

THE FORGOTTEN AMERICAN: A STORY FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION

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As character education continues to be an objective of the social studies, the more effective educators have taken up the challenge by first understanding the principles of their discipline and the opportunities for examining the values of character to be encountered. Strategy then comes to the forefront. Social studies is rediscovering the focus on the actual men and women of history (past and present) as a major cog in teaching character, a method once widely used in American schools and currently utilized successfully in foreign schools.¹ But this focus cannot be a matter of relating simple, irrelevant facts. Rather, it requires the element of story-telling.

History abounds with stories of the human struggle, a perspective that opens a myriad of opportunities for character education. Alan Lockwood and David Harris note that true historical stories involving dramatic moments of moral conflict are especially useful in engaging students to reflect upon values.² These stories relate individuals making personal decisions involving truth, integrity, honesty, and loyalty, among others, and encourage students to analyze the issues and choices made. At the very least, such stories help students realize that others before them have faced the same dilemmas that they do and, by making the right choices, persevered. More importantly, they also prove that the values of good character are not restricted to people of a particular time or place.³

John Campbell has noted the sheer power of historical/cultural stories to impart important ideas and values to ensuing generations, stating that such stories "are about the wisdom of life."⁴ He also has lamented that present education lacks such emphasis. Because of educators' apparent reluctance or perceived inability to not only utilize the story-telling strategy, but more important, to relate life values, what students are learning in school is not the wisdom of life but merely information and technology. This is a historically precipitous circumstance, for the great civilizations of the world could point to a disconcertingly

common denominator of survival: a civilization's citizenry could to varying degrees be academically competent, but once that same citizenry failed to be educated in the virtue of character, it steadily declined.⁵

"History is the essence of innumerable biographies." - Thomas Carlyle⁶

The social studies-based story is value-laden by nature with the power to educate for character, an essential component for citizenship, because the values of its characters transcend time and are thus perfectly relevant for today's students. Moreover, such stories create conditions that enable students to ponder and understand the issues associated with the major themes of social studies. Through their form and content, stories enable considerations clearly beyond those of simple information.⁸ Thus, history, stories, and character education meld into one.

America's past, present, and promise are comprised of adventure stories involving individuals and groups facing life's challenges. They encounter personal tribulations, successes, failures, and, ultimately, resolution. As a reflection of values inherent in a democratic society, however, the adventure never ends. Further, the stories "are likely to attract the attention of learners to arouse their interest, and to raise questions among them that lead to discussion and reflection about values."⁹ As James Leming has asserted, it is against the backdrop of information from our culture's stories that students must evaluate the present state of our values as they relate to their own lives and the future of America.¹⁰

While character education certainly appears to be the leading beneficiary in using the story-telling strategy, there is another benefit as well. Randy Mills maintains that the stories of American history are paradoxical in nature; that is, they reflect a clash among opposing ideas and their resolutions which generate the value-laden drama that is America.¹¹ Tony Sanchez adds that analysis of these values leads to humanistic decision-making reflective of the culture in its continual effort to perpetuate its ideals.¹² Interestingly, both conservative and liberal voices in social studies education have long advocated a shift to history taught through story-telling.¹³ Executed properly, the strategy promotes an appreciation of "the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present"¹⁴ through the value choices made from the paradoxes, images, and metaphors it contains. It seems strange that conservatives and liberals both see story-telling as the key to achieving their often diametrically opposed agendas, but the strangeness disappears when one considers that stories can clearly convey the cultural need for promoting values. A conventional lecture from the conventional history textbook, both of which are overused and abused, most often

renders factual information that could never approach the power of good story-telling.

“Children have more need of models than critics.” -Joseph Joubert ¹⁵

There is another very crucial aspect to the story-telling strategy that directly pertains to educators.

The challenge of the strategy is to relate the excitement and dilemmas of the adventure story through a humanistic and multi-dimensional depiction of the characters.¹⁶ Only in this way can students fully and personally relate to and evaluate the values in question. Given the complexities of the strategy, it is encouraging to know that students typically love a well-told and insightful story, and certainly learn more than from most other strategies. More important, however, teaching values through story-telling is more than just an entertaining and convincing story. Rather, it is because the *educator* tells the story that it becomes a personally shared gift *from* the educator and *to* the student.¹⁷ This has always been the greatest beauty of the strategy.

There is no doubt that story telling is an art, but one that has an immeasurable payoff when properly executed. The process of the craft, however, requires patience, practice, and a knowledgeable educator who is willing to risk going beyond the bland and claustrophobic textbook and taking up the challenge of obtaining the correct information that serves as the foundation for an effective story. To this end there are a multitude of supplementary materials, chief among them being selected trade books, which can be superbly presented, written, balanced, and value-laden, needing only an effective storyteller and the examination of values deemed necessary for effective citizenship and character.¹⁸

The educator's choice of quality materials will enable him/her to keep a structural control over the process. Yet the story-telling strategy hinges upon not only the skill of the storyteller, but just as important, the suitability of the stories themselves. Our history represents the trials and errors of individuals and groups striving to maintain a democratic society in a personalized manner. As they faced the challenges of life, they succeeded or failed because of the moral choices they made. It is not a question of one's fame or infamy, but rather the sobering fact that one's choice of values not only affected one's own character but invariably those of others as well. Character education is not a matter of perfection by any means, for values are complex and fluid.¹⁹ But even without a prescribed notion of “national” character standards, history's stories reveal that some values endure across time, defy cultural/economic differences, and transcend generations, the result being the perpetuation of the American

Dream. It is this concept that allows social studies educators to make a past-to-present connection for students.

A Tale Worth Telling

Every era of our history provides opportunities to pinpoint and explore specified values. As is the case with each of us, history's dominant participants had a song to sing to which, following that metaphor, they themselves wrote the words. Some made the right choices while others did not, but all experienced moments of moral conflict requiring value judgments and choices. These stories invite us to examine the issues, circumstances, choices, and consequences, and ultimately relate them to our own lives. It comes down to real-life people involved in real-life situations. An examination of their stories:

...Can uncover common traditions, beliefs, and values that are the cornerstones of a heritage which has undergone significant change and yet has a continuity that gives shape to our culture. That continuity rests in the values of its common and uncommon people, past and present. Some...dared to face their challenges and in doing so influenced the direction of not only their own lives but those around them...Regardless of the circumstances of their times, they shared a common core of values: courage, perseverance, and daring to risk for the benefit of others.²⁰

Further, the multidimensional depictions in a well-researched story lend credence to the scope of humanity that "allows students to understand the nature of [character] and engage in a dialogue to analyze the relevance of values to their own lives."²¹

As social studies educators, the values we wish to impart are not difficult to ascertain. Respect, courage, honesty, responsibility, perseverance, justice, and kindness are foundations found in the annals of history's stories. The characters virtually cry out to us, yearning to be heard if only we would listen.

The Plot Thickens

In order for a historical story to be meaningful and provide opportunities for "teachable moments" such as character education, it must provoke interest, challenge, and be accurate (this does not include opportunities afforded by myths and legends, which are an entirely different matter historically, but still can be valuable in teaching character and values). History textbooks—those potential harbingers of innumerable and exciting stories of the American Experience—have long been under attack as being "still little more than repositories of dates, names, and facts."²² But the acknowledged shortcomings of the conventional text-

book should not serve as a call for its total abandonment, but rather as a stepping-stone to a more complete rendition.

The question of how educators can validate accuracy begins with the commitment to learning the truth of a rendition. Educators must get over the inane problem of being overly reliant on the textbook as the sole source of instruction without regard to those missed opportunities from a lack of depth, accuracy, omission, and distortion.²³

The Forgotten American

American history is resplendent with intriguing stories that often focus upon a single event. As such, many of our history's noteworthy individuals are consigned to obscurity or oblivion because their lives or careers "fall between the cracks" of memorable events. Such is the case with Dr. Tom Dooley, whose name and exploits have surprisingly never graced the pages of an American history textbook. Despite the fact that during the peak of the Cold War in the 1950s he was acclaimed as one of the most notable individuals in the world for his humanitarian efforts, he is today a forgotten man to most anyone under the age of fifty. Yet Dooley is in his own right a model of character from which much can be learned as teachers seek those individuals who serve as fine examples of American values and citizenship.

As a young Navy doctor, Tom Dooley found himself assigned to Southeast Asia in 1954. During the next seven years, he would become one of the most admired men in America and the world. Few would match his courage, self-sacrifice, and humanitarianism in serving his fellow humans. The story of Dr. Tom Dooley is a celebration of a charismatic and selfless physician who devoted his enormous energies to caring for the refugees of Indochina as the ensuing war against Communism escalated around him. It is more than unfortunate that this "jungle doctor" has been virtually forgotten in the annals of history. All that remains are the three books he wrote of his experiences, yet during the 1950s he was the embodiment of the American humanitarian and on par with the celebrated latter-day achievements of Mother Teresa.

The story of this forgotten American is also the story of values that embody the character of the American citizen that our schools strive to produce: he reminded us of all that we can be.

Dooley's story begins in 1954, when the Navy doctor was part of the massive peacetime operation named Passage of Freedom in Southeast Asia. During this operation, the Navy was instrumental in evacuating over one million Tonkinese refugees to the perceived safety of Saigon. It was in overseeing refugee camps that Dooley first saw "the sad song of humanity

in our time. ²⁴ As he treated the countless atrocity cases and rescued torture victims from the Red tide of Communism engulfing the region, he "sensed that an extraordinary opportunity was beckoning him."²⁵

Dooley had in essence been a spoiled playboy who most likely was destined to be a successful orthopedic society doctor. But he was about to be transformed into a crusading servant of the sick, poor, and depressed of Southeast Asia. His exploits earned him the Legion of Merit in 1955, the youngest medical officer in history to be so honored. As his first book of his experiences reflected, he was to symbolize the American traditions of hope and compassion, and made his cause an international issue of helping the sick and deprived.

In 1956, he resigned from the Navy and abandoned his medical future to organize his own independent medical unit for a return to Southeast Asia. "Armed with only love, faith, and pharmaceuticals"²⁶ which he procured through donations, he chose Laos as the site for the building of his jungle hospital because, among other reasons, there was exactly one physician in the entire country of three million people.²⁷ During the next three years, Dooley and his small staff provided medical care and inspiration to Vietnamese refugees and Laotian villagers and "made such a profound impact on Southeast Asia that Communist radio broadcasts frantically denounced him as an American spy and regularly demanded his expulsion from Laos."²⁸ During this time "no American played a larger role in announcing the arrival of South Vietnam as a new ally whose fate was decisively bound to that of the United States,"²⁹ thus presaging a political and military situation that would eventually involve the United States in a military conflict. By 1957, Dooley's second book of his accounts had put South Vietnam on the map for millions of unwary Americans.

By the end of 1957, Dooley's pilot operation would be expanded through his creation of MEDICO (Medical International Cooperation Organization). A nonsectarian enterprise, its purpose was to build, stock, supply, and train staff for small hospitals to be located throughout Southeast Asia. Dooley believed that MEDICO "will aid those who are sick and by that simple act it will win friendship for America."³⁰ It was to be a matter of understanding the responsibility of those who have towards those who have not. MEDICO's philosophy was, quite naturally, at the heart of Dooley's "realization that we all possessed the realization that the only way man can achieve happiness is to strive for the happiness of others. This is a simple guide: every man has a responsibility to every other man."³¹ The mission would be to build and stock a hospital in a chosen site, train the local villagers to assist and run it on a single level, and within four years turn it over to the host government. But little did

Dooley realize that the entire operation would totally depend upon his sometimes brash and dramatic methods to gain public support and financing. This quest to finance MEDICO would require a seemingly endless trail of fundraising and speechmaking, tasks that regrettably took him frequently from his jungle operation.

As 1958 progressed, Dooley became tirelessly relentless in his Southeast Asia mission. "I do not believe in days off. My crew works every day, all day."³² Though by this time he had attained an international status for his selfless devotion and hard-driving manner of achieving humanitarian goals impeded by limited funds and heavy odds, he was nevertheless criticized in some circles for his allegedly arrogant manner and conduct. Critics also charged that his philosophy was short-sighted, in that local villagers would not be able to maintain his jungle hospitals. But Dooley answered that they could, at least on a level that was higher than before he came: "In America doctors run 20th century hospitals. In Asia I run a 19th century hospital. Upon my departure the hospital may drop to the 18th century. This is fine, because previously the tribes...lived, medically speaking, in the 15th century."³³

Despite his critics, the sincerity of his motives and dedication to his work were obvious and outweighed his personal flaws. His image and mission became one: "His sense of compassion, his deeply rooted faith, his patriotism, his ability to make you see that Vietnamese as real people and suffering human beings who needed help."³⁴ Dooley and his team were totally convinced not only that the genuine concern they felt and demonstrated for the Lao and Vietnamese would earn admiration for themselves and the distant country they represented, but more important that "they were the better for our having been there."³⁵

Through tape recordings that he felt compelled to make and broadcast in America, "Dooley provided his listeners with a feel for everyday life in rural Laos and urged all Americans to consider the commonalities they shared with these heretofore unknown people."³⁶ He continually impressed that his jungle patients were simply people who needed our help. As such, he was driven "not by any private or governmental agency, but by a highly personal spirituality and a mystical vision of an extended family, Dooley's beloved community, which increasingly consisted of people whose names he never knew."³⁷

"Life with Dooley" had to be more than challenging. Despite operating a hospital with limited electrical power and equipment, and no x-ray facilities, plumbing, or air-conditioning, Dooley and his staff began their twenty-hour days at 6:30 a.m. with a sick-call line of more than one hundred people per day for ailments such as tuberculosis, burns, mutila-

tions, dysentery, and pneumonia. Closing the line by 10:30 p.m. allowed for about four more hours of appointed rounds and other duties. Utilizing a uniquely simple practice of medicine, he came to be the family practitioner of Southeast Asia.

The daily challenges he faced often bordered on the horrific. Reading the following excerpt from Dooley's third book, one can feel his commitment, anger, and doubt:

Just before dawn...we were torn from our sleep by the shrieks of a screaming woman. She was only a few feet from our window. I lunged to the window and saw several men huddled over something. The moonlight was bright. I jumped out of the window to the ground a few feet below, yelling for [the staff]. They leaped after me and immediately the clump of men raced away. They left a sagging limp figure on the ground. I bent down and recognized the bloody mass of a young woman we had recently hired. She was working for us as payment for the delivery of her child....

Even by moonlight I could tell she had been brutally stabbed with long dagger-like knives. Dozens of deep wounds pumped blood from her body. The bundle on the ground by her side was her newborn baby. He had also been stabbed.... Why?

We carried her bleeding body into the hospital a few feet away.... Intravenous fluid was started immediately and we began to try to stop the bleeding from all of the stab wounds around her body. It was futile. Within a few minutes she stopped breathing entirely. She had lost too much blood. The floor underneath the operating table was wet with congealed blood. We...turned our attention to the baby... [sewing up] the multiple deep lacerations, which tore through the muscles and down to the bone of both the arm and leg. We repaired the infant, and gave him to a nurse who took the child from the awesome scene.... Whatever prompted such a hideous atrocity so close to our house? Was this an indication of hatred for us?

We carefully wrapped the dead girl's body, and she was buried the next morning. Her child was adopted by some people in the neighborhood.

...It is my personal belief that this was a Communist maneuver in order to frighten us out of North Laos. It frightened us indeed, but not out of North Laos.³⁸

It seemed that nothing would frighten Dr. Dooley, until mid-1959, when he underwent chest surgery for malignant melanoma, a rapidly spreading cancer. His last fifteen months became a race against time and characterized by a relentless drive and sense of urgency. "This kind of medicine is my salvation, my hold on life. It is my means of expression. Also flowing and surging in me was the passionate desire to tell others of this work, of this kind of medicine, of this life."³⁹

With time running out for him, he completed his third and final book in 1960. With the war of Communist aggression (a conflict that

would soon involve the United States) escalating around him, his jungle outpost faced the near-certainty of being overrun by marauding forces. But he steadfastly refused to evacuate. "I knew I was not going to abandon what I think is the correct thing to do in life."⁴⁰ His final two months were especially grim as the cancer rapidly consumed him, and he was finally convinced to return home. Shortly after his thirty-fourth birthday, Dooley died in January 1961. More sadly, as Dooley himself would have maintained, MEDICO would virtually die with him despite his deathbed attempts to ensure its survival. Administrative and political squabbles would ultimately kill it without his intervention. But the personal legacy of Dr. America (as he was called by the scores of people he treated) remained.

Post-Story Opportunity

Dooley's story now presents the educator with the opportunity to follow-up with an examination of the values inherent in the rendition. Some suggested questions might include the following:

- What values can be readily identified in the story?
- Has the importance of these identified values remained the same since Dooley's time or has it diminished?
- Are Dooley's actions surprising for an American during his time and/or are they somehow bound to that particular time with little or no relevance to conditions today?
- The story insinuates that Dooley could be arrogant and brash. What is the relationship between a person's personality and his character? Does one outbalance the other, or are they one in the same? Can a person have an "unpleasant" personality and still demonstrate "good" character?
- Are there currently any individuals on the scene who could be compared with Dooley? Why or why not?
- It is certainly worth asking why such a man of character has been virtually forgotten. Revered for his work during his short time, his exploits for posterity may have been overshadowed by the proceeding controversy of American military involvement in Southeast Asia, a conflict that proved to be cruelly divisive to our nation's social fabric. Or perhaps, as his detractors alleged, it was because he was a shameless showman and self-promoter, and a pawn of the CIA. No hero is without flaws, and certainly Dooley is no exception. But one truth remains: his character was reflective of his achievements, which remain untarnished

and serve as a beacon from which character education can take light.

Such a story as this can make quite a difference in the teaching of history and the opportunities for character education. The typical history textbook, perhaps by its nature a mere teaser based upon its incompleteness, cannot compare to the potential offered by the complete story, especially one of an individual whose exploits have been virtually forgotten. Not only does the story provoke interest and debate, but its value perspective of taking responsibility transcends time and becomes relevant to the conventional student facing the same type of value conflict.

Conclusion

The organizing and teaching of history conceptualized and taught in a powerful manner as well-told and accurate stories represents more than just entertainment. They relate the adventure of a democracy through individuals encountering struggle and resolution by the value choices they make and thus reflect the continuing experience of a democratic society attempting to perpetuate itself. The American Experience has been and continues to be the product of the values we deem important and necessary. As social studies educators, such stories give us the opportunity to meaningfully relate those values that comprise the character of the effective citizen.

NOTES

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