

THE POWER OF CHARACTER

PROMINENT AMERICANS
TALK ABOUT LIFE, FAMILY,
WORK, VALUES, AND MORE

EDITORS

MICHAEL S. JOSEPHSON
AND WES HANSON

The
POWER
of
CHARACTER



*Prominent Americans Talk About
Life, Family, Work, Values,
and More*

edited by
Michael S. Josephson
and
Wes Hanson

a publication of
the Josephson Institute of Ethics
and the CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition



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About CHARACTER COUNTS! and the Josephson Institute of Ethics

No one automatically develops good character. Young people especially need guidance and example—from parents, always, but also in our increasingly fragmented world from schools, businesses, and other community institutions acting in concert. In a pluralistic society, effective “character education” is based on the enduring values that we all share, regardless of cultural, political, religious, and socioeconomic differences.

These are the operating beliefs of a nationwide, grassroots education initiative called CHARACTER COUNTS!. A diverse alliance of human-service and educational organizations, the CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition works to reinforce young lives with core ethical values called the “Six Pillars of Character”: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. With over 250 members, the Coalition reaches millions of young people. Some 40 states and almost 1,000 cities, counties, school districts, and chambers of commerce (plus the U.S. president and Congress) have endorsed CHARACTER COUNTS! and its approach to nonpartisan, nonsectarian character education. To draw attention to their character-education efforts, communities across the country celebrate the third week of October as CHARACTER COUNTS! Week.

The Coalition—a project of the Joseph & Edna Josephson Institute of Ethics—is guided by an independent, volunteer Council of Advisors. National programs are supported by grants, membership dues, training fees, and the sale of videos, curricula, and other creative products—such as this book.

Through projects like CHARACTER COUNTS!, the Josephson Institute encourages people to make principled decisions and carefully consider the effects of their choices. The nonprofit Institute has also conducted programs for more than 100,000 leaders in government and the armed forces, in business and journalism, in law and law enforcement, and in education and the nonprofit community. To help individuals live more ethically, the Institute seeks to:

- Stimulate moral ambition
- Heighten the ability to perceive the ethical dimension of choices
- Teach how to formulate optimal ethical responses
- Show how to implement these responses intelligently

Further, the Institute seeks to enhance the ethical quality of organizational conduct by inspiring leaders to:

- Identify the ethical obligations arising from positions of authority
- Consider the impact of all institutional actions on all stakeholders
- Create workplaces that reward the ethical and discourage the unethical

More information about CHARACTER COUNTS! and the Institute is available online (www.charactercounts.org or www.josephsoninstitute.org) or from the Institute: 4640 Admiralty Way, Suite 1001, Marina del Rey, CA 90292-6610, tel: (310) 306-1868.

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PREFACE



MARK TWAIN ONCE REMARKED that everyone *talks* about the weather, but nobody does anything about it. Human character can seem a little like that—familiar but vaguely beyond our grasp.

This collection of essays, a project of the nonprofit Josephson Institute of Ethics, challenges the notion that we are powerless over our basic ethical makeup, our character. The more than forty contributors to this book make it clear that character, unlike cloud cover, is something we can do a great deal about. Indeed, they illustrate repeatedly that nothing could be more important for the quality of our individual and communal lives than consciously and continuously nurturing good character in ourselves and in others. And they show us how.

These authors have made their names in various fields: from business, politics, and media to academia, law, and laundry. They were asked to participate not only for their accomplishments but also for their diverse perspectives on the importance of character and how it can be developed. They received no payment for their considerable efforts. Proceeds from the book benefit the Josephson Institute, established by former businessman and law professor Michael Josephson to heighten public awareness of ethical issues and to provide ethics education programs for media, corporate, human service, and government organizations. This book is another way in which the institute seeks to be of service, to provide people with tools to live more ethically.

Several of the authors who have worked with the institute mention in their essays the CHARACTER COUNTS!SM youth initiative. One of the institute's most successful projects, this program emphasizes a non-partisan, grassroots approach to teaching core values, which are called the Six Pillars of Character (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship). The program has been adopted by schools and communities nationwide and has been heralded by Congress, the president of the United States, and most state governments. It is supported by a coalition of member organizations, including the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, Little League Baseball, 4-H, the American Association of Retired Persons, the National Council of La Raza, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Goodwill Industries, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the YMCA, and the American Red Cross. More information about CHARACTER COUNTS! and the institute is available on the Internet at <http://www.charactercounts.org> or at <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org>.

The lesson of this book, as with the CHARACTER COUNTS! coalition, is that people working together *can* make a difference in the moral atmosphere. We thank the contributors for generously donating the time and insight necessary to make this book a success. And we thank you for your interest in character—your own, your children's, and your world's.

Marina del Rey, California
July 1998

Wes Hanson

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INTRODUCTION



SUPPOSE YOU SAVED the life of a leprechaun, and in gratitude, he said he would give the man your daughter will marry one exceptional quality of your choosing. This man could be very smart, enormously rich, remarkably good-looking, unusually strong and athletic, highly creative and artistic, or singularly competent—or he could possess extraordinary *character*. What would you choose? Now suppose you were picking a principal for your kid’s school, or a business partner, or your own boss: what quality would you choose?

I would pick character every time. When we have to relate to, work with, and depend upon someone, nothing is more important than personal ethical virtues like honor, reliability, trustworthiness, and kindness.

But what if you were choosing a surgeon to save your life, a general to save your city, or a president to lead you through a depression or a war? I would still pick character, but I would place heavier emphasis on a different set of virtues, virtues like courage, tenacity, integrity—and, of course, competence.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus tipped us off more than 2,500 years ago that “character is destiny.” A person’s true self—that enigmatic bundle of habits, dispositions, and attitudes called character—can influence more than that person’s own life, of course, and this too has been known for millennia. History is largely known to us, after all, through the acts and thoughts of great heroes and villains

whose character shaped their times. But as important as it is to understand how powerful character is in influencing events, it is more important to recognize how powerful *we are* in molding our own character and, therefore, in controlling our destiny. Character may determine our fate, but character is not determined by fate.

To clarify and enrich our understanding of character, this book offers the perspectives of a diverse group of thoughtful and accomplished people. As they write about spirituality, community building, business, leadership, role models, and just life in general, the contributors to this volume help us know what to look for as we pursue the morally good life.

Character Is Dynamic

Character is often thought of as something fully formed and permanently fixed very early in life. This implies that we have little to do with who we are, that what we call character is essentially a composite of hereditary traits, tendencies and temperaments, and environmentally imposed values and attitudes. Psychoanalytic claims that the personality (a concept related to but different than character) is essentially formed by the age of six and old aphorisms such as “A leopard can’t change its spots” and “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” depict character as etched in stone, something to understand and accept, not something that can be altered or improved. Even Popeye says, “I am what I am.” The hidden message: don’t expect me to be more, better, or different.

Many of the chapters in *The Power of Character* challenge this fatalistic notion in favor of a more dynamic concept of character. There is no doubt that the good and bad habits that become our virtues and vices are strongly influenced by both heredity and environment. But in no sense is anyone predestined to be good or bad, nor is a person’s character permanently fixed by external circumstances.

Describing a person’s character is like taking an inventory of that person’s dominant habits of thought and action at a *particular time*.

Of course it's not easy to change our ways. Our habits of heart and mind are well entrenched, rooted in durable dispositions and beliefs. Yet just as a mountain is constantly being reshaped by weather, our character can be reformed by our choices. Our human capacity to reason and choose makes the formation of our character an ongoing process. Each day we can decide to be different. Each day we can decide to change our attitudes, reevaluate and rerank our values, and exercise a higher level of self-control to modify our behavior. Yes, character is the cause of our actions, but it's also the result of our actions. As Aristotle said, "we are what we repeatedly do." Hence the power to control our actions is the power to control our character, and the power to control our character is the power to control our lives.

What It Means to Have Character

To better understand the power of character, however, it's important to understand the nature of character and the central role it plays in our everyday lives. Everything we do and say ultimately arises from and reveals our character. In addition to a proper concern for improving our character, we should care about the character of others. If we know a person's character, we can better predict how he or she is likely to respond to temptation, adversity, and success. It helps us make better judgments when we know about the character of the people we date and marry, do business with, and elect as our political leaders.

In recent years, public discussion about the character of various politicians, business executives, journalists, sports stars, and even children has dominated national media coverage. It would be a mistake to underestimate the profound impact on our national consciousness of stories of unspeakable acts of violence and callousness by youngsters and of the never-ending barrage of scandals among high-profile leaders and celebrities. More and more we are called upon to evaluate individuals and understand events in terms of character.

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So we must be careful to recognize the different ways that the word *character* is used. Sometimes we use the term strictly in a descriptive sense, as if we were describing a particular “nature” or established pattern. Although we can talk about a person’s character without making moral judgments, most of the time we use the term in the context of praising or scorning a person.

When we say a person “has character” or that we want to “build character” in youngsters, the idea of *good* character is implied. A person who has character is thought to be especially worthy, virtuous, or admirable in terms of moral qualities.

The chapters in this book reveal three qualities that are essential to good character. First, people of character have good principles. They believe in honor, integrity, duty, compassion, justice, and other ethical values. People of character also possess two emotional or psychological qualities that help them live up to their values: conscience and courage. Conscience is an internalized sense of right and wrong, a virtuous inner voice that unceasingly reminds us of our moral obligations and urges us to live up to them. A strong conscience will not be denied. It enforces its moral judgments by rewarding good behavior with good feelings of pride and self-esteem, and it imposes penalties for bad behavior, in the form of shame and guilt. But even good principles and a vigilant conscience aren’t always enough. Many of us know when we are doing something wrong, and we know we’ll feel bad afterward—but we still do it. Thus, the third quality possessed by people of good character is moral courage, or willpower, something to help us do the right thing even when it’s costly, risky, or unpleasant.

Character, then, is moral, or ethical, strength. *Your* strength. And *your* future.

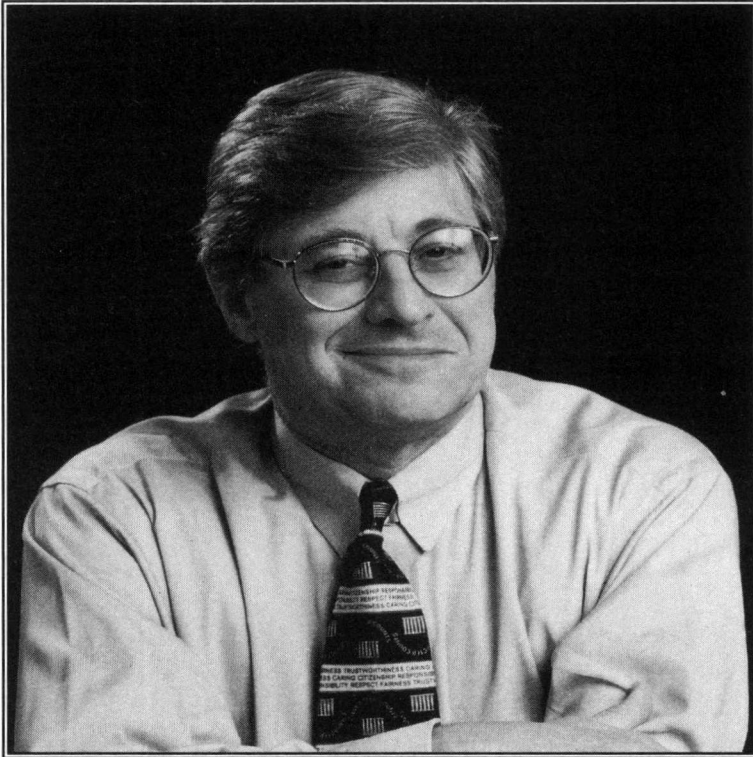
Marina del Rey, California
July 1998

Michael S. Josephson

part one

LESSONS
for
LIVING





MICHAEL S. JOSEPHSON, ending two decades as a law professor and as CEO of a legal education and publishing company, resigned his tenure and sold his business in 1987 to found the nonprofit Joseph & Edna Josephson Institute of Ethics in honor of his parents. Since that time, he has contributed more than \$1 million to the institute and has served as its president without compensation. In 1993, he founded the CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition, one of the nation's largest and most influential character development organizations. Presented with the America's Award for Integrity by former president Ronald Reagan in 1996, he consults with some of the country's largest companies and government agencies. His daily radio commentaries and media appearances have made him one of the nation's most sought-after commentators on ethics and character.