INTRODUCTION

Why Character? Why Now?

When I hear the word "character," I confess I don't immediately jump up and down. There's a joyless starchiness to the word, the image of a strained schoolmarm about to wrap your knuckles. It carries historical baggage. There are so many different value systems now; isn't the time for a one-size-fits-all character revival over? Most pointedly for our purposes, of all the problems this country faces, is character really something that *philanthropists* should address?

And yet, there is interest. And not just interest, but some deep, uncommonly wide agreement that while life in the twenty-first century calls for character more than ever, the conditions under which good character is forged are in trouble—weakened as much by the decline of traditional institutions as by a culture that promotes "I" before "we," pleasure before purpose, self-expression before submission to a source of moral wisdom beyond oneself.

Simply put, there are no longer authoritative institutions that are widely trusted. Many of our countrymen disagree about the fundamental nature of the good, about what it means to be an American, about the requirements and rewards of citizenship. In one decade technology has re-wired our relationships to work, knowledge, place, and one another. There is a creeping sensation of split-level living between the real and the virtual, of compartmentalized identities and behaviors in a dozen different silos, all leading to widespread experiences of alienation and meaninglessness.

Some facts: Seven million prime-working-age men sit at home, idle and unemployed. Neighborliness is an increasingly rare experience, with only 31 percent of Americans socializing weekly with someone next door (down from 44 percent in 1974). More people live alone, eat alone, and displace real-time conversation with controlled (if frenetic) screen communion than ever before. Moral language has declined in both use and understanding, while a 2017 Gallup poll found that Americans' views of the state of our moral values as a society are themselves at a nadir (both conservatives and liberals were surveyed). Tribalism has replaced free and civil debate

on college campuses. Two thirds of high-school students admit to cheating. More and more kids fail to perform simple developmental tasks, and there's widespread concern that young people lack the grit to see them through when the going gets tough.

There are also attitudinal shifts that perplex older generations familiar with a more traditional life script. Traditional markers of adulthood have eroded. People are getting married later, having kids later (if bearing children at all), hopping from job to job, and just generally following a scatterplot of ever-shifting commitments. The young express a crisis of purpose and moral direction, with higher rates of anxiety and even suicide. Religious observance is at record lows, along with rates of volunteerism and engagement in community organizations. Trust in public institutions continues to weaken, diminished further by the coarseness and dishonest public discourse perpetuated by our national leaders. "Fragmentation," "consumerism," "isolation," and "polarization" are perceived as symptoms *and* causes of our deeper malaise, and those who traditionally saw themselves as core to the great American middle now feel forgotten, excluded, and unneeded.

In all of this, alarmed citizens from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and political persuasions are looking to "character" as a kind of thread which, if sewn with care and intention, might stand a chance of restitching our fraying social fabric, or at least help mend its most jagged tears. There isn't full agreement as to the precise definition, but concern for it spans sectors, subcultures, and ideological factions.

And so people are rising up to respond. Across multiple domains, from education, to the marketplace, to a millennial generation's longings and demands, there's a kind of humanistic renaissance going on, a renaissance in which the needs of the whole person are getting a fresh hearing. You might call it the whole person revolution.

You see this in the classroom, where there is growing interest in providing a more holistic, personalized pedagogical palette, including project-based and social-emotional learning. You see this in medicine, with more patients wanting an integrated approach to health. You see it in the rise of shared workspaces and employers promising perks that suggest a concern for one's well-being and sense of purpose in the job. You even see it in efforts aimed at improving life in low-income neighborhoods, with increasing awareness that healthy relationships are key to any economic progress. There's simply a growing appreciation for human beings as more than utilitarian consumers, and this

rediscovery invites "character"—and moral conversation generally—to pull up a chair and stay a while.

We see psychologists like Angela Lee Duckworth making real inroads with her research on grit, perseverance, and self-control at The Character Lab, gaining a wide hearing and finding application at places like KIPP Academies, West Point, even the Seattle Seahawks. The *New York Times* reported in January 2018 that Yale University's most popular class ever is called "Psychology and the Good Life," with 1,200 students enrolled to inquire into the sources of meaning and contentment. Books like David Brooks's *The Road to Character* and Brené Brown's work on courage and vulnerability have made a surprisingly big splash, revealing widespread interest in a revival of moral categories and vocabulary. An increasing number of philanthropic foundations are adding "character" and its synonyms to their giving portfolios.

What's missing is an organizing core. "Character" is alive and kicking, but right now it's a hodge-podge filled with well-intentioned factions, conferences, and research commissions. There is no unifying creed, and, perhaps more importantly, no concrete framework for action.

That is what this book is for. It is to provide philanthropists a fresh lens that they can use to evaluate initiatives that attempt to form character and transform lives. It offers examples of organizations that have succeeded at this task, and draws out some of their common characteristics. It hopes to inspire donors, practitioners, and our nation's leaders to see our current cultural moment as one that hungers for a revived moral consciousness, if only we could strengthen the conditions to awaken it.

My approach

This book begins as a modern-day inquiry into an age-old question: "How do people become who they are?" Put normatively, what are the pathways to forming the will, the mind, and the heart and soul of an individual such that he or she will be equipped to navigate life's vicissitudes with equipoise, courage, hope, and a loving knowledge of the good? What makes a great citizen, a faithful wife, an attentive father, an obedient yet curious child, a devoted teacher, a tireless and kind custodial staffer, a persevering student, a resilient soldier, a wise CEO, a prudent president?

When you put this task to people—"describe the development of your own character"—you usually get a three-part response. First, they

usually cite the presence of a loving authority figure at an impressionable time of their lives. This could be a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a coach. Second, they tend to recall some difficult struggle that forever after defined them, both in the scars it left and the strength it built. Third, they refer to a time when they became inspired to serve a cause greater than themselves, and served that cause with commitment and passion. In all three of these, there's repetition—if through different forms, with different faces—over a lifetime.

It's a pattern, some might even say a formula. But what's *not* formulaic is the most important caveat: these three elements have to be organic. You cannot manufacture love or struggle or even commitment and get authentic character. The three-part pattern does not translate into a machine where you put in raw materials and push out a perfect product. Life—the stuff of mystery and surprise, stakes and emotion—is *always* molding our character. It's never quite a done deal.

This is where philanthropy has often faltered. Especially today, using currencies of dollars and limited time horizons and theories of change and so much data, donors are naturally tempted to crave control of the outcomes, including the time it takes to achieve them. Donors try to confront character head-on, supporting programs that claim to impart it in one fell swoop, conducting research that dissects the complexity of human motivation into slices that can be measured and isolated for targeted interventions. An effort to teach empathy here, some grit training over there. While well-intended, such approaches too often treat the individual as if he or she lives in a static environment, making little difference in the communities and culture we need to see edified.

It doesn't have to be this way. There is an opportunity right now for the philanthropic imagination around character to be recast, away from a didactic focus on individuals towards a more *institutional* vision, one that's equipped to shape the moral ecologies that nurture growth. The question of the hour is: What characterizes those institutions that not only form us to be individuals of character, but also mold us into the sort of people who are faithful spouses, responsible parents, generous neighbors, self-governing citizens, resolute in a crisis and gracious at a picnic?

This book offers an initial sketch by inviting you in to the life and times of those institutions currently doing something special. Many scholars are working on a theory of character-building, and we want to encourage their efforts and build on their progress. But there are hundreds

if not thousands of organizations that are already doing it. When it comes to character, the practice is often ahead of the theory. Our task is to learn from what exists, and to understand why it's succeeding.

To that end, I am going to suggest a list of 16 features that distinguish the most successful character initiatives across class and culture, life stage, and even service sector. I have investigated hundreds of these organizations, and noticed that the ones that work have certain traits in common. There are certain *conditions* present in them that run against today's rhythms and values. These conditions are communal in nature. They transcend walks of life. They are found in successful organizations in every social sector. They meet fundamental human needs.

The questions on the following page offer a framework for donors as they determine whether or not a potential grantee is fostering a community of character. These questions should be useful to philanthropists who want to evaluate their own organizations. They should aid those who want to create *new* institutions. And they can guide all those interested in restoring the broader middle ring of social capital that has been weakened, through a knowledge of what makes for a trustworthy institution that fosters healthy relationships and whole people.

One last note: Obviously, there are different ways to define what character is and how we as a society might better nurture its development. But most of the definitions fall into two categories. There is the individualistic view, which tends to be concerned with behaviors like honoring one's word, comporting oneself with civility and even-handedness, persevering when the going gets rough, thinking about the long-term consequences of one's actions. And then there's more of a communitarian view, one that understands character in terms of a broad set of spiritual and moral longings that can only be satisfied through a web of vibrant communities that foster loving relationships, inspiring ideals, a system of accountability, and some greater purpose. To put it simply, the first view honors the power of human agency, the second the power of structural conditions.

My conviction is that somewhere between these two views is the truest vision. Somewhere between our need for traditional character-builders and our longing for innovative community-makers is where this inquiry needs to begin, and actually where American renewal has always begun. To address one without the other is like pouring new wine into old wineskins, futile and a waste. Good

character and vibrant community are interdependent, and so should their re-imagining be.

So join me in exploring these questions. I hope they advance the conversation around character and community in ways that unify what is currently a loose network of donors, doers, and thinkers. And I hope it inspires you to look at your own life and sphere of influence with fresh eyes to the institutional landscape undergirding both, a landscape in dire need of moral replenishment and the human touch.