



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

The heart of Berry

“In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. If they don’t have the first, the other two will kill you. Think about it; it’s true. If you hire somebody without integrity, you really want [that person] to be dumb and lazy.”

WARREN BUFFETT

At a recent breakfast in Washington, D.C., I heard a U.S. senator speak pointedly about the difference between competence and character. He noted how a lack of personal integrity can undermine the finest accomplishments of a razor-sharp mind and tenacious work ethic, as has been illustrated vividly in the lives of several prominent public figures. The senator went on to wonder why America’s colleges devote most of their resources to the development of the head, in contrast to a studied indifference to the development of the heart. He ended with an unanswered question, “Where does the heart go to college?”

When America’s great colleges were founded, it was customary for the college president to teach a moral philosophy course to all seniors. These courses were designed to integrate a student’s educational experience and usher the student into a life of service to God and neighbor. The organizing theme was a common-sense analysis of right and wrong as it applies to various spheres of public and private life: business, government, family relations, the law, culture and so on. The goal was to build character – Christian character specifically – and the motivation was a deep concern for the spiritual and moral, as well as the intellectual, maturation of students.

Since then, these same leading colleges have largely abandoned their commitment to character formation in the traditional sense.

While the development of character remains a noble goal in the rhetoric of many a college mission statement, most professors steer clear of any moral exhortations that seem religious in nature. A professor of ethics today might rigorously examine different schools of thought but would be less likely to elaborate on the Christian ethic of love that leads to the virtues of patience, kindness, faithfulness, diligence, justice, humility, purity and self-control. The modern curriculum focuses instead on teaching critical reasoning skills using methods of inquiry and analysis. This singular emphasis on the development of intellectual skills brings us back to the senator’s concern about the separation of the head and the heart. At Berry, we continue to believe it is essential to educate both.

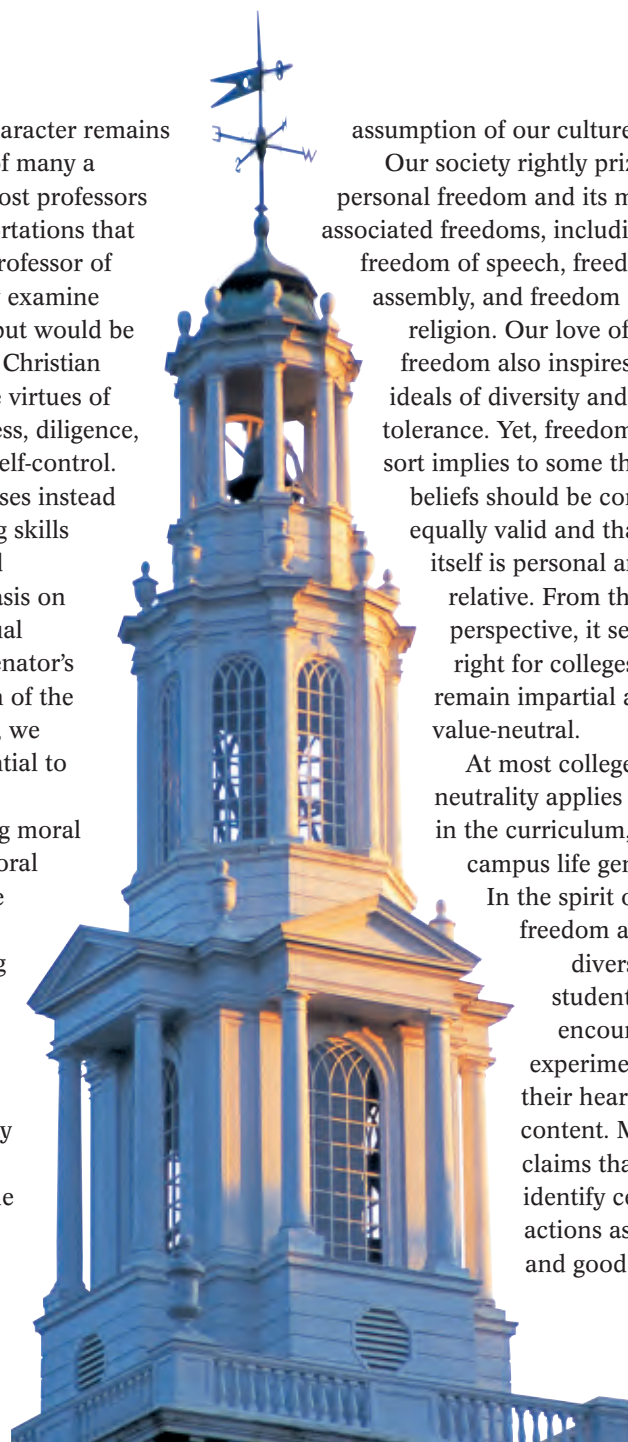
The problem with teaching moral virtues is that it requires a moral point of view. Although there was once a reasonable consensus about the meaning of character based on a shared Christian heritage, that framework has been displaced by a new norm. Personal freedom – the liberty to believe and do whatever one chooses as long as no one is harmed – has become the defining principle and

assumption of our culture.

Our society rightly prizes personal freedom and its many associated freedoms, including the freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion. Our love of freedom also inspires our ideals of diversity and tolerance. Yet, freedom of this sort implies to some that all beliefs should be considered equally valid and that truth itself is personal and relative. From this perspective, it seems right for colleges to remain impartial and value-neutral.

At most colleges, value-neutrality applies not just in the curriculum, but to campus life generally.

In the spirit of freedom and diversity, students are encouraged to experiment to their heart’s content. Moral claims that identify certain actions as right and good are



belittled as outdated and intolerant. Personal freedom is revered as a sacred entitlement, even when it leads to excessive self-indulgence and callous indifference to others.

THE CHRISTIAN CHARACTER OF BERRY

The issue of character has always been central at Berry and rooted in a Christian framework. Martha Berry wrote that “character-building must in the long run be the essence of education.” When asked how she happened to start a school with character, she replied simply: “It grew out of a Sunday school.”

In the Christian understanding, personal freedom is seen as a great good but not an absolute good. It emanates from and must be understood within the context of a moral order in which individuals have dignity and worth. Even our nation’s Founders presupposed that freedom and its associated rights are inalienable because they are endowed by our Creator. The distinctly Christian perspective holds that personal freedom must always be counterbalanced by personal responsibility – to God, to others and to oneself. It also holds that true freedom comes not from rejecting God’s truth as oppressive, but from embracing God’s grace. Freedom is found not in self-assertion, but in self-denial. The model for this is in the life of Jesus, who came “full of grace and truth.”

In fact, the Berry motto is taken from a statement by Jesus about himself. Two of his followers (brothers James and John) came asking for special status in the coming Kingdom. The other disciples were irate. Jesus corrected them all and exposed their self-interest. He captured the essence of the two great commandments – to love God wholly and to love your neighbor as yourself – by asserting that he had “not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” A Christian community is full of this kind of grace and truth, in which service is an act of heartfelt gratitude for the walk and work of Jesus Christ.

CHARACTER AND CULTURE AT BERRY

It is no simple matter to maintain a campus culture that promotes the development of character. In Berry’s case, it



is complicated in part because, in the spirit of Christian hospitality, the college welcomes to its community those who do not accept the historic Christian faith.

Fundamentally different beliefs lead inevitably to tension. Some who hold to the Christian faith would like to relieve the tension by insisting that others assent to Christian beliefs. Some who hold to other faiths or to no faith would like to see Berry’s Christian framework dismantled or at least put on equal footing with other viewpoints.

Although sometimes uncomfortable, Berry’s tension is principled and healthy. In the early years, tension derived from the school being Christian but not adhering to the doctrinal position of a particular denomination. Today, tension flows from the school being Christian but inviting those who do not share the same views to join in community. In both instances, Berry has modeled grace and truth. The challenge that remains is how to teach moral character in a society that assumes the primacy of personal freedom. It is difficult, after all, to reconcile a spirit of moral lenience with an institutional commitment to developing character.

CHARACTER IN ACTION

In the classroom, it is important that faculty have the freedom to teach from their expertise, and it is appropriate for professors to challenge both traditional and contemporary assumptions. Some faculty will argue vigorously in defense of secular assumptions for personal freedoms, and students need to examine the moral and political implications of these assumptions. At an institution rooted in the Christian perspective, however, it is also appropriate that students have reasonable opportunity to interact with faculty who will examine deeply the assumptions and implications of the historic Christian framework.

In the Berry community, it is important to establish standards and expectations that

point to what is morally right and wrong, consistent with the traditional Christian understanding of virtues and vices. Not everyone will agree, of course. Some will assert the freedom to do what is right in their own eyes and will dismiss dissent as intolerance. But a community rooted in truth and grace must emphasize the balance of personal freedom and personal responsibility, even as it promotes diversity and tolerance because of its moral framework. And, when its standards are violated, such a community must seek to guide and encourage as it also corrects.

As in Martha Berry’s day, expectations are still best communicated in action. Her approach to an education of the heart involved building “a faculty of strong Christian people ... [so] that by imitation and suggestion we will develop good character traits.”

I saw this action-based approach of what might be called leading by example embodied recently in the vision statement of the Berry athletic-training department. That statement is based loosely on I Corinthians 13 and includes such language as: “We will not react quickly to an emotional coach or athlete or circumstance. We will think through an appropriate response. We will look for the words or actions that will make the person or situation better. ... We will praise every act that celebrates this attitude of service. ... We will take courage in what is right and count on that to direct our actions. ... We will put confidence in the fact that love is the only way, and it works every time no matter how it looks to everyone else.”

In the years to come, areas of tension and disagreement will inevitably arise as to how Christian values should inform the policies and practices of Berry. Such tension need not be troubling – it will provide a context for growth and a deeper understanding of self and others. But let us affirm again that the development of character, and specifically Christian character, remains at the heart of a Berry education.

In the words of Martha Berry: “This then to me is education, a vivid process of training minds and hands, of stirring imaginations, of creating character, of building souls and bodies fired with enthusiasm to serve God and country.” **B**