

THE DIFFERENCE ONE CAN MAKE

The Story of Nicholas Winton and
The Importance of Character

Lawrence W. Reed and Benjamin D. Stafford



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The Story of Nicholas Winton

The truest hero does not think of himself as one, never advertises himself as such and does not perform the acts that make him a hero for either fame or fortune. He does not wait for government to act if he senses an opportunity to fix a problem himself. On July 27, 2006 in the quiet countryside of Maidenhead, England, we spent several hours with a true hero: Sir Nicholas Winton. His friends call him “Nicky.”

In the fall of 1938, many Europeans were lulled into complacency by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who thought he had pacified Adolf Hitler by handing him a large chunk of Czechoslovakia at Munich in late September. Winston Churchill, who would succeed Chamberlain in 1940, was among the wise and prescient who believed otherwise. So was Nicholas Winton, then a 29-year-old London stockbroker.

Having made many business trips to Germany in previous years, Winton was well aware of Jews being arrested, harassed and beaten. The infamous Kristallnacht of November 9, 1938 — in which Nazi thugs destroyed Jewish synagogues, homes and businesses while murdering scores of Jews across Germany — laid to rest any doubts about Hitler’s deadly intentions. His increasingly aggressive anti-Semitism and Germany’s occupation of the Sudetenland in October 1938 spurred a tide of predominately Jewish refugees. Thousands fled to as-yet unoccupied Czechoslovakia, especially to Prague. Some had relatives and friends to move in with, but many settled into makeshift refugee camps

in appalling conditions in the midst of winter.

Winton had planned a year-end ski trip to Switzerland with a friend, but was later convinced by him at the last moment to come to Prague instead because he had “something urgent to show him” — namely, the refugee problem. Near Prague, Winton visited the freezing camps. What he saw aroused deep feelings of compassion within him: orphans and children whose parents had already been arrested, and families desperate to somehow get at least their children out of harm’s way. Jewish parents who were lifetime residents and citizens in the country were also anxious to send their children to safety, hoping in vain that the storm would blow over. They, like Winton, sensed that the Nazis wouldn’t rest until they took the rest of the country, and perhaps all of Europe as well. The thought of what could happen to them if the Nazis devoured the rest of Czechoslovakia was enough to inspire this good man into action.

It would have been easy to assume there was nothing a lone foreigner could do to assist so many trapped families. Winton could have ignored the



situation and resumed his vacation in Switzerland, stepping back into the comfortable life he left behind. Surely, most other people in his shoes would have walked away. Despite the talk of “peace in our time,” Winton knew the clock was ticking. If any help could be mustered, it needed to come quickly. The next steps he took ultimately saved 669 children from death in Nazi concentration camps.

Getting all the children who sought safety to a country that would accept them seemed an impossible challenge. Back in London, he wrote to governments around the world, pleading for an open door, only to be rejected by every one (including the United States) but two: Sweden and Great Britain. He assembled a small group of volunteers to assist with the effort. Even his mother pitched in.

The London team’s counterpart in Prague was a Brit named Trevor Chadwick. He gathered information from parents who wanted their children out, then forwarded the details to Winton, who used every possible channel in his search for foster homes. There were 5,000 children on his lists. At no charge, British newspapers published Winton’s advertisements to stir interest and highlight the urgent need for foster parents. When enough homes could be found for a group of children, Winton submitted the necessary paperwork to the Home Office. He assisted Chadwick in organizing the rail and ship transportation needed to get them to Britain.

Winton also took the lead in raising the funds to pay for the operation. The expenses included the 50

British pounds the Home Office required for each child (the equivalent of \$3,500 per child in today’s dollars) to cover any future costs of repatriation. Hopes that the danger would pass and the children could be returned evaporated as war clouds gathered in the spring and summer of 1939.

Picture in your mind the unimaginable: the railway station in Prague when anguished parents and relatives loaded the children onto the trains and said what would be for most, their final goodbyes. Boys and girls, many younger than five, peered out the windows of the steaming trains wondering about their uncertain future. No one knew if they would ever be reunited with their families again.

The first 20 of “Winton’s children” left Prague on March 14, 1939. Hitler’s troops overran all of Czechoslovakia the very next day, but the volunteers kept working, sometimes forging documents to slip the children past the Germans. By the time World War II broke out on September 1, the rescue effort had transported 669 children out of the country in eight separate groups by rail. A ninth batch of 250 more children would have been the largest of all, but war prompted the Nazis to stop all departures. Sadly, none of those children lived to see the Allied victory less than six years later. Pitifully few of the parents did either.

Vera Gissing, one of the children Winton saved, and now in her late 70s, puts the rescue mission in perspective: “Of the 15,000 Czech Jewish children taken to the camps, only a handful survived.

Winton had saved a major part of my generation of Czech Jews.”

Vera’s story is an especially poignant one. She was 10 years old when she left Prague on the fifth train on June 30, 1939. Two of her cousins were on the ninth train that never made it to freedom. Her mother died of typhus two days after liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp to which she was sent. Her father was shot in a Nazi death march in December 1944. Vera has no doubt about her own fate had it not been for Nicholas Winton.

Why did he do it? It certainly was not for the plaudits it might bring him. Indeed, he never told anyone about his achievement for half a century. Not until 1988, when his wife stumbled across a musty box of records and a scrapbook while cleaning their attic, did the public learn of Winton’s story. The scrapbook, a memento put together by his volunteers when the operation shut down, was filled with documents and pictures of Czech children. For all those decades, the children and the families who took them in knew little more than the fact that some kind soul, some guardian angel, had saved their lives.

What compelled this man to take on a challenge ignored by almost everyone else? We sat down with Vera and Nicky at the latter’s home in late July 2006 to ask this very question. One would hardly guess that Nicky is 97; he looks and speaks with the vigor of someone years younger. He greeted us heartily, escorting us through his living room and into the backyard where he picked some fresh mulberries for us. He

still tends to the gardens around his house.

This is a quiet man. In some ways he is a reminder of Aristotle’s magnanimous man (from his “Nicomachean Ethics”). Aristotle said the good-souled man is ashamed to receive benefits, and always repays more than he has received. “It is the characteristic of the magnanimous man to ask no favor but to be ready to do kindness to others,” he wrote in his Ethics. You hear no boasting from Nicky, no words designed to put any special focus on what he did. In a matter-of-fact fashion, he told us, “Because it was the thing to do and I thought I could help.” One can’t help feeling drawn to a man for whom doing good for its own sake seems to come so naturally.

In “The Power of Good,” a recent International Emmy Award-winning documentary from Czech producer Matej Minac, Nicky says he kept quiet about the rescue mission because “it was such a small part of my life.” Indeed, the operation spanned only eight months, while he was still working at the stock exchange, and it was prior to his marriage. Still, to us, the explanation seemed inadequate. We pressed him on the point.

“When the war started and the transports stopped, I immediately went into the RAF (Royal Air Force), where I stayed for the next five years. When peace came, what was a 35-year-old man to do, traverse the country looking for boys and girls?” At the end of the war, Nicky Winton was busy re-starting his own life. What he did to save so many others just six years earlier was behind him, and over. For all that



he knew, the children might have returned to their homeland (as indeed, some did). “Wherever they were, I had good reason to assume they were safe and cared for,” he said. Indeed, among their ranks in later life would be doctors, nurses, therapists, teachers, musicians, artists, writers, pilots, ministers, scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs and even a Member of the British Parliament. Today they and their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren number about 5,000.

Recent interviews with many of the adult “Winton Children” reveal not only a deep appreciation for the man whose initiative saved them, but also for living life to its fullest. Many express a lifelong desire to help others as a way of honoring the loved ones who made the painful choice to trust the young stockbroker from Britain. “We understand how precious life is,” Vera told us. “We wanted to give something back to our natural parents so their memory would live on.”

Years after coming to Britain, Vera asked her foster father, “Why did you choose me?” His reply sums up the spirit of the good people who gave homes to the 669: “I knew I could not save the world and I knew I could not stop war from coming, but I knew I could save one human soul.”

So humble is Nicky Winton that others have to tell him, over his own objections, just what an uncommon man he is. Like the other “Winton Children” who have come to know him now, Vera reminds him frequently that she owes her very life to him.

In our effort to add to the chorus of friends and admirers who want Nicky Winton to understand just how we feel about him, we told him this: “You did not save only 669 children. Your story will elevate the moral eloquence of lending a loving hand when lives are at stake. Some day, somewhere, perhaps another man or woman will confront a similar situation and will rise to the occasion because of your example. This is why the world must know what you did and why we think of you as a hero even if you do not.”

In 1988, a television show seen across Britain, “That’s Life,” told the Winton story to a large audience and brought Nicky together with many of his “children” for the first time since those horrific, fateful days of 1939. He is in regular correspondence with, and often visited by, many of them — a source of joy and comfort since his wife Grete passed away in 1999. Vera, who lives just a few miles from Nicky, sees him regularly. She has co-authored a book which tells the full story, “Nicholas Winton and the Rescued Generation: Save One Life, Save the World.”

Governments have honored Nicky with awards and the recognition he never sought. In 1999 he was granted the Honorary Freedom of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead for a lifetime dedicated to humanitarian activities. This award makes Nicky a member of a small elite group, which includes Queen Elizabeth, the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince Charles. The Queen has conferred a knighthood upon him. President George W. Bush

wrote him in early 2006, expressing gratitude for his “courage and compassion.” The documentary, “The Power of Good,” is slowly spreading the Winton story around the world, as are an earlier, superb dramatization called “All My Loved Ones” and, of course, Vera’s book.

In a world wracked by violence and cruelty, Nicky

Winton’s selfless actions nearly seven decades ago should give us all hope. Edmund Burke once said, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” It’s more than a little comfort to know that in our midst are men and women like Nicky Winton whose essential decency can, and did, triumph over evil. •

AUTHORS’ POSTSCRIPT

Three weeks after meeting Nicky in England, we learned another remarkable fact about him that never came up during our visit. On his 94th birthday in May 2003, he became the oldest man to fly in an ultralight aircraft (known in the U.K. as a “microlight”). He did it to raise money for one of his favorite charities, Abbeyfield Houses for the aged. His pilot in the two-seater was Judy Leden, a world champion microlight flyer and daughter of one of the children Nicky saved in 1939. Nicky repeated this amazing feat on his 98th birthday in 2007.

In our view, Vera Gissing is a hero too. She has worked tirelessly to spread the good word about what Nicky Winton did so many years ago.



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Copies of “The Power of Good” documentary are available from the Mackinac Center for \$15 postpaid. Both the book, “Nicholas Winton and the Rescued Generation,” and the film, “All My Loved Ones,” are available now from Amazon.com. Vera Gissing has published her personal reminiscences in her book “Pearls of Childhood.”

THE DIFFERENCE ONE CAN MAKE

The Importance of Character

Nicholas Winton acted in 1939 because he was a man of character. A lesser person might have walked away. This issue of character occupies my mind a lot these days. One can hardly turn on the television or open the newspapers and not be dismayed by the consequences of a serious erosion of it. Telling the inspirational stories of heroes like Sir Nicholas is a necessary part of the effort to address the character deficit, but there is much more we must do. Toward that end, the Mackinac Center is pleased to reprint here a commencement address I first delivered at the Thomas Jefferson Independent Day School in Joplin, Missouri, on May 21, 2006. — Lawrence W. Reed

Twenty years ago, something quite remarkable happened in the little town of Conyers, Georgia — a town like Joplin in so many ways: full of salt-of-the-earth, self-reliant and patriotic citizens though about one quarter your size in population. When school officials there discovered that one of their basketball players who had played 45 seconds in the first of the school's five post-season games had actually been scholastically ineligible, they returned the state championship trophy the team had just won a few weeks before. If they had simply kept quiet, probably no one else would have ever known about it and they could have retained the trophy.

To their eternal credit, the team and the town, dejected though they were, rallied behind the school's decision. The coach said, "We didn't know he was ineligible at the time ... but you've got to do what's honest and right and what the rules say. I told my team that people forget the scores of the games; *they don't ever forget what you're made of.*"

In the minds of most, it didn't matter that the championship title was forfeited. The coach and the team were still champions — in more ways than one. Could *you* have mustered the courage under similar circumstances to do as they did?

Commencement addresses at both high schools and colleges are full of paeans and platitudes that reduce to one cliché: "You are the future." Well, that's an important point but it's also something we already know because it's pretty self-evident, wouldn't you say? So I'll not tell you in a dozen different ways that

the future is yours. I have a different message.

I want to talk to you about one thing that is more important than all the good grades you've earned, more important than all the high school and college degrees you'll accumulate, and indeed, more important than all the knowledge you'll ever absorb in your lifetimes. It's something over which every responsible, thinking adult has *total*, personal control and yet millions of people every year sacrifice it for very little. It will not only define and shape your future, it will put both a concrete floor under it and an iron ceiling over it. It's what the world will remember you for more than probably anything else. It's not your looks, it's not your talents, it's not your ethnicity and ultimately, it may not even be anything you ever say. What is this incredibly powerful thing I'm talking about? In a word, it's *character*.

Character is what the coach and the players in Conyers, Georgia, possessed. And what an example they set! People like me who have never met them will be telling that story for a long, long time. People who *do* know them surely must admire and look up to them with great pride and respect. Thank God for people with character. They set the standard and exert a pressure on everyone to strive to meet it.

Here's another example from personal experience: In my travels to some 67 countries around the world, I have witnessed many sterling examples of personal character (as well as the startling lack of it), but this is one of the best.

In 1989 I visited Cambodia with my late friend,



Photo credit: Lawrence W. Reed

Dr. Haing S. Ngor (who won an Academy Award for his role in the movie “The Killing Fields”). In advance of the trip, there was considerable local press attention because I was rustling up donated medical supplies to take with me to give to a hospital in the capital, Phnom Penh. A woman from a local church who saw the news stories called and explained that a few years before, her church had helped Cambodian families who had escaped from the Khmer Rouge communists and resettled in my town of Midland, Michigan. The families had moved on to other locations in the U.S. but stayed in touch with the woman who called me and other friends they had made in Midland.

The woman — Sharon Hartlein is her name — said she had told her Cambodian friends about my pending visit. Each family asked if I would take letters with cash enclosed to their relatives in Cambodia. I said yes.

Three of the families were in Phnom Penh and easy to find, but one was many miles away in Battambang. Going there would have involved a train ride, some personal risk, and a lot of time it turned out I didn’t have. I was advised in any event *not* to return with any money. If I couldn’t locate any of the families I was told to just give the cash to any needy Cambodian I could find (and they were *everywhere!*).

On the day before my return home, when I realized I just wasn’t going to make it to Battambang, I approached a man in tattered clothes whom I had seen several times in the hotel lobby. He always smiled and said hello, and spoke enough English so

that we could briefly converse. He, like most Cambodians at that time, was extremely poor. I told him I had an envelope with a letter and \$200 in it, intended for a family in Battambang. I asked him if he thought he could get it to them and I told him he could keep \$50 of it if he did. He consented, and we said goodbye. I assumed I would never hear anything of what had become of either him or the money.

Several months later, I received an excited call from Sharon. She said she had just received a letter from the Cambodians in Virginia whose family in Battambang that envelope was intended for. When she read it on the phone, I couldn’t help but shed a few tears. The letter read, “Thank you for the *two hundred dollars!*”

That poor man found his way to Battambang, and he not only didn’t keep the \$50 I said he could keep, he somehow found a way to pay for the \$10 train ride himself. Now, that is *character!* I think I would probably trust my life in his hands, even though I never got to know him and didn’t ask him for his address.

To help us understand what character is, let me tell you what the absence of it looks like. Sadly, evidence of a lack of character is in abundance these days.

In 1995, students on the quiz team at Steinmetz High School in Chicago made national news when it was discovered that they had cheated to win a statewide academic contest. With the collaboration of their teacher, they had worked from a stolen copy of a test to look up and memorize the correct answers in advance. Perhaps worse than the initial deed was the

attitude of the same students five years later, expressed in the New York Times by one of them this way: “Apologize for what? I would do it again.”

What a contrast to the values on display in the Conyers story — and even more so the Cambodian one! No one would say that the teacher or those students in Chicago exhibited character in the positive sense that I am using the term here today. Assume for a moment that the Chicago students had never been caught. Knowing everything else that I’ve told you in these true stories, which group of students would you most want to be like — the ones in Conyers who walked away from a trophy or the ones in Chicago who cheated to win a contest? If you said Conyers, then you have a conscience. You have character, and hopefully a lot of it. And you know something of the inestimable value of being able to look back on your life some day and know that you tried hard in every circumstance to do the right thing.

I love the words of the Apostle Paul, in prison, shortly before he was martyred. It is recorded in Scripture as II Timothy 4:7: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” He had character, even in the midst of extreme adversity. If he had sacrificed it for short-term, selfish gain, all his good words and deeds would hardly carry the weight they do today, nearly 20 centuries later.

A deficit of character shows up every time somebody who knows what the right thing to do is neither defends it nor does it because doing so might

mean a little discomfort or inconvenience. I work in the field of public policy, which brings me into contact often with legislators, congressmen and candidates for public office. Far too many times I’ve heard, “I know you’re right but I can’t say so or vote that way because I won’t get reelected.”

You can blame a politician when he behaves that way but don’t forget the voters who put him in that spot. I see character deficits every time I see people pressuring the government to give them something at the expense of others, something which they know in their very gut should come instead from their own efforts and merit.

Perhaps we should ask, “Where does character come from?” or, putting the question slightly differently, “Why is it that when we speak of character, we all seem to know what it is that we’re talking about?” Well, theologians and philosophers can speak to this much better than I. But I will say this: There is something in the way that we humans are wired. Down deep within us we have a sense of what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. And when we ignore our wiring, something within us — that voice we call our conscience — cries out to us that such and such is simply wrong. In complex situations, the voice can be difficult to discern, and we can even learn how to dull that voice into submission, but we cannot really deny that it is there. It is simply the human experience. We can argue about its origins, but it *is* there.



Boxer James Braddock. Photo credit: SDN-069543, Chicago Daily News negatives collection, Chicago Historical Society.

When a person spurns his conscience and fails to do what he knows is right, he subtracts from his character. When he evades his responsibilities, succumbs to temptation, foists his problems and burdens on others, or fails to exert self-discipline, he subtracts from his character. When he is so self-absorbed he ceases to be of service to others unless there's something in it for him, he subtracts from his character. When he attempts to reform the world without reforming himself first, he subtracts from his character.

As I've written elsewhere, a person's character is nothing more and nothing less than the sum of his choices. You can't choose your height or race or many other physical traits, but you fine tune your character every time you decide right from wrong and what you personally are going to do about it. Your character is further defined by how you choose to interact with others and the standards of speech and conduct you practice. Character is often listed as a key leadership quality. I actually think character and leadership are one and the same. If you've got character, others will look upon you as a leader.

Ravaged by conflict and corruption, the world is starving for people of character. Indeed, as much as anything, it is on this matter that the fate of individual liberty has always depended. A free society flourishes when people seek to be models of honor, honesty and propriety at whatever the cost in material wealth, social status or popularity. It descends into barbarism when they abandon what's right in

favor of self-gratification at the expense of others; when lying, cheating or stealing are winked at instead of shunned. If you want to be free, if you want to live in a free society, you must assign top priority to raising the caliber of your character and learning from those who already have it in spades. If you do not govern yourself, you will be governed.

Character means that there are no matters too small to handle the right way. Former football star and Congressman J.C. Watts once said that your character is defined by what you do when no one is looking. Cutting corners because "it won't matter much" or "no one will notice" still knocks your character down a notch and can easily become a slippery slope. "Unless you are faithful in small matters," we learn in Luke 16:10, "you will not be faithful in large ones."

Here's an example of exemplary character from a recent movie, Ron Howard's "Cinderella Man." The film is a masterpiece from start to finish but I especially loved an early scene in which boxer James Braddock (played by Russell Crowe) learns that his young son has stolen a sausage. The family is hungry and destitute at the bottom of the Great Depression. The boy was fearful that, like one of his friends whose parents couldn't provide enough to eat, he would be sent to live with relatives who could afford the expense. Braddock does not hesitate on the matter for a second. He immediately escorts the boy to the store to return the sausage and apologize to the butcher. He then lectures his son:

“There’s a lot of people worse off than we are. And just because things ain’t easy, that don’t give you the excuse to take what’s not yours, does it? That’s stealing, right? We don’t steal. No matter what happens, we don’t steal. Not ever. You got me?”

His son replies, “Yes,” but Braddock presses the point, two more times: “Are you giving me your word?”

“Yes.”

“Come on.”

“I promise.”

Braddock’s character ascends to new heights later in the film when he does what no welfare recipient is ever asked to do and what perhaps not one in a million has ever done: He pays the taxpayers back. Now that is character! And he certainly knew how to encourage those qualities in his son — both by his words and by his example.

Hollywood turns out so little these days that inspires character but in 2005 it did produce another movie that I rank among the very best of all time. It’s “The Greatest Game Ever Played,” the true story of the son of an immigrant, Francis Ouimet, who won the 1913 U.S. Open Golf Championship at the age of 20. Buy it, or rent it, and watch it as a study in character. Both the main figure, Francis, and the story’s secondary hero, Harry Vardon, ooze character from every pore. The traits they so magnificently exhibit include professionalism, perseverance, integrity, sportsmanship, loyalty and honor. You watch that movie and you’ll come away with boundless admiration for Francis and Harry and it’s not so much

for their great golf abilities as it is because of their sterling characters.

In history, the men and women we most admire and best remember are those whose character stands out because they lived it 24 hours every day and did not compromise it. They are not like that fictional character played by the great comedian Groucho Marx, who said, “Those are my principles! If you don’t like them, well, I have others.”

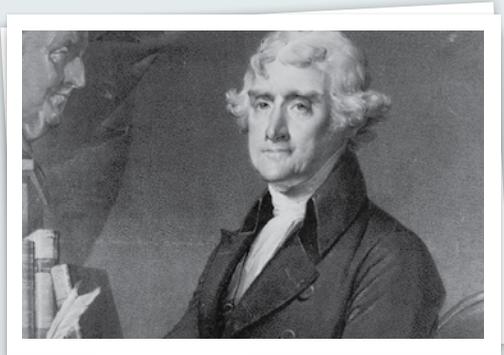
George Washington was perhaps our best president because he knew at every moment that maintaining the highest standards in every aspect of life, public and private, was critical to putting the new nation on the right path. A man of lesser character might not have carried us through such a critical period, or would have put us on a different and more perilous path.

Washington understood the link between character and liberty. Listen to him speaking to the nation in his Farewell Address of 1796:

“It is substantially true that virtue and morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?”

And Washington was not alone.

James Madison wrote in 1788 that “To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.”



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Listen to Thomas Jefferson’s words of wisdom on this issue of character:

Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give up the earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act. And never suppose, that in any possible situation, or under any circumstances, it is best for you to do a dishonorable thing, however slightly so it may appear to you. Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you would act were all the world looking at you, and act accordingly.

Encourage all your virtuous dispositions, and exercise them whenever an opportunity arises; being assured that they will gain strength by exercise, as a limb of the body does, and that exercise will make them habitual. From the practice of the purest virtue, you may be assured you will derive the most sublime comforts in every moment of life, and in the moment of death. If ever you find yourself environed with difficulties and perplexing circumstances, out of which you are at a loss how to extricate yourself, do what is right, and be assured that that will extricate you the best out of the worst situations. Though you cannot see, when you take one step, what will be the next, yet follow truth, justice, and plain dealing, and never fear their leading you out of the labyrinth, in the easiest manner possible. The knot which you thought a Gordian one, will untie itself before

you. Nothing is so mistaken as the supposition that a person is to extricate himself from a difficulty, by intrigue, by chicanery, by dissimulation, by trimming, by an untruth, by an injustice. This increases the difficulties ten fold; and those who pursue these methods, get themselves so involved at length, that they can turn no way but their infamy becomes more exposed.

What those Founders were getting at is the notion that liberty is built upon the ability of a society to govern itself, without government intervention. This ability to self-govern is itself built upon — you guessed it — *individual character*.

Here’s a name you may not have heard of: Fanny Crosby. Fanny Crosby holds the record for having written more hymns than any other human being — at least 8,000 — including the popular “Blessed Assurance.” She died in 1915 at the age of 95. She was the first woman in our history to address the United States Congress. She personally met or knew every president of the United States from John Quincy Adams to Woodrow Wilson, maybe more than any other single person in our country’s history, alive or dead. And guess what? She never in her 95 years had any recollection of ever having *seen* a thing. She was blind from the age of six months. When she addressed Congress, she spoke of how important it was for a person’s character to shine so it could overcome any and all handicaps and obstacles. Many who knew her regarded her as a saint of enormous inspiration.

In June 2003, my best friend and business colleague Joe Overton was killed in a plane crash at the age of 43. He taught me more about the importance of character than anyone else I have ever known. He could teach it because he lived it. While composing a eulogy for his funeral, I came across a few lines about what the world needs. I've never learned who the author was so I can't offer appropriate credit, and in any event, I added a lot to it. It not only describes what the world desperately needs, it described my friend Joe perfectly. I share it with you as I close:

The world needs more men and women who do not have a price at which they can be bought; who do not borrow from integrity to pay for expediency; who have their priorities straight and in proper order; whose handshake is an iron-clad contract; who are not afraid of taking risks to advance what is right; and who are honest in small matters as they are in large ones.

The world needs more men and women whose ambitions are big enough to include others; who know how to win with grace and lose with dignity; who do not believe that shrewdness and cunning and ruthlessness are the three keys to success; who still have friends they made twenty years ago; who put principle and consistency above politics or personal advancement; and who are not afraid to go against the grain of popular opinion.

The world needs more men and women who do not forsake what is right just to get consensus

because it makes them look good; who know how important it is to lead by example, not by barking orders; who would not have you do something they would not do themselves; who work to turn even the most adverse circumstances into opportunities to learn and improve; and who love even those who have done some injustice or unfairness to them. The world, in other words, needs more men and women of character.

Make this day the start of a lifelong commitment to building character. Be the kind of virtuous example that others will respect, admire, emulate and remember. You'll not only go to your reward some day with a smile and a clear conscience, you will enhance many other lives along the way. How can any of us settle for any less?

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Character saves lives, as the story of Nicholas Winton teaches us. It also defines each one of us as a person and in the process, shapes entire nations and determines their course. This is why the Mackinac Center for Public Policy has devoted talent and resources to the character issue. Though much of our work focuses on specific public policy issues, we know that good policy ultimately derives from good character. That's another way of saying that we shouldn't expect government to be any better than the people it reflects. We hope that these two essays will help spark a revival of interest in the critical role that character plays in a free society. •



About the Mackinac Center for Public Policy

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy is dedicated to improving the understanding of economic and political principles among citizens, public officials, policymakers and opinion leaders. The Center has emerged as one of the largest and most prolific of nearly 40 state-based free-market “think tanks” in America. More information about the Mackinac Center and its publications can be found on the World Wide Web at www.mackinac.org.

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