

The Moral Bucket List



ABOUT once a month I run across a person who radiates an inner light. These people can be in any walk of life. They seem deeply good. They listen well. They make you feel funny and valued. You often catch them looking after other people and as they do so their laugh is musical and their manner is infused with gratitude. They are not thinking about what wonderful work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all.

When I meet such a person it brightens my whole day. But I confess I often have a sadder thought: It occurs to me that I've achieved a decent level of career success, but I have not achieved that. I have not achieved that generosity of spirit, or that depth of character.

A few years ago I realized that I wanted to be a bit more like those people. I realized that if I wanted to do that I was going to have to work harder to save my own soul. I was going to have to have the sort of moral adventures that produce that kind of goodness. I was going to have to be better at balancing my life.

It occurred to me that there were two sets of virtues, the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral — whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?



But if you live for external achievement, years pass and the deepest parts of you go unexplored and unstructured. You lack a moral vocabulary. It is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You figure as long as you are not obviously hurting anybody and people seem to like you, you must be O.K. But you live with an unconscious boredom, separated from the deepest meaning of life and the highest moral joys. Gradually, a humiliating gap opens between your actual self and your desired self, between you and those incandescent souls you sometimes meet.

So a few years ago I set out to discover how those deeply good people got that way. I didn't know if I could follow their road to character (I'm a pundit, more or less paid to appear smarter and better than I really am). But I at least wanted to know what the road looked like.

I came to the conclusion that wonderful people are made, not born — that the people I admired had achieved an unfakeable inner virtue, built slowly from specific moral and spiritual accomplishments.

If we wanted to be gimmicky, we could say these accomplishments amounted to a moral bucket list, the experiences one should have on the way toward the richest possible inner life. Here, quickly, are some of them:

THE HUMILITY SHIFT We live in the culture of the Big Me. The meritocracy wants you to promote yourself. Social media wants you to broadcast a highlight reel of your life. Your parents and teachers were always telling you how wonderful you were.

But all the people I've ever deeply admired are profoundly honest about their own weaknesses. They have identified their core sin, whether it is selfishness, the desperate need for approval, cowardice, hardheartedness or whatever. They have traced how that core sin leads to the behavior that makes them feel ashamed. They have achieved a profound humility, which has best been defined as an intense self-awareness from a position of other-centeredness.

SELF-DEFEAT External success is achieved through competition with others. But character is built during the confrontation with your own weakness. Dwight Eisenhower, for example, realized early on that his core sin was his temper. He developed a moderate, cheerful exterior because he knew he needed to project optimism and confidence to lead. He did silly things to tame his anger. He took the names of the people he hated, wrote them down on slips of paper and tore them up and threw them in the garbage. Over a lifetime of self-confrontation, he developed a mature temperament. He made himself strong in his weakest places.

THE DEPENDENCY LEAP Many people give away the book “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!” as a graduation gift. This book suggests that life is an autonomous journey. We master certain skills and experience adventures and certain challenges on our way to individual success. This individualist worldview suggests that character is this little iron figure of willpower inside. But people on the road to character understand that no person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason and compassion are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride and self-deception. We all need redemptive assistance from outside.

People on this road see life as a process of commitment making. Character is defined by how deeply rooted you are. Have you developed deep connections that hold you up in times of challenge and push you toward the good? In the realm of the intellect, a person of character has achieved a settled philosophy about fundamental things. In the realm of emotion, she is embedded in a web of unconditional loves. In the realm of action, she is committed to tasks that can't be completed in a single lifetime.

ENERGIZING LOVE Dorothy Day led a disorganized life when she was young: drinking, carousing, a suicide attempt or two, following her desires, unable to find direction. But the birth of her daughter changed her. She wrote of that birth, “If I had written the greatest book, composed the greatest symphony, painted the most beautiful painting or carved the most

exquisite figure I could not have felt the more exalted creator than I did when they placed my child in my arms.”

That kind of love decenters the self. It reminds you that your true riches are in another. Most of all, this love electrifies. It puts you in a state of need and makes it delightful to serve what you love. Day’s love for her daughter spilled outward and upward. As she wrote, “No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I often felt after the birth of my child. With this came the need to worship, to adore.”

She made unshakable commitments in all directions. She became a Catholic, started a radical newspaper, opened settlement houses for the poor and lived among the poor, embracing shared poverty as a way to build community, to not only do good, but be good. This gift of love overcame, sometimes, the natural self-centeredness all of us feel.

THE CALL WITHIN THE CALL We all go into professions for many reasons: money, status, security. But some people have experiences that turn a career into a calling. These experiences quiet the self. All that matters is living up to the standard of excellence inherent in their craft.

Frances Perkins was a young woman who was an activist for progressive causes at the start of the 20th century. She was polite and a bit genteel. But one day she stumbled across the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, and watched dozens of garment workers hurl themselves to their deaths rather than be burned alive. That experience shamed her moral sense and purified her ambition. It was her call within a call.

After that, she turned herself into an instrument for the cause of workers’ rights. She was willing to work with anybody, compromise with anybody, push through hesitation. She even changed her appearance so she could become a more effective instrument for the movement. She became the first woman in a United States cabinet, under Franklin D. Roosevelt, and emerged as one of the great civic figures of the 20th century.

THE CONSCIENCE LEAP In most lives there’s a moment when people strip away all the branding and status symbols, all the prestige that goes with having gone to a certain school or been born into a certain family. They leap out beyond the utilitarian logic and crash through the barriers of their fears.

The novelist George Eliot (her real name was Mary Ann Evans) was a mess as a young woman, emotionally needy, falling for every man she met and being rejected. Finally, in her mid-30s she met a guy named George Lewes. Lewes was estranged from his wife, but legally he was married. If Eliot went with Lewes she would be labeled an adulterer by society. She’d lose her friends, be cut off by her family. It took her a week to decide, but she went with Lewes. “Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do not act as I have done,” she wrote.

She chose well. Her character stabilized. Her capacity for empathetic understanding expanded. She lived in a state of steady, devoted love with Lewes, the kind of second love that comes after

a person is older, scarred a bit and enmeshed in responsibilities. He served her and helped her become one of the greatest novelists of any age. Together they turned neediness into constancy.

Commencement speakers are always telling young people to follow their passions. Be true to yourself. This is a vision of life that begins with self and ends with self. But people on the road to inner light do not find their vocations by asking, what do I want from life? They ask, what is life asking of me? How can I match my intrinsic talent with one of the world's deep needs?

Their lives often follow a pattern of defeat, recognition, redemption. They have moments of pain and suffering. But they turn those moments into occasions of radical self-understanding — by keeping a journal or making art. As Paul Tillich put it, suffering introduces you to yourself and reminds you that you are not the person you thought you were.

The people on this road see the moments of suffering as pieces of a larger narrative. They are not really living for happiness, as it is conventionally defined. They see life as a moral drama and feel fulfilled only when they are enmeshed in a struggle on behalf of some ideal.

This is a philosophy for stumblers. The stumbler scuffs through life, a little off balance. But the stumbler faces her imperfect nature with unvarnished honesty, with the opposite of squeamishness. Recognizing her limitations, the stumbler at least has a serious foe to overcome and transcend. The stumbler has an outstretched arm, ready to receive and offer assistance. Her friends are there for deep conversation, comfort and advice.

External ambitions are never satisfied because there's always something more to achieve. But the stumblers occasionally experience moments of joy. There's joy in freely chosen obedience to organizations, ideas and people. There's joy in mutual stumbling. There's an aesthetic joy we feel when we see morally good action, when we run across someone who is quiet and humble and good, when we see that however old we are, there's lots to do ahead.

The stumbler doesn't build her life by being better than others, but by being better than she used to be. Unexpectedly, there are transcendent moments of deep tranquillity. For most of their lives their inner and outer ambitions are strong and in balance. But eventually, at moments of rare joy, career ambitions pause, the ego rests, the stumbler looks out at a picnic or dinner or a valley and is overwhelmed by a feeling of limitless gratitude, and an acceptance of the fact that life has treated her much better than she deserves.

Those are the people we want to be.