

William J. Bennett

TEACHING THE VIRTUES

When I was Secretary of Education under President Reagan, I visited an elementary school in Raleigh, North Carolina. As I did at many of the 120 schools I visited during that period, I taught a lesson there on George Washington. Afterwards, I asked the kids if they had any questions, and one little guy raised his hand and asked, “Mr. Secretary, when you and President Reagan and the other people get together at meetings of the Cabinet, do

you really eat Jelly Bellies?” He’d heard about Reagan’s penchant for Jelly Belly jelly beans. I answered, “Yes, the president has a bowl of jelly beans at the meetings, and he eats some and passes them around, and I’ve had a few.” And this kid looked me in the face and said, “I think you’ve had more than a few, Mr. Secretary.”

This was quite funny, and I remember President Reagan laughing when I told him about it. But the story also makes an important point. Do you recall when Gorbachev was visiting the U.S. and trying to figure out what America was like? He went walking up and down Connecticut Avenue, and he went over to the National Archives to look at documents. But he should have gone to that elementary school in Raleigh. I can guarantee you that never in the history of the Soviet Union did an eight-year-old look into the eyes of a heavyset minister of education and say, “I’ll bet you eat all the caviar you can get your hands on.” Maybe the kid’s comment was a little fresh—a little over the top—but it showed that the ethos of liberty is in our hearts, and that is a good and important thing. But of course it’s not the only good and important thing.

Later, when I was director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy—or Drug Czar, as some called me—I visited about 140 communities and heard over and over a much different concern. Whether I was talking to teachers, school administrators, parents, cops or judges, they wanted to know: Who’s raising the children? What kind of character do our kids have? Who’s paying attention to their morals? A judge in Detroit once said to me: “When I ask young men today, ‘Didn’t anyone ever teach you the difference between right and wrong?’ they answer, ‘No sir.’ And you know, Mr. Bennett, I believe them. It is a moral vacuum out there.” I remember teachers in the public schools asking, “Can you help us develop some materials that we can use with our kids to teach them right from wrong?” Isn’t that ironic? The public schools of this country, which were established principally to provide common moral instruction for a nation of immigrants, were now wondering if this was possible. Many people expressed the concern that we had become so enamored of our economic and material success that we were neglecting more important things. Someone wrote me a letter and said, “If we have streets of gold and silver, but our children do not learn to walk with God, what will we have gained?”

Three Ways of Teaching Virtue

Some of us, frankly, had our doubts about whether this moral dilemma could be solved. I authored a series of studies called the

“Index of Leading Cultural Indicators,” which, instead of measuring inflation or interest rates, measured things like school dropout rates, drug addiction, illegitimacy, divorce, SAT scores and crime. A lot of the numbers were quite alarming. I wrote in the introduction to one of the studies that if we kept moving in the direction we were going, this great republic—this great experiment in self-government—could conceivably unravel. So “teaching the virtues” seemed very much to me then, and still seems to me today, a concern of prime importance for the American people. And I think the answer regarding how to teach the virtues is pretty straightforward. Aristotle had a good read on it, and modern psychology and other contemporary studies back him up: We teach by habit, we teach by precept, and we teach by example.

Aristotle says that habituation at an early age makes more than a little difference; it can make almost all the difference. So if you want kids to learn what work is, you should have them work. If you want them to learn what responsibility means, you should hold them responsible. If you want them to learn what perseverance is, you should encourage them to persevere. And you should start as early as possible. Of course, this is harder to do than to say. Being a parent and teaching these things is a very rigorous exercise.

Precepts are also important. The Ten Commandments, the principles of American democracy, rules of courteous behavior—these and other lists of rights and wrongs should be provided to young people. But as we provide them, young people need to know that we take these precepts seriously. That leads to the third part of teaching virtue that Aristotle talked about, which is example. And that, probably, is the one we should emphasize the most. I have been to school after school where the administration thinks it can solve its “values problem” by teaching a course in values. I don’t believe in courses in values. I don’t think that’s the way to go about solving the problem. If we want young people to take right and wrong seriously, there is an indispensable condition: They must be in the presence of adults who take right and wrong seriously. Only in this way will they see that virtue is not just a game, not just talk, but rather that it is something that grown-up people, people who have responsibilities in the world and at home, take seriously.

Let me give you an extreme example of the futility of precept in the absence of example. More than once I’ve been in schools where they are teaching a “virtue of the week.” In one such school, the

virtue of the week was honesty. There had been a test on honesty, and the teacher told me that she had had to prepare a second test because she had caught so many students cheating on the first. We are missing the point of the enterprise here. Our children won't take honesty seriously until we grown-ups demand honesty of ourselves and others, including our leaders. Needless to say, the Clinton years were not good years for impressing the virtue of honesty on our kids.

The Lessons of 9/11

Along these same lines, there are many lessons to be drawn, it seems to me, from the events of September 11, 2001. They are teachable events, and there is much in them for young people to learn. Many sophisticated or pseudo-sophisticated people have been nursing the idea for years that concepts like right and wrong and good and evil are outmoded. But we saw these things in full force on 9/11. We saw the face of evil and felt the hand of evil, but we also saw the face of good and felt the many hands of good, and our kids saw and felt these things, too.

We also saw the sinew, the fiber, the character of the American people. I am not just talking about the firefighters and the cops. I'm talking about the people associated with Xavier High School who died trying to rescue and help people. I'm talking about those folks on American Flight 93—the American businessmen traveling across the country with their laptops. These are the guys who are the butt of humor for every aspiring pseudo-intellectual and every Hollywood filmmaker who wants to run down America. Life in the suburbs, according to these so-called elites, is full of emptiness and desolation and misery. Perhaps I am overstating this, but the middle-class American businessman has been the target of an awful lot of criticism from an awful lot of directions for an awful lot of years. When the chips were down, though, these businessmen did pretty well, didn't they?

I was reading an updated transcript a couple of weeks ago in which one of the four men who rushed the cockpit on Flight 93 said to the person on the other end of the phone line, "We are waiting until we get over a rural area." They knew what was likely to happen, so they were waiting in order to minimize the death toll. What extraordinary human beings these ordinary Americans turned out to be.


In the aftermath of 9/11, I am re-thinking some of the things I wrote a couple years ago about the American character. I had feared, frankly, that we had drifted so far from the ideas and principles of our Founding Fathers that their understanding of nobility had become but a dim memory. Certainly it remains true that the words and deeds of George Washington and of the other great figures of American history are not sufficiently vivid in the minds of our kids, or even of too many of our adults. Nevertheless, 9/11 provided pretty compelling evidence of the solid virtues we Americans retain.

The Importance of Learning

In conclusion, let me connect my point about teaching by example to another 9/11 story. You have probably seen Mrs. Beamer on television—Lisa Beamer, the wife of Todd Beamer, who was one of the heroes on Flight 93. She has said that her children will look at the picture of her husband every day, and that she will tell them daily that he is a hero and that they are to try to be like him. This reminded me of a statistic I uncovered in a book that I wrote on the American family a few years back. We all know, based on countless studies as well as common sense, that if you want to raise happy and successful children, the best formula is a two-parent family. Despite the fact that not all of us have that opportunity—my brother and I were raised by a single parent who was married several times—it's nevertheless true. But the statistic I discovered when writing my book was that children who lose a father in the line of duty—because the father is a police officer or a soldier, for example—are indistinguishable from children who grow up in intact two-parent families. Why is that? It is because the moral example doesn't have to be there physically. It can be in the mind and in the heart. As a result of Lisa Beamer saying, "Be like him," then, Todd Beamer will be in the minds and hearts of his kids.

This illustrates one of my favorite themes: the importance of the things we can't see, of non-material things. Moral examples can exist in the memory of a father or in the memory of the Founding Fathers or in the memory of any of the marvelous heroes in the long history of humankind. The historian Tacitus wrote, "The task of history is to hold out for reprobation every evil word and deed, and to hold out for praise every great and noble word and deed." So we don't need courses in values. We need good courses in history. We need to revive the reading of good books. We need to provide good precepts and encourage good habits. Above all we have to

teach by example. Nor is this to say that we need to be perfect to be good examples. Our children can see us try and fail from time to time. But then they can see us try again and do better, or get it right, the second time. Thus they learn about human limitations, but also about human perseverance.

It's an old notion and an old responsibility, the teaching of virtues. Virtues don't come in our genes, so it is the duty of every generation to pass them on. It is a duty we are not allowed to surrender. 

William J. Bennett is a distinguished fellow at the Heritage Foundation, co-director of Empower America and chairman and co-founder of K12, an Internet-based elementary and secondary school. He has a B.A. from Williams College, a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Texas and a law degree from Harvard. In 1981, President Reagan chose him to head the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in 1985 he was named Secretary of the Department of Education. In 1989, President Bush appointed him director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. He has written and edited 14 books, two of which—*The Book of Virtues* and *The Children's Book of Virtues*—rank among the most successful of the past decade. His latest book is *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

I have no interest in turning this to a forum on creation versus evolution, but I'd like to offer to Mr. Alfonso Campbell the following references.

An organization called Reasons to Believe has developed a testable model of creation which is quite thorough. More detail can be gleaned from the following we link.

<http://reasons.org/resources/apologetics/testablecreationsummary.shtml?main>

In addition I believe that Mr. Adler's book *How to Think About the Great Ideas* give the best non-religious evidence refuting Dar-

win's theory. Chapters 7-10 of that book proved some of the most valuable and enlightening material I have ever read.

Thanks for all your hard work with TGIO journals.

Regards,

Hank Rawlins

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