

PARENTING: A SCHOOL OF VIRTUE

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When we consider what we are going to do with our lives we rarely ask ourselves one of the most important questions our choices entail. When we are deciding to enter this profession or that, to take this job or that, to marry this person or that, to move to a different part of the country, we often ask ourselves which choice will make us happy, or perhaps what will make others happy or what will at least bring us money or pleasure. These are important questions, of course, but perhaps not the most important questions. What we often fail to ask ourselves is "What kind of person will I become if I pursue this profession, take this job, marry this individual? Will the profession, job, or spouse help me become a better person or a worse person? Will it, or he or she, help me acquire the virtues I need?"

Part of the reason for this failure is that we have little appreciation for what the ancients called virtue or character. When moderns talk about good people, if we mean something more than simply that they are nice, we are generally thinking about those who do good acts, for instance, those who help the neighbors and the poor, who pay their bills, don't cheat on their income tax, and spend some time with their families. We rarely speak about individuals being prudent or temperate and not even courage and justice are spoken much of as virtues. Few young people know what prudence and temperance are, let alone admire the qualities and seek to have them. They have been taught that life is the pursuit of certain possessions and experiences; they don't know what a life in pursuit of virtue would look like.

The ancient and medieval interest in ethics was very much centered on a concern with character. Ethics was the study of character [ethos] and of virtue or excellence of character [arete]. Aristotle and Aquinas thought that excellence of character was a worthy possession in its own right. They were concerned to define what qualities made for a good human being and to urge individuals to engage in activities suitable for fostering these qualities. The point of the ethical life was not simply to do just acts, but it was also to be a just person, for unless one had the virtue of justice, one's just acts were not true expressions of who one was; one's acts were rather accidental to one's character. The

ethical life was viewed not as a life of discrete actions that kept to or violated some rule; rather the ethical life was a life oriented to shaping one's character to possess and exhibit the qualities appropriate to human nature and to giving full scope to those qualities or virtues in action. In Christian terms, one was not trying to compile a record of impressive moral actions; rather, one was trying to convert one's heart and to undergo a transformation of character to become ever more Christ-like. Certainly, the expectation was that those who become Christ-like in their interior would do Christ-like actions, but on the otherhand, worthy exterior activity without the suitable interior amounted to just so much vanity.

Again, being and doing were not considered to be totally disparate categories. Good character was certainly to issue in good action for it is part of the human essence to act. But more to the point here, good action was seen as a crucial mechanism for the acquisition of good character; as Aristotle advised, if one wanted to become a just man, one did just actions; as Pascal advised, if one wanted to believe, one took up devotional practices. Good action, while a good in itself, is also an instrumental for the acquisition of good character.

What is being suggested here, is that a major consideration for one's choice of activities, for one's career, job, or spouse should be whether the activity, career or spouse is conducive to the formation of virtue. At the very least, one should be aware what kinds of virtues or vices one is likely to acquire though undertaking various commitments and tasks in life.

People have some sense that certain jobs or undertakings are related to certain qualities of character. It is not uncommon for young people in their attempt to discern what they are going to do with their lives to take into account whether they have the qualities needed to do a certain job well. That is, one may choose to become a doctor or lawyer or businessman for many reasons, but often one also believes that one has the qualities that a good doctor, lawyer, or businessman needs. Individuals may not often articulate this reason, but I believe it is operative in their decision-making. Certainly, when I am advising students what career to pursue, I take this into consideration. Indeed, one of the few places where virtue still seems to be a criterion of importance is on recommendations for law school, business school, and graduate school; we are asked to rate the students on reliability, trustworthiness, integrity, leadership qualities, etc., whereas these terms and concepts play little if any

role in our daily conversations about ourselves and others. Indeed, there seems to be some uneasiness in using these categories, for it sounds as though we are rating ourselves or others for a Boy Scout merit badge. But when a student tells me he wants to go to law school and I know him to be lazy, for instance, I will point out that he is going to have to change if he is going to succeed at the profession of law. And if I know a student to be susceptible to the lure of all the seductive trappings of certain professions, I am uneasy about encouraging him or her to pursue these professions, for I suspect he or she will not long be able to resist the opportunities for corruption. We are then aware at least to some extent that different activities to be done well require certain characteristics and we also have some sense that different activities are likely to foster certain characteristics in those who participate in them. The program Outward Bound is very much based upon the premise that placing individuals in challenging environments will likely assist them in becoming resourceful, brave, and independent.

Let me elaborate further for a moment why it is important to have virtues. As was mentioned, Aristotle and Aquinas thought that virtues were excellences or perfections of the human person. They thought that everything was striving to be a good whatever it was; that is, that tomato plants had an innate inclination to do what tomato plants do well, and that dogs had an innate inclination to do what dogs do well. Furthermore, in the human realm they argued that everyone should want to excel at whatever one does, and more importantly, of course, one should want to excel at what one is, that is, at being a human being. Thus, just as a soldier would want to be a good soldier, and a violin player a good violin player, so should human beings want to excel at being human beings. In the view of Aristotle and Aquinas, an excellent human being would excel in all the fundamental areas of human existence; for instance, he or she would have good physical health, be attractive, have a good marriage, good friends, a good city in which to live and material prosperity. But most important for human excellence is the possession of the virtues for virtues bring order to the soul and the soul is the most important element of human existence. Temperance brings order to our passions, courage orders our fears, and justice orders our relations with one another. More important than physical health, good marriages, friends, and good city states is a good character for without a good character one will not know how to make proper use of all the other goods one may possess. With a good character, one is what one ought to

be -- a good human being who lives a good human life. Thus Aristotle and Aquinas thought that our primary evaluation of every activity should be how it helps us to acquire virtue, how it helps us to be good human beings. Adultery is wrong not so much because of the harm it does, but because the adulterer's passions are out of control. Lying is wrong not so much because of the harm it does, but because a liar has committed himself or herself to some good, a lesser good, than that of truth.

What I want to suggest in this paper is that parenting is an activity most conducive to the formation of the human character and to the acquisition of virtue. And, of course, when I speak of "parenting" I am not speaking simply of the act of begetting a child but of the sustained activity of raising a child, of taking care of its needs day in and day out, of attempting to form the child to be a responsible and independent adult. I argue parenting provides a very important good beyond the good of bestowing the gift of life on one's children. This is good is the opportunity that parenting offers for acquiring virtue. Thus when I speak of parenting as being a school of virtue I am not thinking of the virtue that the parents nourish in the children so much as I am thinking of the virtues that parents acquire while engaged in the activity of parenting. Indeed, it is my observation that the experience of parenting provides an opportunity to acquire virtue in a way that few other experiences do.

Why would this be true? In one sense, every action that involves a choice is an opportunity for growth in either virtue or vice. One is shaping one's character with each moral choice that one makes. Those actions that are a part of the routine of one's life, that are liable to assist one in attaining either good or bad habits are particularly actions conducive to the acquisition of virtue or vice, for virtue and vice are habits. Actions that test one in some sense, that is, that test one's devotion or commitment to a good over the lure of some pleasure or the threat of some evil are, again, particularly conducive to the acquisition of virtue or vice for they force one to solidify one's commitment to the good -- or to abandon one's commitment to the good. It is my claim that the experience of parenting provides abundant opportunities for routine actions that test one's commitment to the good.

Parenting brings with it many stresses and challenges, stresses and challenges that need to be met if one is to be a good parent. And since the natural love that parents have for their children is so strong, parents have a particularly strong motivation to act in accord with the good that a situation demands and thus are more inclined to acquire virtues than vices through the project of parenting. At

any job, one will work hard to acquire the virtues necessary to do the job if one truly loves the job and wants to do well at it. Most parents want to be good parents, not for the sake of the virtue that they acquire for themselves but because they realize that good parents will raise better children and they want their children to be good and do well. Much of this talk will explain how various virtues are fostered through the natural activities of parenting.

But let me pause for a moment here and place some qualifiers upon the sweeping generalizations that I am going to make. First, let me acknowledge that I am not a parent and thus I am not speaking in praise of myself when I speak of the virtues I note in those who are good parents. Indeed, this paper grew out of the observation that most of my friends upon becoming parents were making more rapid progress in the acquisition of virtue than were many of my childless friends and it occurred to me that it was precisely the activity of parenting that explained this disparity. I come to this endeavor somewhat as an anthropologist or as a de Tocqueville to a foreign land who may well, because of a more distant point of view, see things that those intimately involved in a culture or activity might not see. And, like many anthropologists, I may be inclined to have an overly idealized or romanticized view of the activity I observe. But let me insist that I am only making generalizations, not absolute claims. Thus not all the generalizations I make will apply universally to all individuals who are parents; undoubtedly many exceptions and counterexamples might be cited. My examples might not suit the experience of all but I believe the larger claim holds true -- that parenting is an activity conducive to the acquisition of virtue.

I must make another qualifying statement. Let me note that I not am saying that being a parent necessarily inculcates virtue. I am maintaining only that it is the sort of activity that is conducive to the acquisition of virtue. Again, few contest that experiences have great potential to form us. But few if any activities are guaranteed to foster virtue. An easy analogy might be made with participation in sports. Many wish to claim that being involved in athletics helps one develop, among other qualities, the qualities of self-discipline, cooperation, perseverance, and graciousness both in victory and defeat. Some dispute this by referring the amount of corruption in both collegiate and professional sports; Wilt Chamberlain and Magic Johnson may make us cynical about sports as a school of virtue. Nonetheless, many adults who have been successful in their careers and lives attribute much of their success to the

qualities that they developed through their participation in sporting activities. Thus, engaging in an activity is not in itself a guarantee that one will acquire the virtues naturally fostered by the activity; one's preparedness and willingness to allow an experience or activity to form one for the good must, then, be highly influential in the value of that activity for forming one. Here I am suggesting that the activity of parenting is an activity that has such motivation written into it.

Certainly some parents may not respond well to the many opportunities that parenting gives them for acquiring virtue. Some individuals may become more impatient rather than more patient as the result of parenting -- the behavior of some parents at Little League games perhaps indicates well the reality of this possibility. And some individuals may become more narrow, selfish, and materialistic through having children and may treat their children as mere extensions of their own ego, as mere opportunities for dressing them up and showing them off. After all, good parenting requires us to be unselfish and it take some effort to be unselfish; some don't make the effort. But it is my experience that such parents are in the minority. It is my experience that most parents realize that unreasonable behavior at Little League games sets a bad example for children and that purchasing all the latest designer clothing for their children fills them with a false sense of values and thus learn to curb whatever tendency they have in those directions. Their concern for the well-being of their children leads them to overcome their own propensity towards temper-tantrums and self-indulgence and thus leads them to grow in virtue.

Let me ask you to reflect on the kind of changes in attitude that generally accompany the experience of becoming a parent.

--New father

Those who are about to become parents or who are parents frequently find themselves looking at the world with a new set of eyes, as it were. They start to have concerns and take matters seriously that they never before gave much heed to. For instance, parents take an interest in the school systems and school curriculum that they most likely never had as single individuals. They begin to be concerned more about who runs for public office and what policies they propose. They may show a new concern for the quality of entertainment in the mass media and for such phenomenon as pornography. The change in perspective results, it seems, from their new responsibilities; they now are responsible for the

raising of children, for seeing that these individuals grow up unharmed, physically and psychologically, and that they acquire a proper appreciation for right and wrong.

An experience I have had in teaching ethics suggests further how a parental perspective affects one's ethical evaluations. When discussing issues with my students, I inevitably find that when they assess issues from their own individualistic perspective, they evaluate these issues quite differently from how they are inclined to evaluate them if they attempt to take on the perspective of a parent. Issues such as pornography, sex education in the schools, rights of criminals, etc. are especially revealing of their perspectives. When they answer from their own perspective I find that most of them use as their criteria of judgment a standard of the maximization of human freedom. Then I give them a few minutes to think over how they would respond to the same issues if they were parents. Sometimes they have a hard time imagining such a state, and occasionally I must prompt them to try to discern how their parents think about such issues. It regularly happens that there is a significant disparity in their responses based on the perspective of a young person without parental responsibilities and the perspective of a more experienced individual with parental responsibilities. The one who thinks as a parent is much less likely to argue that permitting pornography is important to protect other freedoms protected by the first amendment; the one who thinks like a parent of a daughter is much less likely to champion the goods of premarital sexual activity. The one who thinks like a parent is much more inclined to want to order society by the standard of what is good for man, rather than by a standard to that protects various freedoms maximally.

Not only are the concerns of parents quite different from the concerns of that individual before he or she become a parent, but the inner self, the character of that individual changes in a way corresponding to the individual's new interest. Again, parents, whether consciously or not, generally begin to grow in virtue.

Since virtue is an old-fashioned kind of topic, it seems appropriate to take a somewhat old-fashioned approach to it. While parenting has the power to help one develop many diverse virtues, it will serve my purposes here to frame my discussion around the cardinal virtues of temperance, courage, prudence and justice and the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (self-giving). Here I wish to sketch out how parenting fosters each of these virtues.

Courage is the virtue whose most immediate object is overcoming the fear of death. While it would seem that being a soldier is the activity most conducive to cultivating this virtue, parenting is not without its merits in this regard. Many individuals upon becoming parents find themselves with a strong willingness to die for another -- namely their child. I have a sister who is deathly afraid of blood and all related manifestations of physical suffering, but she took a three month course in emergency medical treatment which included much contact with blood and physical suffering simply so that she would be prepared to cope with whatever emergencies her beloved toddler might encounter.

Physical courage is, of course, only one kind of courage. Parenting requires courage of many different descriptions. In the first place, many will readily acknowledge that it takes some courage even to become a parent in this day and age. Many are frightened by the conditions in society, by the unrest in the world and the prospect of nuclear war, by the breakdown in the general morality of society. Some wonder if it is responsible to bring children into such a world. Some worry about their abilities to meet the financial demands of taking care of their children, both in the short term and in the long term or providing for their eventual college education. Certainly just the day-to-day trials of parenthood also call for courage. One may find, for instance, that one must speak to the principle or the schoolboard because of concerns for the education of one's child. And children are a great unknown. They may be born with physical or mental handicaps; they may have emotional difficulties that a parent may not be fully prepared to meet. There are more subtle needs for courage as well. Many parents have children who are quite unlike themselves and they need to have the courage to assist these children in such activities as sports or musical competitions or dramatic productions wherein the parent him or her self has never had any notable expertise. The parent may never have found the courage to do certain activities for him or herself but will often do them for the sake of their children.

Temperance is a virtue that is quite immediately called for in parenting insofar as it is the virtue that requires the tempering of one's desires. An infant almost immediately forces new parents to find new limits to their need for sleep, privacy, sexual intimacy, and the lesser pleasures of dining out or going to a movie. The financial burdens of parenthood enable many to learn a new economy in their money-management. I am not certain that temperance is the virtue that enables one to curb one's temper, but let us note that most individuals when they become parents --especially of toddlers and

teenagers -- learn that they have a temper they were quite unaware of before they became parents. They learn that they have a relatively low tolerance level for annoyance. With their children, because of their love for their children, they begin to develop what are sometimes prodigious abilities to be patient. If they are overcoming a desire for the pleasure of nondisturbance, patience would be a kind of temperance; if patience is required so that one treat one's children fairly, then it is a kind of justice; but, whatever kind of virtue patience is there is little doubt that parenting requires a lot of it and gives ample opportunity for acquiring it.

I have heard many parents state that they were much more patient and tolerant before they became parents. But I doubt that. I think their patience simply had not been tested before. It is often not so difficult to be patient for a short period of time, but when the prospect of having to put up with certain kinds of behavior or with certain kinds of pain looms before one as a constant on one's horizon, one's patience may well fade quickly. I am always astonished at the patience that parents show their children and am a bit amused when they apologize for their lack of patience. I suspect any non-parent would have buckled much sooner. The point is that parents encounter many more tests to their patience and sometimes fail these tests, but all in all I suspect their overall tolerance level for annoyance and level for assisting the needy has greatly increased through their experience as parents.

The necessity of being a good example to one's children also leads one to work to eliminate certain bad habits one may have acquired. One may need to change one's vocabulary, to stop smoking, or stop leaving one's possessions all over the house. One realizes that it is difficult to expect children to be free from the vices and bad habits that one has oneself. One needs to temper oneself in all sorts of ways.

Let me suggest -- with some trepidation in bringing up such a sensitive topic -- that this analysis suggests some further detriments to placing children in daycare. I take up this point since I believe it suggests a way of testing what I am proposing. I am not saying that parents who place their children in daycare are bad parents or that they will not acquire the virtues of parenting. What I am suggesting is that placing children in daycare makes it more difficult to acquire some of the virtues of parenting and that those who are parents should take this into account as they attempt to accommodate themselves to what effect daycare may have upon themselves and their children. For if parenting is an activity

conducive to the cultivation of certain virtues, in so far as placing children in daycare inevitably considerably reduces the amount of time one gives to parenting, then one should expect that those who place their children in daycare will not as readily obtain the virtues of parenting as those who do not. It is, of course, possible that some exceptional individuals may be able to acquire the virtues of both the workplace and of parenting. But most likely, many will not.

Those who place their children in daycare spend most of their time with their children in the few hours in the evening after a full day of work. They are tired from work and the children are often worn out from being in daycare. This reduced time available for being with one's children may have a significant impact on how one relates to one's children. One readily notes how differently grandparents and aunts and uncles respond to children from how parents do; in general they are much more indulgent with the children than the parents are since they are not ultimately responsible for the children's behavior; they also tend to believe that since they have a limited amount of time to spend with the children the times they have should be good times, so they tend to "spoil" the children. Parents of children in daycare may be in some danger of having a similar response to their own children. If they do, there is obviously reason to be concerned about the children, but here, again, the chief interest is not with the effects on the character of the children but with the effects on the character of the parents.

If my thesis is correct that parenting serves to form the character of the parents, leaving a considerable part of parenting to daycare workers may rob the parents of much opportunity to develop certain virtues. The lack of a "full time" parent at home, one who has the children day in and day out and makes the children the direct center of his or her life relegates parenting to a second-order activity. A parent may become accustomed to discharging his or her responsibility through the professional and commercial offices of another; parenting becomes something that one hires out rather than what one does oneself -- and we rarely hire out what we consider to be most important. The demands of the work place are so great that an individual becomes shaped more by the workplace than by the family; those who work often give their prime time to the concerns of work and their fatigued hours to the concerns of home. It is difficult for parenting to remain a central focus in the lives of working parents because of the stresses and obligations of the workplace are quite enough to dominate their thoughts.

Because they have less time with the children, they develop less patience in being with them, but because they have so little time with them, they become more indulgent of them.

Few households can have two fulltime parents; in those lucky enough to have one stay-at-home full time parent, it is generally this parent who acquires more readily and deeply the virtues of parenting. The stay-at-home parent is generally more patient with the children, the one who understands them better, the one who coaxes and shapes them better. But both parents generally profit from there being a stay-at-home parent since this parent is able to aid his or her spouse in acquiring the virtues of parenting. And because one parent is making parenting his or her full time work, parenting may often be taken more seriously as an activity, one that the working parent is also then expected to perform well. When both parents work, parenting may well become a burdensome chore that neither individual really focuses on -- the focus comes to be getting the kids to bed and getting some quiet time for one's self. Those who place their children in daycare may be in danger of thinking of themselves as a couple with children, not as a family. They may sense that they have a need to spend more time away from the children for relaxation since they may find time spent with the children a considerable strain -- because, indeed, it is another strain added to the strain of work.

Now let me hasten to say that I am not saying that parents who place their children in daycare are bad parents or that they will have no opportunity to acquire the virtues of parenting. Again, what I am suggesting is that placing children in daycare makes it more difficult to acquire some of the virtues of parenting, virtues which are arguably more important to have than the fulfillment, money, or even type of virtue that one acquires at the office. But let me leave this tender topic aside, and return to sketching how parenting assists one in acquiring the cardinal and theological virtues.

I have spoken of temperance and courage, let me speak of prudence. Prudence is the virtue that enables one to know what is the right thing to do in any given situation. It is the virtue best known as practical wisdom. It depends not only upon a good will, but also upon a knowledge of the particulars of life. Being a parent radically increases the amount of experiential knowledge one has; one needs to learn about nutrition and medical care, psychology, financial management, and about many other areas of human endeavor. Again, with one's new responsibilities of being a parent one finds that one has a sharpened interest in these matters; one has a new incentive to become knowledgeable about all sorts

of subjects hitherto foreign to one. Few find themselves becoming less practical upon becoming parents; rather most find themselves being forced to become very practical.

Justice is another of the cardinal virtues. Again, the need to set a good example often provokes many to work on this virtue. One is less likely to take certain liberties in all sorts of activities for one realizes that one's child is observing one's every move. People are often more law-abiding when they become parents; they are more likely to obey the speed limit, to be courteous to policemen, and in general to be honest and just. The constant necessity for disciplining one's children and mediating disputes between siblings and friends drives one to refine one's sense of what is fair.

The theological virtues generally also are more assiduously cultivated when one becomes a parent. There are questions concerning the existence of God and the meaning of life that many often put aside until they face the prospect of raising children. This transformation undoubtedly takes place among those of every religion but here let me draw my examples from Christianity. Those becoming parents often realize that they would like their children to believe in God and to have Christ as a guide. They begin to attend Church more regularly and to become involved in Church affairs. They show concern for the teaching of the fundamentals of their faith to their children and often themselves experience a need to become better grounded in their faith. Their faith is also bolstered by an increased understanding and love of God; they begin to realize what a father's and mother's love is; they watch their children chaff and grow under their discipline and as they reason that God the Father is delighting in and disciplining them in the same fashion, and begin to appreciate more God's love more.

Hope, too, is a virtue that parents cannot be without. This virtue, of course, is closely allied with courage. Again, there are many reasons to fear bringing a child into the world today; the availability of drugs in society, the easy sexuality of our times, and even the prospect of sending one's child on an errand to a store where pornography is freely displayed is enough of a risk to cause considerable anxiety for parents. But Christians believe that God's grace is abundant and that He will carry them and their children through. Many if not most parents experience some heartbreaking events in the lives of their children; there may, for instance, be illness, or moral scandal, bad choices of spouses or defection from the church that will cause one to fret and grieve. The hope and belief that God is watching over all and will protect and guide both oneself and one's child sustains many a parent.

Charity can be defined in many ways, but let us here consider it as the love that guides one to consider another's needs greater than one's own. Parents, of course, make enormous sacrifices for their children and this need to sacrifice has a way of expanding the charity in their hearts. They become less attached to their own needs and more attentive to the needs of others. Parents play games with their children and engage in amusements that they have long lost interest in simply for the sake of the children. They learn to sacrifice their time and interests for their children and thus to some degree become more accommodating to others in general. The virtue of charity, of course, includes much more than the practice of alms-giving, but the practice of charitable giving is often a good index to the charitability of one's heart. It is my suspicion that parents are often more generous to charities than are single individuals. Many of them begin to experience a strong sense of gratitude for the sacrifices their parents made and for the blessings they have had that enable them to have good home lives. They begin to realize what a great gift a family is and feel acutely the loneliness and pain of those without families. They begin to understand how easy it is for one who has not had a good home life to go astray and become more concerned to assist organizations that minister to the needy. Almost all assistance to the handicapped and mentally ill comes from those who have had children who have experienced these afflictions. The love that one has for one's own children softens one's heart to others -- for one realizes that everyone is some mother's son or daughter.

ENDNOTES