

Discovering the Real Me

Student Textbook # 9
Character Education

For teenagers 14 to 15 years of age

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PART I

What Do We Live For?

INTRODUCTION

Michelangelo's famous statue of David (a biblical hero and king) is considered one of the greatest works of art in the world. When people asked Michelangelo how he made his beautiful masterpiece, Michelangelo said he took a huge piece of marble and chipped away all the parts that did not look like David. He made the marble resemble the image in his mind and created one of the world's finest works of art.



If we are going to create something wonderful, we must have a good image in our minds of what it will look like first. If you want to make your life a work of art (or even just satisfying and worthwhile) you need to develop a clear vision of the kind of person you would like to be and how you can become like that. You are the artist of your own life.

This course, *Discovering the Real Me: A Student Textbook in Character Education*, is designed to help you develop a good vision for your life and show you how to make that vision come true.

In the first chapter, you will be asked to envision what kind of person you want to become. That's a tough one. An easier question is: Do you want to be happy?—the title of the second chapter. No doubt you do. What kind of person you are is actually very closely related to how happy you are.

The happiest people are people of *virtue*. They are people who care for others. They are respectful of others and respect themselves. They are responsible, honest, trustworthy, grateful, persevering (they stick to something, even when it's hard). They are full of integrity, able to make and keep commitments, compassionate, empathetic, and good citizens. These kinds of people experience a lot of joy and satisfaction in life. If you have some or all of these qualities, you are already experiencing rewards and happiness in your life. Yet all of us can use some help developing the virtues we do not have and strengthening the ones we do have.

Who is the most virtuous person *you* know?



The next three chapters are devoted to presenting some important principles that are necessary to know and understand in order to achieve our goals in life. We all know the physical universe is governed by certain scientific laws (gravity, for example) that we have to follow if we're going to be happy and healthy.

There are certain “metaphysical” laws, too, that govern human social life, and we need to know and follow these laws in order to be happy and healthy too. We call these laws “moral” and “ethical” principles. If we are ignorant of or violate these laws, we will suffer the negative consequences. By understanding and following these laws, we can cultivate a mature, fulfilled, and joyful character. We can learn how to deal with intense passions and pressures from within and without. We can feel that we are in control of our lives, not victims of our environment or of controlling people or of our own confusing emotions. As Booker T. Washington said, “*Character is power.*” The last chapter in this section deals with the question of our purpose in life. If we can understand our purpose, this will give our lives impetus and focus. We can feel the significance of our being, and it will motivate us to live life to the fullest so that we can become all that we were meant to be.

No doubt, this will be a lifelong project. Yet in the end there is no more important task we will face. Let us begin our journey in life together.



CHAPTER 1

What Kind of Person Will I Be?

How would you like to live in a society where everyone “lives happily ever after”? That’s just a fairy tale...or is it?

Most of us have experienced how difficult it is to find the balance between making others happy and doing what makes “me” happy. It’s great when the two coincide, but what about when they don’t? What if your parents want you to be one way, but you want to be another way? What if your friends want you to do things you don’t like but you don’t want to lose your friends? What if your teachers expect so much work from you it means you have to sacrifice some fun time?

Life is full of choices. For instance, you are about to go out with friends. You expect it to be pleasant and fun, even though you’re just going to hang around together. Suddenly another friend calls and says he is in trouble and needs your help.

What do you do? Helping someone who is in trouble isn’t going to be any fun. Still, he’s your friend and he needs you—more than your other friends who just want to hang out. What’s the best thing to do? You have to make a choice.



Or imagine a different situation. Your friends have invited you to a party, and you are eager to go. But you know that your parents will not approve of your plans because they don’t like you to go to parties where there are no adults. What will you do? Lie to your parents about where you are going? Give up the party? Once again, you are faced with a choice. Every day, several times a day, we come across situations that require us to make a moral choice—a choice between right and wrong. Sometimes it is easy to make a decision, but often we are really at a loss. These little everyday decisions have a lot to do with forming our character and determining our future life. That is why it is so important sometimes to stop and consider a very basic question:

What kind of person am I, and what kind of person do I want to become?

Then it is important to ask:

“Will the choice I’m making now bring me closer to being that kind of person, or will it take me further away?”

Examples of some every day choices we face are:

“My friend’s hair looks awful in that new style. Should I be honest or tell a ‘white lie’?”

“I want to spend money on that new electronic gadget I saw in the store. But it’s my friend’s birthday tomorrow. Should I get him a cheap gift and spend the money on myself, or should I get him a good gift and wait for the new electronic gadget?”

“I know I should treat people with respect, but that new kid comes from a different country and talks and dresses funny. Everyone’s being mean to her. Should I be nice?”

“Vince says if I don’t have sex with him it means I don’t really love him. Should I do it to prove I love him or should I risk him breaking up with me?”



What hard choices have you had to make this week?

To aid us in making choices, it is helpful to have a system of moral values and principles that can help to guide us through these difficult decisions. A basic understanding of spiritual and moral realities is vital for every person—the proper formation of our character depends on it. This book will help you establish a set of moral values and principles that can guide your choices in life.

BUT WHY SHOULD I BE GOOD?

You have probably faced this question more than once. Why should I be good? Why can’t I live just as I please? It is because being good means to be truly human. It is the perspective of the authors of this book that people are by nature good. They don’t always look it. They don’t always act it. But deep down inside, every person is good and wants to live according to that intrinsic good nature. If we aren’t good, we get out of harmony with ourselves and with others and unhappy consequences follow.

Imagine the following simple example: You are tired of brushing your teeth every day, morning and evening. Isn't it boring? So you decide from this moment on you will never brush your teeth again. From your body's viewpoint it is a bad choice, and you soon experience the effects of that choice. In a couple of months, you develop cavities. They're painful and unsightly. What is worse, if you keep up with your bad choice, eventually you lose all your teeth. And so, the final outcome of your choice to disregard the principles of good oral hygiene is that you must spend the rest of your life eating oatmeal.

In the moral sphere, things are more complicated, but the general principle is the same. If we follow moral law and moral principles, good things will follow. If we don't, there are unpleasant consequences.

CHOICES AFFECT WHO WE ARE BECOMING

Values and principles shape who we are and what we are becoming. Every day we make countless moral decisions, even if we don't realize it. The decisions and choices we make, however small they may be or seem to be, influence the kind of person we become. A wise saying captures this truth:

Plant an act; reap a habit.

Plant a habit; reap a virtue or a vice.

Plant a virtue or a vice; reap a character.

Plant a character; reap a destiny.

A few definitions:

A **habit** is a regular pattern of acts.

A **virtue** is a good habit, an inner tendency to accomplish moral good.

A **vice** is a bad habit, an inner tendency to accomplish moral evil.

Character is the combination of our virtues and vices.

Unless we become conscious of the significance of our daily choices, we will be traveling on our journey in life with our eyes closed. Some of our choices involve ordinary things such as what to wear, what to eat, when to sleep, and so on. However important such choices may seem to be, they do not affect the development of our personality and character to the same extent that our moral choices do—the choices we make between doing right and doing wrong.

The choices we make at this time can have a deep impact on our character and view of the world. Likewise, our future success and effectiveness in life are largely determined by the choices we make now.

As you embark on your journey in life, we hope that this course will help you to understand yourself better and help direct the values you will live by and the choices you make for the rest of your life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What kind of person are you?

2. What kind of person do you want to become?

3. What do you need to do to become that kind of person?

4. Why should you be good?

5. What are the values and principles by which you live?

6. Do you think that people are basically good, or not?

7. What do you want to be doing ten years from now?

8. What are the qualities of a good person?

9. What aspects of yourself would you like to change or develop?

EXERCISE: “MY TREE OF LIFE”

Unless we have clear moral values, our inner life will be confused and we will be people who are controlled by others and by our circumstances. Life will be something that happens to us rather than what we make of it. One of our greatest tasks in life is to create “my true self,” a person who is in control of his/her life and influences his/her circumstances. Therefore, in this exercise you will clarify your ideas and moral values by discovering their source and seeing how they affect your actions. We use the symbol of a tree to help you clarify your ideas and basic concerns. Please complete the following statements:

1. The **soil** represents your cultural and socio-economic environment. Concentrate on the areas that concern you most.

I was brought up to believe that:

work is...

money is...

religion is...

my nationality is...

my race is...

man is...

woman is...

sex is...

marriage is...

the family is...

freedom is...

the law is...

learning is...

success is...

a friend is...

2. The **roots** of the tree represent your insights into the fundamental questions of your existence.

I believe that:

There is a higher power that directs our existence	There is no higher power directing our existence
I will exist after death	death ends all
evil does exist	evil does not exist
I can know the truth	I cannot know the truth
I am free	I am not free
I am basically good	I am basically evil
human beings are loving and caring	human beings are selfish and hostile
school is a joy	school is a burden

I believe that my life comes from...

Truth for me is...

I am living for...

Each day I am moving towards...

3. The **trunk** of the tree represents your beliefs about the nature of a human being. Check the statement that you believe and give the reason.

- a. I am basically good because...
 I am basically evil because...
- b. I am free and responsible for my actions because...
 I am not free and not responsible for my actions because...
- c. I am basically selfish because...
 I am basically caring and kind toward others because...
- d. My beliefs shape my personality because...
 My personality shapes my beliefs because...

4. The **branches** of the tree represent your values. List the things that are important to you and why (for example: people, activities, character traits).

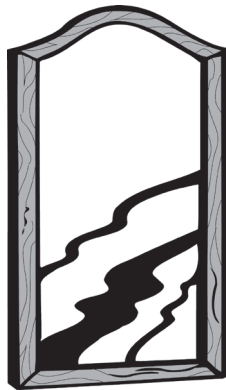
5. The tree's **flowers** symbolize the emotions you experience in your life. List the dominant ones that you experience towards the following:

	desirable	undesirable
myself		
friends		
family		
school		

6. The fruits of the tree represent your actions. List your characteristic ways of behaving in the following roles and activities:

	desirable	undesirable
son/daughter		
brother/sister		
friend		
student		
neighbor		
athlete		
work		
religious faith		
leisure time		

REFLECTION EXERCISE: "WHO AM I?"



Write a letter to an unknown person. Introduce yourself and tell him or her who you are. Describe your appearance, background, activities, interests and talents. You might include something about where you live, work, or go to school (the environment in which you spend your time) as well as something about the significant people in your life.

Read the letter back to yourself, imagining that you are the stranger who has received it. Write down your reactions to the letter.

Dear _____

Reaction:
