



An Overview of the Virtues

by James B. Stenson

As children grow from infancy to adulthood, they need to acquire certain character-strengths: sound judgment, a sense of responsibility, personal courage, and self-mastery. These habits of mind and will and heart have traditionally been called the virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Children internalize these lifelong habits in three ways, and in this order:

example: what they witness in the lives of parents and other adults whom they respect (and thus unconsciously imitate);

directed practice: what they are repeatedly led to do, or are made to do, by parents and other respected adults;

word: what they hear from parents and other respected adults as explanation for what they witness and are led to do.

Sound Judgment (Prudence)

- ❖ Respect for learning and intellectual accomplishment – “culture”.
- ❖ Understanding of human nature and life-experience: motivations, values, and priorities in life.
- ❖ Habit of considering the past causes and future implications of present events and circumstances.
- ❖ Ability to recognize the good, the true, and the beautiful; and to distinguish them from the evil, the false, and the sordid.
- ❖ Powers of moral and intellectual discernment – ability to distinguish (partial list):

• drudgery (pointless effort)	from	sacrifice (purposeful effort)
• immature egoism	from	responsible spirit of service
• acquaintance, accomplice	from	true friend
• “celebrities”	from	heroes
• personal rule	from	rule of law
• person in office	from	the “office” itself (e.g., President)
• “feelings”	from	conscience
• “feelings”	from	reasoned opinions
• eroticism	from	love
• sordid, squalid	from	noble, beautiful
• cynicism	from	healthy skepticism, shrewdness
• hypothesis, assumption	from	proven fact, certain knowledge
• mean-spirited ridicule	from	humor, wit
• hubristic pride	from	healthy self-respect
• pragmatism	from	integrity
• self-indulgence	from	self-mastery, “class”
• impulsiveness	from	calculated risk-taking



Moms Transmit the Faith

- boorishness **from** courtesy, good manners
- ruthless ambition **from** honorable competition
- selfish individualism **from** team collaboration

Responsibility (Justice)

- ❖ Acknowledging and respecting the rights of others – the basis for our duties and obligations.
- ❖ Habit of doing our duties, whether we feel like it or not. (Includes the notion of professionalism: the ability to perform at our best no matter how we “feel”.)
- ❖ Respect for rightful authority. (Authority means, among other things, the right to be obeyed.)
- ❖ Living with the consequences of our decisions and mistakes, including neglect.
- ❖ Refusal to see oneself as a victim.
- ❖ Habit of honoring our promises and commitments, even when this involves sacrifice.
- ❖ Habit of minding our own business, staying out of matters that do not concern us.
- ❖ Refraining from gossip, detraction, and rash judgment; giving people benefit of doubt and respecting others’ right to presumption of innocence.

Personal Courage (Fortitude)

- ❖ Acquired ability to overcome or endure difficulties: pain, inconvenience, disappointment, setbacks, worry, tedium.
- ❖ Habit of overcoming anxiety through purposeful, honorable action.
- ❖ Attitude of seeing escape as something unworthy, even dishonorable.
- ❖ Realization that “anticipation” is usually worse than “reality”. Projected problems are generally lighter and easier than we expect them to be.
- ❖ Confidence in problem-solving abilities, built through lifetime practice in solving problems.
- ❖ Determination to overcome personal shortcomings. If we are shy, we learn to be friendly and a “good listener”. If we are impulsive, we practice restraint and reflection about consequences. If we are lazy, we strive toward purposeful action. If we do not understand something, we make the effort to study.

Self-mastery (Temperance)

- ❖ Acquired ability to say “No” to ourselves and our lower inclinations.
- ❖ Habit of waiting for rewards, and earning them.
- ❖ Enjoying pleasures and goods in moderation: food, drink, entertainment, even work itself.
- ❖ Lifelong habit of saying (and meaning): please, thank you, I’m sorry, and I give my word...



- ❖ Habit of living courtesy and good manners toward everyone, without exception, and doing this even in the face of rudeness or provocation.
- ❖ In a word, “class”: self-restraint, etiquette, healthy self-respect, active concern for the dignity and needs of all around us, an active spirit of service.

Some “Life Lessons” Young People Need to Learn

- ❖ A short-cut to personal happiness: forget about your ego and give yourself generously to serving the needs of those around you, starting with your family.
- ❖ Love is not just sweet sentiments. It is really the willingness and ability to undergo sacrificial difficulties for the sake of the welfare and happiness of others. In a sense, love is sacrifice.
- ❖ Hard work without some ideal is just drudgery; hard work with some ideal becomes noble, adventurous sacrifice.
- ❖ Popularity is not so important as respect. If you strive too hard to have people like you, they probably won’t. But if you strive to win their respect, then they will both like and respect you. (All respect comes from some perception of strength.)
- ❖ If you have self-respect, you will win the respect of others.
- ❖ Nobody respects a liar, a gossip, a cynic, or a whiner. If you act like one, people may temporarily find you amusing; but they will mistrust you and hold you without honor.
- ❖ Never make promises lightly; but if you make them, you must keep your word.
- ❖ If you read a lot, and discerningly, people come to value your judgment.
- ❖ Sometimes it requires more wisdom to take good advice than to give it.
- ❖ Character is what you have left over if you ever go broke.

The real riches in life are family, friends, health, and a good conscience. Everything else is gravy.

