Character and . . .

the Places of Home

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Character and . . . the Places of Home

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Character and the Places of Home

Annalee R. Ward

Young Lacey Lawrence of New Orleans survived Hurricane Katrina after passing police rescued her. Floating on an air mattress, she watched as they shoved the bodies away with their oars. She never did hear what happened to her uncle. She and her family managed to stay in New Orleans, but she found herself adrift. "I was at this new school, my friends were gone, and kids would be saying things. . . . I was getting into fights; violent ones. That was something I never did before, ever. But you lose everything and you don't know how to deal with it" (Carey).

Natural disasters can lead to sudden displacement and homelessness.

Hurricanes, earthquakes, flooding, fires, famine across the world. Wars, conflicts in too many places to list, create refugees and exiles, migrants who seek to immigrate to a new place. All lead to displacement on a global scale. People are homeless for many reasons. Add to that the desperation of poverty, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol abuse, and we have more homelessness. Perhaps that seems too far off. Perhaps you are someone who has moved for school, a job, or family needs. You may have physical shelter,

but the questions of *where do I belong* and *who am I in this new place* emerge with urgent ferocity no matter the reason for displacement.

Displacement disorients. Displacement destroys connectedness. Displacement damages our identity. Displacement calls into question all that we hold dear—or perhaps sharpens it. Placement, in contrast, orients. Placement grows connections, relationships. Counting a place as one's own means belonging to and with a particular community. Placement reminds us that our values are tied up in the particularities of place that have formed us.

In this journal, we look at the concept of home, which gives specificity and emotional content to the idea of place. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman writes about place:

> Place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. . . . Place . . . is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom. (4)

Place, home, and character are intricately related.

Placement orients. Placement grows connections, relationships.

Character and . . . the Places of Home begins a conversation on the relationship between the concepts. Does moral character have anything to do with our identity and belonging to a place? Where might character intersect with the places of home? Does character shape those places and if so how? How might particular places of home in turn shape our character? These kinds of questions began our discussion and research, ultimately leading to the essays in this issue.

This journal emerges out of a process of reading and discussion over the course of a semester. You'll notice that most of the authors cite *Beyond*

Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement by Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh. This book, along with *Place: An Introduction* by Tim Cresswell, initiated our discussions and, in many ways, framed them. We also hosted an interdisciplinary conference titled "Character and Place: How We Shape Home and Home Shapes Us" where Brian J. Walsh was the keynote speaker and Scholar-in-Residence.

We discovered this topic is both generative and expansive. Authors often ventured down a path only to pull back and decide it was too big to tackle in these small essays. As far ranging as our potential topics took us, we returned often to two truths about places of home: 1) Places of home vary and change for all of us, and 2) what remains constant are visceral cravings, emotional memories, and deep longings sometimes for the nostalgic and sometimes for the out-of-reach imagined ideal. Adding into our discussion the role of moral character complicated our investigations in ways that forced us into deeper reflection. These ideas about place, home, and character call for a bit more introduction.

Places of Identity and Boundaries

The idea of "place" apart from a particularity is an unhelpful abstraction. Before putting it into conversation with notions of moral character, we used Tim Cresswells' work, *Place: An Introduction.* He argues, "Place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world" (19). It is "a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world" (18). Place matters because it holds meaning—without meaning a place is just a space (16). Our interactions with a place give us perspective and context from which to live our lives.

Place matters because it holds meaning—without meaning a place is just a space.

Within that context, we enact the practices of our lives which in turn shape our notions of who we are and thus that contexualized place becomes "a way-of-being" (19). In Cresswell's words, "Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an a priori

label of identity. Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice" (71). And our becoming is a becoming in connection with the community of that place. It is deeply tied to memory—ours and others'—and to the stories, the narratives of the lives lived there (128).

In order for a place to exist, we need some sort of boundaries, some way to set apart this place from that place. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh also explore the relationship of identity to place, but do so through a recognition of boundaries.

> Boundaries are constitutive of identity. . . . Without boundaries there can be no sense of "place" as home, as a site of hospitality, security, and intimacy with local knowledge. Without boundaries there is no locality and thus no sense of membership in a particular community, family, or neighborhood with an identity distinct from other communities, families, and neighborhoods. In short, identity itself is impossible without boundaries. (52)

Boundaries exercise power to create a place to belong and a place of identity.

By affirming the need for some sort of boundary to create meaning-filled places of identity and orientation, we stand in a tradition that believes in a God of love and justice who calls us to live truthfully and establishes boundaries. Boundaries, then, create a meaningful moral order and a place to stand to affirm concepts of good and evil, right and wrong (Wuthnow). Without a sense of being able to affirm one place, one community, as good, or some actions as right and some as wrong, we lose authority and even ability to stand against injustice and inhumanity. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh put it this way:

> If all we have is border crossing and boundary blurring in a postmodern context of radical pluralism, then we have no place from which to make ethical judgements, no borders or boundaries the transgression of which constitutes oppression, no ability to distinguish the cry of the oppressed from the arrogant exclamations of the oppressors. (49)

At the same time, boundaries, if too impermeable, create insiders and outsiders, marginalizing some. The key, note Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, is to ensure the boundaries are penetrable and provide "both definition and openness, structure and flexibility" (54). People need to be able to enter a home. The door serves as a boundary but also an invitation to cross into the place.

At Home in a Place

As we consider the power of place to shape identity, and create a locale of belonging through the very existence of some kind of border, our thoughts move particularly to the places we call home. A residence offers one understanding of home, but life's transitions, schooling, marriage, economics, all often bring changes to

Home conjures up deep emotions, memories, and nostalgia.

our homes. Sadly, "sometimes we know home by what it is not" (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 41), because for some, home represents pain. However, we consider such a home an aberration. Home ought to be a place of safety, of security, of stories and memories, smells and rituals, of food and family, of identity, of belonging.

Home also conjures up nostalgia for a place that has deep associations with experiences, emotions, and people. That nostalgia continues to remind us of a longing, a memory or experience just out of reach. Frederick Buechner reflects on that feeling in his book, *The Longing for Home.*

> The word *home* summons up a place—more specifically a house within that place—which you have rich and complex feelings about, a place where you feel, or did feel once, uniquely *at home*, which is to say a place where you feel you belong and that in some sense belongs to you, a place where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren't going all that well at any given moment. (7)

The geographical and emotional locations of home, rich with memory, rarely if ever remain the same. How many of us don't find ourselves longing for something that isn't there?[1] Our lives of mobility, our pursuit of education and jobs, even the fact that we keep growing older and changing—all of this contributes to a sense of uneasy displacement, of longing to keep things the same even as they slip through our fingers. Are we ever really at home? Or do we create homes in many places throughout life?

It's that last question that directed our discussion of the intersection of character with the idea of the places of home. Inhabiting a place is a way of being through practices that form habits of character, traits of virtue and even vice.

Character and . . . the Places of Home

Where does moral character intersect with the places of home? The answers lie in the everyday practices of life.[2] Our very character is shaped by the places we dwell and the places, real or virtual, we call home, the places where we find ourselves at rest physically, psychically, and spiritually. The community (ies) we interact with has potential influence (see Jones's article) as does our environment (see Hoffman's article). Anthropologists have long studied the morality of particular places and the way the places exercise influence on individual character and ethics. Nigel Rapport in a collection titled *The Ethnography of Moralities*, for example, examines the way English landowners have developed a particular morality in relationship to what they consider "outsiders." Places shape our character.[3]

Positive life-giving habits lift up the places of home through the compassion, justice, and integrity we live out.

But it works the other way too. We have power to influence the places we call home. "Indeed," notes geographer Smith, "the very term 'place' as used by geographers means much more than a certain location, and it is in the human threads of place that morality enters" (279). Our attitudes expressed in our actions and everyday practices reveal our

character traits. David Harden notes the power of attitudes to shape our relationship with a particular place, observing that seeing a place as "something to be escaped and exploited or the accepted and respected" (61) will lead to vastly different lives. Positive life-giving habits lift up the places of home through the compassion, justice, and integrity we live out. By nurturing our desire to care for the places of home, we'll discover a yield of places of hospitality, places of authenticity, places of gratitude and compassion. Opening up our eyes to the goodness in those places has positive impact. "When we see our surroundings not as stuff to please us but let ourselves see their intrinsic value instead, we create the opportunity to see our surroundings as sacramental pointers to goodness outside of our interests and ourselves" (Harden 46). Thus, the give and take of character's influence on places and place's influence on character has potential for positive impact.

The essays in this journal are arranged to begin with a common understanding of home as the particular place we reside and the importance of hospitality; move to the local geography of home and the power of our consumption in our community there; stop over at college to consider how homesickness from this change of address can be borne with character-shaping practices; and conclude by considering the potential of nature to nurture our character.
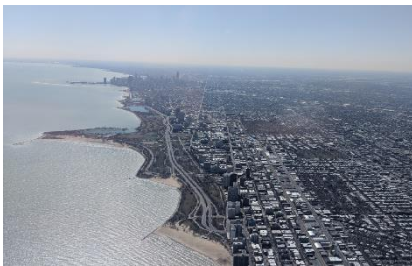
Relationships, space, and place matter.

Places of home are studied by many, but one extensive report comes from IKEA. For its 2017 "Life at Home" study, IKEA conducted interviews and surveys of more than 22,000 people in 22 countries on what makes a home and concluded that four things matter: relationships, space, place, and things. The articles in this issue touch on all of these in some way but focus on them as they engage moral character.

Kerr takes up the challenge of considering the importance of hospitality through the practice of homemaking. "Homemaking, like worldbuilding, is a world-ordering enterprise. To turn space into place is to establish

normative boundaries that bring a certain kind of order to the life lived with those boundaries" (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 53). Too often, however, images of perfection in home style and entertaining get confused with the holy work and spiritual requirement of creating a welcoming and open space for others. Her honest wrestling with self-doubt and homemaking aspirations encourages us all to be more hospitable.

Jones engages the place of home from the perspective of community. David Harden observes,

> Our western culture with its market economics and technological cravings has moved us away from concerns for community first and into a hyper-individualism. By moving away from an emphasis on relationships with God, humans, nature, and even goods, our ethics eschew the particularities of place, of local communities. (101)

Jones's response to this kind of problem challenges us to model authenticity and integrity by rejecting the easy consumerism of national chains and big box stores. Instead, when we support local businesses we encourage the particular development of a community ethos that fosters a moral environment via personal relationships. This leads to relational authenticity.

We move from a look at ways to exercise one's character influence on place in Jones's article to Crawford and Bryant's focus on homesickness at college, a way of considering how particular places contribute to character formation. Buechner notes, "The longing for home is so universal a form of longing that there is even a special word for it, which is of course, *homesickness"* (71). When students find themselves not yet at home, but rather, feel homesick, universities need to acknowledge the issue, its potential negative effects on the students and even their own retention rates, and find ways to empower students to work through it. The authors challenge institutions to engage in holistic moral education that seeks to develop students' perseverance, resilience, and sense of purpose.

Hoffman's article takes us outside to the place of nature. He explores the possibilities for nature to nurture our character by providing

opportunities for caring and stewardship, by displaying the pleasures of diversity and the need to protect just access to that diversity. He concludes with the reminder that nature engenders awe and gratitude. A recent study led by Paul Piff found that a sense of awe increases prosocial

Nature engenders awe and gratitude.

tendencies toward altruism, generosity, and ethical behavior as well as decreases feelings of entitlement. If we can find ourselves at home in nature more often, we may discover we are growing into better, more moral people.

Brian Walsh's response essay, "Meredith on the Subway," prophetically reminds us of the power of the grand narrative of the biblical story of God's work in Jesus Christ to shape the places we live and the ways we live in places. By practicing a life of compassion, integrity, and justice, we contribute to the making of homes that are havens of hospitality.

Conclusion

In a world of displaced people, there is no shortage of a need to belong and no shortage of a need for a place to call home both spiritually and physically. When we have a secure identity and live in love, we have the ability to look outside of our home with the eyes and hands of our loving Savior. Yes, problems of displacement and homelessness abound and longing for belonging remains. But remembering that character development occurs in particular places opens a lens to deeper insights into ways character and place interact and foster a symbiosis of a kind. Looking at how homes and places have shaped us gifts us with the vision and responsibility to shape the places where we find ourselves in such ways as to create hospitable places—homes even—for others.

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purpose. Ward researches and writes on communication, ethics, and popular culture.

Photo credit p. 2: Jocelyn Augustino/FEMA, public record
Photo credit pp. 6, 8, and 10: Annalee R. Ward

Notes

[1] An ultimate, transcendent meaning of home is not addressed significantly in this journal issue, but certainly undergirds much of our understanding of the world and our place in it. Frederick Buechner addresses the longing with an answer. "The home we long for and belong to is finally where Christ is. I believe that home is Christ's kingdom, which exists both within us and among us as we wend our prodigal ways through the world in search of it" (28). Augustine says it this way: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

[2] Alasdair MacIntyre writes at length about the role practices have in virtue, and the need to pursue this excellence for a lifetime within a social context (273).

[3] Significantly, however, place is not a sole determinant of character. "Can we expect persons to transcend the values of their time, or place? Evidently, some are able to, and hence argue or act for a better way of life, otherwise the moral particularities of old eras and communities would never have been challenged and changed" (Smith 296).

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The Hospitality of Homemaking

Peg Kerr

Abstract

The practice of hospitality happens in various places. In this paper, the concept of hospitality is explored with an emphasis on making our homes places to serve others.

I love Pinterest. What's not to love? It is an imaginary world where I can plan my dream home, decorate its rooms in the latest trends, and find delicious recipes for meals that I will serve in my lovely dining room. My problem is that my Pinterest homemaking practices bear little resemblance to my real-life homemaking practices. In real life, I find it a struggle to find time to shop for and cook a meal, and the state of my decorating is more 1990s than on trend. But these facts do not stop me from continuing to pin photos and label them "#HomemakingGoals." Clearly, I am not the only one to participate in the Pinterest phenomenon. The Pinterest social media site reached 150 million monthly active users in 2016, according to Forbes (Chaykowski), and although the user base skews women, engagement among men has increased to 40 percent of all new account sign-ups. While interests vary, the top trending pins always include homemaking categories.

The question is, why do we do this? In my case, I think it is because I am fighting an internal battle with the disconnected and frantic modern culture we live in. I fantasize about creating a beautiful place to gather friends, family, and guests in an expression of hospitality and welcome. I

imagine the impressive dinners I will host one day when my life and home are more organized, and everything looks more like a page out of *House Beautiful* than an episode of *Hoarding: Buried Alive*. I want to open my life and my home to others. Unfortunately, I rarely find a spare minute to clear out the clutter, vacuum up the cat hair, and get the laundry put away. Hospitality becomes one more thing on my to-do list.
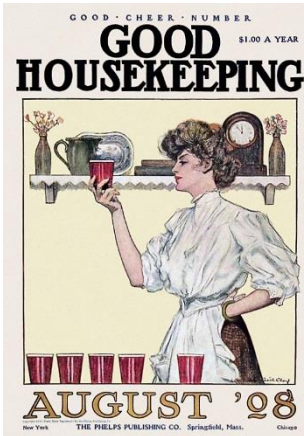
Has our culture lost sight of the real importance of hospitality?

The default thinking for many of us is to focus on all the reasons hospitality does not fit into the reality of our lives. Modern culture tells us that hospitality requires a lot of work. But when we hear the word "hospitality," are we thinking about the right things? People often think of hospitality as having friends in for dinner or hosting neighbors for cocktails at a holiday party, and the pretty pictures we pin to our homemaking boards on Pinterest reflect this perception. The *Oxford Dictionary* definition of hospitality is "the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers" ("Hospitality"). Has our culture placed too much focus on the "entertainment" part of the definition and lost sight of the real importance behind it? The purpose of this article is to explore the concept of hospitality, the need for it, what makes the places we call home hospitable, and hospitality's connection to character.

Christian Hospitality

Christians are called to practice hospitality. In his letter to the Romans, Paul tells us to practice hospitality (*NABRE* Rom. 12.13). Jesus himself ate with sinners and the spurned. Also, a passage in Hebrews says: "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels" (Heb. 13.2). Henri Nouwen would argue that our emphasis on the Pinterest "pretty pictures" aspect of hospitality has denied us of the blessing that God intended for us to receive through the practice of hospitality:

in our culture, the concept of hospitality has lost much of its power and is often used in circles where we are more prone to expect a watered down piety than a serious search for authentic Christian spirituality. But still, if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality. It is one of the richest biblical terms that can deepen and broaden our insight in our relationships to our fellow human beings. (66)

Nouwen's words inspire us to want to experience an "authentic Christian spirituality" through hospitality. We recognize that hospitality viewed as fancy invitations, Emily Post etiquette columns, a pristinely kept house, and expensive table settings have nothing to do with authenticity; in fact, compared to the militantly hospitable person Jesus was, these are weak representations of the real thing.

Christine Pohl, in her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, asserts that the word "hospitality" is no longer really associated with a moral aspect, that most Christians have lost touch with it so we rarely view it as a spiritual requirement (4). However, hospitality is an important concept in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, Abraham and Sarah served a choice steer and freshly baked bread to strangers passing by their tent; as it turned out, the strangers were
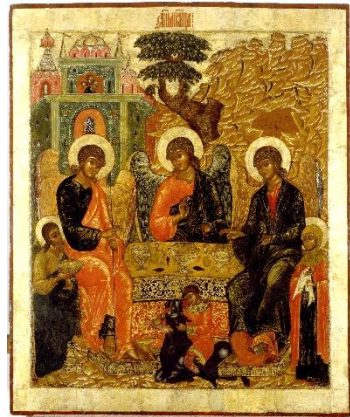
Unknown artist, "Hospitality of Abraham"

messengers of God come to tell them Sarah would have a son before the year was out (Gen. 18). In Deuteronomy, Moses explains to the Israelites they must befriend the alien because they were once aliens in Egypt (Deut. 10.19). There are admonitions to practice hospitality all throughout the New Testament, but perhaps the one that sums up the call most succinctly is from Matthew: "And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matt. 25.40). Mother Teresa took Jesus' teaching literally as she is famously quoted as saying, "I see Jesus

in every human being." These passages are not merely suggestions, and the call to practice hospitality as a moral obligation is presented as key to Christian life.

So, if all of the entertainment planning and home decorating ideas on my Pinterest page do not represent hospitality (which is somewhat of a relief), then what should be done? Francis Schaeffer, founder of L'Abri Fellowship International, a Christian community of study centers all over the world, said, "Don't start with a big program. . . . Start personally and start in your home. . . . All you have to do is open your home and begin" (92). Kristen Schell, author of *The Turquoise Table*, was motivated by the Schaeffer quote to begin her own personal campaign to do exactly that (Schell, *The Turquoise Table* 37), and has also created a movement aimed at encouraging people to open their lives and homes to others (Schell, "#FrontYardPeople"). She started with the simple idea of painting a picnic table turquoise and putting it in her front yard; soon people were stopping to talk as they walked their dogs, curious neighbors came by, and before long the table became a gathering place for both kids and adults, strangers and friends. Her idea has spread across the globe, a phenomenon she attributes to the fact that people are "hungry for connection and a place to belong," and that "we crave community-authentic connection" (Schell, *The Turquoise Table* 202, 203).
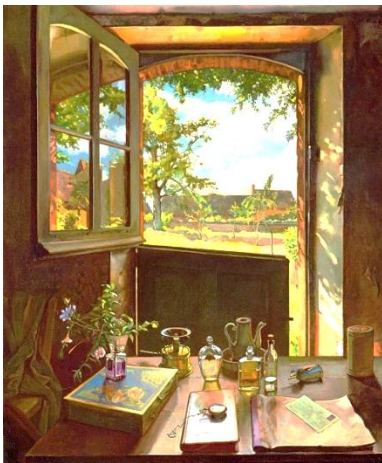
Konstantin Somov, "Open Door on a Garden"

Associating hospitality with home is not an isolated phenomenon. In their book, *Slow Church*, Christopher C. Smith and John Pattinson assert that "one of the most transformative, and intimate, forms of generosity is hospitality: sharing our homes, our tables and ourselves with others" (194). Pohl insists there is an "integral connection in our experience between hospitality and home" (154). Patrick McCormick defines hospitality as opening your house to others and welcoming them in; he also adds that sharing a meal is an important part of

it, too (94). This is not to ignore the importance of the practice of hospitality in our institutions, such as churches and charitable organizations; all of these serve a very important role, but the focus here is on our homes.

Homemaking

In the 21st century, some will bristle when hearing the word "homemaking." It can take people back to junior high and high school where the boys were put in shop classes to learn woodworking and auto mechanics, and the girls were put in home economics classes where they learned how to sew and cook. There is no question that the word has a complicated association in the modern world, particularly where it concerns women. But there is also a practical aspect to this—houses by their very nature are *physical* places that must be maintained and kept up.

Homes cannot function as warm and welcoming places of hospitality if homemaking is absent. Stephen Marche, in a *New York Times* piece, addresses the decline of homemaking. Although he refers to the work as "drudgery," he admits there is value to it; the signs that a home is well-kept represent "intangible, emotional investment." In other words, they show that someone cares. Marche refers to these activities as "the million tendernesses of 'emotional work,'" and he adds that they all require effort. Parents do the repetitive homemaking tasks required of raising children, such as cooking and laundry, because their love for them makes it impossible not to (Marche). Jen Pollock Michel refers to this impossibility, stating, "To love is to labor," and she is not referring just to families but to the world (113). There is the belief this work is not just born of love, but goes beyond to the realm of the holy: it is holy work. Pope Benedict XVI said, "Christ is calling each of you to *work* with him and to take up your responsibilities in order to build the civilization of Love" (Benedict XVI, "Message of the Holy Father"). The Second Vatican Council made clear the "universal call to holiness" in the Church (Benedict XVI, "General Audience"), and that it was meant to apply to all, not just priests and religious.

Matthew Kelly explores the concept of the "universal call to holiness," and asserts that personal holiness is the answer to all of our problems

(63). He defines holiness as "the application of the values, principles, and spirit of the Gospel to the circumstances of our everyday lives" (64), and certainly the homemaking practices that maintain our houses as warm and welcoming places of hospitality constitute a part of our everyday, even humdrum, lives. To see the holy in the day-to-day and the toil it often entails is to understand the authentic Christian spirituality Nouwen said was necessary to practice hospitality. It is important to be reminded of the inherent goodness, the holiness, of homemaking. The term "homemaking" in this perspective is not a reference to a circumscribed set of housekeeping tasks, but as "tendernesses," the little kind things that are done to make homes wholesome, warm, and congenial. Marilynn Robinson goes so far as to refer to these as "sacramental."

Too many have lost the ability to see God's presence in the practice of the mundane and appreciate the holiness and the goodness in the work of making a home a place of hospitality.

Tish Harrison Warren in her book, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, writes about viewing the ordinary routines of daily life through the lens of the liturgy. She writes:

> A sign hangs on the wall in a New Monastic Christian community house: "Everyone wants a revolution. No one wants to do the dishes." I was, and remain, a Christian who longs for revolution, for things to be made new and whole in beautiful and big ways. But what I am slowly seeing is that you can't get to the revolution without learning to do the dishes. The kind of spiritual life and disciplines needed to sustain the Christian life are quiet, repetitive, and ordinary. I often want to skip the boring, daily stuff to get to the thrill of an edgy faith. But it's in the dailiness of the Christian faith—the making the bed, the doing the dishes, the praying for our enemies, the reading the Bible, the quiet, the small—that God's transformation takes root and grows. (35–36)

It could be added that her words also apply to the homemaking people do to make houses hospitable places—to be open to God's presence in an ordinary day. Warren also shares a story about a professor friend who assigned his class to read Augustine's *Confessions*. A student complained it was boring, to which her friend responded, "No, it's not boring, you're boring" (34). The point being that too many have lost the ability to see the wonder; and in the case of homemaking, to see God's presence in the practice of the mundane and appreciate the holiness and the goodness in the work of making a home a place of hospitality.

Who Needs Our Hospitality?

The "entertainment" focus of hospitality, as a distortion of the moral dimension of the word, is a symptom of modern life, according to Elizabeth Newman. She attributes the distortion of hospitality to a "gnawing homelessness," and a lack of a sense of place that has stopped us from practicing hospitality. She cites several reasons for this, including the fact that Americans no longer grow up and live in one place as used to be more common; this mobility causes a lack of personal connections. Urban sprawl makes it difficult to get anywhere except by car, which separates people further. In addition to changes in the spaces we live in, time and how we think about it is different. Both parents work long hours outside the home to sustain their purchases in a consumer economy. Working so much makes home a place of brief stays just to sleep; not a place you live your real life. Other signs of this kind of homelessness, according to Newman, are the hours devoted to TV and video games and not knowing the people next door (33–35). Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh categorized the type of homeless person described by Newman as the "postmodern nomad," who has no sense of place because he or she is always looking for personal freedom and professional success, but is actually aimless and has few important relationships with others (44–45).

So, while the Mother Teresas among us, those living with and providing homes for desperately poor and displaced people all over the world, are revered and respected as icons of Christian hospitality, in reality this is not where most people start in a quest to practice hospitality as a moral good. Leviticus 19.34 states, "You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the

alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt." But, as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, while the word "stranger" commonly implies someone who is unknown, Pohl asserts that it actually applies to anyone who is disconnected from human relationships that give people a protected place on this earth (13). Neighbors, coworkers, friends, students, and virtually anyone at any time could be in need of our hospitality. Margot Starbuck recommends inviting someone totally unlikely, whose presence does not benefit the host, and especially those unable to return the favor (120). Even the close ties shared among family members can be strained by what Pohl refers to as "contemporary values, life-styles, and institutional arrangements which have helped to foster the sense that we are all strangers, even to those to whom we are related" (13). Mothers, fathers, children, sisters, and brothers might be in need of hospitality, too.

Arthur Sutherland asks, "What does it mean to welcome those who wander among us?" (4). Who are the wanderers? Sutherland offers Matthew 25.44: "Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?'" The issue is that those in need cannot be served if they are not *seen*. Starbuck states, "Folks who would be blessed to get yanked into your living space—and who will bless you in the process—are everywhere" (120). Jesus, having perfect sight, discerned those in need—but as Sutherland points out, he did not go looking for them. As he went about his daily business he *saw.* Sutherland advises assuming the vision of Jesus, "Hospitality ought to be ad hoc and personal" (79). Schell refers to this when she laments the fact that, by default, her impulse is always "to do"; that she struggles with the concept of "being" as opposed to "doing"—that it seems too passive. But as a consequence she admits failing to *see*. She states, "our society equates busyness with success, and I internalize that to mean the more I do, the bigger the difference I will make" (*The Turquoise Table* 95). However, it is in just those

> *Neighbors, coworkers, friends, students, and virtually anyone at any time could be in need of our hospitality.*

seemingly inconsequential moments in time that a person in need might be noticed.

A Hospitable Home

As people who are instructed to identify those in need of our hospitality, and to "open your home and begin," we may wonder, what makes a hospitable home? What types of homemaking make a house a hospitable home? Pohl describes the characteristics of homes that are hospitable places. First, they are comfortable and appear lived in. Second, the people in them are thriving in the environment. Additionally, a hospitable home is one that is obviously well-cared-for, not perfect, just cared-for—those are two very different things. She also adds that a hospitable home shows signs of someone paying attention to details such as "attractively prepared good-tasting food or flowers from a nearby garden." Pohl summarizes by noting that consideration of these niceties demonstrates gratefulness for life and the investment of more time than money (152). Marche would categorize this attention to detail as "intangible, emotional investment" into homemaking and serving others.

A meal is a classic act of hospitality. Opening up a home and sharing a meal is a simple act of kindness, showing someone cares enough to prepare a meal and invite someone in. Tim Chester said in his book *A Meal with Jesus*, "Jesus didn't run projects, start ministries, or put on events. He ate meals" (89). The ordinary everyday act of offering and sharing a meal provides human connections and serves others. Inviting someone out for a meal together is also a demonstration of kindness and caring. Hospitality is simple.

Nowhere in the literature on Christian hospitality is beautiful decorating, gourmet food, or perfection mentioned. Gina, a contributor to the blog, *My Joy-Filled Life*, wisely encourages readers to think realistically. As lovely as it might sound, inviting a dozen people over for a formal dinner party is to be avoided unless a person has experience with this type of hosting. Gina advises people to think about the kinds of hosting they actually enjoy doing. Maybe backyard cookouts, potlucks, or laying out simple tailgate food for a game on TV are better suited; host things that sound fun and that everyone will look forward to. There

are few people who don't love a take-out pizza. A host who dreads an upcoming event is certainly not going to enjoy the authentic Christian spirituality in offering hospitality that Nouwen talked about. The best advice Gina offers is this: "Build hospitality around the plans you already have," and "invite people into the life you already have." Modern life is already full of commitments, and no one wants to pile on more. If plans are already in the works for a holiday meal at home, invite the neighbor who is spending it alone. Invite the single brother-in-law to join the family for movie nights.

William Glackens, "A Pineapple"
The pineapple has become a
symbol of hospitality.

This kind of flexible hospitality also satisfies Schell's definition, which calls not only for opening up our homes, but also opening up our lives to others. This can be difficult. People might be reluctant to invite others into a home, or a life, that is less than perfect, that could benefit from more attention and care. No one is perfect, and inviting others in can leave people feeling very vulnerable. Schell states, "vulnerability requires honesty" (*The Turquoise Table* 140). Our culture assaults us with the illusion of perfection. Pictures pinned to Pinterest boards tell a very different story from what is real; to look through them one would think everyone else is perfect. But this is a lie, according to Schell, and the loveliest people are those who gracefully own their imperfections with confidence. Schell asks, "have you learned anything interesting from someone stuck perpetually in the trap of perfection?" (*The Turquoise Table* 142). For many, encounters with these people result in feelings of inadequacy when they believe they aren't measuring up. Stressing over whether our homes are beautiful or clean enough turns the focus back to entertaining as the purpose and ourselves as the focus. Author and blogger Shauna Niequist articulated this very well when she said, "true hospitality is when people leave your home feeling better about themselves, not better about you" (00:09:41-47). Letting go of the illusion of perfection and opening the doors to our

lives and our homes can be a daunting. But authentic hospitality is a humble thing, and the goal is to serve others, not to impress them.

Hospitality and Character

When homemaking is practiced for the purpose of making our homes warm and welcoming places for others, places of hospitality, they are transformed into acts of holiness and goodness done for those in need, people disconnected from human relationships. Biblical stories portray hospitality as an important virtue. The Judeo/Christian tradition is not the only belief system that speaks to hospitality as an important attribute of good human character; the Muslim faithful, Hindu teaching, and Indigenous groups throughout the world all, as examples, have considered hospitality an important value. The offer of food, drink, and shelter has been considered a moral obligation of communities throughout history (Lashley). The provision of hospitality as an expression of good character is evidenced across belief systems. For Christians and non-Christians, the goodness of the humble act of opening doors to our homes and inviting people in is understood on a universal level. One does not need to be of the Christian faith, or any faith, to recognize this. Inviting others, especially those in need, into our homes for opportunities of human connection and welcome is important. As Christians we do this in our quest to grant God's will here on earth, but making the world a better place is not exclusive. Hospitality gentles the world; a warm and welcoming home can be a microcosm of peace on earth.

Conclusion

Surfing the pages of the Pinterest website is fun, and can stimulate creativity and motivation. Preparing and opening our homes to others can be one of the joyful pleasures of our lives. However, if the focus is on entertaining, and the allure of perfection that we see on the social media site overcomes us, it can set up barriers to practicing authentic hospitality—that which puts the emphasis on others. The pursuit of perfection turns homemaking into a task when the focus is on ourselves. Making a hospitable home should not be complicated or difficult because authentic hospitality, an act of humility, is neither of

those things. Authentic hospitality is simple; it does not require going all out to host extravagant dinner parties.

> *Hospitality makes our world a better place, and it starts by simply inviting people in.*

For Christians, hospitality is a moral obligation. To experience it as the blessing it is intended to be requires that we open our doors and our lives. The work of homemaking done in the pursuit of this goal and to provide warmth and welcome is good work; some would call it holy. It is an emotional investment that demonstrates caring and love. The stresses of modern life have created many who are in need of our hospitality, and these people are likely to be all around us, people who are already a part of our lives but experiencing estrangement from their own friends, neighbors, or family. Homemaking pursued for the sake of making our houses places of hospitality—making them homes—and opening them to our fellow human beings is a moral good. Hospitality makes our world a better place, and it starts by simply inviting people in.

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Localized Character: Building Community and Modeling Authenticity and Integrity

Andrew Jones

Abstract

Globalization has placed the souls of our cities in jeopardy. However, by embracing the ideas and practices of the "local" movement, we can begin to develop character by strengthening our communities as places to model authenticity and integrity.

It's a common question of introduction: "So, where are you from?" The response is meant to distinguish something about the respondent or to elicit some familiarity. This small slice of information is meant to reveal insight into one's personality, beliefs, or character. But as towns across America have grown increasingly similar with suburban layouts centered around large retail centers, the value of the question has diminished. But wouldn't it be great if one could rely on the simple mention of a town's name as a strong indicator of the true types of residents or the values that community holds dear?

Since the emergence of online retailers and the expansion of big-box stores and chains into a greater number of communities (and countries), many researchers have examined and questioned the effects that this

type of consumer globalization might have on cultures, identities, and the environment. These wide-ranging sources have touched on the problems that consumer globalization pose for diet and sustainability, democracy, quality of life, and personal responsibility, among others (Featherstone; Beck et al.; Monbiot; Scriven; Walsh). Regardless of the specific focus, these writers have all expressed concerns about the negative impacts on values and virtues in exchange for economic prosperity and growth within a larger societal context.

The problem with the proliferation of globalization and consumerism is that we have begun to lose the souls of our homes—the regions and communities that help to anchor our sense of place and identity. In their book, *Beyond Homelessness*, Christian scholars Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh argue that "global capitalism is a homeless-making force in the lives of millions upon millions of people" (263). They devote a whole chapter to the concept of postmodern homelessness centered around the shift of modern Western individuals away from connectedness toward a consuming, detached, uncommitted, and rootless existence (252).

We have begun to lose the souls of our homes—the regions and communities that help to anchor our sense of place and identity.

But there is more to this "homeless-making force" than the mere impact on economic well-being. Global capitalism affects moral character, empathy, and autonomy. "The power of this ideology . . . is not narrowly economic in nature but is a crisis of culture and an erosion of the values that might shape the public good" (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 106). Indeed, the ability of a place to define and model its own moral character is threatened by global capitalism. In many ways, we are trending toward replacing our specific community values with imported versions created in corporate boardrooms instead of through discourse, interaction, and coherence at the community level.

By continuing to enable the reach of global corporations into more markets with our consumer habits, we only enhance the speed with which we are losing the stories and virtues of our communities. If we fail

to surround ourselves with businesses and spaces that have ties to our community, we begin to lose the sense of what makes our hometowns unique and good, and what they might aspire to be in the future. We run into the danger of replacing specific representations of ideals that our communities hold dear with corporate designed, produced, and mandated versions. This essay will explore ways we can nurture our local virtues by embracing local businesses and spaces as places that build community and model authenticity and integrity.

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Problems of Globalization and Consumerism

Consumer globalization has detrimental effects on cities and regions. Globalization has continued to fuel urban sprawl in modern America through retail expansion for national chain stores. These chain stores and large retailers often prompt the development of strip malls on the edges of cities, only to leave the buildings vacant within a handful of years after the businesses close, go bankrupt, or move again to newer, more advantageous locations. While local businesses may also have short lifespans, they tend to give back more to the community (Leinbach-Reyhle; Mitchell, "Key Studies"). However, large, corporate chains often sign restrictive leases on enormous new retail spaces "that prohibit competitors from moving in there, so [the former chain] is willing to pay on an empty building for a long time" (Associated Press). In an article from *USA Today* titled "Closed Big-box Stores Create Retail Eyesore in Many Cities," J.C. Reindl highlights the prevalence of empty retail spaces formerly occupied by large chains failing in finding new tenants and quotes one big-box real estate broker as saying, "[T]hey may just sit there and eventually get torn down." This trend fuels blight within our communities and visually promotes a modern, "throwaway" culture that doesn't seem to value sustainability or integrity in relationship to place.

In addition, a roundup of research on the impact of big-box retailers published in *Journalist's Resource* noted that the arrival of such stores "was associated with increased obesity of area residents, higher crime rates relative to communities that were not by stores, lower overall employment at the county level, and lower per-acre tax revenues than mixed-use development" (Ordway and Kille). The article goes on to note that despite the known negatives, cities continue to offer incentives to entice retail and restaurant chains.

Local businesses do not have the benefit of many of the resources that global corporations do and many find it challenging to compete. In their academic research, sociologist Amory Starr and political scientist Jason Adams note that "local producers and retailers find their established local markets invaded by international competitors with massive advertising budgets, economies of scale, brand recognition, capital, and expensive product research and development" (23). The Institute for Local Self-Reliance notes that "11,000 independent pharmacies have closed since 1990. Independent bookstores have fallen from 58 percent of book sales in 1972 to just 17 percent today. Local hardware dealers are on the decline, while two companies have captured 30 percent of the market" (Mitchell, "Impact of Chain Stores on Communities").

This decline in independently-owned and -operated businesses in these fields has been coupled with the corporate entities replacing them, trading in long-term jobs for short-term, part-time labor that is viewed as disposable or replaceable if corporate ideology, goals, or management happens to change.

All of these byproducts of globalization undercut the autonomy of local regions and communities. Disposable buildings, workers, and resources slowly affect the hope and optimism of residents for the future of their town, their region, and even themselves. Corporate waste and blight erodes the narrative of a place and people. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh contend,

> virtues are story-shaped, praiseworthy character traits formed by choices over time that dispose us to act consistent with our most deeply grounded narrative. We know what is truly good and how to

> live well by looking to people of virtue as role models and by
> drinking in certain narratives in particular communities. (211)

It follows then that communities could benefit from focusing on futures
that attempt to re-establish their own narrative and autonomy, in
response to effects of global corporations and consumerism. Starr and
Adams note, "Localities independent of global prices and transport are
thereby independent of fads, planned obsolescence, production
priorities, and technologies originating elsewhere. Economic priorities
are determined by the affected community" (38). Community becomes
the key defense by shaping and emphasizing its own priorities. Building
community through businesses and spaces creates a foundation where
moral character can be defined and modeled.

Building Community

The success of many local businesses centers on their ability to create
community, foster discourse, and model ethical and moral behaviors. In
this manner, they craft their own narrative. When a longstanding
business shutters its doors or sees the retirement of its owners, we
often see a community outpouring of nostalgic sentiment. Local
newspapers print stories recounting the company's history, the owner's
impact on the community, or community member accounts of fond
memories shopping or working with the company. They view the
business as an authentic and integral part of their sense of place. Many
community members see this independent business as an extension of
themselves. As Brandeis University Associate Professor of Sociology
Laura J. Miller notes, "the bookstore that reflects the particularities of
its community is seen as a bulwark against homogenization" (396). It
may not even be homogenization that is of concern as much as the
community's right to autonomy surrounding its moral character. The
community's autonomy rests on its ability to be authentic in its desires,
considerations, and undertakings. This need for autonomy, in turn,
reaffirms the efforts of communal spaces to combat the postmodern
homelessness that global corporations and chains foment.

Support for local businesses has seen an increased push in recent years.
As a way to counter Black Friday (and now Thursday, too), the U.S. Small
Business Administration is promoting "Small Business Saturday" ("Small

Business Saturday"). This event looks to ride the wave of post-Thanksgiving consumer spending, but unlike Black Friday the emphasis is on spending money that will directly benefit businesses in the local community.[1] In addition to Small Business Saturday, the slogan "Shop Local" has morphed into various versions: Drink Local. Eat Local. Read Local. Make Local. Participation by more and more local businesses and local patrons suggests that there is indeed a desire for autonomy in communities and that embracing the idea of "local" can begin to shape unique boundaries

Small Business Saturday supports businesses in the local community.

for the community. Another part of the "local" movement ripe for support is the community space that serves as a haven for serious discourse, challenging ideas, and artistic expression.

Communal spaces are important parts of how a city or region defines its moral dimensions. In their book, *Character, Choices & Community*, Russell B. Connors Jr. and Patrick T. McCormick state that "This *moral* dimension of our experience is extremely important. For morality is concerned with our struggle to become and be *fully human persons and communities*" (8). Additionally, Bouma-Prediger and Walsh state that "we need a richer, deeper, and thicker habitus, a worldview rooted in narrative that engenders a culture of hospitality and justice" (112). It would be a mistake to allow ourselves to become lost in the generic and commercial, simply empty residents passing our lives without an awareness or understanding of feeling rooted to a place. This habitus can be formed through community interaction in public spaces. In these shared spaces, community members and citizens enter into dialogue that has situated meaning, shared memory, and ethical implications.

Community is situated around the idea of dwelling—or it ought to be. Individuals need to regain their sense of "dwelling" within their communities. In his theoretical writings related to rootedness, Tim Ingold has emphasized a need to "regain that original perspective . . . [to] understand how the activities of building—of cultivation and construction—belong to our dwelling in the world, to the way we are"

(185-186). In this regard, we need to identify and develop the ways in which place will shape moral character. This idea requires us to be builders of not just structures, but of community and character. As Bouma-Prediger and Walsh offer, "habitual patterns of behavior and ways of looking at the world are rooted in societally shaped and shared dispositions, values, and orientations" (107). With this in mind, we can begin to make concerted efforts to amplify the character of our communities. Unique, local spaces help us provide examples of the characteristics that make our places autonomous—that make them homes we are proud of.

Modeling Authenticity and Integrity

An important reason for encouraging the presence of, and support for, local entrepreneurs, and building spaces of community interaction, is the creation of a sense of place rooted in authenticity and integrity. In order to create a place rooted in authenticity and integrity, communities must model both.

But what do I mean by authenticity? In this case, I am not advocating for an expression of excessive individualism or embracing egoism. Instead, I'm proposing an authenticity that promotes human flourishing in relationship with social coherence and responsibility. In this sense, I'm advocating for models of *relational authenticity*, as influenced by social scientist Charles Taylor and defined by Natalie Fletcher, philosopher at Université Laval in Montreal, as "a moral attitude that strives to capture the genuine way that individual selves connect with the world around them—people, other living things, nature" (87). Fletcher's ethical conception of relational authenticity emphasizes increasing coherence and connections among members of the community and to the natural world, while encouraging individuals to become flourishing, better versions of themselves.

Craig Dunn, Professor of Business and Sustainability at Western Washington University, has provided a valuable overview of the theoretical construction of integrity, as well as a definition of integrity. Dunn states that "integrity requires coherence among a set of moral values . . . consisten[t] with a set of social values, and that integrity further requires congruence between [a person's] behavior and the set

of moral/social values over time and across social context(s)" (109). Local communities benefit from the integrity of local businesses and spaces because they can influence the moral/social values through interactions and purchases. Integrity adds the elements of consistency, time, and broad social contexts to authenticity. In fact, Dunn refers to integrity as a "macro formulation" of moral character. Integrity links disparate parts of moral character in a consistent, coherent set of actions and beliefs that spans past and present.

I believe these concepts of authenticity and integrity can be modeled through local establishments such as bookstores, record stores,[2] and farmers markets.[3]

Local, independent bookstores strive to offer events and build relationships that emphasize authenticity and foster community. One example is the frequent hosting of author readings. While many of the readings feature national writers, a strong number of them are readings by local authors. By hosting readings with local writers, the independent bookstore offers a public space for community voices and a chance for a local audience to experience important cultural contributions that are relevant and reflective of the region. This is an important part of what James R. Skouge and Kavita Rao, professors of education, note as "help[ing] in the dissemination of what is distinctive in the lives of people and their communities" (54). These readings offer members of the community

Author readings offer public spaces for community voices.

an opportunity to be reflective, not only regarding the self, but also regarding elements of human history. As Fletcher notes, such experiences with authenticity can allow people "to understand that they are not the origins of their full identities" (89). These events reinforce long-standing ideas, history, and experiences shared by the community.

While everyone loves the ability to find nearly any book and have it delivered to their door in two days, the biggest loss associated with online bookstores is the communal aspect that a local, independent

bookstore fosters. Instead of communicating with a knowledgeable employee who might make informed recommendations, users scroll through lists of sellers searching for the cheapest option, shipping included. Online retailers allow individuals to be inconsistent in using their purchasing power. They provide individuals with a shield to hide behind which can mask whether their actions are supporting the values they espouse. For instance, if an individual claims to support authors of color but then purchases books only by white males, the package that arrives doesn't hold them accountable for their actions. This is where interacting with the people in a bookstore becomes important in modeling integrity.

Bookstores enhance community and offer a model of integrity through reading groups. The reading groups tend to be wide-ranging and often challenge perspectives, beliefs, and perceptions of the local citizenry. They can be a source of virtuous discussion about things that ought to be considered and challenged in the community. As Connors and McCormick note, "Morality is about our struggle to achieve full humanity which we are *invited* but not *forced* to embrace" (9). Citizens are free to join any reading group and meet with other citizens to discuss what they've read. There is great freedom in this ability to choose to join or exit the conversation. But it is the responsibility of community members to be consistent in presenting their morals. It is one thing for a professor to speak of humility in a classroom of 15 students, but another test of integrity to speak with the same conviction in front of a variety of community members. In this way, bookstores allow for models of integrity by asking individuals to maintain their moral coherence in a variety of roles within the community.

Local bookstores are more than simply a storefront; they can be a shaping force for the conception of home. "Indeed, home is erected not simply with bricks and mortar but more profoundly with memories of relationships and significant events" (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 241). Relationships and significant events should include discourse. In "Reconstructing the Authenticity of Place," Sharon Zukin states, "A powerful discourse becomes a rhetoric and then a strategy of growth" (162). These spaces present challenging voices and community concerns through their offerings. These stores encourage the community to make choices about future offerings and outcomes based on their purchases.

Independent record stores provide a similar experience to the one offered by bookstores. And this experience is translating into a revival of sorts. In 2017, physical music sales (CDs, vinyl albums, etc.) outpaced digital downloads for the first time since 2011 (Kastrenakes) and vinyl album sales set a single-year high of 14.3 million units (Caulfield). In a study of the experiences offered by physical record stores in the age of digital streaming, researchers Brian J. Hracs and Johan Jansson state that "independent record shops remain spaces where meanings are created, rituals are performed, interactions occur, and experiences are staged and consumed" (10). It is important to create meaning, observe rituals, and interact. This emphasis on interaction is necessary for building character at the community level and it relates to what millennial Teddy Crimmins notes in a recent commentary piece for the *Chicago Tribune*: "In the process [of visiting a record store] I had become closer to a friend, talked to someone new about something I'm passionate about, actually gotten out of my house and into the sunlight and learned something about the past." The experiential act that Crimmins writes about is also part of an exercise in authenticity.

Buying at independent record stores keeps the profits in the local community.

In terms of authenticity and the record store, we must consider music sales, knowledgeable curation by staff, and in-store performances by local musicians whose art might not have the same opportunity to be heard otherwise. This opportunity relates to Fletcher's concept of authenticity in that she states authentic people and communities have "a general openness to unfamiliarity and innovation" (91). Record stores offer local musicians a space to sell their work, often through commission agreements, which allows their art to find its way into the community and keeps the profits localized. Hracs and Jansson also find that "some record shops create value by cultivating authentic atmospheres and catering to the demands of different consumers, from local 'regulars' to trans-local 'record tourists'" (10). But if the

community chooses to stay home and shop from their couch on a computer or phone, these authentic aspects will continue to disappear from the community and one could begin to question if the individuals within a community truly possess or care about integrity.

Other aspects that define authenticity in a relational context are the ability to take responsibility for actions and outcomes and avoid self-deception (Fletcher 89-90). This also carries over into having integrity by once again uniting the disparate elements of the individual with society. One community space that models these aspects of authenticity and integrity is the local farmers market. Engaging in conversations about sustainable farming practices and land ethics with the farmers of one's region can help shed light on the efforts and problems an informed citizen should be aware of regarding their buying practices related to food and food sustainability. As Kyle Kramer writes in "The Magic of the Market," a commentary on being an organic farmer, "To bring produce to market, my family and I have to be faithful to the possibilities and limits of our land, skill, time, and stamina. We must be faithful to each other" (9). Kramer goes on to discuss how the market "offer[s] a glimpse of the gentler, more generous economy we would have if we began to insist that it generate real wealth, which is the faithful stewardship of community and creation" (9). The local production model contains a narrative that models human flourishing and pushes us to be better.

Supporting locally-sourced food can help us avoid self-deception about how our consumer choices affect the region. Rather than blindly purchasing highly packaged, processed, and distributed food, people buying from a local farmer are able to learn about and begin to understand the farming process, lessen the impact of packing and shipping, and also see firsthand the hard work and integrity that a small farmer puts into producing food. They can see immediate models of how choices affect outcomes in the regional community. For many

Farmers markets reflect local values and character.

citizens, this narrative of food production, distribution, and land stewardship is the starting point for becoming a "locavore." As anthropologist Arturo Escobar notes, "It's important to learn to see place-based cultural, ecological, and economic practices as important sources of alternative visions and strategies for reconstructing local and regional worlds" (165). Rather than seeing the farmers market as just another place to shop, it can become a model for local systems of production and a model for what the regional community desires and embraces.

The ability to model integrity through consumer practices in a public space is one of the benefits of supporting a farmers market. Buying food that is produced by farmers using organic and sustainable methods on smaller plots of land is just one way to bridge individual values with public behavior. For instance, if an individual donates online to a nonprofit organization that focuses on environmental issues, her dollars may be spent hundreds or thousands of miles away and have little influence on shaping the character of the local region. Such an undertaking doesn't actually involve creating an authentic sense of place for the individual and can be seen as only benefiting one's own sense of character, void of a congruent relationship with community/society.

Ultimately, local bookstores and farmers markets model authenticity through interactions, narratives, and awareness beyond only the self. They offer individuals a way to participate in a locally-driven circle of commerce that promotes community and is defined by the community. Instead of following sales pitches, promotions, and trends generated at the distant, corporate level, local businesses and spaces provide a chance for community members to shape and model authenticity in a relational way. As Fletcher summarizes, authentic people and places are "reflective, discerning, and determined . . . foster[ing] a sense of integrity, historical awareness, and adventure that bolsters responsibility and empathy, all while maintaining humility and perspective" (92). I think it is safe to say these elements are not present in those corporations that leave behind empty buildings, people, and hopes.

Conclusion

As homogenization and profit continue to drive the ever-hungry beast of consumer globalization, we must make a concerted effort to save the integrity and authenticity of our homes—the places where we dwell and flourish. The good news is that we, as members of our communities, have the power to stand up to and challenge the effects of globalization on our cities and towns. We can begin to redevelop our habits with a greater focus on preserving the good character of our hometowns and creating narratives that define a strong sense of place.

Models of virtue and ethics are always important in character development. As David Brooks has noted in his writing about character: "moral improvement occurs most reliably when the heart is warmed, when we come into contact with people we admire and love and we consciously and unconsciously bend our lives to mimic theirs" (xv). It is important to have models to mimic and practices to share. In her work on virtue and consumerism, Roberta Sassatelli notes a similar outcome:

> Happiness is conceived to involve a re-embedding of people in locality and social relations of direct reciprocity. The framing of the consumer within political consumerism thus comes full circle: it codifies a series of practices which are bound up with a particular vision of what consumers should do for the common good as well as their own happiness. (236)

Therefore, if we want our communities to uphold and demonstrate particular traits of moral character, we must support the maintenance or construction of those elements through models that are both authentic and full of integrity.

The great thing about independent regional or local businesses is the opportunity for collaboration and education that lead to clearer definitions of moral character in the community. Farms host local musicians for summer concerts that draw even more members of the community out onto the land. Bookstores host the local farmers and authors for panels on land ethics. And independent restaurants offer menus made with locally-sourced, seasonal ingredients. It is a circle of interdependence, support, and knowledge-building.

This localized circle also generates narrative, discussion, and faith in and about the community. And it can lead to positive action. It can lead to authenticity as described in Connors and McCormick: "Actions *impact* the world around us (helping or harming ourselves, our neighbors, our world) for good or ill. . . . Actions are right if they help build up the humanity of others " (11). Similarly, as Dunn argues, "A necessary element of both narrative and integrity is a stable temporal thread serving to unite seemingly disparate parts into one coherent whole" (114). By engaging, supporting, and building the local community narrative through our consumer habits, we will continue to allow ourselves spaces to model character. It is possible to rebuild and maintain the character-driven souls of our communities and to connect these local circles of values, production, and consumption.

By engaging, supporting, and building the local community narrative through our consumer habits, we continue to allow ourselves spaces to model character.

I would like to return to Kramer for what I believe is a grand way to think about authenticity and integrity in our communities. While I have called them local circles, he has called these parts of our communities *islands*: "With care and patience, these islands can be bridged one to another into an ever-larger web of true belonging, an archipelago of economic, ecological, and social health" (9). We can and should all support building the bridge through our small but intentional actions, so we may begin to be models for the present and future character of our communities.

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Notes

[1] It should be noted that local businesses are still consumer-driven companies and fit within the consumer framework. For more information and discussion about this concession, see Miller and Harvey.

[2] The definition of record store used throughout this paper is a store that sells music in a physical format, whether it be CDs, vinyl albums, or cassette tapes. It is not meant to suggest stores that sell only vinyl albums.

[3] For more in-depth discussions of concepts of authenticity and integrity, see Fletcher and Dunn.

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Homesickness Goes to College: Virtues, Vocation, and Growth

Pamela Crawford
Mary Bryant

Abstract

Most if not all of us have experienced homesickness, something that afflicts the majority of first-semester college students and can impact both their academic progress and retention in school. Promoting education and activities that encourage virtue and character development contribute to an antidote to homesickness. For the continued success of students and colleges, institutions of higher education should go beyond academics and seek to educate the whole person with an educational philosophy that emphasizes growth, moral formation, and vocation.

Leah stared at her computer screen, willing the words for her Literature paper to come to her mind. Instead, thoughts of home filled her head: her dad's home-cooked meals, cozy game nights with her little brothers, hanging out at the local pizza place with her closest friends, and her loyal tabby cat, Dede, keeping her feet warm at night. She had none of that here at college. What was wrong with her? She had longed for the chance to be independent and pursue her dream to become a journalist. But her heart ached so much she couldn't focus.

Leaving home and embarking on the journey that is college can feel like landing in OZ with a cast of new faces, unfamiliar challenges, and, worst of all, no Auntie Em to make it all better. The first few days and weeks on a college campus may, for many students, mark their first extended experience living away from home. Students find themselves adapting to a new learning environment while they are also challenged to develop new social networks and emotional support systems.

All of this can prove a tall order for students out on their own for the first time. What is it about leaving home that so unsettles some students that, despite their desire to attend college, live on a college campus, and pursue their education, they give up and return home?

Students often struggle with homesickness their first year of college.

Loneliness or feelings of displacement affect our sense of belonging (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 65), and leaving home to establish oneself on a college campus can be an unsettling experience. When homesickness in college students persists, it amplifies other concerns such as anxiety and stress and becomes a problem that the institution must address with education focused on the whole person.

Homesickness Goes to College

At this point, you may be wondering just how necessary it is to get so concerned about homesickness in college students. Everyone can get homesick, and everyone moves on, right? Surprising as it may be, homesickness has been recognized as a powerful force throughout history, influencing people of all ages to make dramatic life decisions or distracting them from living out their full potential.

Historical Concern   From the ancient Israelites in exile[1] to *The Odyssey*[2] and *Beowulf*,[3] various documents—historical, religious, literary—record the reality of homesickness faced by humans through the ages. Polynesian folk stories bear witness to the power of homesickness as well, with tales of travelers ship-wrecked or otherwise lost before finally making their way home. One Fijian drama tells of a

spring in the afterlife that provides the "Water of Solace," which alleviates the homesickness suffered by the dead (Beckwith 177, 199). Historical homesickness has also been uncovered in letters written home by those abroad, including Roman soldiers and medieval Oxford University students ("Soldier Homesick"; Crouch 234).

Even ancient medicine was concerned with homesickness as a legitimate ailment. Hippocrates, the Greek physician widely considered the father of modern medicine, theorized on the cause and treatment of homesickness (Thurber et al.). Two millennia later, while treating homesick soldiers with symptoms such as lethargy and even dementia, Swiss physician Johannes Hofer added a new ailment to the medical lexicon of the 17th Century, which he called "nostalgia" (Thurber et al.; Smith 195–96). This condition of nostalgia, or fatal homesickness, was so greatly feared by military leaders that "Home Sweet Home" was banned from being played among the Union army during the American Civil War (Smith 148).

Today, modern medicine continues to recognize homesickness as a health concern. Christopher A. Thurber, psychologist, and Edward A. Walton, pediatric physician, define homesickness in *The Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* as "distress and functional impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home and attachment objects such as parents" (Thurber et al.). Homesickness, when ignored, can impact mental health and lead to further medical problems, such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and even immune deficiencies (Thurber and Walton 1–2).

Since ancient times, we all, somewhere along life's way, have longed to be "home," a place of safety and security. At those times we are not unlike first-year college students. In fact, Thurber and Walton consider homesickness a nearly universal experience, suggesting that most everyone misses some aspect of home during times away (Thurber and Walton 1).
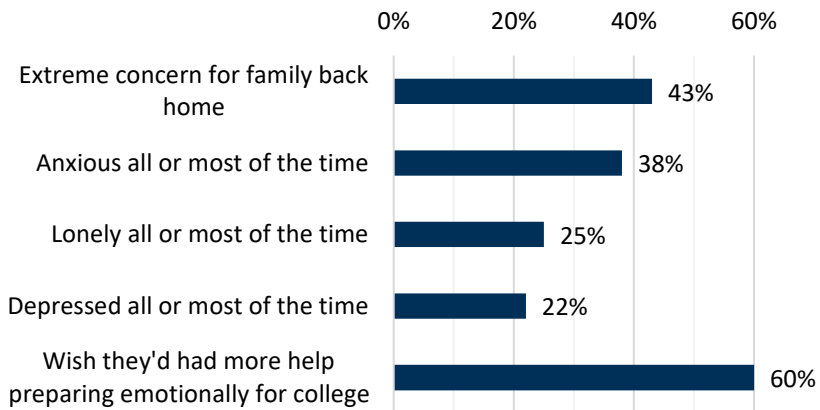
University Woes   It makes sense, then, that students experience an array of emotions as they move from "home" home to their new "college" home. Elation at the idea of attending college may be accompanied by worry about the experience, fear of the unknown, and

unhappiness at leaving the familiar. The intensity of this emotional response may come as a surprise to both students and their families. In fact, experiencing an array of emotions during this transition is normal. But normal as it may be, not all students are able to get over feelings of homesickness on their own.

Homesickness takes its toll on students' physical and emotional well-being and impacts both academic performance and persistence through the first semester and first year. Feeling emotionally unprepared to deal with college stressors will only make things worse. A look at statistics on homesickness indicates just how widespread the problem is for first-year students.

Student Feelings: First Term at College

Extreme concern for family back home	43%
Anxious all or most of the time	38%
Lonely all or most of the time	25%
Depressed all or most of the time	22%
Wish they'd had more help preparing emotionally for college	60%

In a 2015 Harris Poll survey, anxiety, loneliness, depression, and extreme concern for family back home all emerged as student concerns during the first term at college. Sixty percent of first-year students reported wishing they had been given more help in preparing emotionally for college (*The First-Year College Experience* 31, 4, 16).

Perhaps even more concerning is the effect that homesickness may have on first-year students' academic performance and persistence into the second year. A 2014-2015 Mapworks Fall Transition Survey measuring the behaviors and expectations of students entering a

college or university included alarming information collected from 120,967 first-year college students from 127 two- and four-year institutions in the United States (*College Student Homesickness* 2).

The survey found that students suffering from distress related to homesickness (negative feelings or regret associated with leaving home) had lower GPAs than those suffering less distress (*College Student Homesickness* 2, 8). Further, fewer homesick students returned to college for the second semester, a trend that continued into the second year (*College Student Homesickness* 9–11). It is apparent that homesickness does factor into a student's academic success and affects his or her decision to return to college.

Impact of Homesickness on GPA

Level of Distress Related to Homesickness
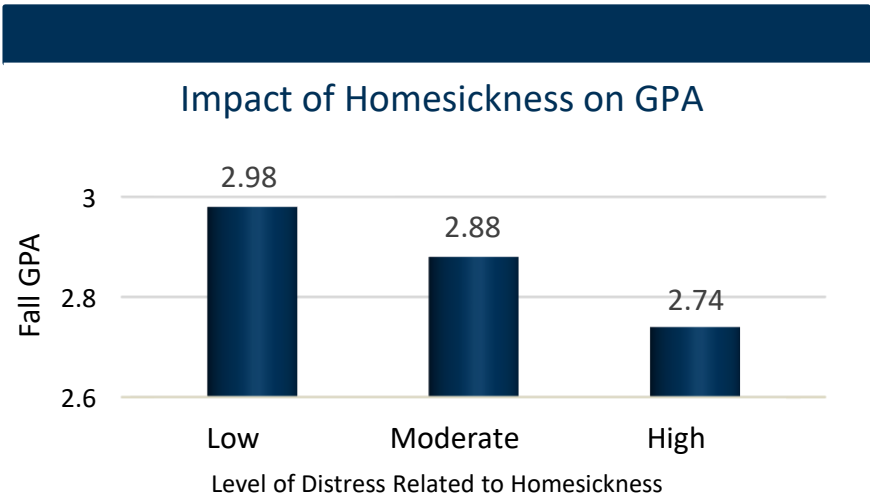
Homesick students who do not persist with their education or experience less than hoped-for academic success often abandon school with a sour taste in their mouths. Students who leave college early are laden with extra debt, without the degree they had hoped would lead to a good job; their plans fall into disarray as they look for a new path forward and rethink their plans for the future. In addition, these young people may be less likely to try to leave home again for fear that they won't be able to cope with the stressors they encounter.

Colleges strive to retain the students they've worked hard to recruit. Persistence or lack thereof affects not only the student but also the

educational institution. Although it has not always been so, in the current economic and political climate, poor retention and persistence rates affect schools' reputations as well as their finances (Field A10). On a more personal level, colleges invest in their students as people. Losing students hurts.

Homesickness has an impact on both students and institutions and is not something that we should ignore. It seems sensible that we seek solutions not just to help young people experience a more satisfactory adjustment to college, but to offer tools for managing these feelings whenever they may arise throughout life's course.

Higher Education as Homemaker

If the source of homesickness is separation from familiar people and places one feels attached to, then it makes sense that getting involved, building connections, and cultivating new relationships are key to feeling more at home and less homesick. For many students, that can be easier said than done; and for institutions, generally impossible to impose on students. What institutions can do is intervene with education that nurtures the whole person, providing students with tools to make these new connections on their own.

Let us be clear. Intervention by academic institutions is not the entire (nor only) solution to the problems that can arise from homesickness. But because homesickness can so negatively impact both students and their institutions, it is a responsibility of institutions to acknowledge the problem and take steps to respond. We suggest that the best response is to provide comprehensive education, including formational and vocational, within an educational philosophy that nurtures growth to help students find their way through what can be distressing times.

Education as Formation   In light of the statistics cited earlier on students' feelings of emotional unpreparedness and likelihood of homesickness, it seems clear that many students are still in formational stages when they come to college. In order to help them succeed in their endeavors at college and beyond, institutions of higher education must be involved with formative as well as academic education. Moral education is concerned with the moral formation of the whole person,

with specific attention to shaping character and nurturing virtues (Beaty and Henry 3; Nord 32).

Traditionally, higher education had understood its work to be framed as moral education. Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, has argued that moral development of students should still be a goal of higher education, contending that service to society is among one of higher education's most important functions (11). In fact, for many private and Christian colleges, moral concerns still hold a place in their educational model.[4]

Unfortunately, today many educational institutions shy away from claiming moral authority or adhering to a specific ideology. Citing the inability of the University of Virginia to explicitly condemn the white supremacist marchers on campus who threw Charlottesville into chaos in 2017, UVa German professor Chad Wellmon laments "the contemporary university . . . seems institutionally incapable of moral clarity." Yet, Wellmon does not see this as something to rectify; it is merely what he sees as the reality of educational institutions today.

Virtue ethicist Paul J. Wadell and moral philosopher Darin H. Davis, however, insist that the mission of a Christian liberal arts education must include moral education, i.e., not only career preparation but also the formation of people who are "good, truthful and wise" (149). By providing moral education, colleges can better equip students to recognize problems and seek help early as well as help their peers through difficult experiences. The emphasis on developing character virtues such as perseverance, ambition, courage, hope, and self-discipline contributes to a student's resilience, the ability to keep going through hardship and enhance his or her ability to cope with the feelings that comprise homesickness.[5]

In addition to being strengthened by these virtues, resilience is also buoyed by a nurturing environment. In their book *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and psychologist Adam Grant outline the four beliefs that help children build resilience: "(1) they have some control over their lives; (2) they can learn from failure; (3) they matter as human beings; and (4) they have real strengths to rely on and share" (11). If these beliefs

aren't in place yet for students attending college for the first time, then it is more important than ever to start cultivating them.

Angela Duckworth, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, has examined the characteristics of people who display resilience, what she calls "grit," with an eye toward understanding what makes some people more able than others to rebound from life's challenges. Grit keeps resilient people going and is supported by passion and perseverance (56). Passion is sparked by interest and enjoyment, and nurtured when there is purpose fueling that passion (Duckworth 91). Together with perseverance, i.e., enduring something essentially good despite difficulties or failure (Wadell and Davis 148), these two virtues make for more resilient people, who can see the pain of homesickness as one segment of a longer journey toward fulfillment of their potential.

By providing moral education, colleges can better equip students to recognize problems and seek help early.

For perseverance to be meaningful, it must be accompanied by courage and hope. Courage is needed to face daunting challenges within and without. Hope keeps one going in spite of disappointment or undesirable circumstances. According to Wadell and Davis, "if human life is a pilgrimage toward the good . . . hope sustains us on that journey by keeping us focused on what is best and most perfecting" (146). Hope is the most essential part of what makes one resilient. Without hope, there is no reason to make that effort to keep going (Duckworth 91–92).

Vocation   Most students who set out to attend college really want to be there. That's why the pain of homesickness in those early days can be so discouraging. And why staying on campus and weathering the storm of homesickness can, ultimately, be a transformative experience for students. But how can anyone persevere through personal misery without a sense of the world beyond themselves? As discussed above, perseverance may be an essential part of managing homesickness, but a sense of purpose in the world and a

vocation that brings meaning to that sense, must come first. After all, why persevere if there is no greater call, nothing beyond to hope for?

Vocation is one of those slippery terms that can have different meanings for different people. Though it was originally borrowed from the Latin stem "*vocation*," meaning a "call" or "summons," today its usages range from "a particular occupation" to "a strong impulse or inclination to follow a particular activity or career" to "a function or station in life to which one is called by God ("Vocation"). In moral education, the term "vocation" lands squarely in the realm of "calling."

Three factors define a calling, according to Bryan J. Dik and Ryan D. Duffy, professors of psychology and leading researchers in the area of vocation. First, there must be some external "summons," some recognized need outside oneself calling for service; second, it must be a source of purpose and meaning in one's life; third, it must be beneficial to others and the common good (11–13).

People who have found their calling, their vocation, are happier and find their lives more satisfying. They are better able to cope with difficulties such as homesickness and less likely to be overwhelmed by stress or suffer from depression. Such people tend to say they have a strong sense of meaning and purpose, as well (Dik and Duffy 17).

Service, one of Dik and Duffy's necessary conditions of vocation, also can initiate a change in how people think about themselves—as more compassionate, giving people, for example. It can impact one's emotional state and encourage a more hopeful view of the world, possibly because people who serve may start to perceive themselves as helping to resolve many of the disheartening problems of the world (94).

Colleges engaged in formative, moral education aim to help students recognize the needs of the world and respond by answering the call to serve others. A student's vocation, more likely than not, will evolve over time, having less to do with personal choice or passion and more to do with finding a place of meaningful engagement with the world and the commitment to good (Dik and Duffy 14; Wadell and Davis 141, 150). It is an approach to life and work that emphasizes the impact one's efforts

has on others (Dik and Duffy 15). It may not be home, but finding one's place and purpose—one's vocation—is grounding nonetheless.

Educational Context   Liberal Arts and Christian colleges that are committed to moral formation as part of their educational philosophy consider it their moral obligation to care for their students and practice moral virtues. These institutions are well-positioned to help their students discover vocations and develop virtues within the context of an educational philosophy that focuses on growth.

Crucial to character development and self-improvement in general is deliberate practice and a "growth mindset," the belief that one can cultivate abilities, including intellectual skills, through effort. What's more, having a growth mindset (versus a "fixed mindset") significantly impacts one's tendency to thrive during challenging times and develop in perseverance and resilience (Dweck 7, 12). Having a growth mindset and the motivation to practice and develop new skills helps students recognize that they can improve their situation and see their homesickness as a temporary condition that can get better with effort.

Perhaps the most helpful action that adults who interact with students who are homesick can take is to set high academic expectations and provide students with the tools that, given effort, allows them to achieve these goals. Then teach students to set their own realistic, achievable goals, and also how to reach out for help when needed. That may be easier said than done, but attaining meaningful goals through one's own efforts results in a sense of accomplishment and control over one's destiny, which further improves self-esteem, changes one's views of one's own capabilities, and spurs on the desire to experience those feelings again.

The educational environment should also be one that nurtures people and allows students to learn and make mistakes without fear of humiliation—an environment that cultivates the courage needed to face the prospect of such uncomfortable possibilities later (Forbes Coaches Council). Based on Sandberg and Grant's findings, it's clear that colleges should create an environment that encourages the growth of resilience—where students feel safe enough to ask questions, to get

things wrong at first, to learn from failure, and where they feel cared for.

There is no one right way for a college to respond. What is essential, however, is that institutions not ignore the problem but instead engage in conversations about how to deal with homesickness in the context of addressing the whole person.

Educating the Whole Person at the University of Dubuque   Let's take a look at one example of an institution that emphasizes the whole person in education—the University of Dubuque, where this journal is housed. At the University of Dubuque, we seek to support our students and guide them in the development of their character. Our mission states the University practices its Christian commitments by educating students, pursuing excellence in scholarship, challenging students to live lives of worth and purpose, and preparing students for service to the church and the world ("Mission, Vision and Values"). Therefore, the University of Dubuque is committed to:

- A hospitable Christian environment which respects other faith traditions;
- Relationships which encourage intellectual, spiritual, and moral development;
- Excellence in academic inquiry and professional preparation;
- A diverse and equitable community where Christian love is practiced;
- Stewardship of all God's human and natural resources;
- Zeal for life-long learning and service.

From the University's mission emerge specific programs for supporting our students. The Wendt Center for Character Education has the mandate to promote a campus culture of excellent moral character and purposeful lives through various initiatives, including campus character lectures and a program that cultivates character leaders within the student body.

First-year students begin their education at the University of Dubuque by identifying their strengths as a way toward empowering them to

respond to the world's needs—in other words, helping them hear a vocational call.

We offer a course in personal empowerment, which encourages growth mindsets and teaches coping skills such as resilience and stress tolerance, and a Bridge Program aimed at supporting a successful transition for underprepared first-year students. Community service is required in some courses and encouraged across campus.

What is essential is that institutions not ignore the problem but instead deal with homesickness in the context of addressing the whole person.

Our "caringly intrusive" philosophy permeates our work with students and guides us in our interactions. Structurally, we take attendance, employ an alert system that identifies at-risk students, and follow up on concerns with a care team trained to respond to a variety of student matters.

Aware of homesickness and adjustment issues among students, and in support of our goal to support the growth of each student intellectually, socially, and spiritually, the University of Dubuque is also graced with the services of a very special individual. We have a Campus Mom who serves as a "mom away from home" for those times when students need comfort and support similar to what they get from parents at home.

Our Campus Mom knows firsthand both the telltale signs that a student is feeling homesick as well as the impact homesickness has on students. She is always ready with "Kleenex and chocolate" and an open ear to listen to whatever students might need to share with her about their distress and anxiety. In "Mom's" experience, the first few days that a student is on campus are often tough for first-year students to navigate without feeling the pangs of missing home. *I miss my friends, I don't have any friends here,* or *I need my family* are only some of the laments that students share with her during the first few days. "Mom" addresses

virtue and vocation, but does so in a way that encourages active participation, helping students make new connections—talking with each other, joining one another at meals, hanging out together and generally becoming involved in campus life (Smelzer).

Other colleges and universities are also beefing up their student support, taking on more programs that nurture the whole person. Southern Utah University has recently redesigned its academic advisers into "student success coaches" who check in on students' social and emotional health as well as their academics. SUU also implemented personality assessment in first-year student orientation and followed up with those identified as introverts to help them get involved, while Indiana University at Kokomo has begun offering a student-success seminar for first-years that emphasizes growth mind-set (Field A12-13). Phi Beta College has put in place a "Meaningful Work Initiative," which included a new course elective on work and meaning, a fellowship program, and a variety of service learning opportunities to guide students through their search for vocation. Similarly, Richboro University emphasizes the importance of a purposeful life with a themed sophomore residence hall, involving its residents in small group discussions, dinners, trips, and retreats, all focused on purpose exploration (Clydesdale 60–64, 75–76). It is our hope that such trailblazing programs will pave the way for further comprehensive whole-person education across the higher education spectrum.

Conclusion

Homesickness is a real malady that should be taken seriously. Remember Leah? The first-year student who couldn't focus because she was so miserable being away from home? How might her experience change if her school is focused on formation as well as academics, with programs and initiatives that encourage her to grow, build virtues, and make connections with other students? Perhaps within the first week, one of Leah's professors assigns community service, and another professor has her take an aptitude test.

Getting out into the community to serve others who need her may be eye-opening. The aptitude test could reveal new areas of potential she hasn't considered before. Her goal to become a journalist may become

stronger and better defined, or she may discover some new passion and vocation she is well suited to. She may still be homesick, but she is no longer solely focused on her unhappiness; she believes she can learn and feels called to serve in the world. She is developing virtues such as passion and perseverance, which assist her in recognizing that she can overcome short-term adversity and weather the throes of homesickness.

Colleges must be engaged in formative, moral education that emphasizes virtues, vocation, and growth. Whole person education empowers students to overcome homesickness, grow, and thrive.

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Photo credit p. 46: Mary Bryant

Notes

[1] See Num. 14.3, Ps. 139, e.g.

[2] See Book 1 of Homer, e.g.

[3] See Heaney 79; lines 1128-1130, e.g.

[4] The debate over whether moral education has a place in formal education is not new. In ancient Greece, Aristotle grappled with the question of how moral virtue can and should be taught. His opinion was that education was essential for developing good and virtuous people. Where nature is not enough, "we learn some things by habit, and some by instruction" (1331b-1332b). For two millennia, moral education was the norm in Western education. College "was

supposed to offer moral guidance, to inculcate wisdom, and to teach students to value truth, beauty, and goodness" (Holmes 1).

[5] Other responses can also contribute to helping students overcome homesickness, but too often moral formation is ignored as a solution. Other practices such as mindfulness, gratitude, meditation, and therapy can also serve well in responding to the problem of homesickness and its accompanying symptoms.

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The Nurture of Nature: Developing Character Virtues

Adam Hoffman

Abstract

Nature benefits individuals and societies in many tangible ways, yet the ability of nature to nurture character formation is under-examined. This paper explores the possibility that nature can teach us to care for the natural world, appreciate diversity, pursue environmental justice, and cultivate the virtues of gratitude and contentment.

"What in the world are utedags?" I wondered aloud. Our family had been exposed to many new practices and routines as we transitioned to life in Sweden for my sabbatical. Yet it was these "outdoor days" that my children were to be partaking in on each Tuesday at school that had me most intrigued.

Was it lost in translation, or had the teacher really just suggested that the place of learning for my children and the entire class, regardless of wind, snow, or rain, would be outside all day on each Tuesday? It turns out that each and every Tuesday, nature was to be the classroom in which the students would learn math, science, language, social studies, music, and history. What wasn't explained to me, and something that only occurred to me as the spring semester marched on, was that nature would not only be the classroom, but also the teacher.

In my day-to-day activities I noticed school children spread out all over the town. They were riding busses, they were translating the items all around them from Swedish to English, they were picking blueberries in the forest, they were examining the cultural artifacts from people long ago gone, and some were even helping me take water samples from the local lake. In addition to meeting the normal reading, writing, and arithmetic requirements, I noticed that they were also learning

stewardship practices in caring for the earth, examining local conservation efforts to enhance the diversity of the flora and fauna community to increase the health of the ecosystem and simply learning to be happy and content outside. In short, nature was nurturing important character virtues in these— and my—children.

Children learn in an outdoor classroom.

Steven Bouma-Prediger, author and religion professor, describes virtue as a settled disposition to act excellently—a state of praiseworthy character developed over time—that is indispensable in allowing one to responsibly act as a keeper of the Earth (132). I wish to expand the argument to suggest that as we are kept by nature, we develop certain virtues that make us more than keepers of Earth, but also keepers of people. This paper will explore the possibility that nature can be beneficial in teaching us and our children character virtues: caring for the natural world, appreciating diversity, pursing environmental justice, and cultivating the virtues of gratitude and contentment.

Caring for the Natural World

Care is the virtue most associated with love. People do not and cannot care or love what they do not know. Our current carefree society results from the fact that we, paradoxically, are too well connected and yet not connected well enough. The average child spends over 7 hours a day staring at a screen, spends less time outdoors than many prison inmates, and half of children do not meet the recommended standard for physical activity (Council on Communications and Media; First United Nations Congress; Eaton et al.). At no time in human history have we spent less time connecting, physically or psychologically, to

nature than the present. How can our children love nature if they do not know nature?

Society stands much to gain from a renewed connection to nature, a connection that can help us care for others. Whether that "other" is a pet, a tree, or a neighbor, nature can help us love. Compassion is a term that is often associated with care, love, empathy, and this connection between care and compassion has been noticed by many researchers. A walk on a deserted beach, through the woods on a starlit night, or on a sunny spring day can be the beginning of a life focused on care for others. Bouma-Prediger and co-author Brian J. Walsh describe compassion as what happens when "love meets suffering" (219). Nature offers everyone the ability to experience both love and suffering and is a gateway into the transition from thinking about the love and hardship of others and caring to do something about the discomfort others may be feeling.

In his memoir of falling in love with the natural world, *The Home Place,* Professor of Wildlife Ecology J. Drew Lanham describes his feelings after losing the place that he loved, his home place. "She sat by silently—tight lipped, with hands folded on her lap—as the land was torn apart by eyes turned toward quick cash. . . . Greed was the cancer that killed the Lanham Edgefield legacy. There were not plans made for anything other than getting and spending" (209, 211–12).

Our care for the land offers an opportunity to develop this important virtue by examining the choice of treating the land like a friend or treating the land like a commodity.

Care can take many forms. An important one for our investigation is the ability to act responsibly, to take actions that mitigate and lessen our impacts in attaining the things we need to survive (Bannon 262). Remaining attentive to our impact on our world around us leads to developing a caring compassion and awareness of how we can treat the land like a friend.

Areas where we can show caring compassion to our friend nature include our construction of cities, food production methods, transportation choices, and energy generation techniques. The table

below outlines choices individuals can make to build the virtue of care and show others a way towards a more holistic excellence.

Environmental Choices Foster Caring Compassion

Areas of Opportunity	Care Building Actions
City Construction	• Create parks and greenspaces • Ban fertilizers and pesticides • Respect unique ecosystems
Food Procurement	• Embrace family farms • Support local and organic foods • Plant a garden
Transportation	• Utilize mass transit • Use human-powered options • Fly sparingly
Energy Generation	• Support renewable forms • Respect animal migration routes • Boycott destructive mining techniques

A lack of awareness regarding the natural world and everyday life threatens to weaken our ability to care for the plants, animals, and people around us. Aldo Leopold writes, "There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace" (6). The danger in ignorance is that if a person does not know the source of their food, one cannot care or show compassion to the plants, animals, and people impacted by its production. It is not rhetorical to ask whether a strawberry picked by your neighbor is the same as a strawberry picked by a migrant worker in a third world country and shipped halfway across the world. In not knowing the source of food, a person is neglecting the responsibility of striving towards excellent character. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh term people such as this the "ecologically apathetic"—they are among the most efficient people in suppressing compassion and those that show a lessened ability to care for others (220).

In one aspect of choices in our daily life, food procurement, we see a myriad of opportunities to care for the land in ways many have not thought of. Large industrial farms often do not show the long-term caring compassion for the land needed for sustainable harvest. What interest is 10 years down the road to a company renting farmland for two years? In her entertainingly educational treatise on indigenous floral wisdom, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment Robin Kimmerer explains how we should care to engage in a reciprocity between humans and the land:

> *Ask permission of the ones whose lives you seek.*
> *Abide by the answer.*
> *Never take the first. Never take the last.*
> *Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.*
> *Take only what you need and leave some for others.*
> *Use everything that you take.*
> *Take only that which is given to you.*
> *Share it, as the Earth has shared with you.*
> *Be grateful.*
> *Reciprocate the gift.* (183)

Although this advice from Kimmerer seems like a how-to for harvested resources, it really is a foundation for developing caring actions that aid us in becoming excellent people in all areas of our life.

One might be lulled into thinking that all this focus on nature will make us lose sight of our fellow humans. Bryan E. Bannon, a professor of environmental studies and sustainability with an interest in environmental philosophy, assures us that those fears are unfounded as he suggests that the caring responses to the environment do not preclude compassion for our fellow human beings, rather caring for nature more fully calls upon our human capacities to think creatively and critically about our responses to the world (277).

Connection to the natural world results in a decrease in uncompassionate behavior among children (Matsuoka 278) and exposure to nature has been linked to increased empathy, cooperative behavior, and generosity (Mayer and Frantz 509; Weinstein, Przybylski, et al. 1150; Chawla et al. 9). In fact, evidence shows that compassion

can be carried over from one situation to another unrelated one (Condon and DeSteno 700; Oveis et al. 625). That is, our attitude toward nature can change the way we behave towards other people. The natural world can help us care.[1]

The suggestion that a strong connection to the environment impacts one's ability and willingness to care for our human kin is a powerful concept, yet one that up to this point rarely has been explored in the literature. On a superficial level, it is intuitive that if you care for a banana slug or a centipede you likely will also care for your human counterparts. Digging deeper, if you show compassion and the ability to empathize with the relationships between organisms in creating healthy and functioning ecosystems, it is likely that you will do the same in fostering diverse human assemblies. Caring compassion allows us to appreciate our fellow inhabitants of planet Earth, whether they be great, small, big, or tall.

The natural world can help us care.

Appreciating Diversity

Practicing the virtue of care is closely connected to an appreciation of diversity. Nature gives us a plethora of examples of the importance of diversity in creating healthy and resilient ecosystems. Neither a monoculture of corn nor a monoculture of people is a healthy environment. Indeed, nature is a splendid example of the value of diversity. Everywhere we look in the natural world we see plants and animals that together shape the landscape. A single urban greenspace consists of a mixture of hundreds of species of plants (Loram et al. 327).

A diverse community structure, both in terms of plants and animals, is a much more resilient community, a community better able to weather changes and external stimuli. Recent examples showing the harms of a monoculture include banana blight and infestation of the Emerald Ash Borer. In the same way that cities try to diversify their economies or landscape architects diversify their landscapes, it is clear that a diverse community is a strong community. Human monocultures often suffer the ills of group think and are less likely to consider alternative solutions to social and economic problems. Many of the external stimuli

impacting ecosystems today result from how we treat animals and plants, as we utilize resources to build cities, feed populations, move people, and generate energy through the aforementioned choices that we make.

These choices can be made to show compassion to the environment, just as they also must be made to show compassion to our peers. It is here that nature can show us a better way to operate. Consider the appreciation nature has for diversity. Regardless of one's race, gender, or sexual orientation, nature offers the same value and treats everyone equally. The sun offers the same radiative warmth to women and men alike, wild blueberries offer nourishment for black and white people alike, and the morning dove coos for straight and gay people alike.

Another location that should also be an oasis of equity are schools. In fact, there are schools that are tapping into the lessons nature can teach us, covering both standard content and, more importantly, the atypical areas of pedagogical content such as cultural competency. Nature-based preschools and kindergartens are popping up worldwide; Germany boasts over 1,500 forest kindergartens and such schools exist in 35 different states in the USA (Michek et al. 739; "Who We Are"). An area in which these schools hold the potential to best traditional schools is the intersection between environmental connectedness and social consequences. It is here that virtue development and character formation might take place at an accelerated pace (Weinstein, Balmford, et al. 1150). In connecting with nature, these schools teach appreciation and care for the diversity in plants, animals, and humans.

Lanham, who as an African American birder calls himself a rare bird, an oddity, writes,

> But in all my time wandering I've yet to have a wild creature question my identity. Not a single cardinal or ovenbird has ever paused in dawnsong declaration to ask the reason for my being. White-tailed deer seem just as put off by my hunter friend's whines as they are by my blackness. Response in forests and fields are not born of any preconceived notions of what "should be." They lie only in the fact that I am. Each of us is so much more than the pigment that orders us into convenient compartments of occupation,

avocation, or behavior. It's easy to default to expectation. But nature shows me a better, wilder way. (1)

If we could adopt nature's viewpoint we would discover the value of diversity in enhancing our interactions between all beings. Applying what we learn from nature, the value of diversity, to our interactions with humans could help us all grow to be more just.

Pursuing Environmental Justice

One can often get some insight into the value a community places on diversity by its commitment to environmental justice. Environmental justice is a unique combination of just actions entombed in a geospatial realm in the belief that all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic class, should equally share in the benefits of environmental amenities and the burdens of environmental health hazards (Pijawka et al. 118). Bouma-Prediger and Walsh point out that ecological destruction has a disproportionate impact on the individuals in society who are the most socioeconomically challenged (162).

Any just society must respect basic human rights, and any society's attempt to address social or environmental justice issues must also address pollution, poverty, racism, climate change, and food shortages, as they are all related to one another (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 164). We cannot separate people from the planet or planet from the people—we are forever intertwined.

Self-awareness regarding environmental justice issues, especially the burdens of environmental health hazards, has been increasing. A recent water crisis shows that we still have much work to do. In Flint, Michigan, one of the poorest, blackest cities in Michigan, a drinking water switch in 2014 resulted in elevated levels of lead, a neurotoxin, leaching into the drinking water. After years of denials and steadily mounting evidence, including a rise in children's blood lead levels, a

> *We cannot separate people from the planet or planet from the people—we are forever intertwined.*

federal state of emergency was declared in early 2016. In the aftermath, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission report determined "The people of Flint did not enjoy the equal protection of environmental or public health laws, nor did they have a meaningful voice in the decisions" (4). Five Michigan officials were charged with involuntary manslaughter (Atkinson and Davey).

We have even more work to do in another area of environmental justice. An oft overlooked, yet just as important, aspect of environmental justice that relates to the disconnect among minorities and people in lower socioeconomic classes is access to environmental amenities. If we are true to ourselves we would surely agree that, just as safe water is a right that all people should be provided, safe access to the natural world should not be a privilege. A common misconception is that justice is accomplished by treating people equally. However, like the plants in our greenspace, that is not true. Each plant is adapted to a difference niche and accordingly needs different amounts of light, nutrients, and water so that treating a cactus like a maple tree is not helpful. Just so with people. What is needed is equitable treatment, which enables each to acquire what they need to survive and thrive.

Equitable treatment enables each to acquire what they need to survive and thrive.

Equity is the goal, but often we fall short. Research has found that ethnic minorities and socioeconomically disadvantaged people, in comparison to those more privileged in society, have access to fewer acres of parks per person, and fewer parks of quality that are well-maintained and safe (Rigolon and Németh 288). Demographic inequities, by no fault or choice of a child, severely impact the ability to connect with nature.

This disconnect has had important effects on the citizens of an area, including on their physical and mental health, and even their exposure to crime. At the Benioff Children's Hospital in Oakland, California, Dr. Nooshin Razani is training pediatricians to write park prescriptions for young patients and their families to visit nearby parks (Seltenrich A255), while Finland public health officials now recommend that all citizens get

a minimum of 5 hours a month in the woods in order to prevent depression (Worrall). Clearly, as people are more removed from nature, it will take more of these programs to re-connect citizens with the positive outcomes of exposure to the natural world.

Another positive outcome of exposure to nature is the finding that more greenspace and vegetation is significantly associated with lower crime rates (Kuo and Sullivan 359; Weinstein, Balmford, et al. 1150; Branas et al. 1301). Especially noteworthy was that the most violent of the crimes studied, aggravated assaults, was most strongly correlated with a neighborhood's degree of greenness, while the least violent crime, theft, showed no association to amount of green space (Branas et al. 1302; Wolfe and Mennis 118).

Wolfe and Mennis suggest that the lower crime rates noted were primarily driven by two factors. The first is strengthened community cohesion as people spend more time socially interacting outdoors in greenspaces. The presence or absence of natural environments can be the difference between people interacting in shared spaces or people being less connected to each other. The second factor is that the presence of plants has a calming and therapeutic effect, which decreases actions and feelings that are precursors to violence (117–18)*.*

Nature is inclusive, it accepts all, and if we learn from it, can help us appreciate the gift that is diversity. Appreciating the diversity in an ecosystem or city can positively change one's feelings about the ecosystem, the city, and importantly, people themselves. Famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted designed New York City's Central Park in response to his realization that there was an inequality in access to beautiful spaces based on a person's class. Inspired by his belief that beautiful green spaces should exist for all people to enjoy, he created Central Park, a greenspace that is the envy of many urban cities in its ability to connect urban citizens of all classes to the environment.

Cultivating Gratitude and Contentment

Our nation's collective greenspaces, the national parks, are special places that for over a century have connected people to the natural world. These gifts to all citizens have been praised as "America's best

idea" (Stegner 4), and they welcome us as Yellowstone does, proclaiming to be "for the benefit and enjoyment of all people" (*National Park Service* 4). The National Park Service was created by Congress in 1916 with an order to maintain the landscapes and wildlife "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations" (*National Park Service* 3).

One of my favorite words in the English language is the word "awesome." The *Oxford English Dictionary* claims the term originated around 1598 and meant being "full of awe, profoundly reverential" ("Awesome"). Rather than the common connotations today of "marvelous" or "great," I will consider the awesomeness of nature and its ability to foster the feeling of profoundly reverential awe. Natural Parks have served as a way of preserving awesome views for the enjoyment of all genders, races, and ages.

Yellowstone National Park evokes a sense of awe.

Humans have a well-developed sense of awe and an affinity for the beautiful. Growing up, we called our place "The Pretty." It was a special area in the woods near my childhood home that connected the neighborhood kids directly to nature. Despite designing Central Park, Fredrick Law Olmsted's "pretty" was the Yosemite Valley. It was the beautiful vista provided by the valley that drove Olmsted to urge that the California legislature protect it from development and allow millions of people today to still enjoy the same view. Natural places impact all of us. We need to facilitate stronger and longer-lasting connections with nature to help us cultivate gratitude and contentment. Natural vistas have a special ability to help us realize how special life is. To enjoy a great view is to enjoy the virtue of contentment. This leads directly to gratitude, in a well-connected cause-and-effect relationship.

Many children grow up confused between wants and needs. The material world and consumer society we live in makes it harder to see the truth that there is a large disparity between the two. The

commercialization of many religious and secular holidays and the constant barrage of advertisements that children see blur the line between necessity and luxury. Nature offers us our needs, but too often we pilfer our wants. As one becomes less mindful, focusing on wants rather than being thankful for the resources available, one moves farther away from being a complete person and exhibits decreased character-building capacity.[2]

It is this confusion between needs and wants that drives consumerism, which further widens the gap of contact and connection to the natural world. To care for the world, one must know the world. To care for a fellow human, one must understand that person. And without connection the capacity to

Facilitating children's connection to nature is vital.

care is lost. Wendell Berry argues that, "We do not understand the earth in terms either of what it offers us or of what it requires of us, and I think it is the rule that people inevitably destroy what they do not understand" (85). If we cannot facilitate the connection of our children with nature, it will lead to the continued confusion about the value in the natural world, both in terms of goods and services. Feelings of greed, lust, and the desire for more leads to consumption and destroys the natural world as well as our communities and personal relationships.

The ability of nature to foster gratitude is certainly one aspect of the natural world that many people do not take time to consider. Nature acts much differently than the commodity-driven economies we're familiar with, economies critiqued by Kimmerer. "Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness, but the (consumer) economy needs emptiness. . . . Gratitude doesn't send you shopping to find satisfaction; it comes as a gift rather than a commodity, subverting the foundation of the whole (consumer) economy" (111). In sharp contrast, nature acts as gift economy, in which its valuables are given without an agreement for immediate or future rewards.

Marvin W. Berkowitz, co-director of the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, states that how parents raise their children is the predominant influence on a child's character formation (54). Children need to be taught how to care for the Earth and to show gratitude to the Earth. To be taught how to say thanks with their words and their actions. Most importantly children need to learn to show gratitude for needs provided by nature. Teach them to thank the apple tree when they take its fruit just as they are taught to thank their grandmother when taking a cookie from her.

Nature's rewards were described by Olmsted 150 years ago. "It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character . . . is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect" (Black 32). The scientific facts Olmsted mentioned certainly were more conjecture than fact at that time. Now without hyperbole it can be stated that it is a scientific fact that the connection to the natural world is favorable to the mental and physical health of men, women, and children. Only in the past few decades has science begun to

Connection to the natural world is correlated with emotional well-being and increased happiness, which lead to better and more efficient growth in moral character.

conclusively show that connection to the natural world is correlated with emotional and psychological well-being, increased innovative potential, positive life satisfaction, decreased stress, and increased happiness (Nisbet and Zelenski 7; Leong et al. 61; Capaldi, Dopko, et al. 10; Ulrich et al. 222). I argue that all these lead to better and more efficient growth in moral character.

Conclusion

Much of the evidence given supporting my idea that the natural world can be beneficial in teaching us and our children character virtues is based on anecdotal evidence. However, I hope it is clear that, like many

promising fields that have started with similar observations, more research will follow to explore this connection.

What *is* clear is that we cannot care for what we do not know. The natural world has shown us time and time again that increased diversity leads to a much stronger, healthier, and resilient community. It is not enough simply to reduce the burden of environmental health hazards for the socioeconomically challenged, rather we also need to facilitate the reaping of benefits of environmental amenities for all people. If we allow people to be awed by nature, they will find that nature is a gateway experience for attaining the virtues of gratitude and contentment.

My daughter, back in her school in the United States, recently had an end of the year "Fun Day" that consisted of an afternoon outside. It brought me back to the utedags they experienced in Sweden and the benefits of weekly outside days. The enhanced connection to nature aided in the development of positive character virtues for all the children. My son repeated a talk they had at his Swedish school relating the many types of trees in the forest that they could look around and see to the many types of people they could look around and see—and how a strong forest—and a strong classroom— results from diversity.

The forest environment plays an important role in outdoor classrooms.

The forest environment played an important role as he explained the class's interaction with a peer. "He isn't nice to people inside, but everyone likes him in the forest." I'm not sure if the student in question was more positively received by his peers due to a shift in the boy's behavior or in the class's response to his behavior. Regardless, nature aided in nurturing a better functioning class community and improved the character of the group. My daughter summed it up best: "It (being outside) makes you forget that you're learning and you just get to play with your friends: people, trees, plants, and animals." Nature is a wonderful classroom and a wonderful teacher,

nurturing virtues that make us more than keepers of Earth, but also keepers of people.

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Photos of Växjö Montessoriskola on pp. 63, 73, and 75 used with permission. Photo credit p. 72: Adam Hoffman

Notes

[1] Interestingly, a growing body of evidence has also shown that compassion for one another and for future generations helps inspire concern for the environment. Social psychologist Stefan Pfattheicher and fellow researchers found that feelings of compassion towards people also promotes pro-environmental feelings activating the moral emotion of compassion (7).

[2] One large benefit in choosing pretty natural vistas over technology is the ability of nature to help us be more mindful, or aware and attune to the present. There are many ways to connect with nature, but research shows that the strongest connections are made when intentional activities involving being outdoors are done daily (Capaldi, Passmore, et al. 7). It can be as simple as a daily walk to work or school, or as involved as a trip to one of the 58 national parks. Buoyed by research that immune cell production is increased and that blood pressure is decreased, Japan has constructed 48 therapy trails to encourage the practice of forest bathing, immersing one's self in nature while mindfully engaging all five senses (Hansen et al. 851).

A common complaint leveled against millennials are that they are so engrossed in their virtual worlds that they are not engaged with the world around them. We need to help them realize the possibilities and benefits of connecting to the wilderness. A heightened sense of awareness results in an empathetic compassion useful in developing character. Barbaro and Pickett found that mindfulness has a positive connection to nature (140), adding strength to the

argument that a connection to nature impacts mindfulness should be a motivating call to arms in helping this group more completely develop character.

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Meredith on the Subway: A Response to Kerr, Jones, Crawford and Bryant, and Hoffman

Brian J. Walsh

The platform is crowded with people increasingly late for work and the trains aren't moving. It is Bathurst Station in Toronto and there seems to be a security issue of some sort. The whole system has shut down until things can be cleared up in the very station where Meredith is waiting to get on a train for work. What's going on? Did someone jump? Maybe a bomb threat? Has a crime been committed? Should Meredith be worried about her safety?[1]

No less than ten police officers arrive and the problem becomes clear. They surround a teenage boy sitting on the platform. He is cuffed and interrogated. The train doors open and everyone squeezes on board. Everyone except Meredith. The boy is black. He doesn't seem to understand why he has attracted so much attention from the Toronto Police Services. He is surrounded by ten large officers. And Meredith isn't leaving.

She goes over to the scene and stands there. No aggressive questioning of what the police are doing to this young man. No pulling out the cellphone to record what is going on. She just stands there. When asked to give the officers some space, she politely takes two steps backwards. She isn't leaving. Her motive is clear and simple. This young man, this

African Canadian teenager is surrounded by police officers because somehow he was perceived as a security threat. And Meredith figures that in the sea of faces around this boy, there needs to be at least one face that is supportive, one face expressing care, one face that is there for him, not against him. She stands to bear witness.

A Toronto subway platform

You see, someone saw a Swiss Army knife fall out of this boy's pocket while he was resting on the platform. That knife occasioned an emergency call to the police that caused significant delays for the whole subway system that morning. But the boy's crime wasn't really the knife. It was the color of his skin. Meredith knew that if a fine-looking, well-dressed white boy had a little pocketknife like that fall out of his pocket, there would be no emergency because there would have been no perceived threat. But black kids in both the United States and Canada get different treatment.

So Meredith stood there to bear witness and only left when it was clear that the lad was not going to be arrested and she had caught his eye to make sure that he was okay. Late for work, she told the story to her boss, who thanked her for doing what she did.

Now, this wasn't the first time that twenty-three-year-old Meredith had intervened on the subway. Let me tell you another story.

As soon as the man stepped onto the subway car it was clear that there was going to be trouble. He took one look at that Muslim family of dad, mom, and child and began berating them. Standing over them, he launched into a threatening tirade of Islamophobic hatred. But before he had one sentence out of his mouth, Meredith was out of her seat and had placed her imposing five-foot-four body between the man and the family. Not on her watch. Not in her presence. Not on this subway car in her city. This man would not be allowed to intimidate this poor family without opposition. This family would not be left unprotected in

the face of such violent racism. Before long another man joined Meredith in defense of this family and ejected the offender from the train. Meredith stayed by the family's side until it was clear that they felt safe.

Now here's something about Meredith. She actually makes a habit of this kind of thing. In fact, she finds herself in such situations with some regularity. In his Narnia book *The Magician's Nephew,* C.S. Lewis wrote, "What you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are" (125). Meredith finds herself standing with a black kid in trouble with the police or a Muslim family threatened on the subway because she saw injustice and racism. She saw fear in the eyes of these neighbors. Maybe that's it. While others either saw threat or simply averted their gaze, intentionally deciding to see nothing at all, Meredith saw neighbors and was compelled to act like a neighbor to them. You see, that's the "sort of person" that Meredith is. By making a habit of this kind of engagement with the world in everyday practices, by being neighborly, even if it puts her at some risk, Meredith both demonstrates her character and continues to form the kinds of virtues that dispose her to inhabit the world in a certain way.

Museum subway platform in Toronto

It seems to me that Meredith's story can serve as a helpful way to bring together some of the themes of this issue of *Character and . . . the Places of Home.*

We have been reflecting on the interrelation of place, home, and the shaping of character. Annalee Ward's opening comments on the disorientation of displacement capture the experiences of that young man surrounded by ten police officers and that vulnerable family confronted by virulent Islamophobia.

A black boy on the subway platform can never forget that he is a black boy. He may be a fourth-generation Canadian who is deeply rooted in this country, and maybe even this city, but the color of his skin and the discriminatory treatment he gets from the police are a constant reminder that he doesn't really belong. While a citizen, born and raised in this country, he is, nonetheless, displaced. Even if he is a hockey-playing, straight-A student in school, who has never been in any trouble, he doesn't have the same "place" on that subway platform as a white kid does. And that Muslim family? Perhaps they are recent refugees from Syria, displaced by war, desperately trying to make a new home in a foreign land. But whether they are refugees or not, their skin color and the hijab worn by the mother clearly identify them as Muslim, and that means that they are marked out as a threat.

Meredith knows such displacement by virtue of her gender. She knows something of the kind of violent threat that these neighbors experienced on the subway. But she also has a deep experience of being placed, of being at home in the world. Maybe it was the way her family home was the gathering spot for all the kids on their street, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion, that gave her this sense of place. Maybe it was all the people who came in and out of her family home, some staying for months, some just dropping in for dinner. For Meredith, home is a place of welcome and hospitality.

Or maybe it was her work in theatre, improv, and circus that attuned her to knowing where she was at any given time, and gave her an awareness of what was going on around her. Maybe it was knowing folks in her life who were literally homeless on the streets of Toronto that has attuned her to forced displacement. Throughout her life Meredith has had deep friendships with people with intellectual disabilities, and maybe that has helped shape her as someone who will protect the vulnerable. Maybe her sense of justice and dignity was deepened through experiences in Central America, or her trip to Palestine when she was a teenager. And from Palestine to the streets of Toronto there have been countless people in Meredith's life who have demonstrated precisely the kind of courage, compassion, and commitment to justice that she displayed on that subway platform. All of these experiences have formed Meredith in a way that has

profoundly shaped her character and given her the kind of life orientation that is born of knowing one's place, one's home.

There is a difference between displacement and placelessness. The displaced are those who are, by various means, stripped of their place. Displacement is something that is imposed on people. Placelessness, however, is a cultural consequence of what James Howard Kunstler calls a "geography of nowhere." As Bouma-Prediger and I put it in *Beyond Homelessness,*

> Whether we are talking about the upwardly mobile who view each place as a rung in the ladder that goes up to who knows where, or the postmodern nomad with no roots in any place or any tradition of place, or the average consumer who doesn't know anything about the place where she lives or the places her food comes from, the reality is the same—we are a culture of displacement. (xii)

The displaced long for place. Those who embrace placelessness don't care.

Ward cites Walter Brueggemann's observation that those who are placeless escape the requirements of place. In the name of an undefined freedom, they embody a certain detachment in their lives, devoid of any commitment. Meredith, however, does not seek escape from difficult and even violent situations around her. Far from detachment, she deliberately attaches herself to threatened neighbors, demonstrating her commitment to them and to a freedom defined by justice. Meredith's experience of place brings responsibility for those who are displaced.

The displaced long for place. Those who embrace placelessness don't care.

In her essay, "The Hospitality of Homemaking," Peg Kerr contrasts the disconnection and fragmentation of a culture of displacement with the virtues of care, humility, and welcome that are at the heart of hospitality. Surely we can see in Meredith's story such radical hospitality. There is no authentic home apart from hospitality and any

life devoid of hospitality is a life hell-bent on home-breaking. That's what was going on in these two subway confrontations. Both stories are about telling people that they have no legitimate "home" in our society. Meredith will not abide such home-breaking. If this city is home for her, then it must be home for all. And so her courageous interventions were about confronting home-breaking discrimination with homemaking hospitality.

In "Homesickness Goes to College," Pamela Crawford and Mary Bryant write about the disorientation of homesickness amongst college students and how education at an institution like the University of Dubuque needs to help students develop resilience in their lives through the formation of virtues like passion, perseverance, courage, hope, vocation, and calling. There can be no doubting Meredith's courage in these subway encounters, nor her passion. Meredith lives in hope of a better world, a world of justice and compassion, of inclusion and equality. And while she has had to persevere, and continues to show remarkable resilience in the face of all kinds of struggles in her life, it is also evident that her passion and courage are rooted in a clear sense of vocation and calling. To not come to the aid of these subway neighbors would have been a betrayal of who she is called to be.

In that sense of calling we meet the kind of relational authenticity and integrity that Andrew Jones writes about in his essay, "Localized Character: Building Community and Modelling Authenticity and Integrity." Jones helpfully moves the language of authenticity away from a romantic individualism to a relational authenticity in community, and the language of integrity away from a self-centered sentimentalism of "to thine own self be true" to a sense of living one's life with an integrating moral coherence. While Meredith demonstrates both such relational authenticity and moral integrity, I find it instructive that we can also detect an abiding connection to locality in Meredith's life. Her character has been formed in the particularity and stability of her family home, and in her family's commitment to local community-building through their political activism, food production, intentionality in buying local, support of community gardens and public institutions like the local libraries and parks, hospitable neighborliness, and ecological care.

The reference to ecological care brings to mind Adam Hoffman's essay, "The Nurture of Nature: Developing Character Virtues." Throughout her life Meredith has cared for animals small (kittens) and large (horses). She has spent time in the wilderness, at a summer camp committed to shaping ecological virtues in its campers, working in the family garden, and playing imaginative games with her friends in the forest. Hoffman is right. Nature can indeed nurture, and the longer one spends being lovingly attentive to non-human creatures, the deeper one's sense of gratitude and contentment will be. Creation teaches compassion, care, and love because creation is born of the compassion, care, and love of the Creator.

Creation teaches compassion, care, and love.

In his book, *Imagining the Kingdom,* James K.A. Smith puts it this way:

> What we do is driven by who we are, by the kind of person we have become. And that shaping of our character is, to a great extent, the effect of the stories that have captivated us, that have sunk into our bones—stories that "picture" what we think life is about, what constitutes the "good life." We live *into* the stories we've absorbed; we become characters in the drama that has captivated us. Thus much of our action is acting out a kind of script that has unconsciously captured our imaginations. And such stories capture our imagination precisely because narrative trains our emotions, and those emotions actually condition our perception of the world. (32)

Our character is rooted in the stories of our lives. Those experiences in the subway have now become part of Meredith's narrative. And, as we have seen, those subway interventions are themselves rooted in the stories of place, family, oppression, vulnerability, joyous activism, engagement with nature, work, and friendship that have shaped Meredith to be the kind of person that she is. And there are, of course, also the stories that have shaped her imagination over the course of her young life. From the stories she was read at bedtime as a child to C.S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicles and (most notably!) J.K. Rowling's tales of Harry Potter, Meredith has been immersed in narratives of good and

evil, of virtue and vice. In these (and many other) stories she has seen how character is formed in the midst of deep struggle and conflict. Tales of creative and resilient resistance to injustice have captured her imagination.

But there is a larger story that is at the heart of Meredith's life. A grand story that has profoundly shaped her imagination. A story that has, in Smith's words, sunk into her bones, provided a picture of what life is all about, and captivated her imagination. We could almost say that she drank in this story with her mother's milk, and this story has provided the primary drama in which Meredith is an actor.

You see, Meredith was raised in a Christian home in which the stories of the Christian scriptures, together with the liturgies of the church, were foundational. In this story Meredith learned that life is rooted in love, and justice is required in the face of oppression. In this narrative it is the poor, those who mourn and who have nothing, who are blessed. This is an upside-down narrative in which the first become last and the last become first. While so much of her culture shouts that it is the powerful and deceitful who are successful in the world, this alternative narrative teaches that it is the meek and the pure in heart who inherit the earth. Here Meredith learned the radical call to be merciful and that the deepest hunger is the hunger for justice. And it is here that she learned that if you live an alternative life, seeking justice and defending the vulnerable, then that just might be dangerous.[2] But since this story is about Jesus, crucified by the imperial powers in collusion with the religious establishment of the day, then danger, suffering, and sacrifice are at the heart of a life of love.

There are likely more ways than we could enumerate how the biblical story has shaped Meredith to be the kind of person that she is. But the central motif that comes to my mind is that of incarnation. In the story of Jesus, the word of God that called forth all of creation became flesh. God became human. The way that Eugene Peterson evocatively paraphrased it was that "the word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (219). To follow Jesus, then, is to bear witness to that word of God, that word embodied in love, justice, forgiveness, and radical hospitality. The word takes on flesh in the neighborhood. No wonder Meredith engages in acts of risky neighborliness. As she

demonstrates what neighborliness looks like, she bears witness to what the word of God looks like when it takes on flesh and rides the Toronto subway.

Meredith stood alone to bear witness when that boy was surrounded by the police. Everyone else on that subway platform left the scene. They didn't want to interrupt their day any further than the delay that had already made them late for wherever they were going. There didn't seem to be anything in their character that compelled them to remain. And maybe this little scenario is indicative of a crisis of character in our culture at this time. Cornell West is one of the greatest prophets in America today. In an article called "America is Spiritually Bankrupt," he argues that as a culture,

> . . . we encourage callousness and reward indifference. We make mean-spiritedness look manly and mature. And we make cold-heartedness look triumphant and victorious. In our world of the survival of the slickest and the smartest, we pave the way for raw greed and self-promotion. We make cowardice and avarice fashionable and compassion an option for losers. We prefer market-driven celebrities who thrive on glitzy spectacles and seductive brands over moral-driven examplars who strive on with their gritty convictions and stouthearted causes.

West describes this as a spiritual bankruptcy because he perceives the narrative of America as lacking the depth of resources necessary to shape a culture of virtue. It is no wonder, West argues, that in the highest office of the nation we find "all spectacle and no substance, all narcissism and no empathy, all appetite and greed and no wisdom and maturity."

If West is right in his analysis of the present moral condition of the United States, then the educational responsibility to shape students as people of virtuous character takes on a subversive urgency. If the "homeland" has degenerated into a society in which the vices of callousness, indifference, greed, self-promotion and narcissism are all normalized and revalued as virtues, then an institutional undertaking like the Wendt Character Initiative has a homemaking calling.

> *Hospitality is at the heart of any place that is worthy of being called a home.*

And that, oddly enough, will require the forming of a community of students who are increasingly not at home in a culture of hard-hearted mean-spiritedness because they long for a better home, a world where righteousness is at home (2 Pet. 3.13). In stark contrast to the xenophobia of the rhetoric about the American homeland these days, hospitality is at the heart of any place that is worthy of being called a home. Peg Kerr put it so well in her article when she wrote, "Hospitality gentles the world; a warm and welcoming home can be a microcosm of peace on earth." And sometimes that hospitable homemaking happens in small acts of courage and love, of taking a stand and bearing witness . . . on the subway.

A Christian Reformed Campus Minister at the University of Toronto, Dr. Walsh pastors the Wine Before Breakfast community and leads a staff team in campus ministry. He was Senior Member in Worldview Studies at the Institute for Christian Studies, has taught in the Creation Care Studies Program in Belize and New Zealand, and currently serves as Adjunct Professor of Theology of Culture at both Wycliffe and Trinity Colleges within the Toronto School of Theology.

Dr. Walsh writes and teaches at the interface of biblical theology and contemporary culture. His work is decidedly interdisciplinary in scope, ranging across the disciplines of biblical studies, theology, philosophy, social science, and cultural analysis. Within the framework of a contextual biblical theology, his work has led him to address such themes as the nature of worldviews, postmodernity, empire, home and homelessness, liturgy, and contemporary music. He has written and co-written numerous articles and books, and blogs regularly at www.empireremixed.com. He also appears in the documentary films Bruce Cockburn: Pacing the Cage and Ordinary Radicals. *He has been interviewed for radio on numerous occasions, most notably for the "Imagination" series produced for CBC Radio's* Ideas *and the episode "Who is the Holy Ghost" on CBC Radio's* Tapestry.

Dr. Walsh lives on a solar-powered organic farm with his wife, Sylvia Keesmaat, where he is still trying to grow a potato crop as good as his garlic.

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Notes

[1] The stories that I tell about Meredith are true, but I have changed her name.

[2] I refer here to the Beatitudes of Jesus as found in Matthew 5.1-12 and (even more radically) in Luke 6.17-26.

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