

Character and . . .

Identity

Volume 6 / 2020

ANNALEE R. WARD

Introduction: Character and Identity

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Editors

Annalee R. Ward, Executive Editor

Mary K. Bryant, Managing Editor

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.

Contact Information

Wendt Center for Character Education
University of Dubuque
2000 University Avenue
Dubuque, IA 52001

563-589-3440 (office)
563-589-3243 (fax)
wendt@dbq.edu (email)
www.dbq.edu/wendt (website)

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Character and Identity

Annalee R. Ward

David lived his integrity. Whether it meant returning a grocery cart to its place, even in the rain, or returning the 57 cents given in too much change from a clerk's error, David did what was honest, kind, and right. These practices carried over to work life. Accept gifts for Christmas from company suppliers? Absolutely not, as it could create the perception of conflict of interest. Fudge the numbers on supply costs—no way.



Even as memories fade, our identity retains its foundations of good character.

David's habits of integrity reduced his decision-making stress and formed his life. Doing the right thing did not need to be debated; he just did it. Today, David, in his sunset years, has lost his short term memory, but he has not lost his identity of moral character. Ask him for help with the vacuuming, he's right there. Hear a report of a politician caught in a lie, he's disappointed, even disgusted. David's character forms the foundation of his identity even as his memories fade.¹

Age-old questions of human identity begin to multiply when put into the conversation with moral character. What is the relationship between who I think I am and how I live? Am I defined by how others perceive me, by my intersections with others and the world, or is there something that stands alone? How much does the situation or locale shape me? How do my practices, my habits, form me? And is that formation the imprint that is my identity, and my identity, my character?

These questions and more began this Wendt Research Team's work together. We quickly realized that we would not be able to delve deeply into the relationship between character and identity—

this issue's theme; rather, each

author would follow different paths hoping to start this journey of exploring the continent of knowledge and questions of human identity. Beginning with the familiar—our own failures, Lindsey M. Ward helps orient our thinking about ways our character grows through failure by being willing to reflect on and share those failures. In so doing, we teach not only ourselves, but leave a trail for others to learn how to avoid our mistakes. From there Joseph Sabin explores identity and character in the context of sports, urging participants to be more deliberate in naming and pursuing character growth even in the setting of competition. Timothy Matthew Slemmons reminds us of the need for the spiritual on our life's journey. He challenges us to open-mindedly listen for God's voice, particularly in scripture, in order to discover the potential for a transformed identity. Failure stories can deepen our character, sport identity can lose sight of character, and scripture can transform our character. Taken together, these essays, while divergent, suggest some definitions of key terms and proceed on presuppositions about the nature of humanity.

What is the relationship between who I think I am and how I live?

Complicated Definitions

Clear definitions of character were not a destination for us; rather, we sought to put moral character in conversation with ways we discern our identities. Thus, these essays do not take the usual paths of identity politics. The landscape of character and identity is vast and these authors chose to go in different directions. I believe this is so because the relationship between our identity and our character contains multiple facets, scattering light on a variety of topics and disciplinary places.


As we considered the relationship between identity and character, we considered identity to often be defined by individual choice while character is revealed in one's interactions with others and the world.

Yet even that is a bit reductive; one might have active choice in both. Identity might be shaped by understanding of one's own character. One might choose to say "I am a person of high moral character," or "I am someone who tells the truth." Choosing character habits joins the individual to a broader community of people choosing to be moral.

Very often, identity emerges in description of physical qualities, experiences, education, work, etc., that remain outside of moral character identifiers. We use identity as a way of distinguishing between people. We speak of moral character as a way of being. Joining these personhood markers together challenges us to think more holistically. Central to these discussions were the influence of context and/or culture, cries for authenticity and the need for horizons of significance to guide our understandings.

One way we come to define ourselves is in dialogue with our context and culture. External forces shape and form us. Interactions with people inform our self-understanding. Our responses in turn impact our perceptions of self and our practices of virtue.

Philosopher Charles Taylor has spent much of his career exploring identity and morality. He reminds us of the centrality of that kind of give and take. "[M]y discovering my own identity doesn't mean I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others" (*Philosophical Arguments* 231). Similarly, Miroslav Volf in his exploration of identity writes:



Choosing character habits joins the individual to a broader community of people choosing to be moral.

I will explore what kind of selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with others. My assumption is that selves are situated; they are female or male, Jew or Greek, rich or poor—as a rule, more than one of these things at the same time ("rich Greek female"), often having hybrid identities ("Jew-Greek" and "male-female"), and sometimes migrating from one identity to another. (10)

The dialogic struggle between identity and context is a common experience, especially evident when we encounter new situations, new people, and life's upheavals. How we respond to this dialogue, whether out of habits or reactions, reflects our moral character, its strengths and weaknesses. When we are able to move toward a self-fidelity, toward consistency, we see another concern of character and identity expressed in the concept of authenticity.



How do we define ourselves?

In an attempt to distinguish integrity, honesty, and authenticity, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, leading researchers in positive psychology on character strengths, define authenticity as “emotional genuineness and also psychological depth” (250). Unfortunately, this rather clinical definition doesn't move us toward any evaluative judgments. And we need those to recognize that following our own hearts (desires) doesn't always lead us to good character. Equating authenticity to this latter definition does nothing for encouraging positive moral identity.

A common concern of authenticity might be that the front we present to the world doesn't always match the way we feel inside or in our private lives. We may question whether we are being authentic and truthful when we don't “let it all hang out.” Scholar Greg Spencer describes his frustration with this phoniness and duplicity as a longing for authenticity—for moral character that matches the person's presented identity. But again, the call for this kind of understanding of authenticity is one that begins with a self-focus. Spencer challenges us to look outside of self when he redefines authenticity as “a rigorous, inside-out consistency that courageously cares for others” (72). Other-care adds a radical dimension to authenticity, taking out self-centered naval-gazing and the sole focus on one's own desires. Spencer's outward gaze returns us to the work of Charles Taylor.


Taylor argues in both *Sources of the Self* and in *The Ethics of Authenticity* that authentic, morally good identity must be anchored in a “horizon of significance.” In other words, definition, authority, and clarity of who I am lies outside of myself and guides my sense of self. By tethering the sense of self in a “horizon of significance,” which acts as a “moral

source” (*Sources* 93), evaluation is possible. We have something to look to, to compare with in order to determine the better or worse, good or bad of our character. Slemmons agrees with this and demonstrates how this external horizon becomes internalized as he shares historical stories of transformed lives, all because the individuals became open to the external authority of God speaking through scripture.

The authority the horizon of significance exercises enables one to grow into an identity that, as Miroslav Volf describes, learns “*what kind of selves we need to be* in order to live in harmony with others” (21; italics his). While identity is not as simplistic as it sounds because we all inhabit multiple identities, the unity found in this common purpose, a purpose that lies outside of self, a horizon toward which we aim, anchors the expression of all of our identities. Our identity(ies), then, becomes visible in our practices as does our character.

Character and . . . Identity Issue

Various experiences shape us, reflect our character, and feed our sense of self, our identity. Shared dialogue, reflection, even argument contribute to our identity and illumine our character. Assuming the power of community formation, the authors of the three essays read together, discussed, debated, wrote, and gave feedback in weekly meetings with the hope that their varying interests would uncover insight. The time we spent in this community sharpened ideas, bringing people together only to send them out to a wide set of topics that somehow find common ground in thinking about character and its relationship to our identity.



*A horizon toward
which we aim
anchors the
expression of all of
our identities.*

Our respondent, Wally Metts, came to this topic with fresh eyes and a gracious engagement with each essay. As he wrestles with definitions, he concludes that we are to take the topic of character and identity at face value, approaching it with humility and a focus on story. To that end, our authors share many stories from the power of failures

to the dangers to character posed by identity tunnel vision, to the possibility and reality of lives transformed.

Using multiple examples from diverse fields, Lindsey Ward eloquently argues for the necessity of sharing failure stories in order to teach and mentor well. Acknowledging our failures should not be something that is abnormal; rather, they present an opportunity to learn and grow as we own them and reflect on them. Too often our culture promotes perfection both on the individual level and on the organizational level. That false image damages identities and carries catastrophic potential, as Ward illustrates. Being willing to share stories of failure—even minor ones—at appropriate times contributes to both normalizing failure as an acceptable occurrence (when minor) and not an identity, and it helps us learn from one another’s mistakes.

Joseph Sabin invites us to question the truism that “sports build character.” While not denying that they can do so, it’s not inevitable, he argues. Far too many athletes seek sports as the means of defining their identity and not their character builder. Far too many parents, coaches, and administrators dream about wins, fame, and fortune, forgetting the power of losses and bench-sitting to teach lessons in character. The current structure of youth sports is biased toward the former goals and not the lessons to be learned, Sabin says. Using the examples of Andrew Luck, retired quarterback, and Ryan Leaf, a released quarterback, Sabin illustrates how there is not a causal connection between playing sports and good character.² Building an identity outside of one’s sport is critical for healthy development, and building one’s character while playing sports takes effort on everyone’s part but leads to a better sports culture and a better world.


Timothy Slemmons delights in contemplating how reading scripture can both shape character and ultimately “write” the narrative of our lives. Using multiple examples from history, Slemmons eagerly invites readers to “suspend their disbelief” and open their Bibles. He promises no magical interventions or dramatic conversions, although some of his examples suggest the possibility, but rather, he winsomely encourages his audience to consider taking a serious look at the Bible as the Word of God. This Word will open up possibilities of shaping one’s identity in a

direction of positive moral character and will be anchored to a significant horizon. Who knows, it could even be transformative.

Conclusion

In a world where too often the question of “who am I?” is answered with what we do to earn a living, this journal issue reminds us that while various experiences, work, and roles contribute to shaping us, they do not equate with who we are at our core, as we see in David. We are humans created as beings stamped with their Creator’s imprint, holding gifts and talents, emotions and intellect, preferences and expressions, but marred by an innate brokenness that can only be healed by the Creator’s touch.

Jean Bethke Elshtain’s *Who Are We?* explores identity from this standpoint of human fallibility, particularly our tendencies toward pride and slothfulness or laziness, and points us toward the hope of a redeemed humanity. But until then, she finds hopeful identity in being Christ-followers who seek to live out their faith in a contextualized, involved engagement with the world by “*display[ing] what incarnational being-in-the-world is all about*” (142; italics hers). We are flawed people who have the opportunity to find identity outside of our flaws and inside of a perfect human in the form of Jesus Christ.



Writing the story of our identity begins with caring about good character.

Whether tunnel-visioned or failure-focused, character and identity can grow and change for the better. Writing the story of our identity begins with caring about good character. Let’s strive to be people who consistently live out their identities in ways that recognize that failures are not the last word. Let’s define

ourselves as people who cast their vision outward toward horizons of significance that call us to genuinely care about others and this world.

Annalee R. Ward is the Director of the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa. Through programming and curriculum, the Wendt Character Initiative seeks to shape character for lives of

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

Photo credit p. 2: Annalee R. Ward; composite: Mary K. Bryant

Photo credit p. 5: Mary K. Bryant

Notes

¹ Scientists are studying the relationship between moral character and identity and have developed the moral-self hypothesis which looks at how even some neurological diseases like Alzheimer's and ALS, while affecting a person's ability to function, do not change their fundamental moral identity. How people live their lives, the habits and practices of daily living, shape and form people. "A study published in the journal *Psychological Science* has found that 'who one is' is largely defined by one's moral behavior and not by one's memory capacity or other cognitive abilities" (Azarian; Strohminger and Nichols).

² After Leaf got out of rehab and prison, he said: "I was told how great I was at something, and I tended to believe it," Leaf says. "I thought I was a god. I was more important than you, because I could do this thing where I played a silly sport that made me a better human being, in my eyes" (Waleik).

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On Becoming a Better Failure: How Failure Stories Can Shape Our Identities

Lindsey M. Ward

Abstract

Failure sharing promotes an essential normalization of failure as a part of everyone's identity as well as a natural retraining of how we assign blame and reason to our own future failures. Three lessons on failure sharing help us construct identities that include a healthy concept of failure: failure hurts, but normalizing it reduces emotional pain; we learn from others' failures differently than from our own; and minor failures can offer healthy lessons as well as major ones. It is healthy and important to share failure stories for the development of identities that are not dependent solely upon success as a primary indicator of who we are but include failure as a normal, significant, and even good part of human existence.

A few friends gathered in a bar with one question: why don't we ever talk about our failures? The conversation became so intensely fascinating that the friends quickly pulled together a repeat gathering with more friends that turned into a series of events that in turn ballooned into a truly global phenomenon. F*ckup Nights, as they were branded, were born (henceforth in this article to be referred to as

FUNs). In just seven years, FUNs have found their way into 321 cities in 90 countries with almost a million attendees and have witnessed the sharing of over 15,000 stories of failure. Offshoots of this simple endeavor, that is, the effort of making room for failure stories, have produced a book, a research entity, and a long list of failure-related publications (“Stories about Failure—Fuckup Nights Global Movement”). As it turns out, people are pretty hungry for a good failure story, but why?



Can sharing failure stories help?

In this article, I would like to propose a few things about sharing our failure stories with one another. First, failure sharing has a positive impact on who we are, our very identities. Next, failure needs to be understood as a normal, natural, and inevitable part of our lives. And last, we can learn from others’ failures, big or small, in ways that are different than learning from our own failures. It is healthy and important to learn to share failure stories for the development of identities that are prepared for the realities of existence and that embrace failure as a normal, significant, even good part of life. But before we dive into all of that, we need to consider why failure sharing is so crucially important.

Where did failure go?

Modern Western society makes perfection look easy. Magazines show perfect bodies, perfect faces, and perfect hair; and billboards and advertisements suggest that there are many ways to perfection—just call now! Social media, possibly the biggest culprit of displays of perfection, shows us all sorts of perfect. YouTube shows off perfect hobbies; Twitch offers users perfect video game play; Instagram wows with perfect homes, outfits, food, and travel; and Pinterest displays nothing but lists of perfect ideas for just about everything. We look out into that endless perfect world, then look into our own lives, and we are shocked to see that our bodies have lumps, our faces have pores, our hair is flat, our video gaming requires hundreds of attempts, our homes are a mess, our kids throw tantrums, our food does not deserve


framing, we do not really even take trips, and our stuff is not always the latest and greatest. And we are left to cope with the vast distance between what we see and what we experience.

Dr. Jean Twenge, author of *iGen*, notes that the internet, and life in general, is relentlessly positive, full of highlight reels and smiling selfies, with people posting almost exclusively stories of success online. The prevalence of such positive and success-oriented performance art is producing the message that friends, families, celebrities, and influencers just do not fail. When we think of our own life experiences in light of what we see online, we rarely, if ever, measure up, and it leads to feelings of inadequacy and depression (94–101).

Dr. Twenge goes on to assert in her research that “[a]ll screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness.” She found a direct relationship between spending time on things like social media and a much greater chance of being unhappy. She goes on to note that social media promises to connect us to our friends, but the people who use social media the most often report feeling lonely, left out, and unloved (“Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”).

The potential identity-shaping effect of this phenomenon is measurable. The percentage of teens and young adults who believe their life is unenjoyable, that they cannot do anything right, and even that their life is not useful has increased dramatically in the last seven years or so. The American Freshman Survey indicated a 95% rise in depressive symptoms between 2013 and 2016, over just four years of surveyed incoming college students (Twenge, *iGen* 103-104).

Success-orientation is problematic in the business world as well, though perhaps in very different ways than with individuals. Organizational behavioral theory suggests organizations with exclusive success experiences will often treat those successes as evidence that “existing organization knowledge represents the world well and that further developments of knowledge is unnecessary.” This leads to faulty, overconfident conclusions suggesting their existing knowledge is all they need to continue seeing success (Madsen and Desai 453).



The perpetual focus on success has detrimental effects on our identities.

Whether in business or in individual lives, the perpetual focus on success has detrimental effects on our identities. It either produces underconfident, depressive identities that lack hope in the possibility of productive lives or overconfident, know-it-all identities that think there

is nothing to learn outside of what we already know in order to continue enjoying success. Either way, eliminating failure stories from our experience has fundamentally shifted our understandings of who we are and aspire to be.

While individuals may have been strongly encouraged by current success-focused selfie culture to forget how to share failures with one another, business sectors overwhelmingly have not. Failure sharing in business has been well researched over time, and there seem to be some beneficial trends. The medical field, banking industry, scientific research labs, and even the global orbital launch vehicle industry, just to highlight a few sectors, all have published abundant research over the years about how they learn from, share, understand, and utilize failures. When considered broadly across a wide variety of sectors, business organizations have some important lessons that could be applied to our individual understandings of our identity as it relates to our failures and failure sharing.

In the sections that follow, I would like to propose three things that individuals could learn from business about failure sharing:

- 1) Failure hurts, but if it is “normal,” it hurts less.
- 2) We learn from others’ failures differently than we learn from our own.
- 3) Minor failures are just as important to share as major ones.

Now that we have learned why failure sharing is so important to who we are and believe ourselves to be, we will look at the three lessons we can learn about sharing our failures that might give us some instruction on how to use our failures and the failures of others in our lives.

Failure hurts, but if it is “normal,” it hurts less

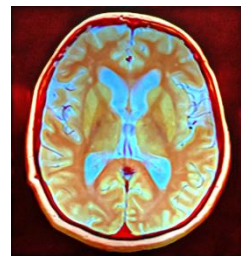
No matter how you frame it, failure hurts. Failure triggers feelings of embarrassment, rejection, and shame, to name just a few uncomfortable emotions. And it hurts worse when it feels out of place or unusual.

Failure emotions diminish our abilities to clearly evaluate.

In a study examining research scientists’ reactions to project failure, scientists interviewed noted feelings of frustration, depression, anxiety, and even physical pain when reflecting on recent projects that failed. They told stories of crying at their desks, taking extended sick leave, and withdrawing from work-related email communication. Some contemplated whether it even made sense to continue their work (Shepherd et al. 1233). Top researchers in their fields were shaken by the deep pain of failure.

Failure-related emotions and experiences can be damaging to our identities. Failure emotions diminish our abilities to clearly evaluate contributing factors to our failures or events of the past; they make us feel detached and isolated from groups and organizations; and they impact future decision-making through anxiety over the possibility of failing again (Shepherd et al. 1233-1234).


Failure is attached to some of the strongest emotional responses that we as humans experience. A feeling of humiliation, which often accompanies failure, for instance, has been measured in brain scans as a significantly more mentally demanding emotion over other emotions like anger, happiness, and even shame (Otten and Jonas). Living in a culture that does not readily accept failure as the norm can accentuate these feelings because they are tied up in a desire for social confirmation. People who feel as though they have lost social confirmation tend to experience a severe kind of pain that is often long-lasting (Alter 224-225).



Brain scans allow scientists to examine emotional responses.

In an experiment set up to test responses to social rejection, Dr. David Hsu of Stony Brook University designed totally transparent tests, letting subjects know in advance that they would be experiencing fabricated rejection from an automated computer system. Even when they knew it was not real, test subjects experienced negative emotions when the computer “rejected” them. A similar study found that people react with negative emotions when rejected by a group that they hate and would never want to be involved in (Kinney)!

FUNs, the failure sharing events mentioned in the introduction, found a possible antidote to such powerful negative reactions to failing and the loss of social confirmation by turning failure stories into events with an audience that was not interested in rejecting the failure of the sharer, but rather embracing it as something accepted, normal, even, dare I say, fun. In doing so, FUNs help audiences and failure sharers alike experience a socially healthy response to failure and rejection, connecting with people over failure and making it normal (Kinney). When embraced as learning experiences, the pain and discomfort of failures have been linked to greater resilience, the desire to improve ourselves (Lang 16-21, 37), and growth in moral character (Ward 3-5).



When failures are viewed as nothing extraordinary, there is a better chance of identifying them and learning from them.

The business sector has also provided a potential solution to helping take the sting out of failures: make failure a normal part of one’s work experience. How? Sharing beliefs of teams and managers about what failures are and how to deal with them can be one way to produce normalizing

results. When everyone is on board and failures are viewed and treated as nothing extraordinary in an organization, they are not nearly as painful, and when they aren’t so painful, there is a better chance of identifying them and learning from them. Normalizing failure in an organization often results in setting up a supportive environment to fail, one that is not based on punishments for failures. This helps to ensure that failures are analyzed and learned from, negative emotions are reduced, and motivation to keep learning is high (Shepherd et al. 1236-1237).

Normalizing failure not only helps organizations learn from their experiences, it can actually redefine what organizations consider success and failure. When failure is heavily stigmatized in the workplace, individuals tend to get creative in how they respond to failures to avoid punishment or discomfort. They either refuse to acknowledge failure, or worse, they find ways to reframe failures as successes.



NASA's space shuttle Atlantis

The global orbital launch vehicle industry presents a tragic example of just how dangerous this can be. In 2002, NASA launched the space shuttle *Atlantis*, its 111th shuttle launch. Just after takeoff, a piece of protective foam insulation broke free from the craft, damaging a part of the solid rocket booster. The loss of foam

did not compromise the launch or the reentry of the vehicle, and NASA determined that the issue was not serious enough to delay future launches with an investigation since the mission had been a success. After all, NASA had a long history with successful shuttle launches, and that history inflated a certain confidence that things like a loss of foam or other debris was not a significant risk.

The space shuttle *Columbia* was launched by NASA just six months and two shuttle launches later in 2003. Just over a minute after launch, the situation that crews had experienced on *Atlantis* repeated itself on *Columbia*. A piece of foam once again fell off and, this time, caused damage to a fuel tank and wing of the shuttle. The rocket was nonetheless able to enter orbit and nearly completed its mission. However, upon reentry into the atmosphere, *Columbia's* foam block damage proved too severe to overcome the forces of reentry. It exploded, killing all seven crew members on board. The resulting investigation of the failed mission produced a six-volume, 4,000-page report on the findings with 29 mandated changes to be made prior to any further NASA launches (Madsen and Desai 451).

The global orbital launch vehicle industry provides a clear picture of what happens when failure is not a normal, accepted part of an

organization's practice. The loss of foam on *Atlantis* was not considered a failure. In fact, the mission was considered a total success, a win. The *Columbia* disaster was a result of a longstanding issue with ignoring or redefining failure, with catastrophic results. In organizations where failure is not accepted, individuals who might have insights into failures instead try to cover them up or redefine failures as successes, losing essential and important information along the way and compromising the integrity of the entire organization. However, organizations that treat failures as normal and not punitively at all levels of the organization have more errors reported and experience fewer serious failures than organizations that do not (Madsen and Desai 471).

In a much lighter vein, one of college football's arguably greatest coaches, Nick Saban, knows a thing or two about defining failure. Even after big wins, he can be seen fuming on the sidelines. He keeps track of errors, both in practice and in games, for all of his players in order to keep them focused on the things that they can control, improve, and learn from. He calls it "the process"



Coach Nick Saban focuses on failures to help his team learn.

("Nick Saban"). Saban's approach, some might think, leans too far from redefining failures into successes all the way to redefining successes as failures! Maybe neither is helpful. But if Coach Saban's "process" had been applied to each of the 112 NASA global orbital vehicle launches prior to the launch of *Columbia*, might we have seen a much different result?¹

How do these lessons in how failure is viewed and treated translate to individuals? One way we normalize failure conversations in our relationships is by establishing shared beliefs about failure. More than ever, we need frequent reminders that everyone fails—it is inevitable, and we need to be talking about that. We need to be willing to talk about what we believe about failures. We need to talk about the pain and emotions involved when we fail. We need to talk about the supports that we seek out to help us through failure. These conversations promote honesty and compassion, and should come up between friends, parents and their kids, mentors and their mentees,

professors and their students, and co-workers and bosses in all sectors of business.

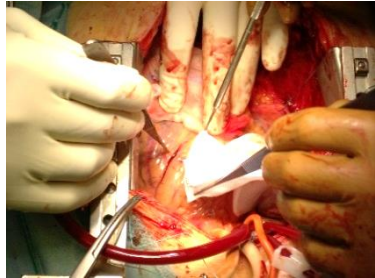
I personally try to share stories of my failures as a parent with other parents often. Having three children in just over two years has been filled with failure. Toddlers, for example, are exhausting and relentless sources of opportunities to fail as a parent: the football-style carry of the screaming kid out of Target without purchasing anything; the permanent marker that leads to a new display on the wall from a budding Picasso; a momentary distraction that results in a potty training poop-trail through the kitchen; one child's backyard tantrum creating an opportunity for a naked romp through the neighborhood for the other.

I would not have to share these experiences with anyone, but I know that being willing to say to a new mom that I do not always love parenting, that we almost never look like the few magical, well-behaved, smiling moments I post on social media, makes it a little more normal for her to feel frustration or less-than-rosy feelings for her experience with her baby. And that might make a difference for her understanding of failure's role in parenting. That support and shared understanding between us is crucial for helping us understand who we are.

As I mentioned earlier, modern culture gives our developing identities a beating with a barrage of constant positivity-viewing. It is tough to place what we know about our own lives into what we see of others' lives. It leaves us with a desperate feeling that we are the only ones who fail. Or we could take the equally damaging road of attempting to redefine our failures as successes to avoid the pain of social rejection. In my parenting examples above, a logical conclusion I might reach if my parenting cannot fail might be that my kids are just unlovable brats. That sort of scapegoating is damaging to not only my identity but also to my (very lovable, not-bratty) kids. This is why normalizing failure is so crucially important in developing our identities as individuals. We all will fail, and we deeply need to know that it is normal. Sharing failure with each other helps with that and even allows us to learn from failure in new ways.

We learn from others' failures differently than we learn from our own

Heart surgeons are not insulated from failure experiences, as frightening as that might be. A ten-year study of a group of heart surgeons documented the process of learning and mastering a new minimally invasive procedure on patients. Even with live patients, new procedures have a learning curve that includes some failures along the way. One would think that in a high risk environment such as heart surgery, if a surgeon made a mistake that resulted in the loss of a patient's life, she would learn quickly and make appropriate corrections to ensure success in the future. It turns out, that is not at all what the researchers found (KC et al.).



People can fail to learn from mistakes even in high risk environments.

The researchers actually found that if a surgeon had early success with the procedure, she was almost twice as likely to have significantly more successful procedures in the future as having no previous experiences with the procedure. And if a surgeon had any failure experiences with the procedure she was three times more likely to have significantly more failed procedures in the future (KC et al. 2442). What exactly is going on here?

When we fail, we have some natural inclinations as a response to that failure. Mostly, we want to save face. We want to maintain the best and most positive self-image we can. After a failure experience, people tend to select factors to blame their failures on, and since we are inclined to protect our own self-image, we most often attribute our failures to external factors like bad luck or difficulty of the task. It tends to ease some of the negative emotions associated with failure mentioned earlier. After a success experience, we are more likely to assign our successes to internal factors such as effort or ability. In psychology, this is called *attribution theory* and it helps us understand the data found in the heart surgeon study (KC et al. 2436).

If a surgeon fails a procedure, attribution theory suggests that the surgeon is likely to associate that failure with things outside of her control. Maybe the patient was too sick, or the equipment failed, or the medical assistant reacted too slowly. If an error can be justified as outside of our control, then we are not at fault, and if we are not at fault, then we are far less likely to make any effort to learn what actually went wrong. We might even double down and stick with the faulty strategy or procedural steps for all future procedures, even if it continues to produce failure (KC et al. 2444-2445). And if you are a heart surgeon or heart surgery patient, then this is very bad news.

However, attribution theory explains something even more profound than the fact that we are not all that likely to learn from our own failures. When we consider other peoples' failures and successes, we attribute factors totally differently than we do our own. Without the negative and painful emotions that conflate our own failure experiences and tend to make us blame other people or things for our failures, when we look at others' failures, we tend to assign them more often to internal factors than external.



Learning about others' failures helped surgeons significantly improve outcomes.

When surgeons in the heart procedure study heard about other surgeons failures, they were 1.5 times more likely to have significant improvements in their own surgical outcomes. Successes of those other surgeons did not matter so much, but their failures most definitely mattered (KC et al. 2443).


Attribution theory does not just explain what we associate our failures and successes with, but it also speaks to the motivation that follows a success or failure experience. If we assign our failures to external or uncontrollable factors such as the weather, other people's actions, or luck, as we often do, there is no real motivation to reflect on the failure and make changes to impact the outcome in the future. The situation seems outside of our control to change so we do not make any changes (Weiner 549).

Since we view other people's experiences differently than our own, we are more inclined to attribute their failures to internal and controllable factors such as effort, ability, or amount of time spent, and that might motivate us to change our own behaviors. This explains clearly what happened in the study of the heart surgeons, and it gives individuals a working model to better learn from failure.

Colleges and universities have long seen attribution theory at work in students. Students who underperform or who fail to meet expectations of being a college student often link their failure to unchangeable internal things such as their own lack of aptitude or ability. They believe they just are not capable. They also tend to associate their successes with less stable external factors like luck. This combination of attributions makes it challenging for students to stay motivated because it does not seem like there is much they can actually change about their failures and successes (Perry et al. 691).

If student attributions are challenged, research suggests they can be encouraged to alter them toward more useful ones that can help them stay motivated. Interventions in student attribution retraining are fairly simple in design: talk with students about what they think causes their successes and failures. In a review of studies on the topic, colleges presented students with attribution suggestions through a variety of interventions. In one study, students were merely asked to imagine specific reasons for failure and success in specific scenarios. Several colleges showed videos or interviewed upper class students who shared stories of their undesirable first semester grade point average and how they were able to improve over time through internal, controllable choices. In one study, feedback on exams was oriented toward helpful attribution suggestions based on exam outcomes (Perry et al. 694-703).

One of the leading researchers in this field, Dr. Carol Dweck, boiled students' attributional tendencies down to just two general mindsets: *fixed mindset* and *growth mindset*. She found that students with fixed mindsets were terrible at accurately predicting their own abilities and performance, but those with a growth mindset were highly accurate. Those



Those with the growth mindset were open to learning.

with the growth mindset were open to learning and therefore needed accurate information about their current abilities in order to effectively improve. The exciting basis for much of her work is that mindsets can be changed. Similar to the college studies mentioned above, Dweck suggests interventions that help students alter their mindsets from fixed toward growth primarily through sharing. Her interventions display students who started out failing, learned a new mindset, then ultimately succeeded through use of that new mindset (2).

Heart surgeons and college students learn from others' failures, and so do the rest of us. I mentioned some of my own comical parenting failures earlier, but I have to say that when I was a new mom, none of my failures felt funny, light, or shareable in any way. I felt like everything was out of my control and good days were just lucky. I was lucky, in a way, to have a few great mom-friends who were willing to set some of my parenting failure attributions straight through sharing of their own failures. Hearing about others' failures allows us to consider what factors to associate those failures with in different ways than we naturally tend to for our own failures. And importantly, we have the opportunity to choose how to move forward with what we believe and what we do with our own failure experiences, hopefully learning and growing into more compassionate and forgiving people.

Minor failures are just as important to share as major ones

If NASA's catastrophic mishap with the *Columbia* global orbital vehicle taught us anything alongside its first lesson of the importance of making failure a normal part of an organization, it is this: Minor failures are failures worth paying attention to. There is a great deal of space between a single chunk of insulating foam flying off of a rocket in one otherwise uneventful mission and an entire space shuttle exploding in another mission because of a single chunk of insulating foam flying off, but all along that continuum, failure should be called what it is: failure. If we rush to redefine or contort small failures into something that looks more like success, we rob ourselves of the rich potential for learning that can take place as a result of those failures.

Near-failure was a term developed in a study of the commercial banking industry to describe banks that began to experience decline of some

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kind but later recovered. But it is a bit of a misnomer. Similar to how *Atlantis* and several other shuttle launches were not exactly failures but certainly experienced failure, the banks highlighted in the study experienced failure, but it was not catastrophic, as the banks did not close down operations. The study discovered that banks learned a great deal from both the near-failure experiences of other banks as well as the total, bank-closing failures. One of the findings of the study indicated that those smaller failures provided a rich data set for other banks to rely on, in essence, a set of pre-post experiments that emphasized possible solutions to failure situations, a template for navigating failures (Kim and Miner 690).

What is great about near-failures or those smaller, seemingly less significant failures is that they can teach some of the same lessons that the big, awful failures can without nearly the same negative emotional load or consequences. In fact, without the consequences or emotional toll, we can more clearly, calmly, and directly learn from the situation.



Failures impact students' identities.

In the world of higher education, failure stories have an impact on student identity development. Arthur Chickering was one of the originators of an entire body of research on student identity development theories, and he found that people involved in the lives of students, be it faculty, administrative staff, even custodians and food service workers, had an impact on their identities. Chickering states,

By letting students know our own occupational history, and by sharing our feelings about it and the reasons for our moves, we permit students to vicariously test their own occupational plans and aspirations. By letting students know our home and family, the way we spend our time, the organizing needs and satisfactions for our particular life-style, we provide a wider base for clarification of their future existence. (Chickering and Reisser 329)

New York Times writer David Brooks once announced in his class that he would be cancelling office hours due to a personal issue that a friend was coming to help him sort out. It was a minute and momentary failure—one that impacted very few and only for a day. His inbox later that day contained fifteen or so messages from his students noting that they were thinking of him or praying for him, and the entire class dynamic noticeably shifted from that day forward. Cognitive science research has shown a connection between emotions and learning; emotions help guide us toward what to pay attention to, get excited about, or remember. His point was that perhaps we learn best from those we love because we can connect with them and the ideas they represent. Perhaps failure sharing works similarly—that when we hear stories of failure from those we look up to or admire, they mean something more and we can learn more from them.

Failure stories have an impact on student identity development.

Failure stories, even small ones, as Chickering notes, can temper our individual experiences and understandings of the world. Individuals have relatively limited sets of experiences that construct their understanding of who they are. When we have people in our lives, especially people we look up to, who are willing to appropriately disclose some of their own struggles, failures, and trials, even in the smallest of ways, our imagination for alternative paths of development gets broadened, refined, and attributed differently, often to our benefit. Character can grow from the pain of failure.²

Now is probably a good time to pause for a moment in this discussion of failure sharing and put it into some sort of perspective. Thus far, a reader might get the impression that I am advocating for perpetual, fully transparent, megaphone-blast sharing of everything we have ever failed at to anyone who will listen. Failure sharing is good, so all of the failure sharing is better, right? I would like to suggest that failure sharing is much more effective when done with a bit of intention.


In the book *Encouragement*, the authors posit that we can carefully craft our conversations with others in such a way that purposefully brings others encouragement. One way we can do that is to ensure our

comments come from a place of love, or genuine care for those we are speaking with, and point toward a place of fear within them in an attempt to reduce or alleviate that fear (Crabb and Allender). Failure sharing with intention to care for and encourage another should reduce the temptation to overshare, share to be counseled ourselves, or share to just make conversation. It serves as a useful guide for how, when, and to what extent we share failures.

The Failure Institute, the research branch of the FUN enterprise, began researching failures in entrepreneurship in Mexico and quickly realized that they could make an impact on people’s abilities to learn from others’ failures, especially those that might need the advice the most. Research out of the Failure Institute focuses on tech startups in developing nations, women in business, low-income individuals, rural startups, and college student startups. The conclusions of much of their research are not earth-shattering: take time to grieve and recover from a failure, avoid common pitfalls with money, don’t blame yourself for failure so that you are motivated to look for problems and solutions. But this is exactly what groups who might ordinarily be prone to failure need, just like the college students in the studies of attribution retraining needed. The Failure Institute and FUN are broadcasting failure stories and lessons to be learned in order to make a big difference and even encourage individuals (“The Failure Institute”).

Conclusion: Make failure sharing a cause for celebration

Failure happens. It is inevitable. Heart surgeons, rocket scientists, college students, moms and dads, football players, bankers, entrepreneurs, social media influencers—we all do it. Our society encourages us to keep those failures under wraps. Post only the good angles, write about only the success stories, sweep the small failures under the rug. All of this failure hiding is hurting us, teaching us that failure is not normal and that we are the only ones doing it all wrong. Sharing failures with others offers a release from all of that pressure of perfection. It is an act of kindness and




Sharing failures with others offers a release from all of that pressure of perfection.

generosity as much as a moment of honesty and vulnerability—and it displays good character.

Failure sharing is an essential part of understanding our identities. When we share failures with others and receive failure stories from others, there is an undeniable potential for positive impact on who we are. When we share our failures, we

normalize failure, pulling it back into our modern, hyper-positive culture as something that is normal, natural, and okay. We can learn from others' failures in ways that are different than learning from our own by imagining accurate attributions for our own failures, which motivates us to learn from failure. And even small failures matter, often providing rich opportunities for learning. It is important to learn to share failure stories with each other for the healthy development and encouragement of identities that are prepared for the realities of the world we live in. Failure sharing helps us embrace failure as a normal, significant, and even good part of life.



It is important to learn to share failure stories with each other to encourage identities that are prepared for the realities of the world.

Let's celebrate failure together. Let's own it, name it, pick it apart, support one another through it, learn from it, grow through it, and better understand ourselves and others because of it. Our identities, the very make up of who we are, depend on it.

Lindsey M. Ward, Assistant Professor of Young Adult Formation at the University of Dubuque, invests in students' lives through courses that help them discover and live into their purpose and calling in a complex and complicated world, lessons she also hopes to instill in her three young children. She holds an EdD from Edgewood College in Madison, Wisconsin.

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Photo credit “A-Day Game football scrimmage for University of Alabama with coach Nick Saban analyzing every move” p. 18: Carol M. Highsmith, Wikimedia Commons/public domain

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Notes

¹ For more on sports and character, see Joseph Sabin’s article, “Shifting Our Mindset: Sports, Character, and Identity” on pp. 30-51 of this issue.

² For further discussions relating discomfort and pain to character growth, see the previous issue of this journal, *Character and . . . Discomfort*.

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Shifting Our Mindset: Sports, Character, and Identity

Joseph Sabin

Abstract

It has long been believed and accepted by sports enthusiasts that sports participation builds character. This idea is so firmly held that few outside of academia ever bother to question or look deeper into the concept, in spite of a seemingly endless cycle of high-profile scandals involving athletes, coaches, and sport administrators who show an utter lack of character. Sports can help build positive character traits, but it is far from automatic. In order for this to occur, there must be an intentional effort to intertwine character development with sports participation and provide opportunities for athletes to develop non-sport identities.

“Sports build character.” This adage is used by parents all over to encourage their children to participate and invoked by coaches at all levels to help provide evidence of the validity of their programs. People simply believe it to be true, as if parents could place their children in one end of the sports machine and years later, they pop out the other end as upstanding and forthright as they can be. This idea is so firmly entrenched that few outside of academia ever bother to question it, even in the face of a seemingly endless cycle of high-profile scandals involving athletes, coaches, and sport administrators who show an utter lack of character.


Sports history in the United States has been marred by scandal. The 1919 Chicago “Black Sox” threw the World Series for money (Lamb), Tonya Harding hired a hitman to break rival figure skater Nancy Kerrigan’s leg at the 1994 Olympics (Pak), Lance Armstrong won seven consecutive Tour de France titles only to have them later stripped due to the use of performance enhancing drugs and blood doping (Wilson), and the Houston Astros’ 2017 World Series title was aided by an illegal sign stealing scheme (Anderson and Axisa). These are just a few examples, but there are countless others.

So, what gives? If sports build character, how do we explain all the scandals?

Participation in sports can be a very effective background and vehicle for important character lessons, but it can also teach athletes to lie and cheat.

There must be an intentional effort to intertwine character development with sports participation, and there also must

be an opportunity for athletes to develop identities outside of sports in order to have positive character effects. Unfortunately, character development has seemingly taken a back seat to winning in the overall structure of sports in our society.



There must be an intentional effort to intertwine character development with sports participation.

In this article, I will explore the potential for sports to contribute to or detract from positive character and identity development and explain how the current structure of sports can push toward the negative. More importantly, I will discuss how athletes, coaches, and administrators can shift mindsets to promote positive character development through sports, in spite of the current structures.

Sports and Character

Character Development Philosopher Christian B. Miller describes character as a collection of traits that leads people to think, feel, and act in certain ways. The Wendt Character Initiative at the University of Dubuque centers its definition of good character around virtues like truthfulness, justice, fairness, and service of others. While there is no consensus definition of character in the sports context, many people

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believe certain character traits are developed through sports. Teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, work ethic, mental toughness, respect for others, self-discipline, and self-confidence are all examples of traits associated with sports participation (Rudd 205; Abrams n. 14). Notably absent from the above list are traits such as honesty and moral reasoning.

Studies in the United States have consistently shown that those who participate in high school athletics earn higher GPAs, have lower rates of absenteeism, show more interest in attending college, complete more years of college, and have greater career success than their non-athlete classmates (Coakley 441). These outcomes are not directly related to character, but they are all positive outcomes, and ones likely to be associated with good character. It can also be inferred that in order to achieve these outcomes a level of work ethic, mental toughness, and self-discipline are necessary.

While there are positive outcomes, the evidence of sports participation building character is largely anecdotal. Proponents tend to theorize that the development occurs as a result of athletes being put into trying situations and growing in character through those situations. This sentiment is well outlined by legendary Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski (affectionately known as “Coach K”) in a 2007 speech at the US Military Academy:

Athletics gives you an opportunity to: one, encounter uncertainty. It gives you an opportunity to encounter competition, a bad call, a bad break, a lucky break. It gives you a chance to experience life in a competitive world and then figure out how you are going to win, while all that is happening. You can't go back to your room and research it. You can't do all those things that you can do in academics . . . for that period of time that you are competing, you have to instantaneously react, be instinctive, who are you, what character do you have,




Coach Mike Krzyzewski goes over plays with his team.

do you do it with honor, do you do it with integrity, do you do it together? Do you win? Do you lose? How do you react? (qtd. in Doty and Lumpkin 19)

Learning how to cope with and navigate adversity at an early age by actually going through it, as opposed to abstractly discussing it, has inherent value. Yet studies that actually show growth in these character traits through sport

participation are extremely hard to come by, if they exist at all, as evidenced by a 2006 review of scholarly literature on the subject (Doty). What is not hard to come by is evidence that people *believe* that sports build character. A 1996 survey found that 93% of Americans believe children learn the value of teamwork through sports and 88% believe sports teach discipline and hard work (Tharp and Chetwynd 30). In a more recent survey, 75% of respondents stated that they believe broadly that sports build character (“Do You Believe that Sports Build Character?”).




Why does the idea that sports build character continue to perpetuate through society?

Despite little to no hard evidence and the endless cycle of scandal in sports, why does the idea that sports build character continue to perpetuate through society? That is a difficult question to answer. It may simply be that people love sports. The popularity of sports is not difficult to prove in the United States. Perhaps the greatest illustration of this is the fact that the three most watched shows of 2019 were Sunday Night Football, Thursday Night Football, and Monday Night Football, in that order (Fitzgerald). Leading sport sociologist Jay Coakley states that our fervent love of sports has led to a blind belief that they are essentially pure and good, and their purity and goodness is transferred to all those who participate in sports. This belief is something he refers to as “The Great Sport Myth,” and it may help support the notion that sports build character despite there being nothing but anecdotal evidence to support it (11). Even the positive outcomes discussed above that have been linked to sports participation may have an alternate explanation.

Scholastic sports have a filtering-out process that may explain the higher GPAs, graduation rates, and career success. For example, in order to remain eligible to play sports at any scholastic level, athletes must maintain a certain grade point average and stay out of trouble. If they fail to do these things, they are either suspended or removed from the team. It may be true that those who maintain their status as an athlete have desirable character traits, but were those built by sports or do interscholastic sports simply weed out those who came in with poorly developed character? Further, if sports remove and disallow the people most in need of character development from participating, can we really tout sports participation as a character builder?

In addition to the filtering out process, sports also have a selecting-in process, as Coakley explains:

People who choose or are selected to play sports often have different character traits than those who do not choose to play or are not selected by coaches. Therefore, sports may not build character as much as they are organized to select people who already possess certain character traits that are valued by coaches and compatible with highly organized, competitive, physical activities. (62)



What is more troubling is the amount of research that shows that sport participation actually damages character and moral reasoning.

We can call this the Harvard paradox. According to their website, Harvard admitted only 2,009 of 43,330 applicants (a rate of 4.6%) for the class of 2023. By just about any metric, Harvard is a great school. They have a massive endowment, and their graduates are among the most successful people in the world. Will these 4.6% of applicants be successful because of Harvard, or could they have been just as successful

elsewhere? To reframe the question for this specific issue, are scholastic athletes more successful because they played sports, or did they possess characteristics of success to begin with?

In addition to the lack of hard evidence of sports building character and alternate explanations for the positive outcomes that sport participation brings, what is more troubling is the amount of research that shows that sport participation actually damages character and moral reasoning. While coaches and parents claim to be teaching respect and fair play, the results of several studies suggest otherwise (Doty 6).

In a study involving over 1,300 high school students, non-athletes scored significantly higher than athletes in terms of their moral reasoning. This study concluded that athletes are less impartial and reflective in their moral reasoning than non-athletes (Beller and Stoll 352). A 2004 study of collegiate athletes returned similar results (Rudd and Stoll). Possibly the most surprising study indicated that even cadets at the US Military Academy showed a decrease in moral reasoning that correlated with the amount of time an athlete spent playing the sport (Doty and Lumpkin 24). It is also worth noting that each of the studies suggested that the decline in moral reasoning is more precipitous for male athletes than it is for female athletes, more prevalent in team sports than individual sports, and more pronounced in high contact sports than non-contact sports.


Youth Sports So, why do sports fail to build character? Clearly, we as a society want sports to build character and continue to believe that they do, despite the aforementioned studies. Are sports incapable of building character? I believe that sports *can* build character, but it cannot be taken for granted, an assumed outcome. It will not happen automatically. There must be an intention to teach and develop character built into the sport experience. Sadly, the way sports are structured and approached by many coaches, administrators, parents, and athletes is not conducive to this.



Youth sports can build character with intentional teaching and leading.

Youth sports in the United States were originally created with the purpose of developing certain character traits. Early organizers hoped

that youth sports would teach children to obey rules and work together productively (Coakley 80). Fast forward a few decades and we find that sports organizations and leagues, even at the youth level, are largely profit-motivated.



The importance placed on winning can lead athletes to believe that it is the only thing that matters.

As public funding continues to be cut from youth sport programs, those who wish to play must frequently turn to the private sector. Private youth sports programs are not beholden to the same standards of fairness and inclusion as their publicly funded counterparts. Additionally, there has been an increase in elite

private training facilities with the goal to prepare youth athletes to compete at a high level. This means parents are spending significant amounts of money on youth sports, in some cases as much as \$1,000 per month (Gigante). This leads to increased parental involvement and pressure (Coakley 83-84). The extremely high visibility of collegiate and professional sports adds to this pressure as well. Well-meaning parents want their kids to get big-time athletic scholarships or multi-million dollar paydays as professional athletes, so the zeal of parents and youth coaches to win frequently surpasses any effort to teach character lessons (Abrams 256).¹

The emphasis on winning in sports is even less subtle at the collegiate level. While the NCAA and various institutions often state that their intercollegiate athletic programs are intended to supplement the institutions' educational missions, academic fraud, major clustering, and other tactics are frequently employed to keep athletes on the field, all in the name of winning. A recent FBI investigation into college basketball recruiting also revealed what many people already knew: many of these athletes are persuaded to attend specific institutions because of financial bribes, not because of the education they might receive (Norlander).

Winning is big business at the NCAA division I level, which is why coaches who are good at winning are paid millions. In 28 states, the

highest paid public employee is a football coach, and in 12 others, a basketball coach (Gibson). For example, in 2017 the five highest paid employees of the state of Iowa were two football coaches, two basketball coaches, and an athletic director. This list was topped by University of Iowa head football coach Kirk Ferentz with a salary of \$5.075 million. For reference, Iowa's governor Kim Reynolds has a salary of \$130,000, roughly 2.5% of Ferentz's (Clayworth).

The importance placed on winning can lead athletes to believe that it is the only thing that matters. There is certainly nothing wrong with winning. Competitive sports are, at their core, a pursuit and display of exceptionalism. However, if we want to use sports as a vehicle for character building, winning and skill improvement cannot be the top priority. For our youngest athletes, they should not be a priority at all.

The problem is that a win-at-all-costs mentality does not pair particularly well with our normal senses of right and wrong or what we in society typically value as integrity. Dishonesty has become normalized in sports to such a degree that many people do not flinch at dishonest conduct, no longer considering it cheating, but instead as "part of the game." What athletes, coaches, administrators, and fans fail to realize is that it only becomes "part of the game" because we allow it to. Examples of this normalized cheating are present in most sports, whether it be "selling" a foul in basketball, selling a catch the player knows he did not make in football, or leaning into a pitch in baseball. These are all dishonest attempts to gain a competitive advantage that is not within the spirit of traditional good sportsmanship, and would certainly not be as readily accepted in other facets of life.

Perhaps no example better illustrates the compromised moral code of sports than the aforementioned Astros sign-stealing scandal in Major League Baseball. Stealing signs is nothing new in baseball. Before every pitch, the catcher signals to the pitcher which pitch to throw using hand signals. The catcher takes great care to keep the signals private, placing his hands low to the ground and between his legs so nobody has a good view. Some catchers are better than others at this, and at all times the opposing team is trying to figure out the catcher's hand sign. It is usually easiest to do so once the team gets a runner on second base. Knowing

what pitch is coming is a massive advantage for the batter. Just take it from notorious steroid user José Canseco.



Teams are perpetually trying to steal the other team’s signs, and it is typically written-off as “part of the game.” What makes the Astros’ case different is that they incorporated technology—a video camera set up to see the catchers’ signs. That seemingly small difference generated a massive response in the baseball world. Many lambasted the Astros as cheaters and the league handed down severe penalties (although not severe enough, in the estimation of many) (Anderson and Axisa).

I am not, by any means, condoning what the Astros did but am merely trying to point out what appears to be a logical flaw in reasoning. If stealing signs is bad, it is bad. The mechanism or method of doing so should not mean the difference between “part of the game” and the largest cheating scandal in baseball history.

Another example of compromised moral reasoning in sports is illustrated in the reaction I get from students when I show them a certain PSA from PassItOn.com. The video features what looks to be a high school basketball game in its waning seconds. A close out-of-bounds play gets called in favor of the team in white jerseys by the official. In the team huddle, one of the players on the white team exclaims to his coach “I touched it,” referring to touching the ball before it went out of bounds. This is met by much dissension from his teammates, but nonetheless the player goes and informs the official

that he was the last one to touch the ball, prompting the official to change his call (“Sportsmanship”).

That video is typically met with incredulous laughter from my students, many if not most of whom are current or former athletes (the corny acting probably does not help). I admit, my initial reaction to the video was similar. When I ask, “why does this seem so crazy?”, the room goes deathly silent until one student says, “because that would never happen.” And they are probably right. The odds of someone being so noble in a basketball game are low. But isn’t honesty a value we hold dear in society? There is little argument to the contrary, but it seems for many athletes that dishonesty can be justified, maybe even encouraged, if it can help them win. Unfortunately, such attitudes are also antithetical to integrity and character growth.

Sports and Identity

The win-at-all-costs mindset of sports can have negative consequences beyond compromised moral reasoning. If winning in sports is so vitally important, it may pressure athletes to dedicate their time, energy, focus, even their very identity to being an athlete. It is, in fact, glorified in Gatorade ads (“Is it in you?”), Nike Commercials (“Just Do It”), and by athletes and coaches everywhere. When I ask my students as an icebreaker to tell the class something interesting or unique about themselves, the most common answer by far is what sport they play.

Having one’s identity tied to being an athlete does not necessarily sound like a bad thing. Maintaining one’s status as an athlete usually requires doing reasonably well in school and generally keeping out of trouble. But problems still exist for those who wrap their identities around being an athlete—mainly hubris, accompanied by major struggles adjusting to life once their athletic careers are over.

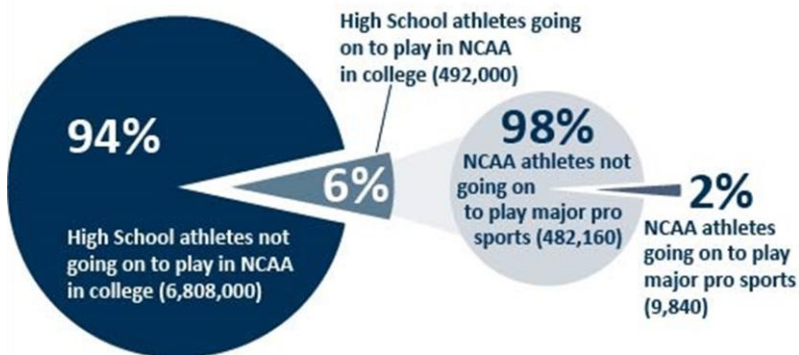
There is a certain status that accompanies being an athlete in the United States, particularly at the high school level and up. This status grants scholastic athletes special treatment and a degree of admiration among their peers that is not typically afforded to those involved in other extra-curricular activities, which can lead to some interesting and potentially dangerous group dynamics. As individuals maintain their

identities as a part of the “in-group” of athletes, many develop a level of hubris, another character flaw. Hubris in this context can be defined as pride-driven arrogance that leads one to feel separate from and superior to others. When left unchecked, hubris can lead to the belief that non-athletes or even non-teammates do not deserve their respect (Coakley 112).

Another issue with having one’s identity centered around being an athlete is that most athletes will not be athletes for much longer. As depicted in the graphic below, the percentage of high school athletes who go on to play in college is extremely low, and the percentage of collegiate athletes who go on to play professionally is even lower. For example, of the 429,000 high school women who play basketball, only 16,600 of them continued to play basketball in college (3.9%), and fewer than 1% of those who play in college continue to play basketball professionally. This means that the vast majority of scholastic athletes are just a few years from going as far in their sport as their talent allows.



Probability of Continued Sports Participation after High School



(NCAA Recruiting Facts)

The Cases of Leaf and Luck

What happens when someone whose identity and main motivation to stay out of trouble is suddenly gone? One example is the story of Ryan Leaf.



Ryan Leaf, former Chargers quarterback. © Tom Reel/San Antonio Express-News via ZUMA Wire

Leaf had a very successful collegiate career as a quarterback for Washington State University that culminated his junior year in 1997 after finishing third in the Heisman Trophy voting and leading the school to its first Rose Bowl appearance since 1931. He was selected second overall in the NFL draft the following year, notably one spot behind future Hall-of-Famer Peyton Manning.

Unfortunately for Leaf (and for Chargers fans), Leaf's collegiate success did not translate to the NFL field. His poor play on the field led the Chargers to move on from him after just three seasons and he bounced around a few years from team to team. His poor attitude off the field caused him to butt heads with management everywhere he went, all the while failing to notice that the common denominator in all these situations was him.

After his unceremonious exit from the NFL, his life and decision-making only got worse. He was fired from his assistant coaching job at West Texas A&M for stealing painkillers from one of his injured players. At one point he cut his wrist in an attempt to take his own life and later he was imprisoned for nearly three years for stealing prescription drugs from houses in his hometown.



Former NFL player Ryan Leaf in court, May 8, 2012.

While it is documented that there are several NFL players who struggle with substance dependency for pain management, Leaf's reasons for abusing prescription drugs went beyond physical pain, as he states, "I'd taken them [painkillers] throughout my career because of surgeries, and

they alleviated my physical pain every time. This would be the first time I took them for my emotional pain, and it worked” (Farmer).

What happens when someone whose identity and main motivation to stay out of trouble is suddenly gone?

Leaf played football nearly his whole life and failed to develop an identity outside of sports, a situation which apparently caused him substantial emotional pain and led him down the path from NFL star to attempted suicide and several years in prison. In Leaf’s own words “My identity was wrapped up in not only being a football player, but a failed football

player, somebody who couldn’t cut it. Not only that, I was a bad person” (Farmer). With only football as his guide to life, he did not develop the moral compass to keep him on a path of integrity and character growth.

Leaf is not alone in these struggles. As Scott Tinley highlights in his book, *Racing the Sunset*, many elite athletes struggle to find an identity outside of sports once their careers are over. This is particularly true for those, like Leaf, who could not end their athletic careers on their own terms, i.e., they were forced out either by injury or because, as Leaf says, they couldn’t cut it.

Even those with long, successful careers are not immune to these types of identity issues, as illustrated in this quote from former NFL defensive lineman Jerry Sherk: “Without football, without my ability to express myself through football I am nobody. I will disappear. Football has been my life and I have so little else” (Tinley 133).

While many people in all occupations struggle with identity issues upon retirement (Jayson), athletes appear to be particularly susceptible to mental health issues (Rice et al). A study by Giannone et al. points out that the greater an individual identifies as an athlete, the more difficult their transition is, noting that “the strength and exclusivity of the athletic role during sport participation increase athletes’ potential vulnerability to psychiatric distress after leaving sport” (600). More simply put, the more one’s identity is wrapped up in being an athlete, the harder time they have when they leave the sport behind.

Contrast Leaf's story with that of Andrew Luck. Luck's early life and entry to the NFL read very similarly to Leaf's (and both are coincidentally linked to Peyton Manning). Much like Leaf, Luck had an extremely successful collegiate football career in the quarterback position for Stanford University. After graduating from Stanford in 2012 with a degree in architectural engineering, Luck entered the NFL draft, where he was selected as the No. 1 overall pick by the Indianapolis Colts (largely to succeed Peyton Manning, who the Colts lost in free agency).

This is where Leaf's and Luck's stories diverge. Football went well for Luck in the NFL. He finished second in rookie of the year voting and was selected to the Pro-Bowl in his first season. He would go on to be selected to four total Pro-Bowls, including in 2018. His career was not all sunshine and rainbows, as he battled more than his fair share of serious, sometimes season-ending, injuries. But he persevered through them to have one of his best seasons in the NFL, leading the Colts to the playoffs. He was 29, at the top of his game, in his prime, and the Colts were widely considered to be Super Bowl contenders heading into the 2019 season. Which is exactly why what he did next was so shocking.



Andrew Luck, former Colts quarterback


Andrew Luck announced his retirement a mere two weeks before the season would have started. Facing down another painful injury, this time his ankle, and having made nearly \$110 million in his career, he decided it was time to move on. While the exact reasoning for his retirement is still a mystery (he has not given an interview since), a teary-eyed Luck stated "I haven't been able to live the life I want to live. It's taken the joy out of this game (Kerr)."

The reaction by the media and fans was one of shock and anger, and understandably so. It is exceedingly rare that a player in his prime simply walks away from professional sports. Add in the fact that there was still \$64 million on his current contract, and the fact that his next contract would likely have paid even more, he potentially walked away from several hundreds of millions of dollars (Matthews).

Many described his retirement as tragic, and I suppose in the pantheon of “what might have been,” it is tragic. But from a standpoint of a human being and his identity, it is anything but tragic. Luck’s identity and personal value expanded so far beyond football that he was willing and able to make this difficult decision in the face of harsh criticism.

A deeper look at Luck reveals that he has never seen himself as *just* a football player. He loves reading and has his own book club with the mission of “building a team of readers of all levels.” He also caught an interviewer off guard when his response to the question of what he may do after football did not involve coaching, the broadcast booth, or anything to do with football at all. Luck stated, “I think I could be very happy teaching high school history” (Feinstein).

What is the biggest difference between Ryan Leaf and Andrew Luck? Luck, while obviously taking football very seriously, appears to have developed an identity and a purpose beyond football, while Leaf, at least at the time when his football career came to an end, had not. It would be difficult to argue that Luck displayed poor character at any point of his career. He was never suspended, never in trouble, and you would be hard pressed to find him ever speaking ill of anybody. In fact, the most objectionable thing he has ever done in the eyes of most football fans is retire too early. Conversely, Leaf is remembered largely for being a jerk. While many players who fail to live up to their athletic potential are lamented by fans and observers, few names will raise the ire of football fans as much as Leaf. While Leaf found purpose, maybe even a new non-sport identity, after football, it is clear that he is still struggling with himself. In May of 2020, Leaf was arrested on suspicion of domestic battery (West).



Many elite athletes struggle to find an identity outside of sports once their careers are over.

In *The Happiness Equation*, author Neil Pasricha speaks about the Japanese concept of *ikigai*, which loosely translates to “the reason you wake up in the morning.” In Okinawa, where this concept originates, the average life expectancy is over seven years longer than that in the US.

Interestingly, in Okinawa, the peoples' *ikigai* rarely centers around their occupation.

Logically, an occupation does not operate particularly well as a reason to wake up in the morning unless the plan is to keep working until death. After retirement, we still need a reason to get up in the morning. If an occupation generally is a poor choice for an *ikigai*, sports participation is a far worse option. We have already discussed the extremely low percentage of individuals who are fortunate enough to reach a level where they are paid to participate in sports. This means that most athletes are “retired” before they reach their twenties.

Even for those that do excel in sports and make it to the highest level, careers are extremely short as compared to other occupations. Athletes like Saints quarterback Drew Brees and Olympic sand volleyball legend Keri Walsh Jennings are frequently lauded for playing in their late thirties into their forties, but in few, if any, other career paths can an individual be revered for continuing past fifty, let alone forty.

The point is that athletes who believe themselves to be more than *just* athletes—those who have purpose and identities outside of sports, the ones who have a true, non-sport *ikigai*, are the ones who have the most success when they retire from the field of competition.

Too many athletes, even at the Division III level, believe they have a long future of playing their sport, and they therefore can avoid finding an answer to the question, “what will I do after sports?” When good character gets added to the mix, and an athlete’s purpose has less to do with how they perform on the field and more to do with giving others a fair shot at life or being good stewards of their time, resources, and talents, their purpose does not have to disappear when they retire. Think about athletes like Walter Payton, Kurt Warner, Eli Manning. Not only did they find a greater purpose and identity outside of sports, but they demonstrate the way good character can then be expressed in meaningful lives.

If young athletes develop good character traits through purposeful training in sports, they may begin to identify not only as an athlete, but also as someone who values sportsmanship, honesty, and fairness,

aspects of good character. When they retire, even if they haven't cultivated other interests or a purpose outside of professional sports, they still have these virtues to help them identify who they are and a moral compass to orient them toward a bigger purpose.

Shifting Our Mindset

So, how do we fix sports so that they will actually achieve what people seem to think they do: build character? It starts with overcoming the win-at-all costs attitude that has permeated sports culture. The simplest way to do that would be to take the profit incentive out of sports at the youth and scholastic level, but that ship has sailed. There are simply too many people who make too much money from sports to enact the kind of structural changes necessary for this to happen.

What may be a bit more pragmatic is a simple mindset shift for all parties interested in building character through sports, including administrators, coaches, parents, and the athletes themselves.

Administrators can combat the win-at-all costs mindset in a very meaningful way by simply using more criteria than a win-loss record to evaluate and hire their coaches. That is not to say it cannot be included. If a coach's team consistently fails to be competitive on the field, it is likely that there are some off-the-field failures contributing. Other criteria that should be emphasized for coaches include academic performance and retention rates. This can remove the constant pressure of coaches to over-prioritize winning and empower them to focus on being real mentors.




Statue of Coach John Wooden, known for his focus on character development

Coaches should make an intentional effort to be mentors to their athletes and consider their influence on athletes beyond the field of play. They should always treat their athletes as an end in themselves and not simply as commodities to help them win. Coaches should also promote good character by creating and enforcing very clear codes of conduct for their athletes,

and discourage cheating in all its forms, even if it is typically normalized as “part of the game.”

Parents need to recognize that a multimillion dollar contract for their young athlete is highly unlikely, and they should not be afraid to take a much more hands-off approach to their children’s sports participation. While most parents are likely well intentioned, being overly involved can add undue pressure on young athletes to perform well. Additionally, parents should reject elite youth sports teams and training programs in favor of community sports, which can also help relieve pressure on young athletes. Perhaps the most important role of parents in this regard is to understand that character lessons are not learned through sports automatically. Helping athletes, particularly younger ones, apply their sport experiences to potential real-life experiences can be of major help as younger athletes are typically unable to make these connections themselves, and there is no guarantee that the coaches are going to do it.



Moral character has the power to shape a life of purpose, a life of meaning.

Finally, I would like to speak directly to the athletes. The most important thing you can do is realize that you are, or at least should be, far more than *just* an athlete. You likely occupy many roles in life, whether it be student, sibling, friend, role model, etc. Furthermore, if you are playing in high school or in college, you are very likely nearing the end of your athletic career. Take time to develop an identity that does not include playing sports. Recognize that moral character has the power to shape a life of purpose, a life of meaning. Contemplate what you are going to do with your time when you no longer have several hours of practice each week and games to gear up for. You owe it to yourself to have a life after sports.

Joseph Sabin, Esq., is a professor of Sport Management at the University of Dubuque. He received a Bachelor’s in Finance and a Master’s in Sport Management at the University of Southern Mississippi, and a Juris Doctorate from the University of Mississippi. His teaching focuses around Sports Law and Regulation, and the Sociology of Sport.

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Photo credit p. 32: “Mike Krzyzewski talks to his team during a timeout” by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CC BY 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en_GB, lightened.

Photo credit p. 35: “_KEM3255 20” by Katie Morrow, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/, lightened.

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Photo credit p. 46: “Coach Wooden” by Evan G., CC BY-NC-ND 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/, lightened.

Notes

¹ An aside of free financial advice for parents or future parents of youth athletes: If you put \$1,000 a month into a college fund (instead of paying for elite sports training) from the time your child is 6 until they are making college decisions, you will not need to worry about your child attaining an athletic scholarship. You will have enough money to send them to just about any school you want.

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Co-Authoring Your Story in Light of God’s Epic: Human Identity and the Divine Word

Timothy Matthew Slemmons

Abstract


Suspending our disbelief in reading scripture puts us in touch with the Author God, who is revealed as such through diverse metaphors. This encounter often unfolds dramatically in crisis, but, just as important for character and identity formation, in daily reading. The Word of God (written, preached, paraphrased, or above all, incarnate in Jesus Christ) encounters people, reorients their lives for the good, invests them with a new identity, shapes their character and vocation, and even continues to “author” their lives afterward.

Austin was a smart kid from a solid family. No math whiz, his particular gift for the language arts was apparent by age 12. His parents, with modest means, put him through private school anyway, and he managed to succeed, even while dabbling in some risky behavior. At 16 he was sexually active with multiple serial partners; at 17 he was hanging out with a gang he called “the wreckers;” at 18 he had a child with a girl his mom didn’t like. Then his dad died. Life was getting heavy and his conscience was weighing on him. His life took a nosedive. Religion drew him but he settled on some simplistic, black-and-white

answers to begin with, picking and choosing what he wanted to believe about life-and-death questions, arriving at no real sense of coherence about them. Questions about the nature of evil gnawed at him, but the explanations he came up with, peppered with a lot of popular philosophy, caused a falling out with his mom, a Christian, who shut him out of the house.

For all of his personal challenges, Austin's education moved right along. He taught grammar in his hometown for a couple of years, then speech. He progressed from one teaching position to another, each more prestigious than the last, was published in his field, built an impressive professional reputation, even showed political promise. He broke up with his long-time girlfriend and mother of his child, largely due to the influence of his (now reconciled) mom. She was pushing him toward a marriage that would make him financially secure and advance his career, but in the "cooling off" period, Austin's sexual drive quickly impelled him into a physical relationship with yet another new partner. He was absolutely wretched: wracked with guilt, utterly helpless, unable to gain control of himself, floundering in an identity crisis.

Everyone faces times of testing, even moments of desperation, and many people do some really destructive, even self-destructive things in response. They may dull the pain with drugs or alcohol. They endanger their lives for an adrenaline rush. They lash out in anger, frustration, or revenge to hurt someone or make them feel guilty. Sometimes their action is simply a cry for help, but one that may take them beyond human reach. If we as persons of character are to avoid such a destructive course, where should we turn for the most creative, redemptive, coherent, and trustworthy guidance possible?




*The Bible can change
your life incalculably
for the better.*

Whether you are a nonbeliever, a skeptic, or a Christian who already esteems the Bible, stick with me here, for both history and the present day are teeming with witnesses to the fact the Bible can change your life incalculably for the better. Not only in desperate crises but every day, the best, most (in)formative source you have available is scripture. Whether you are looking for wisdom to deal with hard situations or

read from it daily, it is the freshest, most bracing and invigorating source. Its divine author is the author of your life, too, and uses the stuff of this book to write your story, to write *you!* Put another way, God's role in the authorship of scripture—without squashing the human authors or overlooking the evolutionary way in which the Bible arrived at its final (“canonical”) form—not only reveals God to you, the reader, but also reveals and interprets you to yourself.

The Book that Breathes New Life

Scripture, then, is understood as an *instrument* of revelation (God's act of revealing). Such revelation can be shocking to begin with, especially in crisis-reading, when you realize you are not only reading but *being read*. Beyond the momentary crisis, however, scripture itself becomes a virtual pen in the hand of the Author God, an essential *tool* for character formation over the long haul. Such ongoing formation invites our daily reading, earnest engagement, and humble inquiry, undertaken with the reasonable belief that we are, or will be, written beautifully into the Book of Life (Rev. 20.12). This book of books invites us to reconsider the



*You are a character—
moral and literary—in
the story that God
authors jointly with you.*

possibility of having our character formed (drawing our concern for *moral* character closer to the familiar sense of *literary* character) in the light of scripture, *not* by a rigid insistence on the *authority* of scripture, but by raising the issue of scripture's divine *authorship*.

Yes, just as the Bible is co-authored, so is your life. You are a character—moral *and* literary—in the story that God authors jointly with you in light of scripture. Yes, God is busy—busy with you, co-authoring your life.

God the Friendly Poet God's double role as author of scripture and author of life is what a young German man discovered when, at age 27, he was sent on a business trip to London. His mission fell flat, likely owing to his speech impediment. After wallowing in his failure, he tried to make money as a musician, but soon found himself broke, indebted, malnourished, far from home, and sick. At one point he began to read

the Bible, without effect. “Six days later, however, on Palm Sunday, he began reading anew and gradually began to perceive that God was somehow speaking *to him* and that the same one who authored the Bible was also the author of his own life” (Betz 31).

He read the entire Bible in a single month(!), producing a diary of biblical reflections on nearly every book of the Bible in the process. His journal echoes with wonder. He writes as if he suddenly sees everything so much more clearly, expressing sheer elation at the playfully poetic quality of God's literary masterpiece. Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) had come to realize that God is a poet in the broadest sense of the word: “creator and narrator alike” (Bayer 54). More than that, in an autobiographical piece from the same period, Hamann

tells of the God who encounters him in the Bible as the friend who understands him: “In the tumult of the passions which overwhelmed me . . . I continually prayed to God for a friend. . . . Praise God, I found this friend in my heart, who crept in there at the time when I felt most heavily its emptiness and darkness and wildness.” (qtd. in Bayer 62, n. 67)

The divine poet behind scripture and creation, he learned, is ultimately friendly.


From that turning point, Hamann knew precisely what he was about. He went on to become a sharp critic of the Enlightenment and the leading intellect of his day. Yet he was able to remain friends with those, like philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose writings he criticized. Regarding the Bible, he would put the question of Horace to skeptical Enlighteners: “Why do you laugh? Change but the name and the story speaks of *you*” (qtd. in Betz 41, n. 9). Commenting on 1 Peter 4.11, he writes: “The Holy Scriptures ought to be our dictionary, our grammar, upon which all ideas and sayings of Christians are founded and of which they consist and are composed” (“Biblical Reflections”; *Sämtliche Werke* 243; *Londoner Schriften* 304).



Johann Georg Hamann

For Hamann, the Bible had become the touchstone for all his analysis, the lens through which he viewed the world and everything in it.

Best Check Your Doubts at the Door OK, so how can the same person be unmoved one day and transported a week, a day, or even a moment later? Why are some people thunderstruck by scripture and others not? Well, the Bible is not a magic book, but there is a trick to reading it, a simple trick that you likely already know because you already use it when watching movies or reading other stories, including histories: *You suspend your disbelief*. You enter into fiction with an attitude of trust, a willingness to be taken for a ride. You know full well that it isn't real but you're willing to receive the message and experience of the text.



If you approach the Bible as merely a story, why expect to get anything out of it without suspending disbelief?

So why expect to get anything out of a book that purports to reveal the presence, the mind, the artistry of God if you approach it with skepticism instead of trust? For that matter, even if you approach the Bible merely as a story, why expect to get anything out of it without suspending disbelief or leaving your

doubts at the door, as you do with every sci-fi novel you read or every superhero movie you see? Why single this one book out for doubt? As Jesus said, "According to your faith let it be done to you" (Matt. 9.29, *NRSV*) and "the measure you give is the measure you get back" (Luke 6.38). Invest nothing, get nothing. Believe not a word, go away empty. It happens all the time. As the Letter to the Hebrews explains: "the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4.12). I can think of no better passage to explain how the friendly God who understands you reveals and interprets you to yourself—that is, to your willing self.

So what ever happened to Austin? One day, at age 32, with his moral life in shambles, Austin flung himself down under a fig tree in the garden and began to bawl his head off and pray, asking God, whom he had kept at arm's length for so long, that he would finally be free from his past sins. Soon he heard a child's voice from the neighbor's yard

chanting what seemed like a song from a game, but a game he did not know: “Pick it up, read it. Pick it up, read it.” Wiping away his tears, he went over to the bench and picked up the book he had been reading moments before, and read the first words he saw: “not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” It was Paul’s Letter to the Romans (13.13-14). As Austin tells it, “it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away” (Augustine 182).

Austin, better known as Augustine of Hippo, would come to be widely recognized as the greatest theologian of the first millennium of the Christian era. The little children’s song that led him to read scripture with trust—“*Tolle lege!* Pick it up, read it!”—is best understood as God’s own prompting to read the Christian scriptures in particular. Taken in this narrower sense, however, the implications are far broader than simply discovering the pleasure of reading.

Enter the Holy Spirit No, the Bible is not a magic book, but an *instrument* of revelation, God’s literary masterpiece. The Bible does not act alone. If it did then perhaps it would be a magic book, but no, it does not fly off the shelf and cram itself down your throat. It awaits a reader, one willing to suspend his or her disbelief. But there is another agent involved. Remember the voice prompting Austin/Augustine to pick it up and read it? It may not be an audible voice or a child’s voice in every case, but some unfamiliar, even invisible prompting, an event, a barely detectable nudge may inspire the reading. More often than not, it is the *timing* of things that is remarkable. Some coincidence or convergence or person (under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) brings together (1) the words one encounters in the “instrument” of the scriptures; (2) the reader or hearer who is receptive in faith; and (3) the presence or agency of the Author God who is revealed in the encounter.



The Bible is an instrument of revelation.

Character and . . . Identity

In these remarkable, even “holy” conversion experiences of Hamann and Augustine, we see a paradigm or a pattern that is surprisingly common. The copy of the book Augustine read—evidently not even a complete Bible, just an edition of the letters of Paul—was basically paper and ink, like any other book. But Augustine was certain that God used the writing as an instrument to communicate with him. For those of us alive today, the essential message is that God remains committed to using the Bible as the place where, through the Holy Spirit, he meets those who want to know about him and to truly know themselves. If you throw the Bible in the trash, you will not likely be struck by lightning, but your conscience may be struck nonetheless. Read it with an open mind and you may just find your character re-written, your identity formed in a wonderful new way.



*Benozzo Gozzoli,
“Conversion of Augustine”*

We can actually recognize such a pattern of transformation that people have experienced down through the ages. In fact, as famous as Augustine's account is, two other such moments are mentioned in the very same passage! Augustine had just been told of the conversion of Anthony a century or so earlier, a wealthy young man who happened into church just as the words of Jesus were being read: “If you would be perfect, go and sell what you have and give to the poor; and come follow me and you shall have treasure in heaven” (Matt. 19.21). Anthony considered himself personally addressed, he responded accordingly, and became the father of a monastic movement.

Augustine's friend Alypius had been told of Anthony in the same conversation and had been with Augustine in the garden as they mulled over Anthony's example. He knew of his friend's struggles and watched him pick up and read the passage from Paul. Alypius himself took the text from him, read the very next line, and applied it to himself: “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions” (Rom. 14.1). Both men were baptized together, along with Augustine's teenage son, on Easter in the year 387.

With this decisive turn, Augustine no longer resisted God's calling to live a holy, devoted life, but entered fully into his new Christian identity, guiding the church through many wrenching controversies, and producing the most significant interpretations of scripture by any church father.

Big Changes, Little Changes, and Sometimes No Change at All As we have said, not every reading of scripture results in a major change in the reader. Some readings involve incremental change, as when one reads a little every day. Others may yield no change at all. The apostle Paul himself acknowledged the difference between dull, ineffectual reading and inspired reading that reveals something: “to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3.15-17).


Jesus, likewise, in his parable about a farmer sowing seed (seed being another metaphor for the Word of God), describes the difference between the receptive and the non-receptive person—such a pervasive theme!—as various forms of soil that either yield a rich, abundant harvest or fail to produce for one reason or another (spiritually hostile forces, trouble and persecution, the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, etc.) (Mark 4.1-20).



What change will your reading yield?
Image: [Freepik.com](https://www.freepik.com)

So the scriptures repeatedly describe the varying degrees of change or response, including none at all, that God's Word effects. One young king heard the scroll of Deuteronomy read and was horrified to realize how Israel had abandoned their covenant with God, so he instituted major reforms (2 Kings 22). After Israel lost their land, spent seventy years in exile, then returned, they heard the scriptures read in public once more and they too wept to hear the Word of God that had fallen silent for so long (Neh. 8.9). In the New Testament book of Acts, an African diplomat happens to be reading a crucial passage in the scroll of Isaiah, and asks the young Philip, who, prompted by the Holy Spirit, has just then run up to meet his chariot, “Who is the prophet talking about?” (Acts 8.26–40).

The timing is exquisite; some might even call it inexplicable if there were not such a clear sense that the Author God is involved, arranging this and other divine appointments.



There is a well-worn path from personal crisis to scripture to positive personal transformation.

The paradigm continues beyond the pages of scripture and throughout history, as we have seen in the cases of Augustine and Hamann. Methodists (representing a stream of Protestant denominations with around 80 million followers worldwide) trace

their theological and spiritual roots back through the moment when a discouraged John Wesley walked into a gathering in Aldersgate, in London, and heard someone reading a passage from Martin Luther's commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans. Granted, his experience was with a text several degrees removed from the original letter—through a commentator (Luther), a translator who rendered Luther's German comments into English, and a reader who was there that day—not directly with the Bible itself, but all these layers rested on the good news revealed in the divine text and they converged in such an way that Wesley, in his journal, wrote how his heart was “strangely warmed.” None of it, not least the change that overcame Wesley, would have happened without the Bible and what it reveals of the good nature of God.

Collaborating Authors

What is the point? This is all simply to say that there is a well-worn path from personal crisis to scripture to positive personal transformation. Scripture is the *sine qua non* for these transformations, the unparalleled instrument through which you can “reasonably believe” you will encounter, learn from, and be shaped by God. But its role is not reserved for thunderclaps of dramatic conversion, still less is it a license to badger people. It is better understood and far better used as the one essential and ongoing source of spiritual “food” that forms one's true identity.

God Feeds Us In both “Testaments” of Christian scripture, “Old” and “New,” some of its human authors (most notably Ezekiel and John)—yes, the authorship of the Bible is a divine-human *collaboration*—were told to “eat this scroll” (metaphorically, I assume). The call of Jeremiah is similar: “Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth’” (Jer. 1.9). This would not only form you inwardly, with a deeper and more literal sense of “information” than we associate with the term, it would also make you a speaker for God, collaborating with the Holy Spirit.

“Wait a minute,” you say. “You spoke of the book, then said it becomes a pen with which God writes our story, our character. But sacred text as food? Didn't anyone ever teach you not to mix metaphors?” You are right! Scripture mixes metaphors so often, it likely drives some English teachers crazy.¹ But work with me here, or better yet: *work with the metaphor that works for you.*


I have a wide, flat, decorative spoon from the Central African country of Malawi, a gift from a missionary friend. The spoon is used for serving *nsima*, a white grain made from maize. The picture on the spoon shows a pair of African hands holding something white, which at first I assumed was the bread in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Spoons are for food, right? Looking closer, I saw it was not bread, but the pages of an open Bible held between those hands. Some optical illusions are as sharp as 20-20 vision! We can see God's Word shaping character and forming identity by feeding people in such starkly different, yet similar ways.²



This spoon reminds us that God feeds us with his Word.

Our Role Is to Partake and to Participate Humbly Perhaps you are asking: But what is my role in this? Let's return to Hamann, the failed musician who found God through the poetry of scripture. One of his chief criticisms of the Enlightenment was that it lost sight of the divine Author of scripture, exaggerating the role of its human authors, and thus scuttled the sense of divine-human collaboration. From the human

side of the things, such collaboration requires faith (not only trust, but loyalty) and humility. Humans, of course, can never be equal partners with God, and yet God, wanting to inspire, sanctify, and summon us to our better selves, accommodates himself to us.



The only proper way to read scripture is by meeting God's humility with our own.


Hamann described God's authorship of scripture as an act of supreme "condescension" (in a positive sense). God willingly lowers himself to the level of creatures in order to reveal himself. This loving and humble approach to humanity was and is still met with arrogant

dismissal, even with the murder of Jesus, the Son of God, also known as the Word of the Lord or the *Logos* of God. Instead of continuing the pattern of human arrogance, Hamann says, the only proper way to read scripture is by meeting God's humility with our own:

God an author!—(The Creator of the world and Father of humanity has been denied and blamed, the God-Man would be crucified, and the Inspirer of the divine Word ridiculed and blasphemed.) The inspiration of this book is just as great a humiliation and condescension of God as the Creation by the Father and the Incarnation of the Son. The humility of the heart is therefore the unique frame of mind which belongs to the reading of the Bible, and the most indispensable preparation for the same. ("On the Interpretation of Scripture"; *Londoner Schriften* 59)

Remember how I said you need to suspend your disbelief, to read with trust, in order to get anything out of scripture? Humility and faith amount to the basic and essential attitude for understanding God's Word, for receiving the food he offers. In a nutshell, the human role in this collaboration is humbly to approach God through scripture and to consider yourself addressed.

A Personal Testimony A happy fellowship emerges among those grateful to be addressed in this way. I teach seminary students, and I assure you that none of them makes the life-altering decision to go back



God essentially turns on the lights for us, revealing Godself through imagery that we mere humans can actually understand.

to school without a text effectively reaching up from the pages of scripture, grabbing them by the collar, and saying: “Pay attention. This is speaking to you.” My own Hamannian/Augustinian moment came in 1988, when I decided to read the whole Bible, not with any mystical

aspiration, religious agenda, or even any conscious sense of devotion. I was simply prompted by the memory of a high school teacher's college preparation syllabus that featured the Old and New Testaments as top priority, and a college literature professor's lifetime reading list on which the Bible was, again, the first thing one “must read.”

Here I was, 25 years old, with years logged in Sunday school, church, Bible studies, etc., and I had only ever spot-read portions of the book that has shaped and arguably defined western civilization far more than any other. I did not get far before I read Isaac's naive question, shortly before he was laid on the altar by his father Abraham: “where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?” Abraham replied: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son” (Gen. 22.7-8). In a flash, I realized what millions of others have concluded long before me. Twenty or so centuries before the crucifixion of Jesus, the Lamb of God “who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1.29), the Author of scripture was speaking through Abraham about Jesus. This Lamb of God, this Author of scripture, had to be *divine*, for what human could see two thousand years into the future without divine assistance and inspiration? Jesus' *subsequent* “once-and-for-all” death not only spared Isaac's life that day but reconciled God and humanity for eternity, thus slamming the brakes on human sacrifice forever.

Some moments, some experiences, simply defy explanation, so no words can do justice to the defibrillating effect this had on me. But at least a small part of it had to do with the sense that, in that moment, many seemingly separate moments of history and truth had converged in a flash and everything of ultimate importance was present and accounted for, bound together in that recognition, in the revelation that

Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—is the Author of Life and the Giver of eternal life, is everything he is revealed to be in the complex, mysterious, composite composition that we know as the Bible. More than this, the searching of this book has become for me, as it is for many others, the basis for everything: not merely for the courses I teach and the sermons I preach, but for the character to which I aspire with each day I am given, for my self-understanding as a beloved child of God, for the kind and charitable regard in which I am to hold my neighbors. I measure up to none of these, but together they constitute both the goal and the frame of reference—of sense, of sanity—we have been given to guide us through this earthly life.

“Pick it up, read it.” Genesis 22 is a riveting story, one that lies behind Kierkegaard's classic *Fear and Trembling*. But far beyond inspiring this or that book, sermon, painting, sculpture, or whatever, it reveals the transcendent perspective of the only Author capable of *seeing, writing, even appearing in*, the whole of human history and steering it through the ages. I say the “only” such Author because God does this from the vantage point of eternity. God essentially turns on the lights for us, writing the story of redemption and revealing Godself through imagery, poetry, symbol, events, parables, etc., so that we mere humans can actually understand. Such an epiphany does not move me to put the book down and say: “Been there, done that. I'm done.” No, I want to know this friendly, most essential Author!

That may be the best way to understand the connection between encountering God through scripture suddenly in a momentary crisis and doing so every day through regular formative reading. You find yourself rescued from a train wreck by a Good Samaritan, and exclaim: “That Samaritan is the best and kindest person I have ever met! What better friend could I have? I want to spend every day with a friend like that!”³

The Most Essential Author Shapes Our Character(s) You know how it is with human authors and artists. A great novel moves you and you want to read more, yes, read *everything* by the author. A song hooks you, so you check out the artist's entire catalog. You want to know their story, their background, their inspiration. What were they trying to say with this or that work? Needless to say, in every case, the search leads

to new discoveries, but also to the realization that some works are better than others and, frankly, not all of it is 5-star stuff.

When it comes to scripture's influence, however, sometimes we see it go beyond the occasional literary allusion and take hold in a deep and discernible way at a particular stage in an artist's career. Just as Bob Dylan had his Gospel period (a phase that I think has not ended, but only grown more subtle), we are now witnessing a similar transformation, as Kanye West, who speaks openly about the Bible's influence on his own creativity (Sarachik), sets aside the god of self and sings and preaches that *Jesus is King* and distributes Bibles to any interested fans (Law). Time will tell whether the transformation of Kanye or Dylan or any of us will hold, but I do suspect that in the future Kanye's catalog and career will be assessed in two distinct phases: Before and after *Jesus is King*.




Jesus stands before the throne of God.

So what about when the Poet, the Author, or the Artist is God, who even counts *me* and *you* among the catalog of his works? The most essential Author writes us, his collaborators, both *with* character and *as* characters. As David wrote in the Psalms: "Here I am!

In the scroll of the book it is written of me" (Ps. 40.11). And in the most hair-raising book of the Bible, there is a mysterious detail. Three times Revelation mentions a separation of those bound for hell, who worship "the beast," from those saints whose *names* are "written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered" (Rev. 13.8; cf. 17.8; 20.15).

But a fourth and final time, in the apostle's vision of the new, heavenly Jerusalem, he writes of the city: "nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but *only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*" (Rev. 21.27; italics mine). All the ominous overtones aside, notice how fitting this phrase is: "those who

are written.” No longer are mere names being written. No, this book of life is no measly class roster, attendance sheet, telephone directory, or even a register of church membership. Rather, at the end of the grand narrative of divine revelation, whole persons—fully-orbed, well-rounded characters—are the product of the pen of the divine Poet, the Author God.



Whole persons are the product of the pen of the divine Poet, the Author God.

Your Life, God’s Epic

So where to begin? At the beginning, of course! In the beginning, “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.” (Gen. 1.3-4) As a newborn, all your eyes were able to make out was the difference between light and darkness. When Austin/Augustine first began to ask questions about life, with an infant in his lap, and questions about death, with the dirt still fresh on his father's grave, all he could grasp were the most simplistic, often superstitious, contrasts. But in time God eventually coaxed him to pick up and read just the words he needed to read in order to set him free and give him a whole new sense of identity. His life began anew just as he began a new relationship with the Word of God.

Likewise, through untold circumstances and the subtlest of spiritual nudges, God manages to get some of us to pick up his epic poem and read it. Under God’s friendly influence, moral agents, persons of maturity, character, purpose, and integrity—Anthony, Augustine, Alypius, Luther, Wesley, Hamann, Kierkegaard, myriads of saints, women and men in every age, and now perhaps even Kanye West and Kim Kardashian!?!—emerge as “new creation,” living, artistic works of this same divine Poet, this Author of salvation. Scripture is a book to be picked up with an open mind. When disbelief is humbly set aside, you should prepare for an adventurous ride, a collaboration with God as he writes you into his book of life. In such a light that spills toward us from eternity, shouldn’t we begin to think of our own lives as epics? Pick up the Bible and read it. God knows what will happen!

Timothy Matthew Slemmons is Professor of Homiletics and Worship and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. A Presbyterian Minister of the Word and Sacrament, he has served churches in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and preached as far afield as Jamaica, Scotland, and Malawi. A past recipient of the David H. C. Read Preacher/Scholar Award (1994), and the John Knox Coit Award for Excellence in Teaching and Student Advising (2016), his writings span multiple genres, including homiletics (*Groans of the Spirit: Homiletical Dialectics in an Age of Confusion*; *Year D: A Quadrennial Supplement to the Revised Common Lectionary*), *liturgics* (*Liturgical Elements for Reformed Worship, 4 vols.*), *catechesis* (*Our Father Knows: The Prayer that Jesus Taught*), *poetry* (*The Just, Quiet Wind*), *illustrated stories* (*A Phenomenal Llama and The Secret of Salix Babylonicus*), and *translations* (*Johannes Oecolampadius, Sermons on the First Epistle of John: A Handbook for the Christian Life*). His translation of *Johann Georg Hamann's* Biblical Reflections of a Christian is forthcoming.

Image p. 55: “*Johann Georg Hamann*,” Wikimedia/public domain

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Image p. 58: “*Conversion of Augustine*,” Benozzo Gozzoli, Wikimedia/public domain

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Image p. 65: scan by Timothy Matthew Slemmons of illustration in 16th c. copy of *Oecolampadius' translation of Theophylact's commentary on the Gospels*.

Notes

¹ Among the most important and illuminating treatments of biblical metaphor, see the classic works of Northrop Frye, namely, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, and *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of “the Bible and Literature.”*

² This is not to say other literature cannot inspire us, shape our character, and form our identity. It is to highlight the claims that the Bible makes for itself, especially for its divine Author, to do so in a way, and with a friendly and redemptive integrity, that secular literature alone does not.

³ There are a number of good daily Bible reading plans available, but I would suggest and even prescribe the one-year plans by Eliot Young (no relation to Sarah Young of the popular *Jesus Calling* series), namely, *The Word at Work*, *The Spirit at Work*, and *Sitometrion*. These plans, like many others, provide for multiple starting points with the assumption that you will read through

Character and . . . Identity

different parts of the Bible (e.g., the Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, Epistles) simultaneously, but they have the added bonus of rich, penetrating, and thought-provoking commentary.

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Humility and Story: Connecting Identity and Character

Wally Metts

*Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
. . . . If one, settling a pillow by her head
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all."*

T.S. Elliot, "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock"

My athletic career ended in the early sixties, when, after attending every Little League practice for two years, I only played in one game. We were ahead by a dozen or so points, and the coach let me off the bench. My mom insisted that I finish what I started but when the season was over, I quit. My athletic *career* ended, but not my athletic experience.

In 10th grade I had a PE teacher (high school coach) who would tell rowdy classmates that if they didn't shape up, he would put me on their team, a real threat since every class consisted of playing different team sports. The final exam always consisted of a fitness test, and I could never do chin ups. I finally got an A in a PE class in college when I took a beginning swimming class, without telling anyone I was a certified lifeguard. The teacher was very impressed by my "progress," and by the end of the term I was even helping others.

If some high school administrator, or even my mother, had read Joseph Sabin's essay "Shifting Our Mindset: Sports, Character and Identity," I would be a different person than I am today. But as Sabin so thoughtfully notes, not necessarily a *better* person. I was undoubtedly shaped by these experiences, and I share my failures, and to some degree other people's failures, as a way of understanding who I am—a critical process described by Lindsey M. Ward in "On Becoming A Better Failure: How Failure Stories Can Shape Our Identities."

For a long time, the tension between how I was perceived by others and how I perceived myself was huge, but I somehow managed to see myself as both better than them and better than they saw me. I was not overweight or cross-eyed or short, just a little awkward in elementary school, a perception that carried over with the same kids in the same school system until I skipped my senior year and went to college. Like Prufrock I often felt no one was listening or cared. But I had read more books than my peers. A lot more.



Wally Metts, fifth grade

One of those books, the focus of Timothy Matthew Slemmons' essay "Co-Authoring Your Story in Light of God's Epic: Human Identity and the Divine Word," was the Bible. I grew up in a conservative Baptist home where it was taken quite seriously. By the time my Dad, a pastor for over 50 years, was in his 60s, he was reading it through four or five times a year, but all my life it flowed out of his lips and through his life. It taught him about grace, which he extended to everyone, including me, his "intellectual," prideful son.

In responding to this set of essays, I will make some general observations about the nature of identity and character as framed by these authors, followed by a brief discussion of similarities and differences between the authors' views. I will then return to the issue of identity, drawing the conclusion that our conception of identity is often too simplistic to account for the diverse and complex influence of culture. And I will finish the story with which I began.

Character and Identity Are Difficult to Define

This issue of *Character and . . .* is an ambitious project, since relating character and identity is made more challenging by the ambiguity of both terms. We do have some idea of what each of these authors mean by character. Sabin points us directly to the Wendt Character Initiative, rooted in the classical virtues such as truthfulness, justice, fairness and service, and he points to Christian B. Miller’s description of traits that lead people to think, feel, and act in certain ways. His essay then directly and indirectly relates to how these traits may or may not develop in athletes. While noting that many believe teamwork, loyalty, and other traits can be developed through sports, he observes, “[n]otably absent from the . . . list [of those developed through sports] are traits such as honesty and moral reasoning” (32). He spends a great deal of time relating lapses in moral reasoning to a pervasive win-at-all-costs mentality.



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But the other authors treat character more by inference. In Slemmons we see Augustine’s moral lapses, for example, and Johann Georg Hamann confronts his arrogance in contrast to divine humility. For Slemmons, to the degree our character is rewritten by scripture, it is as a *better* character with an eternal perspective. This is a reasonable inference, but an inference, nonetheless.

Ward requires even more of an inference to get to her understanding of character. We can infer, for example, that some of the failures Ward encourages us to share are moral failures. Perhaps most of them are. But Slemmons does not deal with the moral issues directly, although certainly the growth we can experience as we share and embrace failure is understood as a positive growth, one that leads to making better choices, not only in our actions but in the way we think about ourselves.

The relationship between character and self-understanding is central to Ward and Sabin and begins to point us toward how all three of these authors understand the issue of identity. None of them make any attempt to define it, but it is loosely understood by all of them to mean “who we are,” which is, unfortunately, not very helpful. I will return to this issue at some length, but first we will look at their limited discussions of identity as a concept.

Early in her essay Ward says, “failure sharing has a positive impact on who we are, our very identities” (12). Our selfie culture, she argues, has “detrimental effects on our identities,” resulting in “under-confident, depressive identities” or “overconfident, know-it-all identities,” and not being able to talk about our failures “has fundamentally shifted our understandings of who we are and aspire to be” (14). She concludes that “[f]ailure sharing is an essential part of understanding our identities” (27).

Slemmons is interested in our self-concept, too. Hebrews 4.12, he says, explains “how the friendly God who understands you reveals and interprets you to yourself—that is, to your willing self” (56). This eventually becomes his framework for identity as he understands it, a Christian identity in which the Word of God transforms us into “fully-orbed, well-rounded characters” (66).

Sabin also sees identity as self-understanding, and sports has the potential to improve it. Or destroy it. Or at least reveal it. He cites coach Mike Krzyewski, who said in a speech that as an athlete on the field, “you have to instantaneously react, be instinctive, who you are, what character do you have. . .” (qtd. in Sabin 32). But Sabin recognizes the limitations of this, referring to the Japanese notion of *ikigai*, roughly “the reason you wake up in the morning” (44). You need a better reason than practice so you can win, he argues. You need a better purpose so you can live.

Character and Identity Are Related . . . But Complicated

However loosely defined, taken together these authors argue that identity formation, experienced in different ways or through different channels, is related to character formation. This is a case worth making

Character and . . . Identity

and supports the goals and mission of the Wendt Center, suggesting both how identity formation leads to character formation and at least one character trait that might emerge.

The how has to do with intention. And the trait is humility. We have to do certain things on purpose for character to develop and grow. We have to read our Bible with intention and faith, Slemmons says, which results in a supernatural outcome. We have to change the way we think about sports and train athletes, which results in a more realistic view of one's life and purpose. We have to talk about our failures in intentional ways, which result in hopeful and helpful self-knowledge.



Illustration by Diane Fraley, dsfraley.com

Both Sabin and Ward use the term *mindset* in this way. For Sabin, developing better people rather than just better athletes will require coaches and parents to shift their mindset about winning and life. “What may be a bit more pragmatic [than eliminating the profit motive] is a simple mindset shift for all parties interested in building character through sports” (46), which he shows does not occur by just playing sports.


Ward connects us to Carol Dweck’s understanding of attributional tendencies as either fixed or growth mindsets. How others receive or profit from our failure stories depends on how well we help them think about what those stories say about us and about them. “[F]ailure sharing is much more effective when done with a bit of intention,” Ward suggests, while cautioning against oversharing and indiscriminate sharing (25).

Slemmons argues for intentional, even daily, reading of scripture, with a willing suspension of disbelief and a partnership with our divine Co-

Author. This is deliberate action with predictable consequences, almost all of which involve the kind of person we are or become. The Word of God, he says, “encounters people, reorients their lives for the good, invests them with a new identity, shapes their character and vocation, and even continues to ‘author’ their lives afterward” (52). But you have to pick it up and read it, as Augustine and a countless stream of faithful Christians have done.

So, character formation through identity development is intentional, but these authors have, unwittingly I suspect, arrived at the same effect. In every case a primary consequence is humility. Slemmons addresses this directly, as does the scripture itself. Each of the examples he cites, from Augustine to

Kanye West, learned or are learning to set aside self-interest to know and understand God’s purpose. He cites Hamann on this point: “The humility of the heart is therefore the unique frame of mind which belongs to the reading of the Bible, and the most indispensable preparation for the same” (qtd. in Slemmons 62). This would be the result of Slemmons’ own testimony to reading the Scripture as a 25-year-old, reading about Abraham’s thwarted sacrifice of his son and God’s willing sacrifice of his own. For Slemmons, “history and truth had converged in a flash and everything of ultimate importance was present and accounted for” (63). The work of God in our lives is humbling. And justly so.



*Character formation
through identity
development is
intentional.*

Sabin addresses this from a different angle, specifically the hubris which sports can often inculcate. He defines this as “pride-driven arrogance that leads one to feel separate from and superior to others” (40). Unchecked this leads to major struggles adjusting to life when it turns out our sports “careers” are short lived. This is not a modern problem. In his 1898 poem “To an Athlete Dying Young,” A. E. Housman wrote:

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads that wore their honours out,
Runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man.

Sabin's solution is less dire than Housman's—an intentional mindset about priorities and realities. But this requires setting aside hubris, which is what humility looks like.

Ward never addresses the issue of humility directly, but what can be more humbling in our success-oriented selfie culture than admitting our imperfections? She treats it in a different way—as humiliation, which Marte Otten and Kai Jonas found to be more mentally demanding than anger or shame. The emotions she relates to failure diminish our ability to evaluate our failures and leave us detached and isolated. This is precisely her case for sharing our stories in the first place—it helps normalize something we all do. Fail. In effect, we humble ourselves by talking about our failures so that we feel less humiliation.

In different ways these authors have argued that intentional character development will, among other things, leave us with a more realistic view of who we are and what we can be, provided we approach these questions with humility.

In Some Contexts, Identity Can Be Essentially Meaningless

We are, however, no closer to understanding what identity is, perhaps an unrealistic expectation from the start. As used here it is simply “who we are,” but so many questions remain unaddressed. How do we become who we are? Is it how we see ourselves, or do we understand ourselves in terms of how others see us? Or both? Does our identity change? If so, under what circumstances? Is this a concept derived from philosophy or psychology or sociology or theology?

The answer to that last question is clear. Yes. It derives from all those fields and some others; they all use it in different ways for different purposes, which is why we can't answer any of the other questions. In none of these essays is it considered in the way we most often see it used, as a reference to tribes or political affiliations or gender identities, social constructions which may or may not be useful. Identity can be used in so many ways in so many contexts as to be meaningless. Or else, as may be the case here, it is so simple as to require no definition at all.

I certainly have no better definition to offer. Ever since “know thyself” was carved on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, philosophers and prophets have been trying to explain how to do it. By the 1950’s it was diffused in the social sciences, as seen in Erik Erikson’s notion of an identity crisis, but, according to Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, since then it might refer to:



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- A basis of political or social action
- A consequential sameness of members in a group
- A core aspect of individual or social being
- A process leading to a collective self-understanding or sameness
- A product of multiple and competing discourses (6-8)

But if identity can mean practically anything, it can finally come to mean nothing at all. By confounding categories of practice with categories of analysis, we ultimately treat constructivism with the essentialism it sets out to destroy. The term cannot do two things well. They write, “whatever its indispensability in certain practical contexts, ‘identity’ is too ambiguous, too torn between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ meanings, essentialist connotations and constructivist qualifiers to serve well the demands of social analysis” (2).

As a category of practice, however, people use identity to make sense of their similarities and differences. Political actors, with varying degrees of integrity, may use it to help people understand themselves and their interests. But treating identity as a category of analysis runs the risks of using it without adding understanding, so that in the end we argue that because identities exist, we must therefore have one. When scholars are both analyst and protagonist, as is often the case, Brubaker and Cooper assert that the term is not helpful, or even necessary (9).

Given this confusion, it could be argued that Ward, Sabin and Slemmons are treating identity as a category of practice, rooted in classical

frameworks of permanence and memory. But we do well to say so, or risk being scolded by the thought police.

Definition, however, is not the only problem with identity. It may also be true that identity has become a more scholarly way to stereotype people. Although Kwame Appiah is more committed to the concept than I am, and much more sympathetic to intersectionality and other modern variations on the theme, his new book, *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*, plows fertile ground in examining the flaws inherent



Identities matter because they give us reasons to do things, reasons we think about consciously.

in our current understanding about identity (29). The lies of which he speaks are the misconceptions and the deceptions we tell ourselves, particularly about some inner essence that explains the way we are. He still says, however, “identities matter because they give us reasons to do things, reasons we think about consciously” (25).

Appiah examines, each in turn, creed, country, color, class and culture, noting the inconsistencies and overlaps that contribute to the complexity and confusion, making the case that nations, for example, are invented, and we make assumptions (or even laws) that have little to do with individual tastes or values. Efforts to create a national identity in Singapore, for example, have had some success but at the cost of linguistic and religious diversity, which are themselves nevertheless rigorously enforced. Appiah calls this the Medusa Syndrome: “what the state gazes upon, it tends to turn to stone” (90-98).

But doesn’t any “identity,” consciously or even unconsciously conceived and embraced, tend to have this totalizing effect? It naturally leads to the kind of hubris, Sabin noted, which in athletes “can lead to the belief that non-athletes or even non-teammates do not deserve their respect” (40). In the absence of uncommon humility, identity becomes a minefield, not just for high school athletes who are prone to such generalizations, but even seasoned diplomats who make similar assumption, based on over-simplified assumptions about the identities of those at the negotiating table.

Kevin Avruch, in *Culture & Conflict Resolution*, says diplomacy is often frustrated by inadequate ideas of culture, since, in his view, “culture always comes in the plural” (15). In mediation, deep-rooted and protracted conflicts often represent the interest of minority identity groups at odds with the interests of more powerful, often majority, interest groups, with example after example of identity-bound passion and unreason on both sides, even different ways of reasoning. Sometimes, unfortunately, the result is war. He concludes that we must “never mistake the simplification function of culture for the world it represents” (108). I would argue the same about identity, which, despite our efforts to understand it and articulate it, is too messy to be of any real value.

We Are All Looking For a Story to Define Us . . . and Explain Us

But if the term identity is too broad, the dangers of using it too great, and the claims about it too simple, can it in some practical sense help make sense of my failed athleticism or prideful intellectualism? Only as it emerges from my story and contributes to my character. In his book, *On the Road with*

Augustine, James K. A. Smith notes that by listening to people in recovery groups, novelist Leslie Jamison observed that every story is essentially the same story—and that’s OK. The point of these stories is not the tellers’ “look at me,” but the hearers’ “that’s me.” We find our people, and they are the people whose stories sound like ours (158).




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Smith argues that in his *Confessions*, Augustine does not share his story to reveal something about himself. “To the contrary,” he writes, “there is a sense in which his own particularity is diminished, his biography

eclipsed. The point is to share a story that is generic enough for any and all to imagine themselves in it” (162). In this sense, Augustine’s identity, and ours, is storied. All of us are looking for an orienting narrative that gives us lines to say and roles to play and with which, on our best days, others can see themselves.

So, I return to my story. Whenever you can say “that’s me,” we share an identity.

I often joke that real men write sonnets, which is a way of distinguishing myself from the athletes who surrounded me. I can write a sonnet in about half an hour, although not a very a good one (that takes a lifetime). But I likely spent as much time as a youth playing with words as some of my peers did playing with a football. Nevertheless, I wouldn’t call myself a poet. Likewise, I learned to play golf when I was in my 40’s because my dad liked to play, and it would be a way to spend time with him. He died of a heart attack before we played a dozen games, and now I play two or three times a year with one of my sons. I wouldn’t call myself a golfer either.



Is my identity how I describe myself and what I love? Or is it how you perceive me and what you call me?

I would call myself a writer, a pastor, a husband, a father, a teacher—these are things I spend more time doing and thinking about. I’m also a white, Southern male who is learning conversational Nepali and likes Polish sausage. But is my identity how I describe myself and what I love? Or is it how you perceive me and what you

call me? How does any of this determine the moral choices I make? The answers to these questions come when we humbly connect description and narrative, giving our identity and character context.

I am shaped as much by not playing sports as by playing them and have learned more by failing than by succeeding. But it was from what I could do well that I learned what I could not do at all, at least not in any satisfying way. As a 16-year old in college I came to face the pride that

The answers come when we humbly connect description and narrative, giving our identity and character context.

made me no different than the most arrogant jock I knew. A lot of things were not going well. I was intellectually competent but Prufrock-awkward (this means girls didn't like me.) I was a church youth director

who knew what to say but not what to do. I was overwhelmed and discouraged, filled with doubt and even self-contempt. And then I read this in 2 Corinthians 3.5: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God" (KJV).

Even my ability to think was a gift, and the only proper response was humility. It was then that I began to bend out the grace that I had received and seen in the life of my father, a Baptist preacher who actually understood grace. He believed it had changed him and could change anyone. Until that moment, I did not. Until then I never imagined it could change those 10th grade boys who mocked me every Tuesday. Or did I imagine it could change me.

In Slemmons' terms, I welcomed my Co-Author and began to become what I am today. It is moments like these that shape our character, and not the labels we wear, or the stereotypes others give us, or the identities we profess. The authors in this series have reminded us that this is intentional and humbling work, framed by the moment we realize football is not our life, or that failure is normal, or that God is speaking to us.



Wally Metts today

These are plot points in our story, and in such moments, we learn who we are. By telling our stories, others begin to understand us, and we begin to understand them. It is not perfect. Neither is the idea of identity.

But story may be a better place to start.

Wally Metts is Director of Graduate Studies in Communication at Spring Arbor University, where he has taught for 35 years, and where he has also led students on cross-cultural trips to China, Ireland, Argentina, India and Nepal. He has a BA in combined sciences from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, an MS in curriculum and instruction from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and a PhD in interdisciplinary studies from Michigan State University. He will spend a sabbatical in 2021 teaching graduate courses in journalism at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. He and his wife have eleven grandchildren, who call him Santa.

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