In my mailbox recently, I received a package that every teacher dreams of receiving. In it, a former student had thoughtfully put his first poetry chapbook and a four-page letter in which he thanked me for guiding him through some difficult years. This student, whom I’ll call Kenny, was in my seventh-grade Spanish class. It was certainly not the subject matter that nourished Kenny, for his Spanish was far superior to mine. Kenny was bilingual, Spanish being his first language at home.

As I reflected on his letter, I realized that our teacher-student relationship embodied something schools are pushing hard to get teachers to embrace today: character education. But the very sound of those two words belittles everything Kenny and I did over the course of three years. It makes it seem prescriptive, as if there were some standard script we followed. In fact, what we did was talk, and listen, and feel, and explore the human condition. These were hefty conversations, but they were just conversations. People tend to imagine that teachers were excellent students, rule-followers, all-around good doobies with a solid moral compass and a clear direction, but that’s not always the case. Kenny’s description of his middle school challenges aptly described my own confused middle school self. There was one key difference: I did not have anyone to talk to. Which is why I think of it as a central part of my job — reaching out to students like Kenny. Listening to them. Talking.

When it came to developing moral fiber as a child, I was on an installment plan. Much of what I learned about right and wrong was not through a religious upbringing, but more from a passive communal effort among my parents and neighbors, most of whom had small family farms with livestock. As kids in this southeastern Massachusetts farming neighborhood, we learned about birth and death and caring for other sentient beings by being part of 4-H Clubs. Watching a sow give birth teaches patience, compassion, and respect. Stealing a cigarette, smoking it, and scorching an entire hayfield by accident (and then lying about it) teaches that something is wrong when others suffer the consequences of your actions. Trying to ride an unhappy cow just for fun and being accused by the cow’s owner of lacking moral qualities also serves to instruct. I cannot say the same for the schools I attended. In middle school, my concerns were strikingly similar to those of my students today: wearing the right clothes, being asked to dance at school dances, and observing exactly how the romantically involved couples interacted. But the similarities end there. I have mostly olfactory memories of learning at that age: the whiff of cigarette smoke and coffee, perhaps mixed with a quick nip or two of hard liquor on the breath of a teacher despite her desperate attempt to cover it with green mints. If there was any effort in any class to instruct students ethically, it often flirted with physical abuse. I recall a classmate accusing me of pinching her (which I did not do) and the teacher aiming to edify my moral understanding of right versus wrong by pinching the back of my upper arm for a solid minute and asking how it felt. The bruise lasted for months — still endures, in some ways. I remember the look in his eyes; he really did believe he was teaching me character. In those days, no teacher felt compelled to reinforce the principles of right versus wrong by talking things through, or by engaging students outside of class in a discussion that challenged their thinking. So I fell deep into the abyss of trying to find virtue and worth in what my peers were doing, with no one ever questioning my attitude or actions.

In retrospect, I have more empathy for those teachers, many of whom were trained to teach in the 1930s and ’40s, and were trying to apply those old methods to the children of the 1960s and ’70s. Square pegs, round holes.
If my moral sense started to emerge in that evaporating farming community, the wider backdrop was the stormy years of the 1960s and '70s, with social turbulence — political and otherwise — in the air and Dr. Spock encouraging permissive parenting. In school, we were not governed by conscience or awareness. We had only to be committed to ourselves. We were self-indulgent, self-absorbed, lacking in self-regulation — the enemy of ethicality. No one ever engaged us in dialogue to impel reflection or learning. As I meandered through middle and secondary school, I was impressed by those who climbed out the window of an English class to demonstrate boredom, or pulled the fire alarm to avoid taking a test. No one was ever chastised for these actions, as far as I knew. For me, learning what it meant to be good or bad was largely from observation, and perhaps from the occasional Saturday afternoon mass at the local Catholic church before I spent the night at a friend's house. For those of us at the tail end of the baby boom, radical individualism shrouded our moral development.

My students have a promising capacity for moral intellect and honorable-minded behavior, but they often get in their own way of practicing it. And it is usually exercised behind the digital scrim of the social media platform *du jour*.

Teachers are asked to embed “character education” into the curriculum, but my own experience shows me that learning to “be good” needs to be habitual rather than something acquired by intellectual means. Internalizing one’s own moral compass happens experientially, and if the expectation is for me to teach my students how to have that experience, then the strategies and pedagogies I embrace must possess a powerful element that fosters empathetic thinking and feeling.

Mulling over the intangibility of “character education,” I came across some illuminating ideas in David Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature*, in which he argues that principles find their origin in sentiment, not reason, but we can use reason to explore something that kindles our passions, and this is acceptable. Cultivating caring students helps them develop a moral sensibility, but they need the freedom to feel what is right or wrong. They need immersion in something that brings them nose-to-nose with an ethical dilemma so they are forced to appeal to their emerging moral sensibility, and to defend the emotions with which they contend when their values cannot be separated from what they are feeling. The tensions abiding those situations are powerful indeed. And they can happen inside or, in my former student Kenny's case, outside of any classroom.

Perhaps the experience of my own lethargic sense of right and wrong when I was in middle school helps me see more clearly how and why students might be reluctant to embrace any direct teaching of character. My students have a promising capacity for moral intellect and honorable-minded behavior, but they often get in their own way of practicing it. And it is usually exercised behind the digital scrim of the social media platform *du jour*. They are not always confident about what's right and what's wrong, but, given the mixed-message bombardment from the critical spaces in their lives (home, school, Internet), one can hardly blame them for their confusion. In such a context, directly teaching students something as abstract as a sense of honor with the teacher standing on her soapbox makes no sense. Setting in motion the necessary foundation so kids can engage in difficult conversations in the classroom takes careful, thoughtful frontloading of material.

Plato and Aristotle believed that *arête* (excellence or virtue) would lead to *eudaimonia* (happiness, or the good life). Both were about character development, and Aristotle believed that training people for thinking with an open mind and empathy started when kids were young. While Socrates was not so sure that younger kids had the ability to reason because they had not developed the capacity for self-examination or for distinguishing good from bad, Aristotle and Plato believed that engaging in activities that helped a child acquire reasoning abilities would lead to a lifelong mode of thinking that was conducive to liberal-mindedness, creating *megalopsuchos*, or the great-souled man. Aristotle believed we become morally minded and happy by practicing virtue in many small, habitual ways. “The virtues
therefore are engendered in us neither by nature nor yet in violation of nature; nature gives us the capacity to receive them, and this capacity is brought to maturity by habit.”

I love the idea that acquiring the ability to establish some moral reasoning can happen in a student-centered setting in which everyone — students and teachers alike — engage in dialogue daily. As the aspiring poet Kenny’s experience shows me, the students may not reach any sort of complete ethical comprehension while in school, but they will know how to be confident and straightforward when considering moral choices in their lives, ready to defend their opinions because they know they draw it from a deep well of careful, considerate reasoning and thought.

And the conversation does not stop at the classroom door. It invites kids back in at any time during the day — recess, lunch, free period, even years after they have graduated. It gives them permission to struggle with their emotions, which are genuine and worthy of investigation, but which they can hardly handle alone. They need motivation from others, be it a peer or a teacher. I was not a neutral bystander as Kenny worked his way through his emerging arête that ultimately led him to eudaimonia. I deliberated morality right along with him, giving us time and space to engage in careful consideration over the course of three years. When I read Kenny’s poems and his letter, I knew he had bridged the gulf between his emotions and his reasoning. He finally understood how both had a role in his happiness.

Kenny’s letter was a gift. He expressed gratitude for what I taught him, but I maintain that it was not instruction in the general, accepted definition of the word. We shared this experience. If it can be deemed “educational,” or “character-building,” so be it. But it was just as meaningful for me as it was for him. What we learned, we learned together by talking. The result was the eventual transformation of Kenny as a master of his own behavior and, I would add, master of his own moral qualities that constitute his unique individuality. Our dialogue was reciprocal and, to me, the core of developing moral sensibility. Taking your time, working your way through something and articulating it — that is the way to “teach” character.

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