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Editors

Jacques S. Benninga, California State University at Fresno
Marvin W. Berkowitz, University of Missouri—St. Louis
In the 2009 BBC film, An Education, the film’s lead character, 16-year-old Jenny Mel- lor, played by Carey Mulligan, is a student who seems to have it all together, including the requisite ability to be a successful student in a prestigious boarding school. Jenny has been groomed by her parents her whole life to attain an offer of admission to Oxford. However, when she meets David, a man almost twice her age who offers excitement, culture, travel, and even a proposal of marriage, both Jenny and her parents are charmed. With her parents’ permission, Jenny decides to drop out of school to marry him. In an encounter with the school’s headmistress, Mrs. Walters, played by Emma Thompson, we come to understand why Jenny finds nothing compelling in her educational experience at school.

Mrs. Walters: Yes, of course studying is hard, and boring ...

Jenny: Boring!

Mrs. Walters: I’m sorry?

Jenny: Studying is hard and boring. Teaching is hard and boring. So what you’re telling me is to be bored, and then bored, and finally bored again, but this time for the rest of my life. This whole stupid country is bored. There’s no life in it, or color, or fun. It’s probably just as well that the Russians are going to drop a nuclear bomb on us any day now. So my choice is to do something hard and boring, or to marry [my man] and go to Paris and Rome and listen to jazz and read and eat good food in nice restaurants and have fun.

It’s not enough to educate us any more, Mrs Walters. You’ve got to tell us why you’re doing it ... I don’t wish to be impertinent ... But it is an argument worth rehearsing. You never know. Someone else might want to know the point of it all, one day [emphasis added]. (Hornby, 2009, pp. 89-90)

To be effective, educators must consider the validity of Jenny’s statement and how best to rise to her challenge: “It’s not enough to educate us anymore ... You’ve got to tell us why you are doing it.”

What young people need most is the “schooling of desire,” a schooling that inspires them to want to choose well among competing goods, an education that inspires them to use their freedom responsibly (Bohlin, 2005). The
“argument worth rehearsing” is this: What constitutes flourishing? How will developing virtues, excellences of mind and character, help students to flourish and use their freedom well? In this article I will explore virtue education as the schooling of desire. I will discuss why virtue is the most salutary building block for human flourishing—becoming one’s best possible self—and how it guides motivation and civic engagement.

Daniel Lapsley’s (this issue) “The Promise and Peril of Coming of Age in the 21st Century” aptly captures what I have come to appreciate in my work as the odyssey of adolescence—an epic adventure replete with battlefronts and opportunities for young people, parents and educators. Schools are well positioned to respond to students’ need to “develop competencies, surmount vulnerabilities, make adaptive changes and pursue options that contribute to thriving and well-being” (p. 20). These competencies include virtues such as the courage to overcome fears, the self-mastery to resist temptations and the habit of stopping to reflect on competing claims about what it means to thrive and lead a fully flourishing life. Young people need a strong moral compass, and they need to consult it often as they form their own identity and shape a life for themselves.

The schooling of desire helps them to develop the competencies and virtues that constitute this compass. These internalized dispositions, in turn, empower them to navigate the storms of adolescence purposefully—to adjust the sails so they can catch the wind and redirect their course as needed. Good character needs to be made attractive and compelling to adolescents. Images of flourishing and degradation abound—as well as everything in between. White collar crime in the corporate world, sex scandals in the highest offices, and drug abuse among world-renowned athletes remind us that even the most educated and accomplished individuals can lack virtue and good judgment. In other words, young people need motivation to live virtuously—again, this is an argument worth rehearsing.

In Book IV of Plato’s Republic, Socrates offers a pioneering analysis of human motivation. As an analogy for his discussion of how justice can be achieved in a city with conflicting interests, he invites his interlocutors to reflect on how justice can be achieved in the human psyche with its conflicting desires. The three seats of motivation in the human psyche or soul, he explains, are the appetite, the spirited part and the rational part. We can envision these three parts as the gut, the heart and the head. The appetite or gut blindly desires pleasure. It is the seat of hunger, thirst, and sexual instinct. The appetite wants to be fed, satisfied, delighted, and to have fun. The second seat of motivation, the spirited part or chest area, desires achievement, recognition, encouragement, and love. It wants to be moved and inspired. The third seat of motivation is the rational part or head. Reason desires inquiry and understanding. It wants to know, to discover, and to be informed. Left to pursue their own interests, these three seats of motivation can easily mislead or conflict a person.

When the appetite dominates without the guidance of reason, we witness the tyranny of self-indulgence and even addiction. Think of Phil Connors in Columbia Pictures’ Groundhog Day (1993) or Dudley Dursley in the Harry Potter series. When a person makes choices based on blind impulse, his appetite calls the shots. It rallies emotion and ambition to pursue a given whim or fancy. The appetite can persuade a person to rationalize overeating, procrastination, or any indulgence. When the spirited part dominates without the wise counsel of reason, a person may pursue gain at any cost. Think of Macbeth or Whitey Bulger. Blind ambition or blind emotion can lead to infatuation, cheating, violence, bullying or abuse of power.

Socrates argued that the justice or harmony among these three parts is necessary for a person to flourish. This harmony is not achieved when reason dominates, but rather when reason captains and aligns the spirited ambitions and appetites with what is good for the individual as a whole. By channeling and directing
their desires to delight in and be inspired by the best possible good, people can freely direct their lives in positive and constructive ways. This tripartite psychology is instructive for educators on a number of fronts (Tigner, 1996). First of all, it reminds us that our students are motivated on all three levels—and sometimes conflicted. Their gut, heart and head are highly desirous, and good teachers understand the importance of feeding all three parts in ways that help them to desire, enjoy, and practice activities that lead a person to greater flourishing and freedom.

Contemporary brain research is clear that the amygdala, which processes memory and emotion and is located in what has been called the “reptilian brain,” is the seat of our fight or flight response. The “new brain” or neocortex is what enables us to stop and think, to evaluate the merits of what we desire. It enables us to weigh consequences and consider the needs of others. We see risk-taking behaviors as well as fear and paralysis in adolescents precisely because the neocortex is not fully developed, and the amygdala is highly responsive. Exercising the neocortex is like exercising muscle, Deak (2011) explains. It is strengthened with practice. When we teach students to reflect on what motivates them and why, they begin to develop new neural pathways and patterns of mature deliberation. When we help them to develop a capacity to discern and desire what is true, good and noble, they develop the capacity to channel their appetites and ambitions constructively. Some people call this impulse control or will power, and Baumeister’s (2011) research offers instructive insight on how will power can be harnessed and developed. Yet young people are plugged in 24/7: texting under the dinner table; tweeting, posting, and iChatting while doing their homework; and sleeping with smartphones beneath their pillows. How do educators and parents compete? How can we provide a compelling educational experience that puts students in the driver’s seat of constructive learning and growth?

Last spring I was copied on an e-mail a parent sent to one of the history teachers at Montrose School: “Thank you so much for a delightful ride home from school today. My daughter was telling me that history was a highlight. She spoke about the national debt, valuation of currency, the cost of war and more. We have a 45-minute ride home and were still talking about Czars Nicholas and Alexander, then about the war in Afghanistan, as we pulled into the garage. Thank you for awakening this passion and helping us raise a daughter who understands that learning about history will enable her to function more responsibly as a citizen.”

How do we inspire this kind of reflection, discipline and diligence in a culture that celebrates immediacy, ease, and comfort? Great educators provide “the argument” Jenny Mel- lor was seeking by feeding students’ desires for lasting satisfaction. They teach self-mastery by cultivating students’ taste for what it means to engage life fully. Empowered with new habits of sustained engagement in purposeful work, students discover a new and deeper level of enjoyment in learning.

During last period on a Friday afternoon before vacation, I visited a precalculus class. As students in small groups enthusiastically scribbled solutions, compared notes and started over, I was unable to capture the attention of the girl with whom I had hoped to speak. What was the secret to their rapt attention? They were learning how to solve systems of equations using matrices and the Gaussian elimination method. “It is a challenging process involving many steps,” the teacher explained. “What makes it particularly difficult is that there is no right way. It is sort of like a maze. You can start down one path and realize you aren’t going to get where you want to, so you have to retrace your steps and try another way. It can be quite frustrating but extremely rewarding when you get the right answer!”

Cognitive science reminds us that our brains only develop and grow when faced with increasingly challenging tasks. And mis-
takes—a paper that missed the mark, an error in math, a conflict with a peer at lunchtime—provide particularly valuable learning opportunities. Virtue is nurtured by helping students to reflect on mistakes and learn from them. Trial and error and formative (rather than punitive) discipline foster students’ capacity to make amends and begin again.

Dweck (2006) calls this approach cultivating a “growth mindset.” The end goal is not the highest GPA or public recognition for individual talent. The end goal is openness to learning and approaching problems in new ways. We are not “fixed” beings with a limited capacity for learning based on our native gifts and abilities, she argues. Rather, we possess a dynamic, open-ended capacity for growth. This capacity is sustained and strengthened by the schooling of desire. The goal of the schooling of desire is that each student sees herself as a work in progress who strives to develop the habits of mind and character that enable her to give her best to her work, to her relationships, and to society. To make virtue one’s own, to develop strength in new and challenging contexts requires personal effort each day. It doesn’t happen overnight. It’s not a fixed capacity. It is the exciting and unfinished work of a lifetime. Students—and adults for that matter—remain works in progress.

The schooling of desire is highly personalized. Each student’s starting points and progress will be different. Certain conditions—family, health, social, educational, economic—and choices may limit students’ freedom to grow as quickly as we would like. These conditions, however, never remove their personal agency, their ability to make choices that define who they are and the person they can become. Educators can never lose hope in the promise and potential of their students.

I was struck by the reflections of a graduating senior who told me that her highest aspiration in middle school was to find a boyfriend she could hang out with on weekends. She had already decided the look, music, and fashion she needed to adopt to attain her ideal of becoming a cool and happy teenager. It was a music teacher who helped her discover her love for a wider range of music and tapped into her talent as a vocalist. Once hooked, this student was motivated to study voice and spend her Saturdays at the conservatory. Her interest in other academic subjects grew as well. She came to appreciate her teachers as mentors, passionate about subjects that suddenly seemed new and compelling to her. She developed a disciplined study schedule to balance academics with her musical commitments outside of school. She gradually shed her former ideal of adolescent “happiness” and committed herself fully to school and her passion for music.

Young people need inspiration and exemplars. They need to envision possibilities for their life. They need a taste of what it is like to have worked hard and to have learned something new to awaken their desire to become their best possible self. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (1997) highlighted among other variables the power of one caring adult, a mentor, to transform a young person’s life and aspirations.

**RESPONSIBLE USE OF FREEDOM, STRONGER AGENCY, AND SELF-POSSESSION**

In the United States, freedom is among our highest ideals—the freedom to choose, freedom from oppression, freedom to vote, the freedom to bear arms, and the freedom to reinvent one’s self. We vigorously debate and defend the scope and limits of these freedoms. Education in virtue does not lead to conformity or rule following, but to responsible use of freedom, to conscientious objection when warranted, and to adherence to what is true and right regardless of the law.

The American ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness do not simply yield the license to do as we please, when we please. This is important for adolescents to understand. Freedom is hard. In choosing one thing we are necessarily renouncing another. This is
threatening to a teenager full of conflicting desires, moods and thoughts. They are afraid of missing out. Part of becoming a mature adult is realizing we live in a tense unity and will sometimes find making choices difficult. Yet to become mature we have to choose, we have to exercise our agency. Our fundamental desire is not merely freedom from something but freedom for something. Freedom is not an end in itself. We exercise our freedom by making worthwhile commitments. Part of growing up is understanding that our choices begin to define who we are and what we care about.

Limitations—in the form of obligations to neighbors, colleagues, family, faith community, school, professional work, or social service—do in fact, give direction to our freedom. The more consciously we embrace and decide to accept the commitments that we have made, for example, the freer we are to live life fully, to be happy—as long as there is nothing intrinsically evil or harmful in these obligations. Education in virtue ultimately strengthens our agency and helps us use our freedom responsibly.

**VIRTUE ENABLES US TO CHOOSE WELL**

All of us are called to respond to circumstances outside our control—a shortage of help at work, an accident, health problems, or job loss. How we respond reveals our character, our virtue in action. As Collins (2005) puts it, “Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, as it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice and discipline” (p. 31).

Virtues are called into play in both ordinary and extraordinary situations, when we are under stress and when we have the leisure to do as we please. A large part of adolescence is learning how to respond well to what Tigner (1995) calls the daily “stress tests” and “leisure tests of character”—meeting deadlines and being kind when we don’t feel like it, or in more extreme circumstances, standing up for one’s convictions as exemplified by Malala, the Pakistani girl who in speaking out in defense of girls’ education was met with a gunshot wound to the head. At Montrose School we inaugurated a *LifePortraits* speaker series. The goal of the series is to help students come to envision the possibilities for their own lives by encountering individuals from diverse backgrounds who have walked very different paths. It helps them to see that a child born into poverty, a person who lost most of her family in a brutal genocide, someone who suffered abuse, or a person from a seemingly ordinary background can discover his or her way and make a contribution to the world. These rich personal testimonies illustrate the power of agency in shaping one’s own destiny and rising above circumstances.

To illustrate how the schooling of desire gives rise to new freedom and the ability to choose well, I want to recount a story about a former student. Several years ago I led a group of students on a literary and theatre tour of London, and one of my tenth graders shared her concern that our schedule would not accommodate her appetite for soap operas and shopping. Sarah was a capable student, but completely disengaged from academics. She slid by, meeting minimum requirements. She only spoke up in class if the topic was relevant to one of her favorite television programs.

At the end of our tour, Sarah had an epiphany on our late night visit to the Tower of London. “That was awesome—in fact, I can’t believe how much I’ve enjoyed this trip.” She paused for a moment. “I wanted to let you know that when I go home, I am never going to watch soap operas again.” My shock soon gave way to admiration. This was not a fleeting resolution. Upon returning to school, Sarah spearheaded the school’s first literary magazine. Later, she served as editor-in-chief of the yearbook. She dedicated herself to volunteer work and became a youth leader in her church. She secured a part-time job to finance her next educational trip to Italy. Her experience in England sparked new possibilities.
15-year-old Sarah had pursued only what she felt like doing, she would have spent her leisure time shopping and watching television in her hotel room. If I had excluded Sarah from the trip because her grades and aspirations were not up to par, she may have taken a much longer time to venture beyond her comfort zone. If she had not developed an appreciation for literature, she would not have sustained the sacrifices necessary to develop a literary magazine. If she had not reflected on the way she had been using her time, talents, and energies prior to this experience, she may have never committed herself to the discipline required to launch new initiatives.

It is difficult to know all of the variables—internal and external—that prepared Sarah for this transformation. It took focus, time, practice and effort for Sarah to replace old habits with new ones. It took mentors and friends to inspire and support her. It took the schooling of desire, and the rewards of her self-mastery, courage and reflection were great. She experienced the satisfaction and enjoyment that accompanies hard earned competence and purposeful work.

**VIRTUE: THE BUILDING BLOCK OF CHARACTER EDUCATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

Charles Murray (this issue) speaks to two foundational virtues in the American Project—industriousness and honesty—and two institutions foundational to engendering virtue—marriage and religion. For the experiment in ordered liberty to succeed, for a self-governing citizenry to flourish, education in virtue is essential. Yet he argues that the contexts and conditions to support it are failing. How can schools respond? Schools will never take the place of families, but they can become communities that stand for something, places where students can contribute to something larger than themselves and envision meaningful possibilities for their lives.

At Montrose School, the student government team proposes a theme for each academic year. This past year’s theme, “appreciation,” was brought to life in student-led assemblies and activities that helped everyone build habits of gratitude. They inaugurated an “Appreciation Station” in the cafeteria, where students and teachers could leave notes of thanks or kudos for classmates, faculty and staff. The representatives led by example, faithfully sending thank you notes to custodians and others who assisted them with events. When students are invited to actively create and shape the culture, they become engaged in something larger than their grade point average or popularity status. They become engaged in building a community that stands for something.

Similarly, while public schools cannot promote religion, they can honor and respect the existential longing of young people and the rich and varied religious traditions to which they belong. The hard won freedom we enjoy in the United States is not freedom from religion but freedom of religion. It is important that public schools and educators in an effort to remain secular do not inadvertently marginalize students of faith or make the discussion of religion taboo. When people generalize religion as a phenomenon that leads to war and conflict, they tend to confuse faith for fanaticism and alienate young people who take their faith seriously. As part of their search for meaning, adolescents ought to be encouraged not only to explore and study world religions but also to give an intelligent account of their own faith traditions. Whether it is in the context of history, art, literature or humanity, there are legitimate and context-appropriate forums for a reasonable discussion of religion in the public schools.

In our richly pluralistic society we encounter a wide range of cultural and religious values. We have equally diverse views on politics, war, economics, social policy, the arts and entertainment. Values and views are informed by our upbringing, study and deeply held beliefs. When we promote particular val-
ues and viewpoints in schools, however, we run the risk of generating more heat than light (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). Rather than promoting specific views or values, schools can nurture core virtues such as self-mastery, respect, courage and good judgment that sustain our experiment in ordered liberty (Ryan et al., 2011).

We need virtue in the public square to meet each other respectfully, to honor each person regardless of his or her views, values or membership to a particular group. We need the habit of reflection to listen to one another and engage in thoughtful inquiry and dialogue. We need virtue to remain steadfast in principled convictions, when they are challenged. We also need virtue to remain open to learning from one another, open to the truth, and open to revising our views and values, when we are reasonably persuaded.

Education in virtue is salutary, because it engenders healthy freedom and responds to a young person’s desire to chart a fully flourishing life. Virtue strengthens personal agency and reminds young people that they can shape their lives with their free choices and commitments. It helps them to navigate the stresses and ordinary challenges of day-to-day life with confidence—and to choose well among competing goods. The argument worth rehearsing is why virtue is the best building block for personal flourishing and civil society.

REFERENCES


