

Encouraging Virtues

By Patricia Morgan MA CCC

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There has been a movement afoot to bring back virtues. With the fading of organized religion in many people's lives, there has been a lack and a hunger for good, old fashioned wise guidance for goodness. Virtues are different from values. Values are what we deem important to us. To evaluate our values we can simply observe where and on what we invest our time, energy and money. If we value skiing, watching television or caring for the elderly we invest in that activity.

Virtues are timeless, valued by all cultures and reflect a code of honour or higher character. While countless virtues are taught and maintained in religious traditions many families seek a more generic, yet spiritual, moral grounding. Virtue conscious parents notice and build upon moments of kindness and potential.

In 1991 Linda Popov, author of *The Family Virtues Guide*, founded The Virtues Project to help families create meaning. A virtue, Popov states, "helps children to remember who they really are, and to know that the purpose of life is to have a life of purpose." The Virtues Project presents 52 virtues to assist parents in guiding their children. Virtues include concepts such as caring, cleanliness, forgiveness, honesty, responsibility and, thank heavens, joyfulness. In William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, this doctor of philosophy organized children's poems and stories under categories such as Self-Discipline, Courage, Friendship, Work and Faith. There is a wonderful poem to recite to a child, teen or adult if they are questioning that they make a difference in the world. The poem by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is included by Bennett in his Compassion chapter:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

Imagine a child being able to recite this poem, a child who would not question whether teasing, taunting or bullying was acceptable. On April 25, 2002 CBC radio reported a research project conducted at the University of Lethbridge. The announcer said something like "The research study concluded that when hockey parents encouraged their children to be aggressive (towards the other team), children showed disturbing levels of violence." These parents were acting out of a value of winning, at all cost. If these same parents supported a virtue such as "excellence" they would encourage their youngsters to give their best effort and turn errors into opportunities to learn and improve. They might give a message similar to a quote by Charlene Costanzo, "May you discover your own special abilities and contribute them toward a better world."

As parents we can begin a conscious journey of integrating high principles and virtues into our own lives. We can ask, "What is my code of honour and conduct? Do my chosen behaviours and words support virtues that bring more harmony, meaning and joy to the world? What new behaviour will I begin today that will increase my life and family purpose?" Happy Virtueing!

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