

Can We Reclaim Virtue?

“I was involved, deeply involved, in a deception.”

That was the shocking statement given before Congress in 1959 by Charles Van Doren, a renowned professor at Columbia University, son of Mark Van Doren who was a Pulitzer-prize winning poet, scholar, and literary critic. Charles was a central player in a television game show scandal when he cooperated with a scheme in which he and other contestants were given answers on the popular show, *Twenty-One*.

A 1994 film, *Quiz Show*, told the story of this scandal. With many levels of meaning, the film is worth watching if only for the scene in which Charles visits his father in a university lecture hall just after Mark Van Doren has finished teaching and reveals to his father that he is to testify before a congressional hearing investigating the cheating allegations. His father reassures him, “Just tell them the truth, you’ll do fine.” Charles declares, “Dad, I can’t simply just tell them the truth.” His father doesn’t seem to comprehend and asks, “Can’t tell them the truth? Why on earth not?” When Charles reveals that telling the truth is “complicated” because he participated in the cheating, his father slumps into a chair, incredulous.

The scene gets to the heart of the film, which is about transition from one generation to the next, a change sped up by new technologies (television) that altered the moral landscape of the country and rendered a fading generation incapable of passing on foundational values, such as simply telling the truth or even a certainty about what the truth is.

It isn’t that the virtues of the Greatest Generation failed completely to transmit to the Baby Boomers or that the Boomers’ virtues did not reach Gen X and so forth. Not every value disappeared as the years ticked away. While it is possible for each succeeding generation to inherit what has been left for them, they also begin afresh, sentenced to making their own mistakes and learning lessons for themselves. To complicate things, the rise of new generations is always accompanied by other forces that appear and dramatically alter legacy: new technologies, catastrophic world events, major sociological developments, or seismic economic shifts.

The appearances of these forces of change have sped up for Millennials, Gen Zs and Generation Alphas. The last forty-plus years have left people breathless and dizzy from the relentless re-working of the world in which we live. A casualty of this kaleidoscope-ish daily living is the collection of virtues and values that ground us, that act as anchors in swiftly moving cultural tides and guideposts in a bewildering moral wilderness.

If we are to be grounded again, is it a matter of reaching back to reclaim the virtues of past generations? The simple answer is, no. The dismay of Mark Van Doren upon discovering the moral disconnect between his generation and his son’s cannot be allayed. Examples of virtuous living by those who have gone before us are exactly that, models, that may be admired and imitated but studying the past will not supply us with virtue. Virtues are not learned, they are practiced. Virtues are, by definition, habits, and that means that certain good actions must be repeated until they are ingrained into a person’s life and become spontaneous responses to what

life presents. Watching a You Tube video about how to live the good life will not make the viewer virtuous. Daring to choose and act on the good again and again will make us virtuous.

We can learn, however, what constitutes “the good.” For that we have centuries of philosophy, religion, personages and events that reveal what is good and evil. But the voices of those ancient authorities are easily lost in our rapidly changing and noisy world. Luckily, we also have two other resources that reveal what is good and of value. First, we have an instinct born into us called conscience. While conscience can be well-formed or ill-formed, it is a capacity we all have, a sense of right and wrong that points us to actions that, if followed, can lead to a virtuous life. Second, is witnessing the flow of events from day to day and observing the consequences of certain courses of action. We can see what yields good and what yields evil.

So, a lot depends on each of us paying attention to our inner self and to see with unbiased eyes what is happening around us. Then, follow the good. Philosophers have reassured us for centuries that living a virtuous life brings happiness. Becoming a virtuous person starts with one good action, then another and another.