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Good Citizen: Trustworthy

Amy B. Meyers Ph.D., LCSW-R

Molloy College, ameyers@molloy.edu

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Chapter 7

Good Citizen: Trustworthy

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

As stated in the beginning of chapter 5, each trait addressed in the specified chapter is titled with the traits, then in the chapter there are character behavior definitions followed by anecdotes about where this trait was witnessed. Or, there may be a story having the time when the person involved, personally, acted on this trait. Such is the case for this chapter with the two culminating internationally recognized person-of-good-character traits of being a *good citizen*, and being *trustworthy*. The contributors are all speaking reflectively about a time in their lives that was of such emotional significance that it is remembered from a few years to decades later. Each definition is followed by one or two examples presented anecdotally. The chapter ends with “Journal and/or Discussion Questions.

DEFINITION OF A GOOD CITIZEN

People who exhibit the trait of good citizenship are those who play by the rules. “A good citizen respects the rights of others and supports governing agencies” (Byrne 2017). These persons support being a good sport by taking on a reasonable amount of responsibility while demonstrating regard for authority. Good citizenship means persons staying informed about the world around them, voting when asked to do that, protecting their neighborhoods and community, “helping those in need through volunteerism” (Bogner 2017b), protecting the environment and conserving our natural resources.

Then, there's encouraging others to take an interest through community service, walk the talk.

Three Examples of Good Citizenship

1. "It felt like something out of a Tennessee Williams play; something to the tune of 'I've always depended on the kindness of strangers.' You wouldn't think making a spontaneous trip to Barnes & Noble in New York City, where I live, would result in three hours in an Emergency Room, and two years of friendship.

"It was a cold winter day. There was salt all over the street, but not in front of the Barnes & Noble. As I entered the door, an elderly man walked out and he slipped. He banged his head on the concrete and was immediately bruised with blood staining his forehead. He also had quite a gash in his finger. A small crowd gathered, specifically an employee of Barnes & Noble who was quickly obtaining demographic information and particulars of the incident. In this litigious society, it was no doubt that this was a protective measure. The man appeared disoriented but compliant.

"At first, I was a bystander, a gawker if you must. Someone in the crowd asked if he wanted to go to the hospital. He deferred, but seemed unable to assess his own need. He gave the impression of being more scared by the blood and the jarring of the accident rather than in any true pain. However, his forefinger was bent and hanging, appearing as though it had lost connection to the joint. The decision seemed to have been made for him, as the ambulance arrived.

"At that point, I felt witness to a feeble, shaken old man who, though surrounded by a group of caring citizens, appeared fearful and alone. Of course, I had somewhere to be and a million things to do. *What should I do?* What does it mean to be a good citizen? My reflective process didn't last long as I found myself asking him if he wanted me to accompany him. He simply nodded. I got in the back of the ambulance and escorted him to the hospital.

"We began to learn about each other. He asked what I did for a living, where I lived, and about my family. He told me that he had a son who worked in trading, and he didn't want to call him, didn't want to bother him. His wife was deceased. As we rode to the hospital, he repeatedly expressed his gratitude, and I knew I had done the right thing. Of course, his appreciation validated my decision. But more so, it was the bond we established during that drive and during the three-hour wait in the hospital's Emergency Room. Two strangers in this vast city who came together, serendipitously, were truly curious about each other's lives and exchanged humor like old friends.

“If you think this was an act of kindness towards him, it’s much deeper than that. It was an act of kindness that also served me. I gained so much from this experience: I empathized with his sense of feeling alone, of feeling like a burden—in that there was a kinship. I took a risk and had done what was for me being ‘outside the box.’ I embraced his vulnerability and, in doing so, connected to mine. I gave him me and that’s all that was needed.

“Through this incident, I confirmed that in NYC you get what you give. You don’t have to be anonymous, you don’t have to be distant, and you don’t have to be unfriendly. By allowing myself to give to him, I allowed myself to be given to. If that’s not setting the stage for a true connection, I don’t know what is.” (Meyers 2014/17c)

2. “It was a hot spring day in 2000, and I was driving home from teaching my college courses. I was on the road at rush hour with over an hour of driving yet to take place. I figured this was going to be one heck of a trip, because the air conditioner didn’t work and it was just that kind of a day. Anyway, I heard this ‘kathud’ sound and figured the car to my right had something wrong with it, like a flat tire. So, I “sped up” to get away from the car and the sound increased its repetitions.

“I thought, ‘No, this can’t be. My car has the flat. Ugh, I better pull over into that turnoff on my right.’ Quickly maneuvering the car I pulled over, stopped the car, and turned off the engine. I got out and looked around the car as I noticed the passenger side rear tire was so flat that the rim was touching the ground. I did the only logical thing. I sat down cross-legged and cried.

“What seemed like only a few minutes, by looking at my watch, had been nearly a half hour when I ‘felt’ a presence next to me. I looked to my right and saw a pair of grungy looking sneakers with grease stained white socks and above that curly white hair on two legs that were also covered in grease. My eyes moving upward for hopefully a better appearance, I noticed khaki shorts, a white tank top with white hair profusely coming from it. And then, there was this person’s face. There were teeth missing in the smile I saw. The facial skin was filthy, which meant more grease stains. I looked a little past this man and saw his dirty brown van that had no windows. I thought, ‘This is it. No one can see me from the road and I’m going to meet my end here, at this time in this moment.’

“How many times had I said to my students and others not to judge a book by its cover? Well, that is exactly what I was doing as this 60+ man stated the obvious, ‘You have a flat tire.’ Then, he asked, ‘Do you know how to change it?’ The truth was I didn’t know how to do that, and I admitted it. The stranger said, ‘Then, let me help you. You must have a spare in the trunk.’

“I thought, ‘Oh, the trunk, it’s like a giant pocketbook for me. It’s filled with students’ Tri-fold Boards and school stuff. Neither he nor I will ever find the spare tire.’ At this point, I used my cell phone to call my husband, and he spoke to the man, explaining it was a foreign car and the pouch was in the trunk along with the donut tire . . . somewhere under my things.

“To make a long story short, Harry backed away from the trunk when he opened it and saw it was loaded with ‘stuff!’ But, he persisted and helped me unload the trunk, find the tire and tools needed to change it, and a few minutes later smiled the broadest smile of accomplishment when he’d changed the tire.

“I just looked at him and thanked all the powers that be for his assistance. Then, I asked him what made him stop, and he said he was just being a good citizen and helping someone in distress. Although I offered it, he’d accept no money for his act of kindness. He shook my hand, told me to have a nice day, and went on his way.

“Good citizenship is what was exhibited, and looking back I say I was lucky that Harry was who he was, a community-minded person who volunteered his assistance when needed. How much I’d taken for granted by his appearance and how much I was willing to label this individual with negatives. The end result is I learned that he was thoughtful, caring, concerned, trustworthy, and responsible, as well as being a good citizen. I hoped if someone needed my assistance one day that I could help that person as this man helped me. I also learned how to change a tire if it went flat, and forthrightly appreciate acts of kindness.” (M. S. Schiering 2000–present)

3. “One time I believe I acted as a good citizen was in my senior year of high school when our school’s music department went on a trip to Hershey Park. A couple of hours before we were leaving the park, my friend and I were walking to the bathroom and saw a little boy, who must have been no older than six years of age. He was walking alone, hysterically crying. At first, I thought that his parents might have been walking in front of or behind him, but I quickly realized that he had separated from his family and was now lost. Right before I went up to him to ask him if he was okay, he ran out the exit of the park, thankfully being seen by one of the Park’s employees.

“Since you can’t re-enter the park after you exit, I asked the employee if my friend and I could go run after him before he reached the parking lot, and she allowed us to do so. We ran out the exit up towards the parking lot and found the little boy wandering near the sidewalk, still hysterically crying. I approached him and asked ‘Are you okay, Buddy?’” All he did was start to cry harder. I then decided to pick him up and carry him back

into the park, where I could bring him to security. He automatically clung to me, and I was glad that I was able to somehow comfort him when he was upset.

“By the time we reached the gates that the three of us had run out of, the employee we talked to before had already called security. While we waited for security to come, the little boy was able to calm himself a bit, but he still wasn’t ready for me to put him down. After about ten minutes, a security guard arrived and took the little boy to search for his parents. Although I never found out if the boy found his parents that day, I am glad that I was able to notice the little boy and catch him before he wandered out of the parking lot and probably made his situation worse.” (Miller 2015/2017)

DEFINITION OF TRUSTWORTHY

Being trustworthy involves honesty, integrity, promise keeping, and loyalty. In a more finite definition, sequentially: (1) honesty incorporates being sincere and loyal; (2) integrity involves standing up for your beliefs about the right or wrong of something. There’s also resisting negative peer pressure and showing commitment, courage, and self-discipline; (3) Promise keeping is part of being trustworthy and it means keeping your word by not sharing a confidence with others that has been shared with you.

Don’t divulge a confidence unless someone has threatened to harm themselves or others, and/or you are aware of emotional or physical abuse. Let students know that those are times when you do not keep a secret and neither should any one of them do that. Honoring one’s commitments is a part of being trustworthy; (4) *Loyalty involves supporting and protecting family, friends, community, and country.*

Two Examples of Trustworthy

1. “As a hobby I collect anecdotes of some of the wonderful civic-mindedness of people in Maine. From my perspective this anecdote includes being kind, fair, caring, respectful, responsible, and having good citizenship. This particular story strikes me as almost from another era, and yet, here it is in the 2000s experienced firsthand.

“I was at the checkout in a supermarket over the summer of 2015, putting my groceries onto the conveyor belt. I was a little annoyed at the fellow behind me.

“He was putting his items onto the conveyor belt, and he was just assuming there would be enough room for his groceries and mine.

I thought, ‘What was he doing infringing on my conveyor-belt space? Didn’t he have the courtesy to wait his turn?’

“Anyway, it was a little before a friend’s birthday, and as per her request, I was buying a prepaid Visa card for her along with the groceries. A little while after I left the store, maybe five minutes at most, I was about 20-feet into the dark parking lot. I heard someone shout ‘Hey!’ I turned around. The fellow who had been behind me had left his groceries to give me the Visa card I had left on the counter—the equivalent of \$200 cash. There he was, this person I’d been silently complaining about infringing on my space, being respectful, kind, caring, fair, responsible, and displaying good citizenship all at the same time as being trustworthy. This was amazing and a wake-up call for me about what it is to be a person of good character!” (Borkum 2017)

2. “This is a story of compassion, kindness, trust, loyalty, and simply promise keeping between a student and his teacher. Julian was a student in my special education class. He had some behavior and academic challenges; however, he loved coming to school.

“We had a very special guest who brought all of the materials needed to plant baby spider plants in cups. The children in the class each got a cup to decorate. Then, they filled the cups with soil and planted these plants. Julian was so excited to be doing this with the class. After several days, the class was instructed to take their spider plants home with them. Julian got especially quiet. You could see he was thinking and that something was bothering him.

“At the end of the day, he came and said, ‘Please Mrs. R. will you take my spider plant home with you and take care of it?’ Of course, I asked him why, as he looked at me with sad eyes. He explained, ‘I’m afraid the other boys will ruin it.’ They don’t understand this plant is really important to me, and I want it to be safe. I know you’ll take good care of my plant, so I’m trusting you to do your best and put it on your windowsill and take care of it like it’s your own.’

“I didn’t even think for a second, as my response was, ‘Of course!’ Julian’s relief was observable as a smile came across his face. He then asked me to make sure that, when his spider plant made sprouts, I would pass those sprouts along to other people. I agreed wholeheartedly.

“After many years that spider plant sits on my kitchen windowsill spreading shoots of baby spider plants. To this day, I’ve seen to it that friends and colleagues are recipients of one or more of those sprouts. When I pass along Julian’s/my spider sprouts, I ask each recipient to do as I did and give a sprout away, paying it forward. I’m not sure how far and wide the spider plant has traveled, but I’m almost certain that love, caring, compassion, trust, being responsible, and kindness are passed along too.

“At a very young age, Julian recognized the qualities of a person of good character. This promise I made to him was easy to keep. And, I have taken every opportunity to share the plant, as I have this story. May you pass it along as well.” (Rouse 2007/2017)

It's Almost Your Turn: Six Character Traits

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 have addressed the six international traits of being a person of good character. The definitions of respect, caring, fair, responsible, good citizen, and trustworthy were provided along with examples of each behavior. Following the questions for this chapter, the next chapter is for you to form groups and provide examples of these traits from your personal experience. This conversation starter and developer provides you with the opportunity either to lead or to partake in an activity designed to build classroom/whole-group community. And, from experience the author has had in using this activity for seventeen years, the participants come to realize the person of good character who is right next to him or her.

JOURNAL AND/OR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were character traits and accompanying definitions of the three behaviors for this chapter?
2. Of the character trait stories, what were the ones with which you most identified? What do you suppose is the reason for this identification?
3. What were your thoughts on the principal's calling home with positive comments about the child? How do you suppose this action builds school and community?
4. Do you think that being “trustworthy” addresses all the person-of-good-character traits? Why or why not? And, if not, what trait do you think encompasses each one and why?