ROBERT COLES

The Moral Life of Children

High school students in New Hampshire, Illinois, and Georgia share a common need to define themselves as persons of character while seeking to understand how family, social group, and school influence their value choices.

As part of my investigation into the moral lives of children, I asked (in 1980) the principals of two public high schools—George Washington Carver High School in Atlanta and Highland Park High School near Chicago—and one private boarding school, St. Paul's School near Concord, New Hampshire—each to select "two teachers qualified to judge character." These teachers would, in turn, select four or so students who, in their opinion, possessed "character" or "high character." When two of the principals asked what I meant by the word "character," I replied that he had asked precisely what I was trying to find out. I told the principals that I wanted to speak with all the students at once, not individually, at each school; and that I also wanted to meet with the two teachers at each school together.

St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire

I went to St. Paul's School first. The headmaster had arranged for two teachers to select four students, and I met the students in a classroom a good distance from the headmaster's office. We were, in a sense, free—no classes, no one to interrupt or keep an eye on what was to be a full morning's discussion. I told the students, two young men and two young women, that I wanted to explore what "character" meant to them, and we were, with no hesitation, off and running.

The word was not a strange one for these students; they had heard it used repeatedly, they said, though none had ever really stopped to think about its meaning. Early in the discussion, one of the young women said, "We talk about 'human nature' or 'personality' or 'identity'; I suppose in the past they talked about 'character.'" These students were quite articulate, as they sifted and sorted among themselves. In no time a whole school was being morally scrutinized: the "jocks," the "beautiful people," the "social butterflies," the "freaks," the "party people," the "grinds," various teachers, and the "goodly heritage," a phrase many who have gone to St. Paul's have heard again and again.

Much time was spent struggling with the question of arrogance, with the temptations of self-importance and self-centeredness—a personal hazard these four were not loath to acknowledge. They were in a school known as one of the best in America. They were, in different ways, doing well there—one academically; one as a scholar-athlete; one as a person trusted and liked by a wide assortment of classmates. Yet they worried that their suc-

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—New Hampshire high school students

cess was a temptation to "become stuck-up," as one put it. Self-righteousness and self-consciousness were elements likely to shut a person off, making that person less responsive to other people. Gradually, how one responds to others took on high importance. One of the young men put it in this way: "I tend to be a private person. I like to take long walks by myself. At times I don't want company. I want to hold on to my individuality. But I like to be with others, too. I like to be a *friend*. I'd like to think that if someone were in trouble, he'd turn to me, and I'd be there, and I'd put that person's trouble above my needs, including taking a solitary walk!"

Other topics came up frequently: the tension between loyalty to one's friends and loyalty to one's own memories, habits, yearnings; the tension between one's competitive side and one's regard for others; the tension between one's wish to win and one's willingness to help others. The word "honesty" was mentioned over and over—an Augustinian examination, done with today's psychological panache: Who is "really" honest, and for what "underlying" reasons? Moreover, does it "pay" in this society to be honest all the time? When do honesty and self-effacement turn into "masochism"? When does pride in one's convictions turn into bullying egotism? If you really do have "a sense of yourself," are you not in danger of being smug and self-serving? When does popularity reduce one's individuality to the point of belonging only to the herd?

Such questions were asked quite earnestly. When pressed by one another (I ended up being mostly a listener), the students offered lists of the traits that constitute "character": a person who sticks to a set of principles; a person who can risk unpopularity, yet is commanding enough to gain the respect of others; a person who has the courage to be himself, herself; a person who is open-minded, who plays fair with others, who doesn't lie and cheat and, interestingly enough, deceive himself, herself. These students had a decidedly dialectical turn of mind: "You can try to be a better person, but it's a struggle. You can be humble, and that way, intimidate people. You can use humility. It's hard to know what's genuine in people. Sometimes people pretend to be something, but they're really just the opposite. They flip and they flop. I don't like the people who are sanctimonious. They lecture others, and people take it, but it's out of fear or there is guilt, and it's being exploited. Every once in a while, I prefer someone who puts his cards on the table and shows he's a real pain in the neck to these holier-than-thou types. Character doesn't mean being a goody-goody person! If you're that kind of person, there's a lot of meanness, probably, inside you, or competitiveness that you're not letting on about to others. Maybe you don't know about it yourself!"

These youths were, obviously, what we now call psychologically sophisticated. Yet, they were (thank God) not eager to have all human behavior a matter of psychology or psychopathology—or sociology, either: "There are reasons we end up being one kind of person or another kind of person, but when you actually become that person (when you're nice to others most of the time), then that's a true achievement. A lot of people don't become nice, and it's no excuse to say you had a bad childhood or you never had the right luck. I think you have to take your troubles and overcome them!" The Puritan spirit lives still in the woods of southern New Hampshire, no matter how often references were made—and they were many—to "adolescence," "identity," Sigmund Freud's ideas, the latest notions of what "motivates" people, what makes us "anxious" or "strung out" or "ambivalent."

More than anything else, these four youths grappled with what used to be commonly called "the meaning of life" in philosophy lectures. One of the young men said this toward the end of our meeting time: "What matters—don't you think?—is what you do with your life. I've tried to be independent, to have my own thoughts, but to listen to others. I hope to live comfortably, but I won't be greedy and selfish. I



don't know what our responsibilities are—to ourselves and our friends and family and neighbors, and to others in places abroad I'll never see. Even today, this is a big world. What are we supposed to do? We're lucky to be here at St. Paul's. We have such a good life. What do we owe others? Isn't that 'character'—what you decide to do for others, not just for yourself?"

The "great suck of self," Walker Percy calls it in *The Second Coming*—the inevitable pull toward our own thoughts, our own wishes, our navels. Adolescence is not the only period of self-absorption, as these youths seemed already to know. For them, one is likely to be neither bad nor good. For them, character was no rigid, categorical trait. For them, character is not a possession, but something one searches for: a quality of mind and heart one struggles for, at times with a bit more success than at others. Not one of these four students wanted to spell out a definition, set down a compulsory series of attributes, offer a list of candidates. One heard from their mouths expressions of confusion, annoyance, vanity, self-satisfaction, self-criticism, self-doubt, self-assurance. One heard, maybe most of all, tentativeness—reluctance to speak definitively about an aspect of human behavior one student kept describing as "hard to pin down," but also as "important to consider when you're thinking about someone."

The two teachers I met at St. Paul's School—a middle-aged man who taught math, a young woman who taught English—had met, discussed the subject of "character," and added to one another's notions, so that, in the end, a written statement was available:

- The aggregate of distinctive qualities belonging to an individual.
- Moral vigor or firmness, especially as acquired through self-discipline.
- The ability to respond to a setback.
- The ability to form an attachment to ideals of a larger community or organization than oneself, and to exert one's influence for the good of the greater body.
- The possession of a sense of humor that allows one to see that there is more to life than living.
- The ability to be an individual in a crowd of people.
- A sense of self that has been found through experience.
- The ability to allow others to be individuals, even though they may be different.
- The ability to disagree with others without condemning (or losing respect for) the individual one disagrees with.
- A sensitivity toward the feelings of others.
- An understanding of the wholeness of other people's personalities or character (even when it is different from one's own).

These two teachers had thought long and hard about a vexing subject—whom to choose for my interviews, and why? A very bright person, involved in many activities, able to speak coherently and easily, headed straight for Harvard? A quiet person who defers to the ideas of others in a classroom, does well, but "not all that well," yet often seems to reach out for others, not to save them, but simply "to do a good turn"? A marvelous athlete who also is a leader in many ways during a school year? A hard-working youth who is most often self-effacing, yet has managed to stand up once or twice on a matter of ethical principle?

Highland Park High School, Highland Park, Illinois

In Highland Park, north of Chicago, a somewhat different arrangment had been made. The principal of this suburban high school had selected two teachers, as I requested, but they had picked four student each—seven girls and one boy. We met in a room across the hall from the principal's office. Twice the principal asked how we were doing, offered water, tea, coffee—in general, showed a distinct, active interest in our discussions. He himself had thought about the word "character," and as with so many of us, found it a bit puzzling and elusive. So too did the students with whom I spent a winter morning. Several of them said that character had a lot to do with personality; in fact, declared "a good personality" or "well-rounded person" to be equivalent descriptions to "good character" or "high character." Two young women dissented, however: "Character has to do with honesty. You can be popular, and have a shrink's seal of approval, but not have character!"

We fairly quickly got into a discus-

sion of ethnic and racial tensions—in the school, in our society as a whole. At St. Paul's it had been the cliques that seemed to threaten individuality, hence character. At Highland Park High School these students seemed to view social divisions as having to do with class and race: Italians and Jews, "working people" and "wealthier people," blacks and whites.

I was given some outspoken lessons in how family life affects one's situation in school and, not least, one's character. "It all depends on who you are! Some kids want to go to an Ivy League school; that's all that's on their minds. They put up a good front, to show they have 'character'; they join clubs, and have all these hobbies and interests, so as to impress the teachers and the people who read college applications. Some kids have to work while going to school. They try to get a good deal, a job that pays well. They're making contacts even now for later on. It's built into their 'character' that the world is tough, and you have to know people to get ahead. A lot of the black kids are here because there's a military base in the school district. They come and then they go. It's hard to figure them out. It's in their 'character' to stay away from us whites. There's a lot of tension among us whites. Go into the johns, and you'll see a lot of writing! [I went, and I saw the ethnic slurs in both the men's rooms and the ladies' rooms.] But a lot of the time we get along pretty well. We've got brainy ones here, headed for college since they were born, and don't get in their way, or else! We've got kids who will work in a store or factory, and not be ashamed. They see the world differently. They take different courses. They have their own code."

The speaker is a wry, outspoken, somewhat detached young woman, bound for college, but "not a fancy one." She is neither Italian nor Jewish, but Anglo-Irish. She had made a virtue out of marginality, and the others in the room seemed a bit deferential: "She isn't pushed around by anyone. She's her own person. She can mingle with anyone. She doesn't put on airs with anyone." The associations moved relentlessly from social situation to moral conduct—not the first time, or the last. "You have to know where the person is coming from," I was told several times. Explain! "Well, if you've got a lot going for you, then you can be more relaxed. True, you can be a tightwad and be rich; but it's easier to be generous if you've got a lot behind you!" On the other hand, one student insisted, "There's still room for being poor and good in this world!" She persisted: "I know some kids, right in this school, and they're not here now, they weren't chosen to be here, and they're from pretty poor families, compared to others; their fathers just get by, make a living. And they would give you the shirt off their backs, those kids: that's character. And they wouldn't go talking about what they've done, bragging, and showing off—that's character! Some people, they know how to play up to the teachers, and they get a big reputation, but what's the truth about them? What are they like when no one is looking, and what are they like when no one is listening?"

We went round and round. Class and character. Egotism and character. Psychology and character. Smartness and character. Motivation and character. Caring and character. Manners and character. To be stuck-up. To be considerate. To be a help when a person needs help—a flat tire, a car ride, a pencil or piece of paper, a loan of money, a sympathetic ear. To take risks, extend oneself to others, brave social pressures. Grade-mongers. Leaders and followers. Hypocrites. People who have one or another veneer. The "way-down-deep truth" of a person. A final test of character: sickness, financial straits, a disaster. Character and mental health.

Part of *Ordinary People* had been made in Highland Park. The students had watched the filming, and they wondered: If one is hurt, bewildered, "seeing a shrink," can one have the "mental peace" to demonstrate character? Can one escape consumerism, selfishness—develop "an ability not to be absorbed with objects?" And at some interesting and suggestive length: literature as a means of understanding character, as in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Atticus had character; he was open-minded, stood up for what he believed, no matter the risks and costs, and so was a "moral man"); or as in *Macbeth* (Lady Macbeth was a "bad person," a "bad character"). And politics: Lincoln and Eisenhower and Truman had character; Johnson lacked it, as do Nixon and Carter. "All politicians probably lie," one student observed, "and maybe all people do, but some just keep on lying, and you can't trust them, and you don't like them, and they're just no damn good, and you can tell, after a while, even if they tell



you they pray every other minute! The truth about a person's character eventually comes out, eventually."

Such faith was not universally shared. There was much talk of appearance as against reality: the way people present themselves to others, as opposed to some inner truth about each of us. In contrast to the students at St. Paul's School, these Highland Park students were distinctly more interested in the relationship between a person's social, economic, ethnic, or racial background—and that person's behavior, hence character. And it did come down to that, they all agreed at the end: "You are the way you act—in the long run." What did that qualification mean? Well, it goes like this: "Some people can put on an act. But if you keep your wits, and keep an eye on them, you can find out the truth about them. If they're good people, kind to others, not just wrapped up in themselves, you'll find it out. If they're putting on a production, you'll find that out." No one, in that regard, seemed to have any doubts about his or her ultimate psychological acuity—or about the long-run dramatic capacities of one or another individual.

There was, as we were ending, a spirited, occasionally tense discussion of tests, grades, the criteria used by colleges and graduate schools to evaluate people. "I know kids who get all A's and would murder their parents, their brothers and sisters, if they stood in their way," one youth offered. Yes, but there's plenty of nastiness to go around, others said, even among those who do poorly in school. What should committees of admission do? How does one make a fairly accurate moral judgment about a person? Numerical rankings may not tell enough. Multiple-choice questions may not do justice to life's strangeness, the complexities and inconsistencies and contradictions with which we all struggle, though some with more decency and integrity and generosity of spirit than others. But how do we arrive at an estimate of a person's essential kindness toward others—in the face of thousands of importunate applicants, each putting on the very best faces possible? Don't interviews have their hazards, the unpredictable variations of mood and temperament, the nuances of subjectivity that can, alas, of a sudden, amount to outright prejudice? We ended on an eclectic note—the desirability of taking a lot into consideration when accepting people for a job, a place in college, and, yes, when judging that elusive concept "character." The last person to leave the room, the young woman who spoke least, said that she thought "character meant being kind and good, even when there was no one to reward you for being kind and good."

The Highland Park teachers, like their students, were acutely aware of the divisions in this society. Actually, the teachers were themselves a bit split. The assistant principal, a man, was quite in touch with the more academic students of the school; whereas the woman teacher was very much involved with those students who were working at jobs while trying to get through Highland Park—headed, mostly, for what many social scientists would call "service jobs," or membership in the "working class," or the "lower-middle to middle-middle class." The two did not argue, however; in fact, they mostly echoed the sentiments of their chosen students: "Grades aren't the whole story, by any means," and very emphatically, "Character has something to do with moral life."

Both teachers worried about class—expressed concern, for instance, that "mere etiquette" can deceive, or insisted that human scoundrels, like wolves, find sheepskins ("social veneer") to wear. I had heard practically nothing about class-connected deceit at St. Paul's, but I heard a lot about it at Highland Park—and character seemed to require, teachers and students agreed, an absence of such a tendency. Moreover, psychiatry and psychoanalysis were even more prominently mentioned at Highland Park than at St. Paul's—a way of getting to the "deeper truth" about people, hence to a judgment of their character. When I mentioned Gandhi's personal eccentricities, his moments of cruelty, vanity, thoughtlessness, the students were ready, all too ready, to take the clue, the hint, and write him off as sick. When I reminded them that he was, nonetheless, an impressive moral leader, the students worried about the burdens placed on his family, and about his own psychiatric burdens.

If I had a little trouble persuading this group of students and their teachers that, neurosis or no neurosis, a person's moral motives can affect his or her character, they had no trouble persuading me that a neighborhood, a level of income, the possession of a given nationality, can all affect a person's character. The teachers especially emphasized the distinction between the quietly considerate person, as against the demonstrative, if not flamboyant, performer of public good deeds. "Some students want to get an A in character, too," one teacher said, as we broke off, a reminder that not only can life be unfair, but virtue can be unfairly perceived—when, in truth, sins are being shrewdly masked. As Flannery O'Connor observed, through the comic irony of a title to one of her stories, a good man is hard to find.

"Character has to do with honesty. You can be popular, and have a shrink's seal of approval, but not have character."

—Chicago high school student

George Washington Carver High School, Atlanta, Georgia

At George Washington Carver High School, in Atlanta, I had quite another discussion, with the principal ready to point out the extreme hazards to what he called "character formation" well before I saw (in a room that belonged, really, to his office suite) the four children (two boys and two girls) and two teachers (both women, one who teaches math, the other, biology). "There is a problem with drugs," he explained. "There is a problem with poverty; with terrible poverty, with welfare homes, with absent fathers, with unemployment all over the

place." He gave me a lively lecture on the school's history—once a "dumping ground for school failures," now a "place of hope," much connected to businesses that offer promising black youths a great variety of jobs, a chance "to enter the mainstream." In time I was able to begin talking with the four selected youths, though not before being told emphatically: "Character is something you have to build, right here in this school, every day. You have to lay down the law, and see that it's enforced. Character means discipline and hard work and looking to the future and getting there!" Of the three school leaders, Carver's principal was the only one to volunteer (or hazard) such an explication.

The students were averse to this line of reasoning. These were young people who were determined to find jobs, determined to be hard workers, strong parents—and not reluctant to explain why such a commitment was connected to a definition, in their minds, of the word "character": "A lot of us, even here, with the principal and the teachers bearing down every minute on us, have trouble reading and writing. We're not going to college, most of us. We're going to try to get a job and hold on to it! It takes character, I think, to do that—not take the easy way out and drink or use drugs or say the white man is on our backs, so what the devil can we do! To me, character is being stubborn. It's staying in there, it's getting out of a hole, and breathing the fresh air, and not falling down any more."

My wife and I had spent three years in Atlanta, talking with youths such as these—young black men and women trying, in the face of adversity, to forge a better life for themselves.[1] These were more outspoken and self-assured individuals than the ones we had known in the early 1960s. They were quick to describe themselves as "job-hungry" and as full of determination, willfulness, hopeful anticipation. They were not, though, uninterested in some of the refinements of psychology I had heard discussed in New Hampshire and Illinois: "There's success and success. It's not only getting there, it's *how* you get there. If you have character, that means you keep trying, no matter how hard it is, and you don't lose your soul while you're doing that. You have to say to yourself, 'I'll go so far and no farther.' You have to draw the line, and if you do, and you can hold to it, you've got character." Nods all around, followed by smiles of recognition as the temptations are mentioned: white devils and black devils who offer serious distractions in the form of drugs and booze, bribes and payoffs, an assortment of "tricks." These street-smart kids have lots of savvy about Atlanta politics, Atlanta vice, Atlanta hypocrisy, black and white alike. Their moralism and self-conscious, urgently stated rectitude is hard earned, yet not entirely invulnerable, and they seem to know it on both counts.



One pushes the word "character," gets responses that are connected to hardship, ambition, the requirements of people living on the edge. They show little interest in metaphysical or metapsychological speculation. Character? Why, J. R. in *Dallas* lacks it, utterly; Dr. King had it, that's for sure. Character? A lot of big shots may seem to have it, but too bad more people don't know who is scratching whose back. There's a woman who works in a Howard Johnson's motel, and she lost her husband from cancer, and she has five kids, and she has two of them out of high school and in good jobs, and the other three are headed that way, and she doesn't stand for any foolishness, none, and she takes those kids to church every Sunday, and they pray

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—Atlanta high school student

hard and long, and she has character, in case anyone wants to know! Not in a school that bears the name of St. Paul, and not in a school where Catholics and Jews seem ready to square off at each other all day, every day, but in Carver we heard about the church. Each of these four high-school-age Americans goes to church on Sundays, and if there is reluctance sometimes (the joy of a late sleep), there is, after all, no real choice: "We have to go. Our mother says we have to go, and once we're there, I don't half mind! I like it there. I'll make my kids go, too."

Much talk of "uplift." Much reference to "building" oneself into "a stronger person," getting "on the map." How? There are auto repair shops. There are radio and television repair shops. There are cosmetology shops. There are dry-cleaning shops. There are tailoring and sewing and shoe repair places. There is a big airport, and people work there—on engines if they are on top, otherwise as cleaning people or doing errands, or driving buses and taxis, "lots of things." If you get one of those jobs, and you hold on to it; if you get yourself a girlfriend or a boyfriend, and they become a wife or a husband, and you become a father or a mother, and you "stay with it," and are good to your family, earn them a living, take care of them; if you remain loyal to your church, and pray to God when you're weak; if you don't forget your people, and try to lend a hand to the ones who didn't make it, who stumbled and fell and are hurt and sad and who are wondering what the point of it all is, and maybe have done wrong, done it too many times—if all that is "inscribed on your soul," then, by God, you have character, and it's important to say "by God," because it's "His grace that does things."

"I'm not as small after church as I am before church," one of these four told me. As for "good manners," they aren't superficial at all; they tell of something very deep down, no matter what so-called depth psychologists have to say, not to mention those who make of them religious figures: "You can tell a person by how he speaks to you. If he's respectful, then he's good; if he gives you the shoulder, then he's bad. I don't care if someone has a lot of bad in him. If he keeps it a secret from the whole world, then he's way out front. If he shows his bad self to everyone, he's putting it on us, man, and it's hard enough without that—another hassle to deal with. My grandmother tells us: 'Keep your mouth shut if there's no good to come out of it. Keep your mischief to yourself. We've all got it—but some of us don't show it off.' She's right; she has character."

Some other virtues that bespeak character are punctuality; how you carry yourself; an ability to laugh, when there's a good excuse for crying or shouting or shaking your fists; how you speak—with clear enunciation of words, so that others may hear you; self-respect, as measured by neatness and choice of clothes, as well as respect for others, as measured by a smile, a please, a thank you; obedience—to your elders, to the law, to your own self-evident ideas of what is right and wrong. "We all stray," said one of the young women, "but if we try hard not to keep repeating ourselves, and if we're not afraid to learn from our mistakes, and if we're willing to work hard, and sacrifice, then we have character."

The two Atlanta teachers were tough-minded, outspoken, a touch contemptuous of anyone wanting to offer sympathy, never mind condolences. They were demanding, insistent, forceful women: "Let these kids work hard, and better themselves, and be good members of their families, and they'll show character; that's how, the only way!" They spoke candidly, bluntly, unapologetically: "We chose the best we have to talk with you. We chose the smart ones, the ones who could talk with you and get themselves across. We have others here who would tax your patience and understanding. Maybe they have 'character,' too. I don't think character is the property of the lucky and the smart and the successful, no sir. But to me, character means an active person, who is ready to face the world, and make a mark on it. That's why I chose these kids. They're ready, they're ready to turn their backs on all their troubles and be good—be full of action. 'Never be lazy,' I tell my kids at home, and here in school. There's that expression: going to meet 'the man.' Well, I say we can become 'the man' ourselves. We can take control of our own lives, be our own masters. It may be preachy of me to talk like this, but we've got to pep-talk ourselves, and then get on with it! I pray God—we need His help badly—that more and more of these kids at Carver will get on with it."

A Message to Remember

On the way home, back North again, I took out my books and papers: notes to write, ideas to savor, comparisons to make.[2] They made me remember the wonderful message that Kierkegaard gave us more than a century ago: "Mortality is character, character is that which is engraved (χαραασσω) but the sand and the sea have no character, and neither has abstract intelligence, for character is really inwardness. Immorality, as energy, is also character; but to be neither moral nor immoral is merely ambiguous, and ambiguity enters into life when the qualitative distinctions are weakened by a gnawing reflection."[3]

He was a great one for leaps, the nineteenth-century version of Hamlet, the melancholy Dane. I wondered on my flight home whether Kierkegaard might somewhere in this universe be smiling, be assenting to the message, the slightly hectoring statement delivered by that mathematics teacher, and later by her tough, occasionally very tough, principal, who told me that he had "a lot of bad characters" to deal with, but damned if he couldn't "take them on," "turn them around," "convert their wasted energy into useful energy." It all sounded slightly like the noise of strained braggadocio: I'll talk big, and hope for the best. It all sounded exaggerated, romantic—like Kierkegaard. It all sounded pretty good, though, to those four young people and two of their teachers. □

[1]See my *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear*, Volume 1 (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1967).

[2]See the section, "Schools" in Volume 3 of *Children of Crisis: The South Goes North* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1967).

[3]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, translated by Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 43.

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