

# The Content of Our Character

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As I was reading a few things here and there in tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., a famous line of his jumped out at me, it is the line where he dreams of a day in which his children, "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." I've heard those words a million times over the years, always remembering to do what I can, personally, to perpetuate the reality of the foolishness of ever judging another human being by the color of their skin. But what caught my attention today were the second part of his words: "the content of their character." Hmmmm, I thought to myself, Martin Luther King, Jr. seemed to believe that character mattered, and he even took for granted that all human beings will be judged, on equal ground ideally, for their character. Interesting. I've suspected for some time now that a lack of character is at the root of a lot of our problems, both personally and globally.

One of the reasons those particular words of his spoke to me was that I am reading the Dalai Lama's new book *Beyond Religion*, and his basic premise is that the thing we suffer from most, that is causing us the most pain and loss, in all aspects of life on this planet is a lack of moral ethics. We've stopped valuing good character. These are his words:

It is clear that something is seriously lacking in the way we humans are going about things. But what is it that we lack? The fundamental problem, I believe, is that at every level we are giving too much attention to the external, material aspects of life while neglecting moral ethics and inner values.

He goes on to talk about what he means by "inner values," saying he believes that the way we survive best is in an environment of concern, affection, warm-heartedness and -- in his favorite word -- compassion. His mention of "moral ethics" was so in line with the message that is coming in on the wind from the lips of those I admire most. At this point on our human journey, the whole idea of character needs a revisit and a good looking into. We know, and have been tragically reminded in far too aspects as of late, the high price of greed, power, hatred and bigotry. Our world is in a mess that we are trying desperately to dig ourselves out of and I couldn't agree more with the Dalai Lama and others that a large part of the answer, the real hope, lies in all of us -- from every leader of every country, to the average Joe everywhere -- giving some serious attention to the internal, to the "living" of a greater compassion and concern for all mankind. It's just that simple in theory and idea, and just that difficult and challenging in practice. It is our greatest call, to use one of MLK's well-loved phrases.

My question is, are we "evolving" as human beings or not? If so, we have no choice but to get with it, and stop the narcissistic free-fall. The Dalai Lama continues:

So actively promoting the positive inner qualities of the human heart that arise from our core disposition toward compassion, and learning to combat our more destructive propensities, will be appreciated by all. And the first beneficiaries of such a strengthening of our inner values will, no

doubt, be ourselves. Our inner lives are something we ignore at our own peril, and many of the greatest problems we face in today's world are the result of such neglect.

I think the mark of an evolved society of people is our willingness to question and combat our more destructive propensities. It almost seems to me that since Martin Luther King, Jr. said those words about being judged solely on our content of character, we have less overall character. How can that be so many years later? We micromanage each other to death, the press pointing out every flaw, we all point judgmental fingers in every direction and all the while true, bonafide character is really hard to find. How often do we trust it when someone gives us their word? How trustworthy are we when we give ours? How about if we simply showed each other the dignity and respect we used to give somebody that we made a promise to and shook hands with?

The reason the Dalai Lama titled his book "Beyond Religion" is that he feels that "many people in the world no longer follow any particular religion" and because of that, "religion alone is no longer adequate as a basis for ethics." To me he's really smart when he says that "in an age of globalization and in multicultural societies, ethics based on any one religion would only appeal to some of us; it would not be meaningful for all ... what we need today is an approach to ethics which makes no recourse to religion and can be equally acceptable to those with faith and those without: a secular ethics."

This is the most sane idea I've heard. It makes me breathe easier. And let me just say, like the Dalai Lama himself, I subscribe to a religion that means a great deal to me, but I feel that it is very un-evolved of me to think my religion would or should work for all -- and my intelligence tells me that I need to embrace a bigger picture where ethics and character have a place in all of us for the betterment of the world at large. Desmond Tutu said this:

In my culture and tradition the highest praise that can be given to someone is, 'Yu, u nobuntu,' an acknowledgement that he or she has this wonderful quality, 'ubuntu.' It is a reference to their actions toward their fellow human beings, it has to do with how they regard people and how they see themselves within their intimate relationships, their familial relationships, and within the broader community.

That to me sums up the essence of character. The best of what it means to be human. We need to focus a lot more on the "best of" if you ask me. Martin Luther King, Jr. hoped so, he said, "Man has the capacity to do right as well as wrong, and his history is path upward, not downward."

Here's to all of us finding our way as a nation, and as a world, to our own version of "ubuntu"... and to the majority of us choosing a path upward rather than continuing on this present downward path we've pretty much worn into the ground.

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