

From Campus Ministry

“How can we expect a harvest of thought who have not had a seedtime of character?”

— Henry David Thoreau, American essayist, poet, and practical philosopher

The following is the second of our two part series on the *Six Pillars of Character* which we began in our April 4, 2008 issue of *The Herald*. We are reprinting its introduction for your convenience.

INTRODUCTION

The book *Making Ethical Decisions* by Michael Josephson outlines six core ethical values. These *Six Pillars of Character* known as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship are ethical values to guide our choices. The standards of conduct that arise out of those values constitute the ground rules of ethics, and therefore of ethical decision-making.

There is nothing sacrosanct about the number six. We might reasonably have eight or 10, or more. But most universal virtues fold easily into these six. The number is not unwieldy and the Six Pillars of Character can provide a common lexicon. Why is a common lexicon necessary? So that people can see what unites our diverse and fractured society. So we can communicate more easily about core values. So we can understand ethical decisions better, our own and those of others.

The Six Pillars act as a multi-level filter through which to process decisions. So, being trustworthy is not enough — we must also be caring. Adhering to the letter of the law is not enough — we must accept responsibility for our action or inaction.

The Pillars can help us detect situations where we focus so hard on upholding one moral principle that we sacrifice another — where, intent on holding others accountable, we ignore the duty to be compassionate; where, intent on getting a job done, we ignore how.

In short, the Six Pillars can dramatically improve the ethical quality of our decisions, and thus our character and lives of the Six Pillars.

4. FAIRNESS

Play by the rules • Take turns and share • Be open-minded; listen to others • Don't take advantage of others • Don't blame others carelessly

What is fairness? Most would agree it involves issues of equality, impartiality, proportionality, openness and due process. Most would agree that it is unfair to handle similar matters inconsistently. Most would agree that it is unfair to impose punishment that is not commensurate with the offense. The basic concept seems simple, even intuitive, yet applying it in daily life can be surprisingly difficult. Fairness is another tricky concept, probably more subject to legitimate debate and interpretation than any other ethical value. Disagreeing parties tend to maintain that there is only one fair position (their own, naturally). But essentially fairness implies adherence to a balanced standard of justice without relevance to one's own feelings or inclinations.

Process Process is crucial in settling disputes, both to reach the fairest results and to minimize complaints. A fair person scrupulously employs open and impartial processes for gathering and evaluating information necessary to make decisions. Fair people do not wait for the truth to come to them; they seek out relevant information and conflicting perspectives before making important judgments.

Impartiality Decisions should be made without favoritism or prejudice.

Equity An individual, company or society should correct mistakes, promptly and voluntarily. It is improper to take advantage of the weakness or ignorance of others.

5. CARING

Be kind • Be compassionate and show you care • Express gratitude • Forgive others • Help people in need

If you existed alone in the universe, there would be no need for ethics and your heart could be a cold, hard stone. Caring is the heart of ethics, and ethical decision-making. It is scarcely possible to be truly ethical and yet unconcerned with the welfare of others. That is because ethics is ultimately about good relations with other people.

It is easier to love “humanity” than to love people. People who consider themselves ethical and yet lack a caring attitude toward individuals tend to treat others as instruments of their will. They rarely feel an obligation to be honest, loyal, fair or respectful except insofar as it is prudent for them to do so, a disposition which itself hints at duplicity and a lack of integrity. A person who really cares feels an emotional response to both the pain and pleasure of others.

Of course, sometimes we must hurt those we truly care for, and some decisions, while quite ethical, do cause pain. But one should consciously cause no more harm than is

reasonably necessary to perform one’s duties. The highest form of caring is the honest expression of benevolence, or altruism. This is not to be confused with strategic charity. Gifts to charities to advance personal interests are a fraud. That is, they aren’t gifts at all. They’re investments or tax write-offs.

6. CITIZENSHIP

Do your share to make your school and community better
• Cooperate • Get involved in community affairs • Stay informed; vote • Be a good neighbor • Obey laws and rules • Respect authority • Protect the environment

Citizenship includes civic virtues and duties that prescribe how we ought to behave as part of a community. The good citizen knows the laws and obeys them, yes, but that’s not all. She volunteers and stays informed on the issues of the day, the better to execute her duties and privileges as a member of a self-governing democratic society. She does more than her “fair” share to make society work, now and for future generations. Such a commitment to the public sphere can have many expressions, such as conserving resources, recycling, using public transportation and cleaning up litter. The good citizen gives more than she takes.

Some Advice About Teens

... from Michael Josephson, editor of the *Josephson Institute* whose mission is to build character among teens as well as adults.

Here are three suggestions for parents of young teens, all learned through my own mistakes:

First, remember that with emerging demands for independence, worries about peer acceptance, pressures of school and extracurricular activities, and a continuous search for self-identity, adolescents are on a physical and emotional roller coaster. Like every generation before them (including yours), teens are often arrogant and over-confident about their knowledge and your ignorance and deeply insecure about most other things. They will make mistakes, behave badly, and be thoroughly self-absorbed. Although they want you to be less involved in their life, they actually need you more. Despite continual battles, if you’re open, you will experience glorious moments that both of you will cherish all your lives.

Second, be firm, but choose your battles carefully. Don’t back down when dealing with important principles, but don’t make every issue a hill you’re willing to die on either. Be willing to lose occasionally and give in graciously.

Third, don’t belittle or underestimate the importance of their feelings. It may seem like they’re over-reacting, but teens feel emotions like embarrassment, loneliness, insecurity, frustration, and love truly and intensely. It’s disrespectful to minimize or discount these feelings with useless advice like “You’ll get over it” or “Everyone feels that way.” Nor is it helpful to dismiss or invalidate an emotion by saying “You shouldn’t feel that way.”

Teens can be hard to love, but be patient. Soon they will be the parents of your grandchildren.