



HEROES & VILLAINS

The Quest for Civic Virtue



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A program of the Bill of Rights Institute
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Founded in September 1999, the Bill of Rights Institute seeks to educate young people about the words and ideas of America's Founders, the liberties guaranteed in our Founding documents, and how our Founding principles continue to affect and shape a free society. The Bill of Rights Institute is an educational non-profit organization, classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) organization, a public charity. With an annual operating budget of over \$3.3 million, the Institute is grateful to be supported by 3,000 individual, corporate, and foundation donors.

What Is Virtue? Teaching Tool



Some assumptions underlie our selection and discussion of virtues.

Understanding virtue means acknowledging that right and wrong exist.

To further justice, we must exercise judgment. In order to understand and evaluate virtue, we must be willing to admire heroes and condemn villains. We must be willing to take a stand. A special challenge today may be that many people do not wish to appear judgmental. We seek to balance two ideas: On the one hand, being too quick to judge is wrong. Respect means not looking down on others who are not harming anyone simply because you don't agree with them. On the other hand, a reluctance to judge the behavior of others should not mean we do nothing in the face of evil. All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.



“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

—Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee



“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Being virtuous does not require belief in a supreme being.

We do not wish to shy away from the term “virtue,” despite the occasional misunderstanding of the term as requiring religion. Virtue is compatible with, but does not require, religious belief. To many in the Founding generation, religion and morality were “indispensable supports” to people’s ability to govern themselves. This is because religious

institutions nurtured virtue, and they knew virtue was needed for self-government to survive. On the other hand, to paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, it does you no injury whether your neighbor believes in one god or twenty gods. A person’s religion alone would not make him virtuous, and his particular (or lack of) religion would not mean he was incapable of virtue.



“We ought to consider what is the end [purpose] of government before we determine which is the best form. Upon this point all speculative politicians will agree that the happiness of society is the end of government, as all divines and moral philosophers will agree that the happiness of the individual is the end of man. . . . All sober inquirers after truth, ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue.”

—John Adams, *Thoughts on Government*, 1776

Why virtues and not “values” or “character”?

Virtues are eternal because they are rooted in human nature. Values, on the other hand, can change with the times. The word “value” itself implies that values are relative. While values can change with circumstances, it is always good to be just, to persevere, to be courageous, to respect others, and so on. We take the word “character” to mean the sum total of virtues an individual displays. A person of character is virtuous.

Why these virtues?

In consultation with our academic advisory team, we worked to identify virtues the Founders believed were required of citizens in order for the Constitution to work. By studying primary sources—notably the *Federalist Papers* and the *Autobiography* of Ben Franklin—we established the “Founders’ Virtues” which include justice, courage, perseverance, respect, self-governance, and many others.

Virtues You Will Explore

- Courage
- Humility
- Responsibility
- Justice
- Perseverance
- Contribution
- Respect
- Integrity
- Self-Governance

What Is Virtue? Teaching Tool



What is “virtue” within the context of this book? How do we mean the term?

Virtue is a “golden mean.”

We began with Aristotle’s understanding of virtue as a mean (or middle) between two extremes. The same character trait, when expressed to the extreme, ceases to be virtue and becomes vice. For example, too little courage is cowardice, while too much makes one foolhardy. A healthy respect for authority becomes blind obedience to power when expressed too strongly or descends into unprincipled recalcitrance when completely lacking.

Virtue is action.

Thoughts may be about virtuous things, but they themselves do not merit the name of virtue. Similarly, words can describe virtuous things but can never themselves be virtuous. Your thoughts and words alone don’t make you virtuous—you have to act on them.

Virtue is a habit.

We also take the idea from Aristotle that virtue is a habit. Virtuous behavior is not the result of numerous, individual calculations about which course of action would be most advantageous. For example, a person who finds a piece of jewelry, intends to keep it, but later returns

it to the owner to collect a reward helps bring about a just outcome (property was returned to its rightful owner) however he falls short the title “virtuous” because of the calculation he went through to arrive at his course of action.

While all virtues must be habits, not all habits are virtuous.

Virtue requires a just end.

Behavior can be virtuous only when done in the pursuit of justice. For example, though courage is a virtue, a Nazi who proceeded in killing thousands of people despite his own feelings of fear cannot be called courageous. Though respect is a virtue, a junior police officer who stood by while his captain brutalized a suspect cannot be called respectful.

A complication can come when you either focus on or enlarge the sphere within which action takes place. Could an officer on the wrong side of a war display virtue in the form of courage by taking care of the younger men in his charge and shielding them from harm? Is the “end” of his action the responsibility towards his men, or the continued strength of his army, which is working towards an evil cause?

RESPECT

Elizabeth Eckford, The Little Rock Nine, and Respect



The Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), with its declaration that segregated public schools were unconstitutional, overturned decades of precedent and challenged deeply held social traditions. Resistance to the decision was widespread, especially in the South. Not all state governments were quick to comply with the Supreme Court's order to integrate "with all deliberate speed," and many fought against it openly. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus ordered his state's National Guard to block the entry of nine newly enrolled African-American students to Central High School in Little Rock. A violent mob gathered in front of the school, and city police failed to control it.

It was into this mob scene that Elizabeth Eckford arrived when she stepped off the city bus, wearing the pleated skirt she had sewn for what was to be a happy occasion. The eight other African-American students had made plans to arrive at school together, but because Eckford's family did not have a phone, she did not learn of these plans. She arrived at school and faced the angry mob alone. National Guardsmen, under the direction of Governor Faubus, blocked all of the African-American students from entering the school. Eckford proceeded to a bus stop to leave the area as angry segregationists shouted threats.

Analyzing Primary Source Documents

1. What clues can you find in the picture about the historical period during which it was taken?
 - *Who* do you see? (Describe the people in the photograph.)
 - *What* is happening? (What types of activities are they engaged in?)
 - *When* was it likely taken? (Look for clues such as clothing styles, architecture, automobiles, etc.)
 - *Where* can you deduce it was taken? (Look for clues such as signage, architecture, bodies of water, mountains, and other geographic features.)
2. What do you already know about the historical period this photograph depicts?

Discussion Guide



Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. How did Elizabeth Eckford's actions illustrate the virtue of courage?
2. The federal district court ordered Governor Faubus to withdraw the Guard, which he did. The Little Rock Nine students tried again three weeks later, this time escorted by city police. Protesters soon forced their way into the building, and police escorted the African-American students out for their own safety. How do Eckford's actions illustrate the virtue of perseverance?
3. The woman pictured screaming racial epithets at Eckford is Hazel Bryan. What virtues is Bryan failing to display in this photograph?
4. What virtues are the many bystanders failing to display in this photograph?
5. How might this photograph have been different—and how might history have been different—if one of the bystanders had acted in defense of Eckford and the other African-American students?
6. Respect is a virtue, but does that mean everyone and everything deserves your respect? For example, does Bryan deserve your respect as she hurls racial epithets at Eckford? How do you know?
7. In response to the crisis, President Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard. Troops from the 101st Airborne Division assisted in the integration of the high school. In his address to the nation on September 24, 1957, the President said that “mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of our courts.” What kinds of respect are lacking when there is “mob rule”? Respect for the law? Respect for the rights of other people? What others?

Virtue In Action



Think about ways you can show respect to yourself and others in your daily life.

- Protect your mind and body as precious things. Extend that protection to every other person you encounter.
 - ⇒ Treat your family members, teachers, school administrators, and others who have just authority over you with esteem.
 - ⇒ Listen and give due consideration to the views of others.
 - ⇒ Defend just claims.
- Stand up for the rights and dignity of others.
- For additional inspiration, you may research the lives of the Little Rock Nine: Carlotta Walls, Jefferson Thomas, Elizabeth Eckford, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Pattillo, Terrence Roberts, Gloria Ray, Minnijean Brown, and Ernest Green.

Sources & Further Reading

Margolick, David. *Elizabeth And Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011.

‘Elizabeth and Hazel’: The Legacy of Little Rock.

www.npr.org/2011/10/02/140953088/elizabeth-and-hazel-the-legacy-of-little-rock

Virtue Across the Curriculum

Below are corresponding literature and film suggestions to help you teach this virtue across the curriculum. A sample prompt has been provided for the key corresponding work, and you are encouraged to create your own prompts for other suggested works.

***To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee**

Taking a stand for justice is more difficult—and more important—when you must stand alone. How does Atticus Finch stand up for justice against the entire community?

OTHER WORKS

The Color Purple by Alice Walker

The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan

The Jungle by Upton Sinclair

Respect

NAME: _____

DATE: _____



Directions What do you think is the greatest misunderstanding people have when it comes to the virtue of respect? For example, do you know people who try to push others around because they “want respect”? Do you know people who think respecting others means you must always agree with all of their ideas? Explain some of the greatest challenges you face in practicing the virtue of respect and how you can overcome them.

A series of horizontal lines for writing, consisting of 18 lines spaced evenly down the page.



“In republics, the great danger is that the majority may not sufficiently respect the rights of the minority.”

–JAMES MADISON