

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Is There a Crisis of Character in America?

**“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king’s horses and all the king’s men
Could not put Humpty Dumpty together again.”**

Although the origin of this nursery rhyme is much disputed—probably during the English Reformation (16th century) or the English Civil War (17th century)—the point for us is well taken: Once something is broken, it is most difficult/nearly impossible to fix or restore.

Is this true of a human life? A few years ago, a Grace University professor had a session with students in which he reviewed his high school yearbook. He cited a rather staggering number of graduates from his high school that had experienced personal failure, brokenness—alcoholism, criminal convictions, drug addiction, divorce and other failures of personal integrity: So much potential, so disappointing in failure.

Several years ago, I shared with the Grace University faculty the results of a major research study. It was a study of professionals in all vocations who did not succeed; who failed. Why did they fail? Was it because of a lack of knowledge? No, their education provided that or they acquired it. Was it because of a lack of skills? No, their education and/or life experience provided the necessary skills. Was it because of a failure of character? The study demonstrated unequivocally, yes!

So this begs the question: How do I guarantee that I do not fail? How do I guard myself? How do I position myself to succeed in what I am choosing to do with my life? It seems to me that knowledge and skills are not enough. You need a dogged determination to be a man, a woman of character.

Sociologist James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia, in his book, *The Death of Character*, states:

“We say we want a renewal of character in our day but we don’t really know what we ask for. . . We want character without conviction; we want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms that we want it.”

If Hunter is correct, is there no hope? What does a dogged determination to be a man and a woman of character look like? Consider two recent examples of dogged determination but failure of character:

- Tiger Woods, winner of every major tournament on the PGA circuit, winning the Masters at age 21. Then we learn that he began playing golf before he started kindergarten. Such dogged determination. But he failed—why? Because of character.
- John Edwards, handsome, gifted speaker; incredibly successful trial attorney; wealthy; VP candidate. But he failed. Why? Because of character.

Also, consider these examples of this crisis of character in our nation:

1. In Baltimore recently, a tourist was beaten, stripped and robbed. A group of teenagers captured it on their smartphones but did nothing to help; their laughter is heard in the background. That video is now on YouTube for all to see!
2. There is a phenomenon sweeping America called “flash robs”: groups of teenagers swarm into stores, rob everything they can and then run out of the store.
3. The recent General Services Administration (GSA) scandal is especially revealing. The mission of the GSA is to promote efficiency in government. But the GSA’s recent conference in Las Vegas included clowns, mind readers and debauchery. What made this conference even more appalling was that several GSA leaders and those who sponsored the conference mocked the taxpayer, who paid for their extravagance and selfishness. The old saying, “vanity run amok” certainly applies!! As columnist Peggy Noonan comments: “All the workers looked affluent, satisfied. Only a generation ago, earnest, tidy government bureaucrats were spoofed as drudges and drones. Not anymore. Now they’re cool. Immature, selfish and vain, but way cool.”
4. Military leaders are to model the burdens of leadership to those who serve under them. But consider a US Navy ship captain who made immoral videos and then showed them to his crew. Leaders, including navy captains, are to scrupulously model standards, including high ethical standards. The burdens of leadership are real and formidable. But this Navy captain mocked the entire idea of leadership and dragged his crew down with him. That is a crisis of leadership.
5. Perhaps most appalling is the recent Secret Service scandal in Colombia. Typically, the Secret Service has a reputation as solid role models—paradigms of ethical and moral behavior. After all, they guard the President of the United States. They have the reputation of being tough, disciplined and mature. This cohort in Colombia modeled just the opposite—drinking heavily and hiring prostitutes. They failed their president and they failed their nation. Apparently, this behavior was not an isolated incident. Noonan relates that the Secret Service “are the ones who are mature, who you can count on, who’ll keep their heads. They have judgment; they’re by the book unless they have to rewrite it on a second’s notice. And they wear suits, like adults.” In Colombia we saw

Secret Service agents in T-shirts, khakis and sneakers cavorting with prostitutes: A powerful picture of decadence and debauchery!!

A few weeks ago, the eminent social scientist, James Q. Wilson, died. A profoundly sensible and wise man, Wilson left his mark. More than anything else, he stressed the central importance of character and virtue in a culture. When he wrote about character and virtue, he focused on the basics—decency, cooperation and that actions always have long-term consequences. Wilson once wrote that, “It is as if it were a mark of sophistication for us to shun the language of morality in discussing the problems of mankind.” For Wilson, virtue for people becomes a habit when they practice good manners, are dependable, punctual and responsible—each day! In his 1993 classic, *The Moral Sense*, he wrote, “Order exists because a system of beliefs and sentiments held by members of a society sets limits to what those members can do.” Wilson believed that the family was the basic unit of society and when it is in trouble, so is the rest of the society. He believed very strongly that humans are born with a strong moral sense and that moral sense is either reinforced by the culture or it is destroyed by the culture. That judgment sounds quite similar to what the Bible declares quite forcefully: We are born with an innate sense of right and wrong (Romans 2:14). That innate sense is either reinforced by the strong family, the church and the broader culture, or, if they are dysfunctional, the conscience is hardened. That hardened conscience then rationalizes sin and dysfunctional behavior results. The crisis of character we now observe in America is a result of that very cycle. James Q. Wilson discerned something going on in American culture and wrote about it. The Bible has been arguing precisely the same thing for nearly 3,500 years. Perhaps it is time to heed these pronouncements!

See Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (21-22 April 2012) and David Brooks in the *New York Times* (7 March 2012).