12 PM - On exploring character

"I like coming to The Savoy for lunch."

"Please pass the garlic bread. I can't keep away from it. Tuesdays the Savoy is revered for serving 'Used Meat.'"

"That's supposed to be appetizing?"

"It's really unused meat—the small pieces of good meat not used to prepare other dishes—simmered in an Italian tomato-based sauce, served over macaroni."

"I'll try it. While we are waiting for lunch, the members of the Character Committee are soliciting support for the Character 'Virtue-of-the-Month' posters and we hope the newspaper will help sponsor them."

"Are you trying to encourage the appearance of character, or character itself?"

"I don't see the difference."

"P. J. O'Rourke referred to Richard Brookhiser's biography of *George Washington, Founding Father* to explain how people looked at things differently 200 years ago. 'We worry about our authenticity—about whether our presentation reflects who we "really" are. Eighteenth century Americans attended more to the outside story and were less avid to drive putty knives between the outer and inner man. "Character" . . . was a role one played until one became it; "character" also meant how one's role was judged by others. It was both the performance and the reviews. Every man had a character to maintain; every man was a character actor.'

"Do you want today's children and adults to live by the 18th century standard where character was a role the immature would play until they discovered through life experience what constituted real character?"

"What's the alternative?"

"To establish a solid foundation of process concepts that lead to character among those capable of grasping it."

"That's what understanding the vocabulary of character tries to do."

"If that's the case, does having respect develop character or does character lead to respect?"

"That's a false choice, isn't it?"

"Try a different virtue. Does obedience result in character or does character result in obedience?"

"I don't know how to answer that."

"If teaching virtues are what should be taught, then there should be a clear path to explain how one gets from the vocabulary to character. Does teaching virtues effectively develop strong character? If not, how do you develop strong character more effectively?"

"Virtues are laudable and rote learning is easy to teach."

"To teach someone to 'Be this way' or 'Be that way' attempts to teach the result you want to achieve, absent the process to get there. People who know the vocabulary don't necessarily act with character. Complicating that, the virtue presented doesn't necessarily apply to the situation. Virtues like 'respect' and 'obedience' sometimes lead to the wrong result. Suppose 'respect' is not deserved. Suppose, authorities demand action that would be unethical, in which case blind obedience would not be a virtue. 'Obedience' is important, until it comes into conflict with other virtues. If teaching just virtues leads to lack of character, how do you determine the difference?"

"People do have to learn to exercise judgment."

"But you propose to teach vocabulary, not judgment. The practice of teaching the vocabulary of virtue may not develop character by any means other than chance. Perhaps learning virtues is different than developing virtue."

"There is a long track record of teaching virtues and we can

show that the children react positively to our program."

"Yes, it's delightful to see schools of smiling children happily singing along in the promotional videos. Teachers vouch for participation, but that doesn't indicate success. Teaching that way is immediate and easy. Downloadable lesson plans promote the vocabulary of virtues. Definitions are easy to test. Essays that explain why a role model demonstrates one virtue or another are easily graded."

"There are universal rules."

"Plato proposed rules 2300 years ago but no one could prove their universality. Churches, which typically depend on rules and examples demonstrating them, have difficulty getting the message across to others beyond their faithful who already are convinced. Campaigns based on religions don't convince, they compel, with no less power than Machiavelli proposed 600 years ago to coerce people to behave."

"The founders of our country believed there are moral values in the lessons of history waiting to be recognized, and you need to know the vocabulary to recognize them."

"We both can agree on that sentence, but each of us will take away something different. You will take away that virtues are, as St. Augustine wrote, written on the fleshy tablets of the heart as some kind of natural law. I'll take away that experience can reveal patterns that, if we choose to recognize and think about them, can give us insight into a more advantageous way to think."

"So how do we move forward?"

"I used to attend meetings to promote character. At one meeting, after the immediate work had been accomplished, I suggested spending perhaps ten minutes each meeting to consider what lessons might best promote character. Prominent members of the committee—elected school officials, mind you—declined to pursue the idea. They had decided not to learn. I thanked them and left the meeting, there being nothing further able to be accomplished."

"Then, what is character and how do you get it?"

"Where does the courage represented by the Hobbits in Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* come from? Characters in books find a well of strength to draw from as surely as they find it in real life. Thomas Mann's hypothesis in *Magic Mountain* does not have to play out, that our culture creates people that are docile and compliant. Docile and compliant isn't courageous. Joshua Chamberlain at the battle of Gettysburg was courageous, not docile and compliant."

"Virtues do develop character."

"So you think. What virtues would you teach?"

"Kindness. Wisdom. Integrity. William Bennett wrote a book on them."

"Looking back to Homer, the virtues the poets favored were warlike qualities—legends and fictions that were oracular. Romantics after the Enlightenment, and perhaps of the 1960s wanted to get in touch with feelings. Those qualities were once taken as the exercise of virtue. Socrates argued that perhaps one could find a more rational approach. That challenge to the livelihood and power of poets did not sit well, so some, like Aristophanes, misrepresented Socrates as someone who would present the worst case as the best.

"Seneca saw justice, moral insight, self-control, and courage as the cardinal virtues in Rome 2000 years ago. Others in the early Roman republic saw slightly different virtues at the heart of citizenship. These were the actions that made you a man, or *vir*, in Latin, the root of virtue or *virtus*:
• Piety, because they felt they were a chosen people.
• Honesty, because they could be trusted.
• True, because they kept their word.
• Just, because they believed in equitable application of law.
• Vigilant, because they would fight to protect that which they believed.

"Literature uncovers interesting observations about virtue. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Night*, Gawain represented the ideals of the Round Table. The tests of desire and the fear of death faced in *Gawain* are the same tests that Buddha faced.

"The medieval pentangle stood for the five chivalric virtues: fidelity to others, promises, principles, faith, moral righteousness, and personal integrity. Elsewhere they are recorded as generosity, loyalty to and love of others—sometimes called piety, temperance or freedom from lust, courtesy, and benevolence."

"Is there overlay in what different cultures consider virtues?"

"That's a fair question. Confucian virtues were very similar to those of Socrates in ancient Greece or Mohandras Gandhi in India—wisdom, justice, moderation, courage. Are there universal human values that stand up to scrutiny better than the virtues? And how do you know the virtues you'd teach are true virtues? What about wealth or fame? Are they virtues?"

"That's *ad hominem*. The real question is 'What is character and how do you get it?' Virtues have been described as those traits a culture values. Our job is to discover them."

"So we should accept what has gone before as gospel?"

"Go with what works."

"What works? Whose gospel do you accept on faith? Which of the hundreds of conflicting religions and sects should win out . . . the one you believe in, simply because it's yours? George Bernard Shaw sarcastically asked in 1919, in *Heartbreak House*, 'Do you think the laws of God will be suspended in favor of England simply because you were born there?' In our world, World War I dashed any vestige of belief that liberal values and technological advancement in natural sciences would lead to steady, civilized society. The world was left in wreckage with cultures in conflict."

"You've got to use some common sense."

"You mean you have to figure out why?"

"Well, yes . . ."

And do you adopt that which other cultures discover to be virtues?

"If they add value."

"What criteria do you use to measure 'value'?"

"I'm not sure."

"What of those things that further society?"

"Perhaps."

"And what of the 'virtues' of different cultures, can you discover those?

"I suppose."

"Perhaps you could explain to me your virtue detector."

"I . . . I don't think I know."

"Well, character certainly isn't promoted through character vocabulists plastering posters in public places. Consider the posters you want to hang:

• *Loyalty – Using difficult times to demonstrate my commitment to those I serve.*

"Hogwash! —A platitude that masquerades as wisdom. Who are those served, and why should one commit to them? Commitment became a liability during the Nuremberg trials after World War II."

• *Wisdom – Making practical applications of truth in daily decisions (versus foolishness)*

"Now we're grasping at straws to find both the vocabulary and the definition."

• *Integrity – The moral excellence in my life as I consistently do what is right.*

"Aye, there's the rub: to decide what is right is left as an exercise to the student."

• *Vigilance – To be conscious and consistent requires constant vigilance and community.*

"What fascinates me is these character vocabulists can walk right by insight, never notice the gold mine, and manufacture trivial tributes for any fine sounding adjective. Suppose we were to manufacture one of our own:

• *Voluptuousness – Using one's beauty to best advantage!*

"It's as fact-based as anything they have offered."

"You should post that one, just for fun."

"Far from promoting 'Character', virtue-promoters want the warm feeling they get when they convince themselves they promote character. Results don't matter. The number of posters posted matters more. If enough posters are posted, those who need character must get indoctrinated."

"So they don't know what character is?"

"They think mastery of the vocabulary of virtues *is* character. Virtues to them are like numbers trying to substitute for mastery of arithmetic."

"Numbers?"

"Sure. 'Seven! Seven is a good number! Learn seven and arithmetic will certainly follow. Five! Five is another worthwhile number. Master seven, five, and several more and arithmetic will magically appear.'"

"But, numbers and arithmetic are not the same thing."

"Tell that to the character vocabulists. For them, if one learns to define the words of character, mastery must be just around the corner."

"Not everyone promotes virtues, some hold up exceptional people to emulate—Luther Burbank, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington."

"Should you emulate their actions or emulate how they decided to act?"

"I'm not sure."

"How do you learn how they decided to act? Where do you learn that? Brookhiser noted something interesting about the northern Virginia culture that George Washington grew up in. In Washington's time character was a role one played until one grew into it. Rules were a substitute used early in one's life until one could be nudged—and 'nudged' was Socrates' word— toward processes that allowed one to figure out for oneself how one should behave."

"Washington's persistence is a virtue worth emulating."

"How do you decide who to emulate or what trait to emulate? Emulating virtues leads to the appearance of virtue, not to the solid processes that lead to virtue. Solid thought processes lead to compelling understanding why virtuous behavior is worthwhile. Persistence shouldn't be emulated because Washington had it. Persistence comes from understanding what is important and why. Teach virtues alone and we risk overlooking the need to nudge people toward recognizing for themselves critical processes of thought."

"Why do people teach the result they want but not the skills to get there?"

"The problem of how to teach character is very old. Socrates died for it in 399 B.C. In the 1700s, Immanuel Kant wondered, why it was that moral instruction accomplishes so little. Yet, he observed, even little children understand that you should do a thing just because it is right. Our challenge is to go beyond rewarding good behavior, which Kant recognized was ineffective, to do that which Socrates called not 'teachable, like geometry,' but teachable in a way, that we might produce not docile sheep but responsible, growing, inquiring citizens."

"That's why we do what we do."

"Do you? Some 2500 years ago, around the dawn of civilization, Confucius thought about the way one should behave. He called it *li*, which is Chinese for *the way*. He determined there were those who intuitively knew *the way* to live—natural saints, as it were. Then, he believed a second, larger group of people could learn *the way*. He considered himself in that group. The remaining group of people required fixed rules of behavior he called laws or ritual.

"You direct your fixed rules to the third and least capable group, leaving others without instruction to master the more useful skills. As many people as possible should be encouraged to join the group that learns how to figure out *the way*—the group that isn't just told the way to live, but constantly considers whether their personal choices are honorable.

"Everyone deserves to be put the question why they should choose a character-centered life. That question really asks why is such a life in one's own long-term best interest. Professor Peter Kreeft in *What would Socrates Do?* pointed out other questions, too. Why do people assume that what is popular will be effective? Why is character education an effort even for adults? Why do youngsters not embrace character education as easily as other things they see to their benefit? Why do people teach the result they want but not the skills to get there? Why should I be consistently moral? Why not be moral only when it pays to be moral? Why not be immoral if you can get away with it?"

"We don't answer every moral concern, but we do our part to help."

"That's funny. Although your boat is turning in circles, with oarsmen rowing only on one side, you are satisfied with your progress."

"Realistically, what can be done?"

"Perhaps character education is only taught the way that it is because alternatives have not been clear."

"Make it clear, then."

"Virtues are the result of thinking about yourself, society, life and your place in it. Our job is to seed that path with a handful of process concepts that people easily turn to help themselves."

"What are 'Process Concepts'?"

"A virtue is a shorthand label for the result of thoughtful analysis about a general concept that is, itself, easily acceptable and easily understood from one's own personal experience. Process concepts help people decide what to do so they can plan for their better future.

"People insist on trying to push character onto others when much of the real work—the work inside their own head—remains unfinished. If you think you know what to do but don't know why, then you don't know character, much less how to convey it to someone else.

"Youngsters may have to be guided by rules until they mature

enough to come to see the practical value in it for themselves. They need to develop the skill to consider points of view, and to value critical thinking as a tool for self-protection. Critical thinking is only now reentering the curriculum. Then they need an opportunity to practice and to see it in practice. Character not a habit but, rather, a skill honed with practice."

"We want people to learn to behave—to follow the law."

"Which law? Any law? Popular laws?"

"We need order."

"*Socrates' Apology* was about order versus responsibility and discipline versus free speech. Those who are afraid of speech don't trust people. You don't trust anyone other than yourself, and yet we are supposed to trust you? For what reason? Socrates asked the question 'Who has the right to educate students?' which is really the question 'Who governs?' You call it order, but it is about who governs, and order is not judgment. What are these children to do when you are no longer present to exercise your judgment for them? Character is not about applying rules. It's about being able to make complex life decisions—and to understand and justify them. This is not easy. Sure, people can fake character by following rules for one reason or another, but Descartes called rule-based living a magnificent temple built on a foundation of mud. Those who live by rules have no certain criteria for determining good and evil. Kreeft reminds us that an act is good because of the principle that motivates it, but rules aren't principles."

"There has to be a better answer."

"You seem to be in the same stew as recent philosophers who have resigned themselves to believe morality is relative and therefore ineffective for organizing society. Relativity is irrelevant if views are expressed in a framework that others recognize will hold equally true for themselves. Frames of reference, constructed from similar experience, while not universal, are as effective as if they were universal. How to act can then be explained in terms even the culturally distant understand and can believe."

"I don't understand how."

"Developing character has to be a two-step process. First, stimulate the distant party to examine their own personal experience for useful lessons. Second, compare their lessons from their experience with your lessons from your experience to extract shared observations that could lead to a common framework for decision-making. For example, can you identify with Montaigne who wrote, 'If a man remembers how very many times he has been wrong in his judgment, will it not be foolish of him not to mistrust it ever after?'"

"Yes."

"Have you ever had similar experiences?"

"You bet. Sometimes embarrassing; sometimes painful."

"Given such personal experience, would that lead you to mistrust your judgment?"

"I would be more careful."

"So cultural relativism does not preclude developing that shared understanding."

"Explain that."

"Montaigne's personal experience certainly is distant from yours, but you can identify the same pattern in your own unique experience. Montaigne and you share a frame of reference despite extreme differences in religion, language, upbringing, culture, time-shift, and almost everything else. You, Montaigne, and people in general can go beyond the traditions that only carry them so far."

"Why does that matter?"

"People seem adrift, infected by moral relativism—the idea that moral judgments are founded in cultural background which implies that what is considered proper behavior for another person differ from our own opinion. What appears as lack of morality is the hollow framework of earlier philosophers crumbling under the heavy weight of more recent criticism like Friedrich Nietzsche's 'God is dead' and Jean Paul Sartre's nausea

at discovering a universe both Shakespeare and Faulkner called 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.'"

"They found nowhere to turn."

"Which left authorities to beat the same drum louder and harder, with no greater expectation of success, to hand out binders full of character notes that miss the mark. They trundle out credentialed experts whose lofty and traditional words mask their limited success. It is easier but less useful to drum into our students a fixed set of rules, or we can help our students develop a process by which they can decide how to respond honorably. That takes more effort, but it produces better citizens."

"Why are they better citizens?"

"They are better able to recognize the ethics of a situation they find themselves in, and to decide how to respond appropriately to those circumstances. People can deduce shared concepts of Respect and Responsibility from experience. Respect is inwardly directed towards ourselves and towards our treatment of others. Responsibility is outwardly directed towards our friends, our school, our community, and our world."

"Nudged to recognize them, constructive patterns of behavior almost leapt out of the past. Extract threads of wisdom that can be labeled and projected into the future as options to help learn to do better next time. It happens every day. As kids connect language and thought, they are empowered and motivated by simple wisdoms extracted from their own experience:
• A sense that they might sometimes be wrong.
• A sense that the map of reality in their mind could be better.
• A sense that others live their lives as acutely as I live mine.
• A sense of time and one's place in it.
• A sense that they are responsible for themselves.
• A sense of process thinking about thinking.

"These are processes kids understand, admire and wish to emulate in a deeper way.

"From simple wisdoms garnered from experience, people can deduce that their long-term interests are served by a character-centered life. Because it comes from personal experience, these

observations are accessible to everyone across cultural and religious boundaries. They foster virtues, a compelling framework for civilization, and a path to honorable decision-making.

"Given a choice between the temptation to teach rote virtues half-heartedly—the 'we tried' approach—or teach process concepts, I'll teach process concepts that encourage thinking about yourself, your place in society, and life itself. A path seeded with process concepts offers practical help that people can easily embrace that ultimately leads to virtuous behavior. Process concepts ignite the spark of self-regulated learning that just this easily pass Socrates' torch on to the next generation."

"You seem to be challenging what we teach."

"We have filtered classical wisdom out of education. Where do you learn to work the complexity of life? Montaigne, when he despairs of making sense of himself speaks to the internal complexity with which every individual must cope. 'All contradictions may be found in me—bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; liberal, miserly and prodigal: all this I see in myself to some extent according to how I turn—I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply and solidly, without confusion and without mixture, or in one word.'

"And where do you learn to struggle? The myth of Sisyphus tells how the gods condemned him for all eternity to roll a boulder up a mountainside only to have it tumble down again just before it reached the top. The myth is a metaphor—a fiction that tells a truth. In his interpretation of Sisyphus in *Once and Future Myths*, Phil Cousineau reminds us of something every generation has to learn for itself: It is not what happens to us that matters; what matters is our attitude towards what happens. The story doesn't ennoble suffering, it ennobles struggle. Struggle is inevitable, and those who learn to see it as an obstacle rather than a burden make life a lot easier for themselves. Cousineau concludes, 'the secret of the creative life consists in taking the next step, doing the next thing you have to do, but doing it with all your heart

and soul and finding some joy in doing it.' If you forget all the facts and formulas you learn in school, you will nevertheless have grown to be an educated person if you shun the self-absorbed, downward spiral of suffering and develop in yourself, instead, the will to apply yourself each time you approach the mountain.

"We clutter the curriculum when the central subject worth teaching is how to live."