

One Of My Mother's Letters

(I was a sophomore in high school when I received this – it was given to me one week before my 17th birthday. The original was handwritten. I re-typed for legibility.)

3/29/78

Julie, dear -

Started talking to you yesterday, but I always forget important things I want to tell you. I write better than I talk - always have written you children letters when I wanted to get something said.

We were discussing attitudes and values. Both are very subjective topics. My values and your values may not be the same and both could still be good, however, they should never be in conflict. Making allowances for the differences in our perspectives, environment, ages, etc. we should still be basically in agreement about what is morally right and good for ourselves and those we love.

Character is built slowly over the years. We may do things that are "out of character," i.e. not the thing we would expect or be expected to do, but those actions would not be a permanent part of our character. A person of good character is a joy to everyone who knows her - family, friends and acquaintances.

You shocked me one time by saying you didn't know what the virtues were. Well in any discussion about character we must define virtues. There are four - Justice, Fortitude, Temperance, and Prudence.

There are also the theological (Christian) virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity.

A person of good character must be just and appreciate Justice enough to fight for it. You obviously possess this sense of justice to a high degree, otherwise you would not have gotten us involved in Andre's behalf.

Justice implies honesty - to yourself and others. I believe in honesty so much that I am appalled at the cheating and law breaking that seems to be accepted by the young people today.

A person of good character must have fortitude, which is perseverance even in the face of adversity, opposition, criticism or deprivation. This is

something you are struggling with right now. Wanting “things” can sometimes be very demoralizing. Either getting everything you want or not getting everything you want can have bad effects on people’s characters. You’ve seen spoiled kids that do bad, irrational things and I’m sure, you have felt less than kind thoughts when you have not been able to have things or do things you wanted to have or do. Fortitude is the ability to put these things in proper perspective. Make circumstances work to enrich our lives - make us stronger in the good sense of the word, able to cope with the circumstances of our lives and turn every experience into a learning experience.

A person of good character must have Temperance, that is control over your actions, your habits, your speech. It is not doing things when you know you shouldn’t either because it’s dangerous to you or others, or because it is immoral or because you don’t really want to do it but everyone else is so you hate not going along, or because it is unattractive (such as smoking, drinking too much, being unclean, argumentative or callous).

Temperance is moderation in all things. For instance, quiet speech is so much more attractive to others than loud, excited speech punctuated by forced (false) laughter. A person who tempers her speech will be listened to and her words will carry more weight than one who talks too much and doesn’t say anything of value.

Moderation in activities and spending is important too. We tend to be carried away by all the opportunities we have – spas and sports and theater and art and travel (I told you I’m doing some self evaluation, too).

A person of good character practices prudence. Prudence is using good judgment based on wise thought. It is good management and good economy. Managing your time, talents and money so that you get the maximum benefit from time and money spent. Prudence is being concerned with consequences of one’s actions. Today’s loose morals are a direct result of people not possessing the virtue of prudence (and temperance). Living for the thrill of the moment, using our bodies (and other people) for pleasure, and not being concerned with the consequences – broken homes, babies without parents who love and nurture them, abortions, personal anguish – are all the result of our society’s turning away from the virtues that build good character. Self-restraint is so much more desirable than restraint imposed by other people.

The theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity are more in the realm of the expression of our character. Faith in God, faith in people, faith in ourselves, Charity toward our fellow man, Hope in the future (that we can always improve our position) are what make life interesting and worth living. It's terrible to know people without hope or trust or love.

When we find ourselves losing faith we should fight to overcome our despair. Everyone is subject to depressions and down periods, but we should never let it be more than fleeting moments of self doubt. Having faith in ourselves is very important. It means we can set goals and really hope to accomplish them. It means other people can rely on us and have faith in our word.

Now what we were discussing – the fact that little virtues lead to big virtues. Little acts indicate attitudes and values. If we do a job well, whether we want the job or not, then it's easier for us to do the next job well. It's a psychological thing. All of us take pride in doing good work and we shouldn't let ourselves do less. If we don't perform well, we know it even if we fool others or make excuses. That undermines our self esteem.

Self esteem is very important. You can't love someone else unless you love and respect yourself.

Now to specifics – you've never given us any reason to doubt or mistrust you (except in small acts that obviously were out of character). You've given us a great deal of pleasure. We are proud of you and in ourselves for producing you. Silly, I guess, but parents can't help but feel like we did it. You're part of us. We love you like that. There's no way to separate you from us. We are individual, but still one. What affects us affects you – what affects you, affects us. We are not afraid of that. It's life and we love it. By sharing, good things multiply and bad things divide and become smaller. That's one of the miracles of love.

For instance, when you were in the hospital for your operation, you said to a friend, "It was bad, but Mama was with me so I wasn't scared." That was such a wonderful thing for me to hear. No greater tribute has ever been paid me.

You are searching, questioning, and evaluating yourself right now. And all your relationships are coming under this close scrutiny. The fact that you are not just like so many other girls is an inspiration to the mature people

who know you. Parents and grandparents of friends (yours) tell me how much they wish their children were more like you and less like the “herd.”

It’s hard to be a little different at 16. You’ll be able to like yourself a lot better when you’re 21, though, I promise.

Have faith in yourself. Your instincts are good. You’re on the right track.

Do a little quiet meditation on the virtues. Apply them to your thoughts and actions. Stretch your mind as well as your body. Remember we are what we think. So keep that mind thinking positive and good thoughts.

We love you,
Mother – and I’m sure I speak for Daddy