



The Strength of Character

The concept of personal character has re-emerged just when it looked as if it might have been forgotten. That was close: Let us never again ignore what has been called "man's greatest need."

□ After Gary Hart's relationship with a young woman hit the front pages of newspapers last year, an unfamiliar word began to appear in the political columns. It cropped up again when another aspirant to the presidency of the United States, Senator Joe Biden, plagiarized part of a speech made by British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock a few months before.

The word was "character," as it applies to personal standards of behaviour. Since it had not been commonly used in that sense for many years, younger readers could be forgiven for wondering what the columnists were going on about.

To those with some idea of what it meant, the spectacle of personal character becoming an issue in late 20th century American politics seemed anachronistic. It took one back to the Victorian era, when people in the English-speaking countries were very picky about all things, especially about how they and others comported themselves. The books of that time were strewn with references to character; in many, the building or loss of it was the central theme.

Why did the journalists of today reach back for such an old-fashioned term? Presumably because they could find none better to express what they were trying to get at. They could have written about honour, integrity, veracity, constancy and moral fibre, but they still would have been writing essentially about character. And, having employed all these words, they still would not have conveyed precisely the thought they had in mind.

The concept of character is exceptionally difficult to pin down. Dictionaries fail to define it in all its

nuances. In some cases, they only succeed in adding to its elusiveness: one, for example, calls it "moral qualities especially, the reputation for having such."

Anyone who has given the subject more than a few moments' thought is likely to conclude that reputation is just what character is not. At best, a reputation is to a person's character what a fun house mirror is to a person's body, casting back a distorted vision of the reality. At worst, it can be the very opposite of the truth: "He that hath the reputation of an early riser may sleep till noon," as the 18th century London critic Richard Bentley observed.

How many times have all of us witnessed public figures of hitherto impeccable repute being exposed as liars, libertines or shysters? Treated to such revelations, members of the public are bound to speculate on how many other reputations for uprightness are about as upright as the false fronts on a movie set.

Even when there is some substance behind it, a reputation can never be more than an incomplete conjecture, since no one can know everything about the inner nature of another person. None of us is as good as our admirers think we are, or as bad as our detractors say we are. The most we can do about our exterior image is to try actually to be all we are cracked up to be if the image is favourable, and try to demonstrate that it is mistaken if it is unfavourable. "You and I cannot determine what other men shall say or think about us. We can only determine what they *ought* to think of us and say about us," the American author J.G. Holland wrote.

"Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of

you," says the Gospel According to St. Luke. The point here seems to be that, as wise actors know, it is dangerous to believe your own publicity. In the glow of unearned good repute, people are apt to fall prey to self-delusion, and think that they can get away with anything. Others who want too badly for "all men to speak well of them" come to care more about outside opinions than their own actions. That way lies moral cowardice.

While it can never be said that how others see us does not exert a certain discipline on how we act, what Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet* remains the basic rule: "This above all — to thine own self be true/ And it must follow, as the night the day/ That thou canst not then be false to any man."

Being true to yourself is anything but easy if the moral standards of your associates conflict with yours. The herd instinct is strong in the human animal, and the phrase "everybody else is doing it" has an insidious attraction. To resist what "everybody else" is doing is to risk being ostracized by your peers, and it is normal to dread rejection. Nothing takes more strength than swimming against the tide.

And moral strength is not something you just happen to have, like the physical or intellectual strength you might have been born with. Rather it is the strength of the erstwhile 90-pound weakling, who builds it up himself through hard work and the exercise of will. The concentration of mind and spirit that must go into the making of character explains why it is frequently equated with quality. It is like the work of a fine craftsman — a manifestation of diligence, care and self-respect.

'Temptation' signifies more than the name of a perfume

While one's upbringing may supply the tools for shaping character, the work that must go into it must come from the individual. Our parents and teachers relinquish the responsibility for what sort of persons we will become quite early in our lives. From then on, it is strictly up to us.

Never has that responsibility been heavier than it is on young people in western countries today. The permissiveness of the culture exposes them to a cavalcade of temptations — drugs, alcohol,

promiscuous sex, and easy money for some. "Temptation" is another old-fashioned word which should be understood to mean more than the brand name of a perfume. Not only does it surround young people, but there is more pressure than ever on them to "go for it," as they themselves would say.

It is an axiom of both theology and psychology that all human beings have a stronger and a weaker side to their personalities. Temptation is a kind of magnetic force which seeks to draw out the weaknesses that dwell in us all. It sets up an inner struggle between our worse and better natures. "Men ought not to say, 'How strongly the devil tempts,' but 'How strongly I am tempted,'" the famous American clergyman Henry Ward Beecher wrote.

We have gone from excusing others to excusing ourselves

Unfortunately, the behavioural motto of the times seems to be "the devil made me do it." In our secularized society, the devil is not a near-human figure with fox's ears and a long forked tail, but a combination of social and psychological factors which are supposed to deprive people of control over themselves. The great pundits of the age are pop psychologists who write best-selling books telling readers not to be too hard on themselves if they surrender to temptation. These experts dismiss the saving grace of guilt as a mere "hang-up" which people should try to expunge from their minds.

The theory that you should fight back guilt fits in neatly with another trendy theory that you somehow have an inalienable right to indulge yourself. Our economy has become heavily dependent on selling things to consumers that will add to their pleasure and ease. A fair proportion of current advertising carries the message that "you deserve a break" — life is tough, so go ahead and pamper yourself. Fine, but what happens when this message is extended to things like drugs, alcohol and casual "love" that falsely promise relief from the psychological hardships — hardships which people throughout the ages have had to endure without having a "quick fix" so close to hand?

What happens is that you get a society like the man Mr. Justice Felix Frankfurter once knew whose

"weakness is ... weakness." We are much more tolerant of human frailties than people ever were in the past. Normal members of society are conditioned to excuse the transgressions of those who are unable to restrain themselves because of abnormalities in their psyches or circumstances. The trouble, it seems, is that many normal people have taken this a dangerous step further and started excusing themselves.

The television news any evening when the weather is fair will show a picture of a society that feels awfully hard-done-by. Demonstrators may be seen pointing the finger of recrimination everywhere but at their own breastbones. Given this public mood, it is easy enough for individuals to slip into the feeling that the problems they encounter are really not their fault, but that of institutional insensitivity and bungling. This is a reversal of the attitude of such traditional thinkers as St. Bernard, who wrote: "Nothing can do me damage, except myself. The harm I sustain I carry with me, and I am never a real sufferer but by my own fault."

*In a society without sin,
there are only 'mistakes'*

The fact that most of us sympathize with the poor souls who can't control themselves presents a temptation to people who *can* to jump on the bandwagon. If we can feel sorry for others, why can't we feel sorry for ourselves? People who do have it in their power to rectify their situation with an effort of will should be careful to reserve their sympathy for the less fortunate. For when self-sympathy is in, self-restraint is out; and self-restraint is the first line of defence against making a mess of one's life.

If popular culture is any indication of the attitudes of a period, the trends evident in books, films, and television these days are quite disturbing. Very little self-restraint is shown by the anti-heroes and anti-heroines who act out fictional representations of late 20th century life. They have few or no scruples about how they get what they want, be it wealth, power, the gratification of their passions, or their own interpretation of justice. "If you would understand virtue, observe the conduct of virtuous men," Aristotle urged. It would be difficult to fol-

low this advice if one were exposed only to what is purveyed in the entertainment media today.

In post-Victorian times, youngsters read novels which propounded the lesson that the road to success was paved with industry, honesty and integrity. The lesson they receive from television today is more likely to be that money really can buy happiness, and that there is no percentage in being overly scrupulous about it is obtained. The old-fashioned heroes were motivated by a challenge to their character. The glamorous figures on the tube today are motivated by a lust for power and greed.

Being filthy rich has proved to be an insufficient credential for Ivan Boesky to make the proclamation that "greed is good;" he was convicted for crooked stock trading after he said it. Boesky notwithstanding, greed remains on the list of the seven deadly sins, which are not really sins as such, but grave character flaws. The others are pride, lust, anger, gluttony (which incorporates habitual drunkenness and drug-taking) sloth and envy. Add a couple of other prohibitions of ruthless dealing described in the Bible as "oppression of the poor" and "defrauding the labourer of his wages," and you have an excellent set of guidelines as to what anyone who aspires to be a person of character should avoid.

When the majority of people of all ages in Canada and other western countries attended places of worship regularly, such guidelines were prominent in the public consciousness. Preachers could tell their congregations what not to do, and why not. Worship and prayer were, people knew, designed to deliver them from temptation. Guilt and censure played a powerful role in seeing to it that people tried to stick to the straight and narrow. Most acknowledged a social imperative to conduct themselves decently.

Now that religious observance has fallen off, it is not unusual to find people who have no basic grasp of good and evil. Their ignorance of the ground rules has been furthered by the amoral pseudo-scientific approach to behaviour which says that vices are the product of psychological disorders which can be corrected by external treatment, the obverse being that they cannot be corrected by an internal effort of will. Small wonder there are plenty of people around these days who believe that nothing is particularly wrong unless it is illegal. After

all, if humans are not responsible for their actions, there can be no sinners. If there are no sinners, there is no sin; there are only "mistakes."

Whether they actively worship or not, persons of character adhere to age-old universal religious principles. They bind themselves not to break or wriggle out of promises or contracts. They contribute money and time to the common welfare. They help the needy. They respect other peoples' feelings and rights.

The hope of humanity comes down to 'right in the soul'

All these acts tacitly recognize the individual's obligation to the community, without which there can be no real civilization. Places where such civil obligations are not generally acknowledged are prone to revert to barbarism. Where lying, cheating, and contempt for the person are the rule, the liars, cheats and bullies take over. The weakest and poorest members of the population are exploited and oppressed, because they cannot stand up to the bullies or pay the bribes necessary to obtain essential services. This is the very opposite of a humanistic system which seeks to establish fairness and equity among the stronger and the weaker — the kind of system to which most Canadians aspire.

How well a nation which values moral principles lives up to its ideals is crucially dependent on the principles of the individuals who comprise it. In a liberal democracy, those who hold the potentially exploitive and oppressive power do so only by public delegation. The public's insistence that moral principles be observed is what prevents that power from being abused.

Since democracy is "government of the people, by the people, for the people," it follows that the moral qualities of the state and of the people are inseparable. No one is exempt from either contributing to the quality of the state or detracting from it, as the case may be.

It further follows that if high standards of integrity are not upheld in every avenue of the society — business, the professions, the arts, education, even sports — we can hardly expect the stan-

dards in politics to be any higher. There is, in fact, an unhealthy tendency to make politicians scapegoats for social ills we have helped to bring upon ourselves. Citizens are always calling upon governments to "do something" about problems that arise from mass attitudes, and berating them for being so lacking in leadership that they let those problems emerge in the first place. Instead of looking to our legislative bodies for causes and solutions, perhaps we should look more to the most important institution of all in our society — everybody's home.

It is largely in the home that attitudes are established and examples are set. People who consciously act with fairness, honour and moral courage towards those immediately around them go some way towards counteracting the corrosive influence on character of the outside world. Those who do conduct themselves this way glean unsought personal rewards in the form of being able to respect themselves and being respected by others. Their lives have meaning, the lack of which is such a common cause of psychological disturbances. This meaning extends beyond their time on earth through the perpetuation of good example. "The noblest contribution which any man can make for the benefit of posterity is that of good character," the American statesman R.C. Winthrop wrote.

"Not education, but character, is man's greatest need and man's greatest safeguard," the English philosopher Herbert Spencer declared. He used the word "man" in the generic sense, meaning all humanity. The formula for why this should be so was advanced by another philosopher, Lao Tsu, in the 6th century B.C.: "If there is right in the soul, there will be beauty in the person. If there is beauty in the person, there will be harmony in the home. If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation. If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world."

So the future of man depends on "right in the soul" — but how does it get there? Philosophers have argued for centuries over whether we are born with it, or whether we develop it as we go along. In either case, one point is beyond dispute — it can only be maintained with an effort. It must be exercised if it is not to wither. And exercise is something which, fundamentally, you can only do on your own.