

The American Way

What virtues are necessary to succeed in global and societal change?



It is an honor and a privilege to be on this panel. It's also dismaying. "Just thinking about virtue," said my daughter, Molly, "makes me want to go smoke and drink." .

This is a huge subject to cover in 20 minutes. I waffle back and forth, lunging between conflicting points and the paradoxes of the heterogeneous American Way. There is the great William Bennett, who writes so often on the topic, yet turns out to be a compulsive gambler! Never mind the million-dollar tabs. He says he can afford them, so his sport is under control. Or preaching virtue in Colorado Springs, the evangelist Ted Haggard got high—worse, caught—having trysts with a homosexual prostitute.

(I use the past tense because I understand he's claiming to have been "cured." Of drugs? Of homosexuality?) Or what about Rush Limbaugh's virtuous belief in "three strikes you're out" prison terms for possession of drugs, when he himself was hooked on prescription drugs? Oh, my. What a dangerous topic. Let he who has virtue throw the first stone.

I don't know exactly when sex – or rather chastity, by which I mean of course the chastity of *women* -- became equated with virtue. And this is curious given the derivation of the word, from Latin *vir*, meaning manliness. Virginity and the fidelity of women have always been high on the list of virtues especially as propounded by men-- most likely because otherwise the man has no idea who fathered the litter that will inherit his goods.

You see, there's always a reason for the virtues, always a prize at the end. Usually it relates to survival.

What virtues are necessary for Americans to succeed in this era of globalization and social change? What a question!

What does that mean, "succeed?" – to gain power over others? To consume even more of the goods of the world, and more oil and energy? Does succeed mean to maintain a position of such military and economic strength that no nation (if we are thinking in terms of the country) and no outside authority (if we mean the personal individual) can take us to task?

Or does it mean to lead lives so rich in interior blessings and so personally fulfilling, that we have overflow with generosity and altruism?

Tom Veblen began this discourse from a businessman's point of view, listing in his initial letter the virtues admired by economist Gunnar Myrdal: efficiency, diligence,

order, punctuality, frugality, scrupulous honesty, alertness to opportunities, cooperativeness, self-reliance.

I take issue with almost everything on his list. If you want efficiency, after all, look to the Holocaust. The virtues are too narrow, too small. They don't allow for the yearnings of the human heart, for joy and optimism, for gratitude that sees the cup not only half full but running over, spilling in the saucer. They don't allow for the soul, or the chaos of creativity, heroism, transcendence..

I'm known for writing about the spiritual dimension, angels, miraculous coincidences, those little synchronicities that indicate the Universe is a friendly place – that there's more than we can see with our physical eyes and moreover that it's on our side. It wants more and better for us than we can possibly imagine.

But on this afternoon I'm going to talk about virtues not from the point of view of angels, which are the epitome of purity and virtue, but at the flawed and failing human levels, and the conflicts they engender.

I 'll speak first about the individual, and then the State. But first, a few characteristics about the Virtues.

First, They are ideals to strive for. As such they are always out of reach – a panoply of qualities requiring constant attention, decisions, choices. Moreover, they are learnt.

The ones that are widely accepted are kindness, justice, courage, generosity – not honesty, actually, since we're not clear what constitutes appropriate lying. Not tolerance, as we see with the immigration issue. Not even killing—when wars are so often idealized as heroic fun.

Second, They are subjective. “There’s nothing right or wrong,” says Hamlet, “but thinking makes it so.”

Jeffrey Skillings of Enron carried this to the farthest extreme. He destroyed a company, betrayed his workers, bilked thousands out of their life savings; yet even as he was sentenced to 24 years in prison he insisted that he hadn’t done anything wrong. So virtues are to some degree subjective.

Third, They are situational.

“In peace,” cries Henry V, “there’s nothing so becomes a man/ As modest stillness & humility/ But when the blast of war blows in your ear/ Then imitate the actions of the Tiger.....”

Not long ago I fell into conversation with a wheelchair patient in GW Hospital, a former soldier. He was furious at the prospect of sending more troops into Iraq. “I served in the Army,” he said. The disgust dripped from his tongue, and I thought he was about to go on about the horrors of war. “The purpose of a soldier is to go in, destroy everything and *get out*. We’re not supposed to be *policemen!*”

So you see how the idea of the virtues slip and slide around-

Fourth, Different cultures admire different traits, and in our heterogeneous society this makes for further tension. Is vengeance or blood feud a virtue now, or not? What of honor?

. It’s all a matter of perception. In 18th c. France, fears of a falling population sparked raging debate about appropriate models of sexual behavior. Proposals abounded: reduce celibacy of priests, legalize divorce, permit polygamy, eliminate sexual taboos

such as incest. In actual fact the population grew by six million between 1700 and 1800.

But with longer lives and smaller families, a general *perception and anxiety* over

dwindling numbers provoked vicious debate about too strict a moral code.

Fifth, Remember, that any virtue carried to excess becomes a vice. Therefore,

Aristotle's insistence on *moderation*. Persistence taken too far becomes pig-headed

stubbornness; courage turns into recklessness. Ivan Stefansson, the Arctic explorer, used

to say that you don't want courage in the Arctic. What you want is flexibility .

Conversely, too little of a quality leads to the opposite vice. Too little persistence and

you have procrastination and laziness, too little patience explodes into rage and violence.

All of literature and all religious instruction attempts to define and instill the virtues of the day. Homer to Jane Austen, Tolstoi to Tom Stoppard. The one thing they all agree upon is that the purpose of Virtue is the survival of the family, the tribe, the nation – and today, with increased globalization, its purpose must include the world.

In *The Magic Flute* Mozart names his three favorite virtues: Patience, Truthfulness, and Courage.

When virtue triumphs over vice, (They sing)
The earth becomes a paradise.

The conflict in both literature and life arises from the tension between competing virtues. So, in Sophocles' *Antigone* the virtue of family honor is pitted against that of community order, societal law. In the play Creon comes out the loser – but it isn't always so clear in everyday life.

I go on about literature because our stories reflect and also form our culture. And our world culture today is shifting, heaving, in flux, our definitions made more difficult by diversity, competing values.

I began my researches anecdotally, by asking friends their thoughts. Everyone has a favorite virtue: Kindness, says one, Humility, says another; Generosity, Tolerance, Courage, Honesty. (No one mentioned efficiency, punctuality, or frugality, by the way.) The fact is we need them all, and ... in balance. In the end, the virtues can be reduced to one word. Love.

This is an age-old parlor game. You can open the Bible to Proverbs # 22 - 24 and read the virtues lifted from the Book of Wisdom of Pharaoh Anemen'ope in 1500 or 2000 BC: to be prudent, humble, honest, avoid gluttony, drunkenness, and prostitutes. And always, of course, to love and worship God.

And what about today?

“He has all the virtues I dislike,” said Winston Churchill, “and none of the vices.”

Today we see the vices paraded everywhere – and these are the images of America, that we send around the world, and that identify **the American Way**: sex, drugs, violence, nudity, pornography, a me-first attitude. Even the programs that pretend to a stance of virtue – like the NBC sting operation in which 50-year-old sexual predators of little children are trapped – even this ends up somehow peddling prurience.

The image of America is one of excess. We look at our culture, in film, books, TV, on the Internet, and we find a nation consumed by greed, violence, pride, luxury – by a sense of humor that delights in other people’s distress -- *shadenfreud* – and by a country fixated on fear.

We live today in a country so barren of its own ideals that – did you think you would live to see this? – we actually debate *the proper use of torture*: When should we torture? How much?

Fitzgerald wrote in *The Great Gatsby*

They were careless people-- they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

There are times I consider the American Way, and I want to weep. My country. My beautiful country. Was it always so commercial, so corrupt?

Were we always so militaristic? Today one of our largest exports is armaments for war. Our major export is murder. Does anyone find that strange?

I look at the pomp and pomposity of our public servants. Have you ever been stopped by the Vice President’s cavalcade? It consists of 17 motorcycle cops, sirens wailing, followed by seven or eight SUVs, limos and jeeps, followed by more police, in case anyone has missed the show, red and blue lights flashing. Our public buildings are barricaded by bunkers. Our public officials so protected by security they hardly

experience the air. And we think nothing odd that in case of an attack these officials are whisked with their families to safe caves deep underground, leaving destroyed cities and a dead populace to be governed. What virtue.

What is the **purpose of virtues?** It is to provide for the individual personal happiness and for the community, the *civitas*, well-being. I'm always amazed at the bus drivers who get out of bed at 3:00 am to ferry people to their jobs, of waiters and shopgirls and flight attendants and fast food short-order cooks doing their jobs, sometimes for not much remuneration. Here we're back to admiring Myrdal's efficiency, frugality, honesty... the sheer goodness of people.

“All human beings,” writes Matt Ridley in the *Origins of Virtue*, “share... the taboo against selfishness,” “Selfishness is almost the definition of vice. Murder, theft, rape and fraud are considered crimes of great importance because they are selfish or spiteful acts that are committed for the benefit of the actor and the detriment of the victim. In contrast, virtue, is, almost by definition, the greater good of the group. This is not some parochial Western tradition. It is a bias shared by the whole species.”

But I'm asked to the question: **What virtues are necessary for Americans to succeed in an era of global and social change?**

We can't choose just one or two virtues. We need them all, and we need them in moderation and balanced by judgment, discernment, wisdom. But given our partisan, competitive, fear-inflicting, fear-affected American society, I'll ask for two. Both are based on trust.

The first is to **Listen**. What would it be like if our politicians and government leaders just shut up and listened to each other? What would it be like if we could rest for a moment in stillness and attend with compassion to our own pain and to the suffering of others? Healing comes from being heard. Just being listened to.

The second involves **language**. We are losing our words, and without words we cannot think. David Orr, writing in *Utne Reader*, reported that in the past 50 years, by one reckoning, the working vocabulary of the average 14-year-old had declined from 25,000 words to 10,000. "This is a decline not merely in words, but also in the capacity to think. We are losing the capacity to say what we mean, and ultimately to think about ... the things that matter most."

Part of this is the inevitable result of improved communications. We drown in information at the same time that without words whole segments of the population are reduced to curse words or worse, to um, stuttering, you know like maybe gosh awesome.

If we used language correctly, if we had awareness, we wouldn't have Orwellian misinformation and disinformation – We'd call them lies. We wouldn't demand justice for the attacks of 9-11 when what we meant was vengeance or retribution. We'd recognize a War on Terror does nothing to assuage our Fear.

What virtues are necessary? You'll say I am naïve. I would simply have us take responsibility, clean up the mess we've made.

What if we were to clear away **the land mines** that maim thousands of children a year? Then do the same to the depleted uranium that we have sowed over the Middle East? That would take honesty.

What if we were to sign **treaties** that brought us back into the world community: the ABM treaty that we abrogated, or those on the environment? That would take humility.

What if we became a signatory to the **International World Court**, submitting to the rule of law – where now we're afraid of being denounced as war criminals. That would take courage.

Finally what if we were to **destroy** tens of thousands of nuclear **weapons**, especially now that we know the damage a boxcutter can inflict. That would require moderation.

What must we *not* do? Strut and swagger, bully and boast – these being the signs of the weak.

In my perfect world we would demonstrate in the American way, **Simplicity**, **authenticity**, **cooperation**. May I add the virtue of **Laughter**? The fearless virtue of **love**?

Our public image is never so high as when we reach out to those in trouble, -- pouring aid to victims of earthquakes, fire, flood, when we recognize the innate goodness of people and the sacredness of the earth on which we live.

We walk on holy ground. We are the expression of the sacred, and it is my belief that people are by nature virtuous. Just as babies are. We don't have to discipline ourselves to it – merely be unafraid to let our hearts show through.
