

The Word's Eye View

The Word's Eye View is a newspaper column written by
Dr. James Modlish

The Need For New Role Models (Article 74)

A recent Associated Press headline read “Woods’ Drama Rekindles Role-model Debates.” The story which followed, for those who don’t keep up, had to do with the fall from grace of the world’s best golfer. My purpose is not to beat up on Tiger Woods...the missteps in his personal life are simply proof positive that the Bible is correct in its assessment of human nature. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,” (Romans 3:23) has a universal application which always hits its mark. On the other hand, some would use this doctrinal truth to provide a cover of justification for bad behavior which leads to further negative consequence.

The larger issue is precisely what the caption screamed---what is the proper criterion for establishing role models? Our generation has clearly demanded accomplishment in preference to character. There is no question but Mr. Woods is an incredible golfer who has generated enough winnings and endorsements to become a billionaire. His idolization only demonstrates the public’s fascination with ability and money. Celebrity worship is a relatively recent phenomenon on the American cultural landscape, and in direct proportion, lessons on moral integrity have been abandoned in our educational system.

During the mid-19th century the McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers were used in U.S. public schools. Pupils might read aloud from stories with such titles as “True Manliness” and “Perseverance.” Or the teacher might read them a tale like “Henry the Bootblack” which begins, “Henry was a kind, good boy. His father was dead, and his mother was very poor.” The man responsible for giving the books their high moral mood was a straitlaced mid-westerner named William Holmes McGuffey. He was a schoolteacher who went on to become a Presbyterian minister. The original two volumes grew to seven -one of America’s first textbook series- and between the 1830’s and the 1920’s, 122 million copies were sold. Lessons in spelling and grammar were thorough, but not so difficult as to intimidate children. The little moral tales were preceded by new words for memorization, but never too many at any one time.

The readers truly were eclectic; they contained a mix of geography, history, poetry and literature. For many children, McGuffey provided the only exposure they would ever have to writers such as Shakespeare or Hawthorne. The books that have borne McGuffey’s name helped shape the minds of generations of Americans who survived the Great Depression and two World Wars. The major emphasis was always...”what is the moral of the story?”

Abraham Lincoln, well acquainted with the McGuffey readers said, “Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, riches take wings. Only one thing endures and that is character.” The problem is exacerbated by the nature of athletes and much of the music industry which requires the strength of youth. The best evaluation of character is conducted by observing an entire lifetime rather than a handful of ball games, concerts or movies. More often than not, the poorest decisions in life are made in a person’s younger years. Good character is molded by standards of absolutes that shun a more modern system of relativity. To many, the only absolutes that remain are climate change and evolution, but virtues such as loyalty, responsibility, courage, determination, honesty, orderliness, initiative and decisiveness are

relegated to the whims of circumstances. When a leader of strong character orders his nation into war, it is with the conviction that it is the right thing to do regardless of the opinion of political supporters or opponents. Noble character possesses a courage and determination to win, not simply to satisfy the polls. The only exit strategy is victory.

One of my personal heroes is George Washington. Not long after the American victory at Yorktown, an officer of the Revolutionary Army wrote to George Washington suggesting that the newly liberated colonies could “never become a nation under a republican form of government” and proposing “the establishment of a kingdom with Washington at the head.”

Washington fired off this immediate reply:

Newburgh, May 22, 1782

Sir,

With a mixture of great surprise and astonishment I have read with attention the sentiments you have submitted to my perusal.

Be assured, sir, no occurrence in the course of the war has given me more painful sensations than yours and I must view them with abhorrence.

I am much at a loss to conceive what part of my conduct could have given encouragement to this greatest of mischiefs that can befall my country. You could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable.

Let me conjure you then, if you have any regard for your country—concern for yourself or posterity—or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your mind, and never communicate, as from yourself, or anyone else, a sentiment of the like nature.

With esteem I am, Sir

Your Most Obedient Servant,

G. Washington

There is a growing number of Americans who fear there is one who would be king but is not blessed with the character of George who said, “No.”