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Resurrect character - and a culture that promotes it

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"Character is dead. Attempts to revive it will yield little." - James Davison Hunter

Has character died? Has its time truly passed? When James Hunter, author of the provocative book *The Death of Character*, issued his postmortem in 2000, some dismissed it as academic hyperbole. As someone more hopeful for renewal, I, too, thought my friend was perhaps, a tad alarmist. Now, I am not so sure.

In recent weeks, we have witnessed NBA superstars brawling with fans; another suspended for yelling a sexual vulgarity at a female fan; the possibility that Barry Bonds, and perhaps up to 50 percent of major-leaguers juiced themselves with steroids; a media icon resigning under a cloud of distrust; and more revelations of Enron fraud. Meanwhile, several CEOs await trials, and Martha Stewart spends Thanksgiving and Christmas in a West Virginia prison cell.

"The irony is sharp," as Hunter observed years before the reckoning. "The death of character," he argued, "comes at a time when the call to restore character is especially loud, persistent, universal - not to mention urgent." Any wonder why there has been so much discussion of "moral values" in defining the presidential election of 2004? The irony thickened when a once-impeached president began counseling his party on how to reclaim the "values" debate. What's going on here?

The ideal of moral character resonates profoundly with Americans, but it is not clearly understood or always put into practice. We reside in a performance culture in which results have become more treasured than virtue; recognition more sacred than modesty. No one justifies the lack of character in our superstars, but there are some other larger forces at work here. Could it be the culture we have fashioned that has inadvertently sanctioned our day of expedient virtue?

David Callahan's book *The Cheating Culture* shows how Americans have cut corners to get ahead. It is the "culture of pleasure that creates the tax evader, the cautious embezzler, the résumé fabricator, the digital file swappers... and the romantic cheaters." As spectators, we howl at umpires and referees, and then jam up talk-show lines when our coaches make "boneheaded" decisions. We are shocked by what athletes will do to get ahead, but any observant parent watching Little League today can regale you with stories of pushy parents and belligerent coaches screeching at their little ones, scolding them at their errors. We are staggered by our athlete's profanity, but hear it from the same stands watching our kids (who, of course, hear everything).

The performance culture we impose on our children is potent. Sports Illustrated's Rick Reilly noticed that even God is competing more and more with Sunday youth sports and losing: "For some reason overcaffeinated parents feel they have to keep up with the Joneses. They used to do

it with their cars. Now they do it with their kids." Ours is a culture in which winning and success have become sacrosanct. Can we be that surprised that since 1996 teenage use of steroids is up 40 percent?

We are livid at our executives when they break their trust. But we (around half of working Americans own public stock) were more than fine with CEOs living large during the boom as long as they kept propping up share price so we, too, might cash in. As any sick patient needing treatment and recovery, we must first understand our condition.

"We say we want a renewal of character," Hunter writes, "but we don't really know what to ask for... . We are, in effect, petrified of such moral leadership because of the very demands it would place on us."

Character has always required a reality bigger than oneself - a reality that impinges upon us from the outside. Such a reality is immune from our manipulation and dictates the boundaries of our life. Without such restraint, pragmatism governs our leaders, for when reality becomes no bigger than the desires and dreams of individuals, personal survival and pleasure become the only true god.

Character today has been obscured and undercut - by sensationalist media and salacious movies, by the difficulty in distinguishing between image and substance, and by the repeated moral failings of our leaders. We look for flamboyance, not deep-rooted virtue. The result is cynicism. Trustworthy leadership cannot flourish where people no longer know how to trust.

So here is the tragedy of our times. We desperately need the very qualities we are extinguishing. Some belittle the many understated models of characters around us: promise keepers; intentional parents; the many role models to be found in the fields of sport and business. We do desire character, but as a culture that doesn't reward or value it, we seek instead something more comfortable, and utilitarian. Character succumbs to pragmatism. We recognize and exalt the former, but enjoy and practice the latter.

To have a renewal of character is to demand a culture that constrains, limits, binds, and obligates. The price, as Hunter suggests, may be simply too high for some of us to pay. Some cry down any moral tradition that frustrates their insatiable appetite for consumption and performance. Then, too often, they fail to honor those who provide hope for renewal. Or as the professor noticed: "We want what we cannot possibly have on the terms we want it."

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