

EDU 6526 Survey of Instructional Strategies
Session 6 Reading: Russell Kirk

“Can Virtue Be Taught?”
by Russell Kirk

The urgent need of the United States of America... is for a virtue arising from habit and affection, rather than from ideological preaching. Without such a renewed true virtue, our commonwealth may not endure. I think of the words of Simone Weil concerning our era, in her “Reflections on Quantum Theory”:

“It is as though we had returned to the age of Protagoras and the Sophists, the age when the art of persuasion—whose modern equivalent is advertising slogans, publicity, propaganda meetings, the press, the cinema, and radio—took the place of thought and controlled the fate of cities and accomplished coups d’etat. So the ninth book of Plato’s *Republic* reads like a description of contemporary events. Only today it is not the fate of Greece but of the entire world that is at stake. And we have no Socrates or Plato or Eudoxus, no Pythagorean tradition, but it can do nothing for us unless it becomes alive again.”

Just so. It is not propaganda nor productivity nor intellectuality that has power to invigorate America at the crisis of the nation’s fate. By virtue are nations defended. But virtue in this land of ours seemingly never lay at a lower ebb. The instruments of false persuasion listed by Simone Weil—the tools of the philodoxers, the purveyors of delusory opinion—have been increased in cleverness since she wrote, by the triumph of television. In no previous age have family influence, sound early prejudice, and good early habits been so broken in upon by outside force as in our own time. Moral virtue among the rising generation is mocked by the inanity of television, by pornographic films, by the twentieth-century cult of the peer group. By example and precept, until quite recently, grandparents and parents conveyed to young people—or a considerable part of them—some notion of virtue, even if the word itself was not well understood. The decay of family, worked by modern affluence and modern mobility, has mightily diminished all that. As for the influence of the churches—why, more is left of it in the United States than in most countries; but in the typical “mainline” church an amorphous humanitarianism has supplanted emphasis upon virtue that runs through the Christian tradition.

...Boys and girls will model themselves, if they can, upon exemplars. But what sort of exemplars? Rock stars, and the fancied personalities of the heroes and heroines of the soap operas, have become the exemplars for a multitude of young people in their most formative years. Rarely are such persons, or pseudo-persons, admirable mentors.

...At no time could every family provide... an exemplar; yet time was when emulation within the family amounted to more than it does nowadays. My relationship with my grandfather made it easy for me to understand Aristophanes’ implicit argument that virtue arises easily, if mysteriously, among families. My grandfather had many virtues and no vices. I assumed then, somewhat naïvely, that the Republic had sufficient such leaders and molders of opinion as my grandfather, and would have enough always.

My point is this: the recovery of virtue in America depends in great part upon the reinvigoration of family. It would be vain for us to pretend that schools and colleges somehow could make amends for all the neglect of character resulting from the inadequacies of the American family.... Rather as some people expect too much from the schools concerning virtue, so other people count overly upon churches and clergy as molders of virtuous character. For Jeremy Bentham notwithstanding, the Church is not a moral police force. What the Church always has meant to do, really, is to offer a pattern for ordering the soul of the believer; and to open a window upon the transcendent realm of being. It is true that a mastery of the theological virtues [faith, hope, love] ought to follow upon sincere belief, and that sometimes it does follow.

Certainly there would be little virtue in our civilization, and quite possibly there would exist no modern civilization at all, were it not for Christian preaching of the theological virtues. From the discipline of the theological virtues issue saints from time to time as from the discipline of the cardinal virtues issue heroes. Yet it will not do to expect priest or minister to fill the vacuum left by the disappearance of family exemplar or mentor.

...Yet there have been times when intellectual virtue has been imparted successfully. Such, in British America, was the second half of the eighteenth century, when there was developed a class of able persons... who knew the meaning of virtue. Theirs was the schooling..., deliberately intended to bring home the idea and the reality of virtue to those members of the rising generation presumably destined to be leading men of their society.... And how were such young schooled in virtue? They were required to read carefully... certain enduring books that dealt much with virtue. In particular, they studied Cicero, Vergil, and Plutarch, among the ancients. They memorized Cicero's praise of virtuous Romans; they came to understand Vergil's *labor, pietas, fatum*; they immersed themselves in the lives of Plutarch's Greeks and Romans "of excellent virtue"—men in whom the energy of virtue had flamed up fiercely.

...A fair amount of content of such studies, nevertheless, used to be conveyed by literary and historical courses in American intermediate and secondary schooling. That remnant has been trickling away—and not in America only. C. S. Lewis... assailed the corruption of school courses in humane letters in England; he found the new textbooks sneering at virtue of any sort. Great literature used to train the emotions, Lewis wrote:

"Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism. I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite skeptical about ethics, but bred to believe that 'a gentleman does not cheat,' than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpers. In battle it is not syllogisms that will keep the reluctant nerves and muscles to their post in the third hour of the bombardment.... And all this time—such is the tragic-comedy of our situation—we continue to clamor for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more 'drive,' or dynamics, or self-sacrifice, or 'creativity.' In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."

Can virtue be taught? Why, it can be learnt, though more through a kind of illative process than as a formal program of study.... [A] diversity, which we Americans seem liable to experience sharply and suddenly..., frequently opens the way for the impulse....

(from *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things are Written in the Sky*, 1987)