

CONCLUSION

Character really is destiny.

When I began this project in the spring of 2016, I didn't know where it would take me, nor, more importantly, the philanthropists I was seeking to serve and equip. The country was embroiled in a bitterly divisive presidential fight, and a crisis of solidarity was cracking up along political, racial, and class lines.

Fast-forward three years and thousands of miles listening to civic leaders, community healers, philanthropists, and moral thinkers, and I began to see “character” as a central thread woven through the searching aches of our time. Everywhere I went, people's ears perked up when they heard that a philanthropic movement to advance character was in the works, and they usually had something to recommend. Americans still care about this mysterious thing called character—deeply—and while they may not always agree on what it is or how to cultivate it, they do agree that if we lose a shared ethos as a society, a uniting set of moral commitments, we will go down like Rome and every other great civilization that rotted first from within and then from without.

The question is: Is it too late? Has our emphasis on self grown beyond intervention? Are we so diverse and polarized on matters of primary principle that restoring a solid moral foundation is a fool's errand?

If the examples in these pages are any signal, I think not. For every coarse lyric and incendiary tweet, for every violent act, public scandal, and disturbing uptick in despairing attitudes and broken homes, there are hundreds of organizations and thousands of citizens working diligently and creatively to serve the common good, to intervene mercifully in fragile lives, and to build up moral strength.

This book tries to bring to life the best of these organizations, and then identifies the conditions that make them successful. I often would think during reporting trips, “Why can't my life be like this? How do I cultivate these conditions in my own home, my office, my neighborhood, every sphere in which I work, relate, create, and contribute? Also, why isn't this everywhere? This level of intentionality, of attention to the other, of hard work without giving up, of radical honesty and relentless

striving for the good?” It’s striking in a world of social decay and moral numbness when a community refuses the superficial and the cynic, and instead revels in wholesome delight in the good, and in one another. Each of the best site visits felt like a once-in-a-year special occasion, like the organization must have been putting on a show for me, the curious outsider. And yet this is how they behave every day.

Character development is demanding, and there are no shortcuts. At the same time, it is not a matter of trying very, very hard until we finally learn to keep things under control. This was never going to be a book about creating so many more perfect people. This is a book about love, and pain, and those communities that hold both. It’s a book about loss, self-sacrifice, and our own poverty of becoming. It’s a book about strength shining through weakness, and wrestling and imperfection and stumbling and more.

Mack McCarter from Community Renewal in Shreveport has a saying: “Every door to character-building must be hinged to love and the preciousness of the other.” To begin anywhere else is a waste. Ultimately, when it comes to character, we’re shaped by the things and people who mean the most to us. In part because they command our affection and respect, but also simply because of our natural inclination to spend more time with them. How to reknit positive relationships into the fabric of society, and the norms and institutions that foster such relationships? How to find our villages, and help others find theirs?

I’ve tried in this book to help you visualize the conditions for this kind of character-driven village-making, conditions that I have found consistent in those communities that are shimmering with moral coherence and molding admirable people. There was a curious refrain that repeated itself by leaders of the most impressive character-building initiatives, and it went like this: “It’s like we know the cure for cancer but are just keeping it a secret. We’ve known for decades how to help people transform their lives. We just haven’t made it accessible to the millions and millions who need it.”

From education to addiction recovery, sports to neighborhood revitalization, the institutions doing the most transformative work speak a common language. It is a language of personalism and relationality, hospitality and recognition of the human soul. And these character-builders—whether they self-identify as such or not—are energized and ready to learn from one another, collaborate, and reach as many people as are humble and willing to trust.

Some Explanations

In undertaking a project around character in an age when no one definition rules and there is a dizzying array of entry points to the discussion, I had to make some clear decisions in service of producing achievable lessons and goals. For every one of the character initiatives featured in this book, there were a couple dozen worthy alternatives but, significantly, hundreds not chosen. Here's why I made the choices that I did, choices that I hope will influence your own thinking and giving.

First, I made a conscious decision to spend more time on an overarching framework for character-forming *institutions*, less on how to measure or develop individual character traits. Defining terms is important, and proper measurement can be helpful, but it is my experience that spending all one's time isolating the components of something this core to human personality not only leaves out crucial elements, but overlooks the very nature of character. This is a holistic enterprise, requiring a deep understanding of the social and moral conditions that allow for healthy attachments to form, that order one's loves, provide opportunities for action, habit-training, and struggle, and that sensitize members to ideals beyond themselves. There's a dearth of sociological and institutional thinking in today's character field, which would go a long way toward helping influential voices within the movement advance beyond word wars and celebrate how character actually gets built. If it's true that character is better caught than taught, formed through practice, not pontification, then we need to learn from what's working, and build from there.

Second, I have not easily answered that common philanthropic question: Can it scale? As Paul Tough, the author of *Helping Children Succeed*, says, "Scaling up doesn't work as well in social service and education as it does in the tech world." Certainly when we look at our own lives, it becomes clear that who we are stems from the mysterious alchemy of particular relationships, life experiences, narratives, and earned convictions. There shouldn't be a McDonald's of character. Rather, the most formative institutions for most people—the thickest ones—tend to be closed systems.

So what does this mean for donors wanting to make an impact? It means that they have to turn their wills and imaginations toward growing these kinds of institutions at a local level. In the 16 Questions, I have offered what I hope is a scalable *logic*, one that can be embodied in different ways in different contexts.

Third, and finally, I did not limit my inquiry to organizations that claim to be in the character business. Rather, understanding the question of character in today's America as inextricably linked to the question of community, I widened the scope to find those organizations that improve relationships, that value the social fabric, that may have other ends in view—health, economic empowerment, rehabilitation—but in so doing transform people's behavior and moral sense. Many explicit character-forming efforts seem to approach their mission didactically, as if you can “teach character” the way you might math or history or physics. This is not to dismiss the good work of organizations being intentional, but it *is* to get donors to think more humanely about the rich ecosystem involved in shaping people to be and do good. An ecosystem that our civil society sorely needs to regrow.

So let us step forward with a fresh purpose. If we refuse cynicism and begin where we are, we may be surprised at how life-giving the cultivation of healthy communities and whole people is. Goodness is inherently attractive: A movement built around the people and communities that best embody it should be uniquely unifying, uplifting, generative. After all, at the center of the most beautiful people and institutions we meet is a glad but tremendous obedience to something—to a craft, to a healing cause, to friendship, to God. Such exemplars showcase the moral life as to make others fall in love with it. They invite us freely to “come and see,” trusting that upon witnessing the unparalleled joys of exemplary living, we too will be devoted to the lifelong venture of going further up and further in.