

The Six Pillars of Character

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

In the last two weeks as I wrote about the Ten Commitments of the American Humanist Association, I remembered a similar document I discovered some years ago about being a person of character. It was written by Michael Josephson, one of the foremost ethicists in the United States. He founded the Josephson Institute of Ethics, which provides character education for youth and also conducts seminars in ethics for business leaders and people in public service.

We live in a world where ethics seem to have become discounted. We hear stories about business people who have been arrested for investment fraud. Sports heroes use banned substances to give them a slight edge in their performance. Politicians are arrested for influence peddling and other abuses of their office. Governments are mired in scandal for breaching ethical boundaries. Religious leaders bilk their followers and breach the trust of faithful parishioners with sexual abuse scandals. Banks have failed because of the greed of the 1% at the top.

As a result, people have lost all trust in almost every institution. Are there any people left with a strong, ethical character? Or does the lust for power override their sense of moral obligation? In such times, we need strong voices to help us find our integrity again as a society.

Josephson is one of those strong voices. I particularly appreciate his emphasis on working with youth, in a program he developed called “Character Counts,” which is designed to help young people gain a sense of the importance of developing character in their own lives. Indeed, many school districts are using Josephson’s materials in developing character education programs. It is an innovative approach which gives me some hope.

The heart of Josephson’s approach is found in what he calls the “Six Pillars of Character.” He has determined six central ethical values which can guide the choices we make. As Josephson says, “there’s nothing sacrosanct about the number six, except that it’s easy to remember.”

More importantly, if we can agree on these six pillars to support a life of integrity, these six pillars give us a common lexicon. That’s important in our diverse and fractured society. If we can communicate more clearly about core values, and if we can use a common language to communicate with each other across our ideological and political divides, then we can begin to see a way forward in which we can work together for the common good.

Equally importantly, these six pillars work together. We can’t simply pick and choose; we need them all to support a stronger, more compassionate life together. If we remove even one pillar, life is impoverished.

The first pillar is Trustworthiness. A characterful person is honest and dependable. She is intent on building a good reputation. A loyal person, she stands with family and friends. She has integrity, which comes from the same Latin word as “integer,” which means whole. A person with integrity is undivided and complete. A trustworthy person acts according to her beliefs and values, and not according to expediency. Such a person keeps the promises she makes and doesn’t make promises she can’t keep.

The second pillar is Respect. Josephson invokes the Golden Rule — do to others as you would have them do to you. We treat others with respect when we honour and value our differences, when we are considerate of their feelings, when we don’t dismiss them because we disagree with them. A respectful person treats others with civility, courtesy, decency and compassion.

The third pillar is Responsibility. The pendulum these days has swing so far to individual rights and freedoms that we have almost completely forgotten about our responsibilities as citizens in society. People exercise responsibility when they are willing to be held accountable for their actions, when they pursue excellence in everything they do, and exercise self-restraint. Such people are self-disciplined and always do their best.

The fourth pillar is Fairness. This is a tricky concept, even though the basic concept seems intuitively simple. It has to do with issues of equality and openness to other points of view, being free from bias or injustice. Fair people do not wait passively for the truth to come to them; they actively seek out relevant information as well as opinions which are different than theirs, so that they can judge fairly and impartially. A fair person is tolerant and evenhanded.

The fifth pillar is Caring. If we could exist alone in the universe, we wouldn't need ethics. But we don't ... and so caring is at the heart of ethical behaviour. Caring people are concerned with the welfare of others. Unethical people act the way they do because they are primarily concerned with themselves. It's hard, sometimes, to care for people. It's much easier to love humanity as a collective. Like Lucy in a wonderful Peanuts comic strip, we often want to yell, "I love humanity. It's people I can't stand." How true. But caring for others, showing compassion, and particularly helping those in need is an important part of the ethical life.

The final pillar Citizenship. An ethical person obeys the laws. But good citizens go beyond that bare minimum. They do their fair share to make the community work and to make it a better place. The community may be the nation, the city you live in, the school you go to, or the neighbourhood association. Good citizens participate fully as members of the communities in which they live. This pillar includes such things as a concern for the environment, for relationships between different communities, for participation in processes of truth and reconciliation, as well as taking the time to reflect before we react in anger.

Six Pillars of Character — TRRFCC. The youth material notes that these six pillars will help you become a TeRRiFiCC person. I encourage you to find out more for yourself. It's wonderful and exciting stuff. Thank God for Michael Josephson and the work he's doing.