



Minnesota Character Council

CHARACTER Connect

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Minnesota Character Council

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The MCC is administered by
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Character as Cultural

By Todd J. Lefko

Modern society often fails to agree on basic concepts. We agree on ideas, as long as we are the definers. Everyone demands honesty, truth, caring and character. These become our standards by which we judge the actions of others, and how we wish others to judge us. Formal definitions change over time.

The original word 'character' comes from the Greek kharakter, for engraved mark', "symbol or imprint on the soul," and instrument for marking." It can be traced to words such as to engrave, pointed stake or to scrape and scratch. The character was a stamp or marking impressed into wax or clay. It became the symbol of the painter, potter, writer, or sculptor. It reflected their personality and individuality.

By the 17th century, character became "the sum of qualities that defines a person." It was our thought, intellect, ideas, motives, intentions and temperament, behavior, imagination, and emotions and hates and loves. It was inside our souls, not created by a shaped image. Character was our "moral life." Ralph Waldo Emerson declared "Men [People] of character are the conscience of the society to which they belong."

By the 20th century, the idea of character was replaced by the idea of personality. Personality is different than character. Individuals began defining themselves through material possessions, dress, associations and activities. We defined character not as moral elements, but as an element of personal fulfillment. The rise of social media allowed everyone to create and communicate the essence of who we declared ourselves to be. As Susman declared, "The vision of self-sacrifice began to yield to that of self-realization."

"Perception became reality in our new world."



Perception became reality in our new world. Public relations and advice books became our guides for how the world was to see what we now defined as our character. A good person may have obtained millions through guile and trickery but would be declared a civic leader by their donations. Very few knew our real identity, as opposed to what we publicly shaped. Causes, promotions, and praise by others became our declaration of personal character.

Character as Cultural . . . continued

The past concept of character became renamed, in terms of things or causes, not as a personal quality. Politics became the art of promoting an image, rather than a reality. We desired character in others, and in our nations. If our actions did not reflect the qualities we demanded in others, but not ourselves, the new actions became justified in a new language of nationalism, patriotism, protection of a declared history, or protection of past values which required protection from new forces of destruction.

New forms of culture shaped by communication and media have become our declaration of modernity. We maintain an intellectual combination, both individually and nationally. We seek personal and national actions which we declare are moral.

Character is based upon common definitions and values, which reflect shared information and trust. The essential question facing the United States and many other nations, is how to create legitimate governance and a shared vision. Without this agreement on national character, our future is difficult.



Differences in definition and philosophy exist around the world. The reality of how to work together with those we cannot speak with, or who refuse to accept that others have beliefs which they accept, with their logic and morality must be faced. We need dialogues as a beginning, discussing where we disagree and more importantly what we share. At the center of these dialogues, the concept of character is essential.

This is not an easy task. Everyone believes they own character, and their actions reflect the qualities which define the concept. We need the process to begin, where we understand where, why and how we have created parallel sets of values. We need a process to begin where we build trust in the qualities of those with whom we disagree. This is required on local, national, and worldwide levels. Threats of pandemics, climate change, warfare, terrorism, and development have become so interdependent that they cannot be faced without joint action.

Character reflects resilience and perseverance. We are in a world which has damaged the historical meaning of the concept of character. The Minnesota Character Council is one important channel to begin this required process.

Character: Maxims for our Republic

By Michael Hartoonian

- 1) Character is the spirit that drives the creation of real wealth — defined within a democratic republic as individual and social excellence.** Character is so important to the civic health of our nation, that it is articulated in every state constitution in terms of a deep responsibility for civic education. The state's first obligation is to educate every student so they might acquire the mutually reinforcing attributes of citizen, scholar and artisan.
- 2) Without a conception of the public good, citizenship makes no sense.** The citizen understands the importance of the public good, as well as the ongoing tensions that exists between basic democratic values such as freedom and equality, unity and diversity, commonwealth and private wealth, and law and ethics. The required education needed to address these tensions calls for attributes of civic and civil debate that rides on the dynamic reservoir of cultural knowledge and wisdom.
- 3) Unless you know who you are, you cannot be responsible.** This third maxim of character applies not only to the identity of individuals, but to all our institutions including families, governments, business firms, non-profit organizations, fraternal clubs, labor unions, schools, and universities. Any institution that does not understand its identity as a public trust and as a piece of the fabric of our common good will not be responsible to its purpose and will neglect to educate individuals into character. Regarding the public schools, their identity stems from their purpose – develop enlightened citizens who understand why and how to govern self; to create, implement, and judge public policies; and to honor our generational covenant.

Recommended Reading *from MCC Members and Staff*

Marvin W. Berkowitz

- PRIMED for Character Education: Six Design Principles for School Improvement
- You Can't Teach Through a Rat — and Other Epiphanies for Educators
- Parenting for Good: Real World Advice for Parents

Stephen R. Covey

- The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People
- Principle-Centered Leadership

Developmental Studies Center

- That's My Buddy! — Friendship and Learning Across the Grades
- Blueprints for a Collaborative Classroom
- Among Friends — Classrooms Where Caring and Learning Prevail by Joan Dalton, Marilyn Watson

Lucy Frontera, Jennifer Jackson

- The Mirror of Good Character — A Four-Year Effort to Take Theory to Practice

Benjamin Franklin, edited by George L. Rogers

- The Art of Virtue

Michael S. Josephson, Wes Hanson

- The Power of Character: Prominent Americans Talk About Life, Family, Work, Values, And More

Fred Kiel

- Return on Character: The Real Reason Leaders and Their Companies Win

Fred Kiel, Doug Lennick

- Moral Intelligence 2.0: Enhancing Business Performance and Leadership Success in Turbulent Times

Tom Lickona

- Character Matters — How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, And Other Essential Virtues

Sir John Templeton

- Discovering the Laws of Life

Hal Urban

- 20 Gifts of Life
- Lessons From the Classroom

Philip Vincent, Doug Grove, with Judith Lamb

- Relationships + Rules + Routines = Results

Your Thoughts and Feedback

Considering the importance of character for our democracy, we are interested in your thoughts about character in your school. Please share your thoughts and feedback at <https://forms.gle/gNZMJqdWwPD2DqKp7>.

"A man who stands for nothing will fall for anything."

—Malcom X