

Virtuous Reality

By Jeb Bush &
Brian Yablonski

The Founding Fathers of this country understood that the survival of our democracy depends on the good character and virtue of the American people. George Washington declared in his Farewell Address that "virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government."

Today our political system is threatened by a cultural decline unprecedented in our nation's history. The growth of crime, the collapse of the family, the failure of education, and the loss of hope for the future are all symptoms of a broader moral crisis. Americans have relinquished responsibility for governing ourselves, expecting government to solve our problems. The betterment of society starts from the bottom up, through virtuous individuals and families and communities, not from the top down through more government.

Over the past 30 years, government has assumed more and more responsibility for the welfare of our children and families. Despite the best of intentions, the governmental response

has been more laws, more regulations, and more programs to protect children from the parents and adults who have let them down. Social legislation in this area now includes welfare, no-fault divorce, child protective services, the juvenile justice system, centralized education, and government programs for child support, foster care, and adoption.

Yet the institutions that have evolved from this social legislation have presided over an increasing number of divorces and out-of-wedlock births. They have watched as AFDC benefits have become an attractive alternative to marriage. State regulations have made it more difficult for adoptions to occur. The foster-care system often does more harm to the child than good. Child-support enforcement has been a disaster. Parents have less and less say in the education of their children. On top of all this, the average family now pays 40 percent of its income to government at all levels.

We have abdicated to government our responsibilities in increments not discernible to the naked eye, but so consistently that it has become the greatest threat to our freedom in modern times.

We often forget that the original purpose of democratic government was to *protect the rights of individuals* and to *provide for things which we could not possibly provide for on our own*. Abraham Lincoln said it best when he wrote that the legitimate object of government is "to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but cannot do at all, or cannot do so well for themselves. In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, government ought not to interfere." As examples of legitimate government functions, Lincoln listed maintenance of roads and bridges, disposal of deceased men's property, and support of the helpless young. Lincoln knew that government is no substitute for a virtuous citizenry that takes

Character-Building

In the Information Age

care of families and communities.

James Q. Wilson, one of the foremost modern scholars on the subject of cultivating virtues, has written that having good character means at least two things: empathy and self-control. Empathy is the ability to take into account the rights, needs, and feelings of others. Self-control is the practice of deferred gratification or being more concerned with the long-term impact of conduct than with the "here and now."

Thus, character is of primary importance in that it determines whether individuals will be selfish or selfless. When we act, do we only take into account our own personal good or do we have in mind the common good and the effects our conduct will have on the welfare of others? Many of our cultural pathologies are a simple reflection of character, of placing the self at the center of one's life. How we ensure a healthy supply of citizens committed to the common good? How do we cultivate virtue and persons of strong character into the next generation?

The moral education of our children has traditionally been left in the hands of parents, extended family, the neighborhood, the school, the church or synagogue, and to some extent other civic associations. But look at the condition of each of these institutions. Our children are a reflection of our ailing social institutions, families, and communities. The indicators show that those character-forming institutions traditionally charged with a youngster's moral development have suffered their own disintegration.

Virtues, Not Values

Some of the difficulty can be traced to an overreliance on government and a willingness to step back from our own character-building responsibilities. But this is only part of the problem—and so only part of the solution. The trouble goes deeper than a simple surrender to government. Unfortunately, these character-building institutions have lost the language of virtue.

Our complex and diverse society now functions not under a universal set of moral principles but rather under competing personal and group value systems. Values—embodied in personal beliefs, opinions, and preferences—have replaced virtues as our moral beacons, and there are many different value systems present in our culture. Our character-building institutions have bought into the idea that we have to recognize any and all value systems. Instead of providing us guidance, they now provide us with the tools to justify a wide variety of deviant behaviors. In other words, they do not teach our children right from wrong, but rather how to make informed choices. As one prison chaplain recently observed, our young children need di-



Dorothy Perry, left, has been a surrogate mother to many.

rection, not choices.

The distinction is critical. Virtues, grounded in universal moral absolutes, represent standards of behavior that are fixed and firm in any civilized society. Who would argue that fortitude, prudence, justice, temperance, discipline, responsibility, honesty, honor, and compassion are not good things? Listen to William Bennett: "Teaching virtue to our children need not be a controversial undertaking. Forming good character in young people does not mean having to instruct them on thorny issues like abortion, creationism, homosexuality, or euthanasia. . . . People of good character are not all going to come down on the same side of difficult political and social issues."

Values, on the other hand, refer to a system of individualized beliefs and preferences. Everyone has values—even Nazis and street gangs. Overemphasizing values accentuates our differences, so that the values of self-expression and individualism now trump the virtues of deferred gratification, responsibility, and commitment to family.

While public policy over the last three decades focused more on recognizing the differences between groups of people and their competing value systems, it did little in the way of reinforcing the common bonds between all peoples—the moral absolutes that transcend politics, race, and gender. Virtues, and the moral imperatives implied by them, were either lost in the debate or they were mischaracterized as values—subjective and relative, personal, and specific to a particular person or group.

Recently, we conducted a simple, highly unscientific experiment designed to see how often we use the word "virtuous" in our popular culture. In Florida's major newspapers, we found only a few random uses of the word "virtuous," frequently out of context. For example, since 1989, the *Orlando Sentinel* has used the word "virtuous" to describe somebody or something on 92



David Levitt, below, found a use for discarded food.

Perry photo courtesy of the Foundation for Florida's Future; Levitt photo by Patty DiRienzo/Silver Image

occasions, or slightly more than once a month. The *St. Petersburg Times* has used the word 140 times since 1987, or fewer than once a month. In most cases, "virtuous" was merely a term used to describe a character in a movie, theater, or book or, sometimes, a person in an obituary—in other words, nonpeople and dead people. This is certainly not to say that the newspapers are not reporting on the good deeds of virtuous people. We just aren't calling them virtuous anymore.

Quiet Acts of Compassion

Correcting our social pathologies will take time. It will require a renewal of virtue and character and a rejuvenation of those institutions that teach virtue and character. This means we must regain confidence in passing moral judgments, using the language of virtue, and teaching virtue to our children.

Our own state of Florida is blessed by countless heroes the rest of us can learn from.

We must also learn from everyday heroes. Our own state of Florida is blessed by an extraordinary number of men and women of character. It is important that we begin to discuss character in the context of those who exhibit it routinely. We must elevate the people who are redefining our culture for the good, for they are the profiles in character from whom we must learn.

In Florida, you will find some of our greatest profiles in character in the places where you might least expect to find them. Take Delwyn Collins, a kitchen worker in Tampa General Hospital. On most days, you will find Delwyn mopping floors or washing dishes in a corner of the hospital's kitchen. But each year, Delwyn Collins devotes a large portion of his earnings from his \$6-per-hour job to support the Angel Tree program, which provides toys for orphans and foster children in the Tampa area.

For years, Delwyn has pulled dozens of paper angels from the hospital's Angel Tree: Each angel bears the name of a orphan or foster child who does not experience a Christmas with family members, or the joys—and toys—that attend the holiday. They become Delwyn's children.

Last year, Delwyn pulled 35 of the paper ornaments from the Angel Tree. Delwyn does not drive a car, so he brings toys to the hospital by pulling them on a flatbed wagon or loading them in his bicycle basket. His quiet acts of compassion caught the attention of many in his community. In 1995, Hillsborough County passed

over several local politicians who were nominated to present its Moral Courage of the Year Award to the soft-spoken kitchen worker.

Talk to some of the children who inhabit the Miami home of Dorothy Perry, dubbed "the Mother Teresa of public housing." For 20 years, Perry has been a surrogate mother to children whose parents were strung out on crack or alcohol, or worked three jobs and had no energy left for parenting. Her "Youths Progressing" program offers meals, clothes, and safe haven for more than 35 abused or displaced kids, ranging in ages from one to 21.

"I think this program saved my life," says James Holley, 20. "My mother was having problems with drugs, and the state was talking about taking me from her. I didn't have anywhere to go." James is now working toward his General Equivalency Diploma. Eighteen-year-old Quintin Varnedoe came to live with Perry when she was seven, after her mother died. "My brothers were in gangs, telling me to sell drugs and rob to get money," says Varnedoe, who enlisted in the Marine Corps last fall.

Another of Florida's virtuous citizens can be found sitting at his desk in an eighth-grade classroom at Osceola Middle School, in Seminole. While most children his age are busy playing sports or electronic video games, 14-year old David Levitt has been busy caring for the needy. Two years ago, David figured out that school cafeterias have a lot of leftover lunch food—and he devised a way for local public schools to donate their unused food to the hungry. On his 12th birthday, he made his case before the Pinellas County School Board and won approval for his idea. For months, David fought a Goliath of bureaucratic red tape and government regulations. His slingshot prevailed: Today, more than 80 of the 92 schools in Pinellas County donate their food to the needy.

To change the course of our culture, we do not each have to run out and start a social program or adopt an orphaned child. Rather, we need to do a little in each of our lives to revitalize what Edmund Burke called "the little platoons," the family and those local and civic associations that facilitate good character. Building character starts at kitchen tables and in front yards of neighbors.

Jeb Bush, a Miami businessman and the chairman of the Foundation for Florida's Future, was the 1994 GOP nominee for governor of Florida. He was recently named a trustee of The Heritage Foundation. Brian Yablonski, a Miami attorney, is the director of communications for the Foundation for Florida's Future. Their Profiles in Character will be published this winter by the foundation.



Town Square

NEWS FROM THE CITIZENSHIP MOVEMENT

Books

The Value of Victorian Virtues

The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values

by Gertrude Himmelfarb
(Knopf)

Maybe it's not so bad being a Victorian moralist after all. True, writes Himmelfarb, the Victorians could be stuffy, self-absorbed moralists. But it is equally true that they acted "on behalf of the poor, whom they sought not only to assist materially but also to elevate morally, spiritually, culturally, intellectually."

The distinction provides a crucial lesson for contemporary welfare reformers. The Victorians are moralists in the sense that they believed in virtues—qualities of character and morality that were desirable for every citizen in a civilized society. Late-20th-century America no longer believes in virtues, Himmelfarb writes, but has substituted for them the notion of values—preferences that are relative and subjective. One result is a welfare system that delivers services to the poor but dares not address their deeper moral or spiritual needs. "We have so completely rejected any kind of moral principle," Himmelfarb writes, "that we have deliberately, systematically divorced poor relief from moral sanctions and incentives."

The discrepancy between Victorian virtues and modern values has produced vastly different outcomes. As it entered the 19th century, England was caught in the teeth of industrialism, capitalism, secularism—features of modernity responsible for the social upheaval America is now experiencing. But the Victorian ethos was grounded in the Christian traditions of Evangelicalism and Methodism, along with their secular counterpart, Utilitarianism. The result? "At the end of the 19th century," she writes, "England was a more civil, more pacific, more humane society than it had been at the beginning." Two social indicators: Between

1845 and 1900, illegitimate births in England fell from 7 percent of all births in 1845 to less than 4 percent by 1900, while the rate of serious crime declined by almost 50 percent.

The Economics of Trust

Trust: The Social Virtues & The Creation of Prosperity

by Francis Fukuyama
(The Free Press)

Fukuyama argues that America's greatness comes from a spirit of individual liberty balanced by "a rich network of voluntary associations and community structures to which individuals have subordinated their narrow interests." America in the past was as group-oriented as Japan and Germany, Fukuyama writes, and this trait accounts for the dominance of these countries in the international marketplace. Only societies with a high degree of social trust can create the flexible, large-scale business organizations

needed for successful competition in the global economy. The crucial difference between America and the two other nations is that social cooperation here was not enforced through emperors or kaisers. In America, strong community emerged in the absence of a strong state.

America's economic future is now endangered by the rapid depletion of its social capital. Fukuyama argues that the dominance of rights-based liberalism, the rise of violent crime and civil litigation, the collapse of the family, the decline of neighborhoods, churches, unions, and charities, and the breakdown of shared values are destroying Americans' ability to cooperate with each other. It is no accident, he suggests, that those ethnic groups with the highest degree of internal trust are economically the most successful. He cites the importance of Asian-American rotating credit associations that count on family members and business associates to honor their debts.

The author explores "the paradox of family values": While families in America are "too weak to perform their basic task of socialization," in some societies families "are too strong to permit the formation of modern economic organizations." In Chinese, Italian, and French societies, Fukuyama suggests, family members trust each other completely. But intense distrust of outsiders precludes civic or political life outside the family, and nearly all economic organizations are family-based. Most giant corporations are government-run, because unrelated people don't trust each other enough to work together.

Building Blocks

Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21st Century

Don E. Eberly, ed.

(University Press of America)

The 23 essays that make up *Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21st Century* explore the condition of America's civic life and endeavor to identify the ideas and policies required for social renewal as America moves into the next century. The work seeks to define the unique American "creed" that will inform this renewal: "If Americans are to build a community of citizens," Don Eberly argues, "they will have to do so

Pope John Paul II on Democracy

Democracy cannot be sustained without a shared commitment to certain moral truths about the human person and human community. The basic question before a democratic society is: "How ought we live together?" In seeking an answer to this question, can society exclude moral truth and moral reasoning? Can the Biblical wisdom that played such a formative part in the very founding of your country be excluded from the debate? Would not doing so mean that America's founding documents no longer have any defining content, but are only the formal dressing of changing opinion? Would not doing so mean that tens of millions of Americans could no longer offer the contribution of their deepest convictions to the formation of public policy?

Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.

—Baltimore, Md., Oct. 8, 1995