

What the World Needs Now



Virtue and Character in
an Age of Chaos

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CHAPTER 1

Culture

Just before the pandemic began in early 2020, I was invited to speak to a group of attorneys in downtown Nashville. I began the talk by identifying significant challenges facing American culture at this particular time in history. Of course, two years of the coronavirus pandemic would only exacerbate all of these challenges, and they certainly remain in American society today.

First, we continue to see high levels of emptiness, meaninglessness, and rising depths of despair. Many Americans do not know their purpose and feel ignored, lost, invisible, and unloved. Depression, addiction, and suicide rates remain high.

Second, loneliness and social isolation are still on the rise. As former senator Ben Sasse says, “Among epidemiologists, psychiatrists, public health officials, and social scientists, there is a growing consensus that the number one health crisis in America right now is not cancer, not obesity, and not heart disease—it’s loneliness.”¹ Our culture is hyper-connected on screens and yet disconnected at the same time.

Third, extreme polarization and tribalism have led to unprecedented levels of anger and contempt, which are fueling populism and anger throughout the West. Contempt is much more dangerous than disagreement. It is the result of anger and disgust with the opposing side. Social media makes this worse.

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Fourth, there seems to be a serious shortage of healthy leaders in our culture who are grounded and well balanced. As politics has evolved into a winner-take-all blood sport, fewer and fewer normal people want to expose their family to the scrutiny and criticism that comes with being a public servant.

These are certainly not the only challenges we face, but they are real and need to be addressed. However, the ability of our society to rise to this challenge has been significantly hampered by an inability to cooperate and even discuss these issues without things devolving into a shouting match.

The day after the first Trump impeachment trial ended, Harvard professor Arthur Brooks stood before the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC, in front of the president, the House speaker, senators, congressmen, diplomats, and faith leaders and boldly said the following words: “I am here today to talk about what I believe is the biggest crisis facing our nation—and many other nations—today. This is the crisis of contempt—the polarization that is tearing our society apart.”² Brooks goes on to say that his motivation for addressing the crisis is tied directly to his Christian faith and the words of Jesus, who taught, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45).

Nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once defined contempt as “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another.”³ Contempt ruins relationships, it ends marriages, and it has the ability to destroy our nation if we are not careful. Whether Arthur Brooks’s call to action and civility

will make a difference remains to be seen. What we do know with absolute certainty is that the angry rhetoric, continual insults, and dehumanization of opponents needs to stop. What we now see in our politics is the opposite of spiritual maturity and human decency. Who has the will and the desire to turn it around? It won't be easy, and it won't happen quickly. But anybody who takes the words and example of Christ seriously needs to be part of the solution. This must include Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, Baptists and Episcopalians, the young and the old. Civil discourse, intelligent disagreement, and the exchange of competing ideas that have made this nation great for many years is being put to the ultimate test.

It is one thing to identify and name these challenges. It is another to work toward practical solutions that will create stronger communities and relationships. The ongoing evolution of the digital age allows people to interact, often in superficial or unhealthy ways, without ever having to get to truly know another person. We live in a sound-bite culture that prohibits us from seeing the nuances of complex topics. As tribalism and fear have expanded, echo chambers abound and healthy dialogue does not happen. We must remind our children that screens should not serve as the basis for relationships and getting to know other people. We all must be willing to listen to one another's stories and the many factors that cause us to feel the way we feel. But before we can begin to address these issues, we first have to name them for what they are.

CHAPTER 2

Virtue

Since at least the time of Aristotle and Socrates, virtue has been an integral part of what it means to be a well-rounded, respected, and happy person. Virtue is an established tendency to act in a certain way, which involves having a sense of how to act in a given situation to bring about a certain result. Important virtues that have been valued in many different faith and philosophical traditions and social and cultural settings include characteristics like courage, temperance, modesty, responsibility, compassion, appreciation, perseverance, honesty, and justice.

Living out any one of these virtues involves many different components and aspects of one's life. Virtuous individuals learn to think before they speak or act and recognize the clear connections between thoughts, words, and actions. How we act, what we say, the feelings we have, our thoughts and emotions are all involved when it comes to virtue. So unsurprisingly, academic and religious formation has traditionally placed a strong emphasis on the development of the entire person—mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We need to properly develop and train our whole selves to act virtuously.

Over time, however, we have seen a decline when it comes to intentionally instilling virtues in young people. Many say that virtue is written on the human heart and is thus something people can discover on their own, using their own resources.

There is something to this idea. After all, we all have a conscience, an innate sense of right and wrong, that guides us throughout life even if we don't always take the most virtuous path. Still, it is certainly not a given that young people will discover and rightly prioritize positive virtues on their own. In fact, for most people who lack guidance, teaching, and examples to follow, a strong sense of virtue is unlikely to develop.

The development of virtue starts well before formal education; it begins in the family with parenting. Parents are called to teach their children right from wrong and good from evil and then model the way each day. Some have shied away from the concept of family values, but it's in the nuclear family unit that the seeds of virtue are first planted or not. This is extraordinarily important for a person's development and sense of self.

Many people believe that being a part of a faith tradition is not necessary for living a virtuous life, and there certainly are examples of this. And it is also true that virtue is certainly context-dependent; people will emphasize certain virtues over others and will apply their virtues in the world in different ways depending on the circumstances and their personal characteristics.

In general, though, what does it mean to be virtuous? What virtues should we aspire to? In the Christian tradition, we can look to what Paul calls the "fruit of the Spirit." He writes, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things" (Galatians 5:22-23). I

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consider these to be the greatest of the virtues; they are simply what flows from a life that opens itself to the Spirit. These virtues are the work of God and can be seen in the example of Jesus throughout his life. And the sooner in life these attributes are impressed deeply on a person, the better the foundation that person will have for building a meaningful, fruitful, and peaceful life. Christianity does not have a monopoly on these virtues, but they are a key part of living a balanced and Spirit-filled life.

Virtuous people, both today and in centuries past, clearly understand that character is of the utmost importance, but character formation takes significant time and intentional practice. It is best begun early and practiced every single day. While this is not always easy, it is a central component of the ongoing struggle to be better and to live better, both for others and ourselves.

CHAPTER 3

Resilience

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Have you heard this before? Some say this is the definition of resilience, but some might find this sentiment misguided and insensitive to people who have suffered great trauma. Perhaps there are a few steps missing between “doesn’t kill you” and “makes you stronger.” Certainly, our injuries can be transformed into strengths with the grace of God and the hard work of recovery and faith.

How do we define resilience and where do we find it? Why are some people able to bounce back from difficult times and others aren’t? According to the American Psychological Association, *resilience* is “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.”¹ Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. It is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.

Resilience is similar to emotional intelligence in that it can be built and developed over time. An interesting article in the *Harvard Business Review* by Diane Coutu in 2002 says resilient people possess three defining characteristics:

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1. They accept the harsh realities that are facing them.
2. They are able to find meaning in terrible times.
3. They have an uncanny ability to improvise and make do with whatever is at hand. They are survivors.²

Since we will all experience pain in life, then it's also true that we should work hard to develop resilience. So how does one do that? Everybody's life is different; all of us face unique challenges and setbacks. It is hard to identify a formula for resilience. The American Psychological Association suggests several ways to build resilience.³ I've adapted some of those ideas that I believe go a long way in helping cultivate a resilient spirit.

1. *Develop strong relationships with people.* Creating and maintaining close relationships with family members, friends, and others is important. These connections from people who truly care about you give you people to lean on for help and support during difficult times. Being active in a small group is incredibly important and should be stressed in churches. Even being there when others are in need is a way to strengthen your own resilience.
2. *In times of crisis, don't allow problems to take away your hope.* You will face tragic and stressful events. It's a part of life. While you may not be able to prevent those events from happening, you can control your response to them. Instead of giving

in to catastrophic thinking, focus on a future where life is better.

3. *Accept what you cannot change and know that change is simply a part of life.* Change is a constant that no one can avoid. Certain situations may mean that one of your goals or dreams isn't attainable. Once you accept that you can't change the circumstances through your actions, you can focus on the things that you can alter and improve.
4. *Focus on opportunities for personal growth.* Character is formed in the trials of life and through the lessons you learn. Look for ways to learn during difficult times of struggle and loss. For many people, those times can: help strengthen relationships, allow them to appreciate the things they have achieved in life, provide opportunities to forge a deeper spiritual life, and increase their overall self-esteem.
5. *Keep a broad outlook on life's challenges.* Throughout life, you will face adversity. When stressful and painful events happen, don't narrowly focus on them. Instead, view them from a broader and more long-term perspective. During the hard times, continue to try to count your blessings.
6. *Stay positive, hopeful, and optimistic.* Paul says, "Affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame" (Romans 5:3-5). There is a big difference between people

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who approach things positively and people who approach things negatively. At the end of the day, hope is a conscious decision that you can make regardless of what you may be going through.

7. *Self-care should be a priority.* Keeping your mind and body healthy is necessary when you are in a situation that requires resiliency. Try to maintain a healthy diet, to drink the proper amounts of water, to get regular exercise, and to get the right amount of sleep. Only you know what your body needs, so make sure that you are taking part in activities that you enjoy and that you find relaxing. Remember, self-care has never been and will never be selfish.

David Moore served as senior minister of Woodmont Christian Church from 1980 to 1987. In March 1986, his wife Dana, who was a vibrant part of the life of this church working with Christian education, lost her battle with cancer, and it understandably really did a number on David. After resigning in 1987, he left the country to do some postdoctoral work at Oxford University and wrote a short book called *The Liberating Power of Pain*. In that book he says, “The Christian faith is founded on the suffering of a single person, Jesus of Nazareth. His constant pain, brought on by rejection, misunderstanding, loneliness, and finally the crucifixion and resurrection, vividly demonstrates the whole love of God.” He spells out the theological implications of Jesus’s suffering, saying, “The model that we have in Jesus is that while God does not cause or desire our suffering, that very suffering can be the means by which we are

caught up in an ever deeper relationship with God and with other people.”⁴ David wrote that because he came to believe it after experiencing it firsthand. Such wisdom about the love of God and others for us in difficult times is only truly made real to us after we experience suffering of our own.

I'm proud to call Reverend Clay Stauffer a treasured personal friend and my spiritual guru. You are about to rediscover what makes a full and complete life. I'm convinced what the world needs now is more teachings from Clay Stauffer!

Jim Nantz, CBS Sports & voice of the Masters

Clay Stauffer calls us back home to our common humanity in his book, *What the World Needs Now*. From the very first paragraph, I couldn't put it down. Every person in America should read this book.

Samar Ali, research professor of political science and law;
co-chair, Vanderbilt Project on Unity & American Democracy

In our era of uncertainty and division, Clay's *What the World Needs Now* gives us a compass of timeless wisdom and spiritual insight that illuminates our shared path forward.

Bill Frist, MD, former US Senate majority leader

What the church needs now is practical wisdom, in the manner of Aristotle and Jesus, that encourages virtuous living in these chaotic times. Clay Stauffer has given us a wise, virtuous book full of contemporary, useful guidance for living better lives.

Will Willimon, professor of the practice of Christian ministry,
Duke Divinity School; United Methodist bishop, retired; and
author of *Preachers Dare: Speaking for God in the Sermon*.

My good buddy Clay has a new book that I know you will be inspired by. He is a good man with great compassion for his fellow man and blessed with a kind heart. You will enjoy these thoughts on a variety of subjects with which we all struggle.

Vince Gill, country music artist

In these thoughtful and insightful reflections, Clay Stauffer gets to the heart of what the world needs now and needs urgently: a renewed focus on character and virtue for all of us. The book is ideal for devotional reading or small-group discussion, and it deserves a wide readership. I heartily recommend it.

L. Gregory Jones, president, Belmont University

I am grateful that Clay is one of the voices striving to remind all of us of the virtues of seeking justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly in a time when loving your neighbor as yourself seems to have gone out of style.

Bill Haslam, former governor of Tennessee



www.abingdonpress.com

Cover Design: Left Coast Design, Portland, OR
www.lcoast.com

RELIGION/Christian Education/General

ISBN-13: 978-1-7910-3933-2



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