

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
Cultivating Character
The Rev. Lori Kyle
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The earliest life lesson on character that I can recall began when I was 10 years old. My dad was running for an elected county commissioner position.

We kids, all 5 of us, helped on the campaign trail, going door to door with our "Smile, Go With Kyle!" bumper stickers and pamphlets that extolled the many wonderful attributes that rendered my father, the Democrat candidate, clearly the best one for the job.

I remember being at a campaign rally, and telling an adult that lots of candidates *said* they were honest and upright, but my father actually was. I was emphatic as I spoke with pride and conviction about his righteousness.

As I was finishing my proud proclamation, I caught sight of a friend of Dad's across the room who had been looking on and was smiling as if to say, "Aw, isn't that sweet...she thinks her dad is the best!" and me then thinking, "This isn't an 'aww' moment. I'm serious, my dad IS the real deal!"

As it turns out Dad won the election, and for several years thereafter looked after the roads, bridges and parks of Platte County, Missouri.

This lesson about character came full circle several years later, during my adolescent years when I had grown a bit more savvy about politics.

In a similar spirit of extolling my father's virtues during his campaign, so then was I extolling the virtues of being a Democrat, who is "someone who cares about the little people - over being a money-grubbing Republican" and how glad I was that Dad was a Democrat.

Upon hearing this my mom informed me that Dad wasn't and never had been a Democrat, but in truth was a staunch Republican. I'm sure the colour was draining from my face as she went on to disclose that the reason he ran on the Democratic ticket was to get more votes, because he perceived his voting pool to have Democratic leanings.

Both she and Dad, I learned that day, were always and remained Republicans.

Not only was that a coming of age moment for me politically, but it also ushered me into the sobering realization that adults, even parents, even *my* parents were all still on the road, shall we say, to discovering what it means to develop the character of our personhood.

(I also couldn't fathom them wanting to be Republicans, but that's a story for another day).

In fairness I can tell you that, to my knowledge, Dad carried out the duties of his office dutifully and diligently, providing solid service to the fine people of Platte County.

I imagine that, at that time in his life, Dad considered the misrepresentation of his political ideologies to be ambitious, achieving and aspiring, shrewd, strategic and ultimately successful.

I also imagine that, at the time of his death (3 years ago) he probably wouldn't have wanted all of those virtues highlighted in his eulogy.

This dichotomy between resume virtues and eulogy virtues is addressed by David Brooks' in his book "The Road to Character."

He differentiates resume from eulogy virtues in this way: the resume kind are those found in a resume (or in a campaign pamphlet)...those that contribute to external success - being productive, forward thinking, accomplished, savvy.

Conversely, eulogy virtues are internal and deeper, residing within the core of your being...those that contribute to inner harmony - being kind, brave, honest, faithful, the kinds of relationships you formed.

Brooks observes that most of us would agree that eulogy virtues are most important and esteemed, reflecting more character, being more inspiring than aspiring.

They make up the part of ourselves that is touched by many movie storylines that, while theoretically attainable, are not usually pursued or lived in the 'real' world.

In the world that isn't make-believe we are encouraged to consider how to construct a thriving career, but not how to cultivate a thriving inner life.

Brooks notes that, instead of learning about humility, sympathy and honest self-confrontation (all necessary for cultivating character) we're taught about how to prepare and promote ourselves for success.

This is alive and well in nearly all cultural domains, including the primary educational setting in society - our children's schools.

Kids are given messages from a very early age to get good grades, to be successful in academic and athletic endeavors. Dr. Andrew Sokatch spoke to this when he said that children aren't allowed the opportunity to fail, and thus are robbed of the opportunity to develop character by learning from failure.

In his 2014 Ted Talk, Dr. Sokatch said that failure can be a tool for growth, but because we are so externally focused on success, failure ends up being a brick wall.

Psychologist Carol Dweck from Stanford did a study on this with children. She split the kids into two groups, and gave each group a simple puzzle to do. When they finished, she praised the first group for being so talented and for so successfully completing the puzzle, and praised the second group for their diligence, focusing on how hard they had worked at the puzzle.

Then she gave both groups a significantly more challenging puzzle, and the kids accustomed to hearing praises about their ability were frustrated by the new puzzle and weren't as interested in trying because they were only familiar with success and had no tools with which to deal with setbacks.

The kids praised for diligence enjoyed the idea of the new challenge and ended up doing the puzzle better than the 'success' kids.

I experienced this dynamic in my last year of high school, specifically when I tried out for the volleyball team. For years, I had excelled at several sports, and thus, like the kids in the 'success' puzzle group, had received praise through the years for athletic ability.

Then in grade 12 some of my sporty friends asked me to go out for the volleyball team, a sport I had never played.

I was reluctant to do this, because it seemed to me to be more of a challenge than an opportunity. I was known to do well in sports, and thus had a reputation to uphold.

Volleyball was a wild card to me. What if I didn't excel at this?

Due to the persistence of my friends, and a bit of narcissism that helped me to ask myself how hard this sport really could be, I went ahead and joined the team.

It was expected by the coach and by the players that I'd do well, but I didn't. I just never got the hang of the sport, and it showed.

After weeks passed and it became obvious that my volleyball skills were mediocre at best, I was benched and became a non-starter.

This was a huge blow to my ego, and terribly embarrassing to me. I made myself stay on the team and not quit, but I couldn't wait for that seemingly eternal volleyball season to finally be over.

For the longest time, I didn't look at this 'failure' as a tool for growth, but definitely as a brick wall. And it solidified a question that I had pondered for years...why do people who aren't good at sports join teams?

A kid in my class named Eddie Carter was one of those kids. Eddie was not blessed with a large amount of coordination. Nonetheless he would regularly and cheerfully go out for several sports, although he rarely got to play in games.

Wasn't he perpetually humiliated, like I was in volleyball? How in the world could he derive more enjoyment than embarrassment and frustration from it?

Despite being perplexed about Eddie and others like him, there was also always a minute sense of knowing that allowed me to envy the Eddies in my life for the freedom that they surely enjoyed.

Tucked deeply away but nonetheless accessible, there was a sense that, despite my public accolades as an athlete, they ultimately were ahead in the game - the game of

life- because they weren't held captive by the need to succeed.

This adulation of success, of resume virtues, which results in discomfort with and avoidance of perceived failure, is widespread in our schools, and then accompanies us right into adulthood.

Adults have those same pressures, but the stakes are higher, and the message is pervasive.

Stop for a moment to consider the messages we receive through advertising about what we should be aspiring to – ads in commercials, magazines, newspapers, billboards, store fronts, online.

Instead of ads designed to inspire and promote internal character, we are encouraged to aspire to wealth and sexiness, such as

From Porsche – “Honestly now, did you spend your youth dreaming about someday owning a Nissan or a Mitsubishi?”

From Silva Thin Cigarettes: “Cigarettes are like women. The best ones are thin and rich.”

We also often receive messages to emulate famous people because of their success...

From Hofner musical instruments: “Paul McCartney plays a Hofner Original. Why don't you?”

Because of these cultural exposures, many of us devote ourselves largely to these 'success' goals.

And according to Brooks, when you do this, you...

...turn into a shrewd animal, a crafty self-preserving creature who is adept at playing the game and who turns everything into a game. When this is all you have, you spend a lot of time cultivating professional skills, but you don't have a clear idea of the sources of meaning in life, so you don't know where you should devote your skills. Years pass and the deepest parts of yourself go unexplored and unstructured. You are busy, but you have a vague anxiety that your life has not achieved its ultimate meaning and significance. You live with an unconscious boredom, not really loving, not really attached to the moral purpose that give life its worth. You lack the internal criteria to make unshakable commitments. You never develop inner constancy. You foolishly judge other people by their abilities, not by their worth. You don't have a strategy to build character, and without that, not only your inner life but also your external life will eventually fall to pieces.

We've seen this play out a myriad of times when 'successful' celebrity's lives unravel.

You may have noticed the quotation by Richelle Goodrich in today's order of service.

She says, “One of the most critical decisions made in life [to assist us in not allowing our inner and outer lives to fall to pieces] is choosing with whom to spend your time. For it is those relationships that gradually mold our character until we become a reflection of the company we keep.”

And so I ask you...with whom do you choose to spend your time?

What kind of a person do you gravitate toward?

This of course applies to our personal relationships, but also applies to which magazines you buy, which television shows you choose to watch.

Taken from another angle we may ask ourselves...

Who in your life do you want to reflect?

Who do you *want* to reflect, and who do you *indeed* reflect?

You may have a bucket list in life.

If so, what virtues are on your *character* bucket list?

What are you doing to cultivate/to move toward being able to check them off that lifelong to-do list?

Or shall we say that lifelong to-**be** list?

I am convinced that you chose to cultivate character on this very day by coming to be a part of this gathering.

Through such gatherings, through such reading as Brooks' *Road to Character* book, we mindfully engage in our cultivation.

May we continue our cultivation so that, as we imagine the time when our bucket list is being laid aside because we are being laid to rest, we can rest assured that our lives were the writers of a eulogy that would have inspired us and others.

So shall it be. Amen.