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Teaching the Virtues

William J. Bennett

Author, *The Book of Virtues*



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The following is adapted from a speech delivered at a Hillsdale College seminar in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on October 3, 2002.

When I was Secretary of Education under President Reagan, I visited an elementary school in Raleigh, North Carolina. As I did at many of the 120 schools I visited during that period, I taught a lesson there on George Washington. Afterwards, I asked the kids if they had any questions, and one little guy raised his hand and asked, “Mr. Secretary, when you and President Reagan and the other people get together at meetings of the Cabinet, do you really eat Jelly Bellys?” He’d heard about Reagan’s penchant for Jelly Belly jelly beans. I answered, “Yes, the president has a bowl of jelly beans at the meetings, and he eats some and passes them around, and I’ve had a few.” And this kid looked me in the face and said, “I think you’ve had more than a few, Mr. Secretary.”

This was quite funny, and I remember President Reagan laughing when I told him about it. But the story also makes an important point. Do you recall when Gorbachev was visiting the U.S. and trying to figure out what America was like? He went walking up and down Connecticut Avenue, and he went over to the National Archives to look at documents. But he should have gone to that elementary school in Raleigh. I can guarantee you that never in the history of the Soviet Union did an eight-year-old look into the eyes of a heavyset minister of education and say, “I’ll bet you eat all the caviar you can get your hands on.” Maybe the kid’s comment was a little fresh – a little over the top – but it showed that the ethos of liberty is in our hearts, and that is a good and important thing. But of course it’s not the only good and important thing.

Later, when I was director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy – or Drug Czar, as some called me – I visited about 140 communities and heard over and over a much different concern. Whether I was talking to teachers, school administrators, parents, cops or judges, they wanted to know: Who’s raising the children? What kind of character do our



kids have? Who's paying attention to their morals? A judge in Detroit once said to me: "When I ask young men today, 'Didn't anyone ever teach you the difference between right and wrong?' they answer, 'No sir.' And you know, Mr. Bennett, I believe them. It is a moral vacuum out there." I remember teachers in the public schools asking, "Can you help us develop some materials that we can use with our kids to teach them right from wrong?" Isn't that ironic? The public schools of this country, which were established principally to provide common moral instruction for a nation of immigrants, were now wondering if this was possible. Many people expressed the concern that we had become so enamored of our economic and material success that we were neglecting more important things. Someone wrote me a letter and said, "If we have streets of gold and silver, but our children do not learn to walk with God, what will we have gained?"

Three Ways of Teaching Virtue

Some of us, frankly, had our doubts about whether this moral dilemma could be solved. I authored a series of studies called the "Index of Leading Cultural Indicators," which, instead of measuring inflation or interest rates, measured things like school dropout rates, drug addiction, illegitimacy, divorce, SAT scores and crime. A lot of the numbers were quite alarming. I wrote in the introduction to one of the studies that if we kept moving in the direction indicated by the numbers, this great republic — this great experiment in self-government — could conceivably unravel. So "teaching the virtues" seemed very much to me then, and still seems to me today, a concern of prime importance for the American people. And I think the answer regarding how to teach the virtues is pretty straightforward. Aristotle had a good read on it, and modern psychology and other contemporary studies back him up: We teach by habit, we teach by precept, and we teach by example.

Aristotle says that habituation at an early age makes more than a little difference; it can make almost all the difference. So if you want kids to learn what work is, you should have them work. If you want them to learn what responsibility means, you should hold them responsible. If you want them to learn what perseverance is, you should encourage them to persevere. And you should start as early as possible. Of course, this is harder to do

than to say. Being a parent and teaching these things is a very rigorous exercise.

Precepts are also important. The Ten Commandments, the principles of American democracy, rules of courteous behavior — these and other lists of rights and wrongs should be provided to young people. But as we provide them, young people need to know that we take these precepts seriously. That leads to the third part of teaching virtue that Aristotle talked about, which is example. And that, probably, is the one we should emphasize the most. I have been to school after school where the administration thinks it can solve its "values problem" by teaching a course in values. I don't believe in courses in values. I don't think that's the way to go about solving the problem. If we want young people to take right and wrong seriously, there is an indispensable condition: They must be in the presence of adults who take right and wrong seriously. Only in this way will they see that virtue is not just a game, not just talk, but rather that it is something that grown-up people, people who have responsibilities in the world and at home, take seriously.

Let me give you an extreme example of the futility of precept in the absence of example. More than once I've been in schools where they are teaching a "virtue of the week." In one such school, the virtue of the week was honesty. There had been a test on honesty, and the teacher told me that she had had to prepare a second test because she had caught so many students cheating on the first. We are missing the point of the enterprise here. Our children won't take honesty seriously until we grown-ups demand honesty of ourselves and of others, including our leaders. Needless to say, the Clinton years were not good years for impressing the virtue of honesty on our kids.

The Lessons of 9/11

Along these same lines, there are many lessons to be drawn, it seems to me, from the events of September 11, 2001. They are teachable events, and there is much in them for young people to learn. Many sophisticated or pseudo-sophisticated people have been nursing the idea for years that concepts like right and wrong and good and evil are outmoded. But we saw these things in full force on 9/11. We saw the face of evil and felt the hand of evil, but we also saw the face of good and felt the many hands of good, and our kids saw and felt these things, too.

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We also saw the sinew, the fiber, the character of the American people. I am not just talking about the firefighters and the cops. I'm talking about the people associated with Xavier High School who died trying to rescue and help people. I'm talking about those folks on American Flight 93 – the American businessmen traveling across the country with their laptops. These are the guys who are the butt of humor for every aspiring pseudo-intellectual and every Hollywood filmmaker who wants to run down America. Life in the suburbs, according to these so-called elites, is full of emptiness and desolation and misery. Perhaps I am overstating this, but the middle-class American businessman has been the target of an awful lot of criticism from an awful lot of directions for an awful lot of years. When the chips were down, though, these businessmen did pretty well, didn't they? I was reading an updated transcript a couple of weeks ago in which one of the four men who rushed the cockpit on Flight 93 said to the person on the other end of the phone line, "We are waiting until we get over a rural area." They knew what was likely to happen, so they were waiting in order to minimize the death toll. What extraordinary human beings these ordinary Americans turned out to be.

In the aftermath of 9/11, I am re-thinking some of the things I wrote a couple years ago about the American character. I had feared, frankly, that we had drifted so far from the ideas and principles of our Founding Fathers that their understanding of nobility had become but a dim memory. Certainly it remains true that the words and deeds of George Washington and of the other great figures of American history are not sufficiently vivid in the minds of our kids, or even of too many of our adults. Nevertheless, 9/11 provided pretty compelling evidence of the solid virtues we Americans retain.

The Importance of Learning

In conclusion, let me connect my point about teaching by example to another 9/11 story. You have probably seen Mrs. Beamer on television – Lisa Beamer, the wife of Todd Beamer, who was one of the heroes on Flight 93. She has said that she and her children will look at the picture of her husband every day, and that she will tell them daily that he is a hero and that

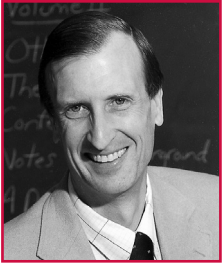
they are to try to be like him.

This reminded me of a statistic I uncovered in a book that I wrote on the American family a few years back. We all know, based on research as well as common sense, that if you want to raise happy and successful children, the best formula is a two-parent family. Despite the fact that not all of us have that opportunity – my brother and I were raised by a single parent who was married several times – it's nevertheless true. But the statistic I discovered when writing my book was that children who lose a father in the line of duty – because the father is a police officer or a soldier, for example – are indistinguishable from the children who grow up in intact two-parent families. Why is that? It is because the moral example doesn't have to be there physically. It can be in the mind and in the heart. As a result of Lisa Beamer saying, "Be like him," then, Todd Beamer will be in the minds and hearts of his kids.

This illustrates one of my favorite themes: the importance of the things we can't see, of non-material things. Moral examples can exist in the memory of a father or in the memory of the Founding Fathers or in the memory of any of the marvelous heroes in the long history of humankind. The historian Tacitus wrote, "The task of history is to hold out for reprobation every evil word and deed, and to hold out for praise every great and noble word and deed." So we don't need courses in values. We need good courses in history. We need to revive the reading of good books. We need to provide good precepts and encourage good habits. Above all we have to teach by example. Nor is this to say that we need to be perfect to be good examples. Our children can see us try and fail from time to time. But then they can see us try and do better, or get it right, the second time. Thus they learn about human limitations, but also about human perseverance.

It's an old notion and an old responsibility, the teaching of virtues. Virtues don't come in our genes, so it is the duty of every generation to pass them on. It is a duty we are not allowed to surrender.





The Hillsdale Approach to Teacher Education

Robert C. Hanna

Associate Professor of Education, Hillsdale College

The following is reprinted from Educating Teachers: The Best Minds Speak Out, published by the Trustees for Better Teachers project, a multi-year initiative of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni aimed at improving teacher education in the United States.

Hillsdale College was founded as an independent liberal arts college in 1844. Its Mission Statement reads in part, “By training the young in the liberal arts, Hillsdale College prepares students to become leaders worthy of that legacy.” Throughout the years, the faculty, administration and Board of Trustees have taken this statement one step further by preparing only the most qualified students to become leaders who teach the liberal arts within the elementary and secondary grades.

Hillsdale College’s Teacher Education Program is fully approved by the Michigan State Department of Education, as are 31 other programs throughout Michigan. However, many of Hillsdale’s program requirements exceed state standards and thereby make the program unique.

First, no students are ever permitted to major in education. Our students major among the disciplines of art, biology, chemistry, English, French, German, history, Latin, mathematics, music,

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physical education, physics, science and Spanish. The choice of minors we permit is slightly expanded to include computer science and early childhood education, with early childhood education requiring the addition of a minimum of two liberal arts minors, one of which must be English, history, mathematics or science. As a result, our students learn much more about what they will teach than if they took most of their college credits in education courses. At Hillsdale College, “how to teach” has never necessitated the credit hours comparable to those demanded by an academic major.

Only the most qualified students are accepted into our Teacher Education Program. Specifically, students must achieve and maintain a minimum cumulative grade-point average of 3.00 on a 4.00 scale. (Students with a GPA between 1.70 and 3.00 can petition to be admitted to the Program by the College’s three academic Deans, the Provost, and the Certification Officer, but such approval is by no means automatic. Students can be instructed to reapply when they meet the 3.00 requirement.) No courses which lead to, or are a part of, the Teacher Education Program are ever audited, so that an accurate GPA is always calculated. Students whose GPAs decline below these standards while they are in the program are not permitted to student teach, and therefore cannot become state-certified teachers.

No students are exempt from any courses on the basis of placement tests or on any other basis. This standard applies equally to core liberal arts courses, teacher education courses, and major and minor credit hour requirements. In other words, students who can demonstrate proficiency in an area of study are simultaneously demonstrating readiness for learning at a higher level of study in that area, whether for the benefit of the students they will be teaching or for the benefit of their own liberal arts education.

Our small number of education courses includes: “Foundations of Education,” “Explicit Phonics Reading Instruction,” “The Teaching of Reading to the Exceptional and ESL (English as a Second Language) Child,” and “Contemporary Problems in Education.” In general, the problems we identify in the latter course are the solutions advocated by other teacher education programs.

Two other ways in which Hillsdale exceeds state standards involve student teaching. While all student teachers in Michigan must spend a

minimum of 180 hours in a school, our student teachers must spend a minimum of 180 hours teaching within their teaching majors and/or minors in a school. Then, when our students have reached the 180 hours, they continue adding on more teaching hours until the semester has ended. Our students spend an entire semester in their host schools, Monday through Friday, following their schools’ hours and days of operation.

Although the Michigan State Department of Education does not designate specific books that future teachers must read and study, we do. In our education courses, students read from such great works of antiquity as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Plato’s *Republic*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Cicero’s *De Officiis*, and modern books including *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* by William James, *How to Read a Book* by Mortimer Adler, *Why Johnny Can’t Read* by Rudolf Flesch, and *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right from Wrong* by William Kilpatrick.

Our education courses also include examples from the K-12 content of the Hillsdale Academy, the K-12 model school of Hillsdale College. Hillsdale Academy’s curriculum was designed by two of the College’s education professors, both experienced elementary and secondary school teachers and administrators. The College’s Provost employs a headmaster who ensures that the curriculum’s scope and sequence are implemented. This benefits not only the children enrolled at Hillsdale Academy, but also the students in our Teacher Education Program, who are able to observe the teaching of this curriculum by Academy teachers who have already completed Hillsdale College’s Teacher Education Program or who are in the process of doing so. In the words of a state evaluator of our Program, “The fine cooperation between the [College’s Teacher Education Program] . . . and the Hillsdale Academy is laudable and a fine model of the type of collaboration other schools and school districts desire.” This includes placing our student teachers at Hillsdale Academy every semester.

In addition to the approval of the Michigan State Department of Education, the effectiveness of Hillsdale’s Teacher Education Program is recognized by other independent sources. The Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, Michigan, writes, “[W]hile Hillsdale may be virtually alone in its diagnosis of the modern educational disease, it is confident that the future of teaching lies in the practices of the past.” “The National Monitor of Education” in Alamo, California, writes, “The Hillsdale

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approach to teacher training is solid meat and potatoes, a practical approach as opposed to theoretical, pie-in-the-sky doctrines often advocated in teacher training programs. There would be few, if any, failures of new teachers in the classroom if, as student teachers, they had the opportunity to participate in programs similar to Hillsdale's."

As of this writing, Hillsdale College has a six-year 100 percent placement rate for those students who graduate with a teaching certificate and seek to start their teaching careers the following school year. According to the College registrar, if the students admitted to the Teacher Education Program were collectively considered as having one and the same major, the Teacher Education Program would be designated as having more students than does any other major that the College offers. Some of these students are placed in the very schools, public and private, in which they complete their student teaching. Will Carleton Academy, a local charter school, hires our students, as does Hillsdale Academy. This is not to suggest that all of our students teach in Michigan; they have been recruited from as far away as Arizona. On a related note, our education professors have advised schools from North Carolina to Nebraska to California on how to identify competent teachers and how to retrain those just

out of college. Hillsdale College also operates a Center for Teacher Excellence, which provides full scholarships so that teachers from across the nation can improve their curricular content and classroom effectiveness. While Hillsdale College's Teacher Education Program graduates tens of liberal arts teachers each year as opposed to the hundreds of education majors turned out by state universities, our teachers do not need to be retrained and are effective in the classroom starting on their first day.

We welcome visitors to all of our education courses on campus, and we can arrange for guest observations of our student teachers off-campus. We also keep Hillsdale Academy open for tours, and we make those responsible for the Academy's curriculum available for consultation.

The faculty, administrators and Board of Trustees of Hillsdale College actively implement the College's Mission Statement. By preparing liberal arts teachers, Hillsdale College's Teacher Education Program is always providing the next two generations, that is, teachers and their students, with the wisdom and value of a liberal arts education.



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