

## **The True Pillars of Society**

*By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – May 12, 2013*

I was conversing with a couple of friends this week, each of whom expressed frustration and disappointment at having been wronged recently in a business transaction. One was a personal property sale; the other was a business transaction. But, in each case, the other party failed to live up to an agreement and was basically just refusing to pay money owed.

Our conversation progressed to a more general discussion about the decline of integrity in our society. “It used to be a man’s word and a handshake were all you needed,” one said. “That meant something then, but not today.”

I was stung by those words. I take my personal integrity quite seriously, and I stand behind my word. I also find most of my friends are individuals in whom I have infinite trust and with whom I share a deep sense of loyalty.

But, considering the point more broadly, I had to agree times have changed. I see it in my own business dealings, and you don’t have to look far to find ample evidence of one person taking advantage of another simply because he or she could. In some circles, it’s accepted as “good business.”

As I pondered my own experiences, I considered what character and integrity mean to me. It may be an antiquated notion, but I see my integrity and reputation as my most precious possession.

Seeking inspiration, I searched for words of wisdom about character and integrity. That led me to something called the Josephson Center for Youth Ethics and a web page titled “Character Counts: The Six Pillars of Character.”

The center was founded in 1987 by a former law professor and businessman with the mission to “improve the ethical quality of society by changing personal and organizational decision making and behavior.” The Character Counts program focuses on young people and values that promote ethical behavior in the form of six “pillars” that define character:

- Trustworthiness – be honest; do what you say you will do.
- Respect – be tolerant and accepting of others; deal peacefully with anger, insults, and disagreements.
- Responsibility – do what you are supposed to do; think before you act – consider the consequences.
- Fairness – don’t take advantage of others; treat all people fairly.
- Caring – be compassionate and show you care; forgive others.

- Citizenship -- do your share to make your school and community better; cooperate; get involved in community affairs.

That's a greatly condensed version of the program's website. But, you get the idea. Who would want to live in a world filled with people who lived like that!?

But, put yourselves in the shoes of a high school student considering such a definition of character. What might he or she think of those words in the context of business, politics, or society today?

How much respect and caring do you think he or she might glean from the latest round of election campaigning or that most recent political email or Facebook rant?

Surveying the business landscape, what's a teen to think? That real estate is losing value; we can just walk away from the debt. Our company is struggling to hit profit targets and we need to cut expenses; let's not pay those suppliers to whom we're already a little behind on invoices. What can they do to us anyway? Our attorney will find something in the contract to give us cover and buy time.

What does a filibuster have to do with fairness or respect? Or, for that matter, slick maneuvering to slam dunk a council or commission vote without debate on the local level? Is winning all that matters? Or, do fairness and respect demand more than just working the system?

What conclusions should that young person make about citizenship in an age of extremely low voter turnout and candidates running unopposed for office?

We may like to think belonging to the right church or joining a certain political party punches our ticket on the righteous express. But, actions -- not affiliations -- make the man or woman.

The Josephson Center put together a great list. And, these values are seeds all teens should carry planted deep within into adulthood. But our behavior -- yours and mine -- determines if those seeds flourish or wither and die.

On my worst days, I grow weary considering the long odds for character to survive in today's world. But on my best days, I realize I can make a difference. I recognize the choices I make chart a course for those who follow. And, thankfully, most days are better days.

