



CHARACTER

PUBLISHED BY THE CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF ETHICS AND CHARACTER
AT THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY AND THE ASCD CHARACTER EDUCATION NETWORK

www.bu.edu/education/caec

The Puritan Narrative

By Dr. Peter Gibbon

"On my arrival in the United States it was the religious aspect of the country that first struck my eye... Among us, I had seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom almost always move in contrary directions. Here I found them united intimately with one another; they reigned together on the same soil." —ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, 1835

At the north entrance to a small park called Cambridge Common in Cambridge, Massachusetts, stands a statue of John Bridge, a Puritan who settled in the area in the early 1630s. Bridge supervised the region's first public school and served as church deacon, selectman, and representative to the Great and General Court. Nearly every day, I walk by this statue of John Bridge. The inscription from Isaiah suggests that by waiting

upon the Lord, we can have our energy renewed, our spirit lifted, and our confidence restored. We can also perform deeds undreamed of in uninspired hours. In my speeches about heroes, I argue that by studying the lives of great men and women, we can improve and enlarge our own lives. I acknowledge that heroes are molded by parents and inspired by mentors; that they emerge out of crisis and are shaped by suffering. I do not mention religion. Yet, as I read the biographies of great Americans, I keep bumping into God.

Our first American hero, George Washington, believed that God favored American independence. In his First Inaugural Address, he referred to Divine Providence five times. He gave his stepson a copy of Sir Richard Steele's bestseller *The Christian Hero*. John Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams, devoured sermons. In office, each did what was right rather than what was popular. It is hard to imagine Theodore Roosevelt



Puritan John Bridge

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Information about CHARACTER

Each issue of **CHARACTER** focuses on a specific topic in the realm of character and ethics education.* This spring we bring to the fore the subject of ethics in religious narratives. Essays by scholars and teachers illustrate ways of mining stories from various faith traditions for universal lessons. For information on teaching about religion in today's schools, we refer our readers to The First Amendment Center (www.firstamendmentcenter.org), an organization that advocates a respectful and responsible approach in exposing students to a diversity of religious views, and to explaining various religions' impact on history, literature, and other academic subjects.

*For a list of topics covered in previous issues of **CHARACTER**, please contact the CAEC at caec@bu.edu or call 617-353-3262.

CHARACTER is published by ASCD's Character Education Network and the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at the School of Education at Boston University. The newsletter is sponsored in part by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), but is not an official publication of ASCD.

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Designed and produced by the Office of Creative Services at Boston University.

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without religion; he taught Sunday school and adopted "Onward Christian Soldiers" as his campaign song. Sent to Groton at age fourteen, Franklin Roosevelt listened to his headmaster, the Reverend Endicott Peabody, who extolled bravery, public service, and self-sacrifice in his sermons. Can we talk about the idealism of Woodrow Wilson and ignore his Presbyterian upbringing? Can we understand the integrity of Harry Truman without knowing that one of his favorite books was *The Pilgrim's Progress*?

Many of our most influential presidents have been molded by religion; so have some of our greatest reformers. Because of God, Sojourner Truth took to the road and fought for emancipation and women's rights. Harriet Beecher Stowe believed divine inspiration drove her to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The fervor of Lucretia Mott came from her faith in the Quaker inner light. Without God, Clara Barton would not have tended wounded soldiers in the Civil War and founded the Red Cross.

The most prominent educators of the nineteenth century were also devout. Noah Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller* and William McGuffey's *Readers* mingled religious instruction with heroic biographies. Webster dedicated his dictionary to "That great and benevolent Being...who has given me strength and resolution." Driven by his Unitarian faith, Horace Mann worked to make education available to all Americans.

Many American capitalists were made more charitable by religion. An earnest Baptist, John D. Rockefeller accumulated money and then gave much of it away. In his essay, "The Gospel of Wealth," Andrew Carnegie wrote, "He who dies rich dies disgraced."

From the first, Colonial preachers had subjected their parishioners to a worldview favorable to heroism. The Puritans believed that work was a form of prayer: "Whatever thy hand findeth to do, do *it* with thy might." From a God who told Americans

they were inhabitants of a City on a Hill—an example to the world—came a sense of destiny and a work ethic that produced extraordinary effort. Out of a sense of divine destiny came a belief in progress and unshakable confidence. From a God who offered explanation for suffering and death came resilience. Most powerfully, Puritanism encouraged heroism by promising help. Through God, promised the preacher, we can end indifference, conquer fatigue, overcome pessimism, and transform our lives.

But Puritanism did more than encourage heroic effort. To the chaos of life, it gave moral order and immediate purpose, imposing meaning on the mundane and reminding Americans that life was short and serious, death certain, and the afterlife unpredictable. Each person had a calling, and at the end of life, each person would be accountable; a watchful, judging God would reward the faithful, the brave, and the good.

Puritan fervor had waned by the middle of the eighteenth century as Congregationalists and New England diminished in relative power and Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Unitarians competed for church members. By the end of the nineteenth century, America as a whole had become less Protestant, as Roman Catholics emigrated from Ireland, Italy, Germany, and Latin America; the Eastern Orthodox came from Greece and the Balkans; Jews arrived from Russia and Eastern Europe; and Chinese came from Asia—bringing new traditions and new heroes to an increasingly diverse nation. But the spirit of Puritanism had given America its religious foundation.

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1830s, he noted that the "spirit of religion" and "the spirit of freedom" coexisted. The Protestant preachers that he heard during his visit were enormously influential throughout

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By Dr. Bernice Lerner

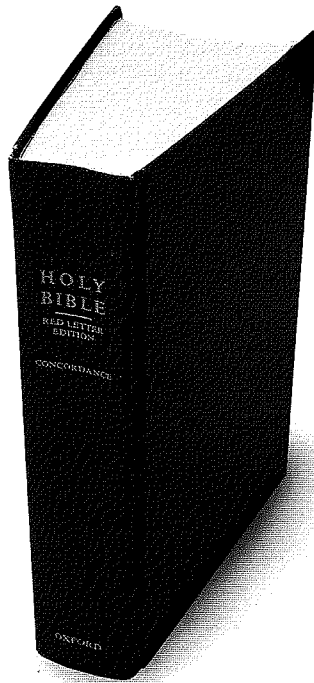
Timeless Wisdom in an Ancient Text



vital part of our human heritage, religious narratives ought to be part of academic curricula.

In the words of Justice Thomas Clark, who ruled in the 1963 Abington case involving Pennsylvania public schools, “[The Bible is] worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities . . . such study, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, [is] consistent with the First Amendment.” In a recent *New York Times* editorial, author Bruce Feiler argued that “finding a way to educate young people about faith should become a national imperative,” and that we must rise above debates about whether an academic approach “leaves God out”—or “sneaks God in”—to the classroom.¹ Religious texts, with protagonists who face challenging situations and who exemplify moral development, afford universal lessons.

Among vivid biblical stories is that of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis: chs. 37–50). A brief review will highlight pivotal moments: The second to youngest of Jacob’s twelve sons and one of two born to Jacob’s beloved wife Rachel, Joseph is his father’s favorite. We are first introduced to him when he is seventeen years old. In the opening scene, he brings “bad reports” of his brothers to his father. Equally obnoxious, he tells his brothers his prophetic dreams, in which he rules over them. That Joseph’s brothers are angry and offended excuses not their behavior in the next scene: while tending their flocks in Dothan, they see Joseph coming toward them and conspire to kill him. The eldest brother, Reuben,



convinces the others to modify their plan. They cast Joseph into a pit, retrieve him, sell him as a slave to Midianites, and present his bloodied tunic to their father. Believing that a beast devoured Joseph, Jacob is distraught.²

Fast forward: Joseph, sold by the Midianites to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh, has landed on his feet—noting his talents, Potiphar appoints him head of his entire household. After some time, Joseph’s character is put to a test. Potiphar’s wife tries—repeatedly and unsuccessfully—to seduce him. One day, she grabs the handsome young man’s coat and screams that he has “dallied” with her.³ Believing his wife, Potiphar has Joseph jailed.

Alas, Joseph’s competence is once again recognized—the chief jailer puts him in charge of the other prisoners.

Joseph interprets the dreams of two distressed officials, one of whom will be pardoned by Pharaoh. He asks this man, the king’s cupbearer, to put in a good word for him once he settles back into his position. When Pharaoh has worrisome dreams that no wise person can interpret, the cupbearer finally remembers the “Hebrew youth” he had met in jail. It is not long before Joseph appears—clean-shaven and neatly dressed—before the king.

Joseph is able not only to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams and forecast years of abundance followed by years of famine, but also—having quickly discerned the crux of the problem—to present a strategic plan. Outlining practical steps for dealing with the situation, he demonstrates ethical judgment. Readers may contemplate what is not in the text, i.e., the extent to which Joseph’s personal development had been spurred by certain of his experiences, such as the injustices that had been visited upon him.

Duly impressed, Pharaoh appoints Joseph vizier, making him—at age thirty—responsible for all the land of Egypt. Though he forgets not where he came from (he never changes his name), Joseph has, on some level, put his painful past behind him. Adroit and efficient, he organizes overseers who gather and store grain. Owing to his efforts, Egypt is well prepared for the impending crisis. Tension in the story rises when, during the widespread famine, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to obtain rations. Upon entering Joseph’s court, the brothers know not before whom they bow. Recognizing

Continued on page 4

his brothers, Joseph is faced with a moral challenge—that of choosing a course of action befitting a judicious leader while containing a groundswell of emotion.

Joseph decides on a harsh stance; he accuses his brothers of being spies. After three days he orders them all—except for Simeon, whom he holds captive—to return to Canaan and to bring back their youngest brother. When he overhears them ruminating remorsefully about the heinous crime they had committed against him, for which they think they are being punished, he turns from them and weeps. He generously fills their bags with grain, and even returns to them their money.

Fast forward once more: After much angst, Jacob finally agrees to let his youngest son, Benjamin, accompany his brothers back to Egypt. When they come to see Joseph, they are taken into his home and treated royally. And when Joseph sees Benjamin, he is so overcome with emotion that he leaves the room.

When he reappears, he continues to exercise restraint, choosing to further test his brothers. Planting a silver goblet in Benjamin's sack, he sends his steward out to "discover" it soon after his brothers leave the city.⁴ Benjamin, the "thief," is now to be kept as his slave. After one of the brothers, Judah, pleads for the vizier to take him instead, Joseph reveals—in a private, magnificent moment—his true identity. Only after hugs, kisses, and tears are his stunned brothers able to speak.

The story of Joseph and his brothers illustrates the human capacity to develop wisdom and self-regulation. Teachers can direct students to examine the motivation for Joseph's decisions at various points in the story and reflect on what he might have done differently. Students may also discuss the story's lessons on repentance and forgiveness and how they might practice such virtues in their own lives.

I presented this narrative for a plenary session at a CAEC Teachers Academy. While all the participants found resonance

in elements of the story (everyone was a child and/or a sibling and/or a parent), one teacher found the session providential. She related how she was soon to see her estranged father, who resides in another state and to whom she had not spoken in twenty years. Our analyses of Joseph's choices offered her insight into her own emotional state and clarified her desire for a positive outcome. She spoke of the enormous burden that she had been carrying that close examination of this story had lifted. The ancient text taught her that she is not alone. ❖

1 Feiler, Bruce. "Teach, Don't Preach, The Bible." *The New York Times*, December 21, 2005, p. A35.

2 For a graphic interpretation of this scene, view Diego Velazquez's painting, *Joseph's Bloody Coat Brought to Jacob* (1630).

3 See Rembrandt's painting, *Joseph Accused by Potiphar's Wife* (1655). Note how Joseph stands meekly in the background, unable to defend himself.

4 Witness the brothers' anguish in Alexander Ivanov's painting, *Joseph's Brothers Find the Silver Goblet in Benjamin's Pack* (1831–1833).

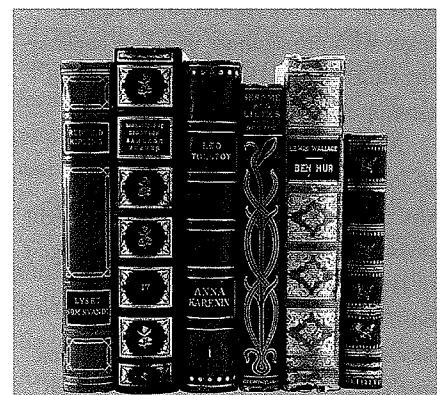
THE PURITAN NARRATIVE *continued*

the nineteenth century. Protestantism could be harsh and authoritarian but it also had a kinder, democratic side, insisting that before God all are equal. Protestant egalitarianism stimulated idealism, called forth charity, and prompted humanitarianism. Many heroes of nineteenth-century America were motivated by religious idealism. Behind many of our reform movements—abolitionism, prison reform, and the creation of public schools, for example—lay thousands of Protestant sermons. By providing a sense of destiny, an extraordinary work ethic, consolation, purpose, hope, high-mindedness, and charity, nineteenth-century Protestantism encouraged heroism.

As I pull back the curtain on the lives of hundreds of heroic men and women, I

see no easy victories. I see much suffering and many failures. I see courage emerging out of fear, confidence laced with doubt, nobility mixed with pettiness. I find achievement gained after great struggle, serenity after despair. More and more, I find heroes fortified by religious belief. Walking by the statue of John Bridge on Cambridge Common, I am reminded of how essential religion has been to our culture, of how powerfully the Puritan narrative has molded our past, and I think about the many heroes of American history who turned to God to renew their strength and transform their lives. ❖

Peter H. Gibbon is Senior Research Fellow and Lecturer at the Boston University School of Education and author of A Call to Heroism: Renewing America's Vision of Greatness (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2002), from which this article was excerpted.



The Ryan Library is a resource to the University community, the School of Education, and the ever-widening circle of national and international contacts of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character. The library is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday—please come visit.

By Susie Tanchel

Strategies for Teaching Troubling Texts

In a troubled, almost confused tone a student asks, "How could God command that an entire nation be wiped out?" Each year in my ninth-grade class, when we begin to study 1 Samuel 15, a student asks a similar question. How could she not? It is a deeply disturbing text. What is this text teaching us about God and about human responsibility?

At Gann Academy, text study permeates our culture through our formal and experiential curricula. In this endeavor, we see the texts as more than mere information; they issue challenges and present opportunities to confront provocative

of what *not* to do? By warning against making the same choices that certain characters do, the text is issuing a challenge to students to learn from others' poor judgment and—when faced with similar situations—to consider different options.

Another possible response to problematic texts—for example those dealing with slaves or equating women with possessions—is to say that they represent a reality far different from our own. In this mode, I note that a given text was composed in a certain historical time period and as such, offers us insights into ancient

ways that render such laws moot. This not only reinforces the idea that Jewish tradition has continuously evolved but serves as an invitation to students to join in the conversation.

Our goal is for students to be both steeped in tradition and comfortable speaking out about it. That is, we want them empowered to make a contribution to the multigenerational conversation that has been going on for millennia, and also to view tradition with a respectful and critical eye. I choose to keep teaching troubling texts, like 1 Samuel 15; I see it as part of my sacred responsibility. Difficult texts are a part of our tradition and our students need to see them, engage with them, and manage the tension they create.

Wrestling with these texts offers students opportunities to consider various courses of action, to explore the consequences of different types of choices, and to learn more about themselves in the process. Studying texts that present ethical dilemmas helps students develop and hone their own strong moral compasses that will continue to guide them long after they have left our school. ❖

Susie Tanchel is Associate Head of School for Jewish Education and Professional Development at the Gann Academy—the New Jewish High School of Greater Boston.

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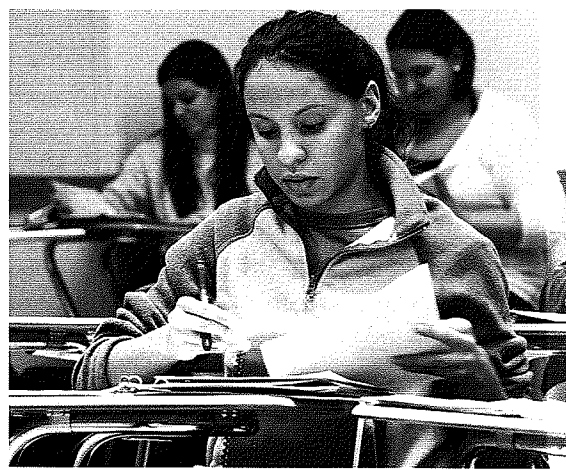
ethical and religious issues. Moreover, we respect our students as thinkers and urge them to become critical inquirers of the text in an environment in which serious discussion is encouraged.

When teaching texts that present ethically complex dilemmas, I use one of a number of different strategies that reflect my desire for students to treat the text seriously and to suspend their judgment long enough to hear what the text is saying.

One approach is to suggest that difficult texts are open to multiple interpretations; it is thus up to each student to notice, to think, to question, and to decide for themselves what they will take away from a particular law or a character's action or inaction. Is the text offering an example that the student would want to emulate or is it offering an example

of Israel. Here I make no attempt to defend the position of the text; I simply explain it. Since, according to this approach, the text's meaning is defined and limited by its original setting, I suggest that we should not look to it as a moral guide for our time. Rather, we can use the text as a yardstick to judge and to appreciate how far we have come since that time, or as a catalyst to undo an injustice in our time.

Limiting a text to its historical meaning is ultimately not sufficient for me as a Bible teacher in a Jewish high school. As part of our sacred literature, biblical texts retain their significance and relevance to our contemporary community. Thus, another possible strategy is to show how rabbinic tradition has overturned certain problematic laws in response to community needs (for example, the stoning of the rebellious son) by interpreting them in



free to choose a course of action that will lead to slavery or to true liberation from all egotistical desires; however, he may also choose to remain passive. Thus, human beings cannot avoid being active participants in the process of reaching salvation. The ethical and moral dimension of this Indian story is that Arjuna must confront his own demons, meaning that he must win the spiritual battle that is taking place within himself.

The significance of going to war against one's family should be understood as a myth or an allegory. The cosmic battlefield is a symbol representing Arjuna's spiritual battle with himself. In other words, Arjuna symbolizes our humanity, or the active life, and Krishna represents the divinity within us, or the contemplative life. The Gita is the eternal dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna, which is none other than the dialogue that takes place within each one of us.

In the Hindu tradition there are three major paths (*margas*) that seekers should master if they want to achieve union with the divine in this life. These three spiritual paths are *karma marga*, or the path of work, service, and action which teaches the seeker how to be detached from the fruits of our good actions; *jñāna marga*, or the path of intuitive knowledge which teaches the seeker how to acquire wisdom by becoming one with the divine; and *bhakti marga*, or the path of love and

Mahatma Gandhi understood the central message of the Gita as an allegory of the human journey. In this spiritual journey there are many paths leading to ultimate reality, to the divine in this life.

In the Christian mystical tradition, the active life and the contemplative life are represented in the paradigmatic model of Martha-Mary. Martha represents the active mystic, while Mary of Bethany symbolizes the contemplative mystic. Martha and Mary are sisters. They are seen today as Christian prototypes of contemplatives in action.

The biblical passage that highlights the apparent dichotomy between action and contemplation in Christian circles comes from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus, answering Martha's inquiry as to why her sister Mary has left her to serve alone, says: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; but one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42). Some Christians have interpreted this passage to mean that Mary has chosen for herself the best life, listening to Jesus's teachings, in contrast to Martha's life of action. But Jesus never rejected the life of action. On the contrary, Jesus lived a very active life.

The exegetical problem that Luke's biblical passage poses to the Christian tradition is whether or not Jesus intended to reject the active life. Jesus saw the unfair treatment of women and let them sit among his disciples and followers. It

when her duty as a woman was to take care of the household? (Luke 10:39.)

In my opinion, the Christian story of Martha and Mary—like the story of Arjuna and Krishna in the Gita—stresses the importance of holding together the life of action and the life of contemplation in oneself. These two sacred stories are similar in that both Arjuna and Martha are anxious about performing their daily activities while Krishna and Mary have chosen a 'best' path, one that is more in tune with ultimate reality. Again, why should these ancient stories matter today? At this point I will let you wrestle with the power of these ancient narrative stories on your own.

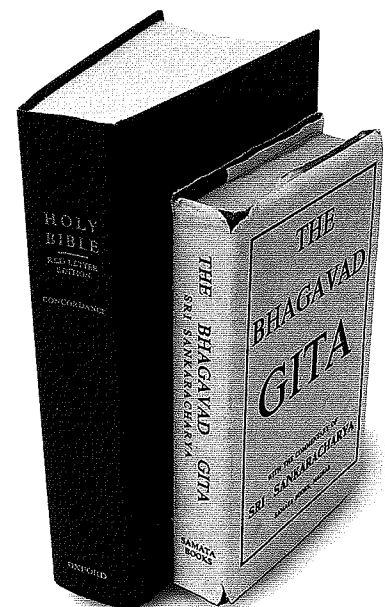
By bringing the study of myths into our classrooms we can learn more about our role in the universe. We might end up knowing more about who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. After all, being a Hindu, a Christian, or a member of another faith does not mean much if we are not willing to see what unites us as human beings rather than what separates us. ❖

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The Christian story of Martha and Mary, like the story of Arjuna and Krishna in the Gita, stresses the importance of holding together the life of action and the life of contemplation in oneself.

devotion, which teaches the seeker how to worship and please the divine. In short, the Gita represents a unique synthesis of action, knowledge, and devotion, and spiritual seekers ought to integrate these three paths in their lives.

could be inferred from a careful reading of the Gospel of Luke that Jesus encouraged women to participate in meetings if they so wished. Otherwise, why did Jesus allow Mary to sit at his feet and hear his word



By Roger Claff

The Reclamation of a Covetous Old Sinner

In mid-December every year, I reread Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to vicariously experience Scrooge's redemption; to feel his joy at simple acts of kindness; to renew a personal vow to expunge sourness, cynicism, and selfishness from my life; and to again perceive people "as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys." As a parent and a scout leader, I enjoy this story because of its straightforward, teachable message about the connection between happiness and virtue and the consequences of failing to recognize that connection.

"Oh! But he was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!" Scrooge makes us uncomfortable because Scrooge's selfishness is in every one of us. Who has not

reflexive and rooted in our survival instinct; we are "wired" to see to our own welfare, even at the expense of the welfare of others. It is all too easy to become like Scrooge, driven by greed and blind to the moral depravity of the pursuit of wealth for its own sake. Scrooge becomes a miser, "solitary as an oyster," shunning warmth, congeniality, and generosity. He also becomes "hard and sharp as flint" by his own design and intent.

As a resident of the career-driven Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, I find that Scrooge's isolated, cynical, me-first character saturates the culture around me; unfortunately, all too often I see Scrooge reflected in my own words and actions. As a parent, I must ask myself this question, fairly and honestly: Would my family be best served if I adopted Scrooge's personal ambition at

of Scrooge saying to my son, "It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people's." Such a disposition not only serves to make me "hard and sharp as flint" and "solitary as an oyster," but passes those same traits on to my son, who himself will be a father one day.

At the time their children are born I think few parents would willingly choose a me-first approach to parenting or wish to pass on this kind of legacy. Careers and personal goals are seductive and demanding, however, and as the years go by many display personal ambition over commitment to family—to the detriment of their children's happiness and well-being.

If selfishness comes naturally, then what motivates acts of selflessness or charity? The Ghost of Jacob Marley's pointed and emphatic rebuke of Scrooge asserts that we have an obligation as a

As a parent, I must ask myself this question, fairly and honestly: Would my family be best served if I adopted Scrooge's personal ambition at the expense of all other considerations? There are many who pursue this path, and yet, is this the disposition I am seeking to instill in my son?

felt at times—at least in his heart—that "It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people's," or that "I help to support the establishments I have mentioned—they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there"? Selfishness is

the expense of all other considerations? There are many who pursue this path, and yet, is this the disposition I am seeking to instill in my son? Whenever I use my career or personal interests as an excuse to evade my son's request to spend time with me, there is the voice

matter of will to overcome our intrinsic selfishness and accept our responsibility to be compassionate if we are to be members of the family of man: "*Business!* Mankind was my *business*. The common welfare was my *business*; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my *business*."

Scrooge could not see that his happiness depends upon this “comprehensive ocean” of personal charity. True poverty—poverty of the soul—comes not from lack of material wealth but from a failure to serve others for the common good. Scrooge observes about the wandering Spirits, “The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power forever.”

Happiness is not a commodity that can be procured through the acquisition or expenditure of wealth alone, nor can happiness be readily secured in isolation. Happiness, joy, personal satisfaction, and contentment are rather to be found in our interactions with others, particularly in our ability to be helpful, to serve others, and to make people’s lives better. To be happy, and—just as importantly as parents—to teach our children from whence true happiness derives, we need

Through scouting I have the rare privilege of shaping a positive environment for my son and his peers, encouraging their sense of wonder and discovery, developing in them—and in myself—a sense of service and commitment to helping others, and building leadership qualities into their character.

to roll up our sleeves, screw up our courage, wade out into the real world, and seek, without expectation of compensation, to make life better for our fellow man. Scrooge recalls how Ol’ Fezziwig “has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil.” The effect is reciprocal and catalytic: when others are made happier by the service we render, their disposition is reflected back to us as approval or reinforcement of our actions, giving us a sense of self-satisfaction and in turn making us happier. Ol’ Fezziwig and his wife are all the merrier for the high spirits of their guests.

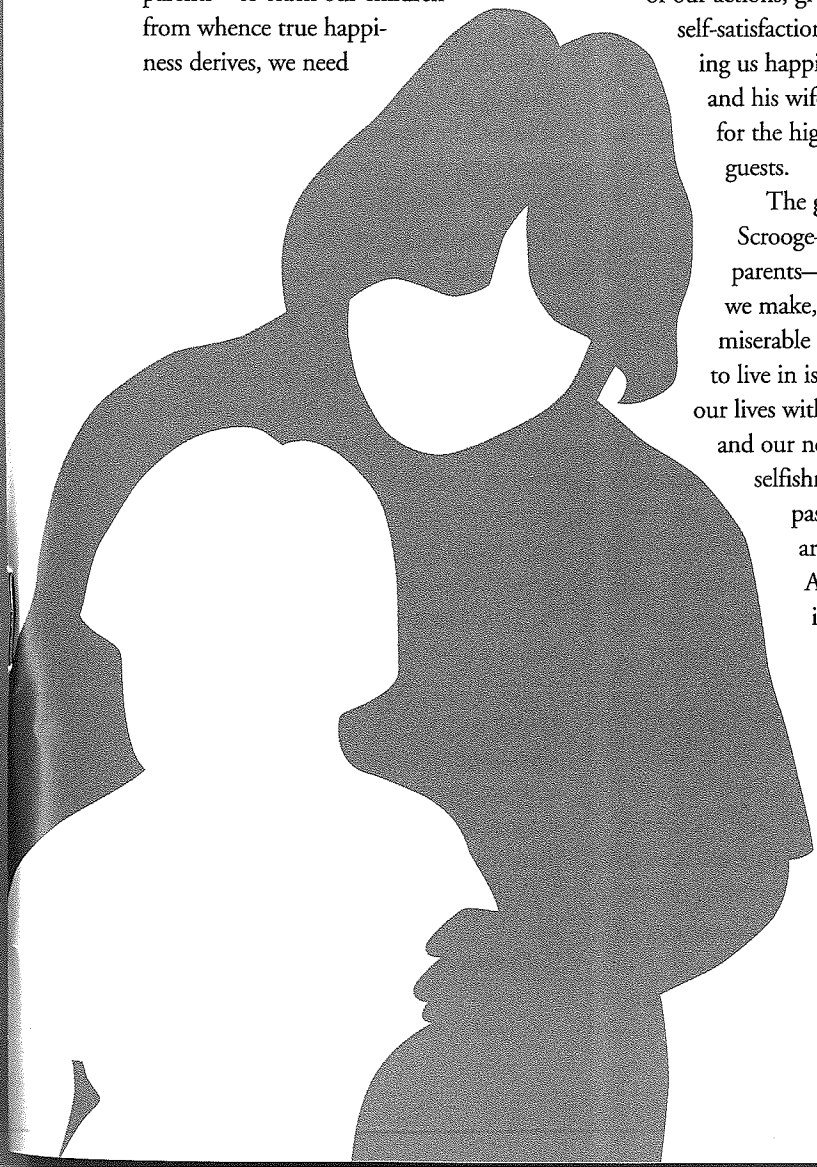
The good news for Scrooge—and for us as parents—is that the choices we make, whether to be miserable or to be happy; to live in isolation or to share our lives with our children and our neighbors; to live in selfishness or to show compassion and caring; are entirely reversible. As Scrooge plaintively implores, “Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in,

they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.”

We must all find for ourselves the “... chance and hope of escaping [Scrooge’s] fate.” This is why I made the conscious decision to become actively involved in my son’s life—and in the lives of the boys in our community—as a Boy Scout leader. Through scouting I have the rare privilege of shaping a positive environment for my son and his peers, encouraging their sense of wonder and discovery, developing in them—and in myself—a sense of service and commitment to helping others, and building leadership qualities into their character. Today my son is an Eagle Scout and a National Honor Society student and is applying to colleges to study civil engineering. But of all his accomplishments, I am proudest of the fact that he is a young man of character and virtue, with a sense of pride in himself and a genuine sense of commitment to serve others.

Such joy, happiness, and contentment as I have derived from my involvement with scouting I could never find in any personal ambition, confined, as it were, to “the narrow limits of [my] money-changing hole.” ❖

Roger Claff is an Assistant Scoutmaster in Boy Scout Troop 1570 in Herndon, VA, and a Den Chief Training Chair for his scout district. In these capacities and as a parent, Roger is interested in developing character in boys. Roger and his wife Ellen are very proud of their Eagle Scout son, Daniel.



LANGUAGE MATTERS:

The Bible as Religious Narrative and Our Responsibility Toward Language

By Dr. Adelheid Eubanks

Director, Liberal Arts Studies Program and Associate Professor,
Department of Communication, Language, and Literature, at Coker College

When I was asked to write about religious narratives and began thinking of my topic, I remembered a particular group of students from several years ago. My adult learners were discussing an excerpt of the Bible in the context of a World Literature course and could not understand my continuous insistence on paying attention to the exact wording of the passage. They objected that this is how it has always been written and that those are the words of God. Most members of the group were astounded, and some even shocked, when they learned that their Bible was a translation and that God did not deliver the Ten Commandments to Moses in English.

There is an explanation for my students' never having thought of the Bible in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, or a host of modern languages. As Karen Armstrong writes, "Christians do not have a sacred language, as Sanskrit, Hebrew and Arabic are sacred to Hindus, Jews and Muslims" (50). This is an important observation, because it helps us understand that Christians, while heeding words, tend to attach more significance to individual people. Armstrong notes that "[i]t is Jesus himself, not the scriptural texts, who constitutes the Christian revelation and there is nothing holy about the New Testament Greek" (50). In my experience, this seems to be true for many American believers. For a number of European Christians, the central figure is Mary, who is revered under the name

"Mary, Mother of God." If Christians venerate biblical individuals and their actions, where does this leave language?

I do not mean to suggest that Christians have a 'special purchase' on the Bible. It is my intention, rather, to show that the absence of a sacred language and the importance given to individual people of the Bible can lead to a certain inattentiveness regarding language. In the following sections I explore the importance of language in the biblical narrative and what it teaches us about helping young people become well-rounded individuals and responsible citizens.

I do not mean to imply that Christians are indifferent to or unaffected by the language of the Bible. Indeed, the prohibition to blaspheme makes many a parent and teacher discourage children from using exclamations such as "my God," or "for the love of God," and other expressions I need not quote. In addition, the religious narrative has inspired a vast number of sayings which we seem to use constantly. Take, for example "my brother's keeper" (Genesis 4:9), "the powers that be" (Romans 13:1), "the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13), and "fight the good fight" (1 Timothy 6:12), to name but a few. Such phrases serve as convenient 'shortcuts,' invoking larger narratives that we think we do not have to elaborate on. Finally, the task of translating the Bible to English has led to the coinage of words that had not been part of the English dictionary before. *The Bible and*

Its Influence cites "ambitious," "beautiful," "liberty," "puberty," and "scapegoat," among others, as examples (12). We clearly have abundant evidence that the language of the Bible has had and continues to have enormous influence on culture.

My concern here, however, is with the general nature, not the specific content, of the Bible as religious narrative. If you think of the "Song of Solomon" or the "Psalms," for example, you will understand what I mean when I say that the language of the Bible is figurative. Put differently, readers of the Bible are encouraged not to simply accept, absorb, or memorize words at face value, but to interpret them. The Bible is full of allegories, parables, and metaphors, all of which elude precise and literal meaning. In addition, consider the array of genres, ranging from lists, to songs, to letters, to sermons, to philosophical ruminations, and more. One of the lessons to be gleaned from the figurative nature of the Bible's language and the diversity of genres within this text is that "[t]here is no meaning resident *in* a word itself," as linguist Karol Janicki writes (61). The absence of exact meaning invites the reader to engage constructively with the text. It forces the reader to become an active participant in the construction of meaning by becoming engaged with the material and by thoughtfully developing an interpretation.

I explore the importance of language in the biblical narrative and what it teaches us about helping young people become well-rounded individuals and responsible citizens.

This is an empowering situation. We are all involved and have equal rights in the meaning-making process. My students—who were parents, caregivers, and professionals—already knew this, of course. They applied themselves to the texts we studied with enthusiasm and success but thought of the Bible in a category of its own. Looked at in terms of narrative, the Bible—as all narratives do—teaches us that meaning, understanding, and the best course of action to take are not givens, but are arrived at through interpretive work.

This is an important reminder to teachers in today's world for two reasons. First, the nature of the widely used and required standardized, multiple-choice tests does not lend itself to creative engagement with language; the task is

narrower in that the objective is to get the right answer. Second, an important implication of meaning being subject to interpretation is that this leaves much room for misunderstanding and conflict. In Janicki's words, "the meaning assigned to a word by the sender [speaker] may be entirely different from the meaning assigned to the same word by the receiver [listener]" (61). It is quite possible for any speaker to be misunderstood some, or even much, of the time. Remembering that our communication can fail and give rise to conflict can help us become more tolerant of other people's (language) behavior.

Importantly, we have an obligation to teach our students about this imprecise and elusive tool we use every day. As Donna Jo Napoli—a linguist from whom

I borrowed part of the title of this article—writes: language "is a way to give legitimacy to the spirit" (181). It is crucial to find and use 'teachable moments' to ask students what they mean by a particular word or phrase or to ask what they interpret the meaning of someone's words to be. It is important to foster a sense of self-worth that comes with being heard and listened to. In addition, learning about making wise choices and developing the habits of good character comes with the practice of interpretation. Toward this end, we need to use narratives—be they religious or secular. ❖

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- Janicki, Karol. *Against Essentialism: Toward Language Awareness*. Muenchen: Lincom Europa, 2002.
- Napoli, Donna Jo. *Language Matters: A Guide to Everyday Questions about Language*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Schippe, Cullen, Chuck Stetson. *The Bible and Its Influence*. New York: BLP Publishing, 2005.

QUOTES, BOOKS, and MOVIES

Wisdom from Various Religious Traditions

"Goodness cannot be obtained until what is difficult has been duly done. He who has done this may be called Good."

—CONFUCIUS, CHINESE TRADITION

"Do no unrighteousness in judgment. You must not consider the fact that one party is poor nor the fact that the other is a great man."

—JUDAIC TRADITION

"View your own Everest-like pain as nothing more than a grain of dust, while the minuscule problems of a friend as being like a mountain."

—RAMCARITMANAS, HINDU TRADITION

"Don't seek others' pain as the limbs of your own happiness."

—BUDDHIST TRADITION

"Let love be genuine, hold fast to what is good."

—BIBLE, ROMANS 12:9, CHRISTIAN TRADITION

"Those who spend in prosperity and in adversity [in deeds of charity], who repress anger, and who pardon men; verily, Allah loves the good-doers."

—THE QURAN, CHAPTER 3, VERSE 134, ISLAMIC TRADITION

Books Related to Religion and Ethics

The Kid's Book of World Religions, Jennifer Glossop & John Mantha

The Children's Book of Saints, Louis Savory

Kindness: A Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents, Sarah Conover

It Could Be Worse: A Yiddish Folktale, Margo Zemach

Muslim Child: Understanding Islam through Stories and Poems, Rukhsana Khan

The Lakota Way: Stories and Lessons for Living: Native American Wisdom on Ethics and Character, Joseph M. Marshall III

Adventure Bible, Lawrence O. Richards

The Story of Divaali, Jatinder Verma, Valmiki, & Niles Mistry

Character Education, K-6, Years 1 and 2

John Heidel and Marion Lyman-Mersereau

Movies Related to Religion and Ethics

Great Religions of the World (Educational Video Network, 2004)

The Adventures of Agent Emes Series (Reel Jewish Entertainment, 2005)

The Chronicles of Narnia (Home Vision Entertainment, 2002)

Paws & Tales: Seeing the Unseen (Triumph Marketing Ltd., 2005)

Life of Buddha (Facets Video, 2004)

Altars of the World: The Eastern and Western Religions (Wellspring Media, 2003)

Inside Islam (A&E Home Video, 2003)

By Harry Lynch

Headmaster, The Newman School in Boston, Massachusetts

The Bravery of Job

We all know the story of Job, don't we? But high school students come to it with fresh eyes and ears. In my World Religions class at The Newman School in Boston, I always look forward to discussing this particular 'disaster story.' The students are alert to every nuance, every injustice, and every outrage perpetrated against innocent Job.

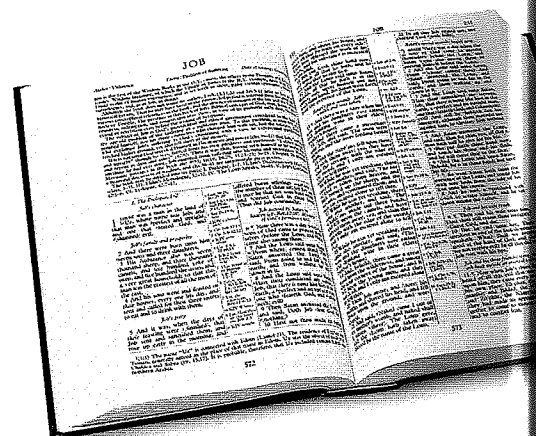
"Job was an upright and just man," they learn—yet, amazingly, a man who becomes the subject of a wager between God and the devil. "Consider my servant Job," God tells his debate partner, "is there anyone like him on all the earth? A man blameless and upright, who fears God and sets his face against wrongdoing." So, Job's existential circumstance is put into play by God himself—who, being God, must have been able to anticipate the Devil's reply. "Why would he not be God-fearing? You've given him everything. Remove your protection, and he will curse you to your face."

The idea that a man's health and the well-being of his family could be treated so cavalierly in a Bible story is both appalling and—on another level—thrilling to my students. For many of them, this is their first encounter with a biblical story that does not put a high polish on God's character, and their interest is piqued by an account of a man so clearly wronged, so unjustly treated. For perhaps the first time, they realize that the problem of injustice in God's world is not one that the ancients treated lightly and not something that they glossed over with a rationalization; e.g., Job's great-grandfather stole from the equivalent of

the corner store, so God had to punish Job. Indeed, no such claim is made. Job is, quite simply, the victim of cosmic injustice, and there must be reason for this.

When I previously presented the story of Job, I found the calm of God's answer to Job's interrogation to be the whole point of the story. Job rails against God, demanding his creator's reply—on what basis, for what reason, on what pretext, have I been subjected to every disaster that has befallen me? Carl Jung wrote that God's answer avoided the question. However, over years of considering this story and counseling students who have had a few of their own "Job experiences," I must conclude that the most dramatic, meaningful, constructive, and redemptive part of Job's exchange with God comes before God's recitations: "Where were you when I set the stars in their courses? When I built up the mountains? Have you an arm like God's arm; can you thunder with a voice like his? Deck yourself out, if you can, in pride and dignity... throw down the wicked where they stand... Then I, in my turn, will acknowledge that your own right hand can save you."

What answer can a man give to these questions? At the conclusion of God's long recitation, Job replies, "I have spoken of great things which I have not understood... I melt away... I repent in dust



and ashes." But in these words we do not find the true dignity of Job's response, and in God's words, we do not find evidence of the dignity of man. The key to the story comes before all this, and when they see it, my students "get it." As the dialogue with his friends begins, Job sits amidst the ashes of his possessions. His flocks are gone, his children are gone, his servants are gone, and his wife ridicules him for his refusal to curse God. Job is covered with sores (courtesy of the devil's last challenge to God), and he uses the shard of a broken pot to scratch his infected wounds. God is silent and removed from him, and Job demands to know why—given his adherence to God's word and his steady faith—he is doomed to suffer.

God's very first statement in reply takes the form of a simple fatherly command: "Stand up like a man, so I can talk to you." What must it have taken,

Job's story is ours, and despite whatever adversity life chooses to hurl at us, we must, at the critical moment, stand up. Our very lives depend upon it.

at that moment, for Job to stand up? *Having weighed me down with all of this, you now have the audacity to demand that I stand in your presence?* I ask my students, can we identify with Job at this moment? Each of us, in the course of our lives, experiences injustice or tragedy that seems too much to bear, that is inflicted upon us for no reason, and that is a source of abiding sorrow. These incidents in our lives and in the lives of our students may involve untimely death, the loss of a friendship, or difficulties at school or work. Whether taken together or alone, each incident and its attendant sorrow attaches itself to our being, weighing us down with remorse, anguish, anger, resentment, or all of these emotions. And our natural human disposition—our preferred position—is usually fetal, as we mourn our losses, curse our fate, and are dragged down by a leaden burden of depression and hopelessness.

What did it take, then, for Job to stand up at that moment? Certainly, as he brought himself to his feet before God, he had to carry all of his burdens up with him. His health, his possessions, his children, his social position, all of that was lost, and there was no hint that it would be restored. He must have been like any of us, struggling to get up from a sickbed, or to rise to our feet at the wake of a loved one, or simply to get up off the bench after losing a close basketball game.

Stand up, God tells us, and face your adulthood. Stand up, so I can speak to you in the fullness of your human dignity. Stand up; you are created in my image and likeness, and it will not do for you to wallow in this adversity. Stand up, find your own heroism, face me, and we can talk—creator to creature—about what I am, and what you are, and what your place in this glorious cosmos of mine is. Stand up. And at that moment, we are all reminded that the story of Job is not old and outdated. Job's story is ours, and despite whatever adversity life chooses to hurl at us, we must, at the critical moment, stand up. Our very lives depend upon it. ❖

UPCOMING EVENTS in CHARACTER EDUCATION

APRIL 1 – 3, 2006

Chicago, IL

ASCD 61st Annual Conference

Contact: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Telephone: 800-933-2723

Website: www.ascd.org

On Monday, April 3, 10:30 – 11:30 a.m., Dr. Bernice Lerner will give a presentation on The Teaching of Biography. From 1:00– 2:30 p.m. that same day, Dr. Lerner will co-present with Karen Newman, Dean of Studies, Pre-K–12, Montclair Kimberley Academy, on Building Character in Schools.

APRIL 6 – 7, 2006

Boston, MA

CAEC Two-day Academy

Contact: Lauren Terry, CAEC

Telephone: 617-353-3262

Website:

www.bu.edu/education/caec

JUNE 12 – 16, 2006

Coker College; University of South Carolina at Salkehatchie; South Carolina State University

CAEC Teachers Academies in partnership with the South Carolina DOE

Contact: Joan Dickinson,

Education Associate

Telephone: 803-734-4807

E-mail: jdickins@sde.state.sc.us

In collaboration with the Office of Safe Schools and Youth Services, the CAEC will provide professional development to teachers through three

Teachers Academies. These week-long programs will guide educators in their efforts to integrate character education into their respective academic curricula and school cultures.

JULY 13 – 15, 2006

St. Louis, MO

12th Annual Character Education Conference

Contact: Cooperating School Districts (CSD)

Telephone: 314-692-1250

Website: www.characterplus.org

AUGUST 2 – 4, 2006

Salt Lake City, UT

Summer Institute:

Educating Heart and Mind

Contact: Kristin Fink, Community of Caring National Office

Telephone: 801-587-8990

E-mail: Kristin.fink@ed.utah.edu

Website:

www.communityofcaring.org

All educators and administrators are invited to attend this exceptional three-day institute featuring presentations on ethics and character from scholars (including CAEC Associates) and practitioners. Guided by the teaching of great philosophers, participants will gain a deeper appreciation of our schools' most important mission—to help students develop the habits and dispositions that lead to wise and responsible choices.



CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF ETHICS AND CHARACTER

EDUCATING HEART AND MIND: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

TWO-DAY ACADEMY

The CAEC's Two-day Academy is a stimulating retreat that inspires educators to embrace a renewed sense of responsibility and dedication to the art of teaching, cultivates their intellectual lives, and instills in them a deeper understanding of how to educate for character. Plenary presentations by Boston University scholars explain relevant philosophical principles and demonstrate how sources of wisdom can be mined for enduring lessons.

Thursday, April 6, 2006—DAY ONE

Educating Heart and Mind: The Theory and Practice of Character Education

Dr. Bernice Lerner, Director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character, School of Education

Plato's *Meno*: The World's Worst Student

Dr. David Roochnik, Professor of Philosophy, College of Arts and Sciences

Luncheon Speaker

Dr. Douglas Sears, Dean, School of Education

Character, Caritas, and Critical Thinking: An Ethical Love Potion

Dr. Natalie McKnight, Chair of the Humanities and Rhetoric Division and Associate Professor of Literature, College of General Studies

Why Heroes?

Dr. Peter Gibbon, Senior Research Fellow, School of Education

Friday, April 7, 2006—DAY TWO

Moral Character and Moral Behavior: Perspectives from Philosophy and Social Psychology

Dr. Simon Keller, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, College of Arts and Sciences

Hello, Dolly (the Sheep): Educating for a New Millennium

Dr. James Tracy, Headmaster, Boston University Academy

Luncheon Speaker

Dr. Stephan Ellenwood, Associate Dean, School of Education

Affirmations of Identity and Experience: The Western Canon and Today's Diversified Student Body

Dr. Joellen Masters, Assistant Professor of Humanities, College of General Studies

For more information, please contact us at 617-353-3262 or caec@bu.edu. Directions to Boston University facilities, a list of area hotels, and parking information will be mailed to all registrants.

REGISTRATION FORM

Fee: \$390; \$350 for three or more teachers from one school or organization.

A continental breakfast, lunch, and materials are provided. Fee includes a \$40 nonrefundable processing charge.

Name(s) and position(s) of participant(s) (indicate contact person with an asterisk)

1. _____ 2. _____
3. _____ 4. _____

School/District _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Fax _____

E-mail _____

Please return this form to:

The Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character
621 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215
Fax: 617-353-4351.

Participants who attend the entire program will receive a Certificate of Completion. Participants who additionally submit a two- to three-page reflection paper (as described at the outset of the program) to the CAEC by Friday, April 21, will earn 12 Professional Development Points (PDPs) from Boston University's School of Education.

Two-day Academy fee (\$390 each; \$350 for three or more teachers): _____
X Number of attendees: _____
TOTAL: _____

Check/s is/are enclosed (make payable to CAEC at Boston University)

Payment type (check one) Visa MasterCard Discover

Card #:

Exp. Date _____ Name as it appears on the card _____

I hereby authorize Boston University to charge my credit card the amount specified above. I agree to pay the total credit card amount listed above according to the card issuer agreement.

Authorized signature _____ Date _____

Registration deadline: March 30, 2006

TO OUR READERS

We want to hear from you!

The strength of this newsletter depends on the active contribution of its readers. Our readers want to learn what is happening in your school or community—that’s what our “From the Trenches” section is all about.

We welcome submissions of any kind, including letters, articles, and anecdotes. What has worked in your classroom, home, or school? What has inspired your dedication to character education? We also encourage recommendations for our Selected Bibliography, Movies, and Character Quotes.

Our next issue will spotlight “ETHICS LESSONS IN ART AND FILM.” The deadline for submissions is May 26, 2006. Please address all correspondence to: Newsletter Managing Editor, Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character, 621 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Please use this form to initiate, renew, or update your membership.

Friend of the CAEC (\$60): Biannual newsletter, occasional mailings.

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ASCD Character Education Network (\$20): Biannual newsletter, occasional mailings.

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NOTE: \$40 of each Friend of the CAEC membership is tax deductible. We are a nonprofit organization and rely on grants and the generosity of our members. Any additional tax-deductible contribution you make to the CAEC is both needed and greatly appreciated.



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