

# Character and . . .

## the Places of Home

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

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

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Brian J. Walsh

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

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

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

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



*A Toronto subway platform*

You see, someone saw a Swiss Army knife fall out of this boy's pocket while he was resting on the platform. That knife occasioned an emergency call to the police that caused significant delays for the whole subway system that morning. But the boy's crime wasn't really the knife.

It was the color of his skin. Meredith knew that if a fine-looking, well-dressed white boy had a little pocketknife like that fall out of his pocket, there would be no emergency because there would have been no perceived threat. But black kids in both the United States and Canada get different treatment.

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

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

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

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

Now here's something about Meredith. She actually makes a habit of this kind of thing. In fact, she finds herself in such situations with some regularity. In his Narnia book *The Magician's Nephew*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "What you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are" (125). Meredith finds herself standing with a black kid in trouble with the police or a Muslim family threatened on the subway because she saw injustice and racism. She saw fear in the eyes of these neighbors. Maybe that's it. While others either saw threat or simply averted their gaze,



Museum subway platform in Toronto

intentionally deciding to see nothing at all, Meredith saw neighbors and was compelled to act like a neighbor to them. You see, that's the "sort of person" that Meredith is. By making a habit of this kind of engagement

with the world in everyday practices, by being neighborly, even if it puts her at some risk, Meredith both demonstrates her character and continues to form the kinds of virtues that dispose her to inhabit the world in a certain way.

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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



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

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


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

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

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



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



*Creation teaches  
compassion, care,  
and love.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The stories that I tell about Meredith are true, but I have changed her name.

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

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