarios show us how three different classrooms and teachers might approach one question, all under the banner of character education, in varying ways. Although we strongly favor the general approach of the third scenario, the classroom centered on virtues, the other two are not without merit. Each approach contributes to the effort to foster character development through the curriculum. Ms. Hadyn helps her students to be sensitive to the effects of racism, including the effect that just portraying racism in literature can have on some people. Mr. Klopper involves his students in the practice of taking different perspectives, challenging them to understand the points of view of others. Both of these approaches lack a moral anchor, however. Neither approach helps students appreciate the difference between a morally good decision and a morally weak one: every moral choice is up for grabs, just one of a set of views or values. When such
approaches become the only or primary way of addressing moral issues, character education has no anchor.

The Problem with Emphasizing Views

The first scenario, of a views-driven classroom, captures the way character education is conceived of and carried out in many American classrooms--as a discussion among viewpoints on controversial moral issues. The teacher believes in helping students develop a moral compass and believes she is advancing this goal by helping them acquire strong views on social issues. It is pedagogically effective. She works from a text and uses the curriculum to help students grapple with important issues. She has them confront the issue on their own and arrive at their own point of view. And because she believes that students should come in contact with well-thought-out views, and perhaps further believing that her view on the banning issue is correct, she shares it with her students.

An exemplar of the views-driven instructional approach is one of America's most popular teachers, Oprah Winfrey. Her highly successful method has not only sired numerous imitators on television but also hundreds of thousands in our classrooms. The Oprah method goes something like this:

1. Find a hot issue, one that will generate interest (ideally passionate interest).

2. Present the issue in as stark and dramatic a fashion as possible. Try as much as possible to keep the issue black or white, with little or no gray area.

3. Get people to formulate their views and to take sides on the issue.

4. Have them present their views in a confrontational (my-side-against-your-side) manner.

5. Act as a referee. Make sure all sides are heard and the situation remains charged but not out of control.

6. Try to stay neutral (except when you believe you have the correct view) and nonjudgmental (except with
views you consider way out of the mainstream).

7. Congratulate people for their interest and participation, not for the merit or truth of their positions.

Although the Oprah approach makes for successful television (that is, her program draws large audiences and sells more commercial products), it makes for questionable education—and dubious character education. The aim of this approach is both to get students to form views and opinions on a wide range of topics and to encourage them to hold specific, socially acceptable views on certain topics. However, focusing on views naturally tends to feed controversy. For instance, although it is difficult to generate much excitement by expressing concern for the less fortunate of the world, it is quite easy to do so by asserting that the United States ought to open wide its borders to them. Few like to talk about abstract principles, such as duty to one's country. It is much easier to take things to a personal level, such as by asking whether everyone should be required to give two years of military service.

There is nothing wrong with generating controversy in the careful pursuit of truth. Controversy can prompt reflection, thought, and insight—but it can also provoke anger, resentment, and a contentious spirit that spills out of control. Every community has its shared views and its competing views. In our country there are a number of so-called hot-button issues that are of great interest to people, particularly adolescents. For instance, during junior and senior high school many students are fascinated by the occult, by the effects of drugs and alcohol, by sexuality, and by all the controversy that surrounds these themes. The more controversial the topic, such as homosexual marriage, a scandal surrounding a public figure, or the use of animals to test drugs, the more interest they have in it. 'Twas ever so. Certainly there is a place in school for discussing society's unfinished business, our unsettled questions. Indeed, such discussions can heighten students' awareness of the moral domain and help them appreciate the complexity of many moral issues. An overemphasis on controversial subjects can harm rather than help a school's character education efforts, however. Such subjects can end up generating more heat than light. At worst, they can leave students with the impression that ethical issues are
"just too complicated" and "ultimately, just a matter of opinion." Too often, the moral significance of an issue is reduced to a smorgasbord of divisive claims and counterclaims, and the moral principles that underlie those claims remain unexamined.

The Problem with Emphasizing Values

Our second scenario illustrates a values-driven lesson. The concept of "values" has been a tricky and troubling one in recent American education. Values are what we desire, what we want, and what we ascribe worth to. Values tend to be idiosyncratic. They can be reduced to a matter of taste or feeling rather than representing the product of thought and deliberate choice. Furthermore, values can be good or bad. What matters is not their content but the fact that we prize them. And often we are a little schizophrenic about our values. For instance, we may value the image of ourselves as "lovers of poetry" but rarely buy a book of poetry or even read a poem. Or we may be quite vocal about the vulgarity of soap operas but in fact spend several hours a week watching prime-time soaps. Human beings have all sorts of values, and we apply them to many different areas of our lives. Some values are no more than matters of preference, like a taste for designer clothing or good wine. Some values are related to one's ethnic background and traditions, such as the French citizen's concern for his language. Some stem from our religious beliefs, such as our attitudes toward the Sabbath. We also have aesthetic values, such as a love for Beethoven or bebop. Some are social values or manners, like the desire to take care of one's personal hygiene and to eat with knives and forks. And then there are moral values, such as those guiding how we treat others. We will take up moral values shortly.

Over the past twenty years, schools have focused heavily on values, instituting "values education" and "values clarification" programs as a primary vehicle to address morality and ethics with students. The problem with values-driven character education, however, is not simply the question of which values should be addressed (our taste in music or our moral values with respect to warfare) but also what we believe about the authority of these values. The current cultural climate holds that values are not only a matter of personal choice but also a personal right, not to
be limited by some sort of "moral authority." Each person is free to define his or her own values. This works fine when we limit ourselves to questions of taste, as in "I really value evenings by the fire" or "I like dry white wine," but such subjectivism can become pernicious in the moral realm. Does anyone have a right to value, say, being able to use manipulation and power to get their way with people?

When the question "Is this the right thing to do?" is pushed, the answer comes, "It's certainly right by me!" In short, values are perceived as relative. But relative to what? The cultural relativist might answer that they are relative to the different rules and mores of different cultures. In effect, different communities and nations have arrived at their own conclusions about what is right and what is wrong. Over time they have forged agreements on rules of conduct. From a values perspective, then, what is right or wrong depends on the particular cultural context with which one is dealing. Can we say in such a climate that, for example, enslaving another person is wrong or teenagers shouldn't be having sex? "Maybe yes, maybe no," comes the answer.

For the cultural relativist, rules are man-made and thus quite arbitrary. Adherents to this view have confusedly alleged that if everything is relative, there are no moral principles, no universal good, to count on. In our ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse society, we have moved swiftly from cultural relativism to personal relativism. In the world of personal relativism, the individual is king. Although she may choose to obey the law as her only moral norm, whatever else she does is a matter of personal choice. And if a person should choose to break the law, what matters most is that she doesn't get caught. Morality becomes a purely personal matter. The only moral standard that remains is that there are no absolute moral standards or norms. There are just individual values. Confronted with an ethical problem, we are responsible for solving it only in the way that suits us best. We are our own private judge and jury.

Writing in Back to Virtue on this problem of cultural and personal relativism, or what he calls the moral worlds of collectivism and privatism, Peter Kreeft explains: "Their effect (privatism and collectivism) is that we live in two
separate worlds. Our feeling life, our inner world of 'values' (no longer real goods), is set against the outer world of behavior, a world governed by social 'mores' (no longer morals). 'Values' are like thoughts, like ghosts, undulating blobs of psychic energy. 'Mores' are like brute facts, like machines, ways people do in fact behave, not ways they ought to. We are like ghosts in machines."

In this prevailing intellectual environment, the most morally educative act teachers feel permitted to perform is to help their students clarify their own values--their "inner world of feelings." They are also free to socialize students to embrace conventional mores and socially accepted values. Neither act fosters character, the integral moral education of the head, the heart, and the hand. Instead they promote subjectivism and a mechanical morality that changes with the fashions of the day.

The teacher in scenario two, the values-driven classroom, is concerned with his students' values. He wants them to come to their own conclusions about what is the morally right thing for Huck to do. And he adds all the emotional detail to help them see that there may be many different answers, depending on what they feel most strongly about. Mr. Klopper took an important step toward developing his students' character; however, as many American educators do, he based his character education effort not on giving his students hard, intellectual evidence, grounding them in the truths of our society's collective moral wisdom, but on the doctrine of privatism--"whatever you feel is important." His method reflects something that is as close to educational dogma as it gets: the idea that adults have no right to impose their moral values on the young.

Mr. Klopper is similar to Ms. Hadyn, who is also intent on helping her students form their own views. The main difference between the two is that Ms. Hadyn asks her students for reasons based on evidence rather than reasons based on an emotionally charged response to hypothetical details. Both believe that it is more important for their students to arrive at their own perspective than to accept someone else's truth. But worse yet, they are inculcating their students with the same dogma: there are no universal truths or values. The best students can do is to come up with satisfying views, with their own feelings about an issue, to clarify their own "undulating blobs of psychic
energy." By focusing on controversy and emotional responses, these teachers have ignored the moral basics. And, as we have discussed in Chapter One, there are moral basics.

The Benefits of Emphasizing Virtues

In scenario three, the virtues-centered classroom, the approach to character education is different. Mrs. Ramirez's approach is a mix of reflection and guided discussion. Keeping the students close to the text of the novel, she wants them to reflect on Huck's actions and thoughts. Additionally, she wants them, as much as possible, to make connections between the work under study and important life lessons. She poses the question about what kind of person Huck is becoming and asks them to base their conclusions on evidence from the story. She does not want them to blurt out the first thing that comes to their minds or to rush to judgment. Like Ms. Hadyn in the views-centered classroom, she gives them time and requests that they commit their thoughts to the discipline of written expression. Only once they have thought and written does she engage them in discussion. Mrs. Ramirez does not conduct an anything-goes free-for-all but sets up a logical thought process to lead students--by eliciting their responses--toward a specific goal. She believes there are important moral truths that must be understood.

Each of these three teachers is skillful in his or her own way. Each is attempting to engage students in serious issues. Each believes he or she is integrating character education into the curriculum. Clearly, each one excites students and gets their "ethical juices" flowing. Yet, only one teacher actually gets to the heart of things. Without a conception of virtue, without a sense of what it may mean for a person to live in an honorable or contemptible way, the views one holds, no matter how well they may be defended, are empty. Without a clear sense of the good, personal values and the ability to show empathy remain hollow. Only one teacher helps students to see why Huck's decision to lie is good, despite appearances. Her students come to see the power of virtue in shaping an individual's life. Only this teacher helps her students understand that character comes not from acquiring particular points of view or values but from developing a set of ideals upon
which to base one's life.

The Search for Meaning in Life

Detached from a conception of the purpose of life, virtues become merely nice ideals, empty of meaning. "What is the purpose of human life?" Although this is an extremely abstract question, for centuries it has consumed philosophers, theologians, great writers, holy women and men, and individuals across cultures and from all strata of society. If we could arrive at an answer to this question, it seems natural that it would direct everything we do, from how we spend our minutes and hours to what we try to accomplish through our family lives and careers. Certainly, too, the answer would inform our educational efforts. Needless to say, however, it is a question that is rarely asked in schools today.

Just because they have not come to grips with this ultimate question doesn't mean our schools have been purposeless. In fact, they have been driven by a cacophony of purposes, from vocationalism to mental health, from mastery of the basics to computer literacy. Clearly there is a good to each of these educational efforts, but each purpose seems to have its turn in school, is tried--often with great fanfare--found wanting, attacked, and then put on the educational ice floe.

Raising questions about the ultimate purpose of life is out of fashion, particularly in our public schools. But the absence of these questions puts at great peril our educational system's goal of drawing the very best from students. One reason for educators' reluctance to ask about our purpose in life is that the U.S. public school system is designed to serve children from a variety of cultures, creeds, and origins. Since individuals of different cultures answer this question in different ways, those taking the lead in our public schools have gently pushed this question aside. The failure to contend with this anchoring question, however, has resulted in enormous confusion and drift. We have replaced the more probing questions about what it means to live well as a human being with secondary questions about how can we help our students to become successful, wealthy, and well liked. But in our view, fundamental reform and increased public support for our schools depends on bringing more sturdy questions back to
We should not fear raising this age-old question about the purpose of life. To ignore it would be miseducative. Further, throughout history there has been a fairly consistent answer: happiness, or living well. Thoughtful observers of the human condition have continually noted this same quest, the quest for happiness. As Baruch Spinoza said, "What everyone wants from life is continuous and genuine happiness." At the turn of the century, William James observed, "How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and all they are willing to do." We all appear to have a drive toward happiness that we can observe in young children, in elderly retirees, and in ourselves. The real questions, then, are "What is happiness?" and "What brings happiness?" Answers range, of course, from the saccharine claim of Charlie Brown that "Happiness is a warm puppy" to the cynical comment of A. Edward Newton that "the formula for complete happiness is to be very busy with the unimportant."

A serious question, "What is happiness?" really invites us to ask, "What does it mean to live well--to lead a fully human life?" And it is here where there are quite different answers and real divisions. A large percentage of Americans would probably respond by saying that living well means having a good family, a satisfying and well-paying job, or good health. Another percentage, being intimately connected to their faith tradition, might add that true happiness means being close to God or some related condition. There are many outside of religious traditions, though, who understand the good as living in harmony with nature or making of their own lives a work of art. Although differences in people's ultimate goals do exist, there is a strong consensus among people holding different life goals on the means of achieving them. The devout Southern Baptist who is trying to follow Jesus and the agnostic struggling to make her life a work of art both agree that they should treat the underprivileged with care, be honest in their dealings, and respect the rights of others. Further, as citizens of the same nation, they usually agree on certain moral standards and virtues that are instrumental in advancing the common good. It is a basic tenet of public education in this country that people of very different
theologies, or no theology at all, can come together in their communities and agree on teaching their children these means to happiness and to living in harmony together.

As a community we may be able to agree on core virtues, such as justice, responsibility, courage, and compassion; however, we are still left to grapple with the purpose of life question. F. Washington Jarvis, headmaster of the over-350-year-old Roxbury Latin School in Boston, illustrates this challenge well in "Beyond Ethics," an article he wrote for the Journal of Education. Jarvis describes a conversation he had with a former high school star, noting that "glittering prizes crowned his accomplishments in school." Jarvis cites the student, now a successful businessman in his early thirties, as saying:

You know, ever since I was in school, all my days have been like this one--never enough time to do everything I need to do. I worked incredibly hard in school. I worked incredibly hard in college and in business school. And I work incredibly hard at my job. Occasionally, along the way, from time to time, I've asked myself, "Why am I working so hard, why do I want this life?" But lately I've been asking myself that question a lot more often. All the time when we were in school you used to talk to us about ethics, about how we should live. That's good, your words did affect us. I've volunteered as a Big Brother and as a tutor and I've taken all the seminars on cultural awareness et cetera. But you really should talk more about why we should live. Ethical questions are important, but the even more important question is whether there is any purpose and meaning to things, whether all this hard work is worth it, whether life is worth living.2

Meaning--the point of it all--nags at us. And it certainly nags at our students. In the small community of South Boston alone there were seven completed suicides and over seventy attempts by teenagers in 1997. Last summer the New York Times Magazine featured a special report on "cutting," an obsessive-compulsive habit that many
adolescents, especially girls, have in which they punish themselves by inflicting pain on themselves--cutting their thighs and arms with razors or burning their skin with cigarettes. By wounding themselves physically, they attempt to escape a deeper pain, that of loneliness, despair, and sometimes anger. Whether our students come from wealthy suburban neighborhoods or live in the projects, they are hungry not only for a sense of belonging but also for a sense of purpose in what they do and what they experience. If adults who have children in their care do not help to provide them with the moral knowledge and truths that people, over generations and generations, have squeezed from our successes and failures, then young people will fend for themselves and find direction elsewhere.

Teachers, whether in the classroom or on a field trip to a nursing home, cannot help but influence a student's groping with questions of human purpose. Students should come away from their education with the understanding that pursuing an answer to these fundamental questions is of the utmost importance. The school that ignores the centrality of these questions or trivializes them because they don't want to offend anyone is, indeed, making a statement to students, that these questions are not really that important.

Although clearly the public schools should not advocate a particular ultimate answer, they can offer a generic one--one such as that offered by Aristotle and echoed by many others down through the generations: "Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and faring well with being happy."

As educators we have an opportunity to help students exercise wisdom in making sense of "the pursuit of happiness" or "living well and faring well." We need to make it clear that "the pursuit of happiness" does not entitle us to simply having a good time, enjoying warm and fuzzy feelings, or leading a life free from toil and suffering. These sought-after goods, although not bad in themselves, represent a caricature of human happiness. Since happiness can present itself to us in a variety of guises--a bottomless box of Godiva chocolates, an Alfa Romeo, a romantic cruise for two around the world--our educational efforts should help students discern what is truly good and
therefore most worth our time, energy, talents, and interest. In the words of Victor Frankl, we need to discover "a reason to be happy."

In the 1993 film Groundhog Day, Bill Murray plays Phil Conners, a self-centered, cynical weatherman who finds himself caught in a time-warp: every day is Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. At the end of his second February 2 day, he breaks a pencil by his bedside and awakes in the morning to find it in its original condition. This is his sign that his actions have no permanent consequences. A jubilant Phil declares, "I'm not gonna live by the rules anymore." He gorges on cream puffs, doughnuts, and bacon for breakfast; seduces multiple women; makes exorbitant purchases; and even stops flossing his teeth. After days of wanton self-indulgence, he finds himself feeling empty—as if he is lacking something. He turns his attention to Rita, his kind and beautiful producer. If only he can "win" Rita over, Phil believes, then he will be happy. He spends days studying her preferences, her likes and dislikes. But Phil ultimately fails because he doesn't understand her character. "I could never love someone like you," she exclaims at the end of one night, "because you'll never love anybody but yourself." After days of despondency and suicide attempts, a "new" Phil Conners sets out to deserve Rita. He spends his days reading great literature, studying piano, helping the troubled and the homeless. He spends less time with Rita, however, and more time serving other people. Through his efforts to improve and focus less on himself, he earns Rita's loving respect and the happiness of a "fully flourishing life." This movie humorously illustrates what it means to come to know the good, love the good, and finally do the good. Phil Conners finally discovers a reason to be happy.

Educators can provide opportunities for students to discover the enormous range of reasons individuals have to be happy. For example, one of the most powerful activities in a high school in our community is a sophomore year project. All the tenth graders have to research and report on the heroic qualities of someone living. Before gathering evidence and documentation and beginning writing, however, the students spend a great deal of time and energy grappling with questions such as, "What makes someone a hero or heroine despite their inevitable flaws?" and "What is a worthwhile life?" Students, teachers, and
parents report that this project has a strong and lasting impact.

The Connection Between Virtue and Living Well

The word virtue comes from the Latin vir, which has a root meaning of "force" or "agency." In Latin the expression virtus moralis became the established equivalent of the Greek expression arete ethike, "moral virtue" or "character excellence." The Greek word arete means "excellence." The novelist Pearl Buck wrote, "The secret of joy in work is contained in one word--excellence. To know how to do something well is to enjoy it." Virtue actually enables us to do our work better and to enjoy it more as a consequence. It helps us to become better parents, better teachers, better students, better friends, better colleagues, and better spouses. What distinguishes virtues from views and values, then, is that virtues are cultivated from within the individual and actually improve character and intelligence. Views are simply intellectual positions, and values evoke neither a moral commitment nor the promise of leading a good life. Additionally, unlike views and values, virtue is not passive. Virtue is both the disposition to think, feel, and act in morally excellent ways, and the exercise of this disposition. Furthermore, it serves as both a means and an end of human happiness. As a means, virtues are those habits and dispositions that enable us to live out our responsibilities more gracefully. Hemingway describes the virtue of courage, for example as "grace under pressure." As ends, virtues such as kindness, courage, wisdom, compassion, and responsibility represent ideals of human life worth striving for. Martha Washington sums up the connection between virtue and happiness in this way: "The greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions [our virtues], and not on our circumstances. We carry the seeds of the one or the other about with us in our minds wherever we go." Teachers and schools have a place in bringing those seeds of virtue to fruition.

This struggle for virtue is, in a way, the everyday wisdom that many of us continually forget. We see it in the serene face of Nelson Mandela, whose sacrifices and sufferings have transformed the once truculent revolutionary. Literature is filled with characters, such as The Scarlet Letter's Hester Prynne, whose acceptance of their plight strengthens and ennobles them. It is there for us to see in
the life of George Washington, who at sixteen took himself in hand and forged himself into the strong and virtuous leader he became as a man. It is there in the life of the teacher Annie Sullivan, whose dogged persistence and compassion opened the mind of a deaf and dumb child, Helen Keller, who in turn brought a brilliant sustaining light to many others. The goal of life is to become a fully human person, that is, a person who is capable of pursuing the good in the context of everything one does--from being a competent computer technician to raising one's children. Helen Keller herself stated it succinctly: "Many people have a wrong idea of what constitutes real happiness. It is not obtained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose."

Earlier we defined character education as the effort to help students know the good, love the good, and do the good. In short, it is about helping students mature into persons of integrity--persons of intelligence and moral character. It is necessary, therefore, to help students wrestle with and understand the good--that is, what is true and worthwhile in life as well as what is right. To do this, we need to help them develop knowledge of the good and intelligent judgment so that they learn to choose well among competing and attractive options in life. Simultaneously, we need to help them love the good--concern for the needs of others, fidelity to one's commitments, a job well done, true friendship--and the habits necessary to attain it. Loving the good is about educating students' feelings and passions so that they love the right things for the right reasons (for example, so that they learn to do their homework for the sake of learning rather than simply a grade, or that they join the KEY club to give to others rather than to gain recognition). As human beings our motivations are frequently mixed; loving the good helps us to recognize and refine them. In a way, it becomes the engine of our moral growth. Moral maturity, in the end, is about leading a good life. To do this we must act, we must fulfill our obligations. Therefore teachers must help students see that doing the good is the bottom line.

Again, Pearl S. Buck can provide us with a helpful insight: "You cannot make yourself feel something you do not feel, but you can make yourself do right in spite of your feelings." A few years ago, when one of us was teaching in
a suburban high school, an incident involving a bright and popular thirteen-year-old girl drove this point home. Sweet and well liked by teachers and peers, she was an animated participant in class discussions and activities. In class one day, however, her math teacher confiscated a two-page note that she had obviously been working on for some time. After class, the teacher asked to meet with her at lunchtime.

Before the meeting, the teacher read the note and discovered that this young woman had been viciously and cruelly maligning one of the less popular girls in the class, a girl who was extremely self-conscious about being overweight. The sheer meanness of the note and the obvious history of cattiness it revealed were both alarming and disappointing to the teacher. When the offending student came to meet with her teacher, she was visibly ashamed and upset. The teacher simply said, “I read your note about Jennifer,” and the girl dissolved into tears. A sober but fruitful discussion ensued. The young woman’s shame turned to resolve when she acknowledged that she would be devastated if others were to talk about her in such brutal terms and, even worse, alienate her from her peers as a consequence. For the remainder of the school year, she not only stopped her cattiness toward this student but actually sought out ways to make her feel genuinely included among her own friends.

It sometimes takes a startling event like this to awaken students to the disharmony in their lives. All too often, we see discordant responses in our students, who may weep bitterly at the cruel injustice they see in a film or read in a story but turn right around at recess and bully the classmate who can’t sink a basketball or taunt a classmate who stutters. There are numerous opportunities throughout the school year for teachers to help students see where they can take steps toward developing virtue.

To attain a virtue is hard work. To cultivate the virtue of generosity, for example, first we need to see (with either our heart or our head) the need for generosity. Then we need to struggle against the competing impulses of selfishness and laziness. Finally, we need to do something generous. But one generous act does not a generous person make! Aristotle, in answering the question “How does a man become virtuous?” said, “a man becomes virtuous by
doing virtuous acts." Occasionally giving five dollars to a charity won't do it. It has to be a habit of giving of oneself and a disposition to react generously to those around us. Generosity has to become second nature to us. Cultivating virtues in our own lives is also a matter of reclaiming ground lost to vices. Vices, too, are habits, or settled-in dispositions. Unfortunately, they come easier to us. We seem to slide easily into habits of laziness, selfishness, carelessness, and the like. These habits become engraved on our character effortlessly. It is a different story with virtues. Anne Frank summed this up nicely: "Laziness may appear attractive, but work gives satisfaction. Virtue is worth the effort."

An education that fosters virtue must also introduce students to society's moral standards and ideals. In common parlance, these are called shared moral values. And this takes us back briefly to that word that has recently been so troublesome for schools: values.

Deciding Whose Values to Teach in Public Schools

As we suggested earlier, one of the most dangerous fancies floating around the world today is that everyone has different moral standards and principles. The notion is carried further in suggesting that everyone is entitled to define his or her own moral standards and values. This may be fine if people's racism or dishonesty stays locked up in their own hearts, but once it "goes public" and individuals act on those moral "values," then we have a problem. When the popular 1960s slogan "different strokes for different folks" spills over from aesthetic values to moral values, social harmony is threatened. Our stroke may be "black supremacy" and yours may be "white supremacy." We need to lean on common moral values. Such values are a community's social glue; they enable people to live together in harmony.

Although some cultural anthropologists and sociologists might disagree, children are not born into this world with many moral values. However, we are social beings. From birth to old age, we are interdependent. All but a handful of us live in some sort of a community, and we cannot avoid contact with others. Lest we sink into barbarism, we need to educate our children to understand and incorporate the community's shared moral values and standards into their
own lives. But accepting that premise brings us quickly to
the question, "Which moral values? The values of my
community, or yours?" How, in a public school system in a
nation as ethnically, religiously, racially, and socially
diverse as ours, can we possibly teach moral values
without offending one group or another? Without an
answer to this, character education becomes a highly
suspect operation, if not impossible. We believe, however,
that there is a strong and compelling answer to this
question.

The answer is much simpler for educators in private and
religious schools. People are free to attend or not attend a
particular nonpublic school. If a religious person signs his
daughter up in a school with a strong atheistic spirit, then
he is free to take her out. There is something of a
consumer-vendor relationship, which is freely formed and
easily broken. The situation is different in the public
schools, where many, if not most, children are compelled
to attend because their parents lack the wherewithal to pay
for private schooling. The public schools need to be aware
of and sensitive to the religious and moral values of
families. Christina Hoff Sommers, professor of philosophy
at Clark University, reminds us of our grounds for doing
so:

We are born into a moral environment just as we are born
into a natural environment. Just as there are basic
environmental necessities, like clean air, safe food, fresh
water, there are basic moral necessities. What is a society
without civility, honesty, consideration, self-discipline?
Without a population educated to be consider-ate, and
respectful of one another, what will we end up with? Not
much.... We live in a moral environment; we must respect
and protect it. We must acquaint our children with it. We
must make them aware that it is precious and fragile.... We
must make students aware that there is a standard of ethical
ideals that all civilizations worthy of the name have
discovered.4

That said, public schools can be secure in teaching well-
established moral values and standards, the social glue we
need to survive together peaceably. For example, the moral
value to treat other people with respect is basic to a well-
ordered society and essential to a well-run school.
Beginning with the cardinal virtues we outlined in Chapter
One, there is a core of common-ground values that quickly come to the surface when educational communities come together to identify them. These lists of core moral values and standards may vary slightly from one community to the next. The way in which one community articulates patriotism or service may be somewhat different from how another community defines them, but there is nevertheless a large overlap in the content that emerges. The Chicago public schools, for instance, have identified ten core values that they believe are essential: caring, courage, courtesy, fairness, family pride, kindness and helpfulness, honesty and truthfulness, responsibility, respect, and a work ethic. In the Tempe Union School District, in Phoenix, Arizona, we find a different list, with enormous overlap. How do these large districts, serving thousands of students, arrive at consensus on these matters? First they establish the need to have a foundation of core values in their schools. Then they invite parents, teachers, students, clergy, and community members to meet and discuss shared moral values and virtues. Finally, they give names to the habits and dispositions they want the school to foster in their children.

Perhaps this sense of a common core of moral values and standards is easier to understand in a more homogeneous nation, such as Denmark or Japan. In a country as diverse as the United States (and one in which that diversity is highly cherished), the issues--on the surface, at least--seem troubling. But Americans have no stronger moral principle than "all men are created equal." We affirm that all of us share a common humanity, and with that affirmation come shared rights and shared obligations. As Americans, we live under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Our laws bind each of us, and each of us is entitled to due process under the law. Certainly the schools should teach our founding documents, since they represent the social covenant under which we live together. But is that all there is?

The late C. S. Lewis spent much of his academic life wrestling with the question of whether or not the cultures of the world--both modern and, especially, ancient--shared moral principles and values or whether various cultures lived under vastly different ethical systems. Having studied the histories and holy books of Hindu, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, American Indian, Buddhist, Babylonian, Christian,
Hebrew, and many other cultures, he came to the definite conclusion that in all these enduring societies and cultures there was a way, a common road, that they all shared. Although different cultures emphasized different standards or values, there existed a common core. Lewis called this common way the Tao, after a term used in the writings of sixth-century B.C. teacher Lso-tzu.

In the appendix of his 1947 book *The Abolition of Man: How Education Develops Man's Sense of Morality*, Lewis lists many of the moral principles and values of these cultures as evidence for this common way, or Tao. The statements below highlight some of these moral facts of life:

- Human kindness is essential to a fully functioning society.
- We owe a special love, loyalty, and support to our parents and our families.
- We have a special relationship to future generations, especially our own children.
- Married people have certain rights and responsibilities in relation to each other.
- Some degree of honesty is needed for a society to function smoothly.
- We are obliged to help the poor, the sick, and the less fortunate.
- Basic property rights must exist in any organized society.
- Some things exist that are worse than death, such as treachery, murder, betrayal, and torturing another person.
- Our own inevitable death colors how we view life and, coupled with the promise of our posterity, gives the continuum of life its meaning.

These moral values and principles make up the *good* that we propose students come to know, love, and do. It takes virtue, then, to live according to these principles. American public school educators can consciously and confidently teach this inheritance. Indeed, this Tao is the legacy and the responsibility of all the world's educators.

Philosopher Andrews Oldenquist has stated the case nicely from an anthropological perspective:
If we were anthropologists observing members of a tribe, it would be the most natural thing in the world to expect them to teach their morality and culture to their children, and moreover, to think that they had a perfect right to do so on the ground that cultural integrity and perpetuation depended on it. Indeed, if we found that they had ceased to teach the moral and other values of their culture, we would take them to be on the way to cultural suicide: We would think them ruined, pitiable, alienated from their own values and on the way out.

Character education, then, is not a frill or another passing fad. It is an essential task of a society to make sure that its children forge the necessary virtues and moral values that advance human life. To use Oldenquist's phrase, to do less is to commit "cultural suicide."