

The Character Ethic

Largely unnoticed by the majority of people, a fundamental shift has occurred in the way people decide how to think about and elicit change in the world. Dr. Stephen R. Covey, author of the popular “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” series, did some groundbreaking research as a graduate student. He decided to discuss all of the “self-help,” “personal leadership,” and “productivity” literature in the past 200 years, beginning with Benjamin Franklin. He explains:

[In] 200 years of writing about success, I noticed a startling pattern emerging in the content of the literature... [M]uch of the success literature of the past 50 years was superficial. It was filled with social image consciousness, techniques and quick fixes – with social band-aids and aspirin that addressed acute problems and sometimes even appeared to solve them temporarily but left the underlying chronic problems untouched to fester and resurface time and again.

In stark contrast, almost all of the literature in the first 150 years or so focused on what could be called the Character Ethic as the foundation of success – things like integrity, humility, fidelity, courage, justice, patience, industry, modesty, and the Golden Rule... The Character Ethic taught that there are basic principles of effective living and that people can only experience true success and enduring happiness as they learn and integrate these principles into their basic character.

After World War I, the view of success shifted from the Character Ethic to what we might call the Personality Ethic. Success became a function of personality, of public image, of attitudes and behaviors, skills that lubricate the processes of human interaction... Reference to the Character Ethic became mostly lip service.

The Personality Ethic had an impact on writing as well. Whereas before, the author was a creator, a genius, or a great voice, by the 1960’s, public trust in authority was at an all-time low. Author voices were subsumed under issues of “imitation,” “cultural appropriation,” and “what we want to hear.” Just as eighty years previously, the nihilist Friedrich Nietzsche had said “God is dead,” so also in 1967, literary critic Roland Barthes said that the author is dead, too.

However, it’s time again to talk about authors. They are certainly talking about themselves! In the 80’s, my generation of TV watchers and idle gossipers, we never would have dreamed that so many people would be committed so completely to TEXT! That was a shocker to everyone. People old and young, educated and uneducated are all chatting in a social space. And even more amazing, many of those people don’t much care who listens, because it’s about expression.

The problem is that in these forums, the “self” seems to be understood as “self-evident,” only requiring a keyboard and some idle time to flesh it out. The idea of working hard to find meaning or substance in one’s life seems to have gotten lost in the fun and games. So while one certainly hopes that all of this writing leads to thinking and self-transformation, it’s not just a function of one’s personality. We all still require substance and meaning in life, and writing still works to show it to us. Authors are still alive and well, and the Character Ethic is coming back in style.