

Character is Destiny

The Value of
Personal Ethics in
Everyday Life

“THIS PROFOUND BOOK REMINDS US HOW UTTERLY
CENTRAL CHARACTER IS TO ALL ELSE IN LIFE.”

SHELBY STEELE

Russell W. Gough

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*The Value of Personal Ethics
in Everyday Life*

RUSSELL W. GOUGH



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Preface

While writing this book, I experienced two unforgettable incidents—one inspiring, the other disheartening. Both are related to the themes presented in *Character is Destiny*, and both will remain indelibly etched in my memory. I'll briefly describe these two incidents, beginning with the disheartening, more recent one.

As I was putting the finishing touches on the final manuscript, just before it went to press, something happened that spoke volumes to me. It should speak volumes to all of us about our culture's desperate need for honest, soul-searching discussions of personal ethics and character. For the first time in my teaching career, a student threatened to take legal action against me over a failing grade deservedly received in one of my courses.

What a lamentable sign of the times: a student threatening to take a teacher to court over a grade! And what bitter, sobering irony it involved, for this student had at one time written eloquently and insightfully about the very themes discussed in this book. For me, I must confess, it was a shrill wake-up call concerning two serious issues: how far many of us are willing to go to avoid taking responsibility for our own actions, and how deeply our culture's win-at-all-costs

attitude has eroded our belief in the primary importance of integrity and personal character.

While there were no valid grounds for legal action against me, I can't deny that I found the mere threat of a lawsuit quite unsettling. (In fact, this represented the first and only time anyone has ever threatened me with a lawsuit for any reason). What I found most disconcerting was that the student and family behind the threat were by all accounts—including my own—good and decent people. Indeed, they are good and decent people, practicing Christians, people whom most of us would be happy to have as friends or neighbors.

Why would good and decent people—like you and me—do such a thing? That's one of the critical questions I've tried to address in this book.

The second remarkable thing that happened while writing this book occurred just as I was completing the rough, original manuscript. It was during one of those times when a writer has second thoughts about the ultimate value of his or her project, especially one such as this book. Is this book worth reading? Will people really be interested in a book about personal ethics and character? If they do read it, will they be better in the least for having done so?

I was asking myself questions such as these in late August 1996. It was the beginning of a new school year, and I was about to deliver a keynote lecture on personal ethics and character to Pepperdine's incoming freshman students (as I have been doing for several years). Immediately following my lecture to the new freshman class, two colleagues of mine, Bob White and Hung Le (the two administrators who

have honored me by continually inviting me to deliver this keynote lecture), related a story that dramatically reassured me of the potential value of this book.

After Bob and Hung offered their usual, gracious words of thanks and compliments, they proceeded to tell me of a graduate who had recently faced an unenviable and gut-wrenching ethical dilemma at work. This woman had learned of a blatantly illegal and unethical company practice, and had been told by her high-level manager that if she blew the whistle she would not only be fired but would also be blackballed forever in that particular industry.

This was a serious threat and one the woman was sure the manager would carry out. Her family as well as her closest friends strongly encouraged her to think long and hard about the consequences of blowing the whistle. After all, her present (and future) career was at stake.

Valiantly, and with a noble, come-what-may attitude, she decided to ignore the manager's warning and expose the wrongful business practice. To her great and unexpected relief (albeit after several days of agonizing uncertainty over the fate of her career), the company's high executives ended up supporting her. She kept her job, and the high-level manager was demoted.

Throughout the whole ordeal, the woman had been in touch regularly with Bob and Hung, both of whom had given her support as friends and sources of moral strength. The main reason Bob and Hung were so intent on sharing this woman's story with me is because in coming to her decision and in its defense, she had expressly invoked my name

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and “with passionate conviction in her voice” had cited from memory a few of the principles expressed in this book.

This revelation moved me deeply. It’s not very often that a teacher—much less a professor of ethics—hears such reassuring testimonials from his or her students. The secondhand testimonial not only gave this author a shot in the arm but also touched this teacher’s heart.

Thus, of the several people to whom I owe a special word of appreciation, I would like to begin by thanking Bob and Hung—and that anonymous former student—for their timely encouragement, given to me when I probably needed it the most. But, come to think of it, that’s just like Bob and Hung—always offering much-needed words of encouragement and support to others.

With respect to the individuals who have been directly involved with the production and promotion of this book, I have been particularly fortunate. And my good fortune is not simply due to the fact that they are all quintessential professionals, which they certainly are. It is also and more importantly due to the fact that they have invariably expressed their sincere belief in, and the need for, this book’s message. So to my agent, Carol Mann, and her associate, Christy Fletcher, and to the team at Prima Publishing—Ben Dornitz, Steven Martin, Betsy Towner, Kathryn Hashimoto, and Patty Oien—I would like to offer my sincere thanks for their exemplary competence and support.

Second only to my wife (and that’s saying a great deal!), there are four people to whom I am especially—and continually—indebted: David Baird, John Secia, Jeff Bliss, and Don

Jacobs. Regarding virtually all of my teaching, speaking, and writing about ethics and character, they are friends, colleagues, and even fans in the highest sense of these terms. For their heartfelt and “headfelt” support, I am truly thankful.

Last, and as always, I wish to express my undying gratitude to Jeannine, my wife, most-valued friend, and role model par excellence. For her unfailing love and encouragement, and particularly for the sacrifices she so willingly makes to enable me to complete a project such as this one, I am deeply appreciative and forever in her debt. I love her with all my heart, and, given Jeannine’s diamond-like character as well as my indebtedness to her, it is only fitting that *Character Is Destiny* be dedicated to her honor.

Introduction

No one would want
to live without friends.

Aristotle

A personal conversation between friends about personal character: That, in a nutshell, describes the spirit in which I have written this book.

By using the expression “between friends,” I’m not trying to be either cute or quaint. Quite the contrary, my intent is both sincere and high-minded, and it is not unlike the spirit in which the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote about friendship over 2,300 years ago.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, still widely regarded as the most complete book ever written on the subject of ethics and character, Aristotle devoted the single greatest portion of the work—nearly one-fourth—to a discussion of friendship.

“But why,” you might be wondering, “would he spend so much time talking about friendship in a book about ethics and character?”

Aristotle’s answer to this question is anything but obsolete or archaic, and it in fact offers those of us at the dawning

of the twenty-first century a refreshing and much-needed perspective on the profound *ethical* dimension of true friendship. For Aristotle, the truest friendship is far more than mere companionship, mutual hobbies, and a common network of acquaintances. Friends in the highest sense of the term are those who make a conscientious effort to take ethics and personal character seriously and inspire each other to be better—in thought, in action, in life.

Indeed, for Aristotle, as for all the great moral thinkers throughout human history, nothing could be more important in the quest to improve our individual lives or our society than giving serious attention to personal character.

I'm going to make the point even more boldly. It is *impossible* to improve our individual lives or our society without genuinely caring about and striving to improve personal character. You must genuinely care about your personal character, I must genuinely care about mine, and we must genuinely care about each other's—as "friends."

I do hope you find the last two sentiments provocative, but please don't assume that I've made them merely to pique your interest or that I'm exaggerating for melodramatic effect. Let me be clear from the start: If I did not believe in the literal truth of these sentiments, I would not have written this book.

There is now hardly a day that goes by in which I am not reminded of these ideas' consequential truth. Sometimes the reminders come in big and dramatic ways; more often they come in small ways. And sometimes—too often, I must admit—they come in painfully acute fashion, meaning that a

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weakness of my own personal character has somehow generated the reminder.

This frequently happens when I'm driving on southern California's congested freeways, a less-than-enjoyable daily experience that has come to be one of my most challenging character tests. I won't beat around the bush: I hate traffic and I hate to be late; more to the point, I'm far from being a patient driver in heavy traffic, and my impatience has led to embarrassing and inexcusable acts of disrespect and incivility on more than one occasion. When another driver cuts me off, tailgates, or crawls along under the speed limit in the fast lane, it is *not* my habit to take it in stride, keep it in perspective, and remain calm, to say the least. My first and strong inclination is not merely to lay on my horn but to roll down my window, shout demeaning insults, and generally emote in ways that I would be absolutely mortified for family, friends, and colleagues to hear about, much less witness.

This may bring a smile to your face or may even make you laugh out loud, either because, like me, you've "been there, done that" (or *are* there and *are* doing that!), or simply because you can visualize witnessing someone like me behaving like a raving lunatic at 6:45 A.M., in bumper-to-bumper traffic, for no good reason. However, from the standpoint of ethics and character, everyday events like this are neither trivial nor humorous.

As we will see in our conversation to follow, such commonplace, day-to-day scenarios—whether at home, work, play, or in transit—represent windows into our personal characters: windows that can show us, if we look honestly

and carefully, the general shape and direction of our individual “destinies”; windows that can reveal to us our deep-seated weaknesses (and strengths) of character. What I would especially like to drive home is how our weaknesses of character—often leading us to do and say things that are regrettable, hurtful, and downright wrong—can be overcome and displaced with strong virtues of character, *if* we genuinely desire to improve ourselves and are willing to work hard at it.

I often tell the story of a twenty-something baseball player who sincerely tried to convince me that he had no control over his explosive temper, specifically when an umpire had made a bad or merely questionable call. The player wasn’t trying to argue that he shouldn’t be punished for bumping or screaming demeaning expletives at umpires; he was simply arguing that he was short-tempered “by nature” and that his bad temper was thus uncontrollable. So I bluntly asked him, “In these situations, why don’t you just take your bat and beat the umpire over the head to a bloody pulp so that he won’t ever be able to make another bad or questionable call?” The baseball player, of course, was quite shocked by my question, and replied, “How can you even suggest such a thing? I couldn’t possibly do *that!*” To which I then responded, “Well, how is it that you can control your temper at one point but not at another? Doesn’t this show that you are squarely in the position of *choosing* at which point you will or will not control your temper? Moreover, would you likewise lose your temper if the umpire happened to be, say, your mother, your boss, or a leader from your church?”

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The same point is equally true for me when I'm behind the wheel of my car. One time, just as I was about to boil over and spew at some blankety-blank driver for tailing me, I happened to take a good look in my rearview mirror and noticed that the offending driver was a colleague and good friend of mine. Unsurprisingly, I *immediately* cooled down, composed myself, and a big grin broke forth from my hardened face.

Let's be honest from the onset: Despite the fatalistic, "I can't help it" attitudes so prevalent in our day, the truth is that *we do have control over and can overcome our weaknesses of character.*

Although I have written *Character Is Destiny* at a time when our country is experiencing a welcome and laudable revival of concern for issues of personal ethics and character as well as character education in the schools, I have approached this vital subject matter with the hope that its message will resonate with readers long after politicians and the media have ceased making "character" the latest headline in the national news. We simply cannot afford to allow issues of personal character and ethics to be treated as the latest political trend or fad, as if the time-less importance of these issues simply went in and out of fashion like bell-bottoms and miniskirts.

Nobody knew this better than our country's founding fathers, who were keenly aware of the *essential* value of personal ethics and character, a point they gave great emphasis to in *The Federalist Papers*, a brilliant set of essays written in 1787-88 in defense of the Constitution. Their passionate plea

was, and still is, that if the wondrous political experiment called democracy is to succeed, it will require more than any other form of government a higher degree of “virtue”—of ethical character—in its citizens. For you and me and our fellow Americans, the hard-hitting reality of this plea couldn’t be more timely or critical.

Of course, when it comes to cultivating virtue, to actually *improving* personal character, the responsibility ultimately lies with each adult individual. You are ultimately responsible for your personal character, as I am for mine.

In this spirit, this book offers what I call a mirroring, rather than a finger-pointing, approach. In one-on-one, conversational fashion, its primary goal is to encourage each of us to think about improving our personal lives and our society exclusively in terms of our own personal character. Not his character. Not her character. Not their characters. Only “my” character.

My aim is not to judge, but to improve; this is an important distinction. If any process of judging is involved, it will only be that which you must honestly and pain-stakingly do of your own character and actions.

In a similar vein, my aim is not to dwell on our past mistakes. While there is profound truth in the saying “You are your past”—a truth we would be foolish to ignore completely—my emphasis will be more forward looking: how yesterday has shaped what you are today with a view toward what you can be tomorrow.

To benefit from the conversation in this book, only two things are required on the front end: You must in fact care

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about the improvement of your personal character and our society in general, and you must be willing to take a serious look in the mirror.

Each chapter in this book is designed to emphasize a given aspect of the all-important nature of personal character. At the same time, each chapter is designed to encourage practical self-reflection and enduring personal growth.

You will notice that each chapter begins with a thought-provoking quote about character. I'm not using these quotes in the usual way, to spice up the beginning of a given discussion. Instead, I'm offering them as actual titles that capture the force and point of each chapter. In this way, you'll find that these chapter titles are definitely well worth committing to memory and, of course, living by.

We live in an exhilarating age of mind-boggling computer technology, an amazing and profitable age that tempts each of us, increasingly and regrettably, to adopt a detached spectator mentality—rather than a full-fledged *participant* mentality. One of my loftier hopes for the book is that it can help counteract the harmful way in which many of us have become accustomed to blaming others for our personal struggles and society's problems. Hopefully we can all begin to take the time to look in the proverbial mirror to ask ourselves questions such as these:

What about *my* character and the attitudes and actions that flow from it?

Could it be that *my* character is partly, if not greatly,

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responsible for my personal struggles and even for my society's problems?

Could it be that *my* character is necessarily an important part of the solution to these problems?

Questions such as these are not the least bit trivial. They are monumental—destiny-determining—especially when we bear in mind, as we will in the pages to follow, that it is impossible to improve the circumstances of society or of *my* individual life without genuinely caring about and striving to improve *my* personal character.