



# Preface

When I was a young mother, raising my two boys in rural South Carolina, I was shocked and saddened to find my children coming home with values which did not fit our family's beliefs. I remember when my younger son Craig, in first grade, came home using racist words and making sweeping generalizations about people of color. When I questioned him, trying to get to the root of the logic, he spoke about "catching cooties" and other phrases he had heard. When I asked, "But Craig, what about John?" naming his closest friend whose skin was a deep chocolate, he said, in six-year-old logic, "Well, not him." When I asked why, he said "Cuz he's my best friend." We had long talks about seeing with your own eyes and thinking with your own mind, and I didn't hear anything more about the dangers of associating with others whose skin is a different color. My job of teaching respect, tolerance and unity was made harder because these virtues were not addressed at school.

I was also distressed by the fact that my older son was constantly overwhelmed by the noise and confusion of the "open classroom" experiment, a methodology which was launched without much understanding of the changes it required. There were no boundaries in the classroom. When I observed his "teaching area", children were running and shouting, my son among them. The noise was deafening. My heart went out to him and the other children who were ill equipped to cope with the chaos. My heart went out to the teachers too. I decided to do something about it.

The next day, I made an appointment with the principal. "I know this open classroom thing isn't working, but what can I do?" he said, looking dejected. I said, "Would you let me help in a small way?" "How?" he asked. "What is your hardest class, the one with the most disciplinary problems?" He named the first grade class. He knew that I was a psychotherapist, working with children and families and he said "I don't know what you're going to do but please do it." I went to the first grade teacher, who had already raised a sweat by 11 AM. The children were restless. One little girl kept flinging herself at the teacher who kept saying, "Kimmy, stop it." I said, "I'd like to help you out a couple of times a week. Give me your five 'most challenging' kids, the ones who are hardest to handle. I'll take them out for a couple of hours twice a week." I will never forget the look on her face. She almost cried. She pointed them out, including Kimmy. A couple of days later, I arrived with drawing paper and crayons, a box of raisins, and an idea.

Mrs. Johnson yelled out the names of the five children and they gathered

apprehensively around me. I knelt down and said, "I'm going to take you to a very special place. You have been chosen by your teacher to come with me." They looked only slightly less worried. They walked, hopped and meandered behind me to a tiny supply room in which I had created a circle of child-sized chairs. "Please sit down." As I looked at them, I did a quick scan of their characteristics. Leroy, whose eyes whirled involuntarily appeared to have some neurological impairment; Johnny was so hyperactive, he was literally attempting to climb the wall behind his chair; Kimmy's clothes were shabby, her hair unkempt, and her body movements agitated. I wondered about possible abuse or neglect; Raymond was slow and obese; Timmy looked very angry. Kimmy and Johnny were Caucasian, Leroy, Raymond and Timmy African-American.

I sat on the floor before their little circle and said, "We're going to learn together about three very special things, which everyone has inside. They are respect, patience, and self-discipline." I looked only at the four who were paying attention. I ignored Johnny, still standing in his chair but beginning to tire from his wall climbing attempts. He suddenly turned around and stopped, perhaps to see if I was watching him. I took advantage of the moment. "See how Johnny is looking at me right now and paying attention? That's the kind of respect I'm talking about." Johnny looked absolutely dumbfounded and plopped down into a sitting position. I had his attention. "This class will be a secret just between us, and when you learn these things – respect, patience, and self-discipline – then you can teach them to the rest of your class."

Each week, I made words of raisins and popcorn, and when the children were able to master the words themselves, the reward was to "eat my words." They laughed and munched. The main focus of our time together was some simple life skills to help them practice the three virtues. They learned that when the teacher asked for quiet, they were to "stop like a statue." They loved playing statues and they understood that it was a way to show respect in following directions. They learned that if they wanted to respond in class, instead of jumping on the teacher, or shouting, they were to put one hand over their mouth and the other in the air. This was a way of showing self-discipline. While the others drew, Kimmy practiced "the magic circle of respect". Having no sense of physical boundaries, she would literally jump on people like a monkey. I showed her the invisible circle of personal space which was a way of showing respect for herself and others. When she was able to go for an entire session without jumping on me or the other children, I would hold her in my arms for a long hug at the end of the class. Johnny received special acknowledgments for his self-discipline when he made the effort to pay attention. Raymond showed enthusiasm and excellence in recognizing words. They all began to read within a few weeks. I received reports from Mrs. Brown that these children were showing "miraculous" changes.

At the end of the term, with their drawings on respect, patience and self-discipline, the children paraded proudly into class. “We are your teachers for today,” Raymond announced confidently. “We will teach you respect,” said Johnny, grinning from ear to ear. “We will teach you patience,” said Kimmy, smiling peacefully. Leroy and Timmy went on to demonstrate the left hand up and right hand over mouth technique. We played Respect Statues with the whole class. My kids beamed with pride as the other children applauded wildly. Based on that simple program of virtues development, the school instituted an ongoing program called “ABC: Aiding Behavioral Change”. Other volunteers came forward to keep it going.

This early experience brought me hope and was the seed for The Virtues Project, which my husband, my brother and I founded 16 years later in 1991. It has become a grass roots movement spanning the globe, spreading the philosophy that by focusing on the virtues – the best qualities within our children – we can encourage them to be at their best.

We need ways to transform our schools into safe, happy learning environments. The purpose of The Virtues Project is to help develop a culture of character where respect, patience, self-discipline, tolerance and joy for learning are among the virtues our children master. The character education of our children has become our first priority. It’s time to make our schools caring communities where all students are encouraged to live by the virtues – the best within them.

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